

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Military-Ideological Dependency: Can Pakistan Afford to Loose the Middle East?

Ayesha Siddiq

In late 2015 Pakistan refused to commit its troops for Saudi Arabia's conflict in Yemen resulting in a reaction from Riyadh. Indeed the new Saudi king was unhappy and disappointed at being turned down by a country that the Kingdom has looked upon as one of the sources for providing security. This development raised a lot of eyebrows inside and outside Pakistan. One of the questions asked outside the country was that did it indicate that Islamabad could de-link itself from its traditional linkage bordering on dependency on Riyadh? And indeed is that possible since, as it is popularly believed that both Islamic states are tied in an ideological relationship in which Riyadh's Wahabism has influenced evolution of Pakistan's both state and society. The liberal elements in Pakistan indeed tend to look at its internal radicalism as an extension of or caused by Saudi ideological expansionist designs. Not to mention the fact that for decades Riyadh has assisted Pakistan and served as a clearing house for the latter's internal political squabbles. Political leaders desiring solutions often head to the Kingdom under the excuse of performing religious rites. The Saudi military dependency on Pakistan is equally essential in defining these bilateral ties.

But this is not an issue of Saudi Arabia alone since Pakistan has developed ties with other Arab states of the Persian Gulf that is Qatar and UAE. Many believe that the relationship is not just due to the nature of linkage built between states but is defined by personal ties between the leadership.

However, as I will argue in this paper that despite issues of Islamic identity, which is critical for Pakistan, its relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states does not reflect a kind of policymaking lobby that is ready to bear a high cost for these ties, at least not in the short term and for issues considered by Islamabad of being of a tactical nature. This does not mean that Pakistan is ready to break its links with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha but that it will not sacrifice its own strategic interests for the Muslim brethren states. For a mix of military strategic, internal security and economic reasons Pakistan views its relations with this part of the Middle East as something that ought to be conducted more tactfully than in the past. In any case, the links with Riyadh or Persian Gulf Arab states this is more of a triangular relationship in which other states such as the US have played a greater role. In the future, both the US and China will have a greater influence.

One of my core arguments is that despite the perception, Pakistan's relationship with the Middle East, especially the Arab world is less clearly defined, and is, in fact, an untested linkage. A secondary argument is that the immediate crisis in the bilateral linkage should also not be viewed as signifying a complete shift in policy. After all, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have played a major role in penetrating Pakistan's society for decades by supporting Pan-Islamic jihadi organizations and ideology. Some of these institutions remain central to Pakistan's military establishment and its larger quest for finding a strategic balance vis-à-vis India. It is this influence that needs to be evaluated and challenged.

Defining the Relationship

An average Pakistani has grown with the perception of Middle East being central to the state's imagination. The school curriculum and historical narrative

builds on Pakistan as a Muslim country in South Asia struggling not only against a ‘Hindu’ India but also for the security and betterment of the entire Muslim *ummah* (nation). Its policymakers and governments felt duty bound to support freedom movements like in Kashmir and Palestine. Resultantly, it did not establish links with Israel. Despite Islamabad’s secret liaisons with Tel Aviv even during the government of General Zia-ul-Haq, who is otherwise notorious for Islamizing the state, officially Pakistan does not recognize Israel.

Military & Strategic Value

The state and its military consciously developed a reputation as a defender of Islam and other Islamic states which primarily meant protecting countries like Saudi Arabia against threat from Israel. In 1951 the country’s first Prime Minister Liaquat stated that:

"We have not created Pakistan to spread some more colour on the map of the world, but to serve Islam and Muslims and strengthen the bonds of World Muslim Unity".¹

This speech was made at a conference in which a resolution was moved by the then grand mufti of Palestine declaring that aggression against any Muslim state must be treated as an aggression against the entire Muslim World. The historical and ideological connotations make the idea of Pakistan defending Islamic states against an ‘outside’ threat sellable amongst its own population. Therefore, during the 1973 Yom Kippur war the political government in Pakistan then had said that: “ an attack on the Arab world is like an attack on Pakistan”² suggesting that security of countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria was equally critical for Islamabad. However, this was more of a political statement by a populist leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan’s first

¹ Mujtaba Rizvi, “Pak-Saudi Arabian Relations: An Example of Entente Cordiale”. In Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 34, No. 1, The Inter-Relation of Muslim States and Pakistan (First Quarter 1981). P. 82.

