

Spectacles at a Time of Geopolitical Change: 4 November and the Iranian-Saudi rivalry after the fall of ISIL

by Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad - 12/12/2017 09:14



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Introduction

Eight long days after the shocking resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister out of Saudi Arabia, Saad Hariri made his first public appearance. On the evening of Sunday, 12 November, the Arab world gathered in front of the TV, for not only the

future of Lebanon was at stake but that of the entire region. The small country on the eastern Mediterranean coast had again been catapulted onto the main stage of the region's heated geopolitical rivalries. The interview Hariri gave also took place in the Saudi kingdom, which had spurred speculations that he was held there against his will. During that interview, he could barely invalidate that impression: The tensions in the room were palpable. Too clearly his body language and his contradictory statements were a display of massive pressure that lied on him.

Hariri interview as burning glass

Like within a burning glass the region's most recent political conflicts were condensed into his person. The apparent pressure Riyadh exercised upon him (and presumably the security of part of his family residing in Saudi Arabia) was to be transferred through him onto his (former) coalition partner Hezbollah and by extension Iran's growing influence in Western Asia. After all, Hezbollah, whose military arm is mightier than the Lebanese army, is financed by the Islamic Republic, which its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah already openly [admitted](#) by mid-2016.

The principal character in this unfolding regional spectacle around Saad Hariri and Lebanon was the 32-year old Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS). The evening of 4 November will undoubtedly enter the annals of the region's history. On that Saturday night, MbS initiated one dramatic measure after another: Internally, under the guise of a fight against corruption, he ordered the detention of high-ranking members of the kingdom's élite – princes from the Saud ruling clan, business tycoons and influential officials – in five-star hotels across the Saudi capital. These clear-cut efforts towards monopolizing power in the Crown Prince's own hands [have created](#) a new political order, whose ramifications are still to play out.

4 November 2017 – A historic night of spectacles

Externally, Hariri's sudden resignation cannot be explained without taking into account Saudi pressure towards that end. His [televised resignation address](#) from Riyadh heavily focusing on Iran read like a *Diktat* imposed upon by his Saudi 'hosts': Iran and its "proxy" Hezbollah were the sole culprits for the Arab world's "tragic conditions caused by external interference in its internal affairs." He then added:

You are the people of a great Lebanon, with its traditions, values and bright history. You were the beacon of science, knowledge and democracy until you became governed by groups that did not care for your wellbeing. They were supported by forces outside the borders, which implanted among the people those who wished to cause strife, and formed a government inside a government. This ended with these forces controlling branches of government and obtaining the final say in the

affairs of Lebanon and the [lives of the] Lebanese.

I refer, frankly and unequivocally, to Iran, which plants sedition, devastation and ruin, which is attested to by its interference in the internal affairs of the Arab nation, in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen – driven by a deep hatred of the Arab nation and an overwhelming desire to destroy and control it. Unfortunately, I found the sons who put their hand in [Iran's] hand, and openly declare their loyalty to them and seek to kidnap Lebanon from its Arab and international environment, with its values and ideals. I mean Hezbollah, which is the arm of Iran not only in Lebanon but also in other Arab countries.

On the same Saturday night, the Houthis in Yemen launched a long-range ballistic missile towards Riyadh's international airport that was, however, intercepted. On the next day, the military spokesman of the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, Tuki Al-Maleki, read a strongly-worded statement on Saudi TV, claiming that Iran had just committed an "act of aggression," thus threatening peace and security in the region. This was [reiterated](#) by the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir who also announced that his country will react in due time. On the next Monday, Riyadh declared that the "aggression" from Hezbollah would constitute an "act of war" by the country of Lebanon against the kingdom.

The understudied Houthi–Hezbollah–Iran connection and Kayhan's belligerent headline

The Saudi accusation in the context of the Houthi missile launch was levelled against Hezbollah as it is widely believed that the Lebanese group has trained the Yemeni rebels on Tehran's behalf.

As [reported](#) by *Reuters* on 1 December, a confidential report by UN sanctions monitors stated that remnants of four ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia this year (19 May, 22 July, 26 July and 4 November) seem to have been designed and manufactured by Iran. Early this year, Iran had intensified its arms supply to the Houthis. According to [a senior Iranian official](#), Major-General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), met with top IRGC officials in February to seek ways to "empower" the Houthis, "agree[ing] to increase the amount of help, through training, arms and financial support." He added: "Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on and winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East." Ignored by many commentators writing on Yemen is the fact that those in charge of Iran's regional policies have consistently viewed the country in the south of the Arabian Peninsula as one of the key areas of operation. While there can be no doubt that Riyadh has consistently been

exaggerating Tehran's involvement in the Yemen war in order to justify its heavy hand there that has produced nothing less than the [worst humanitarian crisis](#) in the recent past, a sober appraisal of the extent of Iran's involvement there has so far been absent by many Yemen commentators who had mostly argued that there is next-to-zero Iranian involvement, failing to engage with Iranian regional strategy.

The belligerent tones from Riyadh were only partly echoed in Tehran. On 5 November, [the headline](#) of Iran's ultraconservative daily *Kayhan* read "Ansarollah's [Houthi's] missile launch on Riyadh – Next target: Dubai." An Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson quickly condemned the title, after which the Supreme National Security Council ordered a two-day ban of the newspaper on grounds it had endangered national security. *Kayhan* and its notorious editor-in-chief Hossein Shariatmadari have traditionally been viewed as the mouthpiece of Supreme Leader Khamenei. But the condemnation of the majority of the Islamic Republic's élite signaled the willingness not to endanger the advances Iran is undertaking currently post-Islamic State, or IS(IL), territory.

