

Lebanese crisis bound up with war drive against Iran

By Bill Van Auken
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The resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, announced Saturday in Riyadh over Saudi state media, marks a further escalation of the US, Saudi and Israeli preparations for military confrontation with Iran.

After becoming prime minister for a second time in 2016—he previously held the office from 2009 to 2011—Hariri, the leader of the Lebanese Sunni Future Movement party, headed a so-called national unity government in which the Iranian-backed and Shia-dominated Hezbollah movement played a prominent role.

In his resignation speech, which he read out over the Saudi Al-Arabiya television, Hariri issued a virulent denunciation of both Hezbollah and Iran, rhetoric that echoed that of the Saudi monarchy. “Wherever Iran is found, we find disputes and war,” he asserted, adding that “we will cut any hand that causes harm in our region.”

“I point very clearly to Iran which spreads destruction and strife wherever it is, and witness to that its interventions in the internal matters of the Arab countries, in Lebanon and Syria and Bahrain and Yemen,” Hariri said.

Hariri’s sudden and unexpected resignation came on the same day that Riyadh was rocked by the summary arrests of close to a dozen Saudi princes and dozens of current and former state ministers on charges of corruption. Among those arrested—and who are being detained in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel rather than any Saudi jail—is Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the son of the late King Abdullah and head of the National Guard. Also detained was the billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, whose Kingdom Holding company has extensive interests in the US and Europe.

Corruption is endemic to the Saudi monarchical system, providing a convenient pretext for the arrests.

Their real purpose is to consolidate the power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who heads up the “anti-corruption” campaign, and ensure his succession to the throne.

The arrests may also, however, have a direct connection to Hariri’s resignation. The Saudi royal family has been roiled in recent months by divisions over the protracted and bloody US-backed war in Yemen, with which Bin Salman is most closely identified. The arrests may be aimed at quelling any dissent in relation to both the war and the continuing escalation of Riyadh’s anti-Iranian crusade, which is being carried out in alliance with both Washington and Tel Aviv.

There is every indication that Hariri’s resignation was staged at the behest of and in direct collaboration with the Saudi regime.

A key role in the affair has been played by the Saudi Minister of State for Persian Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan, who last Sunday had publicly taken Hariri’s government to task for its “silence” on Hezbollah’s “war” against the Persian Gulf monarchy. He demanded that Hezbollah be “confronted by force,” adding, “All of those who work and cooperate with it politically, economically and through the media should be punished,” a category that clearly would include Hariri.

Hezbollah has increasingly drawn the ire of the Saudi regime for the role it has played in helping the government of Bashar al-Assad defeat the collection of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist “rebels” who laid waste to Syria with the aid of billions of dollars in arms and money provided by Riyadh and the other Sunni Gulf oil sheikdoms in collaboration with the CIA.

The Shia-based movement, which emerged in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon,

succeeded in driving the US out of Lebanon in 1983 with the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, and forced Israel to end its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000. Again in 2006, it fought the Israeli military to a standstill in a month-long war.

While Hezbollah is a bourgeois movement, which upholds the interests of Lebanese Shia capitalists and merchants, its resistance to Israel and its populist appeals to the “oppressed” have won it support beyond its Shia base.

Two days after Sabhan’s implicit denunciation of his collaboration with Hezbollah, Hariri flew to Saudi Arabia, where his family’s multi-billion-dollar construction firm is based. He holds dual Lebanese-Saudi citizenship. There, he met with both Crown Prince Bin Salman and Al-Sabhan.

Afterwards, he went on Twitter to report his “extended meeting with his dear friend Sabhan,” while Sabhan himself tweeted that they had discussed “many issues concerning the well-being of Lebanon” and that “God willing, what is coming is better.”

What was coming, of course, was Hariri’s resignation, throwing Lebanon’s fragile sectarian-based political system into crisis and raising the specter of the country plunging once again into civil war.

Hariri, in explaining his resignation and his presence in the Saudi capital, claimed that there were threats to his life and that he feared a return to the environment in which his father was killed in 2005. The Saudi media amplified on this theme, claiming that there had been a botched assassination attempt on the Lebanese prime minister. Lebanese security forces roundly denied the existence of any such attempt or existing plots. Lebanese President Michel Aoun said he would not accept Hariri’s resignation until he returned to Beirut.

Hariri, while having long bitterly opposed Hezbollah, blaming the movement for the assassination of his father, the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, had backed the selection of Hezbollah’s ally Aoun for president, and accepted the nomination to form a government together with the powerful Shia-dominated movement in what was seen as a break in Lebanon’s protracted political impasse. He had also previously praised Hezbollah for its role in driving Al Qaeda-linked militias from the Syrian-Lebanese border.

What has changed is the ratcheting up of the campaign against Iran waged by Washington in alliance with both Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Trump administration has signaled its willingness to upend the Iranian nuclear agreement, which would place it on path to war with Tehran, while the US Congress last month enacted a new series of sanctions against Hezbollah, including the placing of multimillion-dollar bounties on the heads of two of its officials.

Lebanon, which suffered a civil war that bled the country from 1975 to 1989, is threatened with being turned into a field of battle in the drive by US imperialism to destroy Iran as an impediment to establishing hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. To this end, the US administration has deliberately sought to fan the flames of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, with potentially catastrophic implications for Lebanon.

The Israeli regime has made no attempt to conceal its glee over Hariri’s actions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the Lebanese prime minister’s resignation and statements in Riyadh as “a wake-up call for the international community to act against Iranian aggression.”

The country’s thuggish Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman went on Twitter to write: “Lebanon=Hezbollah. Hezbollah=Iran. Lebanon=Iran. Iran is dangerous to the world. Saad Hariri has proved that today. Period.”

The *Jerusalem Post* was even more explicit, stating, “Now, it seems that Hariri has given Israel more legitimacy for a full-scale and uncompromising campaign against Iran and Lebanon, not only Hezbollah, should a war in the north break out.”

It approvingly quoted Yoav Gallant, a member of the security cabinet and former Israeli general, who vowed that should war begin, “Israel will bring Lebanon back to the stone age.”

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