

UNDERSTANDING PAKISTAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN

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Scholarship on Pakistan's relations with its neighbors predominantly focuses on India, Afghanistan and, most recently, China. Little research is conducted on relations between Pakistan and Iran. This is an obvious gap, given the cultural and religious links between these two neighbors that share a 909-kilometer border.¹ Their relationship is often viewed as peripheral to Pakistan's relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia, India and Afghanistan.² A prominent source on Pakistan's foreign policy, Abdul Sattar's *Pakistan's Foreign Policy 1947-2016: A Concise History*, does not even dedicate a subsection to Iran.³ Furthermore, little attention has been given to the impact of domestic factors on Pakistan's foreign-policy choices. Although some scholars have explored the role of identity,⁴ the interplay between domestic considerations and external behavior remains understudied. As will be argued below, this

dynamic has significant bearing on Pakistan's policy on Iran and sheds light on behind-the-scene dynamics that are often overlooked.

Since its beginning in 1947, the relationship between Iran and Pakistan has transformed significantly. At first, "Iran was a friend and brother."⁵ There was significant bilateral cooperation in cultural, economic and security matters; for example, Iran provided moral and material support to Pakistan in its 1965 and 1971 wars against India.⁶ Pakistan was a front-line U.S. ally during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-88) and this affected Pakistan-Iran relations.⁷ According to Sattar, "The Iranian media perception of Pakistan as a proxy for U.S. interests in the region was painful to Pakistanis, who value Iran as a friend and a fraternal neighbor."⁸ During the 1980s, Pakistan's closeness to the Gulf Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, along with Islamization, triggered a sectarian

divide at home.⁹ The U.S.-led “War on Terror,” which brought Pakistan and the United States together, added to the trust deficit between Islamabad and Tehran. Currently, the level of economic cooperation is far below its estimated potential, and there is no defense cooperation. Despite the often publicized rhetoric on both sides referring to the other as a “brotherly state,” there have been skirmishes along the borders, accusations of cross-border terrorism, an Iranian general threatening Pakistan with a surgical strike, and an Iranian drone being shot down in Pakistan.¹⁰ We argue that ideas and perceptions of national identity have a direct bearing on how Pakistan views Iran and makes sense of regional geopolitics.

To address the central question underpinning this research, it is vital to directly engage with members of civilian and military institutions in Pakistan. The need for a mix of civilian and military participants was felt due to the historic influence of the Pakistani army in foreign-policy making. To that end, comprehensive fieldwork involving 30 face-to-face interviews was carried out in Islamabad during June-July 2017. Participants belonged to a variety of fields: (1) three former and three current ambassadors of Pakistan; (2) three retired generals (one three-star and two two-star); (3) seven researchers from prominent think tanks; (4) seven academics with expertise in Pakistan’s foreign policy; (5) two media personalities; (6) three members of local nongovernmental organizations working on Shia-Sunni dialogue at the grassroots level; and (7) a member of Pakistan’s chambers of commerce. In some cases, there was an overlap of the participants’ background and experience. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes each and were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. Only those

interviewees who had given prior permission to be named in outcomes of this research are given attribution.

OVERVIEW

In 1947, Tehran was quick to establish brotherly relations with Pakistan, becoming the first country to recognize its independence from the British Empire. Following the visit by Pakistan’s prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, diplomatic relations were established in 1948.¹¹ The shah of Iran was the first state leader to visit Pakistan — in 1950 — and, according to Abdul Sattar, he “was given a memorable welcome by enthusiastic crowds.”¹² “Iran was a natural ally and role model for Pakistan in being a secular, centralized and western-oriented state.”¹³ A major opportunity for collaboration between Iran and Pakistan was provided by the U.S.-led Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), created in 1955. In an interview for the present study, one of Pakistan’s former defense secretaries, who wished to remain anonymous, stated that CENTO was a crucial factor in further strengthening Pakistan-Iran ties. While CENTO paved the way for cooperation in security matters, the desire for economic cooperation was realized through the creation of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964 among Iran,¹⁴ Pakistan and Turkey.¹⁵ As a dependable ally, Tehran mediated reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan when tensions surfaced during the 1960s owing to differences over the Durand Line demarcation.¹⁶ Tehran had also provided material and moral support to Pakistan in its 1965 war with India. Particularly, in response to concerns from India, the shah of Iran said, “Iran has no aggressive intentions... But it will not accept any attempt to liquidate Pakistan.”¹⁷

