



كلية الآداب والعلوم
College of Arts and Sciences
QATAR UNIVERSITY جامعة قطر

مركز دراسات الخليج
Gulf Studies Center

**Can Pakistan mend relations
between Saudi Arabia and Iran?
Ana Ballesteros Peiró**

**Gulf Insights Series
Nº 10 – October 2019**

Can Pakistan mend relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

Ana Ballesteros Peiró

Imran Khan is visiting Iran and Saudi Arabia in an effort to build bridges between the two influential powers in the Middle East region. Since 2015, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have picked up momentum. Policies that usually aimed at checking each other's influence in the region- and that are wrapped in a tense rhetoric- have evolved into a more tangible confrontation. The policy of balance of power is still there, but recent events add another layer of riskiness in an already fragile environment.

Ever since the change of Iraq's government and the beginning of the different Arab uprisings, Saudi's perception of a pro-Iranian tilt in the region contributed to a heightened proclivity towards balancing actions in a more aggressive way. In 2015, the Yemen intervention and the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) were tipping points of what had been brewing in the previous years.

A [wave of recent events](#) and crossed accusations of responsibility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, even before authorship was established, only testify to the high levels of tension. The attacks on Saudi oil installations of 14th September and to [an Iranian oil tanker](#) in the Red Sea on 11th October are but signals of an increasing fault line that threatens with dragging the region into a deeper polarisation.

Pakistan's Position: An Overview

Different Pakistani governments have had to tread carefully in their policies with the Saudis and Iranians. The balance has not been easy.

Policies undertaken through the sectarian lenses only increase suspicions, while adding opportunities for revolt, as they intensify the perception of insecurity of both minorities and majorities alike. Some would not stop to consider the consequences of the so-called Saudi-Iranian "Cold War" outside the Middle East, but Pakistan has an old experience of what a proxy war between them looks like. After all, Pakistan, while being a Sunni majority country (around 80% of 207 million Pakistanis are Sunni), is home to the second largest Shia population in the Muslim world (estimated between 10-15% of its population), after Iran itself. India would be the third one, making South Asia a region with high numbers of Shias.

Pakistan pursued an Islamist agenda to counter different nationalist demands (mainly Pashtun and Baloch) during the 1960s and 1970s. The instrumentalisation of Islam was a means to gain influence in the neighbourhood. Soon after the Iranian Revolution, the formation of the *Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh Jafariyya* (1979, Movement for the Defence of the Jafari Law) activated political demands for Shias, which were then contested with the formation in the mid-1980s of Sunni groups demanding the "Sunnification" of Pakistan. These events took a more dangerous turn amid the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) and the dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq, who pursued a policy of Islamisation (Hanafi Sunnification). US and Saudi money poured into the coffers of the Pakistani establishment, who used it to finance religious and Islamist groups ideologically similar to Saudi

Wahhabism. Therefore, relations with Saudi grew closer, while Iran was pushed further away.

Once the Soviets finally withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan found itself immersed in an unprecedented sectarian polarisation, which caused a high number of attacks between self-proclaimed Sunni and Shia defence groups. The legacy of those days can still be felt, although in a different manner, in frequent attacks against Pakistani Shias. According to the [South Asia Terrorism Portal](#), sectarian violence in the streets of Pakistan caused the death of 5.602 persons and nearly 11.000 wounded from 1989 to 2018. The incapacity to protect Shias during the holy month of *Muharram* and the attacks towards *Ashura* processions is one of the reasons for the strained alliance between Pakistan and Iran.

Other reasons that hinder the relations between Pakistan and Iran are a conflictive border, and Pakistan's close alliance with the US and Saudi Arabia. Iran and Pakistan share a border of more than 900Km. However, unlike the Durand line (international border with Afghanistan) and the stretch of the border with India's administered Kashmir, this one is not disputed. It is, nonetheless, anything but untroubled.

Pakistanis and Saudis developed a client-patron relationship in which both balanced each other's weaknesses. The Saudis assist Pakistan with its perpetual needs of energy and financial assistance, while Pakistan can provide the Saudis with security, as it has the sixth largest Army in the world. Pakistani Military has often been deployed to the Middle East, usually as instructors and developing joint exercises, but they have also been involved in combat. [Pakistanis flew pilot jets](#) that bombed Yemen during incursions in Saudi territory back in

1969. Military cooperation was further strengthened after Pakistani combat troops aided during the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979. From then on, around 15,000 Pakistani troops were deployed in the Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s.

What can Pakistan really do?