² Ibid., P. 85.

popularly elected prime minister who had built a reputation of a leader of the Muslim world. But the fact of the matter is that for Pakistan there has always been a 'near' Arab and the 'far' Arab. This is not a geographic divide but divides the Arab Middle East into these two categories on the basis of their significance for Pakistan. The near includes Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf states and Libya while Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and others are part of the later category. Libya, for instance, which provided funds to buy yellowcake for weapon grade uranium enrichment is considered a significant player with whom Pakistan also shared its uranium enrichment design during the 1990s. However, the most central out of the 'near' Arab is Saudi Arabia. Although independent of Riyadh, most Persian Gulf Arab states are politically an extension of Saudi Arabia and its ideological framework, if not entirely the same political perspective. As mentioned earlier, threat to the 'near' Middle East was defined in terms of Israel. Thus, Pakistan was perceived by these Arab states as willing to use its military and nuclear capabilities to defend the Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia which had additional significance because of the two most important holy sites for Muslims situated in its territory. The Pakistani military had no problem rushing to Riyadh's help in November 1979 during the siege of Mecca. The popular myth in Pakistan is that it was Pakistan Army that rescued Mecca from the militants. Such an impression seems to have been encouraged by Riyadh due to political reservations regarding publicizing the French military's involvement in the operation.

Islamabad never discouraged Saudi Arabia from thinking that Pakistan's nuclear program would be used in Riyadh's defence. Soon after the atomic tests in the summer of 1998, the then Saudi crown prince Sultan was the only foreign dignitary taken around on a tour of the nuclear enrichment facility at Kahuta. Whatever

impression it may have created amongst the Saudi royalty, from Pakistani government's perspective this was necessary to plead for financial help. Indeed, Saudi Arabia pledged 50,000 barrels of oil per day at concessional rates. However, there is a lot of ambiguity regarding how Pakistan would use its nuclear arsenal in defense of the Middle East. Despite popular perception fuelled by Pakistan that its nuclear weapon was an 'Islamic bomb', analysts like Frank Barnaby believed that the country's non-conventional defence was meant for its own security. Despite Pakistan's general sympathy with the Palestine issue and emotional closeness with the Arab world, the reality is that such sympathy did not deter the country and its military officers like the former army chief (late) General Zia-ul-Haq, who was then a brigadier posted in Jordan, from planning the black September operation and killing over three thousand civilians. Furthermore, while Israel always perceived as a threat, an actual war involving Saudi Arabia always appeared as an imagined probability that might not have materialized in a war where Pakistan would have to use its military power to protect the kingdom. One of the few times that Islamabad actively engaged in a Saudi military operation in Riyadh's neighborhood refers to the 1969 operation against North Yemen rebels in which the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) pilots flew British aircraft to attack the Yemeni rebels then. Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s Pakistan helped Oman in fighting left-wing insurgency. Pakistan was instrumental in establishing and training a number of armed forces in this Arab region starting from Saudi Arabia and UAE to Qatar. Officers from these countries are some of the regular victors to military training academies in Pakistan. During the 1970s and the 1980s about 15,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia for its defence. This presence came in handy in obfuscating the reality of military operation during the siege of Mecca in 1979 in which French military officers played a determining factor.

The popular myth amongst both Pakistanis and Saudis is that it were Pakistan's armed forces that secured the holy site of Kaaba. This was the most convenient option considering that Riyadh could not publicly disclose involvement of a non-Muslim military. However, there is more to this military engagement. Pakistan has been of great interest to the near Arab world primarily due to its nuclear capability and the fact that it has a professional military. Saudi Arabia, according to American scholar Jonah Blank, is Saudi Arabia's 'wild card'³ a notion that certainly explains a peculiar perception of how central is Islamabad to Riyadh's thinking in terms of its security. It was during the 1970s that Arab states like Libya and Saudi Arabia invested in Pakistan's nuclear program, which it was believed would protect it from external threat.

Referring to supply of nuclear weapons or technology, thus far, Islamabad Pakistan transferred nuclear technology and know-how to North Korea, Libya and Iran. However, given the ignominy that it faced in backdrop of being part of the supply chain to such countries, it is not likely that Pakistan would take the risk of supplying Saudi Arabia or any other state. Both Islamabad and Rawalpindi (the latter refers to the army headquarters which is the primary political actor) have become sensitive to the need for being accepted as a responsible nuclear weapons state. Interestingly, there is no analysis on Riyadh's reaction to Pakistan sharing some nuclear technical know-how with Iran. Any discussion between the two states remains a secret.

