

PAKISTAN: BALANCING BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA. THE SHAH, AYATOLLAHS, AND KINGS.

RESEARCH PAPER



ÖMER ASLAN

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PAKISTAN: BALANCING BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA. THE SHAH, AYATOLLAHS, AND KINGS.



Ömer Aslan is an Associate Fellow at Al Sharq Forum and an assistant professor of International Relations at Yıldırım Beyazıt University. He received his Ph.D. from Bilkent University. His current research interests are military and politics in the Sharq region, radicalization, and foreign fighters.



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Executive Summary

Pakistan remains a key actor in the Middle East. 'Islamic Alliance' would arguably have already been admitted dead-born more easily if Pakistan had refused to join. While isolation of Qatar in the Gulf —known as Qatar crisis— would have been much severer if Pakistan had jumped on the Saudi Arabian invitation to downgrade ties with it. Likewise, Saudi Arabia could have perhaps avoided its blunder in Yemen if Pakistan had agreed to send troops to fight in Yemen. The history of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan since the early 1970s demonstrates that its policymakers of all hues have followed a delicate balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia and avoided getting trapped in intra-Arab conflicts at all costs. From the 1950s until the end of 1970s, Iran was indisputably Pakistan's prime partner. As Shah played the role of policeman in the region, he incidentally allayed Pakistan's feelings of existential threats to a significant degree. This however only gradually changed after the oil crisis and ensuing economic boom in the Gulf after 1973 oil crisis as Pakistani workers and military expertise poured into the Gulf. PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took great advantage of the common interest the Saudis and Iranians had in having a powerful Pakistan against the Soviets and thus, reaped economic, military and political benefit from all sides along the way. Bhutto gleefully called the Gulf 'the Persian Gulf' because Iran was a neighbor while the Saudis were far away, all the while continuing to pay lip service to the Saudis' claim to leadership in the Muslim world, adding useful Islamic color to Pakistan's foreign policy.

Even after the Iranian revolution of 1979, which put Saudi Arabia and Iran at odds and despite use of Iran's Shia card against Pakistan, Pakistan continued to play both sides on different issues. President Zia delightedly took Saudi money to bankroll the Afghan jihad and dispatched troops to the Gulf to soothe Arab regimes' security concerns. At the same time, Zia supported Iran militarily in its war against Iraq, despite being wary about the revolutionary regime's intentions. Pakistan's post-Zia policy toward Iraq's invasion of Kuwait too showed that Pakistan would only take steps short of going all the way to satisfy Saudi wishes. While Nawaz Sharif government supported US-led coalition to drive Iraq out of Kuwait despite pro-Iraqi popular feelings at home, and sent additional troops to Saudi Arabia to protect the royal family, Pakistani troops never saw the battlefield.

**BALANCING
BETWEEN IRAN
AND SAUDI ARABIA**

Frictions over different Pakistani, Saudi, American, Indian, and Iranian expectations and designs for the fate of post-Soviet Afghanistan caused Pakistan many problems in the 1990s. In this regional scramble for shaping Afghanistan, sectarianism found a ready playground in Pakistan, where Shia Muslims constituted 15–20 per cent of the entire population. Radical militants began attacking Pakistani Shiite citizens as well as Shiite officials including diplomats, engineers, and cadets in the years 1997–1998. Because Pakistan was one of the only three countries (with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) that recognized the Taliban regime founded in Kabul after 1996, attacks against Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in 1998 further soured relations between Iran and Pakistan. While its interests clashed with Iran to a large degree throughout the 1990s, Pakistan still did not take an anti-Iranian stance after the 9/11 attacks, which put enormous pressure on Iran. As Iran was put under international sanctions due to its nuclear program and an American assault seemed imminent, Pakistan took a firm stance against any attack on Iranian soil for fear of a backlash from its Shia citizens and further destruction in the region.

The ‘Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism’ was announced by Saudi Arabia in the closing days of 2015. Eventually comprising 41 Muslim-majority nations, the alliance vowed to protect Muslims against terrorist organizations, seemingly with the Syrian civil war in its sights. After deciding in April 2015 against contributing Pakistani troops to the Saudi assault on Yemen, Pakistan this time quietly joined the alliance. Yet still, Pakistan has so far done all it can to stay away from giving the impression that the alliance is an anti-Iranian grouping. It needs to be noted that while trying to cajole Pakistan into an undeclared front against Iran, Saudi Arabia was not even able to persuade Pakistan to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus. On the issue of Syria, too, Pakistan has been treading very carefully. Navaz Sharif government kept Pakistani ambassador in Damascus, apart from a short period when it was no longer safe to stay, a policy described as “positive neutrality” and celebrated by the Syrian Ambassador to Islamabad.

Pakistani policymakers, in refusing to pick a side in either the intra-Arab or Iranian-Saudi confrontations, are expressing their constant fear of domestic sectarian infighting. The armed forces, where discussion of officers’ sects is viewed unfavorably, is especially concerned because such social polarization would put army unity at stake. Economic difficulties that force Pakistan to remain cautious should also be kept in mind: Saudi Arabia is an indispensable source of cash in case of an urgent need. Pakistan also faces acute practical problems in ensuring uninterrupted access to gas and oil. Pakistan satisfies its energy needs by importing oil and natural gas from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Iran (plus small amounts from other countries). Remittances that Pakistani migrant workers in the oil-rich Gulf Arab states send home is the other reason why Pakistan would prefer to avoid any drastic policy moves regarding Iranian-Saudi rivalry. The volume of these remittances also force Pakistan to be careful not to provoke the deportation of its citizens over a political fight abroad. For decades, all these interlocking interests and domestic and external limitations have made balance and extreme caution in Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran and its attitude towards intra-Arab conflicts a necessity, not a choice. Pakistan continues to walk a tightrope between dictates of geography and economic and spiritual pull of sentiments.

Introduction

There are not many countries in the world riddled with as many contradictions as Pakistan, and yet still wield as influence as Pakistan does over an area so broad. Pakistan has the second-largest Muslim population on earth and is not famous for its social cohesion.¹ To this day it still suffers from ethnic separatism and is yet to find a sustainable peace within its multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. It does not possess vast natural resources either; nor does its territory give it strategic depth. Since it was founded in 1947, Pakistan has continually felt existential security threats from both India and Afghanistan.

Yet, Pakistan is the sole nuclear-armed Muslim-majority country yet. Pakistan was intended as a democratic home for the Muslims of the Subcontinent yet has witnessed four military coups d'état and remains under military tutelage to this day. It is these contradictions that have shaped the direction, content, and approach of Pakistan's foreign policy. Leaving aside its devoted pro-western foreign policy of the 1950s, Pakistani policy makers, military and civilian alike, have acted pragmatically both in relation to current and to former global powers, including the Soviet Union, the U.S. and China. This is perhaps best evidenced in Pakistan's historical balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In other words, Pakistani foreign policy makers have diligently pursued a balance between the dictates of geography and history that forced it to deal with neighboring Iran and a sentimental appeal in its relations with Saudi Arabia.

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Pakistan's founding leader, Quaid-i Azam [the Great Leader] Muhammad Ali Jinnah, thought of Iran as a friend and brother, saying that bonds of geography were of great importance in relations with neighbors.² The Shah of Iran was the first head of state to ever visit independent Pakistan, although Saudi Arabia also expressed a desire that the new Muslim state should experience great prosperity and progress.³ As

Pakistan's former foreign minister Gohar Ayub (1997-1998), who was President Ayub Khan's son, pointed out four decades later, "Iran must figure prominently in our strategic thought process, being our next door neighbor and relief zone"⁴ whereas "Pak-Saudi relations are embedded in their indelible history and the Islamic ideology."⁵ While "history" figures in both sets of relations, Pakistan's relations with Iran are governed much more prominently by geographic considerations and necessities arising from the proximity of the two states.⁶ The end of the Cold War did not cause any fundamental change in Pakistan's calculations regarding its relations with Saudi Arabia or Iran. This report argues that on the issues of Saudi Arabia's assault on Yemen, the blockade of Qatar and the Syrian crisis, Pakistan has made consistent efforts to strike a flexible balance between its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. This research paper seeks to provide answers to the following questions: How has Pakistan managed its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran? How has Pakistan approached the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and various intra-Arab conflicts since the end of the Cold War? And what political, economic and military factors come into play when Pakistan formulates responses to such confrontational issues?

The History of Pakistan's Balancing Act

In the early 1950s as a fledgling state, Pakistan did not hesitate to ally with the United States with the country's early military leaders taking a lead and its political elite falling in line. Pakistan became a member of Baghdad Pact, later branded the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), in 1955, as well as South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, and hence was deservedly called 'the most allied ally' of the U.S. Pakistani political elites sought all kinds of assistance (economic, political/diplomatic and military) from the United States primarily with the aim of countering the perceived existential threat from India. Iskandar Mirza, then Governor General of Pakistan, is reported to have said to the US Ambassador in Karachi that if the United States refused to extend the amount of military aid as promised because India objects, this would "leave GOP in eyes of world, after so much international publicity, like jilted girl".⁷

The United States supported the first coup d'état in Pakistan's history in 1958 and turned a blind eye to the second a few months later.⁸ Mutual relations climbed to unprecedented heights after the second coup in 1958. Largely thanks to the flow of American aid and advisors, General-turned-President Ayub Khan recorded high levels of economic development in the first decade of his rule. However, all that changed abruptly in the mid-1960s when the U.S., which had earlier helped India in its war against China in 1961, declined to help Pakistan in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war. This was the turning point where Pakistani leaders, starting with Ayub Khan, decided to stop putting all their eggs in one basket and multiply their foreign policy options including abandoning CENTO and SEATO.

