

Parliamentary watch: Summary of the debates in the joint session on Yemen crisis

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This summary is drawn from the debates legislators conducted in the joint session of parliament from April 6th to April 10th 2015. All the quotes and figures are extracted from the proceeding of the session, available online through <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>.¹

A joint parliamentary session was held to deliberate upon Pakistan's response to the war in Yemen was held from April 6th to 10th 2015.

The debate of the session was started by a motion moved by federal minister for defence affairs, who also presented Pakistan's policy statement on Yemen crisis.

Legislators across the board appreciated the government's decision of conveying in the joint session, hoping that a consensus response reflective of the aspiration of the people of Pakistan will come forward. Even Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which had earlier boycotted parliamentary proceedings on the grounds of alleged rigging in 2013 elections, participated in the debate.

The policy statement touched upon three areas: evacuation of Pakistanis from Yemen, request by Saudi Arabia for Pakistani troops, and Pakistan's response to that request. Elaborating the policy statement, the defence minister said that the Saudis have

¹ The debates were conducted in the 4th joint sitting of the second parliamentary year of the National Assembly, having tenure from 2013 to 2018. Proceedings of the sitting can be accessed online.

Day 1: <http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429011384_480.pdf>
Day 2: <http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429269794_198.pdf>

Day 3: <http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429511214_379.pdf>

Day 4: <http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429511354_644.pdf>

Day 5: <http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1429511677_669.pdf>

requested aircraft, naval vessels, and ground troops, to fight alongside the coalition forces striking in Yemen.

Sharing the parameters of any Pakistani response, the defence minister said that Pakistan values its ties with Saudi Arabia, any “violation” of its “territorial integrity” will, therefore evoke “strong response” from Pakistan, which (like Saudi Arabia) condemns the “overthrow of the legitimate government of Yemen.”

Pakistan’s position on Yemen

Pakistan shared Saudi Arabia’s position on Yemen, torn by civil war. To Pakistani government, the overthrow of Hadi government by Houthi rebels in late 2014 is overthrow of a brotherly Muslim country by non-state actors using force. To support Hadi’s government is to stand with a legitimate government.

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Several legislators supported government’s positing on the overall issue. A government minister wondered if “we will allow rebels to takeover Pakistan.” Another

legislator set aside the notion of Yemen conflict being a government-opposition tussle, terming it “open terrorism” by rebels.

According to the defence minister, it was President Hadi, who later escaped to Saudi Arabia, had requested the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for military action, under Article 51 of the United Nation’s charter. The request for defence support too meant Pakistan become part of the GCC-led coalition, which has launched air strikes in Yemen.

But, several other legislators questioned this stance, asking the government to stick to legality. First of all, Pakistan should learn whether the air strikes are legally sanctioned by the Security Council. Yemen, some parliamentarians said, is as sovereign a country as KSA is.

Several legislators questioned the “conflicting claims” on the issue of sending troops to Yemen: has the government already committed troops or is it really asking the parliament for guidance?

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf’s Shireen Mazari wondered if the Article 7 is really been invoked, asking which country has come under armed attack. In any case, Oman, Yemen’s neighbor, is not part of the coalition.

Likewise, another legislator from the same party, Shah Mehmood sought clarification on the air strikes in Yemen, asking if it is aggression or not, given that tomorrow, such acts can be questioned.

“Conflicting claims”

Several legislators questioned the “conflicting claims” on the issue of sending troops to Yemen: has the government already committed troops or is it really asking the parliament for guidance?

Some, for instance, made a reference to the news appearing in Saudi media, according to which Pakistan has already made solid commitments to KSA. One legislator pointed that Pakistani flags were already spotted in the coalition countries attacking Yemen. The parameters guiding Pakistan’s response to the Saudi request also appeared supportive of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the role of the defence minister, one said, should come after the foreign ministry takes a decision of engagement in Yemen crisis; that the policy statement was uttered by defence minister hinted at a decision already been taken.

As if responding to some such concerns, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had clarified in the debate that not all details can be shared in parliament. While some legislators questioned the utility of holding joint session, others asked for conveying

an in-camera meeting to deliberate upon all details.

Causes of conflict in Yemen, and Pakistan’s role

Legislators explained different causes for internal chaos in Yemen, mostly on these lines:

- *Autonomy*

The chaos in Yemen manifests struggle for autonomy within Yemen. The country’s six northern regions, populated by Houthis, are demanding autonomy for long. Because they were denied powers, they overthrew the Hadi government. A way out thus would be a consensus-backed interim government, which represents all regions.