WikiLeaks revealed a patron-client relation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. While the Saudi ambassador to the US in 2007 bragged that [Saudis in Pakistan](#) were not mere observers, but participants, or that in 2009, King Abdullah preferred Nawaz Sharif over then President Asif Zardari (a Shia whom King Abdullah described as a "rotten head infecting the whole body"), speaks volumes of Saudi's preferences in Pakistani politics.

When the majority of the [Pakistani Parliament](#) voted against getting involved in the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen war in 2015, the Saudis were caught by surprise. The government, headed by Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, dealt a blow to Saudi expectations, which had already added Pakistan to the list of contributing countries. The decision was taken carefully, considering Pakistan's neighbourhood. MPs did not only prevent Iran's harsh reaction, but also the effects on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the future stabilisation of Afghanistan after the expected withdrawal of US troops. A growing Iranian influence in Afghanistan (in tandem with India) and the increase of insurgency attacks along the border between the provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan (Iran) and Balochistan (Pakistan), are issues that directly affect Pakistan. Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, [visited Islamabad](#) while Parliament was debating its decision.

It is not the first time a Pakistani leader tries to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Nawaz Sharif, who was better positioned than Khan to deal with both countries, [tried to defuse tension](#) in January 2016 after the execution of cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) general Raheel Sharif reiterated Pakistan's commitment to defending the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Likewise, current COAS general Qamar Bajwa has pledged allegiance to the Saudis by supporting the Kingdom in case of a direct attack. What has changed is Gen. Bajwa's approach to President Hassan Rouhani and his Iranian counterpart, Chief of General Staff for Iranian Armed Forces, General Mohamed Bagheri during a three day visit to Tehran in November 2017, the first by a Pakistani COAS in more than 20 years. [General Bajwa pledged](#) greater defence and security cooperation between both countries.

Pakistan would benefit from preventing a direct confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its economy hangs by a thread. It depends on a \$6 billion IMF bailout in order to survive. Brinkmanship or risk-taking strategy has cost it dearly in the international scenario. Only a few allies (China, Saudi and UAE) have invested in different projects. The Saudis have promised an equal sum as that of the IMF, \$3 billion in foreign currency support and another \$3 billion in deferred payment of oil imports. Yet, the future of Pakistan depends on the stabilisation of Afghanistan, to which Iran plays a decisive role. At the same time, the success of the CPEC relies on stability in Balochistan, to which Iran can play spoiler. If US sanctions against Iran were lifted, Pakistan could benefit from the completion of the long delayed Iran-Pakistan pipeline (of which India dropped out in the past) and the provision of electricity. Power cuts in

Pakistan have provoked more protests than any other reason.

Khan's role, like previous Prime Ministers, is subordinated to the military in matters related to foreign and defence policies. Although inexperienced, Imran Khan and the military are on the same page. Before he took office, Khan's party voted against the Saudi intervention and also, manifested a positive attitude towards the JCPOA. At the 74th UN General Assembly, he confirmed that his discourse is attuned to that of the military establishment. That is, basically, a victimisation attitude and an India-centric view of affairs. Nevertheless, during his discourse, he did not mention peace in the immediate neighbourhood, much less in the Middle East. If anything, it was a call to a renewed belligerence in South Asia. Can he thus deliver peace between Saudis and Iranians? It sounds unlikely. Saudis and Iranians seem obsessed with each other as India and Pakistan. Both pairs suffer from the same syndrome: self-inflicted security dilemmas.

Imran Khan may placate the fires for a while, but the problem runs deeper. As he tries to play the role of mediator (he has declared that it was [President Trump himself](#) who asked him in New York to perform this role during the 74th UNGA last September), we are to see what is in it for Pakistan. President Rouhani presented the idea in his speech at the UNGA, when he called for a Hormuz Peace Endeavour, saying that peace should come "from our neighbours, not someone from outside the region". For the moment, Khan's visits coincided with Wednesday 16th October meeting of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), to decide if Pakistan joined Iran and North Korea in the black list of countries sponsoring terrorism. FATF has left Pakistan in the grey list, with yet

another extension to fulfil its commitments.

There are many sides in today's conflicts in the Middle East, with agency of their own. An entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran may placate the situation for the time being, but it will not solve the region's problems. Pakistan can do as much as bringing both to a non-aggression agreement. Nonetheless, reducing all problems in the region to an Iranian and Saudi Arabia "cold war" is too simplistic. President Trump should know better.

About the author:

Ana Ballesteros Peiró is a Senior Associate Researcher at CIDOB-Barcelona Center for International Affairs and OPEMAM-Observatory on Politics and Elections in the Muslim and Arab World.

About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff and PhD and MA students, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

All articles published under "Gulf Insight" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.