

Explaining the UAE and Saudi Arabia's Response to India's Abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir

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Abstract: India's recent actions in the contested region of Kashmir have led to an intense response from Pakistan and other states. While some expected Muslim led nations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia to support the Pakistani position, on account of their close alliance and Indian aggressions in Kashmir, the Gulf nations reaction has been largely muted. This article casts an eye over the events surrounding India's actions in Kashmir, the subsequent Pakistani reaction and reasons for the apparent neutrality from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It concludes by discussing the position of the two Gulf nations vis-à-vis India and Pakistan.

Introduction

Kashmir forms part of Jammu and Kashmir, a region which has been a point of contention between India and Pakistan ever since they gained independence from the British in 1947.¹ As a result of independence Pakistan was formed as a nation mainly for Muslims to reside in, to keep them free from perceived religious persecution by the largely Hindu dominated state of India. As a result, most of the 550 plus princely states previously under British rule were given an option to join either India or Pakistan in 1947.²

Kashmir, which was a Muslim majority state ruled by a Hindu King, Raja Hari Singh, was initially independent. However, when the newly formed Pakistani government sent in forces to annex Kashmir in 1947, Hari Singh pleaded with India to help protect it, which led to Indian troops entering Kashmir and fighting a war with Pakistan.³ In exchange for Indian protection, Raja Hari Singh allowed India to administer Kashmir with the condition that Kashmir would have its own constitution and special provisions enshrined in Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.⁴

One condition of this agreement was that the Kashmiris would be allowed to secede or join India depending on the results of a referendum, which is still yet to be

conducted. Over the years, Kashmir has witnessed various interferences and human rights violations by the Indian central government leading to a localized protracted rebellion which began in 1989 and has killed at least 30,000 people.⁵ Some rebel groups were also supported by Pakistani forces as a form of irregular warfare. Moreover, in the last five years or so, the transnational Jihadist groups Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have also been vying for recruits and an operational presence in the valley of Kashmir.⁶

On August 5th 2019, the Indian government announced that it would be abrogating Article 370, meaning that Kashmir would now essentially have to follow the Indian Constitution instead of its own.⁷ The announcement was accompanied by a complete communications blackout in the region, with the Indian government justifying this move by saying that they feared that extremists may use this occasion to increase their activity.⁸ In addition to the communication blackout, various groups have highlighted a number of human rights violations such as torture, rape and forced arrests of various Kashmiris by Indian forces.⁹ This has triggered a chain of events across the region.

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The Pakistani Reaction

On account of the tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, the Pakistani reaction to the abrogation of Article 370 has naturally been strong. Firstly, Pakistan downgraded relations with India and expelled a number of Indian envoys and diplomats based in Pakistan.¹⁰ Secondly, Pakistan shut down all bilateral trade between the two nations.¹¹ Thirdly, it banned the hugely popular Bollywood films, and lastly, it ceased operations of the Samjhauta express – a two-way transport service between specific parts of North India and Pakistan.¹²

In addition to taking steps to downgrade its relationship with India, Pakistan also tried to rally the international community against India. For instance, its spokespeople have implored the United Nations (UN), fellow Muslim countries and umbrella groups such as the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) to condemn Indian aggression in Kashmir. More specifically, they have cited the communications shut down in India as a severe human rights violation and have therefore called for condemnation and sanctions against India.¹³

While some independent bodies across the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and others, have spoken out regarding the oppression of the Kashmiris,¹⁴ many other countries have remained silent. And despite previous signs of support from President Trump, who initially offered to mediate the conflict, he later backed down, suggesting that India had everything under control.¹⁵ The European Union (EU) expressed a very neutral stance on the position and called for bilateral talks to reach a solution over Kashmir.¹⁶ Even the OIC, which Pakistan was relying on the most for condemnation, gave only a feeble reaction which bore no teeth.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note the Saudi and UAE reaction, given their historical proximity to Pakistan.