After 1965, President Ayub Khan wanted to diversify Pakistan's alternatives in foreign affairs without incurring any costly bill from any of the three superpowers (China, the Soviet Union and the U.S.). He simply pleaded that his country be left alone. He was now willing to acknowledge that Pakistan was a small power with meager

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capacity to influence the shape of global events.⁹ Ayub Khan no longer wanted Pakistan to be any global power's satellite either.¹⁰ Writing most succinctly in his memoirs, he observed,

*"Looking at the map of East and West Pakistan, you see East Pakistan surrounded on three sides by India, and the only entrance from the other side is the through the seaward side, which is not very difficult to control. And West Pakistan is wedged between three enormous Powers: you have Russia on top; China on the East; and India in the South. . . I don't know which other smaller country has the distinction of having three mighty neighbors. This location of ours is a source of weakness for us. . ."*¹¹

In regional affairs, Iran was Pakistan's best friend. Geopolitical imperatives, a common western alliance, and ideological overlap helped the case of Pakistan-Iran relations. Pakistan and Iran were both members of CENTO. In the following years they also became members of Regional Cooperation and Development (RCD) with Turkey as the other member. Facilitated by a common rightwing ideological alignment, RCD brought Turkey, Iran and Pakistan close enough that Iran allegedly wanted to have political ties too.¹² As against Nasser's fiery anti-Western rhetoric and anti-status quo position in the Arab world in the second half of the 1950s and 1960s, "Iran was a natural ally and role model for Pakistan in being a secular, centralized and western-oriented state" (*italics added*).¹³ The nosedive in American-Pakistan relations after 1965, coupled with the continuing American sanctions, created a concurrent thaw in Pakistan-Egypt relations. General Ayub Khan invited Marshall Abd-al Hakim Amer, an ambitious and powerful general under Nasser, to Pakistan and cultivated other communication channels with Egypt as well. When Khan made even modest overtures to President Nasser in Egypt though, the Shah in Iran was immediately disturbed, because Shah perceived Egypt as the radical force seeking to upset the moderate balance in the region. Khan valued his connection to the Shah so much that he immediately dispatched General Yahya to feel the Shah out and clear up any misunderstanding about Pakistan reaching out to Nasser.¹⁴ This was not the only time President Ayub was genuinely concerned about upsetting the Shah. In late 1968, as Ayub Khan was bidding farewell to the Shah after an RCD [Regional Cooperation and Development] meeting in Karachi, he noticed that Shah was upset over some critical remarks made by a sergeant in the Pakistani air force about Iranian presence in Bahrain. Ayub Khan also found out that Shah was disappointed over Pakistani support for Arab position against Iran in an aviation conference in Manila. President reassured the Shah, gave instructions to all the defense chiefs to make sure that Arabs and Iranians in our [army] institutions do not mix with each other and refrain from making comments on sensitive issues.¹⁵

Ayub Khan, as a 'modernizer' and defender of enlightened Islam,¹⁶ helped the case of Pakistan-Iran relations to a great extent, given that the Shah himself was a secular modernizer. In fact, in the 1950s, when a number of Shia officials including Governor-General Iskandar Mirza, occupied positions of power in Pakistan, there was even a movement in Pakistan that defended the idea of a union between Sunni

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Pakistan and Shia Iran, in which the Shah would be the head of state. The fact that the Shah did not make any attempt to play the Shia card in its relations with Pakistan removed a potential irritant in bilateral relations. One reason for this was that, as Ardeshir Zahedi, former foreign minister in Shah's Iran, said "the Shia-Sunni divide was not important at the time."¹⁷ The Shia card, as an instrument of soft power, "would only be wielded by Tehran after the fall of the Shah and with the coming of the Islamist regime in Tehran in 1979".¹⁸

Notwithstanding friction at times, Pakistan considered Iran too big to make an enemy of. While both Turkish and Pakistani officials showed occasional signs of frustration with Shah's sporadic bouts of anger and patronizing attitude, Ayub Khan thought that "we cannot afford to offend him. The stakes are much too high."¹⁹ One important factor was Iran's assistance in the modernization of Pakistani army. In the 1960s the Shah helped Pakistan modernize its army by buying weapons from Western countries on behalf of Pakistan. Iran's help was critical, especially after the U.S. embargo following the India–Pakistan war of 1965: a move that hit Pakistan especially hard due to Pakistan's dependence on American arms.²⁰ In the aftermath of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, "Iran acted as an arms purchasing agent for Pakistan, which was having difficulty obtaining military equipment in the West. Iran purchased some 90 F-86 jet fighters, air-to-air missiles, artillery, ammunition, and spare parts from a West German arms dealer. The aircraft were delivered to Iran and then flown into Pakistan. Most of the other equipment was delivered directly to Karachi."²¹ While U.S. sanctions on India and Pakistan continued until the mid-1970s, General Yahya Khan, who took over government from Ayub Khan in 1969, asked for American military assistance for the 1971 war in East Pakistan, the Nixon administration used Iran as a conduit to meet the request.²² Pakistan in return trained Iranian air force cadets. Although the Pakistani air marshal found the number of cadets Iran wanted Pakistan to train very high, Ayub Khan instructed him to do whatever he could to satisfy the request²³ 'Iran also provided the Pakistanis with... sanctuary Pakistan's national airline planes during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war.'²⁴

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The Shah's contribution to Pakistan's security emanated from his understanding of Iran's security interests. He believed that Iranian defense began in Pakistan as a key buffer zone before Soviet expansionist designs in the region. He wanted to keep Pakistan intact at all costs, and accordingly assisted Pakistan in its war against India in 1965.²⁵ "In the spring of 1971, Iran loaned Pakistan about a dozen helicopters and other military equipment for use in West Pakistan to replace similar equipment transferred to East Pakistan. Additional supplies, including artillery, ammunition, and spare parts, were sent to Pakistan when Indian troops entered the East Pakistan civil war. Since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, there have been reports that Iran may again act as an arms purchasing agent for Islamabad if Pakistan cannot obtain Western military equipment and spare parts."²⁶ In all probability, Nixon administration was kept in the loop on these deals, as Kissinger himself devised the mechanism, replenishing Iranian jets so that Iran could send older models to Pakistan.²⁷ In other words, Until the Shah's own rule collapsed in 1979, he was the primary custodian that Pakistan had.

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There was always a positive sentiment for Saudi Arabia among the Pakistanis in those years because the Saudis were the custodians of the holy places of Islam.²⁸ However, it is only relatively recently that Saudi Arabia has begun to occupy a significant role in Pakistani foreign affairs. Though Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were both in the western camp in the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia was trying to wither the storm created by Egyptian-sponsored Arab nationalism, and thus had to formally protest Pakistan's participation in the Baghdad Pact. When Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made an official visit to Saudi Arabia in September 1956, the news was received coolly in Pakistan. It is true that President Ayub visited Saudi Arabia in 1960 and Pakistan's skilled workers gradually started pouring into Saudi Arabia for work.²⁹ Yet, a good indication of how little Saudi Arabia occupied the minds of the Pakistani state elite in these two decades was how scant attention Ayub Khan paid to Saudi Arabia in his memoirs. Ideological disconnection must have also played a role since Saudi Arabia represented a lot of things that the president wanted to rid his country of.

Bhutto and the Crescendo of Pragmatism

Observing the government's inability to quell or satisfy widespread protests starting from 1967 onwards, the army forced Ayub Khan to resign and Chief of General Staff Yahya Khan rose to the throne. The troubles that had been brewing for some time in East Pakistan turned into a hot war, then a catastrophe from a Pakistani perspective that ended only in the foundation of Bangladesh in 1971. The loss of the eastern part of the country also brought an abrupt end to the rule of the generals. To save their face and immediate loss of popularity, the military asked Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, an insider, but a civilian and the leader of Pakistan People's Party, to take the helm.³⁰

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was foreign minister in Ayub Khan's later years, carried the pragmatic tone of Pakistan foreign policy to new heights in both regional and global affairs. Bhutto made this policy clear to both U.S. President Nixon and Secretary of State Designate Henry Kissinger when they met on September 18, 1973:

*"In earlier days, there was a simplistic approach to world affairs in which the choice was between God and Satan, and we chose God... Pakistan supported the UK in the Suez crisis [in 1956], and the Egyptians say they have not forgiven us yet. We have always tried to make our contribution. We kept away from Third World non-alignment sentiments... For Pakistan the changing relationship with the U.S. was more painful. There was a romanticism in the relationship. This was wrong, stupid. But it was there."*³¹

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Prime Minister Bhutto made best use of this pragmatic tone in regional affairs when it concerned Pakistan's relations with Iran and Arab states. Bhutto could do so because Iran and Saudi Arabia shared the single common objective of resisting any communist offense into the region, and this factor temporarily overrode their other differences. Therefore, both states wanted to keep Pakistan strong enough to act as a buffer zone between them and the Soviets. As early as 1967, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had agreed to boost their levels of defense cooperation, and it was after this agreement that Saudi military personnel began to receive training in Pakistan.³² Fewer than 100 Pakistani military advisors also went to Saudi Arabia to assist in the expansion and modernization of Saudi armed forces.³³ Yet, it was from the early 1970s onwards, particularly after the 1973 oil crisis, that Saudi Arabia came more forcefully into the Pakistani foreign policy picture. As Bhutto already aimed at raising Pakistan's stature in the Islamic world. One clever means to these ends was the hosting of an Islamic conference summit in Pakistan. Bhutto not only managed to host the second Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore in 1974, but also got the Saudis to finance it entirely. While the Shah did not attend the summit due to friction with the Saudis at the time,³⁴ Bhutto managed to move closer to the rich Gulf states and increase Pakistan's credit by appealing both to the Arab street and its palaces.³⁵ Staff notes prepared at the CIA show that Bhutto managed to secure promises of generous financial aid when he visited Saudi Arabia the same year.³⁶

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Yet Bhutto was also careful not to estrange anyone in the region. He told Nixon and Kissinger that "In the Persian Gulf, Pakistan has very good relations with the Emirate states. Pakistan also has good relations with the Arab states, even with the new messiah [Colonel Muammar Qadhafi] in Libya. Pakistan had some pilots in Libya until they were asked to take off against the Sixth Fleet [US Navy] and we told them 'nothing doing'... Relations with Iran are good. It is something of a feat to have good relations with both Iran and with the Arab states. But we do have good relations with Iran—the best of relations."³⁷ In December 1973, Bhutto's Foreign Secretary, Aziz Ahmed once described during opening parliamentary debate on government's foreign policy the nature of Pakistan-Iran relationship as "special relationship".³⁸

Indeed, as soon as Bhutto thought that the 75-men strong Pakistani air force contingent (including some pilots) could involve in an incident involving the United States, he reportedly planned to pull them back.³⁹ As Bhutto was approaching the Gulf countries in the wake of the oil crisis and 1973 Arab-Israeli war, he did not forget Iran, where the Shah was upset with him. Walking in Ayub Khan's footsteps, Bhutto sent a special emissary to Tehran to find out what bothered the Shah and instructed his envoy to correct things.⁴⁰ Apparently the Shah was upset because when Bhutto visited President Nixon in 1973, he remarked that Shah's future looked gloomy: a comment which either Kissinger or Nixon had cunningly passed on to Shah.⁴¹ One issue that bothered Bhutto in this period was —after much hope given— Iranian-led refusal of his project of 'common customs tariff reduction' among RCD member states.⁴²

While Bhutto's overtures to the Gulf may at first glance appear to have been a tilt toward Saudi Arabia and others at the expense of Iran, this was not the case; President Bhutto did not hesitate to call the Persian Gulf 'Persian'. He once said in a meeting with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger that "we are frequently asked by our Arab friends why we call the Persian Gulf 'Persian'. I always use that term because I have no interest in offending the Shah. I tell the Arabs to ask Alexander the Great why he named it that."⁴³ When enquired by Kissinger about Pakistan's relations with Iran a year later, Bhutto said "Very good. There is the stupid quarrel over the name of the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf. We have no problem with the name of the Indian Ocean. But if it comes to a crunch we will call it the Persian Gulf. *Iran is our neighbor. Saudi Arabia is far away.*"⁴⁴

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Bhutto made full use of the fact that the Shah continued to see Pakistan a crucial buffer zone for Iranian security during the Bhutto years. As Keyhan, Iran's principal newspaper, wrote in 1973, "A strong and prosperous Pakistan shelters Iran from a turbulent Asia."⁴⁵ When Pakistan lost its eastern territories in 1971, the Shah was said to have "shivered",⁴⁶ feeling an existential threat to Iran from Pakistan's dismemberment, and sending economic and military aid to keep it afloat. When Prime Minister Daoud of Afghanistan threatened to incite a Baluch insurgency in Pakistan, the Shah was alarmed. "...an independent Baluchistan carved out of Pakistan could easily set precedence for Iran's separatist Baluch," the Shah thought.⁴⁷ When a Baluch insurgency did explode in 1975, Bhutto crushed it to the Shah's liking and with the Shah's help.⁴⁸ In a diplomatic cable, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad told Washington that the Iranian Shah had reportedly said that he was worried about Pakistan's strength, particularly the air force vis-à-vis the power of the Soviets and India. The Shah also expressed his pleasure that Bhutto was in power and not the military.⁴⁹ The Shah's

preference probably resulted from his judgment of Bhutto's intelligence and balanced grasp of different domestic and foreign policy issues, while the military had committed many blunders—its handling of the East Pakistan crisis being the most costly. It is also possible that the Shah preferred Bhutto at the helm of government in Pakistan because Bhutto, like the Shah, had a deeply secular worldview.