Relations between Iran and Pakistan remained friendly following the 1979 Iranian revolution, which was soon followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Iran and Pakistan opposed the Soviet move and, throughout the war, aided the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen to varying degrees. However, the changing dynamics in Afghanistan affected Pakistan's relations with Iran. Islamabad's support for the Sunni Taliban government (1996-2001) brought India and Iran closer in an anti-Taliban coalition (e.g., supporting the Northern Alliance).¹⁸ This put Tehran and Islamabad in two opposite camps. Pakistan supported the Taliban, which sprang from Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, and Iran backed the Northern Alliance, comprised largely of non-Pashtun groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Hazaras.¹⁹

The 2001 U.S.-led action in Afghanistan created new tension between Iran and Pakistan, as Tehran saw Pakistan's support for the military operation as facilitating the presence of U.S. forces in the region. In subsequent years, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan met to address areas of potential conflict, but the tripartite summits have failed to generate convergence among the stakeholders.²⁰ The situation is complex; Pakistan continues to advocate for the Taliban's inclusion in the future of Afghanistan and plays a major role in bringing the Taliban to dialogue forums, such as a dialogue hosted by Islamabad between the High Peace Council of Afghanistan and the Taliban in Murree in 2015.²¹ But Iran views this as a "re-Talibanization" of Afghanistan and a ploy by Pakistan to keep its sphere of influence.²² This unfaltering assessment is not news to Pakistani leaders. Many respondents in this study turned the accusation back at Iran. For example, Taimur Shamil cau-

tiously observed, "According to Pakistani security analysts, there is Iranian funding and support in Afghanistan."²³ There have been reports of Iranian funding to local NGOs, media institutions and Pashtun-majority groups, including Hezb-e-Islami and the Taliban.²⁴ Contrary to claims by Tehran,²⁵ one think-tank researcher with a military background from Islamabad said that Iran supports the Taliban. He went on to link his argument with the example of Mullah Mansour,²⁶ who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan while returning from Iran.

Contrary to the claim of a former Pakistani defense secretary that there has been no military cooperation between Iran and Pakistan since the Islamic Revolution, there is evidence suggesting occasions of significant cooperation in this area. During the 1990s, there was some collaboration in defense; for example, Pakistan provided nuclear technology to Iran, and the two nations jointly produced Al-Khalid tanks.

Clearly, Pakistan's role in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has been a critical factor in relations between Iran and Pakistan. An Islamabad-based analyst revealed that Shamsi airbase in Balochistan, bordering Iran, has long been under UAE control and sublet to the United States for launching drone strikes and reconnaissance operations in the region, including to Iran. Former ambassador Fauzia Nasreen elaborated on the post-9/11 alliance between the United States and Pakistan: "After 9/11, the relations between Iran and Pakistan have deteriorated due to the U.S. using airbases in Pakistan, for example, the Shamsi base to fly drones in this region." Pakistan's geostrategic partnership with the United States has also been having spillover effects on economic cooperation between Iran and Pakistan.²⁷

A convergence of Pakistan's foreign policy with that of Saudi Arabia, Iran's archrival, is also worth noting. Weinbaum and Khurram have even argued that Saudi Arabia exerts influence on Pakistan's foreign policy.²⁸ Since the advent of the petrodollar and the strategic alliance during the Afghan-Soviet War, Pakistan's cooperation with Saudi Arabia has increased. Pakistan increasingly relies on Saudi aid, and Riyadh has in turn solicited Pakistan's involvement in its regional-security plan, most notably in relation to Yemen.²⁹ This growing integration has obvious implications for Pakistan-Iran relations.

As a Sunni-majority Islamic Republic, Pakistan has been prone to cultural and ideological influence from Saudi Arabia. This influence has spread from the mere cultural sphere to the political arena, which can be seen in Riyadh's direct involvement in Pakistan's domestic affairs. It is important to note that relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are not just limited to policy-making spheres. Based on our collected data, it is clear that there is public support for Pakistan's strong relations with Saudi Arabia. Rashad Bukhari shared details of his personal encounters with many scholars who perceive Saudi Arabia as an ideal society/country where Sharia (Islamic law) is practiced. He further revealed that many such *ulema* (Islamic scholars) have received the patronage of Saudi Arabia through its embassy in Islamabad. There is some historical evidence suggesting that the links between Saudi Arabia and Ahl-e-Hadith groups in Pakistan, such as the Jamaat Ulema-e-Ahl-e-Hadith, reach back to the Afghan-Soviet War.³⁰ In a 2013 study, Murphy documented Saudi sponsorship of anti-Shiite groups in Pakistan in the 1980s.³¹ In the present study, participants spoke of this open secret — Saudi Arabia's

