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## Understanding the Societal Roots of Pak-KSA Defence Ties: A Historical Analysis

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**Abstract:** In the backdrop of recent Israel war on Gaza, world has witnessed extraordinarily close relationship between Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Against this pretext, the relevance of social factors in the making of strategic ties is important to understand what has constituted the special ties between two states (Guzansky, 2016). It demands that we should make a clear understanding of these constituents in international and bilateral relations. The present study constitutes a significant addition to the theoretical knowledge existing in the literature relating to bilateral relationship between Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It argues that interaction between the definition of “self” and ‘other’ determine a state to formulate policy about other state as friend, ally or adversary. Similarly, it is the conservative religion-cultural self-identity and mutual definition of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that help articulate their policy towards each other. Such an ideological affinity provides both sates a strong foundation to further consolidate their bilateral ties in all possible areas of cooperation including the military one.

**Key Words:** Pakistan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bilateral, Societal, Identity, Political, Economic, Strategic, Discursive,

### Introduction

The purpose of the study is to analyze the strong socio-historical, religious, economic and strategic roots of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations. Furthermore, it explores the limit to which these factors can help both states materializing their values and interests in their bilateral relations. Based on such social and discursive making, it unfolds the contemporary level of cooperation among Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in areas of their mutual interest. Finally, it offers the possible grey area in Pak-KSA ties and suggest certain doable options to further consolidate this bilateral relationship. In doing so, it employs discourse analysis to answer what constitutes Pakistan-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations? And to what extent both states can assist each other in realizing their contemporary social, political, economic and strategic interests?

Divided into four sections, this study first explains social and political factors behind the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan cooperation which are common to the two countries. Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations have endured the testing times. It also highlights the strengthening of diplomatic, security, and economic relations during recent years especially during the administration of the present King Salman bin Abdulaziz and the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The second section offers analysis of economic cooperation that exists among the two countries. The role which Pakistan’s labour force has played in serving and developing KSA, its contribution to Pakistan’s economy, and economic interaction and cooperation among the two countries is thoroughly analysed. Third section evaluates the military, strategic and security issues concerning Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and their cooperation, interaction and interdependence in these matters. The two states have signed a military and strategic cooperation agreement to help each other and protect themselves from any outside threats and attacks. Fourth section of this paper analyzes the tragic events of 9/11, analysing the social and discursive reasons behind this apparently sudden occurrence.

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## Internal Dynamics of Pakistan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Pakistan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are both Muslim countries, created in the twentieth century. Though they have different historical background of their emergence and have developed dissimilar political systems, but these are overtly based on Islam. They share values that are drawn from Islam and Islamic teachings. The political system and governance of Saudi Arabia are avowedly based on Quran and Sunnah while the dominant theme of the Pakistan movement was Islam on which its political system was to be based after its creation. In their interaction, the two states have influenced each other indirectly and imperceptibly in matters that relate to the internal situation of their people.

### The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom had its origins dating back to the mid-eighteenth century when the Amir of al-Diriyah Muhammad bin Saud, and Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, an Islamic scholar/reformer, reached an agreement on their policies and formed an alliance to help each other in pursuing their respective objectives. After going through fluctuating fortunes, in 1932, Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud, also known as Ibn Saud, was able to unite basically four regions of the Arabian Peninsula; namely Hejaz, Najd and parts of Eastern Arabia and Southern Arabia; to establish what is known today as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom developed into a hereditary monarchy ruled on Islamic lines by Al Saud family (The Kings of the Kingdom, Vision 2030).

Luckily, six years after the establishment of the Kingdom, on 3rd March 1938, enormous reserves of oil and natural gas were discovered mostly in Eastern part of Saudi Arabia. Rendering to estimates, the geographical areas under the KSA has huge amount of crude oil reserves second after the United States and sixth largest gas reserves. The US-controlled company Aramco, an Arabian-American Oil Company, developed these fields in the Eastern parts of KSA, and income from these sources enabled King Abdul Aziz and his sons to stabilize their rule and transform the kingdom into an affluent state (Al-Rasheed, 2010). In 1972, Saudi Arabia acquired the control of 20 per cent in Aramco, and in 1980, bought out the American interests in the company.

Saudi Arabia's constitution, according to King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz is *Quran*, the Holy book of Islam; and the decisions are made and executed with the process of consultation known as *Shura*. The flag of Saudi Arabia is of green colour with the *Kalimah Shahada*, which is the foundation of Islam, written on it in Arabic (translated as "There is no God, but Allah and Muhammad are the messenger of Allah") in white colour above a white 'saber'. Islam permeates in Saudi Arabia's daily life, alcohol is prohibited, women were not allowed to drive cars (recently, this has changed, now they can drive) or interact in public with other than blood relatives and *riba* (interest on money) is formally prohibited and discouraged by financial institutions in Saudi Arabia. In the fall of 1986, King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz lent additional strength to this impression when he requested that he be addressed not as "Majesty," but as *Khadim-ul-Haramain* means custodian of the sacred places of Mecca and Medina (Salamé, 1987). Practically, the King in the political system of Saudi Arabia is all sovereign and has all the powers pertaining to the matters of legislation, execution and adjudication.

