

Crisis in Yemen: threats of another proxy war in Pakistan?

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On April 10th 2015, the Pakistani Parliament, after deliberation in joint sittings, decided to maintain neutrality on civil war in Yemen. The consensus resolution called for maintaining neutrality, opposing sending troops to Yemen, but resolving to protect territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (*Dawn*, 2015).

At the start of the joint sitting, Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, sharing policy statement on Yemen crisis, revealed that the KSA had requested the government of Pakistan to send its fighter jets (to pound bombs on the rebels) and ships (to check the delivery of arms and wherewithal, allegedly being supplied by Iran). In the same debate, the defence minister, while laying out Pakistan's sacrifices in the war on terror, even questioned as to which country came to help Pakistan in its long war.

To be sure, even though parliamentarians vowed to help the

KSA, should there be any threat to it, they largely conceded there was no imminent danger to the territorial integrity of the Kingdom or the two sacred sites.

Broadly, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), and Awami National Party (ANP) openly and strongly opposed the idea of sending troops to Yemen. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) stayed somewhat vague. The religious parties looked unsure on how to react. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), two main religious-political parties subscribing to Sunni sect of Islam, also opposed dispatching troops to Yemen. The PTI rather took pride in having pushed the government to insert the word "neutrality" in the original resolution, said to be drafted by the Foreign Office (*Express Tribune*, 2015).

MPs feared that by jumping into Yemen quagmire, Pakistan would face another wave of sectarian

violence. While a few of them rejected the perception that civil war in Yemen was not a Shiite-Sunni conflict, many believed the violence would have deep repercussions for Pakistan, in case it decided to take sides. Parliamentarians argued both Iran and the KSA were furthering their strategic interests in Yemen, from which Pakistan should stay away. By joining the KSA-led coalition against Houthi rebels, Pakistan might annoy neighbouring Iran, several lawmakers feared.

After the Parliament passed that unanimous resolution, the UAE's minister of state for foreign affairs, Dr Anwar Mohammad Gargash, warned Pakistan of paying a heavy price for its neutrality. Pakistan and Turkey, he said, must abandon the so-called mantra of neutrality and help Arab countries quell the rebellion in Yemen (*Khaleej Times*, 2015).

Many saw his reference to Yemen as an epicentre of crisis for the entire Muslim as exaggerating. Yet, many believed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif tried to allay the concerns of Arab countries, by, for instance, terming Houthis as "rebels" and clarifying that Pakistan was against the illegal occupation by rebels of Yemen's territory.

To be sure, Pakistan is heavily dependent on Saudi economic assistance. Around two million Pakistanis work in the KSA and UAE, contributing over \$15 billion annual in foreign remittances. Pakistan's economic cooperation with Iran is not yet ideal, even though the two share strategic interests. But, more than that, KSA and Iran fund the individuals and entities of their choices, in Pakistan.

Proxy war in Pakistan

As political parties were debating the issue inside parliament, several religious outfits, blatantly divided on sectarian lines, started staging street protests. The outfits like Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) even vowed to send their *mujahedeen* to fight alongside Saudi forces, if Pakistan refused to send its troops. The outfits hailing from Shiite school of thought warned against accepting Saudi demands.

For long, Pakistan has been a favourite place of both Iran and the KSA to fight their proxy war on sectarian lines, to the disadvantage of the people of Pakistan.

Many seminaries in Pakistan have long been regarded as incubators of religious extremism and

sectarianism. They provide manpower to violent extremist entities belonging to Shiite, Sunni, Deobandi and other sects. Several efforts were launched to reform the seminaries, but failed to yield the desired results owing to multiple reasons (Witter, 2007).

In early 2015, the interior affairs ministry informed Senate, in a written reply, that “financial assistance for religious or sectarian purposes was discouraged, because it was detrimental to law and order and sectarian harmony in the country” (Gishkori, 2015).

At the same time, Pakistani government admitted about over 70 seminaries receiving foreign funds amounting to 300 million rupees in 2013 and 2014 (Gishkori, 2015).

A sorry beginning

Islamization of Pakistan during the entire 1980s sowed the seeds of poison ivy, which has now developed into a full-grown tree. And, what all the successive governments did was to chop off the branches, instead of eradicating the roots. The influx of petro-dollars and hard cash from Washington during the Soviet war plagued the Pakistani

society with elements, which continue to haunt the entire nation.

That Islamization, led by military ruler General Zia, was tilting towards Sunni Islam, thereby alienating Shiites, “who saw it as a majoritarian attempt to make the country more Sunni” (Rafiq, 2014). The campaign coincided with Iran’s Islamic revolution, which revived Shia political activism across the Muslim world, including Pakistan.

This contrasted sharply with the religious and sectarian diversity of Pakistan. From the onset, differences were set aside in favour of peaceful living. But since 1980s, Pakistan experienced sectarian divide, aggravating further after 9/11, when militants turned against the state. Largely, Sunni/Deobandi militants have attacked Shia Muslims (Rafiq, 2014).

Iran’s influence

Iran, activated by the revolution in 1979, was also wary of the situation in Pakistan, which, in the 1980s, was turning into a stronghold of Saudi Arabia.

In Pakistan, Shias boldly claimed their rights and representation, believing that Iran’s Khomeini would

support them; that their model of political activism would succeed in challenging authority. Khomeini, once, sent a message to Pakistan's General Ziaul Haq, telling him if he mistreated the Shia, "he (Khomeini) would do to him what he had done to the Shah." In 1979, when tens of thousands of Pakistan's Shias travelled to Islamabad demanding exemption from Islamic taxes based on Sunni law, the Pakistani government had no choice but to concede.

