

## Reports

### **From Blind Reliance to Contractual Convenience: The Recent Pakistani-Saudi Rift**

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Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have developed a close relationship throughout the decades. [Reuters]

One of the most talked about things from Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's visit to Pakistan in early 2019 was when, with the aim of inspiring brotherly ties between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, he stated, "Consider me Pakistan's ambassador to Saudi Arabia." [\(1\)](#). This proclamation was however brought to bear on 5 August 2020.

In a televised discussion on this date, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, inveighed against, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) lackluster response to the Indian brutalities being carried out in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IoK). Exactly a year prior to this interview, India had abrogated articles 370 and 35 A of its constitution, thereby revoking IoK's autonomy. During the same conversation, Qureshi stated that if, the OIC failed to "convene the meeting of the council of foreign ministers" [\(2\)](#) soon, Pakistan would be predisposed to turn towards countries which are willing to unhesitatingly stand against the sufferings of the Kashmiri people.

Here, it is important to point out last year's Kuala Lumpur summit which was co-hosted by Malaysia, Turkey and Iran. The aim was to find plausible solutions to the perplexities facing Muslims today. However, the summit was perceived as an affront and a direct challenge to the OIC. Due to Saudi pressure, Pakistan had to cancel its representation at the meeting at the eleventh hour. [\(3\)](#)

Qureshi's remarks, meant to be a cautious warning bell, horribly ricocheted and instead had

unwelcome repercussions for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia immediately demanded that \$1 billion of the \$3 billion loan it had given Pakistan in 2018, be returned. [\(4\)](#) The \$3.2 billion oil credit facility (also a part of the 2018 deal) has not been renewed since May. [\(5\)](#) The deteriorating situation also gave birth to rumours that Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif would soon be replacing Imran Khan under pressure from the Gulf countries. [\(6\)](#) Nevertheless, the fact that Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made no rescinding statement was an indication that Qureshi's remarks had the full backing of the government.

On 17 August, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Bajwa, visited Riyadh for what were purported to be routine visits regarding military ties and training exchanges. [\(7\)](#) Au contraire, it was believed that the main purpose was to even out the recent bump in relations. At the same time, Prime Minister Khan also dismissed rumours of any disparities between Islamabad and Riyadh. [\(8\)](#) His statement was reiterated by Qureshi on 31 August, during a meeting with the Saudi ambassador to Pakistan, where he stated that "Pakistan stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Kingdom." [\(9\)](#) Two days later, the OIC's Secretary General assured his organisation's commitment to the people of Kashmir. [\(10\)](#) The Saudi Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, and Energy Minister, Abdulaziz bin Salman, are anticipated to visit Pakistan soon. [\(11\)](#)

A complete breakup seems to have been averted for the time being at least.

### **Pakistani-Saudi Ties: A Briefer**

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have developed a close relationship throughout the decades, which, though initially premised on religion, has gradually taken on strategic and economic configurations as well. Over the years, the political leadership in Pakistan has also cultivated close links with the Saudi royals. The defence pact between the two countries in 1982, progressed into not only equipment procurements but included training and advisory roles as well. In 2018, the National Assembly of Pakistan was informed that as many as 1,671 Pakistani armed forces men have been deployed to Saudi Arabia. [\(12\)](#) The former Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal, famously said that the relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were "probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without any official treaty." [\(13\)](#)

In the economic domain, the huge influx of Pakistani workers to meet the Kingdom's labour needs during the 1970s, commenced the commercial relations between the two countries. All throughout their relations, Saudi Arabia has time and again come to Pakistan's support. In the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests, Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with 50,000 barrels of free oil every day for a year, to help Pakistanis cope with economic sanctions. More recent examples of Saudi bounteousness include \$6 billion in debt relief in 2018 [\(14\)](#) and \$20 billion in MoUs in various fields in 2019 [\(15\)](#) geared towards helping Pakistan avoid a complete economic collapse.

### Catalysts for conflict

It is common knowledge, that in the lead up to a breakup, there is a build-up of resentments which are the catalyst for eventual conflict. In 2015, due to domestic constraints, Pakistan refused to send its troops to partake in the Yemen war. This set off severe reprisals from the Saudis and Emiratis. [\(16\)](#) The following year, General Raheel Sharif was appointed [commander-in-chief](#) of the Islamic Military Alliance – a move which caused much affray and was alleged to be a means for appeasing the Gulf states.

The next year, in spite of pressure, Pakistan did not discount its relations in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis in June 2017. In fact, in the September of 2017, a Qatar-based maritime conglomerate launched a fast container service between Port Qasim (Pakistan) and Hamad Port (Qatar). [\(17\)](#) Another thorn in relations has been the growing cooperation of Pakistan and Turkey. Maritime collaboration has significantly increased and President Erdogan is keen for Turkey to take part in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. Moreover, Turkey has undauntedly condemned Indian actions in Kashmir. This has given rise to overwhelming Turkish sentiment within Pakistan.

For Pakistan, growing Saudi-Indian bonhomie is a major concern. In 2016, Prime Minister Modi was conferred the highest civilian honour, the King Abdulaziz Sash. In February 2019, in the backdrop of his visit to Pakistan, Bin Salman, signed \$100 billion in MoUs in India, which shows the greater opportunity cost Riyadh associates with New Delhi. [\(18\)](#) A month later, despite opposition from Pakistan, India's External Affairs Minister at that time, Sushma Swaraj, was invited to attend the OIC meeting. Supplementing these relations is the air tight India-Israel nexus premised on intelligence sharing, cyber security and recently business. In fact, India follows the Israeli script in its actions in Kashmir. Given the growing Israeli affability

amongst the Gulf states, and subsequent increase in US-Israeli say in Gulf affairs, Saudis cannot afford to openly criticise India even if it means railroading Pakistan in the process, which is why this has become a sore spot in Pakistani-Saudi relations.