The decrees or verdicts issued by the king are the foundation of legislature. Prime Ministerial functions are also done by the King who chairs the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers was created to assist the King in 1953, and the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia. Headed by King, the royal family of Saudi Arabia dictates the political system and exercises unhindered monopoly of political power. The large number of the members of royal family allow it taking up almost all of the central positions in the state; thus, it is able to have presence at different echelons in the political hierarchy. No one questions its right to govern. However, the economic affluence, technological modernization, urbanization, mass education, and the new phenomenon of media gradually created a new political atmosphere in Saudi Arabia. (Ochsenwald, et, al., 2025)

Then, in 1979, the Sunni Islamists were agitated by two events: attack and capture of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by the revolutionaries for ten days and the Islamic revolution in Iran causing disturbance particularly in the Shia community of the KSA which culminated into the Qatif Uprising. These factors along with the occurrence of huge number of overseas workforces – Pakistanis constituted the second largest in numbers Labour migration from Pakistan also disturbed conventional way of living of the Saudis (Halliday, 1977). The high rate of taxes and the growth of

unemployment among the Saudi nationals fuelled the civil unrest. The discontent was further aggravated by the Gulf War and the landing of US troops on Saudi soil (Kelliher, 1990). Many Saudis began to raise questions about the absolute authority exercised by the King and the Saudi royal family. They demanded wider participation of the people in governance (Kaye et al., 2008).

Responding to this pressure, in 1992, King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz issued an instrument labelled as "Basic Laws". This was a semi-constitutional manuscript that erected a 60-member Consultative Council, or *Majlis al-Shura*, with technocrat members from diverse geographical localities whose bills included the member's 'right to question cabinet members and review official social and economic policies before promulgation'. The royal decree officially acknowledged *Quran* and *Sunnah* as the constitution of the Kingdom, and the King was to conform with the *Sharia* (Islamic law) with its injunctions. Political parties and national elections are not visualized in this system (Al-Rasheed, 2010, 166-71).

As a follow-up, the Consultative Council was formed and inaugurated in December 1993, to assist the King in the decision-making process. The chairman and all the 60 members of the Consultative Council were nominated by the King in his discretion. However, there was no woman among the nominated members. At the time of nomination, King Fahd clearly conveyed that introduction of these reforms must not be taken as step towards democracy while because, in his view, any electoral system based on voting was inconsistent with the teachings of Islam which called for governance through *Shura*, consultation (Serjeant et al., 2020).

The ulema hold a unique position in the Saudi political system and society since the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom. They enjoy direct say in the process of decision making. In addition to controlling and influencing the judicial and educational systems, they exercise control and power in the domain of both public and private religious affairs. In addition, they have been involved in every major decision of the Saudi government. For example, the King had sought their consent at the time when oil-embargo was imposed in early 1970s, and subsequently in inviting foreign troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf crisis.

## Pakistan

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Pakistan inherited a political system that evolved in India during the British colonial rule. It started with the Interim Constitution of 1947, and then it had two constitutions (those of 1956 and 1962) and experienced two direct military rules (those of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan). Subsequent to Pakistan's disintegration and the emergence of East Pakistan as an independent country, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979) assumed power in (West) Pakistan, whose Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had gained majority of assembly seats in the then West Pakistan. He nationalized the major industries and introduced radical socio-economic reforms.

The National Assembly under his leadership framed the 1973 constitution, which provided for a parliamentary system of government having a bicameral legislature: Senate and the National Assembly with Prime Minister as the chief executive and head of the government and a President with nominal powers as head of the state. This Constitution also changed the official name of the country as Islamic Republic of Pakistan declaring Islam as state religion. The first elections held under the Constitution in 1977 were spoiled amidst allegations of rigging against Bhutto by Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), a coalition of the main opposition parties. The PPP-PNA negotiations that followed an intense anti-rigging agitation from the PNA culminated in the removal of Bhutto and the PPP from power in July 1977, which resulted into another military rule in the country for the coming decade.

General Muhammad Zia ul Haq (1928-1988), the then Army chief, was the main beneficiary of this whole episode who extended his powers as both Chief Martial Law Administrator and President of Pakistan suspending the 1973 Constitution and reigned the country by martial law decrees. Mr. Bhutto was arrested and put on trial by Zia ul Haq in the Lahore High Court and the Supreme Court of Pakistan on charges relating to ordering assassination of Ahmad Raza Qasuri, a dissident PPP Member, in which his father was killed. He was convicted and hanged on 4 April 1979 which was later labelled as a 'judicial murder'. During the martial law, Gen. Zia and Saudi Arabia assisted the US forces by organizing and funding the *mujahidin* in the Afghan war against the Soviets (Weinbaum & Abdullah, 2014). Later in

1985, the 1973 constitution was partially restored. Three years later in 1988, Gen. Zia got killed in an air crash Near Bahawalpur district of Punjab. By this time, realizing the vanity of its presence in Afghanistan, Soviet Union withdrew its forces.