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Mapping the Reactions of the UAE and Saudi Arabia

Pakistani efforts to rally various countries in condemnation of India was also largely hinged on the opinions of its two strongest Muslim allies in the Middle East - Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Pakistan has long enjoyed close relations with both nations as demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that the two Gulf nations' military forces have been trained by the Pakistani military for years.¹⁸ Moreover, the two Gulf nations have also pledged millions of dollars in aid and future trade for Pakistan.¹⁹

For all these reasons, it was surprising when both Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to stay mostly silent on India's actions in Kashmir. Saudi Arabia stated that problems in Kashmir remained an internal Indian issue which it should solve on its own, whilst pushing ahead with investments of around US\$15 billion in India's biggest oil company, Reliance, demonstrating its confidence in India.²⁰

The UAE's reaction was not just neutral but also seemed to favour India. Its ambassador remarked that: "We expect that the changes would improve social justice and security and confidence of the people in the local governance and will encourage further stability and peace."²¹ More explicitly, the UAE even awarded Indian Prime Minister Modi, who (alongside his second in command and Indian Minister of Home Affairs, Amit Shah) was responsible for engineering this policy, the highest civilian honour – the 'Order of Zayed' during the ongoing communication blockade in Kashmir.²²

Naturally then, Pakistan was troubled by the support shown by the Gulf nations for India and the apparent complete lack of condemnation shown. In fact, in response to the UAE's award to President Modi, Pakistan cancelled its own foreign ministers visit to the UAE in protest. It also expressed concern regarding the lack of empathy for the Kashmir issue. While some would argue that this indicates a shift in UAE and Saudi foreign policy towards the two nations, such steps must be scrutinized further.

How to Explain the Reaction of the UAE and Saudi Arabia?

Several factors may have contributed to the UAE and Saudi Arabia's position regarding India's actions in Kashmir. Firstly, India's growing influence as an economic powerhouse is shaping its position across the world. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have special interest in India because they supply it with millions of dollars' worth of oil to meet the south Asian nation's burgeoning energy requirements. Moreover, both nations have also begun to increase investments in India; in addition to the US\$15 billion dollars Saudi Arabia has invested in Reliance, another US\$100 billion has already been pledged for investment in India.²³

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Similarly, the UAE has also invested in a number of Indian enterprises with figures reaching as high as US\$60 billion in promised investments.²⁴ This is all in stark contrast to Pakistan which is dealing with extensive internal economic woes which have in fact led Saudi Arabia to issue a US\$6 billion bailout package. While this package is also outweighed by a US\$20 billion investment plan,²⁵ Pakistan clearly remains a nation considered more of an economic liability than an opportunity.

In addition, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia share Modi and Amit Shah's disdain for radical Islamists and Jihadists. According to the two Gulf nations, political Islam movements like the Muslim Brotherhood were the antecedents of various Jihadist movements across the Middle East.²⁶ While such fears are often exaggerated by the Gulf nations, it has led them to take numerous actions against Islamists. This converges with the vision of Modi and Amit Shah, both of whom belong to a rabidly Hindu nationalist party that has facilitated the hatred of Muslims, especially those involved in violent activities.²⁷ In spite of the current concerns of the Kashmiri populace, which has been on the receiving end of various brutality by the Indian government over the years, they have taken the rebel movement in Kashmir to be one that is without cause.

This is in stark contrast to Pakistan which has been blamed by India and other actors for supporting Islamist and Jihadist groups for decades for its own strategic gains. In the 1980's, this was done to support USA's conflict with the Soviet Union, which was also in line with the UAE and Saudi Arabia's own visions.²⁸ However, over the years, many of the Jihadists who fought the Soviet Union have gone on to establish different branches of localized terrorist organizations in other countries, some of which also agitated against Saudi Arabia – such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula whose predecessor Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was comprised of some Afghan Jihad veterans.²⁹

Given all these issues, it is reasonable to suggest that the two Gulf nations are leaning even more towards India and away from Pakistan. However, this need not necessarily mean that they will eschew relations with Pakistan completely

