

SCEPTRED SWAY

A war in Yemen exposes the chinks in Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia

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MOHAMMED HAMOUD / ANADOLL AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES

IN THE 1960s, a proxy war broke out in Yemen. At the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic Egyptian leader, was determined to spread his doctrine of pan-Arabism in the region. From his base of power in mighty Cairo, Nasser began stirring a revolt among the Yemeni soldiery with the aim of dislodging the monarchy there, in much the same manner he had overthrown Egypt's own King Farouk a decade earlier. Fearful of the spread of secular nationalism, the Saudi monarchy extended its support to the royalists propping up Yemen's Zaydi throne, freshly vacated by the death of Imam Ahmed, a clownish figure whose private amusements

were said to include drowning dwarves and playing with toy trains.

The Saudis couldn't challenge the Egyptians alone, so they enlisted, among others (including Iran), the support of Pakistan—a fellow Muslim country eager to operate as a pro-American ally in the Cold War. During his reign, General Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military ruler, dispatched Pakistani pilots who slipped into Saudi-marked jets to strafe the republicans from the air, while Pakistani weap-

ABOVE: In the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, a building destroyed by Saudi-led Arab coalition forces fighting against Houthis.

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onry was lucratively hawked to the ultimately triumphant royalists on the ground.

Half a century later, following a series of complex Yemeni tribal struggles, history attempts to repeat itself. In 2015, it is the Zaydis, in the form of Houthi rebels, ranged against the Saudis, who began to conduct air strikes in Yemen in March. The Houthis have formed an alliance with the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, whose brutal and venal dictatorship lasted over three decades before ending in 2012. The Saudis back his successor and former deputy, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and fear that the Houthis represent a front for the Saudis' chief rivals for regional influence—the Iranians.

To help thwart Tehran's ambitions, the new Saudi king, Salman, assembled an impressively broad coalition in Yemen. The Gulf countries were all on board, with the exception of Oman, which preens itself as the Switzerland of the Arabian Peninsula. The once wayward Qataris shuffled back into line. The poorer monarchies of Morocco and Jordan chipped in. And Egypt, with the most powerful Arab army, also said it would render services in return for the billions the Saudis have lavished on the one-man rule of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. (Even Omar Bashir, the Sudanese ruler wanted for war crimes, proffered a modest flock of fighter jets, one of which was soon shot down.)

Pakistanis were surprised to learn that they, too, were being counted among those fighting. It is well known that Pakistani troops were garrisoned in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s, in large enough numbers, as the British-Pakistani writer Tariq Ali once quipped, to mount a takeover of the country. In the teeth of popular domestic opposition, the Pakistanis even dispatched troops to Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War of 1991. The prime minister at the time was the same man Pakistan has now: Nawaz Sharif.

It is notorious that Sharif is intimate with the Saudi rulers. When his second government conducted Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998, the United States imposed severe sanctions on the country. Relief came from the Saudis, who supplied subsidised oil. Given oil prices had already fallen to their lowest levels, it wasn't the most generous of gestures, but was nevertheless widely appreciated. When Sharif was

toppled by Pervez Musharraf's coup the following year, it was the Saudis who diplomatically crowbarred him out of jail and set him up in exile in Jeddah, with a special business loan.

Since returning to power in 2013, Sharif has solicited further favours from the Saudis, such as the "friendly gift" of \$1.5 billion to shore up a collapsing Pakistani rupee, which has since recovered and held its position. This is not a gift that the Saudis would offer just anyone. The former president Asif Ali Zardari, whom the Saudis intensely disliked, was rebuffed when he went to plead for the deference of oil payments in 2008. Nearly two million Pakistanis are employed within the kingdom, and form a large source of remittances; the Saudis also maintain their historic relationship with the Pakistan army.

So confident were the Saudis of Islamabad's support that Riyadh announced it on 25 March, before Pakistan's citizens even realised a war was underway in Yemen. The news, accompanied by Saudi press reports of Sharif issuing breathless words of support, triggered alarm among Pakistan's media, political opposition, and ordinary citizens that the prime minister had quietly struck a deal with the Saudis. The fierce opposition to Sharif's suspected indulgence of his benefactors forced the prime minister to call a special joint session of parliament in April—one which he knew would be near-universally hostile.

For the Saudis, the appeal of Pakistan is obvious. As the silk-tongued former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal never tires of complaining to Western audiences, Iran has been "interfering in Arab affairs" for decades now. By backing Hamas and Hezbollah in Gaza and Lebanon, it challenges the Saudis' claim to be the principal supporters of the Palestinians. Thwarting Saudi policy in the region, the Iranians also back Bashar Assad in Syria, the government in Iraq, the opposition Wafaq party in the Saudi protectorate of Bahrain, and the Houthis in Yemen. To the Saudis, Iranian influence poses an even bigger threat than ISIS or al-Qaeda. And to stave off their fears of encirclement, the Saudis wanted to pull in support from around Iran's borders instead, with Pakistan as a nuclear-armed counterweight to its east.

