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Saudi Arabia-Iran dispute is a threat to Syria peace talks

Josh Wood and Taimur Khan
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The diplomatic rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran threatens to derail the already fragile Syria peace process as some of the key international players in the conflict harden their opposition to one another.

Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Iran on Monday after protesters torched the Saudi embassy in Tehran and a consulate in the city of Mashhad. The protesters were gathered to condemn the execution of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr, a prominent Shiite opposition figure in Saudi Arabia who was convicted on terrorism charges. Several Saudi allies in the region followed suit and cut or downgraded ties with Tehran.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are major players in the Syrian conflict, providing weapons, money and – in the case of Iran – troops. As a result, they are seen as the linchpins to securing the future of talks aimed at resolving the five-year-long war.

Saudi foreign minister Adel Al Jubeir said on Tuesday that regional tensions would not affect talks aimed at ending Syria's war, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported, in an apparent reference to Riyadh's severing of ties with Iran.

“The recent tensions that impacted the region negatively will not affect ... the operations that United Nations carries out alongside the international community to achieve a political solution in Geneva soon,” Mr Al Jubeir was quoted as saying after talks with UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.

But with Syria a proxy battleground for Riyadh and Tehran, where each side backs powerful opposing combatants, Saudi Arabia’s latest moves have been seen as an attempt to leverage its power in negotiations. This comes after other countries opposed to Bashar Al Assad made major concessions to Russia, an ally of the Syrian president.

“These moves are meant to restack and reshuffle the negotiations on Syria and whether or not that is successful – that is, isolating Saudi [Arabia] or giving Saudi [Arabia] a stronger hand – remains to be seen,” said Theodore Karasik, a UAE-based security analyst with Gulf State Analytics.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on Monday that Iran and Saudi Arabia each have a “vested interest in trying to bring about an end to some of the chaos inside of Syria”. He expressed hope that the two countries could continue to work together on the peace plan, which envisaged talks beginning in Geneva later this month.

But Mr Karasik said Saudi Arabia was showing it will take a hard, unmoving stance on negotiations.

“The Saudis are saying one thing and their actions are speaking another language. And that’s the language of non-compromise,” he said.

Michael Hanna, a senior fellow at the New York-based Century Foundation think tank, said it was difficult to gauge how much of an impact the Saudi-Iranian spat will have on Syria’s peace talks given that there were already many factors stacked against their success.

“It’s hard to imagine what major difference it makes to Syria diplomacy which is really in its infancy in any event,” he said. “It makes it more difficult – I don’t want to suggest it makes no impact – but it’s not as if this is a fully fledged process that has great prospects.”

“[The conflicts in Syria and Yemen] are on the trajectory of escalation regardless,” he said.

The cutting of ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran is only the latest obstacle faced by Syria’s peace talks after a period of relative optimism that followed intense diplomatic efforts to push the government and opposition to negotiate and shows of goodwill by both government forces and rebels in recent weeks.

Ahead of UN-backed peace talks between representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, a number of UN-brokered ceasefires and troop withdrawals were negotiated across the country, seemingly reflecting a mood of compromise among at least some of the combatants.

But that mood of compromise and potential reconciliation began eroding even before Al Nimr's execution sparked diplomatic upheaval among Syria's key international stakeholders.

On December 25, Zahran Alloush, one of the most powerful militia leaders in Syria whose Jaish Al Islam group was involved in the opposition's preliminary talks in Riyadh, was killed in an air strike claimed by the Syrian government. The elimination of such a strong opposition player ahead of peace talks was viewed as an attempt by the Assad regime to gain an upper hand in negotiations with the rebels.