From 1988 to 1999, political power in Pakistan rotated between two major political parties, the Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) led by Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif respectively. In October 1999, the then Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf overthrew the elected government of PML-N assuming the power as President of Pakistan. He neither enacted martial law nor abrogated the Constitution. Instead, the Supreme Court of Pakistan authorized him to make necessary amendments in the Constitution without reference to any other institution. It was in his tenure that the incidents of 9/11 happened, hijackers attacking the World Trade Centre towers in New York and the Pentagon building. He allowed the US and NATO forces to use land route and airfield facilities to launch attacks on Afghanistan and remove Mulla Umar-headed Taliban regime from power.

The Taliban dispersed in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, and some of them joined al-Qaeda and engaged themselves in violent activities to oust the NATO forces from Afghanistan. Except for the terrorist activities, Gen. Musharraf did not face any serious opposition within the country as the party heads of the mainstream political parties, PPP and PMLN were on exile and were not allowed to return. In 2002, Musharraf held elections for the National and Provincial Assemblies to seek confidence of the people and legitimize his rule at the popular level. He faced no serious opposition till March 2007, when he removed the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry from his office. However, Mr Chaudhry was restored as Chief Justice as a result of the Lawyers' movement with the support of political parties.

Benazir could return to Pakistan as a result of the NRO (National Reconciliation Order). Then Nawaz Sharif was also not stopped from returning to Pakistan. Benazir was killed soon after her return to Pakistan. The PPP won a majority in the national elections held after her death. The party assumed power, and Asif Ali Zardari replaced Gen. Pervez Musharraf as the President. From the time of Gen. Pervez Musharraf's resignation to the victory of Imran Khan-led Tehrik-i-Insaf in the general elections on 18 August 2018, two parties served five-year term each – the PPP (2008-2013) and the PML (N) (2013-2018).

### Societal Factors: Interaction and Impact on Each Other

The Muslims all over the world are deeply attached to Saudi Arabia because in the two most sacred Muslim cities, Mecca and Medina, *Khana Ka'ba* and *Masjid-i-Nabvi* are located. Since its foundation, Saudi Arabia has an ideology grounded in the Holy book of *Quran* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's concern of welfare of the Muslims outside Saudi Arabia is quite natural. Their attachment to Pakistan has always been there because the country gained independence in the name of Islam and its leadership vowed to build up its polity grounded in the principles of Islamic teachings (Ahmad, 1982; Razvi, 1981). Pakistan's ideology motivates it to have a special relationship with Saudi Arabia. It shares with Saudi Arabia its ambition to promote the welfare of the outside Muslims. The attachment to Islam and the desire to help the Muslims whatever may be their geographic location unite Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to engage in joint and cooperative ventures.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have always shown concern for the welfare and independence of the Muslims of Palestine and Kashmir. They raised their voices in support of the Palestinians and Kashmiris at the UN and other international forums whenever they were repressed by Israel and India respectively. Both the countries have also extended to them moral and material support. KSA always put forward its support for Pakistan and assisted in its conflicts pertaining to India. This sustenance was unflinching in the 1965 and 1971 wars that Pakistan fought against India (Saliba, 1972). It vehemently opposed the breakup of Pakistan which resulted into the formation of a separate Muslim state in the name of Bangladesh.

The desire to unite the Muslims on one platform moved the Pakistani and Saudi leadership to support, sponsor and organize international conferences to promote unity in the Muslim ranks. Both countries collaborated jointly in such cooperative ventures. International Muslim Conference organized in Pakistan in 1951, was one of the earliest attempts

for unity and united action (Orakzai, 2010). The first widely acknowledged International Islamic Conference was convened in Rabat in September 1969, when Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem was set on fire. The representatives of twenty-four Muslim countries, most of them heads of state, took part in this Conference. Incidentally, the Indian delegate who came to attend the conference was asked to leave amidst a protest and walkout by the Pakistani president, arguing that India was not a Muslim country (Orakzai, 2010).

This Conference passed a resolution to the effect that the representative of Muslim countries would hold discussions regularly for the promotion of collaboration and assistance in the areas of economy, science and technology, and culture and spirituality. A follow-up session of the foreign ministers was later organized in the Saudi Arabia's city of Jeddah in 1972. Organization of Islamic Conference (now Cooperation) was established as a by-product of these conferences.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in the capacity of first as President and then as Prime Minister, extensively travelled to Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries after his assumption of office. After consulting King Faisal and the heads of a few other Muslim states, Pakistan organized the second International Islamic Conference in Lahore in 1974. This Conference was historic in the sense that the Heads of States of all the Muslim countries with rare exception participated in this Conference. It was the biggest demonstration of Muslim unity at the top level in modern times. After the Islamic Conference, Pakistan received three soft loans without interest from Saudi Arabia and compensated for the budget deficit.

