

Hizballah, Lebanon, and Reconciliation with the Gulf: The Impasse

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On February 14, in Beirut's southern, Hizballah-dominated suburb of Ghobeiry, Bahraini opposition groups marked the anniversary of the 2011 failed popular uprising in Bahrain. The gathering, organized by the Bahraini opposition group *al-Wifaq*, took place despite the Lebanese interior ministry's orders to cancel it, which were issued in order to avoid offending Bahrain and its Gulf allies.¹ Lebanese ties with a quartet of Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates – have been at an impasse since October 2021. The diplomatic crisis, which has yet to be resolved, was sparked by Lebanese Information Minister George Kurdahi's critical comments regarding Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen. At its core, however, the crisis in Lebanese-Gulf relations is a dispute over Hizballah and its growing political influence in Lebanon – a source of tension for several years.

The failure to restore – or at least make serious progress toward restoring – Lebanese-Gulf relations is due to three interrelated factors: First, the weakness of the Lebanese state; second, Hizballah's hardline and antagonistic position toward Saudi Arabia; and, third, Saudi Arabia's hardline and antagonistic position toward Hizballah. While Lebanese leaders have expressed their desire for reconciliation, they are not capable of fully meeting the Gulf states' demands, lacking the will and power to confront Hizballah. Hizballah, seeking to further erode the Gulf states' influence in Lebanon, refuses to tone down its rhetoric and has no reason to do so. Saudi Arabia,

¹ [“Lebanon: Interior Minister issues two new directives banning a gathering of the Bahraini opposition in Beirut \[Arabic\],”](#) *al-Mayadeen*, February 11, 2022; and, [“The Bahraini opposition party al-Wifaq holds a solidarity meeting in Beirut's southern suburbs \[Arabic\],”](#) *al-Mayadeen*, February 14, 2022.

hoping to weaken Hizballah's grip on Lebanon and pressure the government there to adopt serious internal reforms, has used all the leverage it has to induce change, going all-in on a strategy that has yet to pay dividends – and is unlikely to do so. Indeed, so long as the core demand for fully restored relations focuses on disarming and curtailing Hizballah's power in Lebanon, Lebanese-Gulf reconciliation can only be partially achieved.

Things Fall Apart

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have notably worsened over the past year as Lebanon's political, economic, and financial crises have enabled Hizballah to further enhance its power and influence. In April 2021, Saudi authorities banned the import of fruits and vegetables from Lebanon after they seized more than 7.8 million Captagon pills concealed in pomegranates and in response to the Lebanese authorities' general failure to stop drug-smuggling into the Kingdom.² The following month, Lebanon's caretaker foreign minister Charbel Wehbe was forced to resign after publicly blaming Saudi Arabia – and its Gulf allies – Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates – for the rise of the Islamic State and derisively characterizing Gulf countries as “Bedouins.” Wehbe's comments caused an uproar in Lebanon where some accused him of “committing crimes that threaten national unity and Lebanon's relationships with Arab countries.”³ On October 27, 2021, just days before Kurdahi's comments about the Saudi role in Yemen were published, Saudi Arabia designated al-Qard al-Hassan (AQAH), a Beirut-based financial firm affiliated with Hizballah, as a terrorist organization.⁴ Saudi Arabia has also refused to extend financial support to ease the economic and financial crisis facing Lebanon, conditioning its support on the Lebanese government implementing serious and tangible reforms and curtailing Hizballah's influence in the country, including disarming the group.⁵

Kurdahi's remarks (made shortly before he was appointed information minister in August, but only aired in late October) casting Saudi Arabia as the aggressor in the seven-year war against Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthis touched a particular nerve

² Mohammed al-Kinani, “[Saudi Arabia bans fruits, vegetables from Lebanon after drug busts](#),” *Arab News*, April 23, 2021.

³ Najia Houssari, “[Lebanese foreign minister quits over Gulf remark controversy](#),” *Arab News*, May 19, 2021.

⁴ AQAH was first designated in 2007 by the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Saudi Arabia's designation of AQAH came several months after OFAC had designated seven individuals in connection with Hizballah and AQAH. See: US Department of Treasury, “[Treasury Targets Hizballah Finance Official and Shadow Bankers in Lebanon](#),” May 11, 2021; and, Tuqa Khalid, “[Saudi Arabia designates Lebanon's Al-Qard al-Hassan terrorist entity, freezes assets](#),” *al-Arabiya*, October 27, 2021.