The Shah was concerned that if Pakistan fell, Iran would be next, so he continued to appeal to the Americans to keep Pakistan strong enough to wither the storms it was going through and to defend itself against India. Bhutto made full use of this knowledge, seeking to benefit from his share of the security umbrella the U.S. provided to the Shah

The Shah was concerned that if Pakistan fell, Iran would be next,⁵⁰ so he continued to appeal to the Americans to keep Pakistan strong enough to wither the storms it was going through and to defend itself against India. Bhutto made full use of this knowledge, seeking to benefit from his share of the security umbrella the U.S. provided to the Shah. The Shah once bitterly complained to the Americans, for instance, that Pakistan was becoming weak due to their negligence and inadequate military support.⁵¹ Pakistan in turn was pleased that Iran was so committed to Pakistan's territorial integrity and security. "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."⁵² In the Shah's interpretation in his conversations with President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger, the reason why the Bhutto government had asked Iran and not Saudi Arabia for the \$1 billion it needed was because Pakistan and Saudi Arabia did not have the same level of close relations.⁵³ This was not exactly correct though, as Pakistan under Bhutto truly enjoyed good relations with Saudi Arabia. Though Bhutto's worldview was thoroughly secular, he was a maverick in adapting to different situations and, in the case of approaching the Saudis, in giving an Islamic façade to Pakistani foreign policy and defending two of the most important Saudi goals in the region: strengthening Islam and resisting communism.⁵⁴ He genuinely did the second and appeared to be doing the first.

It is nevertheless true that Bhutto tried to extract as much economic benefit from both Saudi Arabia and Iran as possible. When the U.S. lifted decade-long sanctions on Pakistan in early 1975, Bhutto again asked the Shah for money. When Bhutto visited the Shah that October, the Shah decided to

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help him and promised \$700 million.⁵⁵ Yet, Bhutto did the same with Saudi Arabia. The CIA reported in October 1975 that Bhutto had visited Saudi Arabia the month before and was assured of a generous sum of aid.⁵⁶ It is unclear whether the Saudis fulfilled their

promise, but we do know that in a meeting on September 2, 1975 between King Khalid and U.S. Secretary of State Kissinger, the King asked Kissinger to provide material assistance to Pakistan, which he portrayed as surrounded by two enemies: India and the Soviets. The King also promised to take good financial care of Jordan and Egypt if the U.S. were to help Pakistan and Turkey.⁵⁷ We know for certain that Bhutto managed to get another \$30 million loan from Saudi Arabia the next year.⁵⁸ We are also told by Tahir-Kheli and Staudenmaier that in 1976 alone, Saudi Arabia allocated about 24 percent of its entire aid budget, equal to \$500 million, to Pakistan.⁵⁹ This Saudi economic support was not only in the form of cash loans but also direct monetary input worth \$100 million invested into cement plants, a polyester plant, and a fertilizer factory.⁶⁰ In brief, as the American Embassy in Islamabad reported on January 15, 1976, "Iran and Saudi Arabia remain the two Muslim countries on whom the GOP [Government of Pakistan] relies most heavily for economic and political support."⁶¹

Military Expertise as Pakistan's Export Product to the Gulf

One significant asset that Pakistan had and still has in its relations with Iran and the Gulf countries has been the trust it enjoys with all sides. This is owing to the fact that as a non-Arab Muslim-majority country, Pakistan does not have any political claim on either Iran or the Gulf nations. Thus, an American diplomatic telegram in September 1979 stated that "Arab states would not want to see Pakistan disintegrate. Pakistan is looked to by many Gulf and other (e.g. Libya) Arab states for military manpower and expertise for training and/or mercenary roles. Kuwait, terrified by events in Iran and Afghanistan, looks increasingly to Pakistan as an element of regional stability".⁶² This unique position has enabled Pakistan to provide significant military assistance in the form of pilots and other military officers as trainers for many Arab states both during and after the Cold War. For instance, "Abu Dhabi had an air force composed of a dozen or so Mirages that the French had peddled to the Emirates. With no native pilots available, the planes were flown by Pakistani air force officers who were delighted to fly state-of-the-art aircraft that their country could not afford to buy."⁶³ By allowing its 'Mirage-qualified Pakistani pilots and technicians [to] be assigned to the Abu Dhabi Air Force', Pakistan would also receive financial aid for its military reconstruction program. Abu Dhabi's fighter bombers bought from France would also be based in Abu Dhabi but be available for Pakistan if needed.⁶⁴ More, until mid-1983 the UAE Air Force was commanded by a seconded Pakistani officer.⁶⁵

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In May 1979, the American Ambassador to Islamabad asked Saudi Ambassador Riyadh Al-Khatib if the deal with Pakistan to send Pakistani combat troops to Saudi Arabia in the context of the situation in North Yemen was concluded yet.⁶⁶ We learn from a declassified CIA report that the deal was indeed concluded and Pakistani combat troops were deployed to Saudi Arabia to defend the Kingdom.⁶⁷ Then in July 1979, the Americans concluded in their diplomatic correspondence that “the Saudis have been generous benefactors and in return Pakistan has provided Saudi Arabia with useful technical, labor and military advisory assistance. . . an estimated 650 Pakistani military personnel advise the Saudi armed forces and an unknown number of Pakistanis serve in the Saudi military, mainly in logistic roles. however, we have some evidence that SAG [Saudi Government] and GOP [Government of Pakistan] are negotiating an agreement whereby Pakistani combat troops—possibly personnel for two armored brigades—would man equipment purchased by the Saudis. reportedly, two small Pakistani support units are being organized in the Kingdom now to backstop the two armored brigades.”⁶⁸ As the Saudi naval power was growing, Pakistan became heavily involved in the training of Saudi naval personnel. “There were 280 Saudis at Pakistan’s naval academy in 1982, as compared with 149 Pakistanis.”⁶⁹

When the security situation in the Persian Gulf was fast deteriorating, with convulsions in Iran and a perception of Soviet expansion, the Saudis specifically asked for “a non-Arab state like Pakistan” to replace Iranian troops in Oman should the latter be withdrawn

Yet, it has been in Pakistan’s entrenched interests not to see its soldiers or workers as being a part of either Arab-Iranian fights or intra-Arab fights. An American diplomatic cable from September 1979 shows for instance that “Pakistan has problems in dealing with Arabs because of [intra]-Arab divisions (e.g., Pakistani troops in Libya are seconded on condition they not be used against Egypt). these can lead to frictions which vitiate good will to be expected from supply of Pakistani military. in any event, even where such military relationships are frictionless (as in case of Oman), they do not appear to provide Pakistan with any special political leverage.”⁷⁰ Moreover, when the security situation in the Persian Gulf was fast deteriorating, with convulsions in Iran and a perception of Soviet expansion, the Saudis specifically asked for “a non-Arab state like Pakistan” to replace Iranian troops in Oman should the latter be withdrawn.⁷¹ Pakistan-Oman relationship actually went further. “... Pakistanis actually had an arrangement with the Omanis where they encadred, really ran the Navy. A lot of the enlisted men in the Omani Navy were Pakistanis. Because Oman, until the ‘50s, had an enclave in Pakistan called Gwadar that was Omani. They gave it up. The people there were Baluchis. They had a Baluchi regiment in the Omani army. One of the provisions of their pulling out of Gwadar was that they would have in perpetuity the ability to go to Gwadar and recruit mercenaries to be in the Omani Army. They kept that up.”⁷² Just as Pakistan did not seek to use its troops deployed abroad in political skullduggery, neither did it use its workers in the Middle East and North Africa for those purposes. Pakistani workers brought back goods and money but no political ideologies to destabilize Pakistan, and neither did they ever become a destabilizing factor for the recipient states.⁷³

General—later President—Zia ul-Haq himself was once deployed to Jordan to advise the Jordanian military in its fight against the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Fedayeen in 1970. According to then-CIA Station Chief in Amman, Jack O'Connell, General Zia's crucial advice on the use of the Jordanian Royal Air Force completely changed the outcome of the battle in Jordan's favor.⁷⁴ One can easily contrast this with, for example, the deployment of Egyptian troops in Saudi Arabia in 1958 and the political benefits President Nasser sought to gain by them. "As of 1958 there were over 1,000 Egyptian security personnel in the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] advising the Ministry of Defense and Aviation and helping reorganize the Directorate General of Public Security. Some of these Egyptians were no doubt tasked with identifying and recruiting agents within the Saudi security apparatus."⁷⁵

The considerable number of Pakistani military personnel stationed in different Arab countries seems to have attracted the CIA's attention as well. In a short 1983 assessment piece discussing the implications of Pakistani military assistance, the CIA assessed there to be 18,000 Pakistani military

The CIA assessed there to be 18,000 Pakistani military officers stationed overseas in Middle East and North Africa

officers stationed overseas in Middle East and North Africa. This was a major vehicle through which Pakistan could pursue its foreign policy goals. Using these personnel, Pakistan received salary remittances that sustained the economy, found new sources of arms, and became the largest non-Arab recipient of Arab financial assistance, plus the Pakistani military gained significant experience as well as knowledge about some of the most modern military equipment and weaponry, Western and Soviet alike.⁷⁶ Though the CIA assessed that the venture also carried the risks of Pakistani personnel becoming embroiled in foreign conflicts or Pakistan acquiring a bad name for providing 'mercenary soldiers', obviously none of these risks have so far materialized. The CIA was right in forecasting that civil war in Lebanon, Iran-Iraq war, and Iranian revolution would increase the demand in the Gulf for Pakistani military personnel. It is also worthwhile to mention that the same CIA report suggested that aside from the training of a small number of Libyan pilots and some Palestinian guerillas, Pakistan's policy of providing military personnel to Arab states, especially to Saudi Arabia, was in U.S. interests because it strengthened the hand of moderate governments across the region.⁷⁷ In fact, it was the US policy makers who, as they designed a three-tier defense of the Gulf and encouraged formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council as a joint protection against the Soviets and other sources of instability, thought that Pakistani military could also come to the aid of GCC in case of need.⁷⁸

