



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# As Saudi Arabia Reels, the Middle East Will Only Get Worse

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 638, November 10, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** While the recent wave of dismissals and arrests of members of the Saudi ruling family, senior officials, and prominent businessmen clouds prospects for Prince Muhammad's economic reform plans, signs of an escalation in Saudi-Iranian tensions bode ill for the rest of the region.

As Saudi Arabia reels from Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's frontal [assault](#) on the kingdom's elite, indications are that the Saudi-Iranian proxy war is heating up. The arrests occurred as Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri [resigned](#) in what many saw as a Saudi-engineered move aimed at stymying Lebanon's powerful, pro-Iranian Hezbollah militias. Saudi defenses also [intercepted](#) a ballistic missile attack by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

A Saudi-backed military alliance that includes the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, and Sudan appeared to open the door for a more direct confrontation with Iran when it denounced the missile strike as "a blatant and direct military aggression by the Iranian regime, which may amount to an act of war against Saudi Arabia."

"Saudi Arabia also has a right to respond to Iran at the appropriate time and manner, supported by international law and in accordance with its inherent right to defend its territory, its people, and its interests protected by all international conventions," the alliance [said](#) in a statement.

Aware that a military confrontation with Iran could prove disastrous, Saudi Arabia signaled that it is more likely to strike at Iranian proxies. In response to the missile attack, it [imposed](#) a temporary air, land, and sea embargo on Yemen,

a country that is struggling with a humanitarian catastrophe as a result of the kingdom-led two-and-one-half-year military intervention.

Some 10,000 people have been killed in the war, which, according to the UN, has left half a million Yemenis infected with cholera and some seven million on the brink of famine in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Yemen is not, however, the only place that is likely to see escalation because of increasing Saudi-Iranian tensions.

Lebanon, for example, is a collection of religious and ethnic minorities that has yet to cement an overriding national identity – but that has miraculously maintained stability despite the Syrian civil war on its doorstep and a massive influx of refugees. Following Hariri's resignation, Lebanon is teetering.

While there is only circumstantial evidence for Saudi Arabia's role in persuading Hariri, who said he [feared for his life](#) amid rumors of a foiled assassination attempt, to resign, he was unequivocal in towing the Saudi line in his announcement.

Iran, Hariri said, "has a desire to destroy the Arab world and has boasted of its control of the decisions in all the Arab capitals. Hezbollah imposed a reality in Lebanon through force of arms, and their intervention causes us big problems with all our Arab allies."

The impression of Saudi influence was fueled by the fact that Hariri [made his announcement](#) not on his Future TV network but in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, on the kingdom's Al Arabiya station. Ironically, the owner of Al Arabiya, Waleed bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahim, was among the businessmen detained on the instructions of Prince Muhammad.

Beyond holding dual Lebanese-Saudi citizenship, Hariri long headed Saudi Oger, a conglomerate owned by his family. Saudi Oger [went bankrupt](#) earlier this year, becoming one of the first victims of the economic downturn in the kingdom as a result of decreased oil revenues.

While there is little doubt that Saudi Arabia is seeking to weaken Hezbollah's strong position in Lebanon, it was not clear whether that was sole reason for Saudi enthusiasm about Hariri's resignation. The former prime minister was widely seen as Lebanon's most accommodating Sunni Muslim politician, willing to acknowledge that Hezbollah, believed by many to be responsible for the 2005 killing of his father, Rafik Hariri, was a part of the country's political infrastructure.

By throwing a monkey wrench into Lebanese politics, Hariri has opened the door to Saudi attempts to generate pressure on Hezbollah to choose between being a political party that is subject to government decisions, like not interfering in the Syrian war, or an Iranian proxy that engages in regional conflicts. The problem is that due to the weakness of the Lebanese state and military, past attempts to blunt Hezbollah's fangs have failed.

While Hezbollah has [made clear](#) that it did not want Hariri to resign, does not desire an escalation of tensions in Lebanon, and is seeking a peaceful resolution to the crisis, it may not have much control over events. The [crisis](#) could lead to the demise of President Michel Aoun, a close ally of Hezbollah, or be part of a Saudi effort to provoke a Hezbollah-Israel war.

An international group of former generals, the High Level Military Group, [warned](#) earlier this month that a bloody Hezbollah-Israel war is inevitable, if not necessarily imminent.

"Hezbollah doesn't want a conflict to break out at present, given it is still seeking to consolidate its gains in Syria and continue preparations in Lebanon. However, its actions and propaganda suggest that it considers its ability to fight a war with Israel as a given. The timing of such a conflict is likely to be determined by miscalculation as much as decision-making in Iran and Lebanon," the group said in a 76-page [report](#).

Yemen and Lebanon may be the most immediate theaters of Saudi-Iranian confrontation based on recent events, but they are certainly not the only ones. The two regional powers are on opposite sides of the fence in the Syrian conflict and vying for influence in Iraq. Looming in the background is the Pakistani province of Balochistan, which Saudi Arabia sees as a potential launching pad should it want to stir up ethnic unrest in Iran.

Fueling tensions, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [described](#) Hariri's resignation as a clarion call for confrontation with Iran. Netanyahu said the resignation was "a wake-up call to the international community to take action against Iranian aggression" and warned that "the international community needs to unite and confront this aggression."

None of this bodes well for the Middle East. Not only does it risk escalation in those countries in which Saudi Arabia and Iran are battling it out through proxies, but it also risks fueling sectarianism in a part of the world in which minorities are on the defensive, Sunni-Shiite relations are frayed, and the cost of conflict and war is taking its toll on civilian populations.

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family