The Saudi Hand in Lebanon’s Crisis

Facing defeat in its proxy war for “regime change” in Syria, Saudi Arabia undertook some startling moves, including staging the resignation of Lebanon’s prime minister, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Last weekend during a visit to Saudi Arabia, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri suddenly and dramatically resigned, raising questions about whether the Saudi leadership was engineering a political crisis in Lebanon as a way to counter the defeat of its jihadist proxies in Syria.

Given the timing and the unusual circumstances – from a fancy hotel in Riyadh – questions also were raised about whether Hariri’s resignation amounted to the kidnapping of the Lebanese leader (who has dual Saudi citizenship) or whether it presaged a new front in the regional wars.

I spoke with Beirut-based Professor, Activist and Environmental Scientist Rania Masri last Monday, while Hariri’s whereabouts and safety were still in question.

Dennis Bernstein: The prime minister of Lebanon has stepped down. Could you talk a little bit about what provoked that and the significance of that action?

Rania Masri: The prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, was called very suddenly to Saudi Arabia. He cancelled all his appointments and went on Thursday. On Saturday there was a taped broadcast in which he stated that he was resigning as prime minister. This has never happened in the history of Lebanon. This is a resignation submitted from outside the country!

Secondly, the statement that he read was clearly not a statement that he wrote. We know this because of linguistic assessments of the statement and we know this because his brother writes his statements and his brother has been in Lebanon. It is very clear that this was a resignation forced upon him by the Saudi government. He has not been answering his phone for the past few days. Most likely he is locked up in the Ritz Carlton Hotel along with dozens of other influential Saudi princes and businessmen who are under arrest there. The president has asked him to return to Lebanon before the resignation becomes finalized.

Saad al-Hariri read the letter of resignation on Saturday. He said that he is forced to resign because of Iranian intervention in Lebanon. Imagine, to leave the country and go to Saudi Arabia to resign because of another country’s intervention in your home country! He also claims in the statement that
Hezbollah is an Iranian tool and that Iranian hands must be cut off by all means necessary. It was basically very threatening language against Lebanon.

Since then, Saudi minister Sabhan—who many believe wrote the statement for Hariri—has stated that Lebanon must decide between peace and keeping Hezbollah in the government. He continues to say that as long as Hezbollah is present in the Lebanese government, he will consider that the Lebanese government is at war with Saudi Arabia. So here we have a minister from Saudi Arabia openly declaring war on the entire country of Lebanon!

Dennis Bernstein: The simple explanation in the Western corporate press is that Hariri was afraid he would face the same fate as his father, who was assassinated.

Rania Masri: That has no basis in fact. There are three types of intelligence services in Lebanon, each of which is aligned to a different political party. All have agreed that there is no evidence of any assassination plot against Hariri or anyone else in Lebanon. At the same time, no one has been able to reach him on the phone since Friday. He can’t really believe that anyone is going to kill him if he answers the phone!

Dennis Bernstein: Should we be thinking about this in the context of this extraordinary shake-up in Saudi Arabia?

Rania Masri: One hundred percent. The day before Saad Hariri was called to Saudi Arabia, he was speaking positively of the Lebanese government. There was no discord within the government. Then he gets called to Saudi Arabia, disappears for a day and issues this resignation on a taped broadcast. At the same time, we have the capture and arrest of these very influential multi-millionaires in Saudi Arabia, all thrown into this same hotel.

We have to remember that Saad Hariri also has Saudi Arabian citizenship, that he and his family have had investments in Saudi Arabia since the early 1970’s. He may be held liable to Saudi law, particularly if he loses his diplomatic immunity with his resignation. So at the very least we know that he did not issue his resignation because of an internal Lebanese problem. It is no coincidence that we now have this shake-up in Saudi Arabia to cement financial and military and political power all in one man.

Dennis Bernstein: This would be an extremely bold action on the part of the Saudis, one which almost certainly was not taken without the knowledge of the United States government. You have the US flooding Saudi Arabia with weapons so that they can tighten their grip in Yemen.