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Bhutto Under Stress

Steady relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran did not mean that everything always went well. Saudi Arabia gave support to the Jamaat-i Islami inside Pakistan, which was believed to be increasing its influence inside Pakistan armed forces. Prime Minister Bhutto subsequently warned Chief of Army Staff General Zia ul-Haq that he did not want a Mullah-run army. General Zia then circulated a memo within the military declaring that “we, in the army, are not Mullahs and we do not need anyone’s certification to be followers of Islam... I would like all ranks, and in particular all commanders to bear in mind that we are professional soldiers who have been sworn not to get involved in any political activity whatsoever.”⁷⁹ Iran on the other hand, naturally kept a close watch over Pakistani politics. The number two in SAVAK once cautioned Pakistan’s Ambassador to Tehran, inquiring when he thought Pakistan’s generals were coming back to power. The ambassador was urged by the Pakistani attaché to explore the question further, and was told by the Chief of SAVAK that they kept all neighboring countries under close scrutiny.⁸⁰ When widespread protests rocked the Pakistani streets after alleged corruption in the 1976 elections, putting PM Bhutto under pressure, the Shah became concerned once again. “The Shah did not want to see Bhutto go under in Pakistan, did not want to see a fundamentalist government come into power in Pakistan.”⁸¹ The ‘Pakistan National Alliance’ emerged as a conglomerate of various factions representing the protestors. Bhutto swallowed his pride and asked for Saudi mediation because he knew that the Saudis were close to the United States, whom Bhutto blamed for the troubles in the first place.⁸² Bhutto summoned Saudi Ambassador Shaikh Riyadh el-Khatib to the Prime Ministry on April 20 and asked him to convey his request for Saudi mediation between the government and Pakistan National Alliance. Bhutto did so grudgingly because he never wanted to involve another government in Pakistan’s internal affairs, but now he felt that he had to because he suspected U.S. involvement in the raging protests. “Given the negative interference of ‘a certain power’ in Pakistan’s internal affairs, he [Bhutto] wrote, he felt that it was ‘morally right’ for him to seek the Saudi monarch’s positive and constructive intervention to help resolve the crisis.”⁸³ At this time, the Shah asked U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to help out Bhutto, saying did not want to see fundamentalists coming to power in Pakistan.⁸⁴

The Zia Years

The pragmatic tone within the Pakistan-Iran-Saudi Arabia triangle did not radically change after the 1977 coup d’état in Pakistan led by General Zia ul-Haq despite two major subsequent events: the revolution in Iran and invasion of Afghanistan. Zia visited Shah at the height of revolutionary protests in Tehran in 1979. When Zia came, the Shah advised him to be warned of mullahs and others who exploited religion for political purposes as they could create problems. told him that rightwing parties in Pakistan were loyal and patriotic.⁸⁵ This visit to assure the Shah at the last minute naturally raised the suspicions of the new revolutionary regime. However, retained his confidence and pragmatism to the degree that he told the American ambassador that “Pakistan, in all probability, would be able to have close relations with nearly any foreseeable Iranian govt. because of shared basic interests.”⁸⁶

Yet, to Pakistan's consternation, the Ayatollah Khomeini raised the issue of the welfare of Pakistani Shiite community, saw Pakistan both as an American friend⁸⁷ and an American pawn.⁸⁸ In a move diametrically opposed to Shah's decades-long avoidance of playing the Shia card, now "Iran convinced herself that her revolution was an exportable commodity and her neighbors should be its first recipients. She took undue interest in the activities of the Shiite sect in Pakistan and established contacts with its leadership. This was unacceptable to Pakistan."⁸⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini allegedly issued a fatwa instructing his country to help the Shia of Pakistan.⁹⁰ This was a drastic reversal of how the Shah had handled foreign policy.

In a move diametrically opposed to Shah's decades-long avoidance of playing the Shia card

Hence, the CIA assessed in 1980 that relations between Iran and Pakistan were at a turning point because of certain steps against Pakistan taken by the new regime in Iran.⁹¹

Following the Iranian revolution, the rise of fundamentalist Shiism in Iran and the popularity of Iranian revolution among ordinary Pakistanis was a source of great distress to the Pakistani government.⁹² Just as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the revolution was perceived as 'Islamic' to the degree that Mawdudi, the founder of the Jamaat-i Islami, did not even consider the fall of the Shah as benefitting the Shia alone; he considered it a real Islamic revolution.⁹³ The revolution led to an upswing in Islamic political activism within Pakistan and created significant consternation among Pakistan's more westernized elite.⁹⁴ Thus, the fall of the Shah was a real cause for concern for the Pakistani government. "The downfall of the Shah of Iran at the end of 1978 removed from Pakistan's western flank a like-minded regime that had joined with Pakistan in the American-sponsored alliance of Northern Tier states and that had directly aided Pakistan both in its wars with India and in crushing the domestic insurrection in Baluchistan in the mid-1970s. It introduced in place of the Pahlavis a radical Islamic regime that openly threatened to export social revolution to neighboring Muslim states."⁹⁵ The Shia protests against the zakat (Islamic almsgiving) regulation that the government had imposed were a good indication of how things had changed in the relationship between Pakistan and Iran. According to Vali Nasr, "that Shi'i demonstrators defied martial law ordinances to rally against the zakat law, and that they increasingly relied on support from Tehran to organize and assert their demands even created a certain amount of unhappiness in the military."⁹⁶

Following the Iranian revolution, the rise of fundamentalist Shiism in Iran and the popularity of Iranian revolution among ordinary Pakistanis was a source of great distress to the Pakistani government

Yet, although the government had sufficient evidence to implicate Iranian students who supposedly came to Pakistan for their education in the riots against compulsory zakat collections, Pakistan still did not want to openly antagonize Iran.⁹⁷ In a situation where Pakistan was dealing with the invasion of Afghanistan, it also worked hard not to create a new and formidable foe out of Iran. It did not serve Pakistan's interests to further isolate or antagonize Iran either when the Soviets were now in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ The primary threat Pakistan felt from regime change in Iran was the possible mobilization of Pakistani Shia and destabilization of Pakistan.⁹⁹ Despite claims of Islamism in the government's foreign policy, Zia was a realist

in dealing with the Iranians (as with everyone else). Zia was quick enough to emphasize “simultaneous triumph of Islamic ideology” in both countries and hoped that revolution in Iran would now bless the traditional bond that exist between our peoples.¹⁰⁰ In the emerging difficulties between the nascent regime in Iran and the US, Zia

allegedly urged Carter administration to show “his teeth” and offered “to reestablish its lines of communications with the Iranian foreign ministry and assist us in diplomatic channels.” He was quick however to throw remind that “Pakistan’s geographic proximity to Iran necessitated certain accommodations.”¹⁰¹

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When Carter government asked for Pakistan’s help in getting American hostages in Iran released, Pakistan did not really put pressure on Iran because they did not want to make an enemy of it.¹⁰² A report prepared by the CIA to assess the impact of the revolution in Iran and coup in Afghanistan discussed how the revolution in Iran had deeply affected Pakistan, how reluctant Zia ul-Haq was to cross Khomeini, and finally, how did very little to help the U.S.’s case in securing the release of American hostages after the occupation of U.S. Embassy.¹⁰³ Indeed, in a meeting in Washington with officers from the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Pakistan’s Ambassador to the U.S., Sultan Khan, and Pakistan’s Permanent Representative in Geneva, Jamsheed Marker, confirmed that the government felt that its hands were somewhat tied when it came to dealing with the new regime in Tehran. They conveyed to the Americans that Khomeini had great appeal among the Pakistani people, who remained very agitated over the hostage crisis.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, they said, “Zia is trying to preempt some of the Islamic revolution and keep some of the old traditions in this process. It is a delicate balancing act.” (italics added)¹⁰⁵

The same developments—the invasion of Afghanistan and revolution in Iran—intensified Pakistan–Saudi Arabia relations as well. Earlier, General Zia ul-Haq had reportedly sent a letter to King Khalid informing him of the imposition of martial law in 1977 and thanking him for his efforts to bring about a political solution. Zia assured the King that the army would serve the people as true soldiers of Islam and return the government to civilian control “following elections in October.”¹⁰⁶ Zia visited Saudi Arabia earlier in April 1978 and had productive talks with King Khalid. Two years later, this time Crown Prince Fahd visited Pakistan. In the joint communique issued after this visit, both countries expressed sorrow over the Iran-Iraq war and requested Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ Crown Prince Fahd said in this visit that “any interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan would be considered interference in or injury to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰⁸ Yet again, despite increasingly close relations, General approved capital punishment for deposed Prime Minister Bhutto despite having promised the Saudis that he would issue a pardon. Pakistani–Saudi Arabian relations emerged unharmed from this incident, however. Shortly after Bhutto’s execution, the Saudi Ambassador to Islamabad told his American counterpart that they would not allow Zia’s action to damage relations.¹⁰⁹

In the context of the new strategy the Carter Administration had designed for the Persian Gulf, the U.S. mobilized a large coalition for multi-level assistance to bolster several countries including Pakistan. Saudi Arabia willingly joined, promising to support Pakistan economically.¹¹⁰ From the perspective of the Saudis, the potential for expanding their security network to include arms suppliers aside from the U.S. (such as with France, Britain, and West Germany) and finding more sources of manpower (such as using the Pakistanis to strengthen their forces against the Marxist regime in South Yemen) was a distinct advantage due to special circumstances in the region in 1980 to 1981.¹¹¹ A CIA estimate put the number of Pakistani combat forces scattered throughout the Saudi armed forces at “several thousands.”¹¹² The Afghan resistance, according to a CIA memorandum for the then-U.S. Secretary of Defense’s 1984 visit to Pakistan, helped the Pakistani government to bolster their arguments for political, economic, and military support from China, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia.¹¹³ In 1981 Agha Shahi, who was Foreign Minister under Zia’s rule, visited Washington and was told in the State Department that “The Saudis recognize the magnitude of your military modernization needs. The Saudis are prepared immediately to make substantial funds available so that you can begin to [fulfill] your most urgent military needs.”¹¹⁴ By the close of the 1980s, Pakistan had received substantial assistance in return for Pakistani troops stationed for the defense of Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ Despite this information Vatanka provides, a CIA report dated 29 August 1986 notes that Saudi-Pakistan relations were strained, among other things, because Pakistan thought Saudis failed to honor their military and economic aid commitments. Saudi aid to Pakistan totaled \$315 million in 1980 but fell to \$30 million in 1985.¹¹⁶ The same report provided the following chart to depict Saudi military and economic aid to Pakistan from 1979 to 1985.

