

The Arab League's declaration of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization

Martin Beck

News

Upon a Saudi initiative on March 1, 2016, the Arab League's foreign ministers' committee declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

Summary

By announcing the Arab League's decision to label Hezbollah a terrorist organization, Saudi Arabia showed that it is—at least on the ideological level—eager to further securitize the conflict between politicized Sunni and Shia. It is telling to note that even the European stand toward Hezbollah is now more nuanced than the official Arab one, as the European Union's condemnation of Hezbollah is confined to its military wing. The main task of the present short article is to contextualize Saudi Arabia's recent policy move. The Arab League's decision is actually only one – albeit spectacular – move in a game that Saudi Arabia has been playing since the Arab Spring by conducting an active regional policy, including the utilization of regional institutions, particularly the Arab League.

Key Words

Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah, Arab League, Israel, Securitization

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Analysis:

As the outcome of a Saudi Arabian initiative, the Arab League's foreign ministers' committee condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, with only two members stipulating reservations: Iraq and Lebanon.¹ The Saudi Ambassador to Egypt, Ahmad Kattan, added fuel to the flames by elaborating that "We will deal with Hezbollah as we deal with any terrorist organization. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries have begun preparing measures it will take against that terrorist party and they will be announced at the right time."² Even though Saudi Arabia lacks the military means to walk over Hezbollah, the Arab League's move is remarkable in the light of the fact that Hezbollah (still) enjoys the reputation among many segments of Arab societies as being the most effective and uncorrupted Arab force positioned against Israel. Ideologically the Arab League went much further than the European Union in its condemnation of Hezbollah and joined forces with the US and its allies Canada and Australia, as well as Israel, whose Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accordingly praised the Arab League's decision.³

This raises the question of how to explain the far-reaching declaratory policy of Saudi Arabia and the Arab League in the light of the fact that the flagship of Middle Eastern regional organizations in the 20th century and beyond has hardly managed to come up with clear declarations on highly contested political issues in the Arab world;⁴ in the 20th century Saudi Arabia acted as a rather cautious, sometimes even passive actor on the interstate level in the Middle East.⁵

Fatiha Dazi-Heni traces the recently more aggressive stance of Saudi Arabia in regional politics—as has become apparent, among other things, in their waging war against the Houthis in Yemen (since March 2015) and executing prominent Shia cleric Shaikh

¹ Fatema Basim, "Arab FMs blacklist Hezbollah; Lebanon, Iraq abstain," *Daily Star*, March 11, 2016, available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Mar-11/341753-arab-foreign-ministers-declare-hezbollah-a-terrorist-organization-lebanon-iraq-abstain-sky-news.ashx>.

² Quoted after *Reuters*, "Arab League labels Hezbollah terrorist organization," March 16, 2011, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-arabs-idUSKCN0WD239>.

³ *Times of Israel*, "Arab League declares Hezbollah a terrorist organization," March 11, 2016, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-league-declares-hezbollah-a-terrorist-organization/>.

⁴ Mark W. Zacher, *International Conflicts and Collective Security, 1946-77. The United Nations, Organization of American States, Organization of African Unity, and Arab League* (New York: Praeger, 1979): 201; Marco Pinfari, "Nothing but Failure? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts," *Crisis States Working Papers Series 2* (2009): 2, 6, 10.

⁵ Cf. Thomas Richter, "Saudi Arabia: A conservative p(1)ayer on the retreat?" in: Henner Fürtig (ed.), *Regional Powers in the Middle East. New Constellations after the Arab revolts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 177-190; Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring:

Nimr al-Nimr (in January 2016)—back to Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's accession to the throne in January 2015.⁶ As the under-institutionalized political system of Saudi Arabia leaves comparatively much room for the idiosyncratic behavior of political leaders,⁷ this thesis enjoys some plausibility. However, the politicization and securitization of the schism between Sunni and Shia had already been gradually escalating since the 1980s, when the Gulf States launched a Sunni-based ideology to counter the Iranian claim to political leadership in the Muslim world.⁸

Marc Lynch attributes the increasingly aggressive foreign policy of Saudi Arabia primarily to the threats as perceived by its political elite: mainly the recent American-Iranian rapprochement, as well as the challenge posed by the Islamic State.⁹ In case Teheran is set in the position to unfold its capabilities, which are potentially superior to those of Saudi Arabia on practically all levels except proven oil reserves, Saudi Arabia could indeed once again end up in the defensive—even if acting the Arab hegemon. Moreover, the rise of the Islamic State actually constitutes a significant challenge for Saudi Arabia as a rivaling Sunni actor putting forward the claim to spearheading the Islamic world in the frame of a “caliphate.”

