Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry – options for Pakistan

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Vol. 01, Iss. 02, December 2022, pp. 45-54. *doi:* 10.52567/ijcb.v1i02.142

Abstract

Despite common region, religion and ample of resources, Saudi Arabia and Iran are in state of confrontation to competition for the leadership of the Muslim Uma. The country most concerned with the Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry is Pakistan. Both states have their own importance for Pakistan. Iran being immediate neighbor while Saudi Arabia, a country always supported Pakistan in thick and thin. In past Pakistan had been very careful in dealing with both. The policy makers in Pakistan remained very careful to devise policy towards Middle East because of the certain reasons. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has long been portrayed as a sectarian struggle. There are a few more areas where the two countries are still competing. The relationship between Riyadh and Tehran may be examined through the lens of economic, political, and security dynamics, because of the two states struggle for regional hegemony and supremacy, which has driven the region into political and economic upheaval for the past four decades. The crises in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq are notable examples of proxy conflicts in the Middle East waged by the two regional superpowers, with direct or indirect support from other key regional and global forces. The aim of this research paper is to examine the current developments in Pakistan's bilateral ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, address the impacts of ideologically driven proxies and look at the current regional situation to assess Pakistan's options in dealing with the two states.

Key Words: Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Rivalry, Implications

Received on: *06-07-2022*
Revision on: *29-11-2022*
Published on: *31-12-2022*

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Introduction

A Glance on Saudi Arabia-Iran Relations

The animosity between the Sunni and Shia can be trace back to 16th and 17th century, when Safavid dynasty converted Sunni Iran as the stronghold of Shia Islam. The House of Saud then adopted the conservative Sunni Wahabiyya theology in the 18th century. Some believe that these two events herald the start of sectarian Saudi Iranian enmity. Riyadh and Tehran have deliberately exploited religious terminology in their antagonistic rhetoric toward one other in recent years. Tehran and Riyadh both opted proxies war to exert their influence, seemingly on sectarian lines which further highlighted the Sunni- Shia divide. Scholars perceived this animosity not only through religious lens but also struggle for the leadership of the region (Qadir, M. I., & Rehman, M. S. 2016).

The Saudi Arabia Iran relations can be divided into two phase i.e. Pre and Post Islamic Revolution in Iran, 1979. During pre-Revolution period especially during Cold War period, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were cordial. In order to curtail Communism, United Stated appointed Saudi Arabia and Iran as Police in this region under Twin Pillar Policy by President Nixon (Ighani, H. 2016). During 1960s and 70s both countries enjoyed amiable relations. During 1962-70, Egypt assaulted on Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran joint hands to resist Egypt. There are many instances where both states joined hands to collaborate. The relations between Tehran and Riyadh got soured after the Revolution in Iran in February 1979. The Islamic Revolution in Iran not only threatened the House of Al Saud but also shook the entire region. Several crackdowns, protests had been launched in both states against each other in which hundreds of people died.

In 1989 after demise of Khomeini, the relations between two states started thawing. In 1990 the deadly earthquake in Manjil city of Iran, devastated the city, Saudi Arabia rushed to send aid. During first Gulf War against Baathist regime, both Iran and Saudi Arabia collaborated with USA. The Iranian President Mohammed Khatami paid a visit to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in May 1997, met King Fahd, and in a joint statement both pledged to not intervene in each other's domestic affairs and respect sovereignty. On the same analogy, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah visited Iran in December 1997 to attend an Organization of Islamic Conference meeting and reiterated, "If the two governments have the political will, there are no limits to cooperation with Iran".

Contemporary Dynamics of Saudi Arabia-Iran Relations

The new chapter in Iran- Saudi Arabia relations has started in 2003 when US invaded Iraq and overthrown the Baathist regime. Iran was suffering from heavy sanctions but under the leadership of newly elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Iran quickly started to exert its influence in war torn and fragmented Iraq. US presence in its western border, Iran sought to curb US presence hence became the main actor in Iraq affairs. Iran has supported Iraq and managed to establish influence on Political and Security areas of Iraq. Apart from this, supporting the cause of Palestine, a Sunni majority state, is the foreign policy of Iran which help to get support from the common Arabs. The relationship between Tehran and Riyadh had turned another shape when US attacked Iraq in 2003. The new leadership of Iran, President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad not wasted time to patch up with Baathist regime in order to restrict US presence on its West. Iran than became a crucial policy maker of Iraqi affairs. Hence expanded its sphere of influence from politics to security and economy of Iraq. This growing influence cajoled Saudi kings to counter this Iranian influence through US presence in Iraq.

