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Pakistan's Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split

By Ankit Panda



Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan arrives to address Saudi Arabia's investment conference in Riyadh in October 2018. (Photo by Fares Ghaith/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

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Summary

- For decades, Pakistan has hewed closer to Saudi Arabia than to Iran, but successive Pakistani civilian and military leaders have pursued a more even-keeled foreign policy to avoid being perceived as pro-Saudi and anti-Iranian.
- In 2015, Pakistan remained neutral as a Saudi-led coalition embarked on a military campaign in Yemen against Iran-aligned Houthis. Subsequent Pakistani moves highlighted its sensitivity to Saudi perceptions of insecurity.
- Following the worsening in Saudi-Iranian relations in January 2016 after Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shia sheikh, Pakistan's attempts at shuttle diplomacy and mediation were clear evidence of its interest in avoiding a regional cold war in the Middle East.
- As much as Pakistan's civilian leaders have tried to avoid an overtly public tilt in the country's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia, close military and economic ties ensure that Pakistan likely would choose Saudi Arabia over Iran, should it be forced to pick sides.
- Economic ties between Iran and Pakistan have flourished since the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program in 2015. However, the US decision to withdraw from the agreement threatens to destabilize the Iran-Pakistan relationship.
- Even as Pakistan has maintained its independence in light of Saudi requests with regard to Yemen, it has been less willing to apply diplomatic leverage on Saudi Arabia in an attempt to shape its regional calculus in the Middle East.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the factors that have influenced Pakistan's approach to navigating the ever-sharpening geopolitical split between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 2015. Supported by USIP's Asia Center, the report examines factors driving Islamabad's foreign policy toward Tehran and Riyadh and discusses the implications for the United States in South Asia and the Middle East.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Supporters of Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party wave national and party flags during a May 2015 rally in support of Saudi Arabia's intervention in the Yemen conflict. (Photo by Akhtar Soomro/Reuters)

Introduction

The long-standing geopolitical divergences between Saudi Arabia and Iran—the self-appointed state vanguards of Sunni and Shia Islam, respectively—have posed considerable challenges for Pakistan's foreign policy. As a constitutionally Islamic state with a Sunni majority and a substantial Shia minority, a contiguous land border with Iran, and a purported “special relationship” with Riyadh, Pakistan has spent decades striking a delicate balance between these two antagonists. Since 2015, however, the deteriorating Saudi-Iranian relationship has brought forth a new cold war in the Middle East. These complications have affected Pakistan's broader approach to the region, as Riyadh's and Tehran's divergent interests make it increasingly difficult to avoid choosing sides. Pakistan's significant economic ties with both countries also make it vulnerable to any further hostilities.¹

In the 2010s, two events have had particular relevance to Pakistan's approach to both powers. First, following the start of a Saudi-led coalition's campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen in early 2015, Pakistan's civilian leadership—with legislative assent—elected to remain neutral. Since then, however, Pakistan's approach to the Yemen conflict has evolved, and it now participates in the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. Second, in early 2016, the Saudis executed the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi citizen—an act that sparked a diplomatic firestorm between Iran and Saudi Arabia and forced Pakistan to do what it could to mitigate the fallout. Both events illustrate the many considerations that

Ever since General Zia came to power in the late 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan's military and intelligence services have tolerated and even encouraged more significant public roles for extremist religious groups.

Pakistani decision makers face in their approach to the Middle East today. External factors, including US policy shifts toward Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan alike under the administration of President Donald J. Trump, also have affected Islamabad's diplomatic calculations and prompted it to remain cautious.

Pakistan's Relationship with Saudi Arabia

Substantive and serious bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia date back to the 1960s, when the two countries established formal diplomatic ties and began cooperating on matters of mutual strategic interest. In 1947, British rule in India came to an end, creating the independent dominions of India and Pakistan. The latter was explicitly an Islamic country—a home for South Asia's Muslims—with two noncontiguous geographic components, Pakistan and East Pakistan. Even before Pakistan and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations, their pan-Sunni Islamic affinities were apparent. Over the years, they increasingly cooperated on defense and strategic matters. In 1969, for instance, Pakistani pilots flew Royal Saudi Air Force fighters to repel a South Yemeni incursion of the southern Saudi border.² These military-to-military ties flourished under the regime of Pakistan's General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1978–88). Saudi Arabia actively supported Zia's domestic Islamization campaign, and it was under Zia that the two countries concluded a significant pact on defense cooperation in 1982.³ During the late Cold War, as many as fifteen thousand Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia.⁴

Riyadh's perspectives toward Islamabad, however positive, have not been without conditions in recent decades. Most notably, the Saudi leadership has regarded Pakistani governments led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) with a degree of skepticism not given to governments led by other parties, most notably the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). The reason for this distrust stems from two factors. Under the PPP government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the late 1970s, Pakistan and Iran—the latter then led by Shah Reza Pahlavi—grew closer, marking the start of an era during which successive PPP leaders saw value in a close relationship with Iran that Saudi Arabia did not share. The PPP's rejection of Sunni Islamic extremism in politics and Sunni (Barelvi) exceptionalism in Pakistani politics specifically meant it had less ideological affinity for Saudi priorities.⁵ Moreover, ever since General Zia came to power in the late 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan's military and intelligence services have tolerated and even encouraged more significant public roles for extremist religious groups. Zia's overt pursuit of fundamentalist Sunni policies endeared him to Saudi clerical leaders and the royal family, and he visited Riyadh frequently. Following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) partnered extensively with its Saudi counterpart to counter and manage the Soviet threat in Afghanistan. Saudi funding also supported the ISI's efforts to train the Afghan mujahideen (in partnership with the US Central Intelligence Agency) against the Soviets.⁶ Zia's

Map of Arabian Sea Region

Adapted from artwork by
Yakcuteboy and tele52/Shutterstock

maneuvering of the military in a more explicitly fundamentalist Sunni direction also clashed with the PPP's traditional base of support among Pakistan's Shia community, solidifying the Saudi government's lack of enthusiasm for the party.

