

Emerging dynamics in Pakistani-Saudi relations

By Safdar Sial

■ Executive summary

Established in the 1960s, strategic ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have remained largely cordial, except during the outgoing Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government, which Saudis viewed with suspicion due to the PPP's secular credentials and close relations with Iran. After coming to power in 2013, the incumbent Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz-led government regained an enthusiasm for diplomatic and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia. However, this enthusiasm was recently watered down when the Pakistani Parliament decided to maintain Pakistan's traditional policy of neutrality and non-interference in Middle Eastern affairs and refused to send troops to join Saudi-led combat forces in Yemen. This decision was mainly motivated by a growing shift in Pakistan's foreign policy, which is apparently becoming regionally and China oriented in its outlook and calls for friendly relations with the country's neighbours, including Iran; and fears that Pakistani involvement in Yemen will negatively affect Pakistan's sectarian harmony and internal security. Recently, particularly after Pakistan announced its National Action Plan against terrorism, criticism of Saudi Arabia's alleged funding of madrasas and violent sectarian groups has also increased. Saudi Arabia's 2014 defence agreement with India had also greatly disturbed Pakistani strategists and policymakers. However, analysts believe that Pakistan will not want these factors to become permanent irritants in its relations with Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan considers Saudi Arabia to be a strategic partner because it has always supported Pakistan on matters of strategic interest. The two countries' military, diplomatic and politico-economic ties date back to the 1960s. Saudi Arabia strongly supported Pakistan in its wars with India in 1965 and 1971. Saudis have also been supporting Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, although more cautiously in recent years, when more emphasis was placed on Pakistan and India pursuing a peace process.

Saudi Arabia is indeed one of the few countries – China and the U.S. being the others – that have significantly influenced Pakistan's foreign and internal policy discourses and decisions (Cohen, 2011: 10). But at the same time Pakistan's strategic relationships with other states in the Middle East, particularly Iran, Egypt and Syria, have remained important and Pakistan plays a vital role in their strategic and diplomatic policies (Mustafa, 2007: 99).

Saudi Arabia has been providing key financial assistance to Pakistan, including in the form of oil supplies at critical moments. While deliberating on Pakistan's response to the

Yemeni crisis in April 2015, Pakistani legislators noted that when Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998 the international community imposed sanctions against it, while Saudi Arabia provided the country with free oil (Khan, 2015). Most recently, in early 2014 the Saudi government provided \$1.5 billion in financial assistance to Pakistan, apparently to help the country resolve the chronic circular debt problem in its power sector.

Established in the 1960s, defence and military-to-military ties between the two countries, mainly linked to the training of Saudi military officers, have remained largely cordial. A bilateral programme of cooperation on this issue was signed in 1967. Later, in December 1982, the Organisation of Saudi-Pakistani Armed Forces was founded, headquartered in Riyadh (Zamarayeva, 2014). Since then Pakistani troops have been stationed in parts of Saudi Arabia, including a brigade in Tabuk and another at Khamis Mushahid (Khan, 2015). In the early 1990s, when Iraqi president Saddam Husayn invaded Kuwait, Pakistan sent another battalion to Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2015). Also, the two countries held joint military exercises for the first time

in 2004 named Al-Samsaam (Sharp Sword) (Zamarayeva, 2014), which continued in subsequent years.

Saudi Arabia's ties with Pakistan have remained largely cordial under almost all of Pakistan's political and military regimes. However, the Saudis did not fully trust the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government (2008-13), mainly due to the party's so-called secular and anti-security establishment image and Saudi suspicions of President Asif Ali Zardari's Shia background. Saudi distrust of the political leadership of the ruling party increased further when Zardari signed a gas pipeline deal with Iran on January 31st 2013. However, military and defence links between the two countries remained strong during this period. The then-chief of army staff, General Kayani, described Saudi Arabia as "the most important country for Pakistan" in 2011 – the year when Osama bin Laden's killing and NATO air strikes on the Salala border post in the Pakistani tribal areas had strained Pakistan's relations with the U.S. (Zamarayeva, 2014).