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have both been wary of supporting any group with an Islamist vision, especially one that could challenge the authority of the monarchy in these two states. This could be the reason that the two nations even supported Indian military action deep into Pakistani territory when terrorists launched an attack against Indian security forces in July 2018.³⁰ As such, it is quite likely that any action taken under the justification (whether real or constructed) of suppressing or eradicating radical Islamist/Jihadist action in India would be supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Lastly, it is also quite likely that both Gulf nations would not be in favour of standing up for human rights or democracy in India precisely because they themselves do not espouse such values in their own nations.³¹ Both have a history of suppressing pro-democracy movements and protests in their homelands as well as in other nations such as Egypt, where they provided billions of dollars' worth of aid to the military dictator Abdulfettah Sisi, who deposed Mohammed Morsi in 2013.³²

Is This a Shift of Policy?

Given all these issues, it is reasonable to suggest that the two Gulf nations are leaning even more towards India and away from Pakistan. However, this need not necessarily mean that they will

eschew relations with Pakistan completely. A recent visit by the foreign ministers of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Pakistan resulted in promised investments of US\$20 billion in the future which, while not as much as has been promised to India, is still a significant amount. Indeed, this diplomacy is not new, in February 2019 the crown prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed Bin Salman's scheduled visit to India and Pakistan came a day after the Pulwama attack where Pakistan-based terrorists killed a large number of Indian security forces. Although India and Pakistan were on the verge of war, the prime ministers of both nations welcomed the Saudi prince by breaking official visiting protocol and welcoming him directly within days of his visit to each of the nations. This was also followed by many announcements and agreements between Mohammed Bin Salman displaying the Arab nation's efforts to balance out relations in South Asia.³³ There were several reasons for these actions:

- Firstly, despite moving towards India, it is still evident that both the UAE and Saudi Arabia heavily rely on Pakistani support for defence issues.³⁴ This is evidenced by the Pakistani pledge to support Saudi royal forces in September 2019. Moreover, recent meetings between top Saudi and Pakistani military commanders led to the reaffirming of ties between the two nations.³⁵

As such, while it has been noted that India and Pakistan have balanced relations between the Arab nations and Iran, it is also pertinent to note that the Arab nations also balance relations between India and Pakistan

■ Secondly, on account of its location Pakistan is still an important powerbroker in the Afghanistan peace process and the tempering of the Taliban, both of which Saudi Arabia and the UAE have a stake in. Indeed, the UAE has been known to host talks between the USA, the Afghan government and Taliban representatives which Pakistan has helped facilitate.³⁶ As such, given Iran's recent relations with the Taliban, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE likely fear a loss of influence which Pakistan would undoubtedly lean on to maintain its relationship.³⁷

■ Lastly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have always relied on Pakistan for military support in the case of Iranian aggression. This is especially relevant since the south Asian nation is considered a nuclear umbrella if Iran were to ever threaten nuclear action against either of the two Gulf nations.³⁸ As such, even though relations were strained by Pakistan's refusal to join the UAE and Saudi Arabia in a war against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen in 2015, Pakistan remains an important protector of the two nations who cannot depend on India to do likewise.

Conclusion

Given all these consequences, it is most likely that the UAE and Saudi Arabia have de-hyphenated relations with the two south Asian rivals without necessarily maintaining relations with one country at the cost of its relationship with the other.³⁹ The two Gulf nations are also energy providers and come with deep pockets which helps their case for neutrality, allowing them to support either of the two nations as and when their interests converge.

As such, while it has been noted that India and Pakistan have balanced relations between the Arab nations and Iran, it is also pertinent to note that the Arab nations also balance relations between India and Pakistan. Both have differing but significant importance to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and it is expected that in future low-level conflicts and tensions, they will try to temper their response in a bid to satisfy their friendship with both India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, in this game of 'Realpolitik', the biggest losers will be the Kashmiris.

Endnotes

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