This is not to argue that Pakistan's role in Middle Eastern security was totally benign. However, it is based on convergence of certain interests, which from Pakistan's end have a greater economic and financial angle. For instance, in 2011

³ Jonah Blank, "What Pakistan and Saudi Arabia want from Each other". In <http://www.rand.org/blog/2015/06/what-pakistan-and-saudi-arabia-want-from-each-other.html>

Pakistan's military used its private security firms to recruit retired officials to work in Bahrain to quell the Shiite rebellion in the gulf. This was viewed as a moneymaking venture rather than an action that may pose a direct threat to Pakistan's internal security. It is worth noting that Saudi Arabia's current war against rebels from Yemen cannot be treated simply as a reason to earn a few extra dollars. One of the reasons pertains to rising complexities of Pakistan's internal security. The threat of a possible Sunni-Shia conflict in the country where about 21 percent of the total 97 percent Muslim population is Shia and the rest Sunni, the threat of a Saudi-Iran rivalry playing out is a nightmare. Up until now, the country has lived through years of Sunni-Shia conflict that started during the 1950s but increased in violence particularly after the 1980s. It was during the decade of the 1980s that the state and its intelligence agencies in collusion with the US CIA and Saudi intelligence encouraged those particular schools of thought that historically were averse to Shiite and challenged their religious ideology. However, the ideological disagreement came to fore as a result of the perception about Shiite strengthening and confidence gained from the Iranian revolution in early 1979. Even the military government in Pakistan of General Zia-ul-Haq was uncomfortable by the Shiite population and so encouraged Sunni militancy to grow. Subsequently, there was a lot of bloodshed such as target killing of Shiite medical doctors in Karachi in 1998. This killing was tolerated until the state decided to launch a battle against dangerous militants in the wake of the school attack in December 2014. A lot of these militants conducted sectarian violence as well. The attack on a school in Peshawar resulted in greater effort by Pakistan and its armed forces to fight Talibaan and some selected Deobandi militant groups that specifically target Shiite. Therefore, it is feared that participating in Syria or the Saudi war against

Yemen may result in starting an internal war in Pakistan which it would not be able to stop, and it may have damaging consequences.

Despite these differences, Pakistan continues to have limited number of military personnel in Saudi Arabia who are used for training purposes. During 1980s and later after the US attack on Iraq in 1991, the figure was around 15,000.⁴ Reportedly, this is the kind of commitment which the Saudis demand from Pakistan. However, given that Islamabad needs forces both on Eastern and Western fronts, it is difficult to part with more than a thousand personnel. Notwithstanding the disagreement regarding not participating in operation in Yemen, the existing contingent will remain. There is no sign of a clean divorce. Pakistan continues to be committed to any threat to the holy sites. Resultantly, the Saudi royalty rebuffed any speculation in Indian and Pakistan's media regarding possibility of Riyadh switching dependence upon from Islamabad to New Delhi. Reportedly, in August 2015 Saudi Arabia declined India's offer of a defense pact saying that Pakistan came first.⁵ The fear of India being given greater significance remains there which may be one of the reasons that both Pakistan's army chief and prime minister continue to appease Riyadh and assure it of primacy of Saudi security for Islamabad.

Furthermore, Islamabad needs Saudi and Qatari help and soft intervention to negotiate a settlement for the Taliban. In February, 2016 army chief General Raheel Shareef visited Doha to discuss the peace process in Afghanistan.⁶ There is a joint Pak-Saudi interest in securing Afghanistan according to their respective strategic goals. This means to limit Iranian and Indian intervention and influence, and to ensure that Kabul or the Afghan population in general is sympathetic to Saudi version of

⁴ Arif Rafiq, "The Dangerous, Delicate Saudi-Pakistan Alliance". In Foreign Policy, 01/04/2015.

⁵ Mian Abrar, "Pakistan First, Saudis Tell India". In Pakistan Today, 26/08/2015.

⁶ Tahir Khan, "Army Chief, Qatari Leadership Discuss Afghan Peace Process". In The Express Tribune, 22/02/2016.

