

seminar

June
2022

www.india-seminar.com

75th

inside **pakistan**

SEMINAR

THE MONTHLY SYMPOSIUM POST BOX 338 NEW DELHI 110001

Founder Editors RAJ & ROMESH THAPAR

a journal which seeks to reflect through free discussion, every shade of Indian thought and aspiration. Each month, a single problem is debated by writers belonging to different persuasions. Opinions expressed have ranged from janata to congress, from sarvodaya to communist to independent. And

the non-political specialist too has voiced his views. In this way it has been possible to answer a real need of today, to gather the facts and ideas of this age and to help thinking people arrive at a certain degree of cohesion and clarity in facing the problems of economics, of politics, of culture.

publisher MALVIKA SINGH

editor TEJBIR SINGH

circulation N.K. PILLAI

F-46 Malhotra Building, Janpath, New Delhi-110001; Telephone 91-11-23316534, 23316445; E-mail editors.seminar@gmail.com subscription.seminar@gmail.com
Single copy: Rs 70 Yearly: Rs 800; \$90; £60; Euro 75 Three year: Rs 2200; \$250; £167; Euro 216 Reproduction of material prohibited unless permitted.

NEXT MONTH: FABLES OF VIOLENCE

Pakistan, the Middle East, and Islamism

MATTHEW J. NELSON

A decade after the Arab Spring in 2011, the Muslim world is divided. On one side we see states that accept or support a substantial role for Islamist movements harbouring a socially transformative ideological agenda—states like post-revolutionary Iran or Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Adalet ve Kalkimna Partisi (Justice and Development Party – AKP). On the other side, we see anti-Islamist regimes – in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, for instance, or Egypt under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

This divide between pro- and anti-Islamist camps has left Pakistan in an awkward position. Pakistan's domestic politics – from political parties like the modern, university-based Jama'at-e-Islami (JI) to the Deobandi, madrasa-based Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) – leave a wide berth for Islamist ideologies and political movements. Some of the most important pro-Pakistan groups fighting in Kashmir – from Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (affiliated with JI) to Jaish-e-Mohammad (affiliated with Deobandi madrasas) – also share a broadly Islamist orientation. Yet, Pakistan's most important ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, has turned against Islamism. Increasingly, Pakistan is torn between Islamist values and its longstanding ties to the Middle East's most important anti-Islamist power.

To grasp the overarching shape of this pro versus anti-Islamism divide – and its implications for Pakistan – it

is helpful to re-examine recent trends within and beyond the Middle East.

Pulling away from a focus on 'Shi'I majority' Iran or 'Sunni-majority' Saudi Arabia in favour of an appreciation for *pro-Islamist* Iran and *anti-Islamist* Saudi Arabia, it is helpful to recall the 2011 election of Egypt's first pro-Islamist Muslim Brotherhood President, Muhammad Morsi, and, then, in 2013, Morsi's removal in an anti-Islamist military coup led by General el-Sisi. Morsi exchanged visits with leading figures from Pakistan's pro-Islamist Jama'at-e-Islami. But his removal by General el-Sisi was supported by Pakistan's vociferously anti-Islamist ally, Saudi Arabia.

The July 2021 removal of Tunisia's pro-Islamist parliamentary speaker, Rachid Ghannouchi, by the nation's anti-Islamist President, Kais Saied, was similar. For decades, Pakistan cultivated close ties with Turkey's pro-Islamist Erdogan; but, even as Erdogan condemned Ghannouchi's removal, Pakistan's key ally, Saudi Arabia, supported it. (See Fig. 1 below.)