The government led by Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, which came to power in 2013, regained an enthusiasm for diplomatic and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia. Due to Nawaz Sharif's personal relations with the Saudi royal family and the latter's support for and rescue of him after General Musharraf's 1999 military takeover, the Nawaz government was naturally perceived as being more inclined towards Saudi Arabia.

However, this enthusiasm was recently watered down when the government refused to send army troops to join Saudi-led combat forces in Yemen. This decision was taken in light of recommendations that emerged during the joint session of Parliament held in April 2015. While reaffirming Pakistan's full support for Saudi Arabia, Pakistani parliamentarians decided to maintain Pakistan's traditional policy of "neutrality" in the affairs of the Middle East and the Muslim world. Previously, in 2014 Nawaz Sharif's government had fully supported the Saudi stance on the conflict in Syria.

Pakistan's response to the Yemeni crisis has apparently changed the dynamics of relations and cooperation between the two countries. Apart from Saudi Arabia's engagement with major Muslim countries and diversification of its foreign policy, Pakistan's growing interest in becoming part of emerging regional geo-economics – which calls for establishing good relations with its neighbours, including Iran, and achieving peace and security in both the country and the region – is one of the main factors shaping this new phase of Pakistani-Saudi relations. These and other factors are discussed below.

Saudi political and religious influence in Pakistan

Over the course of their bilateral engagement with Pakistan the Saudis have developed and extended close links with the Pakistani military establishment and large

sections of the country's political and religious elites to a level where they (the Saudis) consider themselves to be "movers and shakers in Pakistan's internal affairs" (Rana, 2015a). The Saudis have at times also played a mediatory role in resolving problems around the civil-military relationship and other political crises in Pakistan. According to a WikiLeaks cable the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Adel al-Jubeir, asserted in 2009 that the Saudis were not observers but participants in Pakistan (Walsh, 2010).

Muslims in Pakistan, most of whom subscribe to the Sunni sect of Islam, generally hold favourable views of Saudi Arabia due to its being the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of the two holiest sites of the faith (Haramain Sharifain). The Soviet-Afghan war had provided the Saudis with the opportunity to extend their religious-ideological influence in Pakistan's public sphere by supporting Sunni religious organisations and madrasas.

Saudis have been using their influence in Pakistan's public sphere as a means to seek and justify political and military support from Pakistan, as well as to counter Iranian influence in Pakistan and the wider region. Political and military support for the nuclear-armed Pakistan has also remained vital for Saudi Arabia in its strategic pursuit of a dominant position in the Middle East and the Muslim world.

At the same time, Pakistan's political and religious-ideological landscape is very complex and diverse and does not by design validate support for the Saudi government and its policies. Recent developments in the country, including the responses of the Pakistani people and leaders on the issue of support for Saudi Arabia's intervention in the Yemeni crisis, have revealed some fundamental problems regarding Saudi religious and political influence in Pakistan.

Firstly, the Saudis' sectarian orientation in dealing with Islamic groups, parties and madrasas in Pakistan does not make them equally credible in the eyes of all Pakistani religious groups and religious-political parties. Secondly, some analysts believe that sectarian tendencies have not yet made inroads into Pakistan's national political discourse (Rana, 2015b). Therefore, with the exception of a few small sectarian-oriented parties, mainstream political and religious-political parties in Pakistan hardly consider that such tendencies steer Pakistan's relations with Riyadh. Thirdly, Saudi religious and political influence in Pakistan varies depending on the Pakistani people's sentiments and popular national narratives. For instance, the Saudis failed to obtain Pakistan's military support on Yemen in light of a national consensus in Pakistan to remain neutral. Fourthly, while the Pakistani people and their leaders acknowledge the holiness of the land of Saudi Arabia, criticism of the Saudi government has been growing in Pakistan in recent months and years, particularly for that government's alleged support to sectarian groups and madrasas that fuel religious extremism and sectarian violence.

Despite its extensive diplomatic and public diplomacy efforts, the Saudi government could not obtain the desired public and political support from Pakistan on the issue of Yemen. Most of Pakistan's political parties, media and civil society had begun to oppose the sending of troops to Yemen in support of the Saudi-led coalition fighting Shia Huthis there even before the joint parliamentary session held from April 6th to 10th 2015 decided the matter. Pakistani legislators condemned the overthrow of the government of President 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and pledged to provide all possible support if Saudi Arabia were attacked or its security endangered, but decided against sending troops to Yemen.