ECONOMIC TIES

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia also maintain considerable economic ties. Saudi Arabia is Pakistan's top source of oil, and many Pakistani citizens—as many as 2.5 million in recent years—travel to Saudi Arabia to work.⁷ Today, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have a skewed trade

balance. In 2016, according to data reported to the United Nations Statistical Division, Saudi Arabia imported \$390 million in goods and commodities from Pakistan, mostly food and textiles, but Pakistan imported only \$61.3 million from Saudi Arabia in return. In 2016, Saudi imports from Pakistan included \$58 million in rice, \$26.7 million in beef, and \$21.4 million in lamb. According to Harvard's Atlas of Economic Complexity, vegetables, foodstuffs, and wood constituted more than half of all Pakistani exports to Saudi Arabia in 2016, and textiles and furniture accounted for another 26 percent.

For Pakistan, however, this economic relationship is integral to its energy security. Riyadh has consistently accounted for an overwhelming portion of Islamabad's crude oil imports. In any given year, more than three-fourths of Pakistan's crude oil has come from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁸ In recent years, Pakistan has sought to reduce its perceived overreliance on Saudi and Arab Gulf crude oil, in one instance by drafting a "government-to-government oil import agreement" with Russia in late 2017.⁹ Beyond the critical importance of oil, Pakistan relies heavily on remittance payments from Pakistani citizens employed in Saudi Arabia; however, this long-term trend may be shifting. According to the State Bank of Pakistan's January 2018 statistics, total overseas remittances by Pakistani citizens grew 2.5 percent in the first half of 2017 to \$9.7 billion, but remittances from Saudi Arabia shrank by 7.5 percent to \$2.53 billion.¹⁰ This drop accompanied a period of overall decline in Pakistani migrant labor abroad. In 2015, the number of Pakistanis working abroad had reached its highest level since 1971, but between 2016 and 2017 this figure fell by approximately half.¹¹ The English-language Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* attributed the drop to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 push for a more diversified economic model: "Due to the drive by the Saudi government to provide its own citizens with jobs, thousands of Pakistanis have lost their jobs in recent months."¹²



THE NUCLEAR QUESTION: A SHARED “ISLAMIC BOMB”?

It takes decades for most aspiring nuclear proliferators to acquire a weapon, and such efforts require a massive domestic defense-industrial complex.

A long-running thread of analytical speculation around the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship has concerned Islamabad’s nuclear deterrent and its willingness to share nuclear knowledge with—or, more seriously, to transfer a nuclear weapon wholesale to—Islama-

bad. Although Pakistan historically has found Saudi Arabia’s beneficence valuable, and at times has been a client to its patron—for example, in the 1969 conflict with Yemen—the prospect of direct proliferation activity between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia mostly has been overstated. However, in the lead-up to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 group of powers (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) in 2015, Saudi interest in the future of nuclear weapons in the Middle East intensified. For example, in 2013, Prince Turki bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud—a member of the royal family and the former head of Al Mukhabarat Al A’amah, the main Saudi intelligence agency—wrote in favor of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East.¹³ The idea of a regional WMDFZ was not particularly new, but Al Faisal was writing at a time when Western commentators feared that a failure to conclude a nuclear agreement with Iran would precipitate a Saudi sprint for the bomb. One of the likely vectors for the Saudis to acquire nuclear materials or even an assembled off-the-shelf nuclear weapon was Pakistan, their long-standing ally. Comments from individuals, including Al Faisal, hinted that Saudi Arabia would seek to become a nuclear weapons state if Iran succeeded in its own nuclear endeavors.¹⁴ These long-running Saudi threats ostensibly were meant to pressure US and European policymakers to take action against Iran’s civil nuclear program; according to US Department of State cables leaked to WikiLeaks, as early as 2008 the former Saudi King Abdullah had asked the United States to consider preventive strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.

It takes decades for most aspiring nuclear proliferators to acquire a weapon, and such efforts require a massive domestic defense-industrial complex. Saudi Arabia does have a burgeoning civil nuclear program, and it has been negotiating with the United States for a so-called 123 Agreement on civil nuclear cooperation.¹⁵ As the country’s vast oil wealth is expected to decline in the decades to come, nuclear power has received a fillip as part of Crown Prime Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 economic diversification push.¹⁶ Yet the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA has once again raised the specter of a nuclear Iran, and made a Pakistan-supported Saudi nuclear arms program all the more plausible.¹⁷ For years, analysts concerned with Saudi nuclear breakout with Pakistani assistance point to testimony from Saudi diplomat Muhammad Khilewi, who defected to the United States in the 1990s.¹⁸ Khilewi asserted that Riyadh had sought the bomb since at least the mid-1970s, that it had funded Pakistani and Iraqi nuclear weapons programs, and that it was running a clandestine nuclear research program. With regard to alleged Saudi financial assistance to Pakistan’s nuclear program, Khilewi claimed that the two countries had reached an understanding where Pakistan would provide Saudi Arabia with nuclear weapons in the future, if needed. Khilewi’s testimony

continues to be cited, but the circumstances under which he was testifying have undermined the credibility of his allegations.¹⁹ The Saudi government likewise has denied his statements.

