



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Pakistan and Middle East: An (Un)Holy Embrace



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Jinnah in his conceptual construct had not imagined Pakistan as an Islamic State. *“No distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state”*, said Jinnah at his presidential address to the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in 1947. It was only in 1956 that Pakistan was officially renamed the ‘Islamic Republic of Pakistan’, and since then the evolution of Islamic politics and an Islamic national identity within the country has been consistently encouraged and enforced by state policy. This is especially apparent in how modern Pakistani leaders have sought to use religion to unify the nation but the spectre of religion today has grown larger than the state itself. During the painful throes of a traumatic birth, a key challenge facing the country’s founders was that each one of Pakistan’s principal ethnic groups overlapped national borders and extended into neighbouring countries. Without a common national adhesive, there was little

### Key Points

1. Pakistan foreign policy remains a pedagogic continuum of Indian Muslim League thought from pre-independence days.
2. Pakistan presently is charting its course in the quagmire of the Middle East by sailing in two boats whose proverbial skippers, the Sheikh and Ayatollah don’t see eye to eye.
3. Shared civilisational experience, faith system, geographic proximity, common aspirations and interests and hopes for a common destiny are the factors that help define contours of the relationship between Middle East and Pakistan.
4. The zero-sum dynamics of Saudi-Iran relations however impinge on their ties with the third country in the region.
5. Shia and Sunni hardline groups in Pakistan may pursue domestic sub-nationalistic as well as religio-militant lines of effort giving impetus to domestic sectarian violence and terrorism.
6. India’s diversified set of partnerships in the Middle East, maintaining and balancing its relationships with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iran, and Israel has provided it with a key position which has invariably made Pakistan queasy.
7. Pakistan has adopted a two-pronged approach; first portray tangible progress in bringing its own house in order; and second, de-hyphenate the relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia and carry a ladder to draw the two flanks of the Gulf closer for its own interests.
8. Afghanistan’s free fall into the quagmire of the ‘New Great Game’ would also force Saudi Arabia and Iran to view Pakistan from an ethnic prism, Pakistan, Taliban and Iran can create a vortex which could upset the Pakistani appellation of hunting with the hounds and running with the hares.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

## Pakistan and Middle East ...

reason why the country's inhabitants should prefer to be Pakistanis and why the country as a whole should cohere. Years of state-sponsored indoctrination and madrasa fuelled education system has put *Islamiyat ahead of Pakistaniyat*, according to a 2009 report by the British Council, more than 75 percent of Pakistanis consider themselves to be Muslims first and Pakistani nationals second.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a May 2011 survey by the Gilani Research Foundation, a Pakistani polling organisation, revealed that 67 percent of Pakistanis favoured the state-led Islamisation of their country.<sup>2</sup>

Irrespective of the secular vision of Pakistan and its internal machinations vis-à-vis religion, leitmotif of its foreign policy from inception has been Islamic in nature. Even before the fruition of the two-nation theory, support to Palestine by Indian Muslim League in 1933 or the Muslim League resolution of December 26, 1943 demanding the independence of Ceraneca, Libya, Tripoli, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria and Tunis<sup>3</sup> are indicative of the religious inclinations, Pakistan foreign policy was a pedagogic continuum of Indian Muslim League thought and remains so even now. Bhutto government sought to provide Pakistan with a new Islamic Middle Eastern identity that would allow it to escape its Indian history and identity. Libya and the Gulf States provided Pakistan with the much-needed monetary support for this ambitious nuclear programme. In return, Bhutto often referred to Pakistan's bomb as the 'Islamic Bomb'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the megalomaniacal and romantic illusion of being the protector of the faith and the holy cities. However, in a hyperrealistic thought for Pakistan, the Muslim Middle East and Central Asia represent the hope of strategic depth and source of both energy supply and economic support. Pakistan's strong relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are built on common interests, shared objectives in the region, and personal ties to the rulers. Afghanistan, once a common cause across the Muslim world, has become the proverbial thorn in the flesh in

Pakistan's relations with the Middle East and with Iran. Pakistan presently is charting its course in the quagmire of Middle East by sailing in two boats whose proverbial skippers, the Sheikh and Ayatollah don't see eye to eye.