Pakistan and the Iran–Iraq war

Though the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan attracts immense attention in the literature on Pakistan foreign policy, there was another theatre of conflict in the Middle East that put Pakistan’s foreign policy through hard tests for eight years: the Iran–Iraq war. Pakistan did not hesitate to distance itself from this conflict in the first place. The Zia government refused to support Iraq against Iran for the duration of the war, which continued from 1980 to 1988.¹¹⁷ In a 1980 interview, President Zia said that since both Iraq and Iran spoke as though they were fighting from a position of strength, he predicted a stalemate and believed that peace was in the interest of both sides.¹¹⁸ It was in this costly war that Pakistan tried to assume the role of a ‘mediator’. President Zia went to both Baghdad and Tehran on ‘peace missions’ and asked to be able to act as a mediator.¹¹⁹ Yet, a separate, domestic meeting the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had held with his advisors early on in the war shows that the Iraqi leader did not favor the idea of mediation.¹²⁰ Though Pakistan sought to stay away from the war and not openly pick sides, its position was tilted a little towards Iran. This must not have been a difficult choice for Zia government because this did not mark an anti-Saudi position. On

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the contrary, the Saudis themselves, although they could not openly say so as an Arab state, did not want Saddam Hussein to defeat Iran. Hence, Pakistan provided some material aid to Iran in the war, yet they could not do anything more for fear of provoking opposition by Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, which itself was caught in an awkward position.¹²¹

Once again, the persistent motivation behind Pakistan's tilt toward Iran was to prevent Iran from using the 'Shia card'.¹²² Acknowledging the Zia government's pragmatic policy toward the conflict, a CIA report discussing the prospects of the fragmentation of Iran due to the Iran–Iraq war recalled the 1975 military agreement between Iran and Pakistan. The agreement had called for Pakistani military and economic aid to any remnant of central government in southeastern Iran and to provide naval and air cover for Iranian territory. The CIA wrote, however, that if the central government collapsed in the war against Iraq and Baluch autonomy or independence appeared to be in sight on Iranian territory, Zia regime may have taken steps to protect its own interests rather than those of the Iranian central government.¹²³ Zia himself seems not to have found Iranian fragmentation a likely possibility. An American diplomatic cable dated February 21, 1984 and based on high-level meetings with Zia reported that the president believed that Iran would eventually prevail in the war thanks to superior manpower and economic might. This however would create grim results for the Shia-Sunni balance in the region, according to Zia, because if Iraq, with its large Shia population, were to lose to Iran, an alliance between Shiites in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran might lead to a Shia bloc in the region to the detriment of the Gulf states. This was why many actors believed that the best scenario was a stalemate in the war.¹²⁴ While he had more time for Iran than Saddam Hussein during the war, Zia did not shy away from providing Pakistani troops to the Gulf Arab states, which Khomeini did not want.¹²⁵

Zia's assessment above shows how much he cared about the Shia–Sunni balance in the region, because it could directly affect Pakistan's domestic security. It also shows that though the civil war in Lebanon was a rather peripheral issue for Pakistan, Zia cared about that theatre of conflict as well. Barring heavy U.S. involvement in the crisis in Lebanon—something Zia wanted but thought unlikely because American elections approached in 1984—Zia believed that Lebanon would be divided into five cantons. In that scenario, with Lebanon stripped of its unity and independence, Zia saw another Israeli-Syrian war looming.¹²⁶

In the Afghan theatre, Zia's aim in supporting the jihad against the Soviets was not only to drive them out. He wanted to strategically shape the post-Soviet situation there for the long term with a pro-Pakistan solution. He believed that Pakistan had “earned the right to have a friendly regime in Afghanistan. We took risks as a frontline state, and we won't permit it to be like it was before, with Indian and Soviet influence there and claims on our territory.”¹²⁷ For this purpose, however, Zia thought that first the Soviets must be defeated in Afghanistan. Based

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on the common goal of expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan and protecting the Gulf from feared Soviet encroachments, he tried to build a bridge with Saudi Arabia through his powerful inter-services intelligence chief, General Akhtar Abd el-Rehman Khan. In return, Pakistan provided 20,000 soldiers for the protection of the Kingdom on the condition that all their expenses were paid by the Saudis. In line with American fears of a coup attempt or internal rebellion against the House of Saud due to tens of thousands of Palestinians and possible feuding between princes, who might even be supported or propped up by the Soviets, the Pakistani forces stationed in the Kingdom acted as the loyal praetorian guard for the Palace.¹²⁸ Moreover, as in Bhutto's policy of taking advantage of Pakistan's intimacy with the oil-rich Persian Gulf and good relations with other Arab states, all the while offering the U.S. an air and naval base on Pakistani soil by the Arabian Sea,¹²⁹ Zia was also aware that "Pakistan's strategic location and its relationship to the Gulf countries accounted for its importance in Southwest Asia"¹³⁰ and wanted to take full advantage of the importance of this location to the U.S. in the 1980s. Since the U.S. had openly declared its commitment to the security of the Gulf after the invasion of Afghanistan, Zia might well have supposed that "a Saudi-Pakistani link, then, might expand the American Saudi commitment, either implicitly or explicitly to the defense of Pakistan."¹³¹

In line with American fears of a coup attempt or internal rebellion against the House of Saud due to tens of thousands of Palestinians and possible feuding between princes, who might even be supported or propped up by the Soviets, the Pakistani forces stationed in the Kingdom acted as the loyal praetorian guard for the Palace

After the Cold War

Frictions over different Pakistani, Saudi, American, Indian, and Iranian expectations and designs for the fate of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal caused several problems for Pakistan. Not only that three dangerous things—terror, guns, and drugs—began to come out of Afghanistan to Pakistan when the U.S. ditched Pakistan in a big way¹³² but also that both state and non-state actors turn Pakistani soil into power playfield. While India did not want outside intervention in Afghanistan by any side, especially Pakistan, and continued to engage the regime in Kabul during the 1980s, all Pakistan dreamed about was a friendly regime for its troublesome neighbor. Zia believed that Pakistan could then have "strategic depth so India will know it can never threaten us again while we have to be worried about our back".¹³³

The U.S., however, supported the jihad against the Soviets by all means, but according to John Gunther Dean, then American Ambassador to India (1986–1989), it had no particular designs of its own in the Afghan territory and only wanted to "restore Afghans' non

alignment, independence, and territorial integrity through the prompt and complete withdrawal of Soviet forces”.¹³⁴ Iran, on the other hand, while opposed to Soviet domination over Afghanistan and afraid of Soviet expansion if left unchallenged, sought to carve out a zone of influence for itself and helped sow sectarian seeds throughout the jihad by supporting several Shia resistance groups in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ However,

*The swift rise of the Taliban, who were able to capture Kabul by 1996, changed the ground situation in Afghanistan completely, and set the stage for regional turmoil driven by an intensification of Iranian–Pakistani rivalry. With Pakistan supporting the Taliban and Iran behind the Northern Alliance, the battle-lines between the two were clearly drawn.*¹³⁶

Iran (in addition to other actors) therefore stood as an obstacle to the Pakistani dream of having a friendly regime in Afghanistan. With contradictory policies over Afghanistan and a new picture emerging on the ground with the rise of the Taliban, sectarianism found a breeding ground in Pakistan, where Shias constitute 15–20 percent of the population. One dataset covering a time period from 1989 to 2017 puts the number of people killed in sectarian violence in Pakistan at 5,681 while over 11,110 people have been injured as a result of sectarian attacks.¹³⁷ Militants began to attack Pakistani Shias in the 1990s. They killed Shiite officials including diplomats, engineers, and cadets in the years 1997–1998. Because Pakistan was one of the very few countries that recognized the Taliban regime in Kabul after 1996, it was implicitly associated with the regime’s attacks against Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in 1998.¹³⁸ This created a serious problem for Pakistan–Iran relations.¹³⁹ In return, Iran supported militant Shia elements in Pakistan in retaliation.¹⁴⁰ Iran and Pakistan did not break off relations, however. As American Ambassador to Islamabad William Milam (1998–2001) observed, Pakistan–Iran relations were “correct. They had diplomatic relations, but they didn’t seem particularly warm to me.”¹⁴¹

In this emerging atmosphere in the 1990s, Pakistan had better relations with Saudi Arabia. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Pakistan—under the first Nawaz Sharif government—dispatched 3,000 troops to Saudi Arabia in addition to the 2,000 already there to protect the Kingdom.¹⁴² There are many twists and turns in the process leading Pakistan to support the U.S.-led Coalition against Iraq, however. While Pakistani public opinion was pro-Saddam and several Islamist forces wanted the newly-minted Sharif government to change its anti-Saddam policy, the government sided with the foreign ministry’s advice that Iraq had always been close to India and had never supported the Kashmir cause, and therefore was not worthy of Pakistan’s support.¹⁴³ However, the Pakistani troops never saw the Iraqi battlefield and were not used for the liberation of Kuwait.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the Pakistani government’s bold move despite popular opposition was

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marred by mixed messages coming from different influential corners of Islamabad. While Army Chief Mirza Aslam Beg had not opposed the government's anti-Iraq policy during internal discussions at first, he later depicted the Gulf War as a "Zionist plot", accused Saudi Arabia of yielding to American policies, and was supportive of Iraq's occupation.¹⁴⁵ General Beg fell afoul of his senior army colleagues in seeing the invasion of Kuwait as "strategic defiance" by Iraq.¹⁴⁶ With confusing messages coming in, the Saudis marched Pakistani troops to the Saudi–Yemen border instead of the border with Iraq.¹⁴⁷ Seriously disturbed by Beg's stance during the First Gulf War and the close relations he had developed with the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the U.S. played an active role in getting a friendlier army chief brought in. The next chief of staff-in-waiting, General Asif Nawaz, told senior Iranian visitors being hosted by General Beg that Beg was a lame duck and that when he succeeded Beg he would review all current activities.¹⁴⁸ "With the backing of the Pakistani president and several generals, Sharif named a successor to Beg two months ahead of his scheduled retirement date."¹⁴⁹

Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear power since the early 1970s enticed both Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s. The Saudis supported the nuclear program in the belief that what they perceived as a nuclear armed client state could provide the ultimate insurance for the Kingdom

Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear power since the early 1970s enticed both Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s. The Saudis supported the nuclear program in the belief that what they perceived as a nuclear armed client state could provide the ultimate insurance for the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia could see a nuclear-armed Muslim-majority state as a useful counter to others such as Israel (and later Iran: something the U.S. State Department already foresaw in 1979).¹⁵⁰ Pakistan seems to have allowed Saudi Arabia to believe that its nuclear weapons were as much Saudi Arabia's as theirs and would be ready to protect the guardians of the holy places. For instance, Pakistan allowed Sultan bin Abdulaziz to visit Pakistan's nuclear sites twice, in 1999 and 2002¹⁵¹ and has always testified publicly that they would come to Saudis' rescue in case of need. The reason for this was largely that in times of American sanctions due to the Pakistani nuclear program, Saudi finance provided much-needed relief.¹⁵² Yet, when rumors swirled regarding Pakistan's nuclear assistance to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan always denied this. "Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry called all the talk of Pakistan helping the Saudis develop a nuclear arsenal 'unfounded and baseless,' adding, 'Pakistan is not talking to Saudi Arabia on nuclear issues. Period.'"¹⁵³ It is very difficult to know whether Pakistan helped with Iran's nuclear program but it is believed that Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of the Pakistani nuclear program, offered to help a variety of states to acquire nuclear weapons. A declassified Iraqi document from October 1990, for instance, shows that Khan proposed to help Iraqis manufacture nuclear weapons, which rightly made the Iraqi side suspicious of the proposal.¹⁵⁴ To what extent this was a rogue individual proposal and whether Khan's actions could be attributed to an official policy are hard to establish. In the meantime, Saudi Arabia managed to form good relations with the aspiring political elite in the Sharif family in Pakistan. When Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in a coup in 1999, it was the Saudis who helped broker a deal with General Musharraf allowing Sharif to leave

the country on the promise not to return for ten years. Given the persistent Baluchistan issue between Iran and Pakistan, President Musharraf reportedly said that malicious Iranian activity on the Pakistani side of Baluchistan confused them, they did not know if Iran was enemy or friend.¹⁵⁵

The Remittances Factor

The First Gulf War made the issue of remittances a more important factor in Pakistan's foreign policy considerations as well. Pakistani workers in the Gulf had been providing huge amounts of remittances since the oil crisis in 1973.¹⁵⁶ Though the following official figures for Pakistani emigrants do not give the correct numbers for the given periods, the exponential increase in the number of Pakistanis applying for official work permits clearly shows the effects of the '73 oil crisis.