Beyond Khilewi's perceived lack of credibility, Islamabad has a number of strategic reasons for retaining exclusive control over its nuclear arsenal instead of directly proliferating assembled weapons to Riyadh.²⁰ Pakistan, for instance, is highly sensitive to the size of its own arsenal; despite its proximity to Saudi Arabia, it would be unwilling to unilaterally compromise its own capabilities with regard to India. Second, any such transfer would also bring Islamabad under unwanted international scrutiny, raising the threat of economic sanctions and further sully Pakistan's reputation by branding it a nuclear rogue state. Third, any transfer of nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia would immediately cause a precipitous decline in Iran-Pakistan relations, and Islamabad has long worked to avoid such an outcome.

Pakistan's Relationship with Iran

From geographic necessity, Pakistan and successive Iranian regimes have maintained diplomatic ties with varying degrees of cordiality over the years. Tehran's leaders and the various civilian and military governments in Islamabad have seen differing challenges and opportunities in their relationship. The two countries share a particularly restive border: Iran's Sistan-va-Baluchestan Province and Pakistan's neighboring (and even more volatile) Balochistan Province are both home to militant groups of ethnic Baloch that have long pursued autonomy.²¹ Despite these concerns, the bilateral relationship is robust, and the two countries have cooperated on several economic projects.

FROM REVOLUTION TO NORMALIZATION

The modern history of the Iranian state's interactions with Pakistan can be divided into two parts. The first period, which spans Pakistan's independence in 1947 to the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, had relatively convivial bilateral ties and neighborly relations. Iran won goodwill with early generations of Pakistani leaders, both military and civilian, by being the first state to recognize Islamabad at the United Nations. The shah of Iran also was the first foreign head of state to visit the newly independent Pakistan.²² More seriously, Tehran provided logistics and force assistance to Pakistan during its 1965 war with India, even allowing Pakistani fighters to refuel at Iranian airstrips at Zahedan and Mehrabad.²³ Pakistan similarly sold arms to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s—even as it also armed Iraq.²⁴ For Iran, Pakistan was a key source of the man-portable, shoulder-launched Stinger missiles used in the 1986–88 oil tanker war.²⁵

The relationship between the two countries became considerably more complicated following Iran's 1979 revolution. The change of government also changed the strategic direction of Iranian foreign policy, and this shift coincided with the start of General Zia's Islamization push in Pakistan, with active Saudi support. The Saudis made additional efforts to influence Pakistan through Sunni clients such as the Deobandi movement and, in more recent times, the Ahl-e Hadith religious movement, mainly to minimize possible Iranian gains.²⁶ The dynamics of this later period continues to have important reverberations to this day.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Iran and Pakistan maintain close but underdeveloped economic ties. Even though they share a land border, their total trade volumes are a fraction of that between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Precise trade figures for the Pakistan-Iran relationship are difficult to ascertain, given that both governments have reported widely divergent estimates of imports and exports, with the Iranian government typically overstating its exports to Pakistan. A 2016 study by the Pakistan Business Council showed vast discrepancies in specific quantities of goods and commodities traded between the two countries.²⁷ Pakistani data from 2016 state that Pakistan's top imports from Iran included mineral fuels, ships, iron and steel, vegetables, and raw hides. Bilateral trade volumes saw rapid increases in 2017. According to Iranian officials, in the final three quarters of 2017, Iranian exports to Pakistan totaled \$634 million and Pakistani exports to Iran totaled \$348 million, a 49 percent increase.²⁸

In 2015, some Pakistani analysts pointed to an opportunity for Pakistan and Iran to develop their economic relationship after the completion of the JCPOA lifted US and EU nuclear sanctions on Iran and the creation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) funneled major Chinese investment flows into Pakistan.²⁹ CPEC seeks to build a network of roads, railways, energy production nodes, and other infrastructure across Pakistan, connecting China's northwestern Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast at Gwadar.³⁰ In 2016, the governors of the Pakistani province of Balochistan and the Iranian province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan agreed to designate Gwadar a "sister port city" of Iran's Arabian Sea port of Chabahar.³¹ The sister city agreement included the formation of a joint border monitoring committee "to prevent human trafficking and drug smuggling," according to Balochistan chief minister Nawab Sanullah Zehri.³² Outside of these opportunities, the two countries also have a joint, cross-border gas pipeline project known as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Once completed, the pipeline will deliver natural gas from Iran's South Pars field to Sindh in Pakistan, running through Balochistan. However, the project has been marred by controversies and delays; in particular, Iran has chastised Pakistan for devoting insufficient resources to completing parts of the pipeline on its side of the border.³³

A DIFFICULT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN BALOCHISTAN

In recent years, the border region between the Iranian province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan and the Pakistani province of Balochistan has been the site of constant conflict. The Pakistani and Iranian militaries regularly exchange mortar and small-arms fire across the border, with major incidents occurring several times between 2014 and 2018.³⁴ Tehran has accused Islamabad of turning a blind eye to the activities of Jaish-al-Adl (Army of Justice), an al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremist militant group that operates primarily on the Iranian side of the border. Jaish-al-Adl began its activities in 2013 and was an evolution of Jundallah, also known as the People's Resistance Movement of Iran. Jundallah and its successor Jaish-al-Adl oppose the Islamic Republic's Shia leaders, and Tehran regards them as terrorist organizations. These groups and other disaffected Sunni Baloch in Sistan-va-Baluchestan have denounced the Shiite Iranian government's repressive practices in the province.³⁵ As a result, the self-determination movement for the two million Baloch living in Sistan-va-Baluchestan has a more

Truck enroute to Iran from Pakistan.
(Photo by Awais Yaqub/Alamy)

sectarian character than that of its Pakistani counterpart.

