

Report

Pakistan and the Saudi-led anti-terror coalition: Regional implications for the appointment of Gen. Raheel

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Saudi forms Islamic anti-'terrorist' coalition [AP]

Abstract

Since its formation in 2015, few operational details have been released about the Saudi-led anti-terror coalition—the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI). In the coming months, Riyadh plans to host a ministerial-level meeting of member states to sharpen the focus of IMAFI's mission.⁽¹⁾ However, one critical development has already been made public: Pakistan's former army chief of staff General Raheel Sharif has been appointed as IMAFI's founding commander-in-chief. Gen. Raheel's appointment coincides with planned deployment of 5,000 Pakistani soldiers to guard Saudi Arabia's southern border.

This paper explores the domestic and regional politics behind Gen. Raheel's appointment and Pakistan's participation in IMAFI.

Formation of a new military alliance

In December 2015, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told media in Paris, "It is time that the Islamic world take a stand, and they have done that by creating a coalition to push back and confront the terrorists and those who promote their violent ideologies."⁽²⁾

The joint operations center to coordinate counter-terror efforts is to set to be based in Jeddah and the member-states would target "any terrorist organization, not just ISIL, in countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan." The Saudi foreign minister also noted that all operations would be carried out in accordance with local laws and in cooperation with the international community. Thus, operations won't require any new national legislation, and cooperation with the international community can be understood as an extension of existing intelligence sharing channels. The original announcement caught some member off-guard, but since 2015 the number of member states has

grown from 34 to 41, with initially reluctant countries like Oman and Pakistan eventually joining.(3) Nonetheless, IMAFT's operational blueprint remains vague.

The impetus for IMAFT developed at the end of the Obama administration as the US's traditional Middle Eastern allies became concerned that America was increasingly reluctant to act forcefully in regional conflicts. However, after the formation of IMAFT the US offered a note of support. Ashton Carter, then US Secretary of Defense, reacted with cautious optimism on a visit to Turkey: "It appears [IMAFT] is very much in line with something we've been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISIL by Sunni Arab countries."(4)

In addition to rising threats from terror groups, IMAFT was formed against a backdrop of assertive postures in the region by revanchist states like Russia and Iran. Many observers view the creation of IMAFT as mechanism to consolidate Saudi-aligned military power in the face of Iranian ascendancy. Indeed, IMAFT was announced during the final stage of the internationally brokered Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action(5) to halt Iran's nuclear program—a deal that Riyadh worries could reorder regional power dynamics.

On the ground, the Middle East and North Africa region has become increasingly embroiled in conflict as various non-state actors fight for local control, often at the behest of outside states seeking geopolitical and ideological influence. The results are horrific: the Syrian civil war has claimed half a million lives and displaced over five million; Libya remains war-torn by rival factions; Yemen is succumbing to a full-blown insurgency and counter-insurgency; and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL) still controls many areas and reaches many more through toxic propaganda. The need for a military alliance is clear, but it is yet to be seen if IMAFT will coalesce into an effective fighting alliance.

Predictably, the military bloc has met with stiff challenges as it takes shape. While the number of participating nations has increased, opposition has also intensified. The complex regional politics of IMAFT membership is most evident in Pakistan, which despite the government's public commitment to fight terror has faced intense criticism for drifting the country toward larger sectarian conflict.(6)

Pakistan's balancing act

Pakistan's membership in IMAFT has been a contentious issue in domestic politics, and the appointment of Gen. Raheel stirred immediate controversy. Opposition to Raheel's new role was galvanized by a set of overtly pro-Iranian and anti-Arab politicians and pundits who support Bashar al-Assad in Syria and remain sympathetic towards Houthi militancy in Yemen. These Pakistani pressure groups express their demands as pleas for "neutrality" in the Saudi-Iran rivalry.

The Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf, both openly pro-Iran, were responsible for blocking Islamabad from fulfilling the Saudi request for troops in Yemen. Succumbing to opposition pressure following five days of heated debate, a parliamentary resolution advised the government to refrain from assisting Saudi Arabia militarily and "maintain neutrality in the conflict so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis".⁽⁷⁾ However, the parliamentary act did not specifically bar Islamabad from involving itself militarily at any point.⁽⁸⁾

Presently, opposition groups advance the notion of "neutrality" contained in the parliamentary resolution on Yemen in their attempt not only to block General Raheel's role as commander-in-chief of IMAFT but also to revoke Pakistan's very membership of the bloc.⁽⁹⁾

Though Shia constitute less than ten percent of Pakistan's population, the community has gained political influence over recent decades and especially since Gen. Pervez Musharraf's takeover of the government in October 1999.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, Iran has effectively exercised soft power with its neighbor by reaching out to likeminded politicians and influencing civil society, academia, and think tanks. In recent years, the Shia community has become more forcefully engaged in regional conflicts. Hundreds of Pakistanis have been recruited to fight along Assad's forces in Syria in recent years, but the issue has received neither parliamentary debate nor attention in the mainstream media.⁽¹¹⁾

The notion of neutrality

The question remains: can Pakistan step outside of its many historical, regional entanglements and plausibly claim a stance of neutrality?