There are numerous cases of cooperation and mutual assistance. At the time of the Gulf crisis, Pakistan also provided Saudi Arabia with its soldiers to defend the sacred places, the Haramain Sharifain, in Mecca and Medina (Azzam, 1991; Bhola, 1990). During Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, KSA in cooperation with Pakistan extended generous monetary and diplomatic assistance to Afghan Mujahidin who were struggling against the USSR's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

After victory of Taliban and formation of their government in Kabul, KSA and Pakistan along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), were the only countries to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (Rashid, 1999). In May 1998 when Pakistan decided to explode its nuclear devices at Chagai hills, KSA was the maiden country whom the then Prime Minister of Pakistan took into confidence. Afterwards these tests, the only countries which stood behind Pakistan and hailed its leadership were KSA and UAE (Alam, et. al., 2013). Furthermore, in the aftermaths of the economic sanctions imposed on Pakistan as a result of nuclear tests, KSA assured the provision of 50,000 barrels of oil/day for free to help to ease economic pressure on the country.

The Saudi Arabia-Pakistan brotherly relations were expressed in other ways as well. For instance, as a symbolic recognition of King Faisal's attachment with Pakistan, one of the biggest cities in the Punjab, Lyallpur, has been named after him as Faisalabad. The biggest and beautiful mosque in Islamabad that was built by Saudi financial support was also named as Faisal Mosque in the memory of King Faisal of KSA. KSA also funded the promotion of religious education in Pakistan (Singer, 2001). New madrassas were established with its financial support and funds were provided for expanding facilities in the existing madrassas. Financial aid was also extended to promote higher education. Its biggest example is the foundation of the International Islamic University in Islamabad (Singer, 2001).

No one familiar with the politics of both KSA and Pakistan can ignore the significance of Saudi-Pak relations. Indeed, all knowledgeable circles would recognize that Saudi Arabia exercises more political influence in Pakistan than any other state, not even the United States of America. As for Pakistan, KSA is essential spiritually, economically and diplomatically. Pakistan cannot run the risk of establishing any relationship that might go against Riyadh. Since the time of King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, all the Saudi leaders had similar vision regarding the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations and followed identical policies for the region. Keeping these policies in view, the Saudi leadership under the guidance of present King Salman, aspire to evolve long-term policies and find ways and means for their implementation.

### Convergence of Security Interests

Since its independence, Pakistan has interacted in financial, military and security matters essentially with three states Saudi Arabia, US and China - more closely than with any other state. Pakistan's relations with China have been the



closest from the time of its creation despite the dissimilarities of their ideological aspirations. Any differences between these two states, and there has been hardly any such occasion, have been communicated confidentially and without any publicity.

Pakistan's relations with the US have witnessed sharp fluctuations and have been widely publicized. In the 1950s and 1960s, it joined and became part of the US-sponsored defence alliances Baghdad Pact/CENTO and SEATO, it was recognized in diplomatic circles as the most allied ally of the United States. Its stances in international affairs were pro-US, anti-communist and anti-USSR; the People's Republic of China was an exception to this general perception of the Communist countries.

Pakistan provided the US site for an air base at Badaber near Peshawar for air surveillance of the strategic regions of the Soviet Union. In return, it received much needed economic and military aid from the US. After the Pak-India War 1965 and the Tashkent Declaration, the US military aid and the sale of all kinds of military equipment to Pakistan was completely stopped and economic aid drastically reduced. A period of close cooperation with the US in defence matters was revived during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Then, Pakistan and the US closely collaborated to support the Afghan Mujahidin, the "Arab Afghans", who were fighting against the Soviet occupation and eventually succeeded in forcing the Soviet Union to leave Afghanistan (Rouleau, 2002). After that, they cooperated with each other in the fight against terrorism but there were often occasions of misunderstandings on matters of policy and the conditions on the ground.

### Cooperation in Military and Financial Matters

The nature of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations was quite different from the relations between any other two states. Their population was predominantly Muslim and belonged to the Sunni sect although sectarian feelings were almost non-existent at the time of their inception. Saudi Arabia is a country where the two most holy places of the Muslims, the Haramain Sharifain, were located and where, like other Muslims, the South Asian Muslims went for Hajj and Umrah.

After independence, as mentioned in the previous sections, the Muslims of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia aspired to have a political system based on the Islamic teachings. Despite the hurdles in the way, they have never faltered in this pursuit. Their sympathy and concern for each other as well as for the Muslims outside the boundaries of their states is a natural consequence of this ideal. Two issues of international concern on which they held unanimity of views were the Palestine issue and the Kashmir issue.

The convening of the international Islamic conferences in Karachi in 1949 and 1951 was partly to express the sentiments of Muslim solidarity and concern for the Palestinian and Kashmiri Muslims. After the conference in 1951, they signed a friendship treaty, which laid the foundation for bilateral cooperation in different fields. However, soon after, the US policy to create anti-USSR and anti-communist alliances temporarily diverted their focus from each other. Pakistan became a member of these alliances, but Saudi Arabia stayed away from these alliances.

When Pakistan approached the Saudi leadership to become a member of the CENTO, King Saud declined to do so. The King perceived that the US was not a reliable friend and was apprehensive that any US-backed alliance would divide the Arab world. However, initially Saudi Arabia supported Pakistan's decision, as it knew that Pakistan was seeking security against its hostile neighbour, India.

In June 1954, King Saud in a letter to Governor General Ghulam Muhammad, wrote, "We will be happy if Pakistan will stronger no doubt. Pakistan's strength is our strength and if the Jews attack on the holy land, then Pakistan will be in the front of the defenders of the Haramain (the two holiest sites for Muslims in Mecca and Medina) as it was promised." However, when Pakistan formally signed the Baghdad Pact in 1955, Saudi Arabia strongly criticized this act.