Islam and Pakistan's military interests. In the past few years, Riyadh's help was sought to intervene with various militant leaders as well. However, there is also an understanding that such intervention comes with a price. There are issues of Saudi intervention which run counter to Pakistan's state control. Therefore, during the previous PPP government (2008-2013), the Kingdom was quietly asked to withdraw its ambassador who was caught in the act of providing funds to different militant leaders.⁷ But such behavior was never reported in the media. It is now that there is some opening in terms of reproducing news about Saudi royalty in newspapers. Moreover, relations during the PPP government were relatively sour.⁸

The Economic Dimension

People in Pakistan's media are generally flabbergasted by absence of a clear policy on whether Islamabad wants to militarily help Riyadh since the country has accepted to be part of the 34-states Saudi military coalition. However, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's advisor on foreign relations, who is considered as de facto foreign minister, Sirtaj Aziz spoke in the Parliament during the second week of February 2016 stating that Islamabad was still clueless about its role in the coalition.⁹ Such confusion reflects ambiguity that is strategically an option adopted by Pakistan to secure or not compromise its diverse interests.

It is indeed a fact that the ruling elite feels dependent upon the Saudis at least financially. There is almost a conscious myth building regarding financial dependence upon the Kingdom which has three dimensions. First, there is financial support provided officially to the government. Reportedly, in 1943 King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud

⁷ Ayesha Siddiqa, "Pak-Saudi Relations: Friends or Masters?" In Newslines, 29/04/2014".

⁸ <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Asia/Pakistan/Publications/Emerging-dynamics-in-Pakistani-Saudi-relations>

⁹ Riazul Haq, "Pakistan still clueless about role in Saudi coalition". In The Express Tribune, 18/02/2016.

gave 16000 pounds sterling to the Muslim League, the party which made Pakistan, even before creation of the country to help Muslims in Bengal.¹⁰ Riyadh started to help Pakistan more consistently after the 1960s when it discovered its oil wealth. More recently in 2013 it loaned the new government of Mian Nawaz Sharif US \$ 1.5 billion at a time when Islamabad was in dire need of resources. Moreover, it was termed as a gift.¹¹ However, a lot of this financial dependency, which is indeed one of the arguments made for Pakistan's dependence on Saudi Arabia, is worth questioning. It has been far less what others have given. For instance, during the 2010 floods in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia pledged US \$ 44 million which was half of what the US committed and less than US \$ 50 million promised by the UK. Saudi financial aid to the government is still considered important because of its availability at the time of crisis. In May 1998, for example, Riyadh promised to provide 50,000 barrels of oil per day to offset challenges due to American sanctions after Pakistan's atomic tests.

Second, the mainstay of this financial dependency is linked with remittances from the approximately 2.2 million Pakistanis in the Kingdom.¹² The remittances for FY-2014/15 were \$5.6 billion which is 1/3rd of total for that year. According to the American Middle East Center, in 2013 remittances from Saudi Arabia grew by a 10 years compound annual growth rate of 24% and reached \$ 3.8 billion.¹³ In fact, contrary to the argument that Pakistan will not be able to delink itself from Saudi Arabia due to economic reasons may be incorrect considering that since General Musharraf's era, the Saudi financial investment in Pakistan has declined.

¹⁰ Mujtaba Rizvi, "Pak-Saudi Arabian Relations: An Example of Entente Cordiale". In Pakistan Horizon, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1981). P. 82.

¹¹ Arif Rafiq, "The Dangerous, Delicate Saudi-Pakistan Alliance". In Foreign Policy, 01/04/2015.

¹² Shah Faisal Kakar, "KSA-Pakistan Ties Touch New Heights". In Arab News, 14/08/2015.

¹³ Marvin Weinbaum and Abdullah B. Khurram, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence". In the Middle East Journal, M VOL 68, No. 2, Spring 2014. P. 219.

Third, there are personal connections between Pakistan's military and political leadership and the Arab world, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Sources talk about Nawaz Sharif's personal business interests in Saudi Arabia that started mainly during the ten years of exile he spent in the Kingdom. But a lot of the country's elite has systematically invested in the Gulf Arab states. According to the land revenue department of Dubai, for instance, Pakistanis invested over US \$ 2 billion in 2015 alone.¹⁴ The estimated investment from Pakistan in Dubai's property market in the last three years exceeds US \$ 6.6 billion.¹⁵ The transfer of black money abroad for the purpose of whitening it, re-investment or securing it by the powerful and the elite is an old story. This also means that the interests of the elite are tied to keeping the Saudi and Gulf royals happy. Not surprisingly, Islamabad pleaded before its own Supreme Court to allow Arab royalty to hunt hubara bustards which was additionally declared as "cornerstone of foreign policy".¹⁶

The Political Dependency

The economic dependency of the political and military elite is not limited to money matters but extends to the extensive role played by Arab royalty and leadership in political negotiations in Pakistan. The most recent example of this pertains to Saudi Arabia bailing out both the army chief and then President Pervez Musharraf and the present Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was then in jail after being sacked in October 1999. The secret agreement between Sharif and Musharraf allowed the former and his family to be exiled for a period of ten years to Saudi Arabia.