Hence, another dimension in need of further study is whether the Houthi missile attacks have been ordered from Tehran or fired independently from it. The timing of the 4 November missile firing remains obscure, as it took place precisely when Iran experienced advances in territories freed from IS(IL), thus making an endorsement of such an attack at this sensitive point in time rather counterproductive to Iranian interests. Taking into account the above-mentioned UN report, the headline of *Kayhan*, that is usually viewed as having access to insider knowledge, can be read as a sign of the hubris among hardline elements of Tehran's élite willing to risk a military confrontation with Riyadh.

The collapse of the Caliphate and the battle over territories freed from IS(IL)

Quite ignored among this series of spectacular events, MbS's consolidation of power and Hariri's shock resignation have precisely come at a time when a new geopolitical chapter in the Middle East emerges on the horizon, with the self-proclaimed Caliphate of the Islamic State on the brink of defeat. The latter's collapse was decisively paved when on 2 November Syrian forces with allied fighters together with the Russian air force fully freed the city of Deir ez-Zor from IS(IL). The day after, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the chief foreign-policy advisor of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in televised comments on a visit to Beirut announced: "We will witness in the near future the advance of government and popular forces in Syria and east of the Euphrates, and the liberation of Raqqa city." The month before, Raqqa, the 'capital' of IS(IL), was seized from the terrorist group by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). After capturing Raqqa, the Kurdish-led SDF said the

population of the majority Arab city would decide their own future “within the framework of a decentralized, federal, democratic Syria” and pledged “to protect the frontiers of [Raqqa] province against all external threats,” handing over control to a city civil council. Later, [Damascus claimed](#) that Raqqa was merely “occupied” by the SDF until regime forces would take over the city. In the ensuing days, [Kayhan title](#) headlines announced first that the “the dossier of Daesh [IS(IL)] dossier has been closed in Iraq” (18 November) and [then](#) the “liberation of the last Daesh bastion in Syria”. (20 November).

All this signals the upcoming intensifying battle between forces allied with Iran on one side and with the U.S. on the other over that one-third of Syrian territory in the country’s east (mostly east of the Euphrates river) whose oil, gas, water and other resources make it indispensable for the survival of any Syrian state.

In other words, the other principal character in this unfolding drama, although acting calmly and patiently in the background as opposed to the brisk and brusque character in the foreground, is Iran. Riyadh’s rash and shrill dictum and deeds do not accidentally coincide with the territorial defeat of IS(IL) in Iraq and Syria. The apprehensions held for quite some time among many of Iran’s Arab neighbors vis-à-vis Tehran’s expansionary regional role have now taken a concrete shape. The Islamic Republic has established itself, quite successfully, in territories freed from IS: [Demographic swaps](#) and the establishment of a permanent [military base](#) are reportedly expressions of Iran consolidating its presence there.

In this phase of geopolitical reordering, merely one day prior to his resignation, Hariri met with none other than Velayati. As [reported by the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency](#), a source close to Velayati reported on that Hariri’s demand at the behest of Riyadh that Iran should stop its involvement in Yemen was rejected by the former, who heads the Center for Strategic Research, arguably the most important foreign and security policy think-tank in Iran, succeeding Hassan Rouhani who then became the president. Only few hours after his meeting with Velayati, [Hariri abruptly](#) left Beirut for Riyadh, during an event he had been hosting himself.

Hariri’s reversal of his resignation and the question of Hezbollah’s adherence to the “policy of disassociation”

Two weeks after his resignation, after stops in Cairo and Paris, Hariri upon his return to Lebanon [announced](#) on his country’s Independence Day (22 November) the suspension of his resignation. In a statement later [released by his office](#), Prime Minister Hariri stated:

The postponement [of resignation] at the request of President Michel Aoun was to

give an opportunity to discuss and negotiate our principal demands to make Lebanon neutral and keep it away from the conflicts and the wars in the region, and to implement the policy of disassociation [...] and commit to the Taif Agreement. [...] As we have previously announced on several occasions, we will not accept Hezbollah's positions that affect our Arab brothers or target the security and stability of their countries.

Linking his future as Prime Minister directly to Hezbollah fulfilling its commitment of “disassociation,” i.e. stopping its extraterritorial operations at the behest of Tehran, political pressure has increased on Iran and Hezbollah amidst a turbulent geopolitical reordering where the latter have so far kept the upper hand given [the lack of strategy](#) from the Saudi side.

On 5 December, almost precisely one month after his resignation as Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri revoked that decision, justifying the step by stating that his ruling coalition (which includes Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah) pledged to adhere to the policy of disassociation. Hezbollah's active military involvement to protect the regime of Bashar al-Assad was a clear violation thereof. On the one hand, Riyadh might rejoice that a flare-up in regional conflicts, likely sooner rather than later, will prompt Hezbollah to re-engaging in extraterritorial operations, thus again violating its commitment to disassociation. Such a scenario could trigger a national crisis in Lebanon, which might produce new, insurmountable pressure on Hezbollah. On the other hand, Riyadh has failed to successfully push back against Hezbollah's influence over Lebanese politics. Further to that, Hariri's reversal may exacerbate the feeling that his resignation, announced while he was in Saudi Arabia a month ago, was merely a result of [heavy Saudi pressure](#). Yet, there has been no pledge from Hezbollah to end its extraterritorial operations.

While many important details of this myriad of key events across the region remain unclear, one thing is certain: The territorial defeat of IS(IL) has opened a new chapter in the Iranian–Saudi hegemonic rivalry that has now a potential for belligerent escalation involving both regional and international players. Hence, an entire region is holding its breath, hoping that the series of conflicts will not merge into a larger convoluted conflagration engulfing the entire region from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq up to the Persian Gulf region