The bilateral relations remained at a low-key level till General Ayub Khan's visit to Saudi Arabia in 1960 when the strategic interests of the two countries gradually converged. After this, Saudi Arabia began to employ Pakistan's skilled and unskilled manpower for the construction and other industries that it had started with its increasing oil wealth. The need for manpower lessened the impact of Pakistan's close relations with the West. The two countries then extended

sympathy and support to each other whenever their security was threatened, or the issues of common security concern were involved.

Saudi Arabia supported Pakistan in its conflicts and wars with India in 1965 and 1971. After 1971 debacle, Saudi Arabia did not recognize the state of Bangladesh out of respect for the public sentiments in Pakistan. In 1972, Saudi Arabia convened the Islamic conference of foreign ministers in Jeddah and expressed deep sorrow over the dismemberment of Pakistan (Ahmad & Faisal, 2014). Similarly, Pakistan's support to the Arabs in the two Arab-Israel wars of 1967 and 1973 was not confined to mere expression of words. The Pakistani Air Force personnel reportedly participated in a few battle missions in the 1967 war. In fact, a Pakistani pilot received an award for shooting down an Israeli aircraft. Its Air Force personnel again played a small but significant role in the 1973 Arab-Israel war; this was claimed by the Pakistan pilot who was fighting in the Syrian Air Force against Israel. Pakistan extended military support to Saudi Arabia whenever the security of the Kingdom was under a threat (Khalid, 1989).

The interaction between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the military field was of a varied nature. It started in the 1960s. Saudi Arabia realized the need for the training of its army and air force personnel on modern lines. Pakistan was a natural choice for providing such a training or rendering any other specialized assistance to the Saudi troops. This choice was also based on the image and performance of the Muslim component of the British Indian Army in the Second World War and of the Pakistan Army after independence against a much larger army in the Pak-India war.

After the 1967 Arab-Israel war, in August, a Saudi delegation headed by the Defence and Aviation Minister visited Pakistan. After detailed deliberations, the two sides signed an agreement for technical cooperation in the fields of defence and civil aviation. This agreement focused on the military training of Saudi troops and bilateral exchanges of military advisors. As a follow-up, in addition to the training of the Saudi army and air force personnel in the military academies of Pakistan, a military training facility was also established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The army officers from Pakistan were deputed to the Kingdom to raise and train the Royal Army and Air Force.

In addition to providing the facility of training the Saudi Arabian Army and Air Force personnel, Pakistan stationed its own troops in Saudi Arabia in situations when the internal security was threatened or there was external threat to the security of the Kingdom. This process of deputing regular troops to Saudi Arabia started in the 1970s. After the Arab-Israel war in 1973, about 15,000 regular personnel of the Pakistan Army were sent to Saudi Arabia. The combat units were deployed near the Israel-Saudi Jordanian border. A battalion of the armed troops was also located along the border of Yemen and Saudi Arabia for security reasons (Khalid, 1989, 66). After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by the revolutionaries in November-December 1979, Pakistan's military presence in Saudi Arabia was further increased on the demands of the Saudi leadership for the increase in the military presence in the Kingdom.

In December 1982, after intensive bilateral negotiations, a Pakistan Military Personnel and Military Training Delegation signed a "Protocol Agreement" with Saudi Arabia. In accordance with this Agreement, two divisions of the Pakistani army (consisting of about 20,000 personnel) were stationed at different places in Saudi Arabia. During 1982-88, an armoured brigade was placed at the disposal of the Kingdom. A major part of the Pakistan military personnel was deployed in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia, where most of the oil fields of the Kingdom are located. This was done to ensure the safety of the oil fields and to respond to any threat of internal riots. The apprehension was that the Iranian revolutionaries might foment discontent and resistance in the Shia population of the region. In addition to the land forces, Pakistan also provided Air Force personnel to the Kingdom. The PAF personnel is stationed in the northern part of the Gulf and the Gulf Coast. It is meant essentially to protect the oil fields.

After the Gulf crisis in 1990-91, when President Saddam Husain, the Iraqi President, invaded and occupied Kuwait, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia realized the wide-ranged security threats to the Kingdom and the region. Immediately Pakistan sent another battalion to Saudi Arabia in case Saddam Husain attacked the Kingdom. They also began to explore new ways and means to widen areas of defence cooperation between the two countries to ensure security. They took several measures for this purpose.

In 2001, they started to implement a joint programme for the development of small arms and ammunition that could possibly be used in case of threat to internal security. Four years after that, they signed a new "military cooperation" agreement for defence cooperation. In addition, an agreement was also signed between the Pakistan Interior Ministry and the Saudi Arabian government that focused on providing military training to the civilian security department of the Saudi security forces (Ahmad & Faisal, 2014, 30).