The Iranian regime’s case—supported by independent research and assessments—is that fighters associated with Jaish-al-Adl use the western reaches of Pakistan’s poorly administered and policed Balochistan region as a hideout to plan attacks across a porous border.³⁶ At present, the group is the largest Sunni militant group working to undermine the Iranian government. Iran’s lack of confidence



in the ability of Pakistan’s government and military to rein in Jaish-al-Adl has led to regular threats of cross-border military intervention to target the group’s hideouts. In 2014, for example, Iranian interior minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli issued a stark warning: “If Pakistan doesn’t take the needed steps to fight against the terrorist groups, we will send our forces onto Pakistani soil.... We will not wait.”³⁷ Fazli’s warning came after Jaish-al-Adl abducted five Iranian border agents from an isolated post in Sistan-va-Baluchestan, transporting them to the Pakistani side of the frontier.³⁸ Tasmin Aslam, a Pakistani Foreign Office spokesperson, rebuked the Iranian warning in an official statement, noting that “Pakistan has already informed the Iranian authorities that its Frontier Corps teams have intensively combed the entire region, but could not verify the entry or presence of these Iranian border guards in its territory.” Aslam continued, “It shall, however, be emphasised that the Iranian forces have no authority to cross our borders in violation of the international law and we must respect each other’s borders.”³⁹ The Pakistani Foreign Office also claimed that it had maintained “active support” against terrorist groups in the past—a claim that fell on deaf ears in Tehran. Jaish-al-Adl, and the Balochistan problem between Iran and Pakistan in general, remain active to date.

Beyond the issue of cross-border terrorism and militancy, recently Pakistan has amplified its concerns that Indian external intelligence uses Iran’s Sistan-va-Baluchestan as a base of operations for human intelligence collection and other activities in the region. In March 2016, in an unusual incident, the Pakistani military’s primary spokesperson, General Asim Bajwa, highlighted that then Pakistan Army chief of staff General Raheel Sharif had raised the issue of Indian intelligence activities in Iran with Iranian president Hassan Rouhani during the latter’s official visit to Pakistan.⁴⁰ Sharif “highlighted challenges being faced by [Pakistan and discussed the] involvement of RAW [India’s Research and Analysis Wing, the external intelligence service] in [Pakistan’s] internal affairs, specially in Balochistan,” Bajwa said, and added, “There is one concern that [RAW] is involved in Pakistan, especially in

If Iran were to fail to reach an acceptable arrangement with the JCPOA's European participants, it likely would allow the deal to unwind and would resume its previously restricted uranium enrichment activities.

Balochistan, and sometimes it also uses the soil of our brother country Iran.”⁴¹ This accusation came shortly after Pakistani counter-intelligence had apprehended Kulbhushan Jadhav, an Indian national, in Balochistan. Jadhav was charged with espionage and sentenced to death, even as the Indian gov-

ernment denied that he was a RAW agent.⁴² Rouhani rebuffed any accusation of abetting Indian espionage in Pakistan in 2016, and Iran has since largely remained silent as Jadhav's ultimate fate snowballed into a major bilateral issue between India and Pakistan.

NUCLEAR COOPERATION

Beyond the growth of their diplomatic and economic relationship and the management of their often-difficult border region, Pakistan and Iran have to some extent shared another important link. According to an International Atomic Energy Agency investigation, beginning in the late 1980s, Iranian scientists contacted Pakistani nuclear scientist and notorious nuclear proliferator Abdul Qadeer Khan.⁴³ Khan helped lay the groundwork for Iran's first uranium enrichment plant, the facility at Natanz, and by the early 1990s Khan had sent Iran more than two thousand components for uranium enrichment centrifuges.⁴⁴ The bulk of Khan's proliferation activity with Iran—at least in the late 1980s, when his input made the greatest marginal difference for Iran's burgeoning domestic enrichment capacity—took place without the full knowledge of Pakistan's civilian leadership. In 1989, Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani first informed Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto of Khan's nuclear assistance during her official visit to Tehran.⁴⁵ Iranian interest in Pakistan's support persisted well into the mid-1990s, and in December 1994, Rafsanjani offered Pakistan financing for its own nuclear weapons program in exchange for continued technology transfers to Iran.⁴⁶ Iranian officials continued to meet with Khan's “clandestine supply network” until as late as 1999.⁴⁷

The conclusion of the JCPOA between Iran and the P5+1 powers in 2015 ended Iran's near-term ambitions for a nuclear weapons capability. Although the agreement permitted Iran to retain a domestic enrichment capacity—the same system that came out of the technology transferred from Khan's illicit network—it would no longer possess a rapid nuclear breakout capability. For Pakistan, as with so many other countries in the region, the JCPOA marked an important moment to reconsider the economic opportunities posed by an Iran that would no longer be frozen out of the global economy by international nuclear-related sanctions. However, the Trump administration's May 2018 decision to withdraw from the JCPOA threatens to break the pact. If Iran were to fail to reach an acceptable arrangement with the JCPOA's European participants, it likely would allow the deal to unwind and would resume its previously restricted uranium enrichment activities. In June 2018, Iran opened a new facility for the production of uranium enrichment centrifuges—a move that did not violate the JCPOA but nonetheless signaled Tehran's intent to cease complying with the agreement should a US withdrawal force its hand.⁴⁸

