

In Lebanon, Why Not A Sunni Militia?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



This much we have been able to piece together: the current Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, son of the late Rafik Al-Hariri, also once a Prime Minister, was summoned to Saudi Arabia on the night of November 2. He promptly flew off from Beirut, assuming that the discussions he had had in Saudi Arabia a few days before were to be continued. Those talks had been about how best to deal with Hezbollah, and Hariri had apparently been relaxed and happy after them, feeling that he and the Saudis were close to an understanding. He expected to be met at the airport in Riyadh on November 3 by the usual welcoming crew of Saudi princes and officials, but none of them were there. Instead, it appears he was unceremoniously whisked away, his telephone impounded, and taken to his house

in Riyadh – the Hariri family made its fortune in Saudi Arabia, and owns many properties there – where he was placed under a kind of house arrest.

He was then asked to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Saturday. Kept waiting for four hours – an ominous sign of displeasure – he finally was ushered in to see the Crown Prince. Instead of more talks about how to handle Hezbollah, Hariri was presented with a resignation speech, written by the Saudis, that he was directed to deliver on television. He did so, as instructed by his Saudi masters. The sight of the Lebanese Prime Minister, resigning in Riyadh, clearly under Saudi pressure, sent shock waves through Lebanon. Since then, Saad Hariri has made remarks on several occasions about a possible return to Lebanon, but still has not done so. Depending on your point of view, either he was being held prisoner in Riyadh by the Saudis, or he was afraid to return to Lebanon lest Hezbollah murder him, as they murdered his father. Most observers appear to believe that he is being held against his will in Saudi Arabia, and that Hezbollah has no intention of killing him precisely because he is too weak, and too scared, to effectively oppose them. Meanwhile, the Maronite President, Michel Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah, has refused to accept Hariri's resignation, which technically still leaves him as Prime Minister; Aoun has confirmed that Saad Hariri was being "detained." The Saudis then decided to let him go – to Paris, which is where he met President Macron on November 18, and as of this writing, he has in Paris yet again promised that he would be returning to Beirut.

The Saudi problem with Saad Hariri is that they believe he is too weak to confront Hezbollah. But one wonders if they realize just how impossible, at this point, it would be for Saad Hariri, or any Sunni in Lebanon, to try to take on Hezbollah. In his talks with the Saudis, he had tried to explain this, arguing for avoiding confrontation with the

Shi'ite militia and terror group. That was not what the Saudis wanted to hear. They are said to favor replacing Saad with his older brother Bahaa, who is now living in Saudi Arabia; Bahaa Hariri issued a statement blasting Iran and its Lebanese proxy. He accused Hezbollah of seeking "to take control of Lebanon." And, of course, he also expressed gratitude to Saudi Arabia for "decades of support" for Lebanon's national institutions.

What will now happen? Will the Saudis be able to impose Bahaa Hariri as Prime Minister, or someone else to their liking, perhaps in exchange for a few billion dollars in military aid for the Lebanese Army, the only military force inside Lebanon at present possibly capable of preventing a complete takeover by Hezbollah? Imagine a situation, for example, where Saad Hariri returns, but following the script the Saudis gave him – making him an offer he couldn't refuse – he sticks to his resignation, urges the Lebanese to accept his brother Bahaa in his stead, and then Bahaa, made prime minister, and ensconced in the prime minister's residence, finds himself surrounded by troops of Hezbollah, with Hassan Nasrallah denouncing Bahaa Hariri as a "Saudi puppet" and demanding someone else, more to their liking, be put in as prime minister. What would the Sunnis in Lebanon then be able to do to oppose Hezbollah? The answer is: at the moment, very little.

What position should the American government take in all this geopolitical confusion? Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis spread an unusually noxious version of Islam, Wahhabism, through the thousands of mosques and hundreds of madrasas that they have built, and staffed, around the world. Their school texts are full of anti-Jewish and anti-Christian venom. 15 of the 19 terrorists on 9/11 were Saudis. And some Christians in Lebanon, it has to be recognized, look to the Shi'a for protection, as islamically less threatening to them than the Sunnis. It has been the same in Syria, where the Alawites, who practice a kind of Shi'ism, have always protected that

country's Christians. Saudi Arabia is hardly a natural ally of the West.

