

Saudis' bolder moves to confront Iran echo across region

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia is more aggressively confronting its rival Iran on multiple fronts. It's a policy that risks sharpening several conflicts in the Middle East, even though so far it has failed to score any successes in stemming Tehran's influence.

The bolder steps are largely seen as the work of the son of King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has consolidated his power. Under his leadership,

the kingdom has shown a readiness to shake up the region, launching a military campaign in Yemen against rebels it sees as Iranian proxies and sparking a confrontation with Qatar in part over ties with Tehran.

Still, Iran has been able to use wars in Iraq and Syria to build a bridge of alliances stretching from its border to the Mediterranean.

The question is whether the Saudis will push even harder against Iran — and what will happen if they do. So far, the kingdom's policies appear to have the full support of U.S. President Donald Trump.

The past weekend saw dramatic developments connected to the

kingdom that intensified regional tensions, including Yemeni rebels firing a missile targeting the international airport in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. Saudi Arabia then accused Iran of supplying the missile, saying it could be "considered an act of war."

Iraqi VP calls Iran-backed militias his nation's top threat

WASHINGTON (AP) — Iraq's highest-ranking Sunni leader said Tuesday the growing influence of Iranian-backed Shiite militias looms as the nation's most pressing

future security threat and called for bolstering U.S. military aid to Sunni forces.

In Washington for talks this week with Trump administration officials and congressional leaders, Iraqi Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi is hoping the administration will deliver on pledges to counter Iran's growing influence inside Iraq and across the Middle East.

Al-Nujaifi is one of Iraq's three vice presidents, and his brother heads a prominent Iraqi defense faction. Both have been represented in Washington by the same lobbyist employed last year by Michael Flynn, President Donald Trump's

first national security adviser. In February, Trump fired Flynn, who is now under investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller.

In remarks Tuesday at the U.S. Institute of Peace, al-Nujaifi described Shiite militias in Iraq operating as a "parallel army" that could divide the nation even as Iraq's military is driving out IS fighters with the aid of American troops.

The Iranian-backed factions "have gained a lot of power and maybe they can pose more problems," al-Nujaifi said.

Al-Nujaifi was explicit about his interest in securing military aid for Iraqi Sunni factions.



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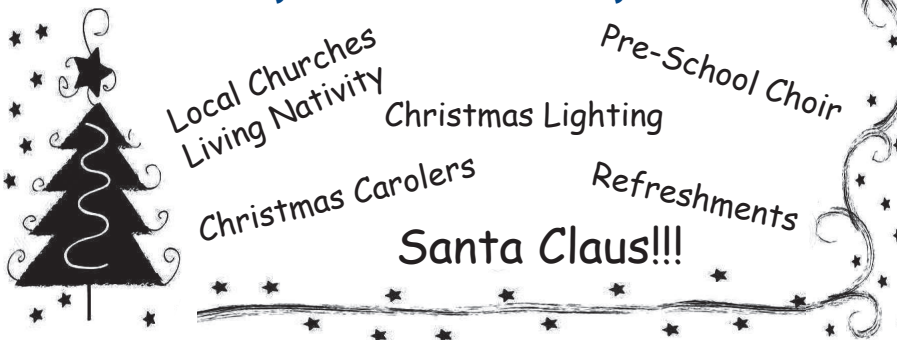
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