TABLE 1
ANNUAL FLOW OF EMIGRANT WORKERS FROM PAKISTAN,
1971-81 BY CHANNEL

Year	Private (overseas employment promoters) ^a	Public ^b	Direct ^c	Total
1971	3,340	194	—	3,534
1972	3,359	1,171	—	4,530
1973	7,654	4,646	—	12,300
1974	14,652	1,676	—	16,328
1975	21,766	1,311	—	23,077
1976	38,516	3,174	—	41,690
1977	77,664	2,606	60,175	140,445
1978	78,685	3,246	47,602	129,533
1979	80,615	3,058	34,586	118,259
1980	91,482	17,114	24,801	133,397
1981	119,711	821	32,549	153,081
Total Number	537,444	39,017	199,713	776,174
Percent	69.3	5.0	25.7	100.0

Source: Finance Division 1982, p. 8.

Notes: ^a About 400 overseas employment promoters have been licensed by the government to recruit workers on behalf of foreign employers. The work of these promoters is regulated and controlled by the regional protectorates of emigrants which work under the Director General, Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment.

^b Emigrants who are supplied by the government upon the request of a foreign government.

^c This includes individual work visas obtained through relatives and friends.

Figure 1 Source: Shah, 1983, p. 412

A research paper prepared by the CIA in May 1983 put the true number of Pakistanis working in the rich Gulf Arab states at 1.5 million and the remittances they sent back to Pakistan at \$2 billion for Fiscal Year 1982. The CIA report claimed that these workers led to three primary benefits to the Zia government at the time: the remittances Pakistani laborers abroad sent back covered Pakistan's foreign exchange requirements and helped catalyze domestic economic growth; the labor emigration to the Gulf reduced unemployment at home and partly relieved the pressure on the government to create jobs; and the middle class merchants, traders, and owners of small businesses became beneficiaries of remittance spending.¹⁵⁷ The following figure displays the amount of remittances Pakistani workers sent back home up to the early 1980s:

Figure 1
Pakistan: Emigrant Workers in the Middle East
in 1975 and 1980^a

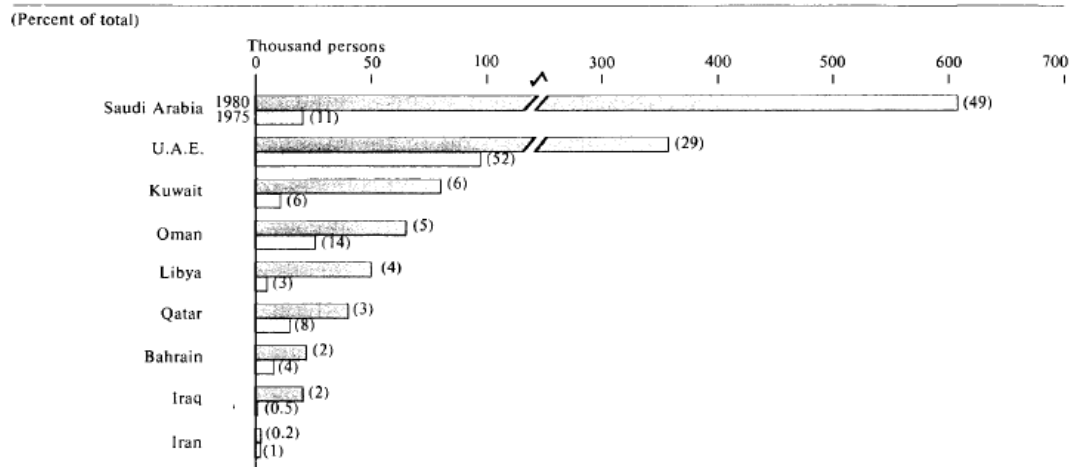


Figure 2: Estimates for 1975 are based largely on official Middle East government figures. Estimates for 1980 are based on World Bank funded research conducted in Pakistan and for some countries are higher than those reported by the Middle East governments. Source: 'Pakistan: Implications of Labor Emigration to the Middle East'.

The following figure gives the number of Pakistani emigrant workers in the MENA region between 1971 and 2015: it is striking that although the number of Pakistani illegal migrants in Iran striving to cross into Europe may be in the thousands, there are few or no Pakistani emigrants travelling to Iran to take up work opportunities.

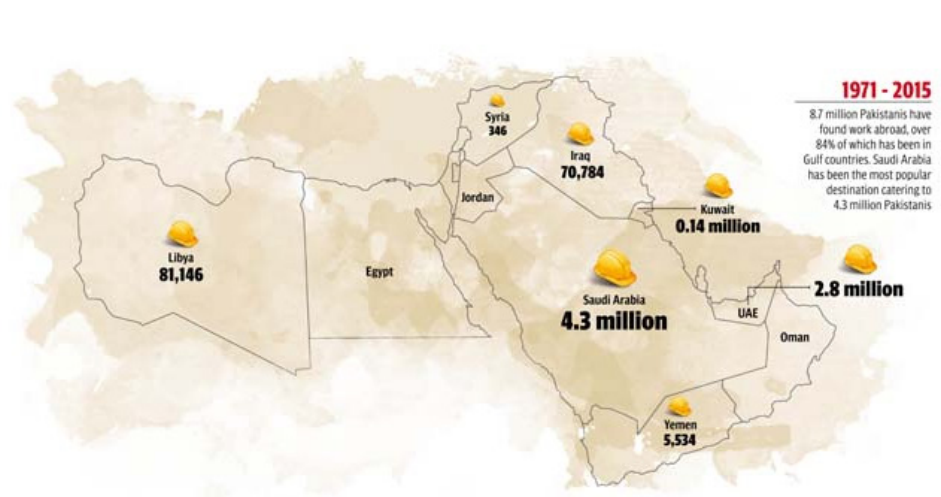
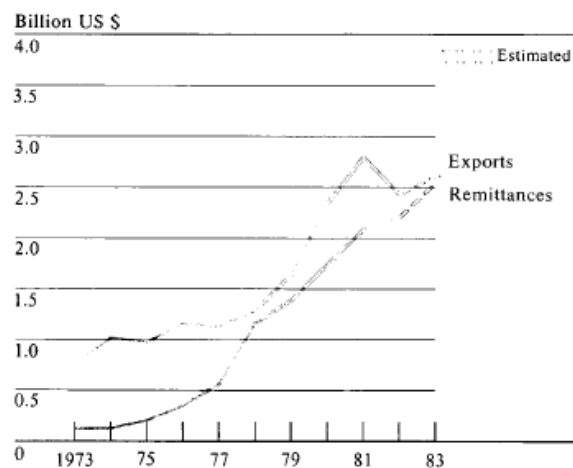


Figure 3: Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1037278/shrinking-prospects-fewer-jobs-for-pakistanis-in-war-hit-mideast/>

The two following figures, the former covering the decade from 1973 to 1983 and the latter giving the latest numbers, give the amount of remittances Pakistani emigrants in different states in the MENA region send back:

Figure 3
Pakistan: Growth in Exports and Remittances



This figure above is confirmed by U.S. Embassy cables sent from Islamabad and Karachi to Washington in 1978 and 1979. In two particular cables, the U.S. Embassy reported that monthly remittances sent from Pakistani expatriates in the Gulf were around \$104 to \$106 million.¹⁵⁸ The reason behind the tremendous increase in Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves from \$387.1 million at the end of July 1977 to \$603.5 million in March 1978 was "the spectacular increase in emigrant remittances".¹⁵⁹ In another report dated from August 1986, CIA noted that around 500,000 Pakistanis worked in the S. Arabia and sent remittances totaling \$1.4 billion.¹⁶⁰

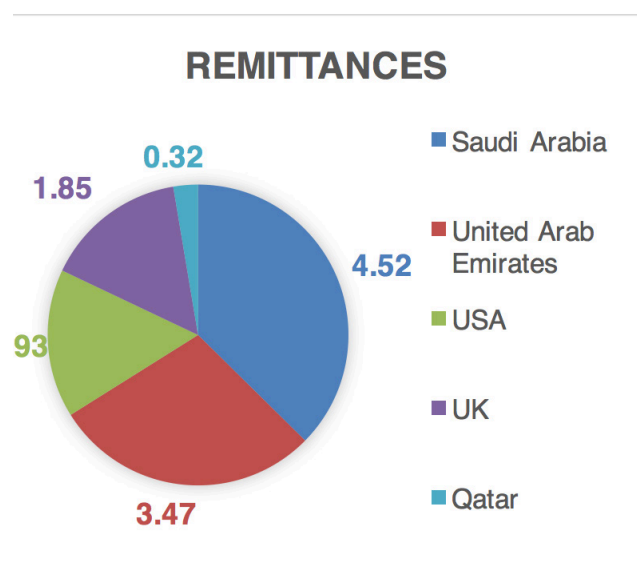


Figure 5: July 2016–April 2017 in billions of dollars. Source: Hashim and Chughtai 2017.

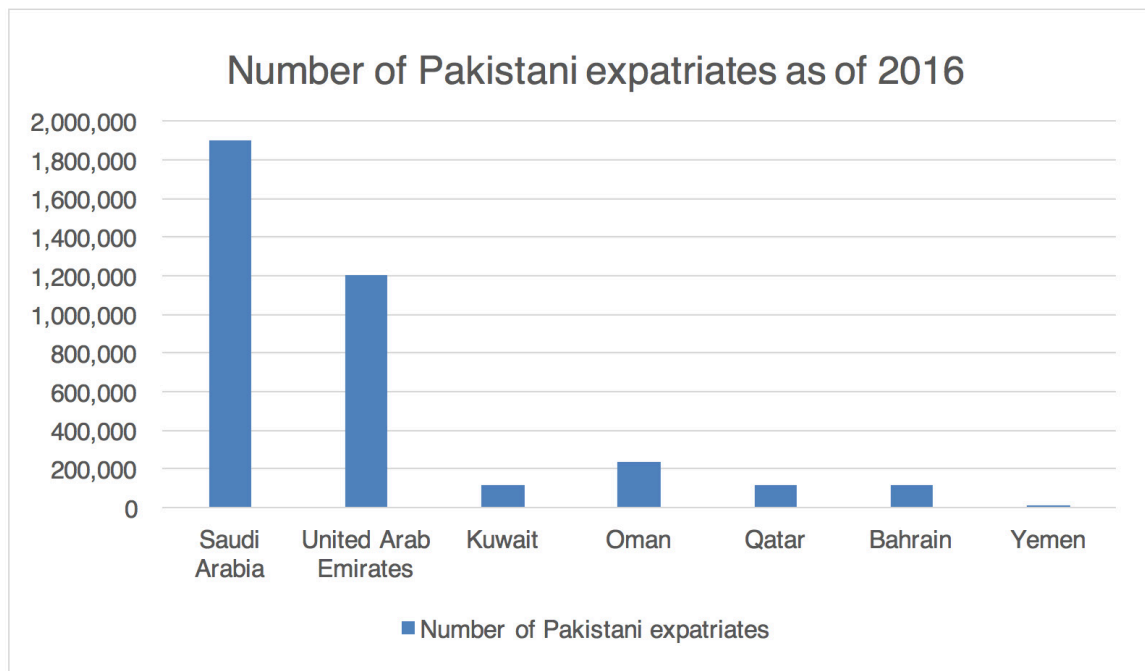


Figure 6 Source: Hashim and Chughtai 2017.