¹⁴ https://twitter.com/Asad_Umar/status/703064357454913536

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/Asad_Umar/status/703065199587291136. See also, Rohma Sadaqat, "Indians, Pakistanis Top Lists for Dubai Properties". In *Khaleej Times*, 09/09/2015.

¹⁶ Nasir Iqbal, "Inviting Arabs to Hunt is Pillar of Foreign Policy: Govt". In *Dawn*, 18/10/2015.

Nonetheless, it is important to note, even the role played by the Saudi royalty in Pakistan's politics is part of a triangular relationship: Pakistan – USA – Saudi Arabia/Gulf states. The popular perception in political circles is that Riyadh's help or intervention in politics is primarily on behalf of Washington. Whatever cannot be negotiated or communicated directly is often passed on through the Saudis. The triangular relationship emerged particularly during the 1980s when intelligence agencies of the three states cooperated to run operation against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. During the early 1980s, the Saudis paid for the shortfall of US \$ 500 million to buy the 40 F-16s Washington agreed to transfer to Islamabad.¹⁷ Therefore for those analyzing Pakistan, visits by Saudi dignitaries raise as much eyebrows as that of their American counterparts.

The Ideological Linkage

For decades Pakistan's rulers have kept close to Saudi Arabia and been part of the Saudi block in the Middle East. This is certainly the case since the 1960s especially after Riyadh came into petro-dollars, and interested in making a block independent of Egypt. King Faisal was keen to challenge Gamal Abdel Nasser's secular pan-Arabism. It was for this purpose that Saudi Arabia's King Faisal started the *Rabata-e-Alam-e-Islami* in the 1960s. Financing religious institutions or other projects was Riyadh's strength for which aid institutions were developed in the country.¹⁸ The growth of the Arab oil wealth was seen as an opportunity by Pakistan's leadership, which wanted to develop contacts with the Middle East because it wanted to socially and politically de-link itself from South Asia. However, being rebuffed by

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¹⁸ Marie Juul Peterson, "Sacrilized or Secularized Aid? Positioning Gulf-based Muslim Charities". In Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (eds.), *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy in the 'Age of Terror' and Beyond*. (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014) Kindle edition, Loc. 707.

Egypt during the early 1960s the Saudi block was the only favorable option. General Ayub's government's claim of Pakistan as the largest Muslim country and thus significant was looked down upon by Cairo. Later, Bhutto viewed the Saudi relationship as Pakistan's entry into Middle Eastern politics and an opportunity for economic growth. The flow of Pakistani workers to the Middle East became visible during the 1960s and picked up even more during the 1970s. According to Pakistani historian Tahir Kamran, these expatriates became vital conduits for transfer of Wahabi ideology into Pakistan.¹⁹ It further increased during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. However, going back to the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was otherwise known as liberal and secular, encouraged Saudi foray into Pakistan's society. An agreement was signed with the Kingdom to promote Arabic language and literature. This included establishing madrassas.²⁰ The influence escalated further due to personal interaction between visiting Arab rulers, who used to visit Pakistan for hunting, and local population. This particularly relates to South Punjab and Baluchistan.²¹ The proliferation of Deobandi madrassas in South Punjab is viewed as an evidence of Arab influence that interfered with the popular traditional belief system or what is considered as the more peaceful Sufi Islam. 1980s onwards we can see a rapid growth of Deobandi and later Ahl-Hadith²² madrassas. Many of the extremely dangerous seminaries in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are Deobandi. The International Crisis Group (ICG) believes that the 'nexus between

¹⁹ Tahir Kamran, "Salafi Extremism in the Punjab and its Transnational Impact". Deana Heath and Chandana Mathur (eds), *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and Its Diaspora*. (London: Routledge, 2011). P. 37.

²⁰ "Pakistan: Madrassas, Extremism and the Military". International Crisis Group Report No. 36, 29/07/2002. Pp. 7-8.