The training of the Saudi defence personnel also widened. From 2004 onward, the Pakistani army and the Saudi Arabian army also decided to organize joint military exercises in the two countries. These joint exercises were named "Al-Samsam" (the Sword). In 2004 and 2006, the first two exercises – Al-Samsam I and Al-Samsam II - were organized in Pakistan. In 2009, the third exercise Al-Samsam III was held in Saudi Arabia. Two years later, the focus of the 3-week fourth exercise was designed to strengthen the capacity of the Saudi Arabian forces to counter terrorism in any low-intensity conflict environment.

In April 2014, General Rahil Sharif, the Pakistan Army Chief of Staff, was a guest at a massive military exercise in which Saudi Arabia's military exercise, "Sword of Abdullah", demonstrated its military strength. His participation in this exercise showed the level of close cooperation that had developed between the armies of the two countries. So far six joint exercises of Pakistan and Saudi Arabian armed forces bearing the name Al-Samsam have been organized in the two countries (Sial, 2015). In October 2017, Al-Samsam VI was held in Saudi Arabia in which live ammunition, landing from airplanes, dealing with improvised explosive devices, ambushes, raids and combat patrols, were practiced. Al-Samsam VI reflected combat ability and professionalism in activating and strengthening the concept of command and control, hitting targets with high precision and joint harmony between the two forces (Arab News, 2020).

Pakistan's defence industry also witnessed sharp rise in the quality and variety of production. It also started to manufacture tanks and fighter planes with the cooperation of China. Recently, Saudi Arabia showed interest in purchasing Al-Khalid tanks and JF-17 Thunder fighter planes from Pakistan, which the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) and the Chengdu Aircraft Corporation (CAC) of China have jointly manufactured (Jamal, 2018; Keck, 2014). The manufacturing facility is in Pakistan. Such deals - the purchase of tanks and jet fighters from Pakistan by Saudi Arabia - would not only help in the development of the defence industry of Pakistan but also strengthen the friendly bonds between the two countries.

Whenever Pakistan faced any financial strains on its economy or could not provide sufficient funds for the development of its defence industry, Saudi Arabia came forward to relieve its burden by direct funding in dollars or by providing oil free of cost or on deferred payment. After Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, strict sanctions were imposed on Pakistan. No one but Saudi Arabia came forward to help Pakistan in this difficult situation and provided oil free of cost for four years: 80,000 barrels per day in the first two years and 40,000 barrels per day in the remaining two years. This assistance was worth 3.4 billion US dollars, accounting for about 23 per cent of Pakistan's oil imports and helped Pakistan in relieving the pressure on the balance of payment (Ahmad & Faisal, 2014, 31). In early 2014, the Saudi Arabian government again provided Pakistan with 1.5 billion US dollars of financial aid. Clearly this was to help Pakistan resolve its long-term debt problem in the power sector.

### **Nuclear and Missile Technology**

Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in the development of nuclear and missile technology of Pakistan. In May 1974, India conducted its first nuclear test, codenamed "Smiling Budha", in the Pokhran Test Range in Rajasthan, near the Pakistan border, followed by acceleration of its nuclear programme. As for Pakistan, after its breakup and establishment of Bangladesh, in January 1972, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto held a meeting of leading Pakistani scientists and emphasized the need for developing nuclear technology. Later on, some of the scientists who had attended this meeting joined the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. In January 1974, at the Second Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto briefed the delegates about the advances made by Israel and India in the development of their nuclear programme, which he apprised them were directed against the Muslim countries.



It is widely believed that King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz who had co-sponsored the Islamic Conference in Lahore promised to provide funds for Pakistan's nuclear programme. After the assassination of King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, Saudi Arabia remained the major financier of the nuclear programme and subsequently of the missile programme. Following the Indian nuclear tests of May 1974, the process of development of Pakistan's nuclear capability was speeded up. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had directed the Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), Munir Ahmad Khan, to complete the project of producing fissile material used to produce atomic bomb by the end of 1976 (Father of the nuclear weapons, 2011). When the process seemed to have slowed down, Abdul Qadeer Khan was invited from Europe and his Kahuta Research Laboratories (KRL), which he established on his arrival, were involved in the process. By 1978, Pakistan had succeeded in producing fissile material which could be used in the production of atomic bomb. Pakistan had acquired the capability of detonating a nuclear bomb by using highly enriched uranium as fissile material by the end of 1984.

However, Pakistan did not conduct the nuclear tests in view of possible hostile reaction from the US and other western countries. When Chief Martial Law Administrator and President General Muhammad Ziaul Haq paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, he unofficially told the King about this success, observing: "Our achievements are yours" (Riedel, 2008). This was in recognition of Saudi Arabia's cooperation and funding of the nuclear project. This cooperation continued during the prime ministership of Benazir Bhutto (1995-96). In 1998, Prime minister Nawaz Sharif informed Saudi Arabia confidentially before ordering the nuclear tests in the Weapon-testing labs-III (WTL) located in the Chagai remote site in the Baluchistan Province.

After conducting the nuclear tests, in June 1998, the Prime Minister paid a visit to Saudi Arabia to meet King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz. He publicly thanked the government of Saudi Arabia for supporting Pakistan. Shortly thereafter, Saudi Minister of Defense Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz during his visit to Pakistan went along with the Prime Minister to see a uranium enrichment plant and ballistic missile production facilities. There Abdul Qadeer Khan briefed the Prince and the Prime Minister on the sensitive issues involved in the production of nuclear explosive devices. This visit fuelled suspicions regarding the Kingdom's nuclear ambitions and the warmth in the relations between the leadership of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Bahgat, 2006, 424).