Pakistan's branding as a 'Grey State' by FATF<sup>5</sup> on one side and a billion-dollar bail-out by China<sup>6</sup> are the inherent paradoxes of India's effort to diplomatically isolate Pakistan. Foreign policy mandarins of India believe that they have found the elixir for a counteroffensive strategy against Pakistan on terrorism. It must however be kept in mind that the more Pakistan is pushed into a corner, the corner may be the one where the international community may wield no further influence and quarantine Pakistan from the challenges of so-called isolation. The further strengthening and calcification of ties with China and its increased involvement in the Middle East are the harbinger of future course of action for a beleaguered state. Shared civilisational experience, faith system, geographic proximity, common aspirations and interests, and hopes for a common destiny are the factors that help define contours of the relationship between the Middle East and Pakistan.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran are locked in a contorted three-way embrace. Despite Arabian-Persian tensions in the Gulf, Pakistan had held good relationships with both, because it is neither Arabian nor Persian and did not become a party to their internal conflicts till recently. Intra-Gulf rivalry is driven by competition for energy markets, the nuclear challenge, the Middle East or Persian Gulf, sectarian issue, territorial dispute and Afghanistan.

Pakistan, on a number of subjects concerning Iran and Saudi Arabia, struggled but managed the balance in its ties with both Riyadh and Tehran. The zero-sum dynamics of Saudi-Iran relations however impinge on their ties with the third country in the region. The equation has been irreversibly mutated with the

appointment of General Raheel Shareef as leader of 39-nation Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT).<sup>7</sup> It may solidify Pakistan's strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia and further endear it to its long-time ally, Turkey, but in the same vein it would drive a wedge and be the *raison d'être* for permanent souring of relationships with Iran. The recent reports of a hotline establishment between ISI and KSA Intelligence Agency has further accentuated the bonhomie between the states, whilst Iran and Pakistan, despite Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent visit to Tehran, are on a collision course. The attack on Pakistani security forces in Ormara was attributed by the Pakistan Government to a Baluch separatist organisation operating from safe havens in Iran.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved in a series of seemingly intractable disputes, be it territorial, economic, sectarian or hegemonic in nature; all of which have the potential to destabilise the entire region and lead to a direct conflagration which at the present moment is being fronted by proxies. These conflicts hold direct socio-economic and security implications for Pakistan. While, on the one hand, Pakistan is supported by KSA through energy and economic means, on the other, it is geographically linked with Iran. Pakistan obtains about 61 percent of its remittances from the Middle East and maintains there a large number of its expatriates. Even if the Pakistani government's stress on the 'economic dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy' is accepted, the challenges seem difficult for the administration to confront.

Fury from the US and its allies, who expect Islamabad to dump the gas pipeline deal with Iran, and lukewarm response from Islamabad has frustrated Tehran. In the near future Pakistan has limited energy sources and if the pipeline with Iran is not constructed, or Iran or Pakistan revise the deal, Pakistan's energy crisis will reach the point of no return. Pakistan's role in Yemen and the presence of additional Pakistani troops in Saudi

Arabia has conflagrated the relationship between the neighbours.<sup>8</sup> While Pakistan maintains that these troops are on train and advice mission, a reality check with Gen Shareef at the helm is very much in order. Reports in media allude to bodies of Pakistanis being airlifted from Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who were said to have died on the Saudi border with Yemen. They are believed to be Pak ex-servicemen casualties of the war on Yemen. To counterbalance its proxy presence in Yemen and mend its relations with Iran, it is likely that Pakistan has turned a blind eye and tacitly acquiesced in raising of a Zainebiyoun<sup>9</sup> Brigade made up of Shia Pakistanis who are fighting ISIS/AQ conglomerate under the guidance of IRGC.<sup>10</sup> While internationally it may allow Pakistan to curry favour with all stakeholders, this phenomenon is likely to have internal ramifications on Pakistan with Shia and Sunni hardline groups pursuing domestic sub-nationalistic as well as religio-militant lines of effort giving impetus to domestic sectarian violence and terrorism.

The recent US pull-out from the nuclear deal with Iran had made it a pariah state once more and invariably more belligerent in pursuing its foreign policy goals, be it in Syria or Yemen. This hardening of stances and additional US gravitas on interaction with Iran would make Pakistan's position untenable. The recent attack on a military parade in Iran claimed by ISIS has further hardened Iran's stance in Syria and the bellicose diatribes of President Trump are adding further fuel to the fire.

