



Why Niger, Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad

India aims to eliminate open defecation by Oct 2019

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BEIRUT: Photo shows a general view of the runway of Beirut International Airport. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates have urged their citizens to leave Lebanon "as soon as possible" and also called on them not to travel to the country, without specifying any threat. — AFP

How Saudi turned on Hariri

Saudi trying to weaken Iranian influence in Lebanon

BEIRUT: From the moment Saad Al-Hariri's plane touched down in Saudi Arabia on Friday Nov 3, he was in for a surprise. There was no line-up of Saudi princes or ministry officials, as would typically greet a prime minister on an official visit to King Salman, senior sources close to Hariri and top Lebanese political and security officials said. His phone was confiscated, and the next day he was forced to resign as prime minister in a statement broadcast by a Saudi-owned TV channel.

The move thrust Lebanon back to the forefront of a struggle that is reshaping the Middle East, between the conservative Sunni monarchy of Saudi Arabia and Shiite revolutionary Iran. Their rivalry has fuelled conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where they back opposing sides, and now risks destabilizing Lebanon, where Saudi has long tried to weaken the Iran-backed Hezbollah group, Lebanon's main political power and part of the ruling coalition. Sources close to Hariri say Saudi Arabia has concluded that the prime minister - a long-time Saudi ally and son of late prime minister Rafiq Al-Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005 - had to go because he was unwilling to confront Hezbollah. Multiple Lebanese sources say Riyadh hopes to replace Saad Hariri with his older brother Bahaa as Lebanon's top Sunni politician. Bahaa is believed to be in Saudi Arabia and members of the Hariri family have been asked to travel there to pledge allegiance to him, but have refused, the sources say.

"When Hariri's plane landed in Riyadh, he got the message immediately that something was wrong," a Hariri source said. "There was no one was waiting for

him." Saudi Arabia has dismissed suggestions it forced Hariri to resign and says he is a free man. Saudi officials could not immediately be reached for comment on the circumstances of his arrival, whether his phone had been taken, or whether the Kingdom was planning to replace him with his brother. Hariri has given no public remarks since he resigned and no indication of when he might return to Lebanon.

'No respect'

Hariri was summoned to the Kingdom to meet Saudi King Salman in a phone call on Thursday night, Nov 2. Before departing, he told his officials they would resume their discussions on Monday. He told his media team he would see them at the weekend in the Red Sea resort of Sharm Al-Sheikh, where he was due to meet Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on the sidelines of the World Youth Forum. Hariri went to his Riyadh home. His family made their fortune in Saudi Arabia and have long had properties there. The source close to Hariri said the Lebanese leader received a call from a Saudi protocol official on Saturday morning, who asked him to attend a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

He waited for about four hours before being present-

ed with his resignation speech to read on television, the source said. "From the moment he arrived they (Saudis) showed no respect for the man," another senior Lebanese political source said. Hariri frequently visits Saudi Arabia. On a trip a few days earlier, Prince Mohammed bin Salman had arranged for him to see senior intelligence officials and Gulf Affairs Minister

Thamer Al-Sabhan, the Saudi point man on Lebanon.

Hariri came back from that trip to Beirut "pleased and relaxed", sources in his entourage said. He posted a selfie with Sabhan, both of them smiling. He told aides he had heard "encouraging statements" from the crown prince, including a promise to revive a Saudi aid

package for the Lebanese army. The Hariri sources say Hariri believed he had convinced Saudi officials of the need to maintain an entente with Hezbollah for the sake of Lebanon's stability. Hezbollah has a heavily armed fighting force, in addition to seats in parliament and government. Saudi-backed efforts to weaken the group in Lebanon a decade ago led to Sunni-Shiite clashes and a Hezbollah takeover of Beirut.

"What happened in those meetings, I believe, is that

(Hariri) revealed his position on how to deal with Hezbollah in Lebanon: that confrontation would destabilize the country. I think they didn't like what they heard," said one of the sources, who was briefed on the meetings. The source said Hariri told Sabhan not to "hold us responsible for something that is beyond my control or that of Lebanon." But Hariri underestimated the Saudi position on Hezbollah, the source said. "For the Saudis it is an existential battle. It's black and white. We in Lebanon are used to grey," the source said. Sabhan could not immediately be reached for comment.