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has spent blood and ample treasure to make its influence felt all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean. Iran's attempts were resisted by Arabs, through Sunni sectarianism (Nasr, 2014).

Saudis's fears and hopes

To the Saudi monarchy, post-revolutionary Iran represents a direct adversary, both for ideological and strategic regions. The two have been eager to wrest power in the Muslim world.

Earlier, in 1980s, Pakistan became a fertile ground for the KSA to safeguard its strategic interest. During the Afghan War, Saudi Arabia wholeheartedly backed the

Afghan and Arab *mujahedeen*. According to one estimate, the Saudi government split the cost of that with the U.S., bearing cost of more \$20 billion (Atwan, 2006). Fundraising committees were formed under the chairmanship of Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the governor of Riyadh district. Imams at mosques were encouraged to deliver fiery sermons exhorting young men to join the fight.

Moreover, the relations of Saudi royal family with Sharifs in Pakistan date back in history. When Pakistan detonated nuclear devices, in May 1998, the KSA doled out Pakistan, then ruled by Nawaz Sharif, oil worth of \$2 billion. A year later, when he was ousted in a military coup, the Saudis got him and his family off the hook, providing them refuge in KSA. In 2007, Nawaz Sharif came back to Pakistan, his return asked by King Abdullah, to participate in elections in 2008. When five years later, Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister for another term, the state of economy was in tatters. Once again, the KSA gifted \$1.5 billion in Pakistan's kitty.

Although Iran and KSA have been waging proxy fight inside countries like Pakistan for long, the recent nuclear deal of Iran with the west

raises a further point of concern for the Saudi Arabia. To the Kingdom, the deal will open more space to Iran.

As of now, not only the KSA demand fighter jets and ships from Pakistan, but a large contingent of its soldiers to participate in ground operation, whenever it is launched inside Yemen. As discussed, the Pakistani Parliament had already rejected the demand and urged the government to stay neutral.

Demanding troops could have been understandable and normal, but what perturbed many people in power corridors was the KSA specific demand of Sunni soldiers for Yemen. Besides, the KSA also wanted that all army officers who would visit Saudi Arabia as part of training or assistance program should hail from Sunni sects (Muhammad, 2015). To some strategic analysts, this was a pathetic attempt to divide the Pakistan army on sectarian grounds.

To be sure, despite all that so-called goodwill gestures and positive attitude, the KSA never made an attempt to heavily invest in Pakistan. The entry of China with \$46 billion of investment over next few years, Pakistani government is thinking differently. One of the main conditions of Chinese to keep their

investment secure was that Pakistan should maintain good relations with its neighbours, especially Iran and Afghanistan. And by taking side with the KSA in Yemen civil war, Pakistani leadership does not want to annoy the Chinese.

Fallout: sectarian violence

What is pertinent to note is that sectarian difference between Shiites and Sunnis didn't turn violent until 1979. Two external events, the Islamic Revolution in Iran under Khomeini and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, rather set the path to violence in Pakistan.

According to South Asian Terrorism Portal, more than 5000 Pakistanis were killed in sectarian violence since 1989. Majority of the assassinated were Shiites.

After 9/11, hard-core Sunni sectarian groups landed under the umbrella of al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). They unleashed an unchecked killing spree across Pakistan, much because there has been a strong nexus between sectarian groups, Taliban, and al-Qaeda (Rehman, 2012). Sectarian violence would be a long-term challenge.

The sectarian tension refused to die down permanently, though there are regular intervals in which it subsided only to blow after any triggering event. An example was witnessed in late 2013 in the city of Rawalpindi. When the main Muharram procession was passing outside a Deobandi mosque in the city, the mosque's cleric reportedly passed objectionable remarks against Shiites. Some mourners allegedly entered the mosque and set it on fire. Several people were killed. Later on, the stalwarts of Sunni/Deobandi religious and proscribed outfits resorted to violence and burnt a few *imambargahs* (Shia mosques) in the vicinity. The tension and peril gripped the city for weeks. In order to control the situation, the authorities had to impose curfew.

Catch-22 situation

Pakistan seemingly is a catch-22 situation on how to respond to the lingering Yemen crisis.

If it comes openly in support of KSA, the next-door Iran will complain, besides possibly imperilling the much-needed Chinese investment in the country. If Pakistan, on the other hand, rejects KSA's stance on Yemen, or even stay neutral for long, Saudi

Arabia might be forced to revisit its historic ties with Pakistan.

In both cases, sectarian outfits of one or other school of thought, with or without backing from KSA or Iran, will raise voice against Pakistan's stance.

Still further, the persistence of Yemen crisis will be detrimental for the internal security and economic stability of Pakistan.

Conclusion

In the given situation, for Pakistan a steady progress on long-term measures is necessary, which include neutralizing sectarian outfits working under different nomenclatures, reforming seminary, modernizing curriculum, bringing sectarian mongers and criminals to justice, striking balance in relations with Iran and KSA, persuading both countries to find out an amicable solution to Yemen crisis, etc.

One thing Pakistani leadership can do is to build a national narrative, that whatever is happening in Yemen will never threaten territorial integrity of the KSA. This will subside the growing concerns among majority Sunni/Deobandi population of Pakistan, which now

believes that the two holiest sites are under attack because of Iranian conspiracies against the KSA.

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