Pakistan has struggled to balance its ties with both sides of this divide even within South Asia. While Imran Khan, Pakistan's ex-prime minister, and the opposition JUI chief, Fazlur Rahman, nurtured close relations with the most striking pro-Islamist regime in South Asia, the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has also sought closer ties with the energetically anti-Islamist leader of Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Whilst

Figure 1

Pro-Islamism	Anti-Islamism
Iran	Saudi Arabia
Qatar	United Arab Emirates
Turkey	Egypt
Tunisia (Rachid Ghannouchi)	Tunisia (Kais Saied)

the Taliban work to construct an exclusionary Islamic Emirate, Hasina has moved aggressively to deny any political space for domestic religious opponents from the Jama'at-e-Islami and a Deobandi madrasa-based protest movement known as Hefazat-e-Islam (Protection of Islam).

Pakistan is not the architect of this pro versus anti-Islamist divide. The historical drivers of that divide lie in Iran and, more importantly for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has merely sought to project a position of neutrality. But, increasingly, hints of its pro-Islamist orientation have also emerged.

Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the basic parameters of the Muslim world's pro versus anti-Islamist divide have primarily emerged from the shifting religious sands of Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, commonly known as 'MBS'. He has sought to articulate and export his own understanding of what he calls 'moderate' Islam: new forms of public entertainment, interaction between unmarried men and women, women drivers, and more. Saudi Arabia's anti-Islamist ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has taken this trend one step further, decriminalising the cohabitation of unmarried couples as well as the sale of alcohol.

MBS, however, does not envision a liberalisation of Muslim (or Sunni) religious discourse. Instead, he envisions a consolidation of his own authoritarian interpretive power. In particular, he seeks to reinforce a clearer hierarchy between the crown and Wahabi clerics, or between the

monarch and the Muslim Brotherhood, bringing the latter to heel. In general, MBS 'moderation' involves an explicit rejection of (a) anti-monarchical revolutionary regimes like that of Iran; (b) the university-based modernist or fundamentalist approach associated with lay Muslim ideologues from the Muslim Brotherhood (or the Jama'at-e-Islami); (c) the evangelism of global Sunni missionary movements like South Asia's Deobandi Tablighi Jama'at; and (d) the historically embedded social and political autonomy of madrasa-based clerics representing various Sunni *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence). In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabi clerics play an important role within the kingdom's religious establishment, but MBS has sought to restrict their space for political manoeuvre, in particular, with respect to the kingdom's notorious vice-and-virtue police: the Mutaween.

For Muslim leaders battling Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jama'at-e-Islami, and various Salafi or Deobandi challengers (such as General el-Sisi [Egypt], President Saied [Tunisia], and Prime Minister Hasina [Bangladesh]), Saudi Arabia's appeal to Muslim moderation, combined with authoritarian political power, is familiar. But in Pakistan, this combination has made for an increasingly difficult fit. Pakistan's military establishment is broadly sympathetic to forms of religious nationalism framed by authoritarian power. But the Pakistani state also retains close ties with many other politically active Islamists. So, even when Imran Khan, Pakistan's pro-

establishment ex-prime minister, faced resistance from destabilising clerical movements like an anti-blasphemy movement known as the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (Movement of 'Prophetic Presence' in Pakistan), or a violent Taliban offshoot known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Movement of Pakistan Taliban), the state did not seek to eliminate them. Instead, Islamabad initiated 'talks' to acknowledge and partially accommodate their demands.

There is no denying Pakistan's close relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, it is equally clear that Pakistan has no interest in joining the kingdom's push for a global anti-Islamist coalition. On the contrary – and, from a sectarian perspective, counter-intuitively – military and civilian leaders in Sunni-majority Pakistan have worked to sustain their engagement with the pro-Islamist government in Iran. In 2015, for instance, Pakistan surprised Saudi Arabia with a unanimous parliamentary vote refusing to join the kingdom's military intervention against Iran-backed Houthi rebels fighting to wrest control from Yemen's exiled President Abd-Rabu Mansour Hadi.¹ More recently, Pakistan and Iran have sought new ways to capitalise on joint transit and trade opportunities associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, Pakistan and Iran are exploring ambitious new forms of regional connectivity along their common coastline on the Gulf of Oman.