Resignation

Hariri's resignation speech shocked his team. Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a Hezbollah ally, told ambassadors to Lebanon that Saudi Arabia had kidnapped Hariri, a senior Lebanese official said. On Friday, France said it wanted Hariri to have "all his freedom of movement". In his speech, Hariri said he feared assassination and accused Iran and Hezbollah of sowing strife in the region. He said the Arab world would "cut off the hands that wickedly extend to it," language which one source close to him said was not typical of the Lebanese leader. Hariri's resignation came as more than 200 people, including 11 Saudi princes, current and former ministers and tycoons, were arrested in an anti-corruption purge in Saudi Arabia. Initially there was speculation Hariri was a target of that campaign because of his family's business interests. But sources close to the Lebanese leader said his forced resignation was motivated by Saudi efforts to counter Iran. — Reuters



Aides say Saudi Arabia forced Hariri to resign

At Beirut marathon, Lebanese urge prime minister to return

BEIRUT: Thousands of Lebanese taking part in the country's annual marathon used the event to call on Prime Minister Saad Hariri to return home after he resigned under mysterious circumstances during a visit to Saudi Arabia. Hariri was a regular participant in the marathon, giving the international sports event a big boost. This year, President Michel Aoun had encouraged runners to call on Hariri to return. Many Lebanese suspect he was placed under house arrest as part of a Saudi plan to wreck a coalition government he had formed with Hezbollah last year.

A dual Lebanese-Saudi national and an ally of Riyadh, Hariri unexpectedly announced his resignation on Nov 4 in a pre-recorded message broadcast on Saudi TV, criticizing Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, and saying he feared for his safety. His father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, was killed by a car bomb in Beirut in 2005. His family lives in Riyadh.

Spectators along the 26.2 mile course wore hats and held signs reading "Running for you" and "Waiting for you." Large billboards with pictures of Hariri rose overhead, and a local TV station re-aired an hour-long profile and interview with Hariri recorded last year. One woman raised a placard reading: "We want our prime minister back." Ibrahim Al-Masri, a 37-year old Hariri supporter,



BEIRUT: Supporters of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Saad Hariri hold up placards demanding his return from Saudi Arabia on the starting line of Beirut's annual marathon yesterday. — AFP

said the Lebanese don't know if the prime minister is staying in Saudi Arabia by choice.

"Whatever he chooses, we are with him. We want him to first come to Lebanon. We will die for him," Al-Masri said. Joanne Hamza, a physical education teacher who was wearing a cap with a picture of Hariri on it, said he was missed at the race. "But in a sense, his absence has been unifying. All Lebanese, from all sects, are missing their leader. This is somehow reassuring but we still want him with us." Aoun called on Saudi Arabia Saturday to clarify the reasons why Hariri has not returned home since his resignation. "The obscurity regarding Hariri's condi-

tions makes anything that he says or does not reflect truth," the president said.

Saudi Arabia has stepped up its rhetoric against Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, accusing both of supporting Shiite rebels in Yemen known as Houthis. A Saudi-led coalition has been at war with the Houthis since March 2015. Saudi Arabia has asked its citizens to leave Lebanon, and many Lebanese fear further economic sanctions or even military action against their country. "It was a shock for the country, and already the country was suffering economically," said Ziad Zakka, a 52-year-old engineer who took part in the race. — AP

Bahrain opposition leader accused of 'spying' for Qatar

DUBAI: Bahraini Shiite opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman will face trial later this month for "spying" for Qatar, the state prosecution said yesterday. Salman will be tried alongside two of his colleagues, Hassan Sultan and Ali Mehdi, from November 27 after they were charged earlier this month of espionage. "The prosecution has referred the case in which Ali Salman, Hassan Sultan and Ali Mahdi are accused of spying for the state of Qatar to the High Criminal Court," the state prosecution said in a tweet. Salman has been behind bars since 2014 serving a nine-year sentence for allegedly inciting hatred.

On November 1 the state prosecution charged him with "spying on behalf of a foreign country ... with the aim of carrying out subversive acts against Bahrain and harming its national interests". Salman was also charged with "revealing defense secrets to a foreign country and disseminating information that would harm Bahrain's status and reputation". The investigation into purported links between Salman and Qatar was first launched in August, after a quartet of Arab countries-Bahrain included-accused their gas-rich neighbor of supporting terrorism and close relations with Shiite Iran. State-run Bahrain Television aired a report which claimed that neighboring Qatar was behind anti-government protests that have shaken the tiny kingdom for the past six years. — AFP