Pakistan in the Middle: Case Studies Since 2015

In the past decade, Pakistan has made strong efforts to balance the competing desires and interests of its regional allies in the face of strenuous tests. In two particular incidents—Saudi Arabia’s actions against Houthi rebels in Yemen and Iran’s explosive reaction to the execution of a Saudi Shia cleric—Islamabad’s diplomatic abilities have been stretched to their utmost. A closer look at the circumstances surrounding these regional crises presents an informative picture of Pakistan’s motivations and methods for responding to tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

OPERATION DECISIVE STORM AND THE SAUDI REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

In March 2015, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council—excluding Oman—issued a joint statement, at Saudi Arabia’s insistence, agreeing to intervene in Yemen. The intervention came in response to calls for support from the internationally recognized government of Yemeni president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Hadi’s government was in conflict with the Houthis, a multisectarian Shia-led movement involving supporters of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh.⁴⁹ “The operation,” according to Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, “is to defend and support the legitimate government of Yemen and prevent the radical Houthi movement from taking over the country.”⁵⁰

Dubbed Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi-led intervention (supported by the United States) initially comprised multiple airstrikes against Houthi positions, followed by the deployment of ground forces into Yemen and a subsequent naval blockade. In April 2015, Operation Decisive Storm ended, and the coalition launched a second phase, Operation Restoring Hope. In the meantime, the intervention and the accompanying naval blockade sparked a serious humanitarian crisis in Yemen, prompting a high-level United Nations emergency response in mid-2015.⁵¹ As of early 2019, nearly four years later, Operation Restoring Hope is ongoing. Hadi’s government has been restored in Aden, but much of western Yemen remains under Houthi control.

The Saudi-led coalition’s intervention into Yemen had stark geopolitical contours. Riyadh saw the Houthis as a client group of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps—another instrument for Tehran to pursue regional hegemony. Saudi anxieties had grown in 2014 over Iran’s gradually expanding influence in Syria and Iraq as Syria’s civil war raged on. Moreover, by early 2015, diplomatic momentum toward a geopolitical game-changer had become clearer as Iran’s government, under President Rouhani, successfully sustained the momentum it had gained in late 2013 under the Joint Plan of Action, a predecessor to the 2015 JCPOA. In April 2015, two weeks before the end of Operation Decisive Storm and nearly a year and a half after the 2013 Joint Plan of Action, Iran and the P5+1 had announced a framework for a comprehensive agreement. That agreement made a final agreement on Iran’s civilian nuclear program more likely, in which Tehran would receive considerable sanctions relief in exchange for limiting its domestic nuclear enrichment capabilities. Saudi Arabia perceived the putative benefits of that agreement as granting Iran more flexibility and resources for regional adventurism.

In the face of looming fiscal concerns in late 2018, the Saudis might well have expected that Pakistan could not afford to alienate any potential sources of outside financial aid.

The Saudis chose to intervene in Yemen without full prior consultation with Pakistan, a country that had hewed to Riyadh's regional designs in the past. Pakistan did not send an envoy to Riyadh to discuss the intervention and Pakistan's possible support for the Saudi cam-

campaign until after the Royal Saudi Air Force launched its initial attacks.⁵² On March 31, 2015—five days after the coalition attacked multiple targets in Yemen, including Al Anad Air Base, which had been occupied by Houthi fighters—Pakistani federal defense minister Khawaja Asif, prime ministerial foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz, and multiple senior Pakistani military officers traveled to Riyadh to discuss Yemen. By then, Saudi decision makers presumed Pakistan would come to their aid in Yemen, as it had before.⁵³ At that time, Saudi leadership enjoyed close personal ties with Pakistan's then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who had spent years in exile in Saudi Arabia after former Pakistani Army chief of staff Pervez Musharraf ousted him in a coup in 1999. Saudi Arabia later helped Sharif return to Pakistan, where he reentered politics and successfully led the PML-N to victory in the 2013 general elections.⁵⁴ Under Prime Minister Sharif, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's military ties also remained strong. From a Saudi perspective, it was a foregone conclusion that Pakistan—a military heavyweight by any measure—would contribute some troops to Operation Decisive Storm.

Saudi complacency about Pakistan's support also stemmed from the knowledge that Saudi Arabia had made a \$1.5 billion loan to Pakistan in 2014 to help Islamabad bolster its foreign exchange reserves and service its external debt.⁵⁵ Currently, Islamabad remains in the throes of a balance of payments crisis, beyond its current arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 2018, the IMF assessed Pakistan's gross external financing requirements for the 2019 fiscal year as \$27 billion—a record high for the country.⁵⁶ The assessment indicated Pakistan's debt sustainability problems would make it difficult for the IMF to arrange further financing at favorable rates, increasing the odds that Pakistan would need to turn to external creditors, including Saudi Arabia and China, to meet its future financing needs. The IMF has projected Pakistan's external public financing requirement could balloon to \$45 billion by the 2023 fiscal year.⁵⁷ In the face of these looming fiscal concerns, in late 2018 Pakistan's recently elected prime minister, Imran Khan, requested financial assistance from the Saudis. Riyadh helped Islamabad shore up its foreign exchange reserves with a \$3 billion package of foreign currency support and an additional \$3 billion for oil imports.⁵⁸ The Saudis might well have expected that Pakistan could not afford to alienate any potential sources of outside financial aid.