Pakistan's Gwadar port – a linchpin of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) linking the BRI's overland Asian 'belt' to its global maritime 'road' – was poised to

1. Hadi is currently based in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis have targetted both Saudi Arabia and the UAE with several missile attacks.

compete with a nearby port in the Iranian town of Chabahar. The port in Chabahar, scarcely 100 miles west of Gwadar, was initially co-funded by Iran, alongside Pakistan's key rival, India (owing to a special exemption from United States' sanctions targeting the regime in Tehran). Specifically, bypassing Pakistan and China, India sought a new route through Iran and Afghanistan to Central Asia and, from there, to Russia: the so-called North-South Corridor. But for India, this route was always dependent on a relatively friendly regime in Kabul. That option disappeared when Pakistani support helped the Afghan Taliban seize power in Kabul in 2021. Indian financing for the port in Chabahar was already lagging, but more recently financing from China has emerged to fill the gap, transforming Indian and Iranian cooperation focused on a North-South Corridor that might bypass the CPEC and the BRI into Iranian cooperation with China and Pakistan on a project more closely tied to the BRI itself. In short, a pro-Islamist regime in Iran has cooperated with Pakistan to advance one of the most important trade and infrastructure corridors in the world. The implications of this link have not been lost on Saudi Arabia.

Even apart from China's BRI, Pakistan and Iran have sought new ways to secure the Pakistani province of Balochistan and the Iranian province of Sistan and Balochistan against external and/or cross-border attacks. Specifically, Iran has sought Pakistani support against Sunni insurgents, allegedly aided by Saudi Arabia (for example, Jaish-e-Adl or Jundullah), who are accused of targeting the interests of Tehran, even as Pakistan has sought Iranian support against ethnic Baloch insurgents, allegedly aided by India, who have

demanded independence from Pakistan (for example, the Baloch Liberation Army, the Baloch Republican Army and, more recently, a new formation known as the Baloch Nationalist Freedom Movement). Once again, Pakistan's ties with Iran have cut *against* Saudi interests in the region.

Similar frictions have emerged in Afghanistan, where Pakistan's support for the Taliban's restoration of a pro-Islamist emirate in Kabul only further widened Islamabad's distance from Riyadh. During the Afghan jihad against Soviet intervention, Afghan mujahideen were supported by Saudi Arabia via Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, with the Saudi leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, helping to coordinate Arab jihadis. In fact, after the Soviets withdrew (1989), and particularly after the Taliban seized power in Kabul (1996), the Taliban established a new Islamic 'emirate' that received formal diplomatic recognition from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates. Still, the Taliban *maintained* their relationship with al-Qaeda and Pakistan even *after* al-Qaeda attacked the US (2001) and turned its guns on Saudi Arabia (2003).

For nearly 20 years, the Taliban battled American troops to restore their emirate in Kabul (2001-21). But throughout this period, key Taliban leaders – the so-called Quetta Shura – remained in the Pakistani city of Quetta. Riyadh offered to host a series of talks between the US-backed Afghan government and key members of the Pakistan-backed Quetta Shura in 2019. But the Taliban refused. Insisting that they would not negotiate with what they saw as an American Afghan 'puppet' regime under Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, they instead accepted an offer from the pro-

Islamist regime in Doha to host negotiations with Washington. In effect, the Pakistan-based, Pakistan-backed, pro-Islamist and al-Qaeda affiliated Taliban turned away from the anti-Islamist regime of MBS toward a pro-Islamist regime in Qatar.

The Pakistan-backed Taliban turned away from Saudi Arabia to Qatar even as Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed an economic blockade on Qatar for its pro-Islamist ties to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. During this blockade, Turkey extended active diplomatic and military support to Qatar, even as Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sought to project a position of neutrality. However, Nawaz Sharif was later removed from office by a Pakistan Supreme Court judgment that relied heavily on a disclosure of financial interests tied to a document provided by the anti-Islamist regime in Abu Dhabi.