continued funding of anti-Shiite groups in Pakistan. In the words of a civil-society activist, Ayub Ayubi: "The Iranian embassy [in Pakistan] supports the Shiite by giving heavy funding, while the Saudis support Salafi and Deobandi groups." Muhammad Nawaz Khan, from the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, expanded on the phenomenon of Saudi funding: "Iran and Saudi Arabia both are engaged in a proxy [war] on the Pakistan soil. This is [Pakistan's] biggest weakness, that we have not been able to stop Saudis and Iranians from engaging in their sectarian proxy [war] in Pakistan." Similarly it is estimated that 285 *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan receive foreign funding, one-third of them receiving funding from Iran and Iraq, and two-thirds from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states in the Gulf.³² This pattern has intensified in recent decades.

Furthermore, Pakistan has always been worried about New Delhi's long-term strategy of encircling Pakistan. This concern is reflected in exchanges between Tehran and Islamabad in relation to allegations of India's support for Baloch insurgents from Iranian territories.³³ Most of the participants in the present study believed India was using the guise of economic linkages with Iran for clandestine operations through its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), to target Pakistan. In this regard, Nasreen pointed to the presence of the Indian consulate in Zahedan, a city in Sistan-Balochistan bordering Balochistan in Pakistan. Similarly, a U.S. scholar of South Asian studies, Christine Fair, revealed, "Having visited the Indian mission in Zahedan, Iran, I can assure you that they are not issuing visas as their main activity."³⁴ To provide evidence of their claims of RAW's clandestine operations via Iran, several participants

referred to the popular case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, an Indian spy who was caught by Pakistani authorities in Balochistan.

Despite claims that RAW was operating from Iran, participants had divergent views on Iranian support for India. Some thought it was not possible for RAW to operate in Iran on its own; others thought it was possible that RAW had been operating without Iran's knowledge. A former two-star general argued that India already has an intelligence-sharing arrangement with Iran. However, others raised a note of caution. Noting the India factor in Pakistan's relations with Iran, former ambassador Arif Kamal asserted that India's influence is over-stated, as Iran does not take itself as a junior partner of India. While Pakistan's armed forces have their own reasons to worry about India's encircling Pakistan, Iran realizes the importance of balanced relations with both countries. Tehran has made regular efforts to resolve Islamabad's concerns, assuring that it would not allow anyone to use its soil against Pakistan.³⁵

Notwithstanding Kamal's caution against exaggeration, the general feeling in Pakistan in relation to India-Iran relations is one of apprehension. While on many counts, Iran has supported Pakistan's positions on the Kashmir dispute, Tehran was viewed by participants as biased against Pakistan in its relations with India. This assumption of an anti-Pakistan bias was sometimes founded on misinformation. A researcher from the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), who preferred not to be named in this publication, shared this: "In 1998 India and Pakistan tested their nuclear weapons. First when India tested its technology, Tehran labelled that as New Delhi's move to counter the U.S., but when Pakistan carried out its test, Iran said it was a threat to regional security."

This account is factually flawed. Iran was quick to release an official statement in support of Pakistan's nuclear tests. In June 1998, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said, "From all over the world, Muslims are happy that Pakistan has this capability Now they feel more confident because it will help balance Israel's capability."³⁶ Another senior researcher from an Islamabad-based think tank was of the view that the relationship between Iran and Pakistan had changed so much that Islamabad should not expect Iranian support in any future conflict between Pakistan and India. He further added that the current geopolitical environment is different from the times of the shah when the two countries were friends, and that expecting Iran to be neutral in the case of an India-Pakistan confrontation would be unrealistic. These assumptions point to the depth of mistrust of Iran and how Iranian policies relate to Pakistani security interests in the region.

With India's investment in Chabahar Port and China's in Gwadar Port, Iran and Pakistan are locked in geopolitical and geoeconomic competition. Chabahar Port is viewed in Pakistan as a symbol of India's growing influence in Iran. Irfan Shahzad of the Institute of Policy Studies said that Pakistan's foreign office is concerned about the strategic posture of Chabahar Port, as India has been able to make the port a strategic asset against Pakistan. This is despite the fact that there was a common understanding among study participants that the port at Gwadar is a far bigger project than the one at Chabahar and that therefore the latter simply cannot compete. Some participants saw Tehran and Islamabad as being on the same page, labelling the two as sister ports. Nonetheless, considering that the two are roughly

100 nautical miles apart in the Indian Ocean, competition for trade is natural.³⁷ Pakistan's concerns in relation to Chabahar Port stem from more than mere geo-economic competition with India. A study participant who worked in the media, Shamil of Pakistan Television,³⁸ referred to his conversation with senior military officials in Pakistan revealing that "they have the information that India is using Chabahar for its intelligence gathering."

