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The Curious Case of Will Brooke

How and why did an Alabama businessman end up as the sole registered lobbyist for the Prime Minister of Lebanon?



The coast of Lebanon from Jbel looking north | Adam Muro, Aug. 8, 2018

In the months before Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was kidnapped in 2017 by Saudi Arabian authorities, he engaged a unusual person to lobby the Trump administration and others in Washington DC on his behalf.

Unlike other foreign leaders, Hariri did not hire a veteran Washington lobbyist. He chose William Wade Brooke of Birmingham, Alabama. Brooke is an Alabama businessman and failed 2014 Republican candidate for the House of Representatives, and had never before registered as a lobbyist.

Brooke, in foreign lobbyist filings with the US Justice Department, reported on Dec. 26, 2017 that, in the preceding months, he spoke with unnamed members of the Trump White House staff on Hariri's behalf. He also said he spoke with unnamed members of Congress and the US State Department. "regarding the desire of the Office of the Prime Minister of Lebanon to engage in discussions with the United States regarding Lebanese national affairs."

Even more unusual, Brooke agreed to do this work for free.

On Dec. 26, he wrote "I am a volunteer acting in what I perceive to be the best interest of the United States. I am not paid in any way for this activity," on a supplemental form, required by the Foreign Agent Registrations Act from anyone working on behalf of a foreign party.

Brooke's ties to Lebanon's top public official appear to have stemmed from work with a Christian missionary group, according to representative of the organization..

Brooke did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Hariri's office claimed that they had never heard of Brooke and did not know that he worked as a lobbyist on the prime minister's behalf.

On Dec. 1, 2018, Brooke filed papers with the U.S. Department of Justice officially terminating his lobbying relationship with the Hariri, but a closer look at Brooke's tenure as a registered foreign agent is significant of a turbulent chapter in Lebanese-US relations.

Brooke registered as a lobbyist for Hariri on May 11, 2017. He said he would bridge a connection between Hariri and the Trump administration.

Brooke wrote he "will contact the Office of the President of the United States on behalf of the Office of the Prime Minister of Lebanon regarding a possible introduction for the purpose of direct communications between their respective offices."

He stated he would not "engage in political activities on behalf of the Office of the Prime Minister of Lebanon but will try to arrange a meeting or other introduction for the Office of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, whose representatives will subsequently engage in political activities at their own discretion."

On Nov. 3, 2017, Brooke updated the US Justice Department on his work for Hariri.

The next day was the most bizarre in his tenure.

Hariri, abruptly summoned to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, ahead of a scheduled meeting with Saudi King Salman, announced his resignation as prime minister of Lebanon.

He read from a pre written statement that blamed Iran and Hezbollah, and claimed that his life was in danger. In truth, he was being held against his will.

After weeks of diplomatic wrangling between Gulf and Western officials, Hariri returned home to Beirut on Nov. 21, 2017, and rescinded his resignation shortly after.

An Unusual Lobbyist

In Washington, DC, there is a small but robust cottage industry of researchers and transparency advocates who live and breathe FARA disclosures. To them, Brooke's case is highly unusual.

"I don't think I've ever seen an instance where they say they're not being paid or receiving any kind of compensation and that they are specifically doing it on a pro bono basis," said Lydia Dennett, a foreign lobbying investigator at the Project on Government Oversight. "I certainly haven't looked at every single registration statement, but I've seen many."

The reason the experts interviewed for this report were so taken aback at the idea of foreign lobbyist working for free? Simply, lobbyists usually make lots of money.

"If you've looked through some of these things [FARA disclosures] then you know just how absurd some of the monthly retainers can be," said Ben Freeman, Director of the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative at Center for International Policy.

Freeman said he had come across some other instances of pro bono foreign lobbying looking at FARA filings, but said he always had the same reaction: "like why? just ask for \$100,000 a month."

According to [Forbes' 2018 list of global billionaires](#), Prime Minister Hariri's net worth is \$1.5 billion, a fortune he amassed primarily from his family's construction company Saudi Oger.

Anna Massoglia, a dark money researcher at Open Secrets, the Center for Responsive Politics' watchdog group that tracks the influence of money in American politics, said she has seen pro

bono lobbying work done for foreign non-profits, as well as other ways lobbyists working for foreign governments get around disclosing compensation on their FARA forms.

According to Massoglia, some law firms that receive money for legally representing foreign leaders or governments say that they're throwing in public relations or lobbying work for free and therefore are working "pro bono" on their FARA forms, for instance.

"It's not always a red flag if a foreign agent isn't accepting funds, but not reporting any disbursements on top of not reporting any funds is also a little more questionable," she said. Brooke's FARA disclosure form lists no disbursements, or money spent in the course of carrying out influence activity.

Aside from being employed by a billionaire, doing a job that's usually highly compensated for free, there was one other aspect of Brooke's case that surprised the experts.