Switzerland—the paradigm of neutrality—describes neutrality as the position of a third-party state during a war between two or more other states. "Neutrality is thus defined in relation to tensions and military conflicts, i.e. in relation to basic forms of insecurity. It is essentially in this context that it has a function as a foreign and security policy maxim."⁽¹²⁾

Prior to IMAFT, the position of neutrality has rarely been invoked in Pakistani politics. In 2003 India and Iran signed a defense agreement whose details were never made public.⁽¹³⁾ More recently, Iran's Chabahar port, which is less than 100 km from Pakistan's Gwadar port, has been leased to India. The question of Iran's neutrality in the Pakistan-India conflict was never raised. Similarly, Pakistan's close ally China has been in advanced negotiations with Iran to export tanks, refine its drone systems, and assist in missile technology.⁽¹⁴⁾ The doctrine of neutrality was never invoked with Beijing

either. At the same time, Saudi Arabia last year accorded its highest award to India's premier Narendra Modi, whose role in deadly 2002 Gujarat riots and antagonistic posture towards Pakistan are well known.⁽¹⁵⁾ In none of these cases did the chorus of pundits demand these states remain neutral in regional conflicts as each pursued its respective national interest.

Rather than accept a false notion of neutrality, IMAFT presents an opportunity to advance Pakistan's footing in the region. Pakistan, which has a longstanding dispute with India over Jammu and Kashmir since 1948, and lost its eastern province (Bangladesh) in part due to Delhi's support of secessionist militants in 1971, now faces conservative Hindu Prime Minister Narendra Modi's threat of diplomatic isolation. The prestigious role for Gen. Raheel as commander of IMAFT is a counterbalance to India's posture. Besides fighting terrorism and extremism, Pakistan sees IMAFT as an opportunity to frustrate Modi's bid of diplomatic isolation.

Iran-Pakistan relations

Since 1947, the relationship between Iran and Pakistan has seen many highs and lows. Iran was among the first countries to recognize Pakistani sovereignty and Reza Shah Pahlavi was the first head of state to visit the newly formed country in March 1950. With no dispute over border demarcation, both neighbors became signatories to key security pacts of the Western bloc. During the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971, Iran extended unequivocal support to the later, condemning Delhi for aggression while providing vital medical and oil supplies as well as purchasing fighter jets from West Germany for Pakistan during the US embargo.⁽¹⁶⁾ Additionally, Tehran provided free fuel to the Pakistan Air Force as well as landing bases away from the enemy attack.

In 1977, amid civil turmoil, Chief of Army Staff General Zia-ul-Haq led a coup and arrested Prime Minister Bhutto and several members of his top leadership. Though the Shah of Iran had recognized Islamabad's new military ruler, the Islamist political party Jamaat-i-Islami encouraged Gen. Zia to reach out to Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978. After assessing the situation in Iran, Gen. Zia sent federal minister and Jamaat-i-Islami ideologue Professor Khurshid Ahmad to meet with the popular Iranian cleric in January 1979.⁽¹⁷⁾

The ensuing bloody revolution in Tehran and Ayatollah Khomeini's harsh tone towards the US and its allies shocked Islamabad. Within weeks after Khomeini's takeover, the Pakistani Shia community founded Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafria (Movement for Imposition of Shia Jurisprudence) in Punjab. On the eve of the Persian New Year, Khomeini spelled out his vision to export the revolution across the world.

"We should try hard to export our revolution to the world, and should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed people of the world."⁽¹⁸⁾

As early as March 1979, Pakistan made its first attempt to steady relations with Iran and secure itself from the threat of a spreading revolution. Gen. Zia sent Foreign Minister Agha Shahi to call on Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian cleric often urged the visiting Pakistanis to "get rid of Zia" but also called him Zia the Hero.⁽¹⁹⁾ Islamabad had no qualms about friendship with Tehran.

The increasing threat from the Soviet presence in Afghanistan brought Islamabad closer to Washington, much to the annoyance of the Iranian leader. Meanwhile, Islamabad's efforts to secure the release of American embassy hostages remained fruitless due to Iran's rigid attitude.