- *Tribal war*

The crisis in Yemen is basically a tribal war or “internal political power struggle” between tribes in Yemen. What is happening in Yemen has occurred there several times in the past five decades, said PML-Q’s Mushahid Hussain. A legislator from Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) said Yemen, like FATA, is a tribal society. To properly deal with the issue, better first properly understand their tribal culture.

- *Inter-state fight*

Yemen-Saudi Arabia conflict is issue between two sovereign countries, which has often at odds for some time. Houthis themselves were once KSA's allies, recalled one legislator.

- *Intra-Arab fight*

One legislator even termed it an "internal fight of Arabs." Already, Arab League has constituted a force of 40,000 troops, saying it is their fight. One member said that while India enjoys observer status in Arab League, Pakistan doesn't.

- *Proxy war*

Yemen has become a battlefield of proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, several legislators either said directly or hinted indirectly.

One legislator, for instance expressed concern over the kind of support Houthi rebels are getting in the form of weapons and ballistic missiles. Head of Jamiat Ahle-Hadith (JAH) said that many rebels smuggled weapons across the border towards Saudi Arabia, to the point that the KSA has to evict Yemenis once. These rebels, he said, found support from Iran. Still, he said, Saudis didn't intervene in Yemen, until its president asked for help.

- *The Arab Spring*

The evolution of conflict in Yemen cannot be studied in separation to the latest developments in the Middle East, which, in the words of one

legislator, is being "reshaped". Another said, "The status quo in Middle East is unraveling", pointing towards "a revolt against longstanding family dictatorships."

Pakistani officials were therefore suggested to think about plugging itself in the changing environment in the Middle East.

- *Crisis in the Muslim world*

A few, however, hinted towards introspection. Advising not to pin all blame on external elements, a legislator asked, "Who asked Qaddafi [Libyan President] to enforce personal dictatorship for forty years?" One legislators asked religious parties, parliamentarians, and intellectuals to come up with response.

- *Great game*

Some legislators, mostly from the religious parties, read the conflict in Yemen as yet another element of the "great game of superpowers", eager to divide Arab countries and exploit resources of the Muslim world. Yemen, they said, was a peaceful country, where tribes were made to fight each other, resulting into today's situation.

- *Sectarianism*

Some legislators also analyzed the conflict's sectarian dimensions, along Shia-Sunni lines.

To be sure, many legislators reject the notion that Yemen crisis is a sectarian

war. JUI-F's chief, Fazlur Rehman, set aside the notion of the conflict as sectarianism, simply because unlike media, Iranian Constitution categorize Houthis, a sect within Shias, as Sunnis. The point was reiterated by another legislator, saying that if studied deeply, Houthis, also known as "Ansarullahs" are "are more towards the Hanafi school of thought with modifications."

JUI-F's chief questioned the sectarian impression of the war, asking if anyone said that the attack on Taliban or on Saddam was an attack on Sunnis.

PML-Q's Mushahid Hussain Syed, for instance, termed the conflict as tribal power struggle, which has become a proxy war in Middle East.

Yet, should the conflict drag on, legislators argued, the sectarian inclination could not be denied. One legislator said that the perception is that of Sunni alliance taking on Houthis in Yemen. Another said that should Pakistan go there, militants associated with Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) can make its way in Pakistan, via Afghanistan, and fan hatred.

- *Beyond single causes*

Some legislators mixed the set of explanations discussed above, offering a more nuanced view. PML-Q's Mushahid Hussain Syed, for instance, termed the conflict as tribal power struggle, which has become a proxy war in Middle East, where KSA and Iran are supporting opposite sides.

One parliamentarian, Hasil Bizenjo from Balochistan National Party, questioned the utility of discussing the internal situation of Yemen; the parliament, he said, is unnecessarily discussing tribes and sub-tribes of Yemen. Warning against such a diagnosis, he reminded how Pakistan blundered in Afghanistan when Pakistan charted its support on the basis of ethnic groups.

Balancing Iran-Saudi relations

Saudi fears

Besides debating the issue of Yemen, legislators discussed at length the threat to Saudi Arabia.

Parliamentarians largely supported Pakistan's relation with Saudi Arabia, pointing to following incidents:

- Two million Pakistanis work in Saudi Arabia; the remittances they send support Pakistan's economy a lot.