²¹ Ibid.,

²² Ahl-Hadith refers to an Islamic school of thought that is similar to Saudi Wahabism or Salafism which is popular in Egypt, Syria and other parts of the Arab world. The underlying principle behind all these groups is primacy of Quran and Hadith (sayings and actions of prophet).

madrassa, militancy and army' started during the 1980s.²³ This is a connection that Pakistan's liberal element bemoan.

Until recently media was not allowed to publish anything critical of Saudi Arabia. It was unimaginable to produce any news in the West critical of Riyadh and the royal family. In any case, people were generally not eager to listen to things critical of the Arab world. Thus, it is not surprising that according to a PEW survey of 2013, 95% Pakistanis had a positive view of Saudi Arabia.²⁴ This popularity is linked with the ideological and emotional connection rather than anything else. At one level, the relationship with Saudi Arabia is similar to Pakistan's links with China that denote lots of bonhomie despite very little real connection between societies. In case of both Saudi Arabia and China it is primarily state-to-state relationship. The average Pakistani has little knowledge about China and Chinese as they have little actual information about the Arab world. This is despite greater familiarity with the near Arab world. According to available statistics, there are about 2.2 million Pakistanis working in Saudi Arabia alone. There are an equal number in the UAE and other Gulf states. But referring to some careful criticism, which is limited to English media, it is primarily because of division within the military, the security community, and liberal elite who believe that Saudi Arabia has radicalized the country and is responsible for financing growth of radical madrassas in Pakistan.

The Saudi funding into Pakistan's informal education that is denoted by religious seminaries came in three phases: (a) 1960s to 1970s, (b) 1980s to 1990s, and (c) after 9/11. The bulk of funding came during the second phase. However, it seems to have proliferated from being largely Saudi specific during the first two phases to include other Gulf Arab states like Qatar, Kuwait and UAE. In fact, currently, the

²³ Ibid., P. 8.

²⁴ <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2014/02/pakistan-and-saudi-arabia-embrace.html>

funding from Qatar seems to have increased substantially that can be traced to the inner tension between Saudi and Qatari Wahabism.

The 1980s is also the period when Saudi Arabia also financed higher education such as opening the International Islamic University in Islamabad. The Saudis administratively control the University. For instance, in 2012 they removed the rector for reportedly accommodating Shiite in the university and inviting the Iranian ambassador to a cultural event despite being told not to do so by the Saudi embassy.²⁵ A Saudi professor replaced Malik.

Nonetheless, it is unfair to apportion all blame for radicalization and growth of madrassas on the Saudis since the Deobandi and Ahl-Hadith ideologies were home grown. Historically, Ahl-Hadith from the Indian Subcontinent (including both territories of India and Pakistan) fed Saudi Wahabism. Riyadh's geo-political ambitions to spread its own brand of Islam as a counterweight to Egypt's secular pan-Arabism led to seeking partners in other regions, especially in the Muslim world. The Saudi government in collusion of private charity at home focused on building *dawwa* (teaching and propagation) campaigns²⁶ that aimed at ideological transformation. In Pakistan, the Saudis initially invested in Deobandi madrassas to reduce influence of local Bareilvi sect that kept at a distance from Saudi patronage, and later in Ahl-Hadith madrassas. Many of the Deobandi militant outfits such as the Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its various offshoots received funding either directly or indirectly. Influential Salafi figures such as Osama bin Laden had direct contacts with many of the Deobandi militant outfits and their educational infrastructure. The expansion of madrasa network was done primarily in collusion with Pakistan's military that was

²⁵ "IIUI rector on leave: Personal Decision or Saudi Pressure?" In The Express Tribune, 13/05/2012.

²⁶ Nora Derbal, "Notes on the Institutionalized Charity in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia". In Robert Lacey and Jonathan Benthall (eds.), *Gulf Charities and Islamic Philanthropy in the 'Age of Terror' and Beyond*. (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014) Kindle edition, Loc. 3709.

