Opinion
News



Prime Minister Saad Hariri of Lebanon gestures during an Oct. 9 news conference in Beirut. Following the prime minister's Nov. 4 resignation, Catholic leaders in Lebanon urged the international community and players concerned to stop wars and bring peace to the Middle East. (CNS/Mohamed Azakir, Reuters)

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With the so-called 'Islamic State' terrorist group, or ISIS, all but defeated in the Middle East, at least in terms of territory it once held, the cold proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran is rapidly heating up; and could herald even more dangers for the region and beyond.

The cold war between these two regional powers has played out since the Iranian revolution in 1979, but most prominently over several years now in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, Iran and its main nonstate ally, the militant Shiite Lebanese group Hezbollah, have sent men and material to fight alongside the Syrian regime against a wide array of opposition groups, some of which have been funded and supplied by Saudi Arabia. This, along with Russian air support, has resulted in the Syrian regime recapturing all the major cities it had lost to the rebels and the winding down of the civil war, albeit with no political solution in sight.

In Yemen, Iran has intensified its support of the Houthi rebels by sending advanced military weapons and advisors. The Shiite Houthis are fighting both the feeble, internationally-recognized Sunni Yemeni government and their Saudi allies, who are engaged in an intense air campaign against the Houthis and their areas of control with little success to show for it. The conflict has led to famine, a massive cholera outbreak, 2 million internally displaced, and over 50,000 casualties.

What these two conflicts share in common is a frustration of Saudi efforts and an Iranian resurgence and expansion of influence.

Iranian advances in Syria and Yemen were expressed in a major escalation on Nov. 4 when Houthi rebels fired an Iranian-modified ballistic missile from Yemen over a distance of 700 miles at the Saudi capital Riyadh. The Saudis and U.S. have accused Iran of supplying the missile to the Houthis. The Saudis have also accused Hezbollah of helping the rebels and playing a role in the firing of the missile.

The Houthis have disputed this, claiming that they built the missile. Hezbollah has categorically denied sending any missiles or weapons of any nature to Yemen, while conceding it has sent weapons to Syria.

Whether the missile was supplied by Iran, modified or built by the Houthis is not the real issue for the Saudis. It is that Iran is succeeding in spreading its influence in the region where Saudi influence traditionally prevailed. Today, in Baghdad, Damascus, Sanaa, and Beirut, Iranian influence is real and expanding.

The country where Saudi Arabia most recently decided to take a stand against Iran and start pushing back is Lebanon, which has an unfortunate long and bloody history of serving as the arena for proxy global and regional conflicts. Instead of confronting Iran directly, Saudi Arabia has chosen to pressure Iran through what it considers its most potent proxy, Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Further complicating things is a commonality of interests between a Trump administration eager to ramp up pressure on Iran and a more aggressive Saudi foreign policy egging Trump on and spearheaded by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This intersection of strategic imperatives by is dangerously ill-thought out and guaranteed to result in a raft of unintended consequences counter to U.S. national interests.

On Nov. 4, Saad Hariri, Sunni Lebanese prime minister, appeared suddenly on a televised broadcast from Saudi Arabia to announce his resignation. Hariri heads a Lebanese coalition government that includes ten elected members and two cabinet ministers from Hezbollah's political branch.

In the speech, Hariri fiercely criticized Iran for sowing strife in the region and claimed he feared for his life in Lebanon. The fact that he resigned in Saudi Arabia and not in Lebanon and that he looked strained and uncomfortable during the speech were telltale signs that the Saudis, who are his prime political backer, had pressured him into resigning.

While questions abounded about the Hariri resignation, what was certain is that the Saudis wanted Hariri out of Lebanon's political picture because he refused to confront Hezbollah directly, thereby providing them with a measure of official legitimacy. Removing Hariri also would have shattered the Lebanese coalition government, which the Saudis hoped would undermine Iranian influence by in effect removing Hezbollah ministers from power, and the legitimacy being in power accorded them.

After a three-week period of uncertainty and in a sudden reversal as unexpected as his original resignation, Hariri "suspended" his resignation as prime minster upon his

return to Lebanon on Nov. 22. The significance that the date chosen for his reversal, Nov. 22, was Lebanese Independence Day, was not lost on the Lebanese.

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The New York Times reported that Hariri justified this reversal by saying that he now wanted to hold a dialogue with other Lebanese political leaders to address "divisive issues and their effects on Lebanon's relations with the Arab brothers," and "protect" Lebanon from "the surrounding wars and fires." What was left unsaid but understood by Hariri was that dissolving the coalition government under Saudi pressure would dangerously destabilize his country.

It is too early to conclude whether Hariri's return to Lebanon and the suspending of his resignation was a blow to Saudi plans to remove him, or whether his resignation had triggered behind-the-scenes negotiations with Hezbollah and Iran, with the aim of reining in Hezbollah's influence politically inside Lebanon and its military adventurism outside the country.

What can be concluded however is that while Saudi Arabia may have the power to remove a prime minister in another country who is a political ally, doing so backfired and united nearly all Lebanese — who were made to feel their sovereignty was infringed upon — behind their government, even if it does include Hezbollah.

The 16 years of conflict that Lebanon endured between 1975-1991, in addition to the destructive conflicts with Israel in 1996 and 2006, are still fresh in Lebanese minds. While true that the majority of Lebanese do not agree with Hezbollah's agenda both inside and outside Lebanon, they also refuse to allow their country to once again become a bloody battlefield for regional powers nor do they take kindly to political interference by any foreign power, whether Saudi Arabia or Iran.

This is not to say that Hezbollah, as a "state within a state," is not a serious and ongoing threat to the sovereignty and independence of the Lebanese state. Unfortunately, the issue of disarming Hezbollah and transforming it into purely a political party is tied in to the larger tensions and rivalries in the region. Resolving the issue of Hezbollah will only occur when Iran and Saudi Arabia reach an accommodation and flashpoints between them in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Bahrain are extinguished.

In the absence of regional tranquility and realistic options to disarm Hezbollah and achieve true sovereignty for Lebanon, the only option for the Lebanese is to remain united and cognizant of the serious dangers facing them if they allow any outside power to divide them. The very future of their country is at stake.

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