- Saudi Arabia has helped Pakistan in natural disasters, with one legislator claiming that King Abdullah personally asked for money for Pakistan when it was hit by earthquake.
 - The Saudis have even helped Pakistani political leaders, such as by bailing out Nawaz Sharif when he was removed in a coup in 1999.
 - After 1998 nuclear tests, when the international community was imposing sanctions against Pakistan, the KSA gave Pakistan free oil. And last year, in 2014, the KSA gave Pakistan handsome amount.
 - Saudi-Pakistan's military-to-military ties are also cordial: since 1981, Pakistani troops are stationed there; a brigade is lodged in Tabuk, and another at Khamis Mushahid. When, in 1991, Saddam attacked Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Pakistan sent brigade plus a battalion.
 - Some legislators claimed that Saudis has always been ready to support Pakistan in its war with India. One legislator claimed that during 1965 war, Saudi King Faisal not only sent Pakistan planes but also the spare parts. Likewise, another recalled that in 2001, when India stationed troops on the border with Pakistan, he found that Saudis, unlike others, readily supporting Pakistan.
 - Another claimed King Faisal also warned Bangladesh that if it mistreated the Pakistani Prisoner of Wars, Saudi Arabia will treat the Bangladeshi prisoners the same way.
 - Earlier, in the start of the debate, the defence minister said that many Pakistanis were safely evacuated from Yemen, thanks also to Saudi Arabia which provided Pakistan with "safe corridor" and "no-fly zones".
- Legislators underscored that Pakistani Muslims, like others, deem themselves duty-bound to secure the holy sanctuaries against any threat.
- Several, however, asked for delinking the protection of the holy sites from Saudi Arabia's. PPP's Aitzaz said that "Saudi state, Saudi government, and the two holy sites" are three different things. MQM's Farooq Sattar asked for differentiating between "House of Kaaba" and "House of Saud". Another legislator said even when the Saudi dynasty didn't exist, Mecca and Medina still existed.
- JAH's Sajid Mir questioned this distinction, terming it "academic and artificial". Saudi state, he said, is the land of noble sanctuaries; its rulers, "servant of the sanctuaries". He recalled that King Fahd refused to be called as "His Majesty", and instead preferred "Servants of the

Sanctuaries". It is the same state, Mir said, which expanded the sanctuaries, providing more and more space to pilgrims. The Saudis, he said, supported Pakistan, without saying they will be neutral. And therefore, it must be defended.

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Senator Aitzaz Ahsan sought elaboration on what entails violation of KSA's sovereignty, as mentioned in the policy statement: will Saudi's sovereignty be threatened by internal infighting or external attack? One legislator wondered if tomorrow, Saudis start revolting against their government, will Pakistan go and shoot them, too? MQM's Tahir Mashadhi wondered if the Kingdom is "foreseeing uprising of their own people", due to which they are "hesitant to use their own forces."

Some likened Yemen is to Saudi Arabia, what Afghanistan is to Pakistan. Instability in Yemen will affect KSA, they argued, therefore, having legitimate grievances.

One legislator, however, argued that the troops request has come in the

context of Yemen crisis, not for Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity. The issue, therefore, should be the former, not the latter. In any case, others said, Saudis have not attacked Yemen, not the other way around.

Several legislators wondered if Saudi integrity would even be threatened by the chaos from Yemen. It was reminded that a major city of KSA lies 2000 miles away from Yemen, which, in any case, is militarily inferior to KSA's, having the region's most-sophisticated air power. One legislator said, "Saudis' airpower would not allow the movement of any troops in the deserts, just like the Americans killed Saddam forces evicting Kuwait." Another said, the KSA already is installing barbed wires along Yemen.

However, Saudi's concerns were justified too, in the debates. Some likened Yemen is to Saudi Arabia, what Afghanistan is to Pakistan. Instability in Yemen will affect KSA, they argued, therefore, having legitimate grievances. The debate also referred to securing the Gulf of Eden, a major global trade route. Moreover, KSA faces a major challenge from violent outfits like ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

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KSA, chief of JAH said, fears of being encircled by Iran, which has also been supporting monarchy in Syria and rebels in Bahrian. Thus, to the north and south, KSA faces, on the one hand militant groups and what KSA thinks are Iran-backed regimes or actors, Houthi being one of them.

Iran, the next-door neighbour

Assuming the divergent interests of Iran on the issue, some legislators warned against damaging Pakistan-Iran relations. Iran too has expressed its concerns to Pakistan over its expected involvement in Yemen.