⁵ “[Saudi assistance to Lebanon conditioned on serious reforms](#),” *The Arab Weekly*, August 11, 2021; and, “[Lebanon foreign minister: disarming Hizballah is a red line](#),” *The National*, January 30, 2022.

in the Gulf and provoked a severe response. Saudi Arabia announced it was severing diplomatic and trade ties with Lebanon, expelling the Lebanese ambassador from Riyadh and recalling its ambassador from Beirut, while also banning all imports from Lebanon. Several Gulf states also took punitive steps against Lebanon in solidarity with Riyadh, but to different degrees. Bahrain and Kuwait expelled Lebanese diplomats and recalled their own ambassadors, while the UAE only recalled its ambassador from Beirut. Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE also advised their citizens not travel to Lebanon and for those citizens residing in Lebanon to return home. Qatar denounced Kurdahi's remarks and urged Lebanon to take steps to heal the rift that had emerged. No Gulf state, however, went as far as Saudi Arabia and banned imports from Lebanon.⁶

The Limits of Mediation

Seeking to limit the damage, Lebanon's prime minister, Najib Mikati, and its president, Michel Aoun, immediately disowned Kurdahi's statements and implicitly urged him to resign, which he refused to do. Urging Kurdahi to "prioritize national interests" in order to end the crisis, Mikati was careful to avoid directly calling for Kurdahi's resignation, which would have angered Hizballah and Amal (which supported the information minister) – and led to the dissolution of the government. Lebanese officials also attempted to placate Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states by publicly praising the Kingdom, distancing Lebanon from the comments, and making sentimental appeals to the deep ties between Lebanon and the Gulf.

However, their carefully worded statements, which were designed to avoid antagonizing Hizballah, had little chance of being welcomed in the Gulf, which wanted the one thing most Lebanese officials were keen to avoid – confronting Hizballah. Nor did Hizballah help the matter of reconciliation by taking an equally hardline position vis-à-vis the Saudis. Hizballah and its allies accused Saudi Arabia of meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs and blackmailing the country, further antagonizing the Saudis, and Hizballah's deputy chief, Naim Qassem, suggested that Saudi Arabia apologize for the whole affair.⁷

Efforts to mediate the crisis by the Arab League and the French initially focused on convincing Lebanon to meet Saudi Arabia's demand that Kurdahi resign, using it as a

⁶ ["The most prominent stages of the latest crises between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon... Kurdahi is not the first \[Arabic\],"](#) *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, October 30, 2021; ["UAE calls on citizens in Lebanon to return as soon as possible,"](#) *Arab News*, October 31, 2021; and ["Bahrain calls on citizens to leave Lebanon immediately: BNA,"](#) *al-Arabiya*, November 2, 2021.

⁷ ["Naim Qassem – Saudi Arabia initiated an aggression against Lebanon and should apologize \[Arabic\],"](#) *al-Nahar*, November 3, 2021.

starting point for repairing relations. Kurdahi refused to do so until early December 2021, announcing his resignation on the eve of French president Emmanuel Macron's visit to Saudi Arabia. French and Saudi leaders agreed to establish a joint French-Saudi mechanism to provide Lebanon with humanitarian assistance but stopped well-short of providing a path forward for fully restoring relations. Indeed, the Gulf states' core demands (shared by the French) for actual reform in Lebanon and curtailing Hizballah's power remained broadly unaddressed. Nor did Saudi Arabia or the other Gulf states agree to return their ambassadors to Lebanon or lift their economic blockade. Indeed, the French initiative was largely hollow, succeeding only in calming tensions on the surface. It was only several months later, on February 28, that details on the French-Saudi joint working mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance were published and agreed upon.⁸

The latest rapprochement efforts have been led by Kuwait. In January, Kuwait presented Lebanese leaders with a twelve-point roadmap for restoring relations. Among the conditions were holding parliamentary elections as scheduled, launching a reform program, complying with UN Resolution 1559 (calling for all militias, i.e., Hizballah, to disband), and that Lebanon not be used as a platform for verbal or physical aggression against the Gulf states. Lebanese officials have gone to great lengths to openly signal the Saudis and their Gulf allies that Lebanon does want to reconcile. For example, the Lebanese government condemned the Houthi attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia,⁹ announced Lebanese security forces had made multiple seizures of illicit drugs concealed in foodstuffs that were for export to the Gulf, and Lebanese president Michel Aoun sent a letter to the Saudi king commemorating the Kingdom's establishment and expressing hope for reconciliation.¹⁰

However, while Lebanese leaders responded positively to the Kuwaiti initiative, they also made it clear that it was impossible for Lebanon to disarm Hizballah. Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib declared that the demand to disarm Hizballah would lead to "civil war" in Lebanon and was beyond the means of the Lebanese government.¹¹ Indeed, Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah, while saying he supported

⁸ ["Saudi Arabia, France agree to set up joint working mechanism to support Lebanese people,"](#) *L'Orient Today*, February 28, 2022.

⁹ ["Lebanon condemns deadly Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia,"](#) *al-Arabiya*, December 27, 2021; and Tala Ramadan, ["Lebanese officials condemn suspected drone attack in Abu Dhabi,"](#) *L'Orient Today*, January 17, 2022.