"I don't know about a guy in Alabama [lobbying] for Lebanon," mused Freeman, "that just seems really odd."

All the Prime Minister's Men

Previously, Hariri has employed lobbyists to work on his behalf in the United States.

From November 2011 up until January 2018, Hariri and Future Movement, his political party, employed the services of Amal Mudallali and her lobbying firm Bridges International Group. This relationship was facilitated by a private Lebanese company, Millennium Group Services. Bridges received over \$1.2 million over the six years it worked to "enhance the cause of Lebanon and the client and raise their profile in the United States," according to a FARA document.

Mudallali also advised Prime Minister Hariri's father, Rafiq Hariri, on foreign affairs until his assassination in 2005.

In July 2017, Mudallali, who remains the CEO of Bridges International, was appointed Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations.

An Alabama Politician

William Wade Brooke has spent his entire life in Alabama and has deep ties to the state's Republican Party.

He was born near Birmingham in 1956. He holds a bachelor's degree and a law degree, both from the University of Alabama.

He founded a law firm, Wallace, Jordan, Ratliff, and Brandt, in Birmingham, in 1987, where he worked before joining the Harbert Corporation in 1991, the company he has been with ever since. He is currently an executive vice president and a limited partner.

In 2014 he launched a failed bid to represent Alabama's sixth congressional district, which includes Birmingham, in the House of Representatives. He gained a brief moment of internet fame for an advertisement featuring him firing bullets of increasing calibre into a copy of the Affordable Care Act, to make a point about how it was too long.

He also attends Covenant Presbyterian Church in Homewood, Alabama, where he sometimes teaches Sunday school.

Brooke also has deep ties with Alabama's Republican Party.

Michael Hubbard, who led the Alabama Republican Party to sweeping state level electoral victories on promises of ethics reform and a corruption crackdown, was found guilty of felony ethics charges in 2016 for using his political position for personal gain.

Emails that surfaced during his trial include communication between Hubbard and Brooke, in which he asks Brooke for help with his failing business, Craftmaster Printing.

“Failure is not an option as it means personal and political ruin,” wrote Hubbard.

Brooke wrote a business plan, which called for soliciting \$150,000 from some of the wealthiest businessmen in the state, including Brooke himself. Brooke wired Hubbard the money in October 2012.

Brooke was not implicated in the Hubbard scandal.

While Brooke was chairman of the Business Council of Alabama’s board of directors, the group’s CEO William Canary. Canary was named in one of the felony corruption charges against Hubbard, which alleged that he had given something of value to the former speaker. He was found not guilty.

The Missionary Connection

So how does Brooke, Alabama lawyer and businessman who volunteers for a Christian missionary group, end up lobbying for Saad Hariri, the Sunni Muslim prime minister of a country thousands of miles away?

According to an article in a local Alabama newspaper The Anniston Star dated Nov. 12, 2017, Brooke said that he “encountered officials from the Lebanese government while on a mission trip with a church group.”

Though Brooke’s local church is in Homewood, Alabama, the group he traveled to Lebanon with goes by the name CRM, short for Church Resource Ministries. Effective January 1, 2019, its name changed to NOVO Mission Inc.

According to documents filed with the California secretary of state, where CRM was founded and is legally registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Brooke is currently sitting on their board of directors and serving as secretary.

CRM’s website and attached blog paint a picture of a sprawling missionary organization, boasting over 500 missionaries employed in over 80 countries around the globe, and a network of affiliate organizations that have sprung up as it grew.

As for what these missionaries do, the website does not offer much in the way of specifics, but their work seems to be spreading Christianity across the globe.

From a financial standpoint, the group appears to be quite successful. A copy of their 2017 financial statements reveal over \$11 million in assets, with a little under \$8 million of that coming from investments.

The group also reported \$15.5 million in contributions in 2017.

Brooke, in addition serving on CRM’s board of directors, is also a major donor through a family foundation.

Between 2010 and 2014, the Brooke Family Foundation, his philanthropic organization, donated over \$2.3 million to the organization, according to 990 tax forms.

CRM’s website does not list any operations in Lebanon, but says it carries out missionary work through its partner organization, the Near East Organization.

“We have a team of 105 spread across 16 countries and we have 550 volunteers,” said Nadim Costa, founder of the Near East Organization.

Costa partnered with CRM after founding the Near East Organization in 2005, and eventually filed papers to become a 501(c)(3) in California. He said that CRM provides logistical support “for a fee” and that senior staff, who are also members of the Near East Organization’s board of directors, frequently visit him in Lebanon.

According to Costa, it was on one of these trips that he was introduced to Will Brooke.

While he was building up operations at NEO, Costa was elected to Beirut City Council, serving from 2010 to 2016, representing the protestant bloc. During his time there, he cultivated a relationship with Prime Minister Hariri.