The two countries share 780 km border. Hasil Bizenjo said that “closer neighbor” is different than “distant neighbor”. Iran will be the source of the much-needed gas pipeline in the future. Some legislators from the western provinces, KP and Balochistan, also warned that Pakistan should avoid getting into a situation where its western border with Iran gets conflict prone. The nuclear agreement Iran signed with the west show Iran is opening up in international arena. The regional situation around Pakistan will be different, if sanctions on Iran are lifted.

Solutions

The military option

On the option of sending troops to Yemen, legislators offered mixed

history, and therefore mixed lesson:

- One legislator said that Pakistan has never sent troops to the Arab world. Only once did Bhutto send Pakistani pilots to assist Syrian Air Force in the six-day war in 1973. That assistance was meant to fight Israel, not any other Muslim country, he said. Today’s realities are different.
- Senator Farhatullah Babar said that in 1967, General Ayub sent Brigadier Zia ul Haq to Jordan, where evicted out the leaders of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The same leaders, he said, later refused to support Pakistan in our Kashmir cause. Another legislator said that the incident is known as “Black September” in which over 15000 Palestinians died. However, Ijaz ul Haq, son of Zia ul Haq, contested that Pakistani troops didn’t go there; instead, four officers were stationed there.
- Legislators reminded how Pakistan continues to suffer for jumping into Afghan war in 1980s. Likewise, since 2001, Pakistan continues to suffer further for participating in American war, some said.

To be sure, legislators reminded that under the existing security agreement with KSA, the troops in Saudi are not mandated to fight in

Yemen. The troops are not there for combat, but to defend the KSA.

Some legislators argued that committing troops to a distant land don't sit well with Pakistan's existing resource. The country is already thin on resources, as troops are busy in North Waziristan, and conditions on the border with India are equally unfavorable. The defence minister also said, according to a legislator, that already 40% of the troops are committed in war against terror. The country's war doctrine, said a legislator, calls for checking internal security threats.

Several said Pakistan should not send troops simply because the war in Yemen is not Pakistan's war.

PML-Q's Mushahid recalled that some time ago, the foreign secretary shared that Pakistan refused sending troops to the international coalition against ISIS, because the move, the secretary said, will be diversion from the country's internal fight against militancy.

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MQM's Farooq Sattar rejected the military option for being pre-emptive in nature now. "If we give Saudis the right", he said, "tomorrow, India too

can express the right of pre-emptive strikes."

PPP's Farhatullah Babar called for limited defence support, "only for the protection of installations in Saudi Arabia", like training facilities, logistical support, intelligence sharing, and mountain warfare assistance and medical relief.

Another legislator said that like the U.S. on Iraq, Saudi Arabia and GCC countries, forming "coalition of the willing" didn't go through the UN's Security Council. "If we bypass the UN now", the legislator said, "tomorrow, non-super powers will fear that the precedent can be set against them." Article 7, the legislator argued, has been sidestepped.

Another legislator said that the military at best can have advisory. Even if we are to send troops, send the non-officers, another said.

Legislators advised the government of several steps, some of them being the following: ceasefire in Yemen; cessation of fire in Yemen; constitution of interim, consensus government in Yemen; dispatch of humanitarian assistance to Yemen.

Some legislators supported the enforcing peacekeeping force. PPP's

Babar said that if Pakistan has to send troops, it can send them as peacekeepers under UN's mandate. Already, Pakistan has the largest representation in the peacekeeping force. Another legislator asked the OIC to form peacekeeping force for Yemen; the 40,000 Arab League-constituted troops could be shaped accordingly, one of them said.

Diplomacy, foremost

Many called Pakistan to play the role of mediator, for which Pakistan has to stay neutral. Even the government representative admitted that Pakistan is willing to defuse the crisis and find a political settlement. One member, however, questioned if Houthi rebels will accept Pakistan as mediator.

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Many legislators advised the PM to engage in what can be termed as shuttle diplomacy, by calling ambassadors, meeting leaders of other countries, or sending his cabinet members for that purpose. One legislator, Siraj, said government should form a delegation, comprising of representatives of different sects.

Legislators also called for invoking Organization of Islamic Countries, which include Saudi Arabia and Yemen. A legislator recalled that in 1997 Pakistan-hosted OIC summit included Crown Prince Abdullah from Saudi Arabia and President Rafsanjani from Iran. Some said both Pakistan and Turkey can jointly co-host officials of the other countries.

Another legislator advised the government to ask China for enforcing ceasefire through the UN's Security Council. Pakistan, another said, may try to opt for a seat at Arab League.