PAKISTAN'S NEUTRALITY RESOLUTION ON YEMEN

Past performance and current circumstances notwithstanding, Saudi assumptions of automatic support from Pakistan were misplaced. In mid-April 2015, two weeks after the start of Operation Decisive Storm, the Pakistani parliament voted overwhelmingly to maintain neutrality as the conflict in Yemen played out, effectively denying Saudi Arabia's request for Pakistan to send troops, equipment, or supplies to the Yemeni theater.⁵⁹ "The parliament of Pakistan expresses serious concern on the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in Yemen and its implications for peace and stability of the region," the resolution said, adding that the parliament "desires that Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemen conflict so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis."⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the resolution reiterated Pakistan's friendly relationship with Saudi Arabia, and noted Pakistan would "stand shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia"—a Pakistani phrase used to signal support for Riyadh. Historically, the Pakistani Army has played an important role in shaping the country's foreign and security policy choices, but it did not publicly play a role in the neutrality declaration in 2015. During Pakistani parliamentary deliberations in March and April 2015, Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif made no public statements on the advisability of intervention in Yemen.

In Pakistan, the parliamentary declaration contravened strong statements by the prime minister's office and senior officials that implied greater Pakistani support for Saudi plans in Yemen. By the time that the Pakistani parliament issued the neutrality declaration, Saudi media had included Pakistan in the list of coalition members involved in Operation Decisive Storm, forcing the Pakistani Foreign Office to push back against rumors. Days after the Saudi air campaign began, Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry told reporters that media reports of Pakistan's involvement in the coalition-backed attacks were "completely baseless."⁶¹ Around the same time, Federal Defense Minister Khawaja Asif reiterated that Pakistan had made no assurances to Riyadh: "We have made no decision to participate in this war. We didn't make any promise. We have not promised any military support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen."⁶² Most tellingly, Asif also said that Pakistan would "not take part in any conflict that could result in differences in the Muslim world, causing fault-lines present in Pakistan to be disturbed, the aggravation of which will have to be borne by Pakistan."⁶³ Asif similarly informed the Reuters news agency that Pakistan's decision making in the early days of the coalition's attack on Yemen had explicitly considered the "many minorities and sects" that "live in Pakistan." He added, "Whatever assurances we give Saudi Arabia is to defend its territorial integrity, but I assure [you] that there is no danger of us getting involved in a sectarian war."⁶⁴ His statement was the clearest tell that in the early days of the Saudi coalition's decision to strike Yemen, Pakistan had assessed the potential for this war to evolve into the latest flashpoint in the simmering Saudi-Iranian cold war in the Middle East.

Pakistan's sole action in the days between the Royal Saudi Air Force's initial strikes against Yemen and the visit of its official delegation comprising Asif, Chaudhry, and other senior military officers was to evacuate approximately five hundred Pakistani nationals from Yemen by plane. Brigadier General Ahmed Asseri confirmed the evacuation on March 29, 2015, emphasizing that "coalition forces provided a safe passage for [the evacuees]"—a statement that highlighted the military-to-military coordination between the Saudi coalition and the Pakistani government in the early days of the conflict.⁶⁵ Yet this cooperation was not necessarily a signal of a special relationship between Islamabad and Riyadh; the Saudi coalition also coordinated with other major evacuation efforts, including those of India and China. Federal Defense Minister Asif, along with Prime Minister Sharif, had drawn at least one redline for Pakistan, noting that even though Islamabad would defer a decision on military involvement, "any violation of Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity would elicit a strong response from Pakistan." Asif also backed Saudi Arabia's interpretation of the political facts on the ground in Yemen as well, referring to Hadi's government as "legitimate" and the Houthis as "non-state actors."⁶⁶

It would take until late 2016 for Pakistan's willingness to dispatch troops to Saudi Arabia to change, followed by an intensification in January 2018—months after a corruption scandal had forced Prime Minister Sharif out of office. In November 2016, Pakistan's top military leadership changed. Following the end of his customary three-year appointment, General Raheel Sharif handed the country's armed forces over to General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Notably, Prime Minister Sharif had appointed

Bajwa, demonstrating a degree of civilian control over the military that could not have been taken for granted in the run-up to General Sharif's retirement. In December 2016, General Bajwa visited Saudi Arabia, as previous Pakistani chiefs of army staff had done earlier in their terms. Following Bajwa's visit, in early 2017, Pakistan announced that a brigade of five thousand troops would be sent to Saudi Arabia.⁶⁷ In February 2018, Pakistan announced that it would deploy additional troops to Saudi Arabia, all in the name of border security.⁶⁸ On February 15, 2018, the Pakistani military's public communications wing, the Inter-Services Public Relations, released a statement noting that a "Pakistan Army contingent is being sent to [the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] on training and advise mission," but stressed that the Pakistani troops would "not be employed outside" Saudi Arabia. The deployment was announced following a meeting between General Bajwa and Nawaf Saeed Al-Maliki, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Pakistan, at the Pakistan Army headquarters in Rawalpindi.⁶⁹

THE ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

Some in Pakistan initially felt that the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition was merely a thinly veiled alliance of Sunni-majority states—not least because neither Iran nor Iraq had been included.