These figures underline the other motivation behind Pakistan's conscious pursuit of "active balance" in its foreign relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and avoid at all costs openly confronting either. Pakistan may be remembering that when the Iran–Iraq war broke out and then the latter invaded Kuwait at the end of the same decade, this badly affected remittances from Pakistani workers in Iraq: an important setback for Pakistani economy.¹⁶¹ Yet, the record shows that Pakistan can be very pragmatic with its workers abroad as well. For instance, when rumors emerged in 1981 that some hundreds of Pakistanis were being trained in Libya either to fight in an insurgency against the Zia government or in Chad, the Zia government called for an inquiry into the matter and started a diplomatic conversation to avoid expelling a further 10,000 Pakistani workers based in Libya. Not only were no Pakistani workers expelled but in fact the number of Pakistani expatriates in Libya increased after the incident.¹⁶²

This growing reliance on remittances sent home meant that Pakistan had to be careful that its citizens were not evicted over foreign policy fights. Otherwise, a U.S. diplomatic cable warned, "should [Pakistani] workers return in substantial numbers, [it] could be devastating. In addition to sudden end to major foreign currency source, worker remittances, it would cause recrudescence of problem of unemployment and underemployment, which largely solved by post-1973 worker exodus to Gulf. In any event, most Pakistanis in Gulf are there to make fortune and return home rather than settle in Gulf."¹⁶³ Pakistan's case has always been helped by the fact that all other conditions being equal, its workers, officers, and

Pakistan's case has always been helped by the fact that all other conditions being equal, its workers, officers, and troops have been preferred by Arab states. The favorable treatment of Pakistani-origin workers in the Gulf over available others has also been seen as a result of Pakistani aloofness from inter-Arab competition

troops have been preferred by Arab states. The favorable treatment of Pakistani-origin workers in the Gulf over available others has also been seen as a result of Pakistani aloofness from inter-Arab competition.¹⁶⁴ As a CIA research paper put it, one reason why Pakistani workers were attractive to oil-exporting states in the MENA region was that these were “less likely than the Arab expatriates to hold political views at odds with the host country regimes and therefore less likely to engage in subversive political activity.”¹⁶⁵ As another American cable suggested, Pakistan is also comfortable with this arrangement because the “wealth of Gulf states does not necessarily translate into influence over Pakistani policies. Pakistanis tend to hold back on Middle East issues to see which way Saudis are going but look to others as well. Pakistan maintains [probably a small military] mission in Cairo where they are protecting power for number of Arab countries. While some Arabs pressing them to pull out (e.g. Libya, Iraq), others (Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) favor their continued presence in Cairo.”¹⁶⁶

‘Islamic Alliance’

According to Aminullah Chaudhry, “pressure from a friendly Middle East country” and a supportive courtesy ruling by the Pakistan Supreme Court were behind the Sharif family’s early return from their exile in Saudi Arabia to Pakistan in November 2007.¹⁶⁷ It is highly likely that this friendly Middle Eastern country was Saudi Arabia. 2007 was also the year when Adel al-Jubeir, then Saudi Ambassador to Washington and incumbent foreign minister, reportedly said that Saudi Arabia was not an observer in Pakistan, but an active participant.¹⁶⁸ These narratives underscored Saudi intentions to establish a firm political influence over Pakistani politics. Saudi Arabia was reportedly ready to call for military rule during the rule of President Asif Zardari (2008-2013), who was perceived to be close to Iran.¹⁶⁹ In this regard, Saudi Arabia’s effort to enlist Pakistan in the so-called ‘Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism’ is the final manifestation of the Kingdom’s desire to declare its suzerainty over Pakistan, or at least to act like it has it.

It needs to be noted that while trying to cajole Pakistan into an undeclared front against Iran, Saudi Arabia was not even able to persuade Pakistan to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus

The ‘Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism’ was announced by Saudi Arabia in the closing days of 2015. Eventually comprising 41 Muslim-majority nations, the alliance vowed to protect Muslims against terrorist organizations, seemingly with the Syrian Civil War in mind. After deciding in April 2015 against contributing Pakistani troops to the Saudi assault on Yemen, Pakistan this time quietly joined the alliance. Yet still, Pakistan has so far done all it can to stay away from giving the impression that the alliance is an anti-Iranian grouping. For instance, in 2016, then-Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif said that “the objective of the coalition is not of a military nature and it is aimed at adopting a joint counter-terrorism narrative,”¹⁷⁰ emphasizing that it was “not an anti-Shia alliance.”¹⁷¹ Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz also said recently that “It would be more appropriate to use the word ‘balanced’ than ‘neutral’ for our policy towards Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Muslim countries.”¹⁷² Aziz confirmed in a hearing at the Pakistani Senate in June 2017 that what they had agreed to take part in was “a coalition rather than an alliance, which requires a formal agreement... [and] that all members will decide

by themselves which activity they would participate in and which they would not.”¹⁷³ Yet, it needs to be noted that while trying to cajole Pakistan into an undeclared front against Iran, Saudi Arabia was not even able to persuade Pakistan to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus. On the issue of Syria, too, Pakistan has been treading very carefully. The Sharif government kept their ambassador in Damascus, apart from a short period when it was no longer safe to keep him there, a policy described as “positive neutrality” and celebrated by the Syrian Ambassador to Islamabad.¹⁷⁴

The fact that Pakistan not only joined the Islamic Alliance but also allowed its very popular former Chief of Staff Raheel Sharif to head the alliance may still appear very confusing. Yet, before the Pakistani government issued a statement that they did not object to General Sharif’s new appointment, the government reportedly contacted Iran first to prevent any misunderstanding.¹⁷⁵ The government declared several times that Sharif’s new position would never pit him against Iran.¹⁷⁶ Besides, the new chief of staff, Qamar Jawed Bajwa, became the first army chief to reach out to Iran.¹⁷⁷ General Bajwa openly stated that the Pakistani army greatly valued the historical relationship between Pakistan and Iran and that they would not allow it to be compromised.¹⁷⁸

Yet, at the same time, “1,180 Pakistan Army personnel of different ranks are in Saudi Arabia for the purpose of instruction and training.”¹⁷⁹ Pakistan still trains dozens of Saudi military cadets in its military academies, but also does the same for Iraqi cadets.¹⁸⁰ Yet again, despite occasional talks and plans to send Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan does not permit its troops to move into Yemen or anywhere else on Saudi Arabia’s behalf.¹⁸¹ When Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan’s powerful and well-connected ambassador to Washington and special representative to the U.N., was asked if Pakistan should send soldiers to Yemen in 2015, she underlined the constraints Pakistan’s geography put on its choices: “Pakistan should not do anything in hurry. Yemen is an Islamic country. Muslims should not attack it... It does not suit Pakistan to send its army against an Islamic country. We have to take care of the interests of Iran because Iran is our close neighbor. Pakistan will suffer an irreparable loss in case its relations with Iran deteriorate. Already Pakistan has also to take care of the Afghan front along with India. Now a third front with Iran will paralyze Pakistan” (italics added).¹⁸² Khalid Mahmood, a retired Pakistani Ambassador to Tehran who served there during Hashimi Rafsanjani’s reign, recently also said that Pakistan should not allow the Islamic Alliance to turn into an instrument for isolating and confronting Iran. “Pakistan would not allow its friendship with other countries in the Persian Gulf region to stand in the way of the development of friendly relations with Iran.”¹⁸³ Finally, regarding the alleged Pakistani tilt towards Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Iran in 2017, a Pakistani diplomat was reported to have said that “We have been trying and will continue to try to convince them that relations with Saudi Arabia are not at Iran’s cost. We equally value ties with Iran as a neighbor and a Muslim country. We cannot change our neighbours and so need to have good relations with them.” [italics added]¹⁸⁴

On the contrary, Pakistan has added to its “balancing” relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran the role of “mediator” as well. In the row between Saudi Arabia and Iran that heightened after Saudi Arabia executed Sheikh Nimr-al Nimr in early 2016, Pakistan did not pick a side and assumed the role of a ‘broker’/‘mediator’ between the two sides. Prime Minister Sharif and General Sharif went to both Riyadh and Tehran to request calm. Pakistan has hung onto the mediator role once again in the current Gulf crisis during the blockade of Qatar, while knowing that its words, as in Zia’s time during the Iran–Iraq war, would not carry much weight in the eyes of either side.

Maintaining the Balance

Pakistani policymakers, in refusing to pick a side in either the intra-Arab or Iranian-Saudi confrontations, are expressing their constant fear of domestic sectarian infighting. The armed forces, where it is considered best etiquette that officers’ sects should not matter or be discussed,¹⁸⁵ are especially concerned because such infighting would put their own unity at stake. In the particular case of Saudi requests for Pakistani troops to join their military assault on Yemen, for instance, it is reported that although the political leadership and Chief of Staff Sharif were willing to dispatch troops, commanders at large opposed the proposal.¹⁸⁶ Abdullah Gul, the son of former Inter-Services Intelligence Chief Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, claims that “Yemen was hotly debated within the military. Ultimately, the military feared that there would be a sectarian backlash within the military itself if it got involved in the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Yemen.”¹⁸⁷ This bold refusal to send soldiers was taken even at the cost of provoking the ire of both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸⁸ The claim that General Bajwa, who was then Inspector General for Training and Evaluation at the General Headquarters, was particularly opposed to the Saudi request parallels his desire to spend extra effort to assuage Iran’s concerns and preserve the balance in Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Major-General Asif Ghafoor, the Director-General of Inter-Services Public Relations, said openly in April 2017 that Pakistan wants to have good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran: “Pakistan values friendship with Iran and Saudi Arabia and wants both countries to become friends too.” He added the new coalition would not do anything jeopardizing relations between the two Islamic countries.¹⁸⁹ It is no surprise that several retired generals in Pakistan warn against steps that may inflame sectarianism within the armed forces. As retired Air Vice Marshall Shahzad Chaudhry has said, “proxy wars on sectarian lines between Islamic countries must not be allowed to be fought on the soil of Pakistan.”¹⁹⁰ Retired Lieutenant-General Talat Masood has also said that Pakistan should not take sides in these types of Middle Eastern feuds.¹⁹¹ The same fear of sectarian tensions and rising militancy also leads Pakistan to oppose sanctions or any attack on Iran.¹⁹²