There were two apparent reasons for this. Firstly, a consensus was emerging among Pakistan's political and military establishments and civil society organisations against sending troops to Yemen, which in turn influenced the media and public opinion. Pakistan's fear of a sectarian backlash in the country; growing internal security concerns and actions, particularly those taken after the December 16th 2014 attack on an army public school in Peshawar; regional engagements, including those with China, which called for the establishment of good relations with Pakistan's immediate neighbours including Iran; and the foreign policy commitment to maintain Pakistan's traditional policy of non-interference in the Middle East paved the way for this consensus. Therefore, because they ran contrary to the larger national narrative on the Yemeni crisis, the street protests organised by religious and sectarian groups in support of sending troops to Yemen were unable to generate any impact.

Secondly, two main religious-political parties in Pakistan, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), were reluctant to join pro-Saudi protests and rallies. According to some analysts, JI has remained linked to the Muslim Brotherhood movements of the Middle East, which have suffered at the hands of Arab monarchists, particularly after the so-called Arab Spring. "From this perspective, JI is reluctant to become part of any movements which support the monarchists' aggressive adventures", noted one observer (Rana, 2015c). Similarly, although some of its local leaders were unhappy, JUI-F supported the parliamentary resolution on Yemen, apparently in an effort to enhance its credentials as a mainstream political party by supporting widely held national and mainstream views (Rana, 2015c).

Therefore, in the absence of some major religious-political parties, pro-Saudi protests and demonstrations by small religious and sectarian groups and parties – including those financially supported by Saudi Arabia – failed to attract the attention and participation of the people and government. Most of these protests and rallies were held by the alliance Tehreek-e-Difa-e-HarmainSharifain

(Movement for the Protection of the Holy Sites), which was formed at the Lal Masjid mosque in Islamabad on April 2nd 2015 (Ali, 2015a) with the aim of influencing the government to send troops to Yemen to support Saudi Arabia.¹ Some other groups, including Jamaatud Da'wa, also held several rallies and demonstrations in various cities.

The Iran factor

One of the main factors affecting Saudi Arabia's efforts to strengthen its political and religious-ideological foothold in Pakistan has been its desire to counter Iranian influence in the region. However, Pakistan has always tried to maintain a balance in its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has at times proved very tricky (Syed, 2014a). General Zia's military takeover in Pakistan in 1977, the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the Soviet-Afghan war in Afghanistan brought Pakistan and Saudi Arabia closer not only in religious-ideological terms, but also in emerging regional strategic alliances.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Pakistan also witnessed the emergence of Sunni and Shia sectarian groups, including violent ones, allegedly supported by Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively. While the Iranian revolution inspired the Shia groups, the Saudi-Pakistani alliance in Afghanistan and General Zia's Islamisation policies, which were oriented around Sunni Islam, did the same for Sunni groups. Iran was concerned about Zia's religious-ideological alignment with Saudi Arabia, both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Since 2001 Pakistan has successfully maintained normal relations with Iran; these relations became very warm when the PPP government was in power (2008-13). As discussed earlier, the Saudis were unhappy about this and sought to shift the balance of relations in their favour immediately after their traditional ally, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), came to power in 2013. A marked warming up of Pakistani-Saudi relations in the first quarter of 2014, which entailed some high-level bilateral visits and the provision of \$1.5 billion in Saudi aid to Pakistan, was largely seen as the result of Saudi efforts to weaken Iranian influence in Pakistan, which had grown while the outgoing PPP government was in power.

During Saudi crown prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Sa'ud's visit in February 2014 Pakistan fully supported the Saudi position on the Syrian conflict and asked Syrian president Bashar al-Assad – Iran's main ally in the region – to form "a transitional governing body" (Syed, 2014b). There were also reports that Saudi Arabia was in talks with Pakistan to provide arms – including anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles – to Syrian rebels, a claim that Pakistan denied (Dawn, 2014). Pakistan also denied reports that it would send 100,000 of its troops to Saudi Arabia (The Nation, 2014).