Following his retirement from the Pakistani military in late 2016, General Raheel Sharif was tapped to lead the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, a Saudi-led counterterrorism coalition of Muslim-majority states that had been founded in December 2015. The alliance—which later would be renamed the Islamic Military

Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)—initially included Pakistan as a member. However, the Saudis had never actually informed Islamabad about the group, and when Riyadh formally announced the group's founding the blindsided Pakistani government reacted to the announcement with bafflement.⁷⁰ Most of the group's members were also part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, but some observers in Pakistan initially felt that the group was merely a thinly veiled alliance of Sunni-majority states—not least because neither Iran nor Iraq had been included. Yet the coalition's sectarian character was not absolute; countries friendly to Iran, including Oman, also joined the IMCTC.⁷¹

The December 2015 announcement of the founding of the IMCTC came just nine months after Operation Decisive Storm began in Yemen and Riyadh and Islamabad failed to see eye to eye on the latter's participation in the Yemen campaign. After a week of confusion about its inclusion in the alliance, the Pakistani government suddenly confirmed that it would participate after all.⁷² To explain the delay, Pakistani newspaper reports suggested that the Pakistani Foreign Office had not been privy to private assurances from other parts of the Pakistani government about Islamabad's willingness to join the coalition. *Dawn* reported that "Saudi Arabia had been given a secret commitment regarding joining the alliance."⁷³ In early 2016, other newspapers cited anonymous sources that claimed that Saudi Arabia had communicated a desire to have General Sharif lead the IMCTC following his anticipated retirement in November 2016.⁷⁴ The general's postretirement plans—and indeed, whether he would seek to postpone his retirement—were the topic of much public commentary and speculation in Pakistan throughout 2016. General Sharif, however, retired as expected, and by January 2017 Pakistan had not only made its peace with the IMCTC but approved General Sharif as the group's leader.

Pakistani defense minister Khawaja Asif confirmed that Islamabad had chosen to join the alliance after consultations between the Saudi and Pakistani governments. "As you are aware

that this thing was in the pipeline for quite some time and the prime minister was also part of the deliberations,” he said in January 2017—a sharp divergence from the government’s apparent confusion about the alliance two years earlier—and stressed that Pakistan supported the alliance because the “Muslim *Ummah* [community] is in a spot of bother right now and needs unity among its ranks.”⁷⁵ In response to Sharif’s appointment, Iran’s ambassador to Pakistan, Mehdi Honardoost, expressed concern, noting that the move “may impact the unity of Islamic countries.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, to date, the IMCTC has not been a decisive player in counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East. General Sharif, the leader of the coalition, also has sought to downplay its perceived divisive nature. At the inaugural IMCTC summit in November 2017, Sharif stated in his keynote remarks that the IMCTC is “not against any country or any sect.”⁷⁷

THE NIMR AL-NIMR EPISODE: A SCHISM IN THE OPEN

In the first days of 2016, Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s long-simmering contest for regional primacy hit a flashpoint. On January 2, 2016, the Saudi government executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia leader from Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. Sheikh Nimr had long been openly critical of the Saudi government and was popular in his native province, home to Saudi Arabia’s most prominent Shia minority population. He had been arrested multiple times starting in 2004, and in October 2014 the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court sentenced him to death for abetting “foreign meddling”—an ostensible reference to Iran—in the country.⁷⁸

Nimr’s execution, along with forty-six other prisoners, in early 2016 was the spark that lit the tinderbox of brimming discontent and outrage with the Saudi regime. Although Shia in the Middle East, the West, and South Asia, including in India and Pakistan, protested his death, Iranians reacted with particular force. In Tehran, protesters gathered outside the Saudi embassy, shouting anti-Saudi slogans and even firebombing the building. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei further stoked their ire when he appeared on Iranian state television to condemn Nimr’s execution as unjust: “The unjustly spilled blood of this oppressed martyr will no doubt soon show its effect and divine vengeance will befall Saudi politicians,” he said, adding, “This oppressed cleric did not encourage people to join an armed movement, nor did he engage in secret plotting, and he only voiced public criticism . . . based on religious fervor.”⁷⁹ The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs fired back, swiftly condemning Iran’s “blind sectarianism.” In an official statement carried by Saudi state media, Riyadh said that “by its defense of terrorist acts” Iran was a “partner in their crimes in the entire region.”⁸⁰ On January 3, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir announced that Riyadh would formally sever diplomatic ties with Tehran; he ordered all Iranian diplomats accredited to Saudi Arabia to leave the country within forty-eight hours.⁸¹

The events of January 2016 gave remarkable public prominence to the strategic struggle between Riyadh and Tehran that had long been taking place behind the scenes. Tensions between them had slowly accumulated, especially with Iran’s ongoing support for Yemen’s Houthi rebels and for the then beleaguered regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad against Saudi- (and US-) backed rebels. Moreover, Saudi Arabia’s fast-ascending crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, had taken a special interest in countering what he saw as Iranian adventurism in the Middle East, describing Ayatollah Khamenei as the region’s “new Hitler” in a 2017 interview.⁸² As of early 2019, diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran remain severed and show no signs of improvement.

PAKISTAN AS MEDIATOR

At the end of al-Jubeir's visit, the Pakistani Prime Minister's Office released a statement that stressed its impartiality in the dispute between its neighbor and its long-standing ally.

For Pakistan, the events of January 2016 were as clear a conundrum as any in its post-1979 history of navigating the Saudi-Iranian schism. Just three weeks after Nimr's execution and the subsequent severing of diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran, Pakistan's top

military and civilian leadership put on a rare display of synchronicity—a move that underlined the extent to which this regional rift mattered to Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif and General Raheel Sharif, then in their respective positions as prime minister and army chief of staff, traveled together to both Saudi Arabia and Iran—visits that were billed as a consultative trip but in reality were Islamabad's attempt to mediate a return to normalcy between these two states. Pakistan could not allow this explosive moment in the Middle East's politico-sectarian tensions to derail its foreign policy in the Gulf and with its neighbor to the west.

