

The Saudi-Lebanon Imbroglia and Geopolitical Realignments in West Asia

Written by Ramu C. M.

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RAMU C. M., DEC 29 2017

To ascertain whether the Syrian conflict was a blessing-in-disguise for Lebanese politics may appear as truism. For one, the underlying challenges associated with the conflict were instrumental in piecing together a pragmatic unity (at the national level) between the politically influential oligarchic factions and the militia-turned-political party, Hezbollah. Incidentally, it was only after a lengthy hiatus that such a taut amalgamation managed to trump the volatile socio-political fabric that often characterises Lebanese polity. Besides the socio-economic distress caused by the unbridled influx of refugees from Syria, the threats emanating from ISIS and Al Qaeda-affiliated terror groups had heralded the hitherto unlikely coalescence of a consensus-backed unity government in Lebanon. The 2016 Lebanese parliamentary elections were unique in a way that it saw the restoration of a relatively stable coalition government reinforced by the strong support of the Maronite Christians, the Sunnis and the Shiites – the three dominant ethnic groups in the diverse multi-cultural Arab republic.

A point that beckons mention here is that Lebanon sports a multi-confessional and multi-party parliamentary system with a carefully devised power-sharing apparatus. Accordingly, the President is normally chosen from within the Maronite Christians, the Prime Minister from the Sunni Muslim community and the Parliamentary Speakership rests with the Shiites. Even today, it is a country that is recovering from the vestiges of a series of unfortunate events, ranging from a prolonged civil war to partial occupation by both Syria and Israel – and not to mention – the assassination of a popular former Prime Minister. That former Prime Minister was the business tycoon Rafik Hariri, a Sunni Muslim with extensive family-cum-business connections in Saudi Arabia. Credited largely with the reconstruction of Beirut following the end of the civil war, the late Hariri had founded the Future Movement (FM), which officially became a political party under the stewardship of his son and current Prime Minister, Saad Hariri. In the context of the current debacle involving Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, the deep-rooted patron-protégé relationship between the Saudi royal purses and the Hariris (and their FM) needs to be given its due weighting.

The Ascent of Mohammed-bin-Salman

The entry of Mohammed-bin-Salman very much marks a spectacular breakthrough in years of Saudi polity. The young and charismatic Crown Prince has been undertaking radical domestic reforms in Saudi Arabia on a scale not seen since the days of King Faisal (1964-75); or perhaps even better. The key events of 1979 that rocked the Islamic world, namely the Iranian Revolution and the Grand Mosque Seizure, had shaken the nerves of the two prominent power-centres within Saudi Arabia: the Al-Saud family and the all-pervasive Wahhabi religious establishment. Under the pretext of safeguarding the royal family's custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites (Mecca and Medina), the alliance between the ultra-puritanical Wahhabis and the House of Saud was one again revitalised. The result was the curtailment of manifold civilian liberties and the iron-clad exercise of power by the religious establishment over the Saudi society.

Another offshoot of this alliance has been the massive export of the Wahhabi brand of Islam, besides the more fanatical Salafi ideology (that mutated as praxis to the former). It goes without saying that the same extremist ideas are behind the wave of terrorist organisations that are threatening global peace and stability in contemporary times. Interestingly, the oft-concealed sources behind several international terror-financing operations could be traced to the

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coffers of the many princes and their proxies (representing the top echelons of the oligarchic classes), who are in some way connected to or acquainted with the expansive Saudi royal family lineage. Until the massive crackdown initiated by Mohammed-bin-Salman on those responsible for the years of run-away corruption and capital outflows, these royal oligarchs had enjoyed total impunity under the shadow of the 'collective leadership' system that sustained itself mostly through the appeasement of the powerful clergy.

