

Shaken by Yemen, Lebanon works to keep its balance

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Reverberations from a Saudi-led armed intervention in Yemen have reached Lebanon, where another potential proxy battle looms between Saudi Arabia and its regional rival Iran.

“They are killing Shi’ites in Yemen,” said Hassan Masri, a Shi’ite supporter of Hezbollah in southern Beirut. “The Arab Sunni countries have declared war on the Shi’ites.”

The latest crisis in Yemen illustrates the interconnected nature of the conflicts tearing apart the Middle East, as Saudi Arabia and Iran seek influence at each other’s expense. In Lebanon, the two leading parties—the Shi’ite Hezbollah and the Sunni Future Movement—are backed by these regional rivals.

Saudi Arabia heads a coalition of 10 Sunni-majority Arab nations ranged against Yemen’s Houthi rebels. The Houthis, members of a Shi’ite sect reportedly supported by Iran, hold Yemen’s capital, Sanaa, and are advancing on the southern port city of Aden. Arab airstrikes against the Houthis continued Monday, amid calls from Yemen’s government for Saudi-led ground troops to invade. Over the weekend, Arab League leaders said that the airstrikes would continue until the Houthis “withdraw and surrender their weapons.”

For Lebanon, the conflict threatens to complicate a series of dialogue sessions between Hezbollah and the Future Movement that arose last year in an attempt to ease tensions stoked by the war in neighboring Syria, where Iran and Saudi Arabia are also on opposite sides.

“We certainly see what is happening in Yemen is a repercussion of what is happening in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, and Saudi Arabia cannot let its neighboring countries, especially Yemen, fall under the control of some militias,” Saad Hariri, leader of the Future Movement and a former Lebanese prime minister, told al-

Arabiya television last week. “I do not think that anyone in the Arab world is against Iran, but they are against its actions in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Arab world.”

In Iraq, Iran is helping Baghdad roll back the gains made by the Islamic State, while in Syria, Iranian troops have become essential to defending President Bashar al-Assad. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, rather than the Assad regime, has taken charge of the campaign to crush rebel groups. Alongside the exhausted and decimated Syrian army, the IRGC is employing its own forces as well as a patchwork of Shi’ite paramilitary militias drawn from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to battle the mainly Sunni rebels across the country.

“The increasing control of power by Iran and Hezbollah in Syria seems to be part of a strengthened regional power concentration” by the guard corps, said a European ambassador in Beirut, “not least based on sectarian militias, including Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the Afghan Fatimiyoun militia.”

Hezbollah leader reacts

While Saudi Arabia has backed various Syrian rebel groups with cash and weapons, it has avoided any overt military action to protect its regional interests against Iran—until now. But its intervention in Yemen has raised hackles among Shi’ites in Lebanon.

On Friday, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary-general, slammed the Saudi-led intervention, saying it was doomed to fail.

“It is the right of the oppressed and brave Yemeni people to defend and resist the aggression,” he said. “They will do and they will emerge victorious because these are the laws of God and history.”

Iran’s influence in the Middle East has grown, Nasrallah added, addressing Saudi Arabia, because “you are lazy, losers, and you don’t take responsibility.”

Hariri quickly shot back, posting on Twitter that Nasrallah’s speech was a “storm of hatred against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states” because they were opposing “the Iranian infiltration of Yemen.”

Dialogue a national 'necessity'

Ali Asiri, the Saudi ambassador in Lebanon, offered an unusually strong-worded rebuttal, saying Nasrallah's speech "reflected the confusion experienced by the side he represents [Iran], and contained a lot of slander and false allegations" against Saudi Arabia.

Still, despite the heated rhetoric, both Nasrallah and Hariri say they wish to continue their dialogue sessions. Tamam Salam, the Lebanese prime minister, told local newspapers that political differences in Beirut were "natural."

"We are living in a democratic system," he said.

Nabih Berri, Lebanon's veteran parliamentary speaker, said the Hezbollah-Future Movement dialogue was a "national necessity" that has helped restore some stability to the country. The next dialogue session between the two rival camps is slated for Thursday.