None of this means that Iran does not create troubles for Pakistan. Iran maintains covert action within Afghanistan and Pakistan by mobilizing their Shia populations to fight in Syria on Iran’s behalf

None of this means that Iran does not create troubles for Pakistan. Iran maintains covert action within Afghanistan and Pakistan by mobilizing their Shia populations to fight in Syria on Iran's behalf. "Residents of Pakistan are recruited to join the fight in Syria through Urdu-language websites... at least hundreds—if not thousands—have left Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria under Iranian direction."¹⁹³ The issue of Baluchistan continues to be a problem area as well. Shortly before General Raheel Sharif retired, during President Rouhani's visit in March 2016, Pakistan accused Iran of allowing the Indian spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), to operate from Iranian soil in the Baluchistan area.¹⁹⁴ In turn, Iran complains of Pakistani negligence in stopping anti-Iranian groups such as Jaysh al-Adl to operate in Baluch areas inside Pakistan.¹⁹⁵ Iran accuses Pakistan of negligence in Baluch areas, resulting in malicious external actors (Israel, CIA) taking advantage of the vacuum to support terrorism against Iran. Despite these problems and occasional skirmishes and exchanges of fire along their border, Iran continues to tower high in Pakistan's foreign relations. In 2015, 57 percent of Pakistanis held a favorable view of Iran, as opposed to 16 percent who had unfavorable views, marking the highest approval rating among Muslim-majority countries. This rather high percentage hides the fact that Iran's approval rate in Pakistan was 72 percent in 2006.¹⁹⁶

Economic considerations that force Pakistan to remain cautious should also be kept in mind: Pakistan faces acute practical problems in ensuring uninterrupted access to gas and oil. Pakistan satisfies its energy needs by importing oil and natural gas from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Iran (plus small amounts from other countries). The following figure shows that Saudi Arabia has always provided the largest share of crude oil to Pakistan, followed by the United Arab Emirates:

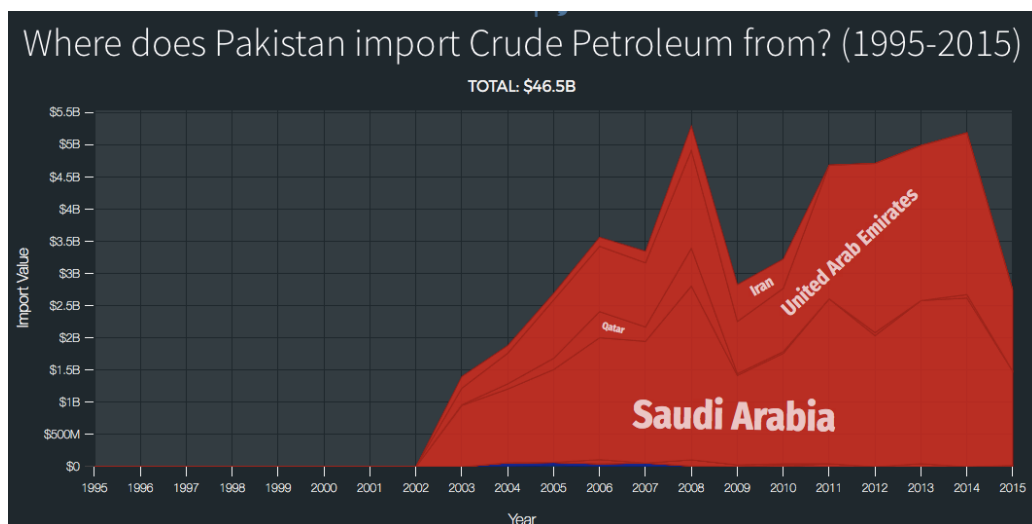


Figure 7 Source: <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/stacked/hs92/import/pak/show/2709/1995.2015/>

When it comes to natural gas needs, however, it is Qatar that provides the largest share, followed by United Arab Emirates, Singapore, and Iran. Pakistan signed an agreement with Qatar in 2016 to secure provision of liquid natural gas until 2031,¹⁹⁷ and is looking to receive more from a willing Iran.¹⁹⁸

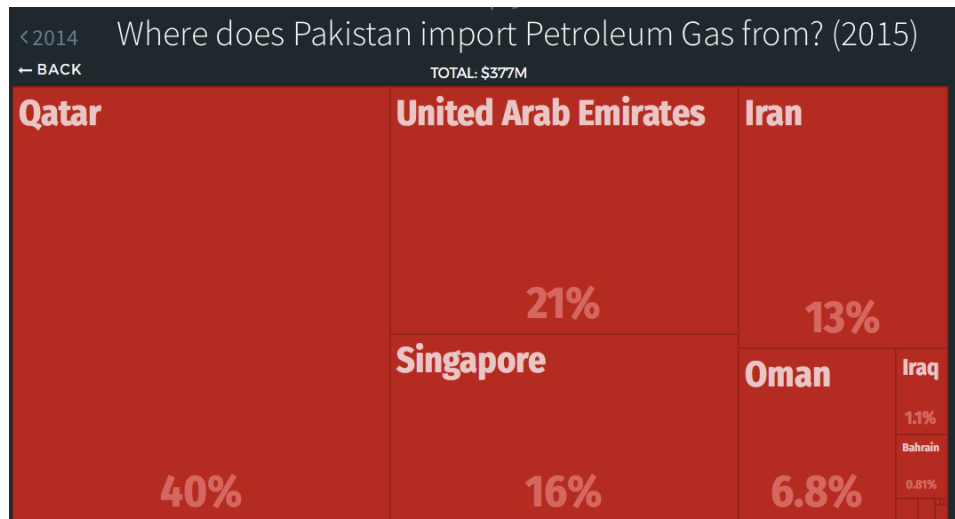


Figure 8 Source http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hsg2/import/pak/show/2711/2015/

Saudi Arabia as well as United Arab Emirates are also seen as sources of cash in emergencies. Saudi Arabia at least twice extended loans and aid to Pakistan to shore up and even rescue Pakistani economy.¹⁹⁹ That fact and the data above also help explain why Pakistan to pursue an active balance between its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran and additionally avoid getting entangled in intra-Arab conflicts. Pakistan cannot afford to lose Saudi Arabia as a provider of crude oil, just as it cannot afford to antagonize Iran and see it improve relations even further with its arch-enemy India. Pakistan is not only aware that Iran is often silent when it comes to issues such as Kashmir but also it cannot rely on Iran to help in case of an Indo-Pakistani conflict. At the same time, Pakistan has much to gain from Iran reopening to the world economy after nuclear agreement. In view of exploiting this new opportunity, Pakistan and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding for a Five-Year (2016-2021) Strategic Trade Partnership to enhance economic cooperation.²⁰⁰ From the geopolitical perspective too, Pakistan does not want to isolate Iran to the point of pushing it towards the India–Afghanistan axis. This was why Lt.-Gen. (retired) Nadeem Lodhi says that “Iran must not be further alienated and its interests in the CPEC [China Pakistan Economic Corridor] should be developed.”²⁰¹

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Conclusion

For decades, Pakistan's domestic dynamics and external limitations have made a flexible balance in relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as in intra-Arab conflicts, a necessity, not a choice. It is still the case, however, that "Saudi Arabia is a very important relationship, while Iran is a neighbor."²⁰² In several crises in the past such as the invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran–Iraq War, the First Gulf War, the Iranian nuclear program and current manifestations of Iran–Saudi rivalry, Pakistan has carefully managed its relations with all sides. The Zia government unhesitatingly received Saudi financial support for the Afghan jihad to spend as they saw fit and dispatched significant numbers of troops to protect the Kingdom on the condition that their expenses be paid by Saudi Arabia. While remaining very close with Saudi Arabia politically, Zia never openly confronted revolutionary Iran in the 1980s. Fearing the spread of revolutionary zeal onto Pakistani soil, Zia tried to preempt the revolution by his own dose of Islamization, all the while supporting Iran in the war against Iraq to a certain degree. Yet, as the CIA foresaw correctly, if the war went badly for Iran or if Iran had been dismembered earlier during the revolution, Zia certainly would not have abided by the 1975 military agreement with Iran and would only have protected Pakistan's own interests.²⁰³ At the same time, despite closer relationship built with Saudi Arabia after the invasion of Afghanistan, "Pakistan has maintained a neutral attitude toward the Iran-Iraq war and has resisted Saudi entreaties to deploy Pakistani troops in Iraq, referring to earlier treaties between Iran and Pakistan. President Zia-ul-Haq has told the Saudis that Pakistani troops will not be allowed to do any battle within any Islamic country."²⁰⁴

In the meantime, Pakistan began to gradually contribute troops and advisors to the Saudi armed forces from the late 1960s onwards and received plaudits from the Kingdom, but it never allowed its soldiers to fight for Saudi Arabia (or any country else) outside the Kingdom. The First Gulf War provided another example. The second civilian government in the post-Zia period, the Nawaz Sharif government, decided to sail against popular wishes and send troops to Saudi Arabia to protect the Kingdom from possible Iraqi onslaught. Yet, again, with decision-making divided later due to dissent from Chief of Staff Mirza Aslam Beg, the Pakistani troops remained inside the Kingdom and never came under enemy fire. Later in the 1990s, Pakistan and Iran were at odds, with differing policies over the fate of Afghanistan, but when Iran was designated as one of the three countries in the "axis of evil" by the Bush government and its nuclear program came under heavy criticism and sanctions, Pakistan appealed to the west not to attack Iran. Pakistan had two main worries: its own domestic situation with a significant number of Shia and the fear of having another unstable neighbor at its door, with the possibility of tens of thousands of new refugees.

In view of these internal and external constraints and a clear history of refusing to choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran at the expense of either, Pakistan's long-standing foreign policy continues. Whether it is the Saudi war in Yemen tensions over Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric residing in the Kingdom, or Iran's participation in the Syrian Civil War, Pakistan will call for calm, try to mediate, and may even do things that may rankle with one side or the other, but is unlikely to do anything radical. It is no surprise therefore that Pakistani diplomats were lately quick to clarify that Pakistan's participation in the Arab-Islamic-American summit in Riyadh in May 2017, which turned into a therapeutic session of Iran-bashing, did not mean they agreed with the spirit and content of the summit: "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.'"²⁰⁵

Judging from detailed historical accounts of Pakistani behavior over the years, we might confidently say that Pakistan will remain in the 'Islamic Alliance' and still attend similar meetings in the future but will not allow its troops used for fights outside the Kingdom, whether against Iran or any other actor. Iran will continue to mobilize Pakistani Shia and bring them to Syria to fight in the civil war but Pakistan, though aware that this is a challenge, will not even withdraw its ambassador to Damascus and will continue friendly relations with Iran. Pakistan will deploy further troops to Saudi Arabia to protect the royal family and pay lip service to Saudi demands due to the history of enormous impact of remittances from Pakistani workers in the Gulf and its dependence on Saudi oil, but it will continue to import LNG from Qatar and seek to establish further economic ties with Iran. And such quintessential pragmatism has historically proven to be the wisest choice for Pakistan, which remains too important of a country to offer itself as a sacrifice to capricious Kings and pompous Ayatollahs.

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org



research.sharqforum.org