Not all was well in Saudi Arabia when Mohammed-bin-Salman's father and current ruler, Salman-bin-Abdulaziz, acceded to the throne. Oil prices were in steep fall and the widening budget deficit had forced the government to cut down on several welfare subsidies. Moreover, the Saudis were facing strategic setbacks on their direct and indirect campaigns in neighbouring Yemen and Syria – and that too at the cost of Iranian success. Similarly, the politico-diplomatic isolation of Qatar has only worked to little or no avail. Being an octogenarian at the sunset of his political career, Salman decided to vest de-facto control over the kingdom's domestic and foreign policy in his young and able son, Mohammed. Acutely aware of the multi-faceted problems engulfing the kingdom, Mohammed-bin-Salman has realised the need for an unavoidable detox of the economy and the administrative apparatus. The purported objective of these reforms is to create a more tolerant society with a vibrant economy that could easily woo foreign investments in the non-oil sectors. This is one of the hallmarks of the Crown Prince's Vision 2030, which entails a gradual economic overhaul that seeks to diversify Saudi Arabia from an exclusively oil-based economy to a knowledge-based economy – more or less on the lines of Dubai in the neighboring UAE.

So if Mohammed-bin-Salman is doing all the right things, then why is there a need for caution? For one, he seems to be going a tad overboard with his obsession of chastising Iran. And it is this obsession that has hastened the fiasco involving the alleged "hostage-taking" and subsequent resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister. Hariri seems to have rescinded his resignation after denying he was ever held hostage in Saudi Arabia; but has since toed a critical line towards Hezbollah and its benefactor, Iran. He however, refuses to divulge the details of what exactly transpired during his Saudi visit; yet the implications of the recent events are somewhat tacit and self-explanatory. It may be assumed with reasonable logic that Hariri was strong-armed by the Mohammed-bin-Salman machinery, given the former's business and family ties in/with Saudi Arabia. For instance, Saudi Oger, a construction company owned by the Hariri group, was forced out in Mohammed-bin-Salman's crackdown on corruption and graft. Ironically, all the elite oligarchs arrested in the crackdown were temporarily confined in the Saudi Ritz-Carlton, a luxury hotel owned by the defunct Saudi Oger.

The strong clout leveraged by Iran in Syria and Lebanon, especially in the aftermath of its resounding political and military success in Syria, has thrown a wrench in the works of the ambitious schemes envisioned by Mohammed-bin-Salman for a Saudi-led regional order. Down south, Yemen is a mess with the Saudi-led-military-alliance going up the blind alley in its campaign against the Houthi rebels. The carnage in Yemen has turned out to be a humanitarian disaster; yet hubris has taken the better of Crown Prince who vowed to step up the protracted campaign. Mohammed-bin-Salman vehemently blames Iran for its alleged support of the Houthis, in the same manner he blames Iran and Hezbollah for their "destabilising" presence across the 'Shia-corridor' stretching from Iran to Lebanon besides traversing Iraq and Syria.

In Lebanon's case, even if Saudi Arabia managed to use the Hariri episode to whither public support for Hezbollah, the desired outcome has so far not been achieved. As a matter of fact, what the Saudis do not seem to bear is the fact that Hezbollah is not a mere blemish in their plans for Lebanon, but it is rather the elephant in the room. It is not just the Shiites, but a considerable section of the Lebanese populace transcending the Maronite Christians, the Sunnis and several other minority sects still see Hezbollah's strong decentralised presence in Lebanese administrative and security circles as more of a boon than a curse. Besides, previous trends have shown that Hezbollah's support is vital for the stable functioning of any coalition government at the national level. On the flipside, the Saudi-Hariri affair has fueled a lot of resentment among the Lebanese people over the former's brinkmanship behaviour, supposedly aimed at stoking sectarian tensions to achieve political gains.

