

Political crisis in Pakistan as Saudi Arabia demands it join war against Yemen

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Saudi Arabia's demands that its long-time ally Pakistan participate in its US-backed war against Yemen have produced a political crisis in Islamabad.

In the nearly two weeks since Riyadh declared that Pakistan was part of its war coalition, Islamabad has undertaken a whirlwind of diplomatic activity, as it attempts to balance between Sunni monarchies in the Gulf and neighboring Iran. At the same time, Pakistan's political and military establishment are fearful of a further outbreak of sectarian tensions within the country.

Air attacks by the Saudi airforce and its allies—targeting Houthi rebels backed by Iran and forces loyal to former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh—continue to kill dozens of civilians on a daily basis in Yemen, while laying waste to towns and cities.

Riyadh, encouraged by Washington's backing, has not only spurned calls for a halt to its illegal war; it is also completing preparations for the coalition of states it leads to mount a ground invasion, with the aim of delivering a blow to its regional rival Iran, which has backed the Houthi rebels.

The war has already intensified sectarian tensions between predominantly Shiite and Sunni states and militias across the greater Middle East. These developments are especially troubling for Pakistan, where decades of US intervention and wars have produced deep sectarian divides.

A majority Sunni country, Pakistan also has a sizable Shiite minority that makes up 20 percent of its population, or about 40 million people. Sunni Islamist fundamentalist militia, which arose out of the CIA-backed proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, have killed several thousand Shiites and other minorities in the country over the past few years.

Responding to Saudi news reports that Pakistan had

joined the war against Yemen, Islamabad initially came out with contradictory and ambiguous statements. It declared its support for Saudi Arabia while publicly refraining from making any commitment to become directly involved.

On the day that airstrikes began, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared, "Any threat to Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity would evoke a strong response from Pakistan." However, the following day the government informed the parliament that it had made "no decision to participate in this war."

A day later Sharif offered "all potentials of the Pakistani army" to Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in a telephone conversation.

The government then sent a delegation—including Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, National Security Advisor Sartaj Aziz and top generals from the military—to Riyadh last Monday to "assess the situation." Following their return, Sharif himself left for Ankara, where he met both Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In a joint press conference held with Davutoglu, Sharif declared, "We are concerned at the overthrow of the legitimate government in Yemen by use of force by non-state actors," referring to the Houthi rebels. He added that Pakistan is committed to defending "Saudi Arabia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

In fact, there is no threat to Saudi Arabia from Yemen. Sharif's remarks were aimed both at placating the Saudis and providing a justification for the military support Islamabad has already provided or may provide in the future. Sharif went on to claim that Pakistan is for a "peaceful solution to the Yemen conflict."

There are also concerns within the political establishment that a backlash from Tehran—with which Pakistan shares a 700 kilometre border and which has

considerable influence in Afghanistan—could further destabilized the country. Iranian officials met Pakistani Ambassador Noor Mohammad Jadmani to convey their concern over reports of Pakistan’s participation in the war. They insisted on a “policy of non-interference,” while requesting a “dialog” on the crisis with Islamabad. Iran’s Foreign Minister Javed Zarif is scheduled to visit Pakistan this Tuesday.

The concerns within the ruling class were reflected in Sharif’s call for a joint session of the lower and upper house of the parliament for today. Co-chairman of the main opposition Pakistan Peoples Party and former president Asif Ali Zardari last week threw his support behind the government, declaring, “It becomes collective responsibility of the international community to join hands against the [Houthi] militia to protect Saudi Arabia and Yemen.”

The emerging consensus indicates that Pakistan will likely expand its role in the war, even if publicly it continues to claim its policy is one of “non-intervention.” At the same time, the political establishment is seeking to avert a sectarian backlash in the country. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif explained the risks to parliament last month, saying, “In Syria, Yemen and Iraq, division is being fuelled and it needs to be contained. The crisis has its fault lines in Pakistan too, [we] don’t want to disturb them.”

The dilemma was further expressed by an editorial in the English daily *Dawn* on March 27, which asserted that Pakistan should not take sides between Saudi Arabia and Iran, “considering Pakistan’s strategic relationship with the former and geographical proximity with the latter.”

In February 2014, then Saudi Defence Minister Prince Salman, in a rare three-day visit to Pakistan, effected a shift in Islamabad’s position in relation to Syria. Pakistan threw away its “non-interference” policy and called for “a transnational governing body with full executive powers”—in other words, the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad. Weeks later it was revealed that Saudi Arabia had agreed to \$1.5 billion in aid to the crisis-ridden Pakistani economy.

According to the US-based Brookings Institution, “Pakistan has received more aid from Saudi Arabia than any country outside the Arab world since the 1960s.” It is also a major source of foreign remittances to Pakistan, which last month alone amounted to \$453

million. The money from “more than 1.5 million often poorly treated migrant workers,” according to Al Jazeera.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, with the encouragement of Washington, have extensive military ties. Since the 1960s, Pakistani troops have been stationed in Saudi Arabia, providing essential defence forces for the reactionary fiefdom. Saudi Arabia’s intimate relationship with Pakistan developed in the 1980s when it funded US-backed dictator Zia-ul Haq’s “Islamisation” of Pakistan policy and the war in Afghanistan in accordance with US strategic aims. It is in this period that Sharif emerged as a protégé of Zia and developed close relations with the Saudi monarchy.

Pakistan is said to have received up to 60 percent of the funding for its nuclear project from Riyadh. According to recent US and British news reports, this was done in the expectation that the Saudis could obtain nuclear weapons from Pakistan at will, especially if Iran were ever to develop them.

Pakistan also faces practical limitations on how much support it can give Riyadh in the Yemen war, as it is already waging a war in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the north-west against Islamist fundamentalist militias, as demanded by and in collaboration with Washington. It also maintains high troop levels along the border with its arch-rival India to the south and is waging a brutal repression in the Balochistan province on the border with Iran against separatist nationalist militias.

Whatever the maneuvers of the ruling class, the escalation of war in Yemen will have a deeply destabilizing impact on Pakistan, while intensifying the danger of a regional war throughout the Middle East and Central and South Asia.



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