¹⁰ ["Aoun expresses wishes to end Gulf rift in letter to Saudi king,"](#) *L'Orient Today*, February 25, 2022;

¹¹ ["Bou Habib says Gulf countries' demand to disarm Hizballah constitutes a call for 'civil war',"](#) *L'Orient Today*, February 18, 2022.

efforts of dialogue, rejected what he termed as Kuwaiti “dictates” and the very idea that his organization would disarm.¹²

Hizballah – The Path of Open Antagonism

Notwithstanding Nasrallah’s statement of support for dialogue, Hizballah has adopted a more openly hostile and antagonistic approach to the Saudis since the start of the new year. In a speech commemorating the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, Nasrallah accused the Saudis of spreading terrorism and holding Lebanese working in the Gulf hostage. To be sure, there is no love lost between Hizballah and the Saudis. However, Nasrallah’s provocative accusations marked a departure from the relative restraint the group typically demonstrates when criticizing Saudi Arabia to avoid upsetting Lebanon’s internal sectarian balances.

Hizballah’s antagonistic approach was on full display a week later when it hosted the “Arabian Peninsula Opposition Conference,” an event supporting the Saudi opposition in its southern Beirut stronghold of Dahiyeh on the eighth anniversary of the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.¹³ Sheikh al-Nimr was a prominent Shi‘i dissident in the Kingdom and his execution in 2016 sparked widespread protests among Shi‘a across the region, which called for the downfall of the Kingdom’s ruling Al Sa‘ud family. Held on such a symbolic day, Hizballah hoped that the conference, which brought together Sunni, Shi‘i, and Ismaili opposition figures, would serve as a moment to galvanize a unified Saudi opposition movement, and speakers at the conference openly denounced the Kingdom.

Lebanese officials have tried, to little or no avail, to reign in Hizballah regarding its antagonism towards the Saudis. Following Nasrallah’s speech on January 3, Prime Minister Najib Mikati distanced the Lebanese government from Nasrallah’s comments and accused Hizballah of opposing Lebanese national interests and Lebanon’s diplomatic relations. Mikati’s comments were echoed by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who accused the Shi‘i group of “adventurism,” and President Michel Aoun, who stated that good relations between Lebanon and the Gulf states was in everyone’s interest. However, their entreaties and others have fallen on deaf ears.

¹² Ismaeel Naar, [“Hizballah leader denounces Kuwaiti proposals but backs Lebanon-Gulf dialogue,”](#) *The National*, February 9, 2022.

¹³ Jeanine Jalkh, [“Hizballah goes on the offensive: ‘We will no longer accept being called terrorists,’”](#) *L’Orient Today*, January 13, 2022.

Lebanese officials have also tried to wield what little power they have to dissuade Hizballah from openly provoking the Saudis and other Gulf states to little avail. In December 2021, Bahrain's Shi'i opposition group al-Wifaq held a press conference under Hizballah's auspices decrying the Bahraini government and its human rights record. The event outraged Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, forcing the Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi to announce he was expelling non-Lebanese members of al-Wifaq from the country.¹⁴ Similarly, prior to its conference with the Saudi opposition, Mawlawi warned Hizballah to refrain from publicly attacking the Kingdom. The latter warning was ignored entirely and the chairman of Hizballah's Executive Council, Hashem Safieddine, accused the Saudis of harming Lebanon and trying to pit the Lebanese people against each other, warning them to stop interfering in country. Safieddine, however, did not stop there: he openly voiced Hizballah's support for the Saudi opposition.¹⁵ The most recent, February 14, incident with al-Wifaq in Lebanon demonstrates that the Lebanese government lacks the power to enforce its own pronouncements and bans when it comes to the actions of Hizballah and the groups it supports.¹⁶

To Where?

Hizballah's open antagonism towards Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the weakness of the Lebanese state, and the Gulf's ongoing demand to curtail Hizballah's power complicate Lebanese-Gulf reconciliation. While Hizballah's open antagonism may win it accolades among Lebanese Shi'a and its benefactors in Iran, it can only bring further harm to Lebanon by inviting painful economic reprisals from the Gulf that would further destabilize Lebanon's precarious political and economic situation. At the same time, while Lebanese officials appear to genuinely want rapprochement, a full restoration of ties is unlikely so long as the Gulf maintains its demand that Hizballah disarm. Thus, partial reconciliation seems the only possible outcome, but this, too, is dependent on a Lebanese government actually implementing reforms that strengthen state institutions and on Hizballah toning down its rhetoric.

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¹⁴ ["From Beirut... 'al-Wifaq' attacks Bahrain with the support of 'Hizballah'... and the Lebanese government is silent \[Arabic\]," Okaz](#), December 9, 2021; and Kareem Chehayeb, ["Lebanon to deport members of banned Bahraini group Al-Wefaq," al-Jazeera](#), December 15, 2021.

¹⁵ Jeanine Jalkh, ["Hizballah goes on the offensive: 'We will no longer accept being called terrorists,'" L'Orient Today](#), January 13, 2022.

¹⁶ Ismaeel Naar, ["Lebanon bans Bahrain opposition group's events in Beirut," The National](#), February 11, 2022; and Ismaeel Naar, ["Banned in Bahrain, Al Wefaq holds event in Hizballah-held Beirut suburb," The National](#), February 15, 2022.

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