The American-Israeli Hand

That said, it would be fallacious to come out with an isolated analysis of the Saudi-Lebanese tango, particularly one

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that is restricted to the Saudi-Iran proxy confrontation, and does not take into account other direct and indirect stakeholders. It is no exaggeration that Israel and the United States are more than mere spectators in the game. President Trump has minced no words in expressing his admiration for the current Saudi administration, but more particularly Mohammed-bin-Salman and his bold reforms. This is a slight deviation from the approach of the Obama, Bush and Clinton administrations towards the Saudis. Whereas the previous post-Cold-War American administrations generally succumbed to the policies formulated by the largely neoconservative bureaucratic establishment, the Trumpian policies towards Saudi Arabia clearly show a marked effort to make it a tête-à-tête involving the close circles of the President and the Crown Prince. But this nowhere implies that Trump is acting all by himself; his commitment to Israel needs no elaboration and the overarching impact it has on his Middle East policies is no less succinct.

If pitted against one another in terms of their hawkishness towards Iran, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may probably fare well above Mohammed-bin-Salman. Already on the verge of completing his third term as Prime Minister, Netanyahu has succeeded in capitalising on an increasingly security-conscious Israeli public. Faced with existential adversaries (Hezbollah and Hamas) on its northern and southern fronts, alongside a reinvigorated Iranian presence across the Golan buffer zone with Syria, Netanyahu is pulling all the strings he needs in ensuring a reversal of fortunes for Iran and its proxies. Apart from wielding his personal bonhomie with Trump, Netanyahu has managed to mobilise the powerful Israeli and Zionist lobbies in the American Congress and Beltway to persuade the US establishment to take heavy-handed measures against alleged Iranian aggression. The invisible hand in the Saudi-Hariri bilateral episode is arguably a byproduct of Israel's calculated strategy to isolate Iran, withhold its access to hard currency earnings through sanctions relief, and scuttle its assistance to Hezbollah and Hamas.

At the same time, it is interesting to see where Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner features in the ebb and flow of American involvement in Middle East politics. Being among other things, senior adviser to Trump, Kushner's role pervades multiple domains of the President's policies. It is no secret that Kushner acted as chief interlocutor between American defence major Lockheed Martin and Saudi Arabia for the USD 28 billion contract signed earlier this year. In the changing pattern of the Saudi-US relationship from that of 'oil-for-security' to 'investments-for-security', Kushner looks poised to play a larger-than-life role.

It is further believed that Kushner's rather low-profile visit to Saudi Arabia just days before the corruption-crackdown and the Hariri affair had more to it than that merely warrants a low-profile picture. By connecting the dots, it becomes clear that one of the objectives behind the crackdown is to impart more transparency in the business environment within Saudi Arabia and in the functioning of Saudi-linked corporations. Such a transparency drive is inevitable, given the fact that the government plans to offer a fraction of the Saudi Aramco shares to the public. Since the Saudis intend to squeeze the maximum out of the proposed IPO (Initial Public Offering), Mohammed-bin-Salman has expedited the much-needed reforms to clear any cloud of secrecy regarding the balance sheets of the national oil giant. And if all goes to plan, the Aramco-listing should soon take place as expected in the New York Stock Exchange; precisely where Mohammed-bin-Salman has placed his bets. Suffice it to say that the somewhat sloppily executed Hariri episode was part of the grandiose scheme of things that alludes to a convergence of interests between Saudi Arabia, the United States and Israel.

Conclusion

Where the Saudis floundered by going overboard with the execution of the Hariri episode, France and Egypt earned some points with their timely 'mediatorial' services. Their message is clear: there are times when pragmatic 'regionalism' should triumph over ruthless polarisation. Reinforcing a similar perspective were Turkey and Russia which have displayed a nonchalant demeanor of sorts after officially expressing their consternation over the entire play of events. Perhaps Mohammed-bin-Salman should presently just focus on fighting corruption within the kingdom, and terrorism elsewhere. Using Lebanon as a pawn to throw brickbats on Iran will not divert attention from the abject state of affairs in Yemen. Obsession with short-term tactical gains can often deflect one's attention from the long-term strategic objectives. All in all, it will do himself and his country well if the Saudi Crown Prince marshals his one-upmanship to rejuvenate the national economy – and not where it is bound to backfire.

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