Prime Minister Sharif and General Sharif arrived together in Riyadh, where they met with senior Saudi leaders. They were received first by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, then the deputy crown prince and defense minister. Days after Nimr's execution, the crown prince had visited Pakistan in his capacity as Saudi defense minister, where he met with General Sharif and received assurances that Pakistan would stand with Saudi Arabia.⁸³ Notably, the prince had come to Pakistan just days after Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir visited Islamabad.⁸⁴ At the end of al-Jubeir's visit, the Pakistani Prime Minister's Office released a statement that expressed its concern without taking sides—"Pakistan expressed deep concern at the escalation of the situation and condemned the burning down of (the) Saudi Embassy in Tehran"—and further stressed its impartiality in the dispute between its neighbor and its long-standing ally:

Pakistan believes in respect for international norms and adherence to principle of non-interference. The Prime Minister called for resolution of differences through peaceful means in the larger interest of the Muslim unity in this challenging time.⁸⁵

The Riyadh component of the high-level visit largely affirmed what al-Jubeir and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had been told during their respective visits to Pakistan.

In Iran, Prime Minister Sharif and General Sharif met with the senior Iranian leadership, including President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.⁸⁶ After the meeting, the prime minister announced that Pakistan would appoint a "focal person for the resolution of the issue [between Saudi Arabia and Iran] and will ask the two countries [to] also designate focal persons."⁸⁷ The general, meanwhile, met with Ali Shamkhani, chief military adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. In that meeting, according to Pakistani reports, General Sharif voiced support for direct communication channels between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Two weeks after the two Sharifs visited Saudi Arabia and Iran, then UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said that Pakistan could play an important role in resolving the impasse between Riyadh and Tehran.⁸⁸

Implications for the United States

As this report has shown, Pakistan has striven to maintain a delicate balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran in their intensifying struggle for geopolitical primacy in the Middle East. Although a considerable body of evidence suggests that Islamabad would side with Riyadh if push came to shove, Pakistan's civilian and military policymakers might well pause before wholeheartedly throwing their lot in with the Saudis. Pakistan's interest in hedging between Iran and Saudi Arabia has several indirect implications for US foreign policy in the region.

First, as relations between Pakistan and the United States appear to be on a steady downward trajectory under the Trump administration, Washington may find Islamabad looking to Riyadh for greater concessions. Prime Minister Imran Khan has shown himself willing to do so and has been successful at least initially, securing \$6 billion in Saudi financing to stem Pakistan's balance of payments crisis. Going forward, additional incentives could include sustained Saudi financial backing, as Pakistan's prospects for a new round of IMF assistance dwindle, and military support. In this context, the Pakistani military and civilian leadership may find it beneficial to concede to Saudi demands in a range of areas. Considering the fact that Pakistan reversed its 2015 decision to avoid sending additional troops to Saudi Arabia to support the campaign in Yemen, the Saudis might well request Pakistani support in any number of other regional interventions, a move that could cyclically distance Pakistan from Iran. US policymakers should also keep in mind the long-term effects of a sustained Saudi-Pakistani rapprochement. As long as counterterrorism remains a core US interest in Pakistan, along with the ability to support ongoing operations and political reconciliation in Afghanistan, expanded Saudi influence in Pakistan may have spillover effects that could help the Afghan Taliban.

Although a sustained Saudi-Pakistani rapprochement would antagonize Iran and further degrade the security situation in Balochistan, the Pakistani military shows no signs of ending its long-term support for hardline Islamist militant groups—the same groups that have harmed US interests by continuing to destabilize Afghanistan. Islamabad's ongoing economic issues, including a sustained and serious balance of payments problem beyond its existing IMF arrangements, may prompt it to look to Saudi Arabia, other Gulf States, and even China for financial support.

Second, in ongoing military-to-military contacts between Pakistan and the United States, Washington should not give Pakistani military leadership further reasons to tilt toward Saudi Arabia—either because US support is likely to continue to wane amid the general downturn in bilateral ties, or because Saudi support is invaluable for Pakistan's ongoing military readiness. For now, the Saudi-led coalition's campaign in Yemen shows no signs of ending, and Islamabad may be drawn deeper into its operations. This recommendation will pose a dilemma for Washington. Since January 2018, the Trump administration has taken a hawkish approach toward Pakistan, withholding \$900 million in both Foreign Military Financing and Coalition Support Fund reimbursements. Although such moves may serve short-term US objectives by altering Pakistan's decision-making calculus in taking action against groups like the Taliban and the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan, they may also cause Pakistan to think more seriously about hedging its longer-term prospects, driving it closer to countries like China and Saudi Arabia.



Members of Majlis Wahdat Muslimeen, a Shia political organization in Pakistan, demonstrate against the January 2016 execution, in Saudi Arabia, of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. (Photo by Mohsin Raza/Reuters)

Third, Washington should recognize that despite Islamabad's strong attempts at hedging between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 2015, at the end of the day Pakistan likely would choose Riyadh over Tehran. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly demonstrated the value of the economic relationship with Pakistan multiple times through financial bailouts and other forms of economic assistance. Meanwhile, the long-standing Saudi-Pakistani defense relationship is unlikely to decrease in value for either side. An important variable—all the more vital after the July 2018 general elections—will be the state of civil-military relations in Pakistan and civilian primacy over the country's security and foreign policy more broadly. The Pakistani military is organizationally dispositioned to favor close ties with Saudi Arabia, whereas the civilian leadership—including under Imran Khan—sees advantages in a more nuanced approach. The United States, by shoring up support for civilian rule in Pakistan, can ensure that the second-order effects of the Pakistani military's preferences with regard to Saudi Arabia and Iran remain in check.

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