

Saudi Arabia cancels \$3 billion grant for French military aid to Lebanon

Kumaran Ira
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On Friday, Saudi Arabia announced that it would scrap a \$3 billion grant to buy French weapons for the Lebanese Army and suspend \$1 billion in aid for Lebanon's internal security service. The decision comes in response to growing Saudi concerns over ties between Lebanon and Iran, Saudi Arabia's main regional rival.

The decision to abandon military funding was the result of "hostile Lebanese positions resulting from the stranglehold of Hezbollah on the State," the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) stated. The SPA quoted an official source as saying that the increased influence of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah party in Lebanese affairs had undermined Saudi-Lebanese ties.

The Saudi-funded "Donas" military aid program was announced in December 2013 by the late King Abdullah to finance the purchase of French weapons and equipment by the Lebanese armed forces. The deal was signed between France and Saudi Arabia at the end of 2014.

The Saudi grant was three times more than the annual Lebanese defense budget of \$1.2 billion. The program includes shipment of vehicles, helicopters, drones, cannons and other equipment.

After an initial delivery of 48 Milan anti-tank missiles in April last year, the program was delayed as Saudi authorities sought a review of certain aspects of the deal, a French source said. But France's Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian later said "the execution of Donas resumed normally at the end of 2015," as reflected in the signing of contracts with the companies concerned. This included a deal for about 200 armored vehicles.

Riyadh reportedly abandoned its military aid to Lebanon in retaliation for Lebanon's refusal to back a Saudi resolution against Iran, after angry mobs attacked

the Saudi embassy in Tehran early this year in response to Saudi Arabia's execution of Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr. Since then, Riyadh and Tehran have cut diplomatic ties.

The SPA said Riyadh scrapped the deal because of "non-condemnation of the blatant attacks against the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and its Consulate-General in Mashhad, which are contrary to international law and diplomatic norms."

"Saudi Arabia considers these positions as regrettable and unjustified," the SPA said. It considers the Lebanese decision "inconsistent with the fraternal relations between the two countries and they are not taking into account their interests."

Bound up with Saudi anger over Lebanon's attitude to Iran, however, are far larger stakes involved in the war crisis in Syria and the ever-wilder zig-zags of imperialist policy. Initially, led by Washington and the European powers, Saudi Arabia pushed for regime change in Syria to oust President Bashar al-Assad, stoking up civil war by arming and financing various reactionary Sunni Islamist militias, including Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

In 2013-2014, Riyadh saw military aid to Lebanon as essential in order to buy regional influence and counter Syria and Iran with an aggressive policy. At the time, France was taking a bellicose stance against Tehran and the Syrian government. Iran and Hezbollah, on the other hand, were playing a pivotal role alongside Russia in backing the Assad regime against the NATO powers, providing military support to Assad against the Saudi-backed Islamists.

The political conditions that underlay the Franco-Saudi-Lebanese deal have exploded, however, in the face of the rapid escalation of the Syrian war and related regional developments. These include the US

signing of the Iran nuclear deal and the increasingly bitter rivalries inside Europe provoked by Germany's remilitarisation of its foreign policy and the rise of German hegemony inside the European Union.

After the signing of a deal on Tehran's nuclear programme last July, the US and the European powers lifted economic sanctions on Iran, renewing diplomatic and economic ties. Paris saw the nuclear deal with Tehran as an opportunity to boost French corporate interests by regaining its influence in a \$400 billion economy with the world's fourth biggest oil reserves and a consumer market of nearly 80 million people. French firms recently signed tens of billions of dollars in contracts with Iran during a tour by President Hassan Rouhani to Paris and to Rome.

Since Russia intervened militarily in Syria last year to back Assad, moreover, French and Saudi policy towards Russia have increasingly diverged, despite France's continuing hostility to Assad. While Saudi Arabia has for decades backed Islamist groups hostile to Russia across the Middle East and Eurasia, going all the way back to the 1979-1987 Soviet-Afghan war, French relations with Russia are warming noticeably.

Only days before Saudi Arabia cancelled the deal, signs of a Franco-Russian rapprochement aimed at Germany emerged openly into view. At the Munich Security Conference, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls publicly attacked German policy in the Syrian refugee crisis as unacceptable to France and embraced Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. Medvedev had denounced the German policy as "stupid" only the day before.

This provoked a broad reaction in foreign policy and media circles, including in pro-American elements of the French media. Former *Le Monde* editor Natalie Nougayrède wrote a contributed column in the *Guardian* declaring: "Paris would do well to rebuild bridges with Berlin—and fast. [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel has kept silent over this pitiful episode, but don't think the damage isn't real."

Faced with a contrary shift in policy from Paris, as well as an intensifying fiscal and political crisis at home as its revenues collapse due to the global slump in oil prices, the Saudi monarchy manifestly saw no reason to continue funding Franco-Lebanese military ties. As it prepares its own military intervention in Syria, Riyadh reportedly fears that military aid to

Lebanon could even fall into the hands of Hezbollah and of Iran.

Riad Kahwaji, CEO of the Institute for Gulf and Near East Military Analysis, a Dubai-based think tank, said, "This shows that there is a consideration from the kingdom that the Lebanese government has very little control over the country's affairs, with Hezbollah and Iran having the majority control over affairs in Lebanon."

Sami Nader, head of the Beirut-based Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs, told Bloomberg that "Saudi Arabia is unable to ensure the French weapons won't fall into the hands of Hezbollah, whose fighters are supporting President Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria's war. ... Since Hezbollah, their staunch enemy, has the upper hand in Lebanon's decision-making system, the Saudis are not sure where the money is going and who will be controlling it."

In Lebanon, Sunni political circles urged Saudi Arabia to reconsider its decision to stop the aid. Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam said, "We were very sad to hear the Saudi kingdom's surprising decision to halt aid to the army and the internal security forces," calling for "the review of the decision."



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