Meanwhile, India succeeded in reaching out to Tehran through influential Shia figures, inching closer to Tehran's new regime. Iran and India formed a joint defense commission in 1983, forming the basis for bilateral military ties.⁽²⁰⁾ At the same time, Pakistan gave Iran access to its Karachi port—secure from Iraqi air and naval attacks—during its war with Saddam Hussein's regime despite opposition from friendly Arab states.⁽²¹⁾

Despite the ups and downs of the Pakistani-Iranian relationship, Pakistan's embassy in Washington has been handling Iranian affairs since March 1992 (after Algeria refused to continue the service).⁽²²⁾

After the Soviet withdrawal, Iran and Pakistan pursued cross-purposes in Afghanistan. Iran supported the secessionist Afghani Northern Alliance while Pakistan backed ethnic Sunni Pashtuns, who had borne the brunt of the campaign against the foreign troops.⁽²³⁾ This proxy war had bitter results for the region. The 1990s marked the worst period for sectarian violence in Pakistan⁽²⁴⁾ and a destructive civil war in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Iran deepened its military cooperation with India in 1993 by seeking help to develop new batteries for three Russia-made Kilo-class submarines. The Rafsanjani government's pursuit of closer ties with India stemmed from the clash of interests with Pakistan in Afghanistan. The lowest point arrived a decade later when Iran's President Khatami attended the Republic Day parade in New Delhi and the two countries signed a top-secret defense pact, which was a follow-up of a memorandum signed in 2001. Jane's Defense Weekly reported that the Indo-Iran "pact had shifted the strategic balance" as it not only had implications for Pakistan but Arab nations too.

Over the years, Pakistan-Iran relations have been marred by varying degrees of mistrust as Iran continued making inroads through likeminded elements in Pakistan. The coziest period of Pakistan-Iran ties was during 2008 to 2013 when the government led by Asif Ali Zardari nearly abandoned Riyadh and other Arab allies. In Pakistan, Zardari remains the most pro-Iran leader.⁽²⁵⁾ He is criticized for accepting an outrageously high rate for pipeline gas imports in March 2013, which critics termed an “economic death sentence”.⁽²⁶⁾

Despite the above, Iran enjoys a generally favorable image with the Pakistani public,⁽²⁷⁾ mainly due to its anti-US and anti-Israel posturing, which strikes a chord with many Pakistanis. Additionally, Tehran has cultivated inroads in political circles, media, and among left-leaning intellectuals to build upon its natural constituency in the Shia community.

Saudi-Pakistan relations

Relations between the Saudi leadership and the Pakistan Movement began in April 1940 when the All-India Muslim League leaders in Bombay and Karachi welcomed Crown Prince Saud bin Abdul Aziz. The crown prince and his five brothers, Faisal, Saad, Fahd, Mansoor, and Abdullah spent several days meeting with the Muslim leadership.⁽²⁸⁾

On the instruction of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Abul Hassan Isphani along with Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz went to the United Nations in 1946 to meet with international diplomats and discuss the plight of Muslims of India and their desire for a sovereign country independent from British rule. Prince Faisal Ibn Abdul Aziz personally introduced the Pakistan Movement members to other delegates.

Bilateral relations were established immediately following Pakistan’s independence, and Saudi Arabia’s King Saud laid the foundation stone of Saudabad, a township named after him in Karachi, on his maiden tour in 1954.⁽²⁹⁾ In the years to come, Pakistan would name a key Karachi artery and a vital airbase after the Saudi royal family—the government even renamed the Punjabi city Layallpur as Faisalabad.

Saudi-Pakistani military cooperation began under the reign of King Faisal. Pakistan’s Air Force trained Saudi pilots and helped the country develop a modern air force. The Royal Saudi Air Force’s supersonic jets were piloted by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) during the campaign against South Yemeni militants in 1969.⁽³⁰⁾ The PAF’s domination of the skies during the 1965 war with India earned it widespread respect.

Three years after the 1965 war with India, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi Minister of Defense and Aviation, visited Pakistan to sign a bilateral defense agreement. After India detonated a nuclear device in 1974, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s

sought Saudi financial assistance to start the country's atomic program. Various veteran aides of Bhutto have claimed that \$500 million—equal to \$2.5 billion today—was solicited for this project from Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Iraq.(31)

All along, both shared a similar approach to regional and international issues. Pakistan's commandoes were instrumental along with Saudi and French troops in ending the two-week siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979.(32)

Extending the 1968 security pact, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed another military protocol in December 1982 that provided for Pakistan supplying troops to Riyadh upon request.(33) The arrangement was formalized and the practice continued for decades. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Pakistani military was stationed and deployed around key Saudi installations. With the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan was faced with multiple challenges and dilemmas. On the one hand, its western border was vulnerable to Soviet invasion while on the other, the exodus of Afghan refugees was overwhelming Pakistani cities. International financial assistance began in 1980, and sizeable military support for the Afghan mujahedeen began in 1983.(34)

The testing of nuclear weapons in May 1998 opened Pakistan to severe Western military, economic, and technological sanctions. Riyadh provided one-sixth of Pakistan's total oil imports free for one year, amounting to 50,000 barrels per day. Over a year later, Riyadh mediated discussions with military ruler General Pervez Musharraf to pardon and exile ousted premier Nawaz Sharif. The military dictator obliged and the Sharif family resided in Saudi Arabia until 2007.