The phenomenon of Arab Spring in December 2010 has dragged this rivalry into a next level. Each of them attempted to sway the results of the Arab revolutions in their own benefit, adopting seemingly conflicting strategies in the process to achieve these aims, Saudi Arabia and Iran have adopted sectarian discourse and affiliations in addition to military deployments in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. While the conflicts in these three states are easily interpreted as Sunni-Shia rivalries, the reality in each is far more nuanced. Their rivalry was not only manifested through proxy wars but at domestic levels their minority areas were got preyed of this sectarian turmoil.

Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of role in unrest in Bahrain in 2011, as well as Shiite protests in its Eastern Province. Moreover, Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who was a significant figure in the Saudi protests and was sentenced to death by the Kingdom in 2014. The Iranian government has criticized Saudi Arabia's actions. This came after massive protests in Iran's capital decrying Saudi Arabia's actions. The US under Obama regime had signed an agreement with Iran in order to restrain Iran to acquire nuclear technology while Iran has been struggling for long to acquire this nuclear technology. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was also a turning point in Iranian history. On July 15, 2015, the P5+1 world powers reached a historic nuclear deal with Iran, ensuring that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia, as a rival, was quite concerned about the development. It is somehow considered that in response to JCPOA, Saudi Arabia has called for an alliance of 40 Muslim countries. On December 2015, Saudi Arabia launched the coalition to combat "terrorism," citing the "Islamic State" (IS) as a sickness damaging Islam's name. Iran was not invited to attend this summit along with Iraq and Qatar. Questions were raised that whether it is to counter IS or counter Iran. Because IS was defeated in Syria and Iraq so it is of for what purpose?

The assassination of Iranian Nuclear Scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 27 (Khoshnood, 2021). Israel's foreign intelligence agency, Mossad, since 2004, was tasked with preventing Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, the organisation has waged a campaign of sabotage and cyberattacks against Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment facilities (Bialer,, 2007). It was also carefully eliminating experts believed to be in charge of Iran's nuclear weapons Programme. This event along with the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general's assassination on 3rd January 2020 further strained the situation (Katzman, McInnis, & Thomas, 2019). Later on Saudi oil field, ARAMCO was attacked and world again saw a sharp hike in oil prices. Iran and Saudi Arabia both are among largest oil exporters and producers and members of OPEC. The oil exports are the main source of income for Iran and Saudi Arabia, therefore, it is also observed that both states came across in certain event for the oil production and pricing mechanism.

Implications of Saudi Arabia – Iran Rivalry on Pakistan

There are several reasons for Pakistan to keep a balance approach between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan is considered the state which affected most by the Saudi Arabia Iran animosity. Their rivalry has implications on Society, Security, Political, and Economic arena.

Implications on Societal Fabric

The interfaith harmony is necessary for any multi ethnic religion state survival. A state like Pakistan, where people of different religious and ethnicity live interfaith harmony is indispensable. As the 20 per cent of population in Pakistan are of Shia Muslim sect and the amalgamated in such way if harm cause to any sect will ultimately cause a havoc in entire country (Abbas, & Syed, 2021). From top ranked army personal to a common man, Shia and Sunni Muslims live together, therefore, any sectarian violence will be detrimental for the society. Hence, Pakistani policymakers are always keen to balance out the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in order to avoid any conflict within country.

Security and Extremism Threats

Pakistan parting to either side (Saudi Arabia or Iran) could be preyed to proxy war. Therefore, this ultimately cause security threat and violence. After 9/11 the Pakistan became the front line state against terrorism but Pakistan is the country, despite its efforts to counter terrorism, suffered most. The PPP government is considered pro-Iranian because during Bhutto period Shah of Iran supported Pakistan financially despite US sanction. While during Zia era Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were closer. The US and Saudi Arabia since General Zia came to power in the late 1970s and 1980s, supported Zia regime against Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Zia's openly pursuit of fundamentalist Sunni policies insinuated him to Saudi king, and he paid visit to Saudi Arabia more often. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in late 1979, Pakistan with the support and aid of Saudi counterpart, trained Afghan mujahideen against the Soviets. During Zia regime the terrorism and religious extremism flourished.

