

Lebanon: Once Again a Proxy Battlefield?

By: Wouter Jansen

The crisis unfolding in Lebanon might not come as a surprise to those acquainted to the turmoil of recent years in the country and the region. With Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigning as Prime Minister, a void has opened in a country that already suffers dearly from political instability – further penetration is already occurring. Iran already pulling the strings in Syria and Iraq, it is crucial to see whether Tehran will consolidate its already powerful foothold in Lebanon through its Hezbollah proxy.

The assassination of his father, Rafik Hariri, in 2005 – an act committed by Hezbollah – certainly had Saad Hariri constantly in fear of an attack on his own life. Ten days ago, Hariri fled to Saudi Arabia where he resigned his post. Hariri has a long history in Saudi Arabia, he was born in Riyadh, left to study in the US and then returned to Saudi Arabia to manage his father's businesses. Only after the murder of his father did Hariri relocate to Lebanon to enter politics.

A few vocal pundits have voiced concern that Hariri is being held in Riyadh against his will as his resignation speech focused mostly on Hezbollah and Iran's influence in Lebanese politics. Yet Hariri is no prisoner. He can return to Lebanon whenever he wants.

Saudi Arabia and Iran, although not officially in a state of war, *have* fought proxy wars in the recent past. The two are situated on opposite sides in the Syrian civil war; Iran supports the al-Assad regime with money and military equipment and has sent numerous Shia militias to the country, such as the *Shabiha*, *Hezbollah* and the *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade* from Iraq, which consists of Syrian and foreign Shia fighters. Saudi Arabia supports some Sunni militias that oppose the Syrian leadership, such as Jaish al-Fatah. In Iraq and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia



backed different Sunni groups, while Iran gave their support to the Shia—cementing the strong opposition between the two countries.

The contrasting foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and Iran epitomise their regional rivalry. Iran's goal for an Islamic revolutionary Middle East implies that it strives to fracture US-Arab relations and hence supports groups that share the same objective (re: Hezbollah). The survival of Iran's clerical establishment, with Ayatollah Khamenei as its leader, remains at the core of Iran's geopolitical strategy. This means spreading revolutionary Islamic Shi'ism over the region and opposing the Sunni establishment in Saudi Arabia. Iran believes that it is not only the leader of Shia Islam, but of all revolutionary Muslims that want to confront the West. Having a solid foothold in both Syria and Iraq while gaining more influence in Lebanon works to support Iran's geopolitical strategy, as is interfering in the internal affairs of countries with Shia populations (re: Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Bahrain). This is the main cause of conflict with Saudi Arabia, which is trying to limit Iran's penetration of its allies in the region.

How the conflict in Lebanon will end remains to be seen. However, the void created in the political landscape of the country is one that enhances the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some speak of a Middle Eastern Cold War between the two, highlighting the opposing views on the way the Middle East should be governed, and Lebanon is the latest country – on a list of many – that stands to suffer the consequences of the Irano-Saudi Arabia rivalry. No stranger to civil war, Lebanon requires Saudi Arabian support to balance against Tehran's ambitions to consolidate the northern tier of its Shia crescent.