Iran's president says Saudi Arabia behind 'hostility' in region

Hassan Rouhani says Riyadh is interfering in Yemen and Lebanon, and its allies, US and Israel, dominate to 'plunder oil and wealth'

Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, stepped into a growing dispute with Saudi Arabia, saying Riyadh orchestrated the resignation of Lebanon's prime minister. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images
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Iran's president has waded into the growing dispute between his country and Saudi Arabia by accusing Riyadh of sowing hostility in Yemen, strengthening Islamic State, and orchestrating the "unprecedented" resignation of the Lebanese prime minister.

Hassan Rouhani's response came a day after the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, accused Iran of "direct military aggression" by supplying missiles to Houthi rebels in Yemen. Tehran ferociously denied the charge.

Simmering tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two regional rivals at opposing ends of the Yemen conflict, have ratcheted up after the launch of a ballistic missile from Yemen towards Riyadh on Saturday. The missile was intercepted and debris fell at Riyadh's international airport.

"Why are you showing hostility towards the people of Syria and Iraq? Why are you strengthening Isis and leaving the peoples of the region with them? Why are you interfering with Lebanon's internal affairs and governance?" Rouhani said, referring to the resignation on Saturday of Saad Hariri, Lebanon's prime minister,

who unexpectedly stepped down as prime minister while he was visiting Saudi Arabia.

Hariri's resignation was announced in a televised address from Riyadh, during which he said Iran was controlling the region. He blamed Lebanon's powerful Shia militant group and political movement Hezbollah of exerting full control in the country.

 Saad Hariri, who has resigned as Lebanon's prime minister. Photograph: Dalati Nohra/EPA

Rouhani told his cabinet on Wednesday: "There is no case in history that a country forces another one's authority to resign only to interfere with their internal affairs. This is an unprecedented event in history. Where are you going in this way?"

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, said that Hariri's resignation was "a Saudi decision".

The Iranian president said Riyadh was not in a position to threaten Iran, saying that "those bigger than you have not been able to do anything against the Iranian nation".

Iran has formally protested to the UN security council about the Saudi accusations over the missile launch and threats to retaliate militarily, saying they were based on "unfounded assumptions".

It said the claims were an attempt to "shift the blame and to distract attention from [Saudi's] war of aggression against Yemen" and that Riyadh was "committing war crimes" by striking the Arab world's poorest nation and also imposing a blockade on aid access to the famine-stricken country. He said Saudis were behind "blind attacks and murdering of Yemeni innocent people".

Since March 2015 Saudi Arabia has led a US-backed military intervention in Yemen, aimed at reinstating the ousted president, who lives in exile in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, and at countering advances of Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Iran has denied any military backing of the Houthis, who control Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, as well as large swaths of the country.

Saudi Arabia's military intervention has been criticised for its civilian casualties. Houthis, who have seized power without election, have also been blamed for exacerbating the conflict.

Rouhani said Saudi officials were making a "strategic mistake" by considering the US and "the Zionist regime", Iran's terminology for Israel, as allies. He said the US and Israel were trying to dominate the region to "plunder its oil and wealth" and that Donald Trump's administration was "skilful in pickpocketing" Saudi Arabia.

"Today, the question is that what benefits has Saudi Arabia's animosity towards the peoples of the region got for it?" he said.

Rouhani defended Iran's role in Iraq and Syria, saying: "Iran is accused of interfering in the region, while it is helping Iraq and Syria to fight terrorism on their own request and we are proud that we were able to stop Isis from reaching its goals."

The White House said on Wednesday: "We condemn the Iranian regime's activities and stand with Saudi Arabia."

It accused Iran of "perpetuating the war in Yemen to advance its regional ambitions" and said Houthi missile attacks "enabled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps threaten regional security and undermine UN efforts to negotiate an end to the conflict".

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