# French President Hollande announces Lebanese arms deal in Saudi Arabia

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French President François Hollande traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with Saudi and Lebanese officials on Sunday and Monday. He was accompanied by 30 top business leaders and four ministers, including Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Hollande held separate meetings with Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, Saudi King Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and Syrian opposition leader Ahmed Jarba.

The main purpose of Hollande's visit was to back the continuing Sunni opposition forces' sectarian war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and arm Sunni forces in neighboring Lebanon to the teeth. He inked a weapons deal with Saudi Arabia, which has pledged to provide a $3 billion royal grant to buy French weapons for the Lebanese Army. The grant is two times the entire military budget of Lebanon, which like Syria is a former French colony.

Following the assassination of former Lebanese Finance Minister Mohammad Chatah in a car bomb last Friday, the situation in Lebanon was at the top of the agenda. Both French and Saudi leaders expressed concern over Iran's role in the region. Other topics included the civil war in Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation in Egypt, and growing commercial ties between Saudi Arabia and France .

At a press conference at the French Embassy in Riyadh, Hollande pledged to "support the Syrian coalition." He said that the two countries "share a pledge to work for peace, security and stability in the Middle East."

Hollande also held a 40-minute meeting with billionaire former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri of the Lebanese Future Movement on Sunday, accompanied by his foreign minister. Ahead of the meeting, Fabius said Hollande would reiterate Paris's friendship with Lebanon and his "calls for the integrity and independence" of Lebanon.

Hariri praised France's readiness to arm the Lebanese Army and also thanked King Abdullah for the "historic and unprecedented" scale of the arms deal.

Hollande and his defense minister also met with Ahmed Jarba, head of the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (NCSR).

Fabius told Jarba that he approved of the opposition's participation in the January 22 Geneva 2 conference. He promised that France would support the "moderate opposition and in no way the terrorist movements that paradoxically serve the interests" of Assad, who he claimed was using the threat of fundamentalists "to put pressure on the moderate opposition."

This is a cynical dodge, aiming to hide the fact that in Syria, France—together with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and its allies—have backed a collection of Sunni Islamist militias and criminal gangs linked to Al Qaeda.

France, which aggressively pushed for air strikes against Syria last year—before the United States shifted policy and opened up negotiations with Syria's key regional ally, Iran—continues to provide aid to the reactionary Syrian "rebels." Hollande continues to insist that a political solution that leaves Bashar al-Assad in power is unacceptable.

The enormous shipment of French weapons to Lebanon, funded by the Saudi royals, represents a renewed intervention of French imperialism into the politics of its former colony.

The references of Hollande and Fabius to regional stability and Lebanese independence were aimed at disguising the character of the visit. In fact, the unprecedented weapons sale represents an intensification of France's role in the imperialist-

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backed conflict in Syria and Lebanon.

The French arms industry is to be provided a boost to its profits at the expense of the Saudi people. Despite being home to the world's richest oil reserves, Saudi society is shaped by enormous inequality. A quarter of the population lives in poverty, youth unemployment stands at 30 percent, and a large workforce of migrant laborers works the country's oil fields and construction sites in appalling conditions.

The corrupt and super-rich Saudi royals, on the other hand, monopolize tens of billions of dollars for their own reactionary purposes. Cables released by Wikileaks revealed that a handful of Saudi princes skimmed off revenues from up to 1 million barrels of oil per day in the 1990s, while thousands of other members of the royal family received smaller stipends.

The Saudi monarchy uses another portion of the country's profits to exert its influence in the region—serving as an instrument of the ambitions of the US, France and other imperialist powers.

The US has now shifted its regional tactics in the direction of direct negotiations with Iran, but the consequences of its policies remain in the form of a conflict that threatens to draw the entire region into a civil war between rival sects and tribal groups.

Saudi Arabia has continued to back the opposition in Syria and add fuel to a conflict that spilled over into Iraq and Lebanon last year. The Saudi monarchy views the US policy shift as a serious threat to its own economic and political position and has refused to be bound by any Western agreement with Iran and Syria.

"The Saudi monarchy cannot fathom the fact that Assad might survive this crisis and then turn against them," Ali al-Ahmed, director of the Washington, DC-based Institute of Gulf Affairs told the Associated Press. "They reject this possibility and are willing to do what they can to make Assad go."

Hezbollah, which stands on the opposite side in the Syrian conflict, has insisted that it is the primary target of the French-Saudi weapons deal. A source inside the March 8 alliance, led by Hezbollah, told *An Nahar* newspaper that "the Saudi grant is linked to the extension of Suleiman's mandate as Saudi Arabia aims at controlling the army to confront [Hezbollah]."

A caustic editorial in *Al-Akhbar* by its editor-in-chief, Ibrahim al-Amin, addresses Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, accusing him of serving the whims of France and Saudi Arabia. "In your last visit to Riyadh, the one giving the handout told you that the army's duty is to fight Hezbollah – disarm them and prevent them from going to Syria. He told you this is the precondition for supporting the army," al-Amin wrote.

Another *Al-Akhbar* article claims that the $3 billion donation is conditional on the formation of a cabinet that excludes Hezbollah. It links the donation to Suleiman's earlier announcement of his intention to form a "neutral government" excluding Hezbollah in the first week of January.

March 8 representatives told *Al-Akhbar* that "the decision to form a de facto government is part of the war Saudi Arabia is waging in the region, from Syria and Iraq, to Lebanon and Bahrain." They have threatened to storm the prime minister's headquarters if they are excluded from government.

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