¹ The alliance comprised Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Sami, Ansarul Ummah, Sunni Ulema Council, Sunni Wahdat Council, Sunni Tulba Ittehad and the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat.

Pakistan's support for the Saudi position on Syria raised speculation that it was changing its Middle East policy under Saudi pressure. Concerns were expressed that Pakistan was not only changing its traditional position of staying neutral in Middle Eastern affairs, but was also "exhibit[ing] a stance that did not converge with those being held by some of its important regional allies in China and Iran" (Syed, 2014b).

Eventually, the PML-N government took two steps. Firstly, it convened a conference² of Pakistani diplomats in the Middle East and the Gulf in Islamabad on May 6th 2014. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told participants that Pakistan would maintain its policy of neutrality and non-interference in the Middle East (Yousaf, 2014). Secondly, following this conference, the prime minister paid a visit to Iran.

The Iranian-backed Huthi takeover in Yemen in September 2014 added to the Saudis' regional insecurities in the Middle East and North Africa. The Saudi government badly wanted Pakistan to join the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen against the Huthis, but Pakistan's political and military leadership decided not to send troops to Yemen. The Saudis might have viewed the decision as reflecting a Pakistani tilt toward Iran, but it was in fact designed to strengthen Pakistan's policies of staying neutral in the affairs of the Muslim world and maintaining balanced relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

During the five-day joint parliamentary session held on Yemen in April 2015 some parliamentarians expressed fears that sending troops to Yemen would annoy Pakistan's "closer neighbour" Iran, with which Pakistan shares a 780-km border and has great prospects for bilateral engagement once international sanctions on Iran are lifted (Khan, 2015). Others warned that Pakistan's interference in the Yemeni conflict would not only create a sectarian backlash in the country, but could also impact Pakistan's ongoing military operations against internal militants. It could both ease pressure on the militants and also motivate them to start recruiting fighters for the war in Yemen.

Yet it remains to be seen how Pakistan's refusal to send troops to Yemen to aid the Saudis will affect its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran in the long run. Despite deciding to stay neutral on Yemen, Pakistan has repeatedly expressed complete solidarity with Saudi Arabia and vowed to defend that country's territorial integrity. In April 2015, after the Pakistani Parliament decided against sending troops to Yemen, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif led a high-level delegation to Saudi Arabia comprising the army chief, the defence minister and other high-ranking officials to explain the decision to the Saudis.

At the same time, apart from the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, several other factors also affect

Pakistan's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, such as the world powers' signing of a nuclear deal with Tehran, which, by easing economic sanctions, could reintegrate Iran into the regional and international trading systems; emerging regional dynamics and alliances in South and Central Asia; the new Saudi leadership's strategic priorities and preferences vis-à-vis Pakistan; Pakistan's relations with India and/or India's influence on Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia; and the threat of Islamist militancy and terrorism.

Changing regional dynamics

Some analysts have noted that it was not easy for Pakistan to refuse to support the Saudis, who were aggressively pursuing a diplomatic mission to woo Pakistan not to adopt a neutral position on the Yemeni crisis and instead align with the Saudi-led military alliance against the Huthis (Rana, 2015b). A United Arab Emirates government minister even warned Pakistan of serious consequences for taking an "ambiguous stand" on the Yemen issue (*Pakistan Today*, 2015). However, Pakistan's refusal to comply indicated what many called a paradigm shift in the country's foreign policy, which is apparently becoming increasingly regionally and China oriented in its outlook, particularly after the two countries signed \$45 billion worth of agreements linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in April 2015.

For Pakistan, two key imperatives of this emerging policy outlook – most likely suggested by China – are: (1) to establish friendly relations with its neighbours, mainly Afghanistan and Iran, who could become part of the emerging regional geo-economic dynamics; and (2) to achieve security and stability in the country and wider region. These imperatives are also meant to create a secure environment for the implementation of the CPEC project in the country.