Since 1995, a major focus of Pakistan-Iran bilateral dialogues has been devoted to the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline. Energy imports from Iran are crucial for meeting Pakistan's ever-growing energy shortfall.³⁹ The project's fate demonstrates recurrent hiccups, mainly owing to international sanctions on Iran. Originally the proposal had also included India, but New Delhi has opted out, due to its desire to secure a civil nuclear deal with the United States.⁴⁰ Rafique mentioned that Iran has built its part of the pipeline; now it just needs extension into Pakistan, once Islamabad fulfills its part of the deal by building a further 700 kilometers. He further added that Tehran has even offered to partly fund the project; however, Islamabad has been unable to move ahead and continues to blame the international sanctions. These sanctions on Iran have not prohibited other countries, such as India and Turkey, from trading with Iran. According to Nasir, there is great potential for mutual benefit through trade between Iran and Pakistan: "[Iran] has 80-85 megawatt production of electricity but their requirement is half of that. Iran has a huge requirement of chicken, beef, and wheat and even is prepared to work through barter trade." The 2013 change of government in Islamabad again pushed the IP project onto the backburner, and since then this issue has become a bi-

lateral bone of contention. In March 2018, Tehran warned Pakistan that it would file a case in the arbitration court, claiming \$1.2 billion in damages due to the delays.⁴¹ In reply, Pakistan's foreign office followed its usual policy, ignoring disturbances in relations with Iran:

Pakistan and Iran enjoy close cordial and good neighborly relations. The two are engaged on cooperation in various fields. We have not received any official communication regarding claims of damages on [the] IP Gas Pipeline project from the Iranian side. You may check with the line Ministry for further information.⁴²

The Baloch insurgencies have been problematic for bilateral relations. The level of mistrust between Iran and Pakistan is reflected in regular accusations from each side against the other in relation to support for Baloch insurgents. This topic and Pakistan's alleged support for Jundullah,⁴³ a Sunni militant organization based in Sistan and Balochestan, were the most controversial issues for the research participants. For example, a former brigadier in Pakistan's army decided to no longer participate in the interview after quietly saying that Jundullah was supported by Pakistan. Other participants, such as Nasreen, did not go beyond acknowledging that Jundullah is a cause of friction between the two countries. Although the participants refused to discuss the issue of cross-border terrorism, some scholars have written about Iranian concerns over Jundullah sanctuaries in Pakistan. According to Curtis, Jundullah's presence in Pakistani Balochistan was the main cause of six separate border clashes in 2010.⁴⁴ Incidents of cross-border fire have been regular; for example, in May 2017, Iranian

border security forces fired mortars into Balochistan in Pakistan.⁴⁵ Prior to this incident, Major General Mohammad Baqeri had issued a warning that Iran was willing to attack Jaish al Adl⁴⁶ hideouts in Pakistan

In June 2017, an Iranian drone was shot down by the Pakistan air force while flying in Pakistani airspace. Incidentally, there was no strong reaction from Pakistan's foreign office in response. In a press briefing, a spokesperson did not even mention Iran, simply stating, "our position is that drone strikes are counterproductive and violate the sovereignty of Pakistan."⁴⁷ Clearly, Islamabad was keenly aware of the very sensitive nature of Iranian drone reconnaissance on Baloch insurgents operating in Pakistan and did not wish to aggravate the situation.

The above analysis suggests that Pakistani respondents see geopolitical factors driving a wedge between Iran and Pakistan. This rift is aggravated by the significance each side attaches to events. As argued in this paper, domestic socio-cultural and political factors permeate foreign-policy thinking and provide a point of reference for many actors. Domestic considerations in Pakistan, such as national identity and its interwoven ties with sectarian identity, for example, have gained greater importance for the way Pakistan defines itself in the region.