Because so much of the country’s official business is done in Beirut, even down to the issuing of I.D. cards and marriage licenses, the Prime Minister’s office works closely with city council “Prime Minister Hariri has a say in the people who are chosen to run for Beirut city council, that’s how he and I met,” explained Costa.

He said the two came to an understanding, and that Hariri was able to see that his ultimate interest was in spreading the teachings of the Bible.

“I articulated that, and he said ‘I’m happy to help where I can,’” Costa said. “Hariri at several times, I would say, was very helpful in sorting things out for us, helping us in areas or places where we tried to serve a certain community, and were hit with bureaucracy.”

Costa went on to detail two times, though he said there were others, when Hariri interceded on NEO’s behalf.

In the first, he said Hariri contacted “municipalities” in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, the poorest region in the country and it’s border territory with Syria, to secure water pipes and electrical wiring for a group of Lebanese Bedouins that NEO was ministering to.

“They used to talk like 20 minutes outside their camp to full buckets of water,” said Costa, “Now they have electricity.”

The second instance Costa described was in Beirut itself. NEO were trying to get a number of street children in their ministry to attend public school, but ran into roadblocks when the local school declined to register them.

“The office of Prime Minister Hariri helped us, they spoke to the public school, registered those kids, even put some money into it,” said Costa. “Hariri is one of those who even though he comes from a Muslim background, is open, very open, to every other religion.”

Winning over the Christians

To Joshua Lanis, director of the center of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma, Hariri seeking to cultivate good will with a large Lebanon based Christian group is pure politics. “Playing the Christian card is important because the Christian community is 30 percent of the population of Lebanon and they hold 50 percent of the seats in parliament,” he said. “They’ve got tremendous political clout but they’re divided 50–50.”

Landis explained that since the start of the Syrian civil war, some factions of the Christian voting bloc have steered away from Hariri. This is in part because he is supported by the Saudis, and the Saudis have armed and funded Salafi jihadist groups fighting in Syria who kill Christian minorities.

Traditionally, the Sunni Muslim faction, of which Hariri is a member, and the Christians have been in a political alliance.

As for what issues Hariri may have wanted Brooke to bring attention to amongst his political connections in the US, Landis said that entire issue needs to be viewed through the lense of a greater regional power struggle, with Saudi Arabia, the US, and Israel on one side, and Hezbollah, Iran and Russia on the other.

“The US strategy in Lebanon has always been ‘lets support the Saudis and hariri against Iran-Hezbollah because hezbollah is a terrorist organization, we want to protect Israel, we want to keep Lebanon in our sphere of influence as much as we can,’” he said.

This was traditionally accomplished through foreign aid in the form of weapons and military training for the Lebanese Army, with the aim of it eventually being able to compete with the military might of Hezbollah. In turn, Iran has subsidized Hezbollah.

But most recently with the Trump administration, there was a shared effort by Saudi and Israel to put pressure on the US to up the ante again by stopping contributions of money to the Lebanese military, and to sanction Lebanon.” said Landis.

“I think Hariri I think Hariri has been trying to moderate that to a certain degree and keep America interested in funding Lebanon despite Hezbollah’s paramountcy.”

Who Did Brooke Talk To?

Brooke, in his his December 2017 supplemental foreign lobbying disclosure statement to the US Justice Department, said he talked with “White House Staff, the United States Department of State, and members of the U.S. Congress,” on behalf of Prime Minister Hariri,

The filing is unclear on who exactly he spoke with, and what was discussed.

The Department of State declined to comment, and the White House did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The offices of Alabama Representatives Martha Roby and Bradley Bynre said neither had any contact with Brooke on issues related to Lebanon.

The other four Alabama members of the House of Representatives, and US Sen. Richard Shelby did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Additionally, none of the 23 members of the Senate committee on foreign affairs returned requests for comment regarding contact with Brooke. The foreign affairs committee oversees funding for foreign aid, weapons sales, and military training programs for U.S. allies.

History of US Lobbyists for Lebanon

Since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, lobbyists in the U.S. who officially represent the Lebanese government have been relatively rare.

More common has been Lebanese political parties, many of which grew out of factions and militias that fought against each other in the war, employing lobbyists to advance their interests in the U.S.

Since 1990, the Lebanese Option Party, the Lebanese Forces party, and the National Dialogue Party of Lebanon were registered as Foreign Principals with the U.S. Department of Justice.

In 1993, a Florida based arms exporter, Major Export Inc., registered as a foreign agent in order to supply military equipment to the Lebanese Ministry of Defense.

For a little over two months, from Nov 30, 2011 to Jan. 31, 2012, The Moffett Group, a Washington D.C. based lobbying firm, was contracted to “advocate for the Embassy of Lebanon before the US Congress, Administration, and other US Entities,” according to a FARA registration document.

The Moffett Group also worked for free. It cited a “long standing friendship” between the firm and the Ambassador of Lebanon as an explanation for their generosity.