

Saudi-Iranian rivalries in the Middle East

History and geography are key to understanding the conflicts in the Middle East. The abrupt resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri earlier this month has left Lebanon in a political crisis and thrust the Gulf nation back onto the front line of the power struggle between Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran. Here's a guide to the region's alliances and proxy wars.

LEBANON

- The sudden resignation of Lebanon's prime minister Saad al-Hariri on Nov 4, a day after he arrived in Saudi Arabia, is seen by some as the kingdom's bid to influence Lebanese politics.
- Mr Hariri spoke out against Iran for "interfering in Arab states".
- Mr Hariri's resignation is seen as an attempt by the kingdom to isolate Iran, which is friendly with Lebanon's Shi'ite militia Hizbollah. The group is part of the coalition government which Mr Hariri has headed for a year.



Young supporters of Lebanon's Shi'ite Hizbollah movement carrying portraits of the founder of Iran's Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (left), and his successor Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during the funeral in March of a Hizbollah fighter who died in Syria.

SYRIA AND IRAQ

- Iran has backed the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria while Saudi Arabia has supported Syrian rebels in their failed campaign to topple Assad.
- The political vacuum in Syria helped pave the way for the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
- In Iraq, the late strongman Saddam Hussein had kept a check on the spread of Iranian influence. Since his death, Iran has steadily gained influence in Iraq.
- Now that ISIS is nearing defeat in these two countries, the battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional hegemony is expected to intensify.

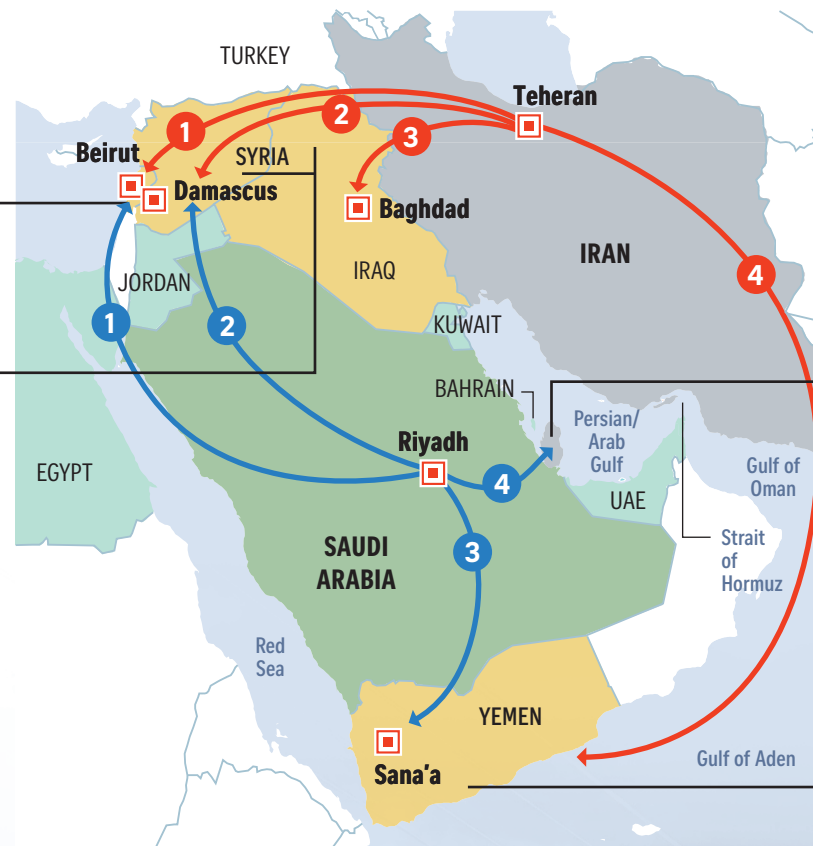
Below: Iraqi forces and members of the Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation units) advancing towards the city of al-Qaim, in Iraq's western Anbar province near the Syrian border as they fight against remnant pockets of ISIS group militants on Nov 3.



GOVERNMENT POSITION

- Close to Iran
- Close to Saudi Arabia

SAUDIS AND IRANIANS COMPETING FOR INFLUENCE



SAUDI ARABIA

- 1 Believed to have influenced the resignation of Lebanese PM Saad al-Hariri
- 2 Backed failed rebel campaign to topple Assad
- 3 Supports government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi
- 4 Led economic blockade of Qatar

IRAN

- 1 Backs Shi'ite militia Hizbollah
- 2 Backs Assad regime
- 3 Backs powerful Shi'ite militia groups
- 4 Supports Houthi rebel forces

QATAR



Imported Turkish goods in a supermarket in Doha in June.

- In June, a group of nations led by Saudi Arabia and including Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) cut ties and blockaded Qatar, accusing it of supporting extremists and fostering ties with Iran.
- Qatar, the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas, denies the accusations.
- Kuwait has led mediation efforts.
- Turkey and Iran have stepped in to support Qatar with food imports.

YEMEN

- Much of Yemen is controlled by the Houthis, who are from the country's Shi'ite minority.
- A Saudi-led military alliance is fighting in support of the internationally recognised government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi (right).
- On the same day Lebanon's prime minister Hariri announced his resignation, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being the source of a missile fired at Riyadh by the Houthis. Iran calls the allegation baseless and provocative.
- Saudi Arabia and its allies tightened a longstanding blockade of Yemen's borders in response.

