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## Tempering Saudi-Iran rivalry and the role of Pakistan

By Prateek Joshi  
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The ongoing crisis in the Middle East has got more complex with the revival of Saudi-Iran tensions. While tensions have simmered between these two nations for long, what caused their lingering enmity to snowball into a face off were Iran's alleged support to Syria's Bashar al Assad regime, Saudi airstrikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Further intensifying a sense of mutual hostility was the negotiation of a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in which the P5+1 powers reached an amicable solution with the Iranian leadership, getting the latter out of decades of global isolation. Tensions had begun to emerge when the deal allowed Iran to curb its nuclear program (and not eliminating it), thus feeding into Saudi insecurities. All of this took an even uglier turn as successive dampeners unfolded with the latest ones being the death of hundreds of Iranian Hajj pilgrims in a stampede at Mecca in 2015 and the execution of a Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr-al-Nimr by Saudi authorities in January 2016. The reaction to the latter came in the form of arson attacks on Saudi embassy in Tehran, following which Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies cut their diplomatic ties with Iran.

The ramifications of this intensifying hostility is being felt across the Muslim world, especially in South Asia which houses approximately 30% of the world's total Muslim population. The repercussions being witnessed are in the form of deepening Shia-Sunni sectarian divide; an effect that flows directly out of the configuration of Saudi Arabia as a Sunni majority state and Iran as a Shiite one. However, this conflict is not new and dates back to the Iranian revolution of 1979 which marked the beginning of a modern stand-off to take place between the claimants to Islamic supremacy- Saudi Arabia and Iran.

## Sectarianism in Pakistan: A theatre of Saudi-Iran rivalry

One such state affected by sectarian tensions is Pakistan which has a 20% Shia population, making it a significant minority in its present demographic setup. Thus, to analyze Pakistani politics without mentioning the Shia-Sunni relations would certainly be incomplete, especially in the current context where it finds itself embroiled in the Saudi-Iran spat and in a rather very sensitive manner.

As a nation, Pakistan was born after the undivided British India was partitioned following the demand from a majority Indian subcontinent's Muslims for a separate homeland. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the west leaning charismatic leader who led the Pakistan movement did not live long enough to setup an ideological base for the newly born nation. Following his death, the military took control and started running the administration hand in glove with the Sunni Islamist organizations that repeatedly called for running Pakistan on the lines of puritanical Islam. The cause of Islam and alliance with the USA during the cold war made Saudi Arabia and Pakistan natural allies.

Sectarian divide deepened in Pakistan after General Zia-ul-Haq staged a coup in 1977 and became the President of Pakistan. His tenure was notorious for his policy of 'Islamization' which promoted the radical Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism, fostering both discontent and discomfort among the Shias in Pakistan as a result. Pakistan received massive funding from Saudi Arabia to setup thousands of Islamic seminaries to institutionalize the Islamic ideology. This also formed the basis of the mujahedeen movement against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan which saw Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) becoming a launch pad from where radicalized youth could be injected into the 'holy war' against the 'godless' Communists.

This phase coincided with the 1979 Khomeini revolution in Iran, and which also marked the beginning of the exportation of Shiite influence to Pakistan. Recognizing the new Iranian leadership, Zia famously declared that, "Khomeini is a symbol of Islamic insurgence". On one hand, Pakistan enjoyed close diplomatic ties with Iran and even went as far as secretly supplying nuclear technology to Iran's covert nuclear facilities in the 1980s. On the other hand, the Shia-Sunni divide intensified when a Shiite outfit named, Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria was established (under the leadership of Arif Hussaini, a student of Ayatollah Khomeini) in 1979 as a response against Zia-ul-Haq's policy of Wahhabi Islamization.

The timing of the establishment of this outfit and its influence in the decade of 1980s is attributed to Iranian support. As a logical reaction to its founding on Iranian might, many Sunni fundamentalist organizations such as Sipah-e-Sahaba (1986), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (1996), etc. cropped up, all of them being allegedly funded by the Wahhabi networks operating in Saudi Arabia.