As far as the first imperative is concerned, Pakistan has recently enhanced its efforts to establish friendly relations with its neighbours. Its decision to stay neutral on the Yemeni crisis was also partly meant to not annoy Iran and pre-empt any sectarian backlash that might result from the Yemeni conflict. China was also a factor in influencing Pakistan to choose that option. One media report indicated that Pakistani leaders felt confident, particularly after their discussions with the visiting Chinese president in April 2015 – discussions that also included the subject of Yemen – that with the incoming Chinese investment and always-present political support, they could afford any possible cuts in financial support from the Arab world (*Express Tribune*, 2015b).

There is also a perception in Pakistan that China is supporting Pakistan's efforts to establish friendly ties with Afghanistan and contribute to the process of political

2 Pakistan's ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and other countries of the region attended the three-day conference.

reconciliation there. A round of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban was held in Murree, Pakistan, in July this year. Chinese and U.S. representatives were also present at the talks as observers. According to an expert on Afghan affairs, Rahimullah Yusufzai, earlier a similar dialogue was held in Urumqi, China, and was attended by some Afghan Taliban leaders, “including Mullah Abdur Jalil and Mullah Hassan, etc., who are all based in Pakistan” (Ali, 2015b). Experts believe that China appears to be ready to play an ambitious role in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan and even to play the role of a “guarantor in the next stage of a Taliban peace deal” (Humayun, 2015).

China’s growing interest in actively engaging in the Afghan peace process and influencing Pakistan to establish friendly relations with its neighbours is based on its rising stakes in South and Central Asia in terms of security, and trade and economic projects. The security stakes are rooted both in creating a secure environment for huge Chinese investment projects in the region, and in Chinese Uighur militants’ presence in and links with militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

With regard to the second imperative, Pakistan is actively pursuing military and search-and-destroy operations against militants in parts of the country, mainly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Karachi and Balochistan. The military operations Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan and Khyber 1 and 2 in the Khyber Agency have significantly damaged the militants’ infrastructure. Pakistan also developed a comprehensive National Action Plan (NAP) early in 2015 that contains 20 measures aimed at countering extremism and terrorism in the country.³ Indeed, Pakistan was never as actively engaged in counter-terroring terrorism as it has been since July 2014, when the army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb. This offensive gained added impetus after the December 2014 terrorist attack on an army-run school in Peshawar.

Political and strategic analysts are describing the CPEC as a game changer for Pakistan and the wider region in many ways. While it will open trade routes for China and Pakistan to the Middle East and Central Asia, the corridor will also improve prospects for regional economic interdependence, as well as for peace and stability. Amir Rana, a Pakistani political and security analyst, wrote in *Dawn* after his discussions with informed Chinese in Beijing that China anticipates that the successful completion of the CPEC could encourage other countries in the region to start or become part of similar projects. This would also make it easy for China to “pursue India, Bangladesh and Myanmar for the East Asian corridor”, he noted (Rana, 2015d).

Iran has recently expressed its interest in becoming part of the CPEC, which it believes could restore and expand the ancient Silk Route (Waziri, 2015).⁴ Iran is located at the crossroads between the Asian and Middle Eastern regions, which China wants to connect – and extend such links further to Europe – through its “One Belt, One Road” initiative entailing a chain of energy, infrastructure and maritime linkages (Singh, 2015). Meanwhile, reportedly on China’s request, Pakistan has decided to increase the number of CPEC-linked trade routes with Afghanistan to 16 from the existing four (Mustafa, 2015), including five new trade routes in Balochistan and seven in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁵

Another recent development that could impact the emerging regional scenario is the Western powers’ signing of a nuclear agreement with Iran. Pakistani leaders, including government ministers, have welcomed the deal and expressed strong willingness to enhance bilateral trade and economic cooperation with Iran, including the implementation of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, an agreement for which was signed by the two countries in 2013. The project was to be completed by December 2014. While Iran says it has completed its part of the pipeline, Pakistan has failed to do so partly due to U.S. and Saudi pressure and partly due to the non-availability of funds due to the international sanctions on Iran.

Nonetheless, after the nuclear deal was reached, Iran invited India to invest in infrastructure projects in Iran, including in developing the Chabahar strategic port (*Dawn*, 2015), which many think could prove a counterbalance to the Chinese-operated Gwadar port in Pakistan’s Balochistan province. India envisages that Chabahar and Iran could open up India’s access to Afghanistan and Central Asia “amidst Pakistan’s reluctance to offer over-land transit facilities” (Mohan, 2015).