To develop a counterbalance, Middle Eastern countries are pivoting to India or at least giving it a fresh look and this gives India arguably more leverage than it has ever had in the past. India's diversified set of partnerships in the Middle East, maintaining and balancing its relationships with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iran, and Israel has provided it with a key position which has invariably made Pakistan queasy and has forced it to adopt a more belligerent posture aimed at regaining its *prima donna* position in the

region. The region continues to remain India's priority in economic domain as the main source of imported oil and natural gas (58 percent of its oil imports and 88 percent of its liquefied natural gas imports in 2014-15 came from the Middle East). In addition, NRIs in the region (Table 1) remitted over \$36 billion in 2015 (52 percent of the total remittances to India). Add to that India's Sunni and Shiite populations (among the largest in the world), counterterrorism cooperation with some countries, India's defence relationship with Israel, the desire to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran, and the potential market and source of capital it represents for Indian companies and vice versa, and it becomes clear why this region has a key symbiotic relationship with India which makes Pakistan uncomfortable.

**Table 1: NRI Presence in Middle East<sup>11</sup>**

Country	NRI Population	% of Total Population
Saudi Arabia	3 Million	9.8
UAE	2.2 Million	40
Kuwait	580,000	21.6
Oman	450,000	17.5
Bahrain	150,000	19

Pakistan has significant strategic interest in encouraging reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran but the same is being jeopardised by growing Indian influence in the region. Pakistan has adopted a two-pronged approach; first portray tangible progress in bringing its own house in order; and second, de-hyphenate the relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia and carry a ladder to draw the two flanks of the Gulf closer for its own interests.

In this regard, Pakistan is hoping that institutions such as GCC and ECO could be mobilised. Militarily the presence of nuclear weapons provides Pakistan a haloed status in the region as the 'Islamic Bomb' remains a great psychological force multiplier in the region. Pakistan's ties with the Muslim Middle East still reflect a fundamentally constructive quest for an identity and a set of relationships that take it out of the India-centred South Asia. Energy trade with the Middle East is still vitally important to Pakistan, but the other economic relations have weakened as Pakistan's economy has stagnated and aid flows and remittances have shrunk. But the tone of Pakistan's future ties with these countries – especially with Iran and Saudi Arabia – will be set in Pakistan. The ethnic fault lines between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan would temper the Iranian narrative as also the Saudi Arabian Wahabi monarchy's response to Pakistan. Afghanistan's free fall into the quagmire of the 'New Great Game'<sup>12</sup> would also force both nations to view Pakistan from an ethnic prism, Pakistan, Taliban and Iran can create a vortex which could upset the Pakistani appletart of hunting with the hounds and running with the hares. The present Iran-USA stand-off may also get Pakistan to review its ad libitum tightrope walk; a hedging strategy may not run its course and may create a point of inflection where Pakistan may have to make a Hobson's choice. Two areas are critical here: policy toward Afghanistan, and Pakistan's own internal cohesion. The Muslim world can offer sympathy in both areas, but the key decisions are Pakistan's to make.

## Notes

1. British Council Pakistan. *The Next Generation*. Full report available at <http://www.britishcouncil.pk/pakistan-Next-Generation-Report.pdf> accessed on July 1, 2018.
2. Gilani Research Foundation. *Religion and Governance: Islamization of Society*. Full report available at <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/31-05-11.pdf> accessed on July 1, 2018.
3. Resolution of the All India Muslim League from May 1943 to December 1943, Delhi, pp. 29-30.
4. "We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change." Taken from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *If I am Assassinated* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), p. 138.

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6. <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-china-loans/china-lends-1-billion-to-pakistan-to-boost-plummeting-fx-reserves-sources-idINKBN1JQ0TV> accessed on July 1, 2018.
7. [English.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/02/18/The-mystery-surrounding-the-head-of-Muslim-NATO-.html](http://English.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/02/18/The-mystery-surrounding-the-head-of-Muslim-NATO-.html) accessed on July 1, 2018.
8. Press Release No. PR-70/2018-ISPR available at <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=4565> accessed on July 1, 2018.
9. The brigade is named after granddaughter of Prophet Mohammad whose shrine is in Syria.
10. <https://jamestown.org>, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14, Issue. 11, accessed on October 5, 2018.
11. <http://nriol.com/indiandiaspora/statistics-indians-abroad.asp> accessed on July 1, 2018.
12. Fair, Carol & Tom Levy. (2019). "The All-New Great Game." [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331502038\\_The\\_All-New\\_Great\\_Game/citation/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331502038_The_All-New_Great_Game/citation/download) accessed on June 28, 2019.

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