Rania Masri: Trump has been saluting the Saudi regime. After what has been
happening the past few days, he actually tweeted that he would like Aramco to move its headquarters to New York and be part of the New York Stock Exchange, that this would serve US interests.

No, I don’t think the Saudi regime began this shake-up without the US administration’s blessing. Some have even taken it a step further and say that this is not a Saudi-imposed resignation but an Israeli-imposed resignation presented via the Saudis. There are several different analyses you can make, but what is clear is that our prime minister issued his resignation while out of the country and has not been available for communication ever since.

The Saudi regime has been escalating its war in Yemen without any political victory in sight, it was the main financier behind the ISIS terrorists in Syria with the specific purpose of destroying Damascus, and now has set its sights on Lebanon.

Dennis Bernstein: How do we find out at this point what is really going on?

Rania Masri: Given its record in the region, I don’t think we should be calling in the United Nations. Remember that the United Nations Security Council imposed genocidal sanctions on Iraq for twelve years. In no way, as a person from this region, would I be reaching out to the UN.

What is needed is for Hariri to return to Lebanon and, if he wants to resign, he can do it from the safety of his home here. What is also needed is for the media, particularly in the West, to clearly recognize what is happening. These are not changes for democracy and against corruption in Saudi Arabia, as has been promoted by The Guardian, among others.

It’s important to recognize that when Hezbollah is threatened, all Lebanon is threatened. Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization within the country, Hezbollah is a legitimate political party, a legitimate resistance movement, it is part and parcel of the fabric of this country. What the Saudis are calling for is that the Lebanese relinquish what is left of our sovereignty and to sacrifice our main means of protecting ourselves against Israeli aggression.

Remember that it was Hezbollah that fought to liberate the south of Lebanon from the 22-year occupation of the Israelis. It was Hezbollah who defeated Israeli in the 2006 war. And because of that, since 2006, Israel has not launched another military aggression against this country, even though they typically do so every three years.

And for Saudi Arabia to threaten Lebanon that either we disarm and remove Hezbollah as a legitimate political party or we will face Saudi repercussions is basically having us choose between a war with Saudi Arabia or being defenseless
and broken. Saudi Arabia has the means to cause assassinations, to launch terrorist campaigns, to wage economic warfare against the country, but they do not have the means to break the back of the Lebanese people.

Dennis Bernstein: You alluded to the invisible hand of Israel.

Rania Masri: Benjamin Netanyahu has been gleeful ever since the Saudi statements and he has been promoting it as a further reason for the international community to attack and isolate Iran and to dismantle Hezbollah. We already know that this Saudi regime and the Israeli regime are in cahoots. So it comes as no surprise for the Israeli government to be the first to welcome these Saudi statements.

The Saudis seem to have forgotten who the real enemy is in the region and to have accepted a false sectarian discourse that the enemy is Iran and the Shias. Well, we all know that the enemy of the region is Zionism, a philosophy built on apartheid that continues to seek expansionist means, that continues to promote ethnic cleansing and genocide against Palestinians.

Dennis Bernstein: What are you watching now, what are your concerns?

Rania Masri: People from various political spectrums in the country have been re-tweeting the statement of the Saudi Arabian Minister of State for Gulf Affairs and basically consider this a declaration of war. We are watching the news, we are following the situation very closely. We are making a lot of jokes about what is happening because that is how we deal with it. But we are also following the advice of Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, who has advised us to be calm and to wait a few days until we understand what has been happening. Nasrallah will speak again on Friday [Nov. 10] and respond to the specific content of the letter presented to us on Saturday.

Dennis Bernstein: How does Syria play into all of this?

Rania Masri: The way the Saudi government is behaving is like a cat in a corner. It is important to stress that the Saudi Arabian plan in Syria failed miserably. They were not able to destroy Damascus, they were not able to break the country apart, they were not able to dismantle the Syrian regime. They were able to contribute to the destruction and to the many massacres at the hands of ISIS.

We are dealing with a country with a great deal of financial and military power but whose plans in the region have failed. Now it is looking to completely destroy the resistance movement in Lebanon, particularly because Hezbollah also played a part in standing against ISIS in Syria.
Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).