In this context it remains to be seen to what extent the CPEC and Gwadar port could become instrumental in forging and enhancing regional coordination and cooperation, and how Pakistani-Iranian ties in this regional connectedness could affect Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia.

Apparently, in this emerging regional outlook, economic and trade cooperation and counterterrorism, including border security management, will take centre stage. Saudi Arabia does not share borders with Pakistan, nor does it face shared security threats with Pakistan, as do Iran and Afghanistan in the form of Islamist and insurgent movements operating across the borders.

Although Saudi Arabia’s place in the emerging regional outlook – provided it materialises – will be minimal,

³ See *Express Tribune* [2015a] for a summary of the 20-point NAP.

⁴ The Silk Route has historically been a means of trade and cultural exchanges between East and West linking India, China and Pakistan to the Mediterranean region.

⁵ The existing four trade routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan include Chaman, Torkham, Ghulam Khan and Miran Shah. The Miran Shah route is currently not functioning due to a military operation under way in North Waziristan.

Pakistan will not want the new regional arrangements to become an irritant in its relations with the Saudis. Pakistan will continue to strive to maintain balanced relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia and stay neutral in Middle Eastern affairs. It will also remain committed to defence and military cooperation with the Saudis and will continue with its traditional diplomatic, political and religious-ideological bilateral engagement with Saudi Arabia. Apart from this, Pakistan will also be more than happy to work for peace in the Middle East, including efforts to bridge gaps between Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey and other countries, if prospects for such a situation arise.

The Afghanistan factor

Pakistani and Saudi interests have largely been in alignment in Afghanistan, particularly since the Soviet-Afghan war. Both countries initially supported the Afghan mujahidin and later the Afghan Taliban. In the past the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan also all shared the objective of eliminating al-Qa'ida from Afghanistan (Tellis & Mukharji, 2010).

Pakistani and Saudi support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s greatly annoyed Iran. The Saudis' trust in the Taliban began to diminish after 1998, when they felt that the Taliban were unwilling to stop supporting Osama bin Laden (Steinberg & Woermer, 2013).

However, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have maintained relations with some Taliban factions and leaders since the fall of the Taliban regime, mainly to protect their strategic interests in Afghanistan. At present Pakistan and Saudi Arabia support the Afghan Taliban's reconciliation with the Afghan government. While Pakistan's objective in doing so is largely influenced by growing Indian influence in Afghanistan, the Saudis want at least some factions of the Taliban in the Afghan government to counter Iranian influence (Steinberg & Woermer, 2013).

In recent months, particularly since the last quarter of 2014, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has started to increase its influence in Afghanistan, which is disturbing for all the countries in the region, including Iran, China and Pakistan, as well as Saudi Arabia. Unlike the case of the Taliban, which aligned Pakistani and Saudi interests in Afghanistan, IS-inspired militants are perceived as an equal threat by all these countries. While IS is an extreme anti-Shia and anti-Iran militant group, it has also claimed responsibility for some recently launched terrorist attacks in parts of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the Saudis perceive the group to be more threatening to their interests in the Middle East and elsewhere than al-Qa'ida.

Rifts in the Afghan Taliban movement, which grew after the Taliban's and Afghan government's recent announcement of the death of the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar; growing frustration among hardline Taliban factions who want to continue fighting in a bid to establish a caliphate in

Afghanistan; and the weak Afghan state and security apparatus are creating spaces for IS.

Those in Afghanistan who have pledged to or supported IS include hardline and dissenting factions/commanders of the Afghan Taliban who are strongly inspired by IS's achievements; factions of Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan; Pakistani Taliban commanders who broke away from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, declared allegiance to IS and later moved across the border to Afghanistan due to ongoing military operations in the Pakistani tribal areas; factions of Uzbek and other Central Asian militants; and some leaders of the so-called Salafi Taliban based in the Kunar and Nuristan provinces of Afghanistan.