But despite all that, there are reasons for favoring the Saudi project in Lebanon. As of now, the greatest threat to the West's interests is Iran, because of the aggression of its leaders, and its geopolitical expansionism, and its nuclear project, which it might finally bring to a successful conclusion if it chose not to honor the agreement with Washington. Iran is, at this point, the most dangerous Muslim country in the world. It is at war against Sunnis, both directly and by proxy, in Yemen, where the Shi'a Houthis have withstood months of Saudi bombing in Sana, in Syria, where Iran and Hezbollah have helped the despot Bashar al-Assad to stay in power, by successfully fighting, through its Hezbollah proxy, the uber-Sunnis of ISIS, even though that meant siding, but not cooperating, with the hated Great Satan, America, and, at the same time, fighting the more liberal Sunni opposition forces to Assad, which put them on the side opposite to the Great Satan.

Right now, in Saudi Arabia, there is a new king-in-waiting, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who promises all kinds of changes. He appears willing to challenge widespread corruption. (He also has the ability, useful for a Saudi prince, to be a hypocrite, having just bought a yacht from a Russian vodka tycoon for 500 million dollars, a sum far larger than he could normally afford even on his princely subsidy.) He promises to build a giant megacity, NEOM, to help transition Saudi Arabia off of its oil-based economy, a city where Saudis will have real work in private enterprises, including in high-tech businesses, rather than continue to be coddled in those unchallenging government jobs that are now safe sinecures for 2/3 of Saudi workers. The new megacity he envisions will also help to promote a social revolution, for he plans to allow men and women to work side by side, and to free women from being treated like wards of their male

relatives. But whatever grand plans are made for progress domestically, the Saudi rulers worry constantly about the ambitions of a malevolent Shi'a Iran.

Meanwhile, the Saudis and their Sunni allies, in Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, are rightly alarmed by the military aid, including weapons, training, and in some cases troops, from Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, that support Shi'a in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The Saudis for now are no military threat to the West. Iran and Hezbollah, on the other hand, have been a vocal threat ("Death to America!") to Western interests, with both growing in military power, ever since Ayatollah Khomeini arrived on the scene in 1979 to see justice done, beginning with the seizure of the American embassy.

The choice is clear: between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of them intolerant Muslim states, choose to support the one that poses a lesser threat. That would be, for now, Saudi Arabia, which may in fact be liberalizing (as the Crown Prince promises), and its allies, especially the Emirates, and Egypt, both now ruled by enlightened despots (in the Emirates, there are several) who deserve Western support. Iran and Hezbollah now threaten Sunnis all over the Middle East, and also, of course, the Jews of Israel. The Saudis can do two things. First, right now, almost immediately, they can supply the Lebanese army with enough weaponry from their own stores to hold Hezbollah in check. But that's only a stopgap measure. Second, what Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies need to do is to create in Lebanon, from the ground up, a Sunni militia capable not just of holding Hezbollah at bay, but in pushing it back, or perhaps even over the border into Syria. Saudi Arabia can send unlimited amounts of military equipment to such a Sunni militia. It can also outfit and supply Sunni Arab troops, most likely from Egypt and Jordan (and their governments could be paid substantial sums by the Saudis for these "volunteers"), to help local Sunnis defend "Lebanon's sovereignty from Iran." There could also be smaller

contingents of Sunni troops from Saudi Arabia and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, just to give it even more legitimacy in Arab eyes. This militia needs to be created quickly, in months, not years, while Iran still has its hands full in Iraq and Yemen, and before it has consolidated Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria.