The Saudi-Pakistani connection exists not only at the leadership level. More than three million Pakistani citizens reside in Saudi Arabia, and these workers sent home approximately \$6 billion in remittances in 2016.(35) Both countries share similar views on many regional flashpoints, be it Palestine or Kashmir. Though Pakistan did not send troops to Yemen, the Saudi leadership did not express public displeasure, unlike the United Arab Emirates.(36)

Conclusions

The controversy that surrounds the appointment of General Raheel to lead IMAFT speaks volumes about the difference that Pakistan's participation can make in the coalition.

Critics have repeatedly expressed concern for Iranian security without considering Pakistan's perspective. The Iranian government has also openly expressed its reservations.(37) But Islamabad has tried to offer reassurances to Tehran, consistently maintaining that the coalition is not aimed at any particular country but at terrorism itself.(38)

Unlike its relations with Saudi Arabia since 1947 or with Iran during the reign of the Shah, Pakistan has not enjoyed peaceful ties with its southwestern neighbor, India. Owing to security threats from India and volatility in Afghanistan, Pakistan still wishes to appease Iran, by providing occasional access to ports and cooperating with multilateral organizations such as Economic Cooperation Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Developing-8. Terrorist attacks against Shia communities in Pakistan, UN sanctions relating to Iran's nuclear program, and hardliners within Iran have been largely responsible for stymied relations with Islamabad. In recent years, Iran has been overly reliant on Pakistan's Shia population, which has a greater presence on social media platforms. Tehran's clout can be seen in its expanding influence in the parliament as well as media, two arenas the Saudis have never cared to exploit.

Iran could not succeed in undoing General Raheel's appointment but it offered tough resistance. Tehran's diminished economic and military clout undercuts its need to create a buffer zone on its southeastern flank by neutralizing Saudi influence. Tehran's recruitment of Shia youth to fight alongside the Assad regime in Syria has alarmed the public to an extent. At the end of the day, Islamabad would lose more by opting out of the military alliance than it would gain from Tehran.

Beyond the important economic and religious connections, Pakistan has close ties with the Saudi military. These ties range from young Saudi cadets receiving training in Pakistan to close connections among the top brass. After Pakistan rejected calls to send fighters to Yemen, Riyadh revisited its relationship with Islamabad.

Setting aside the implausible notion of neutrality in Pakistan's complex regional setting, Islamabad sees enormous opportunity for diplomatic leverage over India with General Raheel heading the bloc. Intelligence sharing lies at the heart of counter-terror operations, thus the IMAFT brings Pakistan's spy agencies closer with other member nations.

General Raheel has the requisite experience of fighting terrorist organizations—al-Qaeda and the Taliban—while they received support from outside states. Given the Saudi resolve to set the alliance in motion this year, it's apparent that the kingdom is ready to address its financial necessities. Eventually, a formula to pool finances as well as military hardware will have to be worked out to make IMAFT sustainable.

Many other questions remain. Will there be a standing multinational military force? How much political support will the other member-states contribute and for how long? Tussles are likely to emerge if countries like the UAE, Turkey, or Egypt find the alliance being dominated by Saudi Arabia. Gen. Raheel will face his own set of difficulties. His previous

command was at the helm of a fully functioning military machine. In Jeddah, he has to erect or evolve a force with limited time and resources, drawing soldiers from a variety of cultures, nationalities, and levels of professional experience.

The North Thunder military exercise held in February 2016 offered a glimpse into the capabilities of the militaries of 21 nations. More exercises like this must be carried out to strengthen IMAFT into an effective combat force.

Yet another variable is the global balance of power. If revanchist states like Russia and Iran continue their policies of disruption, a greater deterrent will be expected from the alliance. The Houthis' evolution from a political opposition to a highly equipped militia has had devastating implications for the region as well as Yemen itself. Once the war in Yemen is over, the next major task will be reorganizing, training, and equipping Yemen's armed forces. It is possible that Bahrian's suppressed opposition could also evolve into an insurgency. The coalition command center must strengthen the counter-terror and counter-insurgency preparedness of Bahraini armed forces. The alliance appears to be inherently defensive, aimed at preserving the status quo. And an over-reliance on military rather than political solutions—in places like Bahrain—could create more problems than it solves.

Firepower alone is never enough to win an asymmetrical war or address underlying political and economic grievances. The coalition requires robust diplomatic support, strategies to support good governance, and a persuasive counter-terror narrative. IMAFT will leave much to be desired if its focus remains limited to military and intelligence matters.

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