DOMESTIC FACTORS

An examination of relevant socio-cultural and ideational considerations in Pakistan will help complete the puzzle in relation to domestic factors that influence foreign policy on Iran. It was noted earlier that geopolitical factors weigh heavily on the minds of Pakistani policy makers. However, as Gourevitch argues, outside pressures cannot be fully determining; a

country's choice of responses needs a thorough investigation of domestic factors.⁴⁸

Sociocultural

During four centuries of the Mughal empires, Persian was the lingua franca of the Indian subcontinent, and the language has kept its nostalgic significance. In an interview for this research, Bukhari said the educated class in Pakistan has fellowship with Iran because of Persian language and literature: "Our prominent people, such as poets and [storytellers], have an affiliation with Persian people, and this language has most influenced us after Arabic." Allama Muhammad Iqbal is given credit for the "Two-Nation Theory," the idea of a separate homeland for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Iqbal wrote primarily in Persian, as did other prominent poets, such as Mirza Asadullah Ghalib. After confirming this Persian influence, Tughral Yamin⁴⁹ revealed that some prominent members of the government, especially Sartaj Aziz, the then-prime-minister's adviser on foreign affairs, and Shahbaz Sharif, the chief minister of Punjab, are fluent in Persian.

Given the above, it was surprising to note a consensus on the drawbacks of Iranian/Persian culture and heritage. The majority of the participants argued that Iranian perceptions of their heritage often complicate Pakistan-Iran relations. Both civilian and military participants conceded that factor, a rare case of congruence of opinion between the two. In the words of Kamal, "the Iranian nation suffers from a superiority complex which is partly due to the fact that Iran was not colonized." Similarly a former two-star general who preferred not to be identified said, "Iranians are arrogant people and Persian nationalism is a cause of their superiority complex." He added that Iranians consider

Pakistanis “third class.” Yamin also labeled Iranians as “arrogant,” but noted that “they lower the level of their arrogance on certain occasions.” Previous studies on Iranian foreign policy have also identified Persian nationalism as an important factor shaping the country’s foreign relations.⁵⁰ It is interesting, however, to observe how negatively Persian nationalism is viewed by participants working in different fields. In the majority of cases, these views were based on personal interactions with Iranian counterparts; for instance, Pakistan’s former diplomats had direct contact with those of Iran during their time in the foreign office.

Conversations with respondents made it clear that they formed their opinion of Iran based on recent events and personal encounters. For most, Iran’s 1979 revolution started the drift between the two states. Many mentioned fear of Iran’s desire to export its revolution to Pakistan. This has something to do with the rhetoric from Tehran. According to Khan Abdul Nasir, a member of the chambers of commerce in Pakistan, “Tehran has constantly expressed its desire to export its revolution, but that is a bigger threat to Saudi Arabia than Pakistan.” Likewise, a former military officer, currently working in a leading think tank, said, “Iran’s constitution tells them to export the revolution They may believe in what they believe in but should not export their ideology.” A retired major general agreed, “Iran is exporting Shiite revolution in Pakistan.” Nasreen also talked about Iran’s agenda of internationalizing the revolution. Since 1979, Iran has overtly extended its support for Shiite groups in Pakistan with the desire of gaining cultural and political influence.⁵¹

Iran’s attempts to extend its cultural influence in the neighborhood predates

the creation of Pakistan. Despite the Shiite connection between the shah and Pakistan’s top leadership at its foundation, including Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Iran had not used the sectarian card. Instead, Iran promoted its Persian identity through its cultural outposts. This was evident in Iran’s establishment of “houses of culture” across Pakistan to promote the rich Persian legacy of art, literature and language.⁵² Since the shah, there has been an expansion of cultural centers. A Persian-language research institute was established in 1992 in Pakistan,⁵³ and there are houses of culture in several main cities, including Karachi, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Lahore and Quetta. Following the Islamic Revolution, a layer of Shiite Islam has been added to their scope. While elaborating on the influence of external actors on sectarian violence in Pakistan, Yamin argued that Iran had been using its centers in Pakistan to support its culture and brand of religion. According to Abbas, Iranian cultural centers “began actively distributing works of leading Iranian *ulema* among Pakistani Shias and offered hundreds of scholarships to Pakistanis interested in pursuing religious studies in Qom and other religious centers in Iran.”⁵⁴ Some participants also talked about Iranian diplomats in Pakistan having strong links with the local Shiite community. In particular, Bukhari pointed out that the Iranian embassy arranges many events for the local Shiite population, which feels an affinity with Iran.