The new element of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, however, appears to be less the “Sunni” aggression toward the “Shia” than Riyadh's utilization of the most important regional organization of the Middle East to advance its foreign policy. Moreover, there are some strong indicators that the Saudi change in foreign policy dates back to the Arab uprisings rather than to Salman's accession to the throne: In contrast to the 1950s, when Saudi Arabia was put in the defensive by revolutionary Egypt, this time Riyadh aimed at pursuing an active regional policy in order to meet the challenge from the very beginning. Due to the structural weakness of Egypt under the two Presidents Muhamad Mursi and Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, Saudi Arabia paradoxically benefited from the “Arab Spring” in terms of gaining relative power capabilities in the Arab world.

Opportunities and Challenges of Security,” in: Henner Fürtig (ed.), *Regional Powers in the Middle East. New Constellations after the Arab revolts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 191-208.

⁶ Fatiha Dazi-Heni, “Saudi-Arabia: The political implications of a new regional policy and the jihadist challenge,” *Arab Reform Initiative*, September 2015, available at: <http://www.arab-reform.net/saudi-arabia-political-implications-new-regional-policy-and-jihadist-challenge>.

⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, “Foreign policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism,” in: Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Third Edition, 2013): 229-230.

⁸ Cf. Peter Sluglett, “Deadly implications: The Rise of sectarianism in Syria,” in: Martin Beck, Dietrich Jung, and Peter Seeberg (eds.), *The Levant in Turmoil. Syria, Palestine, and the Transformation of Middle Eastern Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 39-55.

⁹ Marc Lynch, “Why Saudi Arabia escalated the Middle East's sectarian conflict,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 4, 2016, available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/04/why-saudi-arabia-escalated-middle-east-s-sectarian-conflict/ioiv>.

An integral part of the new foreign policy strategy of Saudi Arabia in response to the challenges of the “Arab Spring” was the vitalization of the Arab League. The turning point was the organization's policy toward Libya when it suspended Libya's membership in February 2011. Moreover, in March the Arab League asked the United Nations to establish a non-fly zone.¹⁰ Later in 2011, Syrian membership was also suspended. In January 2012, the new approach in the declaratory policy of the Arab League became manifest in a joint European-Arab initiative to support the Arab League's “peace plan” for Syria, which, however, was disapproved of by China and Russia.¹¹ It was mainly Saudi Arabia that promoted a new role for the Arab League, which for the first time in its history made a difference in *Arab* regional affairs with *global* relevance.¹²

Conclusion

The Arab League's declaration of Hezbollah as a terrorist group is insofar a stunning novelty in the history of the organization's declaratory policy as it had never before launched a policy move that to such a high extent courted Western and Israeli interests and at the same time contradicted the political attitudes of many politicized social groups in the Arab world. Whether the ideological front created by the Arab League and the Gulf States headed by Saudi Arabia will have major effects on the ground remains to be seen. Yet, Saudi Arabia, supported by all Arab foreign ministers but those of Iraq and Lebanon, sent a clear signal that should Hezbollah become involved in a war with Israel, it could not rely on any diplomatic restrictions and consideration in terms of Arab solidarity on the interstate level.

The Saudi-sponsored launch of the Arab League's condemnation of Hezbollah appears to a certain degree to be triggered by the idiosyncrasies of the new Saudi leadership headed by King Salman, who ascended the throne in early 2015. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was most likely acting under the perceived threat of a relative loss of power capabilities vis-à-vis Iran in the light of the American-Iranian nuclear deal. However, all this should not blind us to the fact that the Arab League's political move goes beyond being merely the *ad-hoc* policy of an idiosyncratic leader of a highly authoritarian

¹⁰ Richard Leiby and Muhammad Mansour, “Arab League asks U.N. for no-fly zone over Libya,” *Washington Post*, March 12, 2011, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-league-asks-un-for-no-fly-zone-over-libya/2011/03/12/ABoie0R_story.html.

¹¹ Müjge Küçükkeleş, “Arab League's Syrian Policy,” *SETA Policy Brief* 56 (2012): 4; Spencer Zifcak, “The Responsibility to Protect after Libya and Syria,” *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 13 (2012): 5-6, available at: <http://www.law.unimelb.edu.au/files/dmfile/downloadaddad11.pdf>.

¹² Martin Beck, “The End of *Regional* Middle Eastern exceptionalism? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council after the Arab uprisings,” *Democracy and Security* 11 (2015): 190-207.

regime to accelerate the securitization of the politicized Shia-Sunni schism. Rather, Saudi Arabia's policy of utilizing the Arab League for branding Hezbollah a terrorist organization fits well in a long-term strategy of Riyadh's foreign policy, which aims at generating hegemonic leadership of the Arab world in coordination with the US.