Sectarian killings have been rampant in Gilgit-Baltistan (a predominantly Shia region in northern Pakistan), Karachi (Sindh Province), Quetta (Balochistan Province) and NWFP. While the Pakistani establishment has attempted to curb these activities by repeatedly banning many of these organizations, but their deep ideological inroads amongst their followers have made the task easier said than done. The hostilities have risen to such level that besides attacking the Shia

population, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi has also been attacking Pakistani politicians. This includes the recent assassination of the Home Minister of the Punjab Province, Shuja Khanzada ostensibly as a response to the killing of Jhangvi's leader, Malik Ishaq by the police.

Present situation: Balancing the domestic and international

In January 2015, the Houthi (a Shiite sect in Yemen) rebellion reached its crescendo when its forces raided the presidential palace, thereby ousting the Yemeni President, a Saudi ally. This prompted air strikes by the Saudi establishment and its allies on the Houthi strongholds inside the Yemeni territory. Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of covertly supporting the Houthi rebellion.

Tensions emerged in Pakistan when the Saudi establishment asked the Pakistani government to provide armed assistance for its operations against the Houthi rebels. Though Pakistan refused eventually, the hype generated about a possible Pakistani support had already split the nation again on sectarian lines, with the Shiite community leaders lodging their protests against such action.

The year 2016 was welcomed by a fresh resurgence in tensions in Pakistan following the execution of Sheikh Nimr-al-Nimr. Various cities and towns in Pakistan witnessed a public outpour of anger against Saudi Arabia that executed this famous Shiite leader along with 40 others who were branded as 'terrorists'. The Media Regulatory Authority of Pakistan also issued an advisory cautioning the news channels to refrain from debating on issues related to sectarian politics. It is at this juncture the Pakistani establishment decided to act, to balance its foreign policy as well maintaining internal stability.

Saudi Arabia has come to rescue Pakistan in worst of its times, especially providing aid in the times of natural disasters and even providing assistance to rectify Pakistan's Balance of Payments crisis. Moreover, Saudi Arabia also houses close to 2 million Pakistani expatriate workers, thereby becoming a huge source of remittances. Both nations share strong military ties, described as the closest which Pakistan has with any other fellow Islamic nation. Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries where the Pakistani military missions are deployed. Simultaneously, Pakistan cannot afford to deteriorate ties with neighboring Iran, with which the ambitious Iran-Pakistan pipeline project is all set to be rolled out, which will go a long way to meet Pakistan's energy requirements.

The New Year began with the Pakistani establishment prioritizing the Saudi-Iran issue. Both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and General Raheel Sharif travelled together to Saudi Arabia and Iran in an attempt by Pakistan to find a ray of hope for peace between the two powers, whose rivalry has specifically hit Pakistan hard, internally as well as externally.

Calling them Pakistan's 'brotherly nations', PM Sharif in his address to the media in Iran recalled how Pakistan could manage to diffuse the charged atmosphere between Iran and Saudi Arabia back in 1997. In fact, hoping to play the role of 'messenger of peace' once again, PM Nawaz Sharif who had landed in Saudi Arabia before heading to Iran had met with King Salman and discussed among other issues the rising Saudi's hostilities vis-a-vis Iran and the exclusion of Iran, Syria and Iraq from the 34-member Coalition of Islamic nations against terrorism.

Wielding the baton of peace, a section of Pakistani media suggested that the ‘successful’ meeting between the Pakistani PM and the Saudi King has created a window of opportunity, with the latter handing over a list of negotiating points to the former for discussion with the Iranian premier. Currently, diplomatic parleys are underway and given the importance that Pakistan has to both the countries- for demographic, strategic and economic reasons- it is very much possible that this country could once again broker peace between the antagonized Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The previous years of sectarian instabilities faced by Pakistan and the role played by it in arresting the rising hostilities between Iran and Saudi Arabia are a visible proof that this country is both a theatre where the Iran-Saudi rivalry plays out and a force that can broker peace between them in the same breath.

This time, a visibly neutral government offering to play as a mediator does offer a sense of commitment on part of Pakistan as it cannot afford to be destabilized again with sectarian violence, especially at a time when the \$46 billion worth China Pakistan Economic Corridor project is all set to take off. However, only time will tell how effective the Pakistani leadership has been in mediating a crisis which has put its domestic as well as foreign policy stability at stake.