The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations regarding nuclear technology and missile technology are surrounded by mystery; therefore, are often open to speculations, sometimes quite far-fetched. For instance, the BBC Newsnight programme, quoting information received from different sources reported that Saudi Arabia had invested in the Pakistan's weapons projects and could obtain "atomic bombs at will" (Urban, 2013). That Saudi Arabia's quest for countering Iran's atomic programme was now possible because the Saudis might be able to deploy such devices more quickly than the Islamic republic. A senior NATO decision-maker informed the Newsnight reporter that he had seen intelligence reports that nuclear weapons made in Pakistan on behalf of Saudi Arabia were ready for delivery.

A former head of Israeli military intelligence informed a conference in Sweden that in case Iran got the bomb, "the Saudis will not wait one month. They [have] already paid for the bomb, they will go to Pakistan and bring what they need to bring" (Urban, 2013). King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz had warned Dennis Ross, the US special envoy to the Middle East, on several occasions that if Iran crossed the threshold, "we will get nuclear weapons"; Saudi Arabia sent numerous similar signals to the US (Bahgat, 2006). The reported visits of Prince Sultan to the Pakistani nuclear research centre in 1999 and 2002 were cited to underline the closeness of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia defense relationship (Urban, 2013).

Gary Samore, who was attached to the centre of the US intelligence and policy web at the White House, was of the view that "just giving Saudi Arabia a handful of nuclear weapons would be a very provocative action" (Bahgat, 2006). Any such action would create huge political difficulties for Pakistan with the World Bank and other donors. The most likely option for Pakistan, in his view, would be to send "its own troops armed with nuclear weapons and with delivery systems to be deployed in Saudi Arabia". The Newsnight contacted both the Pakistani and Saudi governments to verify all such allegations. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed such stories as "speculative, mischievous and baseless",

aimed at maligning Pakistan. While the Saudi Embassy in London issued a statement pointing out that Saudi Arabia was a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and had always worked for a nuclear free Middle East (Bahgat, 2006).

Whatever might be the genuineness of these stories, one thing is clear that Pakistan developed its nuclear and missile technologies with the financial support and encouragement primarily from the leadership of Saudi Arabia (and Libya). There are quite a few other areas where Pakistan and Saudi Arabia held identical views and actively cooperated with each other for joint action. One such area was the situation in Afghanistan from the 1970s onward. One would hardly find any controversy in their policies regarding Afghanistan after its occupation by the Soviet Union.

### Israel Factor and Mutual Defence Agreement

The most recent development in KSA-Pakistan relations is the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, signed on September 17, 2025. Following Israel's September 9 strike on Hamas targets in Qatar, Both KSA and Pakistan have taken noticeable foreign engagements. One of the most significant developments was signing the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA). The pact provided firm grounds for joint military engagement in both peacetime and wartime including an important clause "any act of aggression against one will be treated as an act of aggression against both". In other words, it offers joint deterrence to both sides which means each of the parties has shown written commitments to defend the other.

Strategic timing and regional context are important to comprehend in this regard. Israel's strike on Qatar in August 2025 happened to an eye-opening event for the Gulf countries as well as for the KSA. It led the Gulf states to build strong and enduring defence capabilities. The Israel's horrendous killings of Gazans and the attacks on the neighbouring states including Jordan and others as well as its recent war with Iran helped uniting the apparent opposing blocs in the Arab world. For example, the GCC Joint Defence Council declared that Israel's attacks on Qatar constitutes an attack on all members and announced immediate measures.

In the foregoing context, KSA and Pakistan's security agreement naturally align GCC states as Pakistan maintains strong partnership with the GCC as Pakistan is already having military partnerships with Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain, hence, an institutional mechanism for military cooperation already prevails. The recent KSA-Pak defence agreement will augment Pakistan's defence partnership with the GCC and enhance the joint defence capabilities of the member states.

### Conclusion

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are Muslim majority states. Their bilateral relations have been mutually beneficial in the past and have been marked by peace and harmony. They have benefitted from each other economically and diplomatically. Pakistan has provided technical expertise and advice in the fields of construction and related industries over the years. The overseas Pakistanis who live in Saudi Arabia have contributed to the economic and industrial development of Saudi Arabia as well as Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has helped Pakistan financially in difficult times and has given aid whenever it has faced financial crunch or met with problems in the balance of payments. Saudi financial assistance in the past has been giving aid and financial times at times when Pakistan faced problems of balance of payment or suffered from natural calamities like devastating floods and earthquake (Burke, et. al., 2006). A change in this trend is in the offing. Saudi Arabia's public and private sectors are likely to invest in Pakistan's official and private development projects.

