



PC: Nabih el Boustani from Unsplash

# EYES ON SAUDI ARABIA: THE COMPLEXITY OF FRENCH- LEBANESE RELATIONS

Mahaa Ayub

On December 4, 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron made headlines as the first Western leader to visit Saudi Arabia since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In October 2018, a team of agents within the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul dismembered and disposed of Khashoggi's body, alleged at the direction of Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman. The brutality of the murder shocked the Western world, causing an uproar from human rights organizations and a near global condemnation of the Crown Prince. During the visit, President Macron insisted that he had not forgotten the journalist's murder but declared Saudi Arabia vital to stability in the Middle East against Islamic militants.<sup>1</sup>

But France has another interest in Saudi Arabia—to advocate for Lebanon. During his visit, President Macron focused on the devastating economic crisis in Lebanon and targeted Saudi Arabia's isolation of Lebanon. He even went as far as to facilitate a phone call between the Crown Prince and Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati to further the promise of a strong relationship between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Macron did not elaborate on whether the punitive measures taken by Saudi Arabia against Lebanon would be revoked, however. This comes at a critical time for Lebanon as the country faces isolation from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

On October 29, 2021, Saudi Arabia voted to expel its Lebanese ambassador and place a heavy import ban on Lebanon, an intense reaction to comments made by Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi with regard to the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.<sup>3</sup> Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates

followed suit, siding with Riyadh, calling back their ambassadors, and expelling Lebanese envoys. Saudi Arabia and Lebanon's relationship has become increasingly strained over the past years due to the rising influence of an Iranian proxy known as Hezbollah, whose chief, Hassan Nasrallah, has harshly criticized Saudi Arabia. Growing political tensions and the fragile temperament of the Saudi Arabian government has pushed Lebanon into a corner amidst one of its worst economic crises.<sup>4</sup> Lebanon's GDP fell from an estimated US \$55 billion in 2018 down to \$20.5 billion in 2021, a drop typically associated with war-like conditions.<sup>5</sup> This initiated a catastrophic social decline with plummeting employment and poverty, exacerbated by a decline in medication and fuel in the middle of a pandemic. This disarray caused France to advocate directly to Saudi Arabia for forgiveness against Lebanon, especially as the Information Minister resigned and issued a formal apology for his comments.

France has historically been strongly allied with Lebanon. On August 4, 2020, an explosion ripped through Lebanon's capital, Beirut, killing over a hundred people and injuring over five thousand. Two days later, President Macron visited the country, promising immediate aid and resources. This relationship has existed since the formation of Lebanon in 1920, when French imperial powers created the State of Greater Lebanon after claiming the land through the Sykes-Picot Agreement. French institutions governed Lebanon until their independence in 1943. Today, roughly one fifth of the Lebanese population speaks French, and the French government has continued to play a role in Lebanese affairs.<sup>6</sup>

In the interest of Lebanon, Macron declared that Saudi Arabia and France “want to fully engage” in re-establishing a relationship between Riyadh and Beirut. Macron further highlighted the success of the call between the Lebanese Prince Minister, the Prince, and himself: “With Saudi Arabia, we have made commitments towards Lebanon: to work together, to support reforms, to enable the country to emerge from the crisis and preserve its sovereignty.”<sup>7</sup> The humanitarian plea for Lebanese stability and aid paints a picture of a concerned nation, one primarily interested in global stability and improvement. That being said, Macron's Gulf tour was not without its own controversy.

In particular, Macron's actions during his trip to the United Arab Emirates garnered widespread condemnation. The United Arab Emirates upgraded to buy 80 Rafale warplanes in a deal with the French Defense military, a contract worth \$18 billion and France's larg-

est weapons contract for export in history. The president highlighted this deal as important to France, stating it would help benefit the French economy. Manufacturer Dassault Aviation declared that the weapons will ensure that the United Arab Emirates will be “capable of guaranteeing sovereignty and operational independence.”<sup>8</sup> Activists worried that the weapons might be used in the Saudi-led war in Yemen. Moreover, Macron's continued relationship with Saudi Arabia and UAE despite their disastrous human rights record has led activists to criticize the French President, noting the juxtaposition of human rights interests against French business interests and weapons manufacturing.

Despite the visit from Macron, Lebanon is still suffering without strong international aid and struggling to build back its economy. Punitive measures taken by Saudi Arabia and fellow Gulf countries have not been revoked as of Christmas Day, and the Central Bank Chief claims that Lebanon will need anywhere between \$12 to \$15 billion to kick start its recovery.<sup>9</sup> The promises made in early December seem distant as conditions in Lebanon worsen, yet France has benefited from its economic weapons contract in the UAE regardless of the country's economic crisis. Multiple agendas and growing concern of the multilateral actions of Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia cannot be ignored. The political agenda of Western nations is one that transcends humanitarian aid, often rooted in economic and resource control—the power of Saudi Arabia's oil rich lands and resources surmounting its power in political negotiations.



PC: Nabih el Boustani from Unsplash