Sectarianism

While the Middle East has witnessed a surge of sectarian violence in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, this kind of activity in Pakistan predates 2011. General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization of Pakistan in the 1980s led to the emergence of sectarian violence

in the country. In 1980, Islamabad was the site of the first-ever demonstration by Pakistani Shiites against the implementation of the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance,⁵⁵ with local Shiites demanding exemption from paying *zakat*⁵⁶ to the state.⁵⁷ While the government succumbed to Shiite pressure, the successful protests in Islamabad eroded Shiite-Sunni relations in Jhang (Punjab) — currently a hot spot of sectarian violence — where both communities had lived peacefully for generations.⁵⁸ Nasreen elaborated on this dimension by highlighting that sectarian violence in the country began with the assassination of Shiite cleric Arif Hussain Al Hussaini in 1988.⁵⁹

Pakistan's strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia is viewed as a crucial factor in shaping its foreign policy on Iran. Many participants talked about how Iran and Pakistan have not been able to use or expand infrastructure for trade, for example, with the Quetta-Zahedan rail connection's not being operational. The director of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Najam Rafique, claimed that economic cooperation has also been subject to the sectarian divide that has shaped Pakistan's posture towards the custodian of the two holy cities, Saudi Arabia. He particularly referred to Pakistan's inability to benefit from opportunities created through the RCD (which morphed into the Economic

Cooperation Organization). Besides international sanctions on Iran, Pakistan's policy shift as a result of its ideological alliance with Saudi Arabia can help explain the regular fluctuations in Pakistan-Iran relations as reflected in the overall low volume of bilateral trade (see Table 1). In 2009, Pakistan was Iran's fifth-largest trade partner, with a volume of \$1 billion per year, still far below an estimated potential of \$5 billion.⁶⁰ While there were peak years of bilateral trade in the last decade, for example 2008–09, the volume of annual trade reached its lowest levels in 2013-14.

While the Sunni-dominated Islamization of Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq was a trigger for the public display of the sectarian divide, external factors did exacerbate the situation. According to Grare, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry has been a key factor in incidents of sectarian violence in Pakistan.⁶¹ Since the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia and Iran have provided clandestine funding to Pakistan-based Sunni and Shiite extremist groups.⁶² According to data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal, Pakistan suffered 2,523 deaths due to sectarian violence during 1989-2001 and 8,253 during 2001-2017.⁶³ In other words, Pakistan has experienced an average of 385 sectarian-related casualties per annum since 2001.

Due to the alarming rise of sectarian divisions and violence, there appears to be

TABLE 1: Pakistan's Trade with Iran, 2005–14 (\$ million)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Exports	174.4	178.8	146.2	426.2	252.2	182.2	153.3	142.0	62.6	43.0
Imports	363.2	443.2	436.8	737.6	955.9	883.6	303.8	120.3	167.8	185.7
Total	537.6	622.0	583.0	1,163.8	1,208.1	1,065.8	457.1	262.3	230.4	228.7

Source: Pakistan Business Council⁶⁶

an awareness among Pakistani policy makers of the need to enjoy balanced relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. This was a factor in Pakistan's initial decision to refrain from participation in the Saudi-led military coalition against the Houthis in Yemen. According to Teller, "had Pakistan chosen to take sides in Yemen, there was the possibility that sectarian tensions within Pakistan, always ready to boil over, would be exacerbated."⁶⁴ Ultimately, however, Pakistan could not resist pressure from its strategic and economic partners in the Gulf region, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and joined the so-called Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT). A majority of the (civilian) respondents in the study viewed Pakistan's decision as a bad move with serious repercussions for the country's relations with Iran. There were some significant differences in the view of those from military-sponsored think tanks and civilian institutions. Respondents from the army-funded IPRI,⁶⁵ in particular, viewed IMAFT as entirely focused on counterterrorism.

In contrast, researchers from the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad,⁶⁶ funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, saw a political motive behind IMAFT and viewed Pakistan's decision to join to be a mistake. In particular, Rafique argued that the alliance is jointly formulated by the United States and Saudi Arabia against Iran. He went on to say, "if Pakistan needs to have a policy direction at all, then it needs to recall General Raheel Sharif⁶⁷ immediately in terms of showing Pakistan stands on neutral grounds." A former Pakistani diplomat, Nasreen, shared this viewpoint: "The IMAFT is definitely anti-Iran and Pakistan was pressurized to participate in it." Another civilian interviewee, Bukhari, believed that joining the

alliance had adversely impacted Pakistan-Iran relations. He added that IMAFT looks like an alliance of Muslim countries, headed by Pakistan because its former army chief is commanding it.

Differences between the views of participants with military and civilian backgrounds are not new, and in this particular case represent divergent interests. While the civilian leadership tries to promote a balanced or neutral foreign policy, the position of the Pakistani army is based on long-term defense relations with Gulf Cooperation Council states, especially Saudi Arabia.⁶⁸ The influence of the armed forces on Pakistan's foreign policy has been significant and more apparent since the 1980s in relation to its immediate neighbors. As Ahmed has noted, "Pakistan's military leaders believe that the demands of national security necessitate their involvement in foreign-policy making."⁶⁹ While Pakistan has officially remained silent on Iran's support for Shiite militant groups in Pakistan, there are widespread concerns among the intelligentsia about the spread of Iranian-Saudi sectarian rivalry into Pakistan. A former major general who is now working in a think tank cautiously shared this: now the sectarian division is so big that the Shiite and Sunni sects are portrayed as separate religions.