Since the Pakistan-backed Afghan Taliban returned to power in Kabul, the role of Pakistan's erstwhile partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has been minimal. Today, limited diplomatic influence in Kabul passes through the pro-Islamist regime in Doha.

The most glaring illustration of the post-Arab Spring divide between pro- and anti-Islamist camps, however, is not strictly confined to Saudi Arabia. From Pakistan's perspective, the most glaring illustration concerns the shifting relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's chief rival, India. In the past, Saudi Arabia and the UAE enjoyed close ties with Pakistan. However, following MBS, anti-Islamist trends in both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have tilted sharply in the direction of (anti-Islamist) India.

Seeking to choke off a popular Muslim resistance movement in Indian-administered Kashmir that is

also supported by Jama'at-e-Islami and Deobandi militant movements (for example, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammad), for instance, India abrogated the special constitutional autonomy associated with the state of Jammu and Kashmir in early August 2019.

Pakistan assumed that Saudi Arabia and the UAE would reinforce its diplomatic objections to this important constitutional change. But they refused. Instead, both states praised India's Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi for boosting India's ties with the Gulf. Indeed, under MBS, Saudi Arabia's economic investments in India have grown to five times the size of Saudi investments in Pakistan. And, already in 2016, Saudi Arabia awarded Modi its highest civilian honour, the Order of Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Special Class). Further, in late-August 2019, the Emirates added its own highest honour, the Order of Zayed, despite (a) Modi's controversial actions in Kashmir three weeks earlier; and (b) Modi's widely documented reputation for failing to deter deadly vigilante violence targeting Muslims in India.

Seeking support for its objections to Modi's actions in Kashmir, Pakistan turned away from Saudi Arabia to Turkey and Malaysia. But Saudi Arabia retaliated. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had previously invited Pakistan, Iran, Qatar, and Turkey as well as Indonesia to an event in Kuala Lumpur in December 2019 that some described as a pro-Islamist alternative to the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The Gulf's anti-Islamist monarchies were not invited and, in due course, Saudi Arabia threatened Pakistan with sanctions. Pakistan did not attend the meeting in Kuala Lumpur, but when Pakistan asked Malaysia to support its objections regarding Kashmir, Saudi Arabia called in

Pakistan's final payment on a US\$3 billion loan and halted a deferred payment scheme on Saudi oil shipments. Even when Pakistan's top general, Qamar Javed Bajwa, was dispatched to Riyadh, MBS did not receive him, forcing him to meet the Saudis' chief military officer instead.

Apparently, MBS did not view this possibility of a global pro-Islamist Muslim bloc kindly. He simply used India's controversial actions in Kashmir – in many ways, the most important foreign policy issue in Pakistan – to reinforce his point.

Changes led by MBS in Saudi Arabia figure powerfully in Pakistan's relationship with the Middle East and, beyond this, the wider Muslim world. These changes have heightened a longstanding cleavage between the supporters and opponents of several different shades of Islamism – from (a) the anti-monarchical revolutionary regime in Iran to (b) university-based modernist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or the Jama'at-e-Islami to (c) traditional Deobandi groups like the Tablighi Jama'at or the Taliban. While MBS has turned against these groups, Pakistan has not. On the contrary, Pakistan's historically embedded relations with all of these groups have increasingly pushed it away from Saudi Arabia towards Saudi rivals like Qatar, Turkey, and Iran.

For Pakistan, there is geostrategic value on both sides of the Islamism divide. It is, therefore, unlikely that Islamabad will downplay its relationship with Riyadh even as numerous contexts – from Balochistan and Afghanistan – push it to engage with Tehran. However, the challenge will lie in maintaining some semblance of neutrality. For Pakistan's military and civilian elites, the country's geostrategic interests are divided. Its Islamist values are not.