

Tensions rise as Hariri and Rifi compete for the Lebanese sunni-vote

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Ashraf Rifi, a contender against Lebanon's current prime minister Saad Hariri, has accused his opponent of "harassing his supporters in [the Northern town of] Tripoli".

Saad Hariri, Lebanon's current prime minister, leads the Saudi-backed Future Movement, which has the majority of the support of Lebanon's Sunni population. Former Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi has a growing support base which threatens the power of the Future Movement. He is also trying to win over the Sunni support base.

Hariri and Rifi want to run for parliamentary elections in Lebanon next may, and according to Asharq Al-Awsat news, the conflict between these two political candidates "has reached a level of no return".

Ashraf Rifi, who presided over Lebanon's Internal Security Forces from 2005 until 2013, was once an ally of Hariri. But in 2016, that changed when he challenged Hariri's leadership of Lebanon's Sunnis in northern Lebanon, particularly in the municipal elections of Tripoli, a sunni stronghold. Reuters, who describe him as a

"hawkish" called his success in local elections "a blow to long-established Sunni leaders".

Rifi has capitalised on the retracted resignation of Hariri in November last year, and has also positioned himself as a hardliner who unlike Lebanon's current Prime Minister, has no intention to ever enter into negotiations with Hezbollah. 59% of Sunni Lebanese citizens have "unfavourable" views of Hezbollah, and Rifi has constructed a persona which is Anti-Assad, pro-Saudi Arabia, and anti-Iran. His promises to fight against corruption has also endeared him to many.

But now Rifi is accusing his opponent of foul play.

In a press conference on Monday in Tripoli, Rifi accused Interior Minister Nohad Mashnouq and director-general Imad Osman, of "harassing his supporters in Tripoli". He also accused an intelligence official, Col. Mohammad Arab, of orchestrating the murder attempt on one of his key bodyguards.

The Future movement entirely denied those allegations, according to Asharq Al-Awsat who reached out to them for comment.