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OPINION | Can Saudi Arabia Count on Pakistan's Support for Sunni Alliance against Terrorism?

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By Dr. Sulaiman Wasty



Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's announcement last December of a Riyadh-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) received a positive response from Western policymakers. Undoubtedly, the enthusiasm was largely premised on hopes that the oil-rich Gulf Arab states will contain the spread of terrorist groups such as "Islamic State" (Daesh) and al-Shabaab across the Muslim world -- from Somalia to Syria and from Libya to Afghanistan. Yet, the focus throughout has been on the manifestations and symptoms of these organizations' global terror campaigns. Explicit acknowledgement of geopolitical, religious or ideological leanings of the major proponents of the IMAFT has been lacking within Western discourse.

Analysts must take stock of three important points. First, there has been a misdiagnosis of the IMAFT because of its sectarian dimension. Second, Saudi Arabia has made overstretched and financially unsustainable militaristic commitments. Third, Pakistan, a nuclear Islamic member of this alliance, is unlikely to actively participate in IMAFT beyond expressing platitudes of moral support.

The IMAFT's plan for destroying Daesh has a relatively limited stated objective: to protect the Muslim countries from all terrorist groups and organizations (irrespective of their sect or name), and to fight terrorists in "Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan". There is hardly any consensus, however, on the nature and the level of this effort among the original 34 (now 39) countries comprising the Saudi-led coalition. Essentially, due to the dominance of the states having Sunni-majority populations (with the notable absences of Iran and Iraq), IMAFT is a coalition with a sectarian agenda.

Daesh presents itself as a representative of authentic Islam, commonly known as Salafism, as practiced by the early generations of Muslims. It includes the special brand of Wahhabism adopted by Saudi Arabia, whereby many Islamic principles of the dominant Sunni and Shi'ite sects are considered polytheistic—such as philosophy, spirituality, the spirit of sharia, and use of metaphors. Until there is greater recognition of the interplay between the ideas and politics, many observers will likely continue to misperceive Daesh's ideology. Ultimately, while most non-Arab Muslim-majority member countries such as Pakistan are unanimously in favor of preserving the sanctity of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, they are not necessarily in favor of “re-Sunnifying” both Iraq and Syria and flipping the existing power structures.

Second, through Saudi Arabia's so-called “Salman Doctrine” the kingdom has embarked upon an assertive and militarized approach to its regional conflicts. The centerpiece is Riyadh's intervention in Yemen. A standard interpretation holds that this adventurism emanates from the kingdom's frustration with what Saudis see as Washington's retreat from the Middle East and America's tacit complicity with Iran's foreign policy agenda following the passage of the watershed Iranian nuclear agreement. Not surprisingly, Riyadh's decision to counter Iran's influence was a key driver of the decision to support the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime—even at the cost of giving rise to a myriad of Salafist extremist groups.

Saudi Arabia's oil-dependent economy is currently on a roller coaster. Saudi Arabia's spectacular economic performance of the past commenced with a significant and sustained increase in the price of oil with concomitant increases in government and export revenues. Large-scale expenditures and investments in public sector ventures, with corresponding increases in imported labor, Saudi Arabian employment, massive building programs, and contributions to the Public Investment Fund as well as, to a much greater extent, the foreign exchange reserves, accompanied rises in oil prices. But the kingdom imports almost all of its military and most of its domestic security technology and equipment, valued in the tens of billions of dollars. Consequently, national security will continue to depend greatly on the power, development, transformation, innovation, and creativity of its economy during an era of cheap oil.

Accordingly, public sector expenditures are being cut back and government employment opportunities for the country's most recent university graduates look less promising than in past years. There is even talk of some of the public sector bills being paid with IOUs and admission by government ministers of there being a discussion (but no agreed-upon plan of action) to introduce taxation for expatriates and forced repatriation of migrant labor from South Asia. Overall, a series of erratic and counterproductive swings do not indicate that Saudi Arabia is a confident state. These are instead the outward projections of a troubled dynasty's anxieties about succession and looming social and economic challenges, along with an array of regional and security threats, as recently illustrated by the July 4, 2016 suicide bombings in Jeddah, Qatif, and Medina.

After considerable initial ambiguity, Pakistan finally welcomed the initiative. Officials in Islamabad confirmed Pakistan's participation in the IMAFT and stated that the country was waiting for further details in order to decide the extent of its participation in the different activities of the alliance. When Saudi Arabia launched “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen in March 2015, the Pakistani parliament's vote against Islamabad joining the campaign underscored Pakistan's ambivalence and preference for “neutrality” in the Yemeni crisis.

Many observers of Pakistani-Saudi reciprocal relations may consider the latter's position on Yemen somewhat surprising. After all, Pakistan's military collaboration with Saudi Arabia dates back to the Cold War. Since the 1970s, Pakistan, with the world's seventh largest army (made up of more than half a million active troops and the same number of reserves), has signed defense protocols with Saudi Arabia, other GCC members, and Jordan, providing military training and deployment of contingents in advisory positions. Even today, Pakistani defense personnel remain stationed in Saudi Arabia.

Nonetheless, Pakistan has to prioritize its own foreign policy and internal interests. Situated at the intersection of South Asia, greater Central Asia, Iran, and the Arab world, Pakistan must maintain a delicate balance with regards to the emerging geopolitical environment. Second, Pakistan's military posture has traditionally been focused on India. Moreover, dealing with the volatility in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces by means of Operation Zarb-Azb (sharp strike) against militant groups presents a heavy financial burden. Last but not least, the military-political establishment is not convinced of the probable success of the IMAFT.

Pakistan is also experiencing the growing influence of extreme forms of Sunnism and Wahhabism, despite the fact that a significant portion of its population of 180 million is heterogeneous in its sectarian mix. Indeed, the country is being dramatically radicalized by the influence of the Taliban and, not surprisingly, numerous religious preachers have tacitly pledged their allegiance to Daesh with little resistance from Pakistan's government. Accusations of blasphemy are rampant, and there is less and less space for spiritualism, mysticism, and the legacy of the Indus civilization in folk music and literature.

Conversely, the politically conscious masses of the country have so far been abhorrent of the rigidity of the Salafi-inspired landscape against "nominal" Muslims. There is little patience among the general population for the particular criticism of the Shi'ite community, 20-25 percent of the country's population. Similarly, the educated elite is exceptionally averse not only to the extremist ideas advocated by Wahhabism against modern institutions and democratic norms, but also to the justification of war against members of the military and security forces in Muslim countries beyond the Arabian Peninsula. More significant, the Pakistan army, as a largely-secular institution, plays a deciding role in the pursuit of Islamabad's foreign policy objectives.

Consequently, there are few signs of any direct involvement of Pakistan in the widening geo-sectarian cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Last but not least, the intelligence and security establishments, both within and outside Pakistan, are perennially conscious and extremely wary of the specter of nuclear technology falling into the hands of these Saudi-inspired fundamentalists.

In conclusion, there is a lack of clarity concerning IMAFT's objectives and strategies. The alliance exists thus far as a pronouncement more than anything else. At the same time, non-Arab members of IMAFT are likely to find themselves co-opted in this sectarian initiative. Hence, this delusionary coalition may persist until a re-shaping of power configurations stabilizes the traumatized Middle East.

About the Author:

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