Economic Factor

The Economic ties between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are crucial. In past, Saudi Arabia came to help Pakistan when IMF rejected to bail out (Ahmed, 2012). Beside that Pakistan's economy is interlinked with its energy security. Pakistan imports three-fourths of its crude oil from KSA and United Arab Emirates. In 2017 Pakistan has diversified its oil need from KSA and UAE to Russia.

The remittances Pakistan send back to country is also a major source of income. In 2015 the number of Pakistani working in Saudi Arabia was highest since 1971 (Ahmad,1982). But now under Saudi Arabia vision 2030 Saudi Arabia diversify its economy and more job opportunity provided to the citizens of Saudi Arabia (Sial, 2015) in this way many Pakistanis have lost their jobs. The pandemic has further destroyed the economic condition. People working there have to leave their job and come back to country.

The Economic trade potential between Pakistan and Iran is still untapped. Despite sharing boarders both states have underdeveloped economic terms. The sanction led economy of Iran has difficulty to trade with any state (Rafique, 2016). Some Pakistani analyst were of view that JCPOA and left sanction on Iran so that Pakistan and Iranian trade improved. The governor of Baluchistan province of Pakistan and Sistan Baluchistan Province of Iran agreed to establish a Gwadar port as sister port city of Chabahar in 2016. Gas pipeline project also known as Peace Pipeline was also among such projects which are not yet functional. For decades, all of these intertwined interests, as well as domestic and foreign constraints, have made maintaining balance and extreme care in Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as its neutral stance on intra-Arab crises, a necessity, not a choice.

Role of Pakistan in navigating between Saudi Arabia and Iran

After the establishment of Pakistan, in 1950 Pakistan has joined US bloc. Pakistan joined Baghdad Pact in 1955, later on after the withdrawal of Iraq, called Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and in 1954 South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and entitled as "the most allied ally of the USA" (Darabu & Daud, 2021). Geopolitical proximity, a common western alliance bloc, and ideological commonality aided Pakistan-Iran cooperation in regional affairs. Pakistan and Iran were both members of CENTO and Regional Cooperation and Development (RCD) in the following year established along with Turkey. RCD drew Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan closer together, facilitated by a strong ideological alignment to serve political and economic interests (Khan, 2010) .

It is noticeable that during Shah Regime, in Pakistan mostly government officials were Shia majority including Iskandar Mirza, Governor General during 1950s but Shah refused to play the religious card in his relations with Pakistan (Vatanka, 2015) .The religious card has been started to use in relations after Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

Iran supported to modernize the Pakistan army during 1960s through purchasing arms and weaponries from Western countries on behalf of Pakistan. Particularly, despite signing SEATO and CENTO America did not support Pakistan in 1965s war between Pakistan and India, and Pakistan was dependent on USA for security (Baxter, 2013). Iran, proved to be a conduit in the need of hour, requested USA to send weapon to Pakistan despite USA sanctioned on Pakistan and India. In 1970s Iran through back channels to Nixon administration, seek help from USA for Pakistan in 1971 war (Office of the Historian, December 4, 1971) · In return Pakistan trained the cadet of Iranian air force. The Iran contribution to Pakistan's security was due to its geographical proximity with Pakistan and consider Pakistan buffer zone for Soviet expansion (Qaisar & Khan, 2020).

In September 1956, right after the Indian Prime Minister Nehru paid visit to Saudi Arabia, which awaken and President of Pakistan Ayub Khan visited Saudi Arabia in 1960 and hence the skilled workers export had been started (Mujtaba, 1981). Not only remittance factor but also the Saudi Arabia being custodian of two great holy sites for Muslims had also made him prominent in Muslim world.