IS-inspired groups and militants in Afghanistan have clashed in recent months with the Afghan Taliban on many occasions in Farah, Nangarhar, Kunar, Helmand and other provinces. A review of IS-related news and reports that appeared in Afghan media between September 2014 and July 2015 indicated that IS-inspired militants have demonstrated their presence in several provinces of Afghanistan, including Ghazni, Helmand, Samangan, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Paktia, Jowzjan, Logar, Farah, Zabul and in the vicinity of Kabul.

If IS-inspired groups were to gain a foothold in Afghanistan, this could give rise to a dangerous scenario, while the Afghan government's failure to achieve a political reconciliation with the Taliban could further complicate matters. The Afghan government will find difficult to fight both the Taliban and IS-inspired groups, which will undermine the security situation in the country and further weaken the power of the state. In such a scenario regional countries' reliance on their "favourite" groups and ethnic factions could increase to further their interests, including that of countering the IS foothold.

Saudi-Indian defence cooperation

India and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement on defence cooperation in February 2014 in New Delhi. The agreement allows "exchange of defence-related information, military training and education as well as cooperation in areas varying from hydrography and security to logistics" (Panda, 2014).

Many saw the agreement as part of Saudi efforts to diversify security partnerships with various countries against the background of its growing insecurities in the Middle East and North Africa amid the U.S. rapprochement with Iran and reluctance to take stronger action against the Assad regime in Syria. However, it disturbed Pakistani strategists and policymakers, who believe that strengthened Indo-Saudi relations could help India to achieve some sort of strategic balancing in the Arab and Muslim world vis-à-vis Pakistan.

While many are convinced that Pakistan cannot convince Riyadh not to expand its strategic and defence relations

with India, others see in this situation an opportunity for both the Saudis and the U.S. to influence India and Pakistan to work for bilateral peace. Nonetheless, India sees the establishment of good relations with Saudi Arabia as an opportunity to influence the Saudis not to support anti-India militant groups in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Countering terrorism and sectarianism

As stated earlier in this report, Pakistan's decision to stay out of the Yemeni crisis was partly due to its internal security concerns. Many expressed the fear that sending troops to Yemen could encourage the local extremist and militants groups against which the Pakistani army is fighting. Also, militant groups could take involvement in Yemen as state policy to go there and fight "jihad", resulting in the possibility of increased recruitment among the religious groups that were engaged in protests and demonstrations in support of the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen.

Pakistan's Salafi and Deobandi groups, clerics, and madrasas developed strong links with Saudi Arabia during the Soviet-Afghan war. In subsequent years the Saudis continued to provide huge funds for the establishment of new madrasas. At the same time some charitable organisations operating as part of religious extremist groups such as Jamaatud Da'wa and Jaish-e-Muhammad have been receiving huge amounts of money from Saudi and other Arab sources to carry out so-called "relief work". Part of this money has been instrumental in recruitment for such groups, as well as in the rise of Ahle Hadith⁶ and Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan (Moniquet, 2013). The Saudis might claim to be supporting religious and sectarian groups and madrasas in Pakistan to increase their religious-ideological and political influence, but most analysts are convinced that this has increased religious extremism and sectarian violence in the country.

Recently, criticism of Saudi Arabia's alleged funding of madrasas and violent sectarian groups in Pakistan has increased, particularly after Pakistan announced the NAP to counter terrorism early this year. Pakistan's federal minister for inter-provincial coordination accused the Saudi government of creating instability across the Muslim world, including in Pakistan, through the distribution of money to promote its ideology (Haider, 2015). Although the ruling PML-N did not support the statement, the Saudi embassy had to issue a statement denying that Saudi Arabia was funding of extremists and madrasas in Pakistan, and also saying that all its donations to madrasas had government approval. According to media reports, a group of experts had recommended to a NAP committee that Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates should be asked to stop funding the banned religious sectarian groups in Pakistan (Gishkori, 2015).

However, Saudi Arabia has been providing political and financial support to Pakistan in the latter's war against terrorism. In this regard, the main Saudi interests have been the elimination of al-Qa'ida and the achievement of security and stability in Pakistan. Similarly, the Saudis will be more than ready to actively support Afghan or Pakistani counterterrorism efforts if IS makes inroads into these countries.

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6 Ahle Hadith is an Islamic sect in the Indian subcontinent that many regard as being affiliated to Wahhabism or Salafism.

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