

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia aims to rebuild Lebanon ties with foreign minister's visit

Riyadh is also trying to reset relations with Syria after fall of Assad regime



Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, left, with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun at the presidential palace in Baabda © Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

Ahmed Al Omran in Jeddah YESTERDAY

Foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan became the most senior Saudi Arabian official to visit Beirut in more than a decade on Thursday, marking the kingdom's attempt to rebuild relations with Lebanon after the country elected a new president.

Riyadh is also keen to reset relations in Syria after Islamists toppled the regime led by former president Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran.

The moves highlight a shift in the regional balance of power as the [oil-rich Gulf state](#) steps in to take advantage of the weakening of Iran's influence, the shift in power in Lebanon after Israel's devastating offensive against Hizbollah, and the fall of Assad in Syria.

Prince Faisal said after meeting Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun that he was "optimistic about the solidarity of the Lebanese leadership to seize the opportunity and work seriously to enhance [the country's] security and sovereignty, and to preserve its institutions and achievements."

The election of Aoun, an army commander, by MPs earlier this month filled the vacant presidency after more than two years of political stalemate. Aoun was the preferred candidate of Riyadh and western powers, which offered postwar

reconstruction and recovery funds as leverage, according to diplomats and Lebanese politicians briefed on the discussions.

The prince also met parliament speaker Nabih Berri and [Nawaf Salam](#), former president of the International Court of Justice, who Aoun appointed as prime minister. Lebanese politicians are holding talks on forming a new government.

Speaking in [Davos](#) on Tuesday before his trip to Beirut, Prince Faisal warned that the kingdom would wait for more reforms to give its full support to Lebanon's new authorities.

"We will need to see real action . . . We will need to see a commitment to a Lebanon that is looking to the future, not to the past, in order for us to raise our engagement," the foreign minister said on a panel at the World Economic Forum on Tuesday.

It is a past that Saudi Arabia has partially helped to forge, as it hosted the talks that ended the 15-year Lebanese civil war in the city of Taif in 1989. The Gulf state was a key financial and political backer of the fragile settlement in Lebanon's post-civil war era, holding sway over the country's Sunni political class.

But relations became increasingly strained as Hizbollah, the Iranian-backed Shia militant group, became the country's dominant political and military force. In 2017, Riyadh warned that it would treat Lebanon as a hostile state as long as Hizbollah remained in its government, days before Saudi authorities [detained](#) then Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri.

Now Riyadh is seizing an opportunity to re-establish itself as a political force in Lebanon and Syria. Hizbollah has been significantly weakened after 15 months of conflict with Israel, which killed its veteran leader Hassan Nasrallah and several military commanders.

[Asaad al-Shaibani](#), foreign minister of Syria's caretaker government, travelled to Riyadh this month on his first official foreign trip.

"Saudi Arabia is emerging as a big winner in the Levant. The ongoing change in both Syria and Lebanon underlines the central role that Saudi Arabia is playing in the Levant," said Lina Khatib, associate fellow at the Middle East and north Africa Programme at Chatham House in London. "It is impossible for Lebanon and Syria to carry on their transformations without Saudi support."

HA Hellyer, a senior fellow in geopolitics and security at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence in London, said Prince Faisal's comments signalled that Saudi

leaders' support for Lebanon could be conditional on a change in the country's sectarian political system.

"I'm not sure if they want to try to repeat that cycle where they are backing the Sunni community. What would be entirely likely is that they see there is a new president and a new prime minister with very strong support internationally," he said.

"This could mean a bit of a reset in terms of the entire political dynamic [in Lebanon], where you have a move towards a monopoly of force in the country that is reserved for the state, including in the south," which has traditionally been a stronghold of Hizbollah.

Prince Faisal said in Davos that it was "up to the Lebanese to decide and make the choices and to take Lebanon in a different direction".

Additional reporting by Raya Jalabi in Beirut

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