

US appeals to Iran, Saudi Arabia to show restraint

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Washington: The US yesterday asked Saudi Arabia and Iran to show restraint as the tensions between the two countries erupted into a full-blown diplomatic crisis over the execution of a Shiite cleric.

Secretary of State John Kerry telephoned the foreign ministers of the two countries in this regard while the White House in a public statement called both Iran and Saudi Arabia to take steps to de-escalate the situation.

“We do continue to be concerned about the need for both the Iranians and the Saudis to de-escalate the situation in the Middle East,” White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest told reporters at his daily news conference. Earnest called on both countries to show restraint and avoid further inflaming sectarian tensions between Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shiite-ruled Iran.

“That we are urging all sides to show restraint and to not further inflame tensions that are on quite vivid display in the region. Kerry has been in touch with his Iranian counterpart. US diplomatic officials in Saudi Arabia have been in touch with their counterparts to convey this message,” he said.

“We have seen a lot of volatility and instability in the Middle East has a tendency to break down along sectarian lines. It is not a coincidence. We believe there’s more that can be done by people on all sides to try to bridge those divides in a way that advances the interests of countries all across the region,” the White House spokesman said. Syria, he said, is probably the most vivid example of this.

He urged Saudi Arabia and Iran not to let the conflict derail fragile talks aimed at securing a cease-fire and a political transition to end the war in Syria. “The United States has succeeded in leading the international effort to bring all sides together to try and bring about a political resolution inside Syria,” he noted.

“It was a lot of painstaking diplomatic work to bring them to the table the first time, and there will always be reasons for them to be suspicious and be reluctant to engage with countries that they consider to be their adversaries. But the pursuit of this ultimate goal is so clearly within their own direct interest, that we are hopeful that they will continue to engage, but ultimately, it will be up to them,” Earnest said.

Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran late yesterday, giving diplomats 48 hours to leave the country, after protesters set fire to its embassy in Tehran Riyadh’s execution on Saturday of prominent Shiite cleric and activist Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.

Responding to a question, Earnest expressed concerns over the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia in particular the recent execution of political and religious leaders in that country.

“I can tell you that the United States regularly has raised concerns about the human rights situation inside of Saudi Arabia. The President has even done that in his conversations with King Salman,” he said.

“More recently, there have been direct concerns raised by US officials to Saudi officials about the potential damaging consequences of following through on mass executions, in particular, the execution of al-Nimr, political opposition figure, but also the religious leader,” he said.

“This is a concern that we raised with the Saudis in advance, and unfortunately, the concerns that we expressed to the Saudis have precipitated the kinds of consequences that we were concerned about,” Earnest said.

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