Hezbollah has until now been virtually unopposed militarily by Sunni Lebanese. The Saudis have wanted Israel to enter the fray against Iran; the Israelis have not done so. But while they will not send their own troops to fight (and die) in what is a Muslim civil war, they will certainly help however they can in the creation of a Sunni militia, with Lebanese Sunnis, augmented by large numbers of volunteers from Egypt and Jordan, and guns, tanks, weapons systems supplied by Saudi Arabia. The "Rafidite dogs" of Hassan Nasrallah will not have an easy time maintaining their current control of Lebanon. And Israel will continue to do as it has been doing, bombing weapons depots and weapons factories of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, keeping that Shi'a militia from being resupplied.

Neither Hezbollah, nor Iran, will give up the prize they have won in Shi'a control of much of Iraq (not yet a wholly-owned subsidiary of Tehran, but close), a victory that was inevitable given that the Shi'a Arabs outnumber the Sunni Arabs three-to-one in Iraq. They have also won a place in the stony heart of Bashar al-Assad, who likely still needs the Iranians and Hezbollah to help him stay in power in his rump state, but the result is that Assad did not fall; he is still there, he was not overthrown as so many thought he would be; he controls all of Syria's major cities. In Yemen, Iran is committed to helping its fellow Shi'a, the Houthis, who despite Saudi bombing, have maintained their control of the capital, San'a. Tens of billions of dollars have been spent by the Saudis on their bombing campaign, but they have failed to dislodge the Houthis who, if they were to control Yemen, could threaten all of southern Saudi Arabia. Given these setbacks

for the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria and Yemen, the Saudis need a victory over the Shi'a somewhere, and Lebanon – where Hezbollah got its start – is now the place where such a victory might be won. But it requires building up, quickly, a large Sunni militia rivaling the size of Hezbollah, and properly equipped. Both Sunni and Shi'a Lebanese are equal in population; the Sunnis assumed the Lebanese army would protect their interests against Hezbollah. But that army never came close to the military power of Hezbollah, which initially presented itself as the great Arab defender of Lebanon against Israeli aggressors. Eventually it became clear that Hezbollah had its Shi'a sights set on Lebanon itself.

In Lebanon, the West should be supporting the Saudis, despite misgivings, because they are the most determined Arab enemy of Hezbollah. The man reputed to be their current candidate for prime minister, Bahaa Hariri, cannot really be expected to stand up to Hezbollah until provided with the military wherewithal. The Sunnis and Shi'a are evenly matched in population; each constitutes 27% of the Lebanese population. But the Shi'a have created, with help from Iran, and over many decades, a powerful militia, and claims of as many as 65,000 fighters, while the Sunnis in Lebanon did not. The Sunnis let things slide, hoping they could count on the Lebanese Army to protect their interests and withstand Hezbollah. But that's not a task which that army could fulfill. It cannot be counted on to fight Hezbollah. There are many Shi'a in the Lebanese Army (some of whom also serve in Hezbollah), and also many Christians, who look to the Shi'a for support against the Sunnis. Their loyalty to the Lebanese state, and against Hezbollah, is uncertain. Furthermore, that army is greatly outmatched in weaponry by Hezbollah.

The Saudis could give more aid to the Lebanese army, immediately, just to keep it from collapsing should Hezbollah attack it as a "Saudi/Zionist" puppet, but most of its effort should be given over to the buildup of an entirely new force,

a Sunni militia truly capable of taking the fight to Hezbollah. The Americans should enthusiastically endorse the idea of a strong militia in Lebanon to balance Hezbollah and behind it, Iran. It need not be identified as "Sunni," but rather, as a coalition of the willing against Hezbollah. The weak performance of the Lebanese army can be passed over in silence.

How might Rex Tillerson respond?