After the fall of Dhaka, a new Civilian regime had taken the power in Pakistan. Pakistan People Party came into power and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who during Ayub Khan era served as Foreign Minister, being Prime Minister of Pakistan took a pragmatic approach in foreign policy of Pakistan at global and regional level. On global arena, in order to counter Communist expansionism Saudi Arabia and Iran supported Pakistan under Nixon policy both states served as the policeman in the region. In early 1960 the Saudi Arabia seek Pakistan Military training to Saudi army and Pakistan provide security to Gulf states (Weinbaum, & Khurram, 2014). It was early 1970s Saudi Arabia came into the picture to devise foreign policy of Pakistan. In 1973 oil crisis, Saudi Arabia supported Pakistan. Pakistan got opportunity to host in Lahore, second Organization of Islamic Cooperation Summit in 1974 and King of Saudi Arabia not only participated in this conference but also financed it (Pirzada, 1987) on the contrary, Shah of Iran refused to take part because of Iran and Saudi Arabia had not good terms. Bhutto assured the fact that Pakistan Security is linked with the security of Iran and Pakistan play as buffer zone against communist invasion. A principal newspaper, of Iran wrote in 1973, "A strong and prosperous Pakistan shelters Iran from a turbulent Asia." By the mid-1970s, Pakistani leaders recognized the military superiority of Iran

and appreciated statements by the Shah that Iran would, if necessary, intervene militarily to protect Pakistan in case of a threat to its integrity" (Ford, 1977, p.479).

PPP under Bhutto's era managed to secure $30 million in form of loans from Saudi Arabia, even in 1976 Pakistan got 24 per cent of entire budget of Saudi Arabia in form of aid and this was equal to $500 million. Not only soft loans but Saudi Arabia also invested in Pakistan in different factories and Plants. on January 15, 1976, the US Embassy in Islamabad stated, "Iran and Saudi Arabia remain the two Muslim countries on whom the GOP [Government of Pakistan] relies most heavily for economic and political support" (Hussain, 1994).

In comparison to states like Syria, Libya, and Iran, Pakistan's military regime of General Ziaul Haq favoured traditional monarchs (Ali, 1977). This was partially owing to the fact that Zia regime's conservative Islamic bent, and partly due to the financial assistance Pakistan received from Saudi Arabia, as well as the latter's help for building up Afghan-Islamic resistance in Pakistan in order to combat Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. During Iran Iraq War 1980, Pakistan supported Iran (Imtiaz, 2019).

By increasing relations with Libya, Syria, and Iran, Benazir Bhutto's government (1988-1990) aimed to balance Middle East policy. In the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Pakistan committed to supply 5,000 troops to Saudi Arabia under Nawaz Sharif's first cabinet (1990-1993). It also collaborated with Arab countries and the US to get Iraqi soldiers out of Kuwait (Haroon, 2016). After Pakistan's nuclear explosions in May 1998, Saudi Arabia delivered oil to Pakistan on a three-year payment plan. Musharraf and Zardari then tried unsuccessfully to obtain a similar facility from Saudi Arabia.

In recent history of Pakistani, the increased activism in Saudi Arabia-Pakistan ties under Nawaz Sharif compared to the PPP years (2008-2013) can be explained by Pakistan's desperate economic needs. Pakistan anticipates receiving financial assistance from conservative but wealthy kingdoms in the form of loans, aid, investment, more jobs for Pakistanis, and favourable oil and gas supply terms. In addition, Nawaz Sharif and his family hold the House of Saud in high regard because it rescued them from Musharraf's military regime in December 2000.

During period of PML(N), the Yemen crisis had started when Saudi Arabia assaulted Yemen and seek Pakistan's support for the war planes, arm forces, and military assistance (Yasmeen, 1998). The Pakistani parliament's refusal to join the military intervention in Yemen in response to a Saudi request. Pakistan's strategic requirement is to maintain a balance in its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the crisis has revealed (Iqbal, 2015).

The Iran Pakistan ties got bit bitter when A Former Indian Naval Officer Kulbhushan Jadhav, was arrested by Pakistan from Pak-Iran Boarder area, on the March 2016 and accused of espionage. This ultimately provoke to strengthen its border area and Indian dominance in Iran.

