**Why Syria will pay for Iran-Saudi rift**

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The UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has stated that the [breakdown in relations](http://bigstory.ap.org/article/afcf82e445124567a46184a259f9711a/latest-swiss-summon-saudi-diplomat-over-mass-execution) between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not affecting his efforts to advance the work of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). However, there are reasons to believe that Riyadh’s cutting of diplomatic and commercial ties with Tehran will have a negative impact on the ISSG’s ongoing efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis.

Summary[⎙ Print](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/will-iran-saudi-diplomatic-breakdown-affect-syria-talks.html) Despite UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura's assurances to the contrary, the breakdown in ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia appears set to impact the fragile talks on Syria.

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United Nations Security Council [Resolution 2254](http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm), which calls for a cease-fire and a transitional government in Syria, was passed after serious efforts and consultations on behalf of the United States and its European partners to accommodate Saudi Arabia and Iran enough to sit at the negotiating table. Yet, with the recent negative developments regarding [relations between Tehran and Riyadh](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-arabia-iran-crisis-nimr-execution-regional-impact.html), it’s unclear how the two countries will pursue negotiations within the framework of the ISSG.

Indeed, concerns over the potential negative impact of the deterioration in Iran-Saudi relations on finding a solution to the Syrian crisis have led the West to uncharacteristically perform the difficult balancing act of accommodating both Tehran and Riyadh in order to continue their presence at the sessions of the ISSG. In this vein, White House spokesman Josh Earnest has [criticized Saudi Arabia](http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/us-expresses-concern-over-saudi-human-rights-records/) over the execution of Shiite cleric Sheikh [Nimr al-Nimr](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-arabia-execution-nimr-shiite-syria-yemen-iran.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), while chiding Iran for the subsequent attacks on Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has taken the step of speaking by phone with the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia, urging the two sides to [calm tensions](http://euobserver.com/foreign/131700). In a statement, Mogherini also denounced the Saudis for the execution of Nimr. Separately, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has condemned the execution and ensuing [attacks on Saudi diplomatic compounds](http://www.n-tv.de/politik/Steinmeier-weist-Iraner-und-Saudis-zurecht-article16691546.html), stressing the need for Iran and Saudi Arabia to ease their tensions. Moreover, British Prime Minister David Cameron [canceled his planned visit](http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-iran-britain-idUKKBN0UJ0Y220160105) to Saudi Arabia, while Canada has issued a statement [condemning only the execution](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/01/03/stephane-dion-saudi-arabi_n_8908644.html) of Nimr.

The [next session](http://www.ibtimes.co.in/un-special-envoy-syria-will-be-convenor-syria-peace-talks-25-january-661015) of the ISSG will involve representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition. While apparently still slated to be held in Switzerland on Jan. 25, it is certain that there will be many challenges at the negotiating table — and that the various parties’ positions will be far apart. Although the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is neither discussed in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 nor in the ongoing political dialogue, it is not yet clear what the different parties’ stances on this matter will be. Moreover, the classification of nonterrorist opposition groups allowed to have a seat at the table — a very important issue in the peace talks — has not yet been finalized. The list of acceptable opposition groups has to be approved by a committee, which includes Iran. If the list is not finalized in the coming days and weeks, it is clear that the ongoing diplomatic efforts must be considered a failure and the Jan. 25 ISSG session thus unlikely to yield important results.

The ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia may also influence the matter of the [fight against the Islamic State](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-isis-terrorism-coalition-erdogan-foreign-policy.html) (IS). For the Saudis, hindering Iran’s claimed influence in the region is of more importance than the fight against IS. This has been clearly displayed during the ISSG sessions so far, as Riyadh has made fighting IS a lower priority than the ouster of Iran-backed Assad. Indeed, rising tensions between the region’s Shiite-Iran and Sunni-Saudi Arabia powerhouses over Syria will shift the focus of all parties away from fighting IS. In this vein, only IS will benefit from the current situation, and the terrorist group can be counted on to make use of the widened gaps between regional states to pursue its objective of promoting its sectarian narrative. Furthermore, one cannot disregard the matter of how rising hostilities between Iran and Saudi Arabia will increase insecurity in various countries across the region in addition to Syria and, perhaps, beyond. This would also be perfectly in line with the objectives of IS. Indeed, the more insecurity, the faster the group will grow.

Recent developments in Homs, where a cease-fire deal between armed opposition groups and the Syrian government was achieved following ISSG meetings in Vienna, led many to express hope for an end to the fighting. However, with the breakdown in Iranian-Saudi relations, these hopes are fading, with the situation on the ground bound to become more complex.

The current situation is such that [Jaish al-Islam](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jaish-al-islam-piece-918366283%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), the coalition of Islamist groups backed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is not in a very good state, and despite earlier successes in the fight against the Syrian government, it has recently suffered setbacks on several fronts. The [Lebanese Hezbollah](http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155) movement and Syrian government forces are in a better position. Against this backdrop, Iran and Saudi Arabia can be expected to strengthen their allies and proxies in Syria, resulting in a further escalation of tensions. Riyadh, as the patron of armed opposition forces in Syria, and Tehran, as the main supporter of Syrian government troops and militias supporting Assad, will both attempt to hurt the other side in a full-scale proxy war. This situation will deepen the conflict in Syria and broaden ongoing disputes.

As Iran and Saudi Arabia will likely try to strengthen their proxies and tilt the situation to their own advantage, the progress achieved within the framework of ISSG in recent months may very well evaporate.

Many analysts believe that Saudi Arabia has sought this heightening of tensions and deliberately carried out the death sentence against Nimr. In their view, Saudi Arabia predicted Iran’s violent reaction to the execution, which appears to have been used to send messages to the United States, internal Saudi opposition as well as Iran. The message to Washington may have been that Riyadh finds it unacceptable that following the implementation of the July 14, 2015, [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/14/politics/iran-nuclear-deal/), Iran will likely emerge as a major power in the region. In this vein, the Saudi maneuvering can be construed as an ultimatum to the West to either choose Saudi Arabia or Iran. To domestic critics, Nimr’s execution may be a signal that death is the fate of any critic or rebellion. Finally, as for Iran, the Saudi message has been that it will never accept Iran’s regional role.

Amid this escalation, the concern for the United States, more than anything else, is the fate of the political negotiations to resolve the crisis in Syria. Indeed, Washington believes that the negotiations are at a sensitive stage and therefore should not be allowed to collapse. Thus, the United States is working toward lessening tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The intensive consultations of American diplomats, and particularly Secretary of State John Kerry, with the Saudis and Iranians to reduce tensions has been done to ensure the continuation of the ISSG’s efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis. Only time will tell whether the United States, as in the past, can bring the current tensions under control.