A researcher from IPRI alleged that Iran overtly supports Shiite groups around the world and that Pakistan should raise this issue in its bilateral exchanges with Iran. Islamabad has, however, been following its traditional policy of avoiding controversial discussions or an outright clash with Iran to avoid another front on its borders.⁷⁰ This approach has been reflected in numerous bilateral exchanges. During Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit to Islamabad in March 2018, for example,

the focus of meetings with Pakistan's prime minister and foreign minister was the gas pipeline, peace in Afghanistan and border security.⁷¹ Shahzad, from the Institute of Policy Studies, talked about a growing desire in Islamabad to stop both Iran and Saudi Arabia from ideological infiltration into Pakistan. This, however, has not happened in any of Pakistan's bilateral exchanges with Iran or Saudi Arabia.

Tehran has noted the growing sectarian violence that frequently targets Shiites in Pakistan. During President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Tehran in 1999, President Mohammad Khatami expressed concerns on the matter.⁷² In 2001, following an agreement to cooperate on mutual challenges such as terrorism, drug and human trafficking, arms smuggling and sectarian violence, the Pakistan-Iran Joint Ministerial Commission on Security was set up. This mechanism has, however, not made any concrete progress. Violence continues against Shiites in Pakistan, and increasingly this phenomenon is becoming a bone of contention with Iran. In the aftermath of the June 2014 attack on Shiites in Karachi, Tehran issued a statement reflecting the weight it gives to the murder of Shiites across borders: "The Islamic Republic of Iran condemns the terrorist action against innocent people of any ethnicity and religion and hopes for required steps to be adopted to prevent the repetition of such terrorist measures against defenseless people (*Alalam*, June 9, 2014)."

From the sectarian divide arises the issue of the treatment of Shiites in Pakistan and Sunnis in Iran. While Iran has repeatedly expressed its concerns over the rise of violence against Shiites in Pakistan, Islamabad has been silent on the treatment of Sunnis in Iran. Nonetheless, there appears to be concern among Pakistani intelligen-

tsia on this matter, some of it apparently influenced by anti-Shiite or anti-Iranian propaganda. Many research participants who have visited Iran are of the view that Sunni mosques are not allowed there. This could be because many of them have only been to Tehran and would have prayed in the prayer room of Pakistan's embassy. In Tehran, there is some truth to this observation; despite the claims of the government that there are nine Sunni mosques,⁷³ the city has several Sunni prayer rooms that do not have the proper structure of mosques. Iran has a sizable Sunni population — equal to roughly five percent of all Muslims⁷⁴ — and Sunni mosques, too, with most in Sunni-majority areas such as Sistan-Balochistan. This was noted by one interviewee, Shahzad, who had stayed in that province and talked about seeing several Sunni mosques.

Iran's advocacy of Shiite interests in Pakistan, and the assumed affinity between Pakistani Shiites and Iran, have led to a discernable level of unease in Pakistan. Interviews with members of both civilian and military institutions pointed to this sense of mistrust. While many participants talked about the so-called Shiite lobby in Pakistan and Shiite dominance in certain important sectors, such as the media,⁷⁵ several interviewees expressed concern about the loyalty of the Shiites. After elaborating on the existence and effectiveness of a Shiite lobby in the army, a former two-star general said that Pakistani Shiites would support Iran if there were a war between the two countries. Similarly, a former Pakistani diplomat argued, "we cannot send our Shiite diplomats to our Iranian embassy due to lack of trust." The data collected during our fieldwork revealed that sectarian considerations are taken into account in civilian and military institutions, to

the detriment of the Shiites. Based on the predominant stereotypical view of Shiites in Pakistan, Rafique presented a bleak assessment:

Naturally, the very fact that the other side has been stereotyped, the Shiites in Pakistan have been branded as non-Muslims, or *kafir*, and this gets perpetuated because it is so prevalent within the society. These social divides have been there for generations and somehow Pakistan has been unable to find a middle ground where it is willing to accommodate the notion of otherness.