He could say something like this:

The Islamic Republic of Iran, and its proxy and ally, Hezbollah, have for years been constructing a ring of fire around many of our allies. They are in Yemen, threatening Saudi Arabia from the south by supporting the uprising by Shi'a Houthis. They are in Iraq, where instead of bringing about national reconciliation, they support a winner-take-all approach for the Shi'a Arabs who, with three times the population of the Sunni Arabs, and with Iranian troops bolstering Shia militia, can impose their will on any Iraqi government. But the most serious interference by Iran has been in Lebanon, where it has helped to create and arm a militia, Hezbollah, that is now more powerful than the Lebanese army, that frequently stages marches to intimidate the Sunnis, and that has repeatedly been involved in terrorist attacks. Hezbollah is not just the enemy of a free Lebanon; it is our enemy, too. It was Hezbollah that, acting under Iran's direction, bombed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983, killing 241 Americans. It was the deadliest terrorist attack on Americans until 9/11. It was the deadliest day for our Marines since Iwo Jima. Those Americans, remember, were in Lebanon as peace-keepers. Apparently Iran and Hezbollah didn't want peace to come to Lebanon. They didn't want it in 1983, and they didn't want it on February 14, 2005, when Hezbollah blew up a car carrying former Prime Minister Rafik Harari, because as a strong Sunni political figure, he stood in Hezbollah's – and Iran's – way.

And Iran, with help from Hezbollah, has taken its bombing campaign to lands far from the Middle East. Iranian-backed terrorists bombed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992. In 1994, a single Hezbollah member bombed the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. In both attacks a total of 114 people were killed.

We want to declare our support for the new Saudi initiative, which is simply to create, for the people of Lebanon, a militia force capable of standing up to Hezbollah and, behind Hezbollah, Iran. As we understand it, the Saudis will supply weapons, as well as facilitating the recruitment and transport of volunteers from Egypt and Jordan. We look forward to working with our Saudi and Israeli partners in matters of intelligence sharing and logistics. For our part we will ensure that the skies over Lebanon remain free of Iranian planes. We are confident that not just the Sunnis in Lebanon, but others too, will come to see the necessity for such a force to offset Hezbollah. Christians in Lebanon, some of whom have allied with Hezbollah because they feared its retribution if they did not, will now be reassured that there is a militia powerful enough to protect all Lebanese from Hezbollah and Iran. There are also moderate Shi'a in Lebanon, opposed to, but fearful of, Hezbollah and Iran, who might welcome this new militia as counter-balancing Hezbollah. We do not see it as a "Sunni militia," but as a militia open to all those, in Lebanon, and among its closest allies, who oppose the aggressive and tyrannical rule of Hezbollah and its master Iran.

The Chief of Staff of Israel's military, General Gadi Eisenkot, recently announced – in an unprecedented interview with a Saudi newspaper – Israel's complete agreement with Saudi Arabia that the main threat in the Middle East is Iran, that Iran must be stopped. He said that Israel stands ready to share intelligence with Saudi Arabia. Many believe that such intelligence sharing has already been going on; General

Eisenkot did not deny it. He described Iran's attempt to create two Shi'a arcs, as it seeks to take control of the Middle East, creating a Shi'ite crescent from Lebanon to Iran, and then another from the Gulf to the Red Sea. Eizenkot said, when asked about Iran's intended goal. "We must prevent this from happening."

The Saudis are clearly quite disturbed about the situation in Lebanon, as are its allies in Egypt and Jordan who, we know, would gladly offer volunteers for a militia which will be predominantly, but not exclusively, Sunni. We are now certain that Israel, too, will not just be sharing intelligence with the Saudis – and with their Lebanese, Egyptian, and Jordanian allies – but take steps, in concert with them, to prevent Iran's supplying the latest weapons systems to Hezbollah.

We fully support the efforts of Saudi Arabia, together with Egypt, Jordan, and the Emirates, to create and sustain a powerful militia in Lebanon, in order to prevent a takeover of Lebanon by forces subservient to Iran. We all know what the threat to peace is in Lebanon. It's Hezbollah. It's Iran. And we are pleased that Israel and Saudi Arabia will be cooperating against a common enemy. Hassan Nasrallah may think he's invincible, and can continue to ride roughshod over Lebanon, but there are many now cooperating to prove him wrong. The American government wishes them, and all the people of Lebanon, whatever their sect, well.

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