Besides the interaction in the field of economy, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have developed strategic and security relations. They have maintained excellent brotherly relations despite some minor irritants in their bilateral relations in the recent past. Pakistan occupies a unique central position in the Muslim world. Since the 1960s, it has played an increasingly significant role in the security of the Gulf region without regarding itself as a competitor in the region. The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia strategic relationship, which was formally established in the late 1960s, was strengthened during the Afghan crisis. They jointly supported the Afghan Mujahidin in their struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Their bilateral relations remained very close and cordial.

However, there have been a few short periods of misunderstanding between the two countries when they did not understand each other's position on some issues. For instance, misperceptions between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia developed when the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was in power in Pakistan (2008-2013). This was a period when the PPP government cultivated close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran ignoring to take Saudi Arabia into confidence. The high point of Pakistan-Iran relations was the signing of the Pak-Iran Gas Pipeline Agreement to deliver gas from Iran to Pakistan.

Pakistan's focus was on solving its problem of acute shortages of gas and possibly of oil. Besides, it was then facing Shia-Sunni tension that was resulting in violent incidents and loss of human lives throughout Pakistan. Its primary objective in coming closer to Iran was to fill its needs for gas shortages and harmonize Shia-Sunni sectarian tension within Pakistan. The Saudi leadership misperceived this growing harmony in the Pakistan-Iran relations. It felt that Pakistan by coming closer to Iran was ignoring its security sensitivities and its position in the Gulf region. Its befriending of India and signing of a defence agreement with that country was partly a reaction to this situation.

In the general elections of 2013, there was a political change in Pakistan. The PPP failed to get most seats, and the Pakistan Muslim League (N) emerged as the winner, whose leadership had traditionally enjoyed friendly relations with the Saudi leadership. Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, its President, assumed the office of Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif and his family had lived in exile in Saudi Arabia when General Pervez Musharraf had captured power in Pakistan. With Nawaz Sharif as the Prime Minister the harmony and enthusiasm in the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia diplomatic and strategic relations were restored. A sign of goodwill was that Saudi Arabia immediately gave substantial financial assistance (1.5 billion dollars) to Pakistan to alleviate its financial problems.

Unfortunately, this cordiality between Pakistan's civilian leadership and the Saudi leadership did not last for long. The sectarian conflict and the struggle for power in Yemen soon spoiled the course of smooth development of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations. The civil unrest in Yemen had led to civil war and violence. The Houthi Shias emerged as the dominant force in this conflict in Yemen and established their control over northern Yemen. A duly elected president was ousted who enjoyed the support of Saudi Arabia, in all this tussle, the Houthis had the backing of Iran. Their militant stance and subsequent control over Yemen posed a serious threat to the security of Saudi Arabia and other neighbours.

Saudi Arabia whose territories the Houthis bombed saw a grave threat to its security and integrity. It raised a multi-nation force to fight against the Houthis. It invited Pakistan to send its troops to join this force but opinion in Pakistan was sharply divided on this issue. The dominant viewpoint in Pakistan was apprehensive of its fall-out on the sectarian situation within the country and was against sending troops to Saudi Arabia. The issue was brought before the National Assembly which after an intense debate passed a resolution, in which it was decided that Pakistan should maintain its policy of neutrality in the Yemen conflict "so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis" (*The Express Tribune*, 10 April 2015). The Saudi leadership had not expected such a response from Pakistan and was naturally disappointed. Nevertheless, Pakistan sent its troops to facilitate Saudi forces in their fight against Yemen in 2018.

However, Saudi Arabia did not give up and tried to involve Pakistan indirectly. It approached the military leadership in Pakistan. General Raheel Sharif, Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army, agreed to head the multi-nation Muslim force. After retirement, he proceeded to Saudi Arabia to join and head the Islamic Army. The controversy surrounding his decision to join the Islamic Army without getting the necessary NOC from the Government of Pakistan and against the parliamentary neutrality resolution of April 2015 did not block his departure. No serious controversy or rift in the Pakistan polity erupted on General Raheel Sharif's decision to lead the multi-nation Islamic Army in Saudi Arabia. Instead of aggravating sectarianism in Pakistan, it enabled its civil-military leadership to eliminate successfully sectarian violence inside the country. The military-led national action plan, the Zarb-e-Azb, has played a vital role in controlling terrorism in Pakistan.

The policies that Pakistan began to follow, and the changed perception and policies of Saudi Arabia are likely to increase Pakistan-Saudi Arabia cooperation in future. They are bound to cooperate for their own safety, as General

Raheel Sharif emphasized at the end of the joint military exercise in February 2019, that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia would continue to do their utmost to maintain cooperation for mutual safety. Pakistan's efforts for creating Saudi Arabia-Iran harmony have also contributed to softening of Saudi Arabia-Iran tensions.

The most recent Mutual Defence Agreement between KSA and Pakistan reflects their mutual trust rooted in decades-long friendship, mutual societal affinities, and faith. In this regard, both states' cooperation and united action can play a vital role in the welfare of their people as well as in the security of the region. They have played a crucial role in the recent past in freeing Afghanistan from the Soviet occupation, and now by united action can bring peace to that war-torn country. Similarly, their cooperation and unity are bound to play an important role in the maintenance of peace in the unstable region of the Middle East especially in the post-Israel's war on Gaza.

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