But it is the very fact of a shared border that makes Pakistani parliamentarians anxious. "The Saudis are our brothers and Iran is our neighbour," the opposition politician Imran Khan told reporters outside parliament. By picking a side, Khan suggested, Pakistan risked inviting the flames of a regional war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran that could take on a sectarian colouring. It was better for Pakistan to remain neutral. It already has enough problems at home.

Pakistan has already committed 40 per cent of its troops to the fight against Taliban militants along its western border with Afghanistan, the defence minister told the parlia-

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ment. The border with Iran curves along the province of Balochistan, where anti-Shia groups massacre Hazaras, and a Baloch separatist insurgency flickers. Already, Pakistan accuses India—to furious denials—of clandestinely destabilising the province. Interference from its large, powerful neighbour to the west is unthinkable: Pakistan isn't going to risk general Qassem Soleimani—Iran's famously itinerant “shadow commander,” and an Instagram enthusiast—adding a selfie from Balochistan to his album of war tourism from the Greater Middle East.

Earning the enmity of Iran carries other perils. Pakistan is home to the second largest Shia population in the world. There are no exact figures, but an estimated one out of every five Pakistanis is Shia. The country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was Shia. Pakistan has had Shias as president and army chief, with rarely a public comment on their affiliation. Unlike the heterodox Ahmadi sect—which was excommunicated at Saudi urging in 1974—Shias have been regarded not as a minority, but one of three strains of mainstream Islam, alongside ascetic Barelvis and literalist Deobandis. By participating in the Saudi-led coalition of Sunni-majority countries, Pakistan would risk taking on an explicitly sectarian identity.

In case the Saudis hadn't noticed, Pakistan is currently embroiled in a war of its own. Some 170,000 troops are currently engaged along the Afghan border, with the fiercest fighting taking place in North Waziristan, the most hazardous of its seven tribal areas. It hasn't helped matters that last year, the Line of Control that divides Kashmir saw the worst fighting in a decade, with claims of egregious violations traded between India and Pakistan against the roar of fierce shelling overhead. When Saudi Arabia and other carbon-rich monarchies that fringe the Persian Gulf ask why Pakistan hasn't come to their aid during their time of need, many Pakistani citizens turn the question right back at them. The world's largest energy supplier has remained impassive while Pakistan endures a crippling electricity crisis.

Saudi Arabia is accused of playing an even more controversial role on the security front in Pakistan. As some of its most lancing critics point out, extremist madrassas are

showered with cash from Gulf donors. A leaked US State Department cable estimated that as much as \$100 million pours into madrassa coffers each year without any serious effort to interdict these schools. The return on that investment was on clear display this April, as a parade of hard-line Deobandi groups, including violent anti-Shia outfits, took to the streets of Pakistan's main cities to rouse support for an armed campaign to help Saudi Arabia against the Houthis. These groups craftily cast it as a battle to defend Islam's two holy cities, when, of course, they are under no threat from the Houthis who are confined, hundreds of miles away, to Yemen.

The Saudis have long been adept at arrogating to themselves the status of Islam's temporal rulers. “Saudi Arabia, as the birthplace of Islam, and the leader of the Muslim and Arab worlds, has a unique responsibility,” Turki al-Faisal, also a former ambassador to the US, once told a Washington audience. But such claims have long been contested. Some of Pakistan's parliamentarians perked up during the special debate on Yemen to point out that while the mosques of Mecca and Medina lie within the desert kingdom, they belong to all Muslims.

By trading on their religious prestige, the Saudis successfully evade public scrutiny in Pakistan. Unlike the Americans—whom the Saudis have keenly supported since the formation of the Saud kingdom—they are scarcely held to account for their role in creating the Afghan mujahideen, or underwriting Pakistan's military dictators. Nor are questions asked about the racist and degrading treatment of Pakistani labourers slaving away in the kingdom, placed in an unofficial caste system above Bangladeshis and Afghans but below Sudanese and Egyptians.

The worry had been that vital remittances, around \$1 billion a month from across the Gulf, might be choked off. After all, when Ali Abdullah Saleh backed Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War, Yemeni expatriates were thrown out of the kingdom. The poor country the Saudis now profess to defend and support was plunged into economic ruin. Such jitters aren't necessarily overblown. After Pakistan's parliament passed its resolution avowing neutrality in Yemen, a junior minister from the United Arab Emirates warned that “a great price” may have to be paid for the exercise in democracy.

The threat riled some Pakistanis, but it also made many proud that their elected representatives took a stand for national dignity. They weren't going to be suborned by petro-dollars to take part in a likely ruinous foreign war. “The Pakistani parliament has taken the right decision for the right reasons,” the journalist Fahd Husain wrote in the *Express Tribune*. If the sheikhs “don't like it, they can go jump into their oil wells.” Within hours of the column receiving widespread praise on social media, it mysteriously vanished from the newspaper's website. ■