The natural question is despite the increasing acrimony between the two countries, what is keeping them from completely decoupling?

Why does Pakistan need Saudi Arabia?

First and foremost, Pakistan relies heavily on the Kingdom for remittances which make up almost 86 percent [\(19\)](#) of Pakistan's foreign reserves. Out of this percentage, almost 30 percent comprise of inflows from Saudi Arabia. Before the coronavirus pandemic, there were more than 2.5 million Pakistani workers residing in Saudi Arabia. In addition to this, 60,000 Pakistanis were in the process of entering the Kingdom before lockdown measures were enforced. [\(20\)](#)

Secondly, Pakistan imports nearly 25 percent of its oil from Saudi Arabia. The provision of subsidised oil has been vital for Pakistan's economy over the years. Figures from 2019 show that out of the \$1.7 billion in bilateral trade between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, 74 percent was made up of oil imports. [\(21\)](#)

Additionally, the fact that Saudi Arabia has time and again supported Pakistan, both financially and without commercial interests cannot be denied. Instances include the provision of \$10 million in humanitarian aid during the Balochistan earthquake in 2005 and \$170 million for relief and rehabilitation operations during the 2010 and 2011 floods in Pakistan. [\(22\)](#) Therefore, Pakistan cannot disregard the fact that Saudi Arabia has always been there as a support in times of crisis.

From a religious standpoint, Saudi Arabia is revered by Muslims all over the world, owing to the fact that it is the home of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. In 2019, nearly 500,000 pilgrims from Pakistan performed umrah – the highest number from any country [\(23\)](#). In addition, with the exception of this year due to covid-19, an estimated 200,000 Pakistanis perform the annual pilgrimage, hajj, each year.

Lastly, despite it being mostly tokenism, there is no denying that Saudi Arabia's occasional iterations in support of Kashmiri Muslims has helped keep the issue alive even at the OIC, whilst it has been cold shouldered at many other forums.

### Why does Saudi Arabia need Pakistan?

Firstly, for the Kingdom, Pakistan is essential because of its appendage of troops and security advisors in accordance with the 1982 defence pact. Moreover, presently, Saudi Arabia's quest to develop its nuclear facilities is of utmost importance. For the nonce, Pakistan's nuclear competence guarantees the Kingdom deterrence against its enemies.

Secondly, the Saudi economy has borne a heavy brunt due to falling oil prices, the ongoing war in Yemen and the covid-19 pandemic. [\(24\)](#) Hajj revenues, which make up 20 percent of the Kingdom's non-oil revenue, took a big hit this year, since it was scaled down from the usual 2.5 million pilgrims to about 1,000 people. Now, more than ever, in accordance with Bin Salman's Vision 2030, the Kingdom needs to move away from oil dependence. In this regard, Pakistan can be critical, since it provides the Kingdom with cost-effective labour, an international market for its oil and foreign investment opportunities vis-à-vis CPEC.

Thirdly, Riyadh cannot afford to fracture relations with Islamabad because of its bete noire, and Pakistan's neighbour, Iran. This aspect has been underscored in recent times in light of talks of a potential \$400 billion [China-Iran Chabahar deal](#) which if implemented will ensure Iran's formal inclusion in the regional tapestry of China's Belt and Road Initiative. [\(25\)](#) The resulting economic benefits which Iran will reap is something arch-rival Saudi Arabia cannot bear.

In conjecture to the previous point, it is important to highlight the Kingdom's dependence on its ideological reach beyond the Arab world. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan had heralded Saudi influence in Pakistan's religious circles early on. In furtherance of its endeavour to counter Iranian influence, the Kingdom has been funding anti-Shia madrassas in Pakistan, the extensive nature of which was brought to light in a wiki leaks cable. [\(26\)](#) The September 2020 mass anti-Shia rallies in Karachi are also evidence of the depth of Saudi clout within the country. [\(27\)](#)

Fourthly, the recent rapprochement between many Arab states and Israel puts added

pressure on the Saudis to follow similar patterns (despite covert relations between the Saudis and Israelis). This is something it cannot afford to do this since the Kingdom's entire belief system is based on being the leader of the Muslim ummah and hence champion against atrocities being carried out against the Palestinians. Not to mention, despite on surface bonhomie, the Saudis have creviced relations with the majority of the Muslim states. Hence, it cannot afford to push Pakistan away at this point without completely isolating itself in the process.

## Going Forward

Realism dictates that a clean break in relations in a globalised world order is not within the realms of possibility. The most that can be achieved is a dramatic downgrading of ties. Currently, both sides cannot afford any form of immediate disconnect, in the short to medium term; hence, they will adhere to the norms of caution and compromise.

However, in the long term, there will be a shift in Pakistani-Saudi ties towards a more economic oriented relationship. Analysts have already pointed out that there is a strong probability that Egypt has supplanted Pakistan as Saudi Arabia's main sponsor for both internal and regional security. This thought process is bolstered by the fact that the leadership in Pakistan has not invested in cultivating personal relationships with the new generation of the Saud leadership. All this time India has been projecting its soft power into enticing the Saudis to look upon India favourably, completely disregarding the atrocities Prime Minister Modi is commandeering against Muslims.

Concurrently, Riyadh's constant rebuffing of Pakistan or threatening the latter with dire consequences after every disagreement will soon or later scorn Islamabad towards other countries, which although might not be economically at par with the Kingdom would nonetheless respond to Pakistan on a much more equitable and respectable footing.

To put it briefly, while it is clear that moving forward is presently the only option available for both sides, there is no doubt that the previous blind reliance has now been replaced with a sense of contractual convenience.

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