

France arranges Hariri's return to Lebanon amid danger of regional war

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On Saturday, French President Emmanuel Macron received former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the Elysée presidential palace in Paris. Hariri had come from Saudi Arabia, where he had resigned on November 4 under pressure from Riyadh. Last night, Hariri left Paris for Cairo, where he will meet Egyptian dictator General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi before returning to Lebanon.

Hariri's resignation plunged Lebanon into a deep political crisis. Paris is intervening in an explosive situation that could destabilize the entire Middle East, while in neighboring Syria the proxies of Saudi Arabia and Washington are fighting the forces of the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran, the main supporter of the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah. Riyadh is violently hostile to Hezbollah, which is a partner in Hariri's current coalition government in Lebanon.

Riyadh's action threatens the fragile political equilibrium in Lebanon established after Lebanon's 1975-1990 sectarian civil war between Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Druze factions. Druze politician Walid Jumblatt tweeted, "Lebanon is too small and vulnerable to bear the political and economic burden of [Hariri's] resignation. I will continue to call for dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran." In 2008, Sunni-Shiite conflicts nearly plunged the country into a new civil war.

Paris, which intervened in the current Syrian conflict alongside Washington, is trying to find a graceful resolution to the dispute that benefits Saudi Arabia. Macron declared that he was hosting Hariri "as prime minister," since "his resignation has not been recognized by his country, because he did not go there."

On Sunday, Macron announced that he had spoken to Trump, Sisi, the Saudi monarchy and UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres in order to find "ways to

stabilize the Middle East and to build peace," the Elysée announced.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun refused to accept Hariri's resignation unless he returned to Lebanon, calling Hariri a "hostage" of Saudi Arabia. Hariri said that he would return to Lebanon Wednesday to celebrate the national holiday.

Important questions remain, however, as to how much influence Riyadh will continue to have over Hariri. His children did not travel with him to Paris, which could "raise a lot of questions" in Lebanon, noted *Al Jazeera* journalist Zeina Khodr. "Some in Lebanon will doubtless say that in one way or another, Saad Hariri is still a political hostage."

Hariri himself is issuing improbable denials that he resigned under pressure from Riyadh. In a tweet, he asserted that his voyage to Riyadh aimed simply "to carry out consultations regarding the future of Lebanon and its relations with its Arab neighbors. ... Everything that was said [...] about my trip [to Saudi Arabia] is only rumor."

In fact, credible reports indicate that when Hariri arrived in Riyadh, the Saudi monarchy took him hostage and forced him to read a prepared speech. On Saudi media, Hariri announced his resignation, denounced Iran and Hezbollah, and accused Iran of having "control" of his country via Hezbollah.

If Paris intervened to try to smooth over the crisis in the short term, it is clearly not resolved. The *Financial Times* of London opined, "While undoubtedly a diplomatic coup for Mr. Macron, some regional and French diplomats have cautioned that his strategy to try to appease all sides in the region may backfire."

France, the former colonial power in Lebanon and in Syria between the two world wars, aims to play a mediating role to advance its own reactionary

imperialist interests. Macron's government has let it be known that it is intervening to prevent an "explosion" of the entire Middle East. But its intervention to defuse the current crisis does nothing to resolve the broader conflicts that produced the Hariri crisis, which emerge from decades of bloody neo-colonial wars waged by successive French governments allied to the other NATO powers.

Over the more than a quarter-century since the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the USSR eliminated the main military counterweight to imperialism, Washington and its European allies intervened across the Middle East. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, wars claimed millions of lives and forced tens of millions of people to flee their homes. Now, a conflict between a Washington-Riyadh axis and a Moscow-Tehran axis is emerging that threatens to engulf not only the Middle East, but also Europe and the world in war.

Donald Trump's election in 2016 and the defeat of Washington's Islamist proxies in the Syrian war by the Russia-Iran-Syria coalition mark profound shifts in the political situation. The collapse of the US-led policy undermines the policy of Paris, which had participated alongside Washington in the financing and arming of Islamist militias in Syria. However, it has also intensified conflicts between Washington and its nominal European allies.

Trump's visit to Riyadh in May provoked bitter criticisms in Europe, where it was seen as giving Riyadh a blank check for military escalation against Iran. Trump is also signaling he could repeal the nuclear treaty with Tehran signed in 2015 by the Obama administration and the European powers, which threatens European economic interests in Iran and could provoke an all-out war with Iran.

If their intervention is less visibly aggressive than Washington's, the European powers nonetheless play a reactionary role that feeds the imperialist drive towards all-out war in the Middle East.

Increasingly opposed to Trump, the European Union (EU) aims to impose deep austerity on the workers to finance the creation of a war machine, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), that can fight independently of Washington. In the meantime, the European powers play an unclear game, trying to advance their commercial and strategic interests

independently of Washington without provoking a break that could lead to open conflict.

Berlin denounced Riyadh's intervention in Lebanon. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel declared that Europe "cannot tolerate the adventurism that is spreading over there." The Saudi monarchy reacted by denouncing Gabriel's remarks, which it called "shameful and unjustified," and recalled its ambassador in Germany to Riyadh for consultations.

French imperialism tacks between the different powers, trying to profit as much as possible from the ongoing conflicts. Lebanese political scientist Ziad Majed, at the American University in Paris, said: "France is right, given that US foreign policy is far from clear, to mediate between the Saudis and Iranians, to be a major actor, but also for its economic interests in Iran (a major potential market if sanctions are lifted) and also in Saudi Arabia."

Since the signing of the nuclear accord with Iran in 2015, Paris has been reinforcing its commercial ties with Tehran despite US sanctions against Iran. Automakers Renault and PSA Peugeot-Citroën and oil major Total have signed billion-euro contracts with Iran. Paris also wants to snap up contracts in Saudi Arabia, which announced an ambitious construction project for 2030, the "Neo-M project," for €500 billion.

Currently, Paris seems to be tacking towards Riyadh. Macron recently paid a surprise visit to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, sent Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to Riyadh, and invited Hariri to Paris. The Macron government may also host a meeting in Paris of the international support group for Lebanon, which includes the United States, the UN and the EU.

Paris is also increasingly critical of Tehran. In Riyadh, Le Drian denounced the "hegemonic ambitions" of Iran. Macron has also demanded that Iran explain its ballistic missile program.



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