It is clear that in the contemporary setting, the historical cultural connection between Pakistan and Iran is subsumed by more pressing considerations. This is mainly due to a range of factors: negative perceptions of Iranians/Persians in Pakistan, with a majority of participants considering Persians to be arrogant; and distinct sectarian identities in both countries (Iran as a Shiite-majority country and Pakistan a Sunni-majority country with the second largest Shiite population after Iran). Particularly since Zia's Islamization of Pakistan in the 1980s, which led to Iran's support for Shiite groups, sectarianism has impacted the bilateral relationship by adding to the significant trust deficit manifested in Islamabad through fear of Iran's desire to export its revolution.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan's relationship with Iran is a product of the country's relations with its immediate neighbors, particularly India, and partners in the Muslim world, such as

Saudi Arabia. A range of external factors has influenced Pakistan's relationship with Iran. Islamabad's foreign-policy choices, however, are also subject to significant domestic, political, social and cultural factors that continue to push Pakistan along the path of sectarianism. Pakistan's reevaluation of its national identity along sectarian lines takes place against the backdrop of an Iran-Saudi rivalry, and the Saudi view of Iran as a regional threat. This view is becoming increasingly acceptable to many opinion-makers in Pakistan. This negative view of Iran is reinforced by cases of border conflicts along the Balochistan border and concerns that Iran is pursuing a strategy of cultural and ideological encroachment into Pakistan through its network of cultural centers and funding to Shiite groups. This threat assessment feeds into Pakistan's longstanding concern about India, as trade deals and India's investment in Chabahar Port are interpreted as evidence of Iran's regional alignment with India. Islamabad's decisions have always been based on enhancing Pakistan's economic and defense capabilities. By the same token, hindsight shows that Pakistan's economic and defense cooperation with the United States and Saudi Arabia has led to a neglect of Iran as a priority in its foreign policy. This neglect is reflected in the lack of both scholarship on Pakistan-Iran relations and cooperation between the two countries. This trend is likely to continue due to Pakistan's strategic concern with the India-Iran partnership as Islamabad is drawn further into the Saudi orbit.

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¹⁰ Lisa Curtis, “The Reorientation of Pakistan’s Foreign Policy Toward Its Region,” *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 2 (2012): 255–269; and Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Criticizes Iran for Threatening Cross-Border Military Action,” *Voice of America*, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-criticizes-iran-for-threatening-cross-border-military-action/3844351.html>.

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¹⁴ After its withdrawal from CENTO in 1979, Tehran lost interest in RCD, considering it a product of the United States’ influence — “a byproduct of CENTO”; and Mohammadally, “Pakistan-Iran Relations (1947–1979).”

¹⁵ In 1985, RCD was renamed the Economic Cooperation Organization and now has 10 members, but has failed miserably to expand trade among its members, especially between Iran and Pakistan.

¹⁶ Qureshi, “Pakistan and Iran.”

¹⁷ L. K. Choudhary, “Pakistan as a Factor in Indo-Iranian Relations,” *Indian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1974): 352–361.

¹⁸ Alam, “Iran-Pakistan Relations,” 537.

¹⁹ Ghani Jafar, “Pakistan-Iran Relations: Back on Track?” *Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (2014): 3241; and Pant, “Pakistan and Iran.”

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- ⁶⁵ Four researchers were interviewed at IPRI.
- ⁶⁶ Three researchers were interviewed from the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.
- ⁶⁷ General (retired) Sharif is the commander of IMAFT. He was the chief of the Pakistan army during 2013–16.
- ⁶⁸ Since the 1960s, Pakistan has been a prominent guarantor of Saudi security; during the 1970s and 1980s, more than 15,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. See Robert Mason, "Saudi Arabia's Relations with South Asia," in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. by Neil Partrick (I.B. Tauris, 2016): 304-322. Bilateral defense relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were formalized in the 1982 Protocol Agreement entitling the kingdom to the supply of Pakistan's troops on request (Ahmad, Naveed. 2016. "Pak-Saudi Relations: Friends with Benefits." *Express Tribune*, January 9). During Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1991, Pakistan sent 15,000 troops to Saudi Arabia for the protection of the holy sites, as well as provided tanks and armoured vehicles. The two countries have also held joint military exercises since 2004, including Al-Assam I in 2004, Al-Assam II in 2006, and Al-Assam III in 2009 (Ahmad and Faisal 2016, 30). (Khushboo Ahmad and Muhammad Faisal, "Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Relations: An Assessment," *CISS Insight* 3, no. 1 (2016): 26-30). Further, Saudi Arabia is a top buyer of Pakistani weapons exports such as Al-Khalid tanks and JF-17 fighter jets (Mateen Haider, "Made in Pakistan weapons being sold to 40 countries," *Dawn*, November 28, 2014).
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