eager to fight the US war in Afghanistan during the 1980s, and later the battle in Kashmir or India in general. Over years, allowing the Arab intelligence agencies and individuals from the ‘near’ Arab established direct contacts between these states and religious seminaries. Now there are many areas in which the Deobandi and Ahl-Hadith madrassas and mosques have proliferated due to funding uncontrolled by Islamabad. The state may have knowledge of recipients of foreign funding but little control as normally non-banking and illegal channels such as *havala* and *hundi* are used to transfer money. There are many cases in which religious clerics have agents in Arab states that are used as conduits to bring money from outside. Not to forget internal sources of funding for militant groups and madrassas. Not all religious seminaries are involved in militancy, but these are central to nurturing ideology that contributes to sectarian and militant violence. Over years, the madrassas in Pakistan have evolved into newer forms that are more modern and are meant to accommodate and educate the middle class and upper-middle class.²⁷

It is difficult to eliminate madrassas as the bulk provides education to the poor. More important, replacing these is a huge financial challenge for the state. However, these seminaries do not determine the state’s military-strategic policies.

Conclusion

The liberal elements in Pakistan, who are in minority, believe that the state must review its relationship with Saudi Arabia. There is a division within policymaking circles and the society regarding how far should Islamabad go to appease its old Arab friends. While concerns are voiced against repercussions of de-linking from these friends such as Pakistan’s dependence on foreign remittances from

²⁷ Ayesha Siddiq, “The Madressa Mix: Genesis and Growth”. In Dawn, 03/03/2015.

the Middle East or supply of oil, Islamabad has adopted greater caution in dealing with Saudi request to actually join hands in its war against Yemenis rebels. The answer probably lies in overall strategic cost calculation in which the price of involvement tantamount to higher cost for Pakistan.

One of my arguments in this paper is that the benefit of Pak-Saudi or Pak-Gulf relations is based on an imagined and inflated cost. Indubitably, there is an emotional bonding between Pakistan and the 'near' Arab primarily because of the former's Islamic identity. Historically, the country and state-sponsored intellectual elite has struggled to sever natural connections of the soil with South Asia and build links with the Arab Middle East. For both the military and civilian leadership it was convenient to align itself with Saudi Arabia which has a special place in the Muslim world due to this being location of the holy sites. From early on, Pakistan aligned itself with the Saudi sponsored Muslim block as opposed to the Egyptian go-political grouping. The bulk of the Muslim population, particularly Sunni Muslims are inclined towards Saudi Arabia. There is also a lot of myth building in terms of economic dependence. However, the financial date does not bear out such stories. The non-Arab world seems to have contributed more. But this largely remains an untested relationship. Pakistan's armed forces have engaged in defending Saudi Arabia from perceived threat from outside the Muslim world. Successive governments sought direct or indirect financial help from the Kingdom and other Arab states to build the country's non-conventional defense capability and to muster support from within the Muslim world. However, a situation as serious as the current times never occurred in which Islamabad had to deal with the issue of a political or military standoff between two major Islamic rivals – Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were more aligned during the 1990s as compared to Islamabad and Tehran. The Pak-Iran relations were at its peak during the 1970s when the former used to get lots of political help from the Shah of Iran. However, situation changed after 1979. The Pak-Saudi relations became more critical after 1979 and during the Taliban ascendancy in which Islamabad and Riyadh cooperated with each other. Now the situation seems to have tilted again. This time it is not an issue of either Saudi Arabia or Iran but for Pakistan to keep balanced relations with both. From an economic standpoint, Islamabad is interested in acquiring natural gas and oil from Iran. The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is expected in the end of March 2016 to visit Pakistan to negotiate the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project.²⁸

More important, a rivalry with Iran is not what Pakistan can afford at this juncture. An involvement in the Saudi war against Yemen runs the risk of starting an internal conflict in Pakistan between the Sunni and Shia populations. The country has bore the brunt of sectarian conflict for long which is no longer affordable given that now China has promised to invest in developing a trade corridor and relevant infrastructure. The bulk of this will be in the Southwestern and southern provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh. The economic uplift expected by Pakistan is dependent upon certain level of peace and stability. This means that the government in Islamabad would have to be cautious in how it matches changing regional geo-politics with its traditional alignments. It can't be business as usual. It does not appear logical for Pakistan to get embroiled in a conflict that will only encourage sectarian conflict but also Deobandi and Ahl-Hadith militancy. This does not mean that Saudi Arabia will be entirely abandoned. The risk of Riyadh twisting Islamabad's muscled remains. The

²⁸ Zafar Bhutta, "Iranian President to Visit Islamabad to Push for IP Gas Pipeline Project". In Express Tribune, 01/03/2016.

source of peace and stability in South Asia largely depends on Pakistan opting for neutrality and consolidating it for future purposes.