The incumbent government of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf since its came into power trying to keep the balance as well as on some point in the event presented as mediator. PM Imran Khan was again in troubled water when Pakistan was invited to Kuala pur Summit. The summit, which will be attended by over 400 Muslim leaders, intellectuals, scholars, and thinkers from 52 nations, will begin on December 18, 2019 in Kuala Lumpur, with foreign leaders meeting on December 19 to discuss fresh and feasible solutions to the Muslim world's challenges. Imran Khan is thought to have contributed to the summit's idea during a trilateral meeting in September in New York with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir bin Mohamad and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly session. The new

forum is being chaired by Mahatir and Erdogan. Moreover, the relation got soured when Pakistan asked Saudi Arabia to call a foreign minister level meeting on Kashmir against the Indian Act of 5th August 2019. The situation in Kashmir and Saudi Arabia's increasingly close ties with India have deteriorated the Saudi ties with Pakistan (Zweiri & James, 2021).

Conclusion

Since its inception, Pakistan's internal dynamics and external constraints have forced maintaining a dynamic balance in relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as in intra-Arab crises, a necessity rather than a choice. However, "Saudi Arabia is a very vital partner, while Iran is a neighbours". Pakistan has dexterously managed its relations with all sides in the past, including the invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran–Iraq War, the First Gulf War, the Iranian nuclear Programme, and current manifestations of Iran–Saudi rivalry. The Zia regime accepted Saudi financial backing for the Afghan jihad without hesitation and dispatched large numbers of troops to safeguard the Kingdom on the condition that Saudi Arabia cover their expenses. In the 1980s, Zia never overtly addressed revolutionary Iran, despite maintaining a close political relationship with Saudi Arabia. Zia attempted to avert the revolution by Islamizing Pakistan, while also helping Iran in the fight against Iraq to some extent. The Nawaz Sharif government, the second civilian government in the post-Zia period, chose to go against public opinion and send troops to Saudi Arabia to safeguard the Kingdom from an outside attack. The Pakistani troops remained within the Kingdom territory. Later in the 1990s, Pakistan and Iran were at conflict over the outcome of Afghanistan, with differing policies, but when Iran was named one of the three countries in the "axis of evil" by the Administration of Bush and its nuclear Programme was harshly criticized and sanctioned, Pakistan appealed to the west not to attack Iran. Pakistan was concerned about two things: its own domestic situation, which included a sizable Shia population, and the threat of another unstable neighbours knocking on its door, perhaps bringing tens of thousands of new refugees. Pakistan's long-standing foreign policy continues in light of both domestic and external restraints, as well as a clear history of refusing to choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran at the expense of either. Whether it's tensions over Saudi Arabia's execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, a resident of the Kingdom, or Iran's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, Pakistan will call for calm, try to moderate, and remain neutral. Upon Pakistan's participation in Saudi led Military Alliance, Islamic Military Counterterrorism Alliance, in its summit on December 2015, 40 Muslim countries had participated but Iran was not invited. Pakistani diplomats stated the Pakistan's participation in such way: "Pakistan's participation in the Saudi Arabia Summit did not mean Pakistan was supporting Riyadh against Tehran. 'If Iran also holds such a meeting, we will definite attend it. We cannot have relations with one country at the cost of the other. It is a fact that we are struggling to win over Iran these days but we will be able to do that in the coming weeks."

The gradual shift toward conservative monarchies constitute a conundrum that Pakistan faces in its dealings with Middle Eastern countries from time to time. As part of its dedication to the concept of the 'Ummah,' or Muslim Universalism, Pakistan has always placed a high value on its relations with Muslim countries. The operational political realities at the global and regional levels, as well as the domestic challenges of individual Islamic states, have dimmed Pakistan's enthusiasm for the Ummah. Due to their disparate historical experiences, regional and dynastic conflicts, economic differences, and incompatible foreign policy agendas, Islamic governments have been unable to form long-term global partnerships.

In a nut shell, it is evident that Pakistan's foreign policy remain neutral in the case of Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry and moreover it could be served as mediator, as incumbent government of PM Imran Khan did during the crisis emerged after the assassination of Nuclear scientist of Iran Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and the commander of elite Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Crops. Pakistan will never allow its forces and army to work outside the Kingdom territory. And such classic practicality has historically shown to be the best option for Pakistan, which is far too valuable a country to be sacrificed to capricious Kings and pompous Ayatollahs.

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