

ISAS Brief

No. 469 – 28 April 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism: Implications for Pakistan's Security and Foreign Relations

Pakistan will need to be circumspect about its conduct in the Middle East. Alignment with Saudi Arabia and leadership of the military alliance may help it to regain some of the lost space in the international arena but sectarian rifts and violence may increase at home.

Faiza Saleem¹

The formation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) was announced in December 2015 by Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister, Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud. The alliance aims to bring together Muslim countries to fight international and regional terrorism. Till date, it has 41 countries,² including Pakistan, that have confirmed membership and agreed to share intelligence, training and possible military support for counter terrorism initiatives, primarily among Muslim majority countries. Last month, former Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Raheel Sharif, was appointed and approved as first commander of the military alliance.

¹ Ms Faiza Saleem is Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at faizasaleem@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

² Member countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia, Oman, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Tajikistan have discussed membership but have not formally joined the alliance. All members are part of the Organization of Islamic Countries.

Pakistan-Saudi Relations

After initial confusion and surprise at its inclusion in the Saudi-led IMAFT, Pakistan publicly acknowledged its membership and reiterated its commitment to fighting terrorism. It may not have had much choice. Distancing itself from the alliance would have risked souring relations with its closest friend and ally in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia has backed Pakistan in international fora and remains one of the biggest donors to the country. For instance, the promise of 50,000 barrels of oil per day from Saudi Arabia cushioned the economic fallout of the nuclear test related sanctions in 1998. Pakistani workforce in the country sent home approximately US\$6 billion in remittances in 2016.³ In addition, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has depended on the Saudi government for personal support and lived there as a guest after the military coup of 1999 put him in exile. In turn, the Saudis rely on Pakistan for military support and expertise.

Prior to Pakistan accepting membership in the IMAFT, relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were at a low point. In April 2015, Saudi government requested Pakistan to join the military coalition against Houthi rebels in Yemen and the parliament unanimously passed a resolution to maintain neutrality in the conflict. Such unprecedented independence in foreign policy decision-making was a setback to relations. In the months following the resolution, Pakistan also saw Gulf countries, especially the United Arab Emirates, develop closer ties with neighbouring India. Pakistan's non-involvement in the coalition would have been an early blow to the IMAFT and Saudi Arabia's ambitions of "leading the Muslim world". It would also have led to a permanent rift between the two countries, something that Pakistan cannot afford. Therefore, Pakistan's leadership committed to becoming part of the Saudi-led IMAFT.

At present, Pakistan's role in the IMAFT is unclear. No member country has, as yet, provided military support to the Saudi coalition fighting Houthi-rebels in Yemen, or any other conflict in the region. However, Raheel Sharif has been immensely successful in countering the insurgency in North and South Waziristan in Pakistan. Therefore, he may be tasked with handling the Yemen quagmire that Saudi Arabia has been in for the past two years, as well as the terrorist attacks happening within the country. Saudi Arabia stands to benefit immensely from Raheel Sharif's leadership of the IMAFT. On the other hand, as a Saudi-led initiative, it is doubtful that Raheel Sharif will be able to set an independent and neutral agenda for the

³ DAWN. "Shahid Iqbal". 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1271081>.

alliance. Pakistan's military retains controls over much of the decision-making regarding security and foreign policy in the country. Consequently, the exact terms of his appointment and the country's future role in the alliance have been shrouded in mystery.

Fanning the Flames of Sectarian Conflict

Pakistan picked sides during the 1980s Afghan War. The political, social and economic costs of that reverberate in Pakistan till this day. Until now, it has wisely chosen to stay out of crises that have divided the Middle East along sectarian lines and is representative of the long-standing competition for influence between regional rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The proxy wars between these two powers have inflamed the Middle East and have spilled over into Pakistan as well.

Within the country, the Deobandi⁴ groups conform to the puritanical version of Islam followed in Saudi Arabia. These groups are also in favour of Saudi Arabia's conflict with Houthi rebels. Involvement in Middle East will breathe new life into the Sunni militant base in Pakistan, which has the avowed aim of targeting Shias. Any ensuing sectarian strife in Pakistan may have adverse ramifications on Pakistan's own war on militancy, thereby encouraging Tehrik-e-Taliban⁵ and Islamic State⁶ support groups and worsening the country's security environment.

The military alliance is itself controversial. With the exception of Oman, its members are overwhelmingly Sunni-majority countries. An alliance which claims to counter terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan, excludes Iraq and Syria – two countries that have been epicentres of violence in the region. The exclusion of Shiite majority Iran has rendered firm the perception that this is a predominantly Sunni alliance aimed at projecting Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim world. In addition, the alliance's aim of countering terrorism contradicts the geopolitical reality in which Saudi Arabia is itself giving financial support to rebel groups fighting the Iranian-backed Baghdad government, as well as rebel groups in Syria, linked to the Al-Qaeda Nusrat Front.

⁴ Deobandi is an orthodox movement or sect within Sunni Islam.

⁵ Tehrik-e-Taliban or Taliban Movement of Pakistan is a terrorist organisation, containing multiple militant groups, focused on targeting Pakistan.

⁶ Islamic State or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is a terrorist organisation that follows a fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam.

Turbulence in Diplomatic Relations

In recent years, less than cordial relations with India and delays in targeting extremist groups within the country have resulted in Pakistan losing support in international fora. Countries in Middle East and South Asia have also distanced themselves from it. Raheel Sharif's appointment as head of the IMAFT may help to rekindle relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. It will also solidify Pakistan's image as a responsible state acting against terrorism, which is currently helpful when Pakistan is unsure of what the new American administration's policy towards it is going to be. Within the IMAFT, Pakistan will hope to be a dominant member. It is the only country with nuclear capabilities as well as have significant past achievements in counter terrorism strategies at home under the leadership of Raheel Sharif.

The possible negative consequences of Pakistan's role and leadership of the IMAFT appear to far outweigh the benefits. Involvement in Middle East conflicts that are increasingly taking on a sectarian colour will harm relations with Iran, Pakistan's south-western neighbour. With a hostile environment on both the east and west, alienating Iran will leave it with no friendly neighbours and restive borders on all sides. Until now, relations with Iran have been steady, even as it has increased defence cooperation with arch rival India. On the other hand, siding with Saudi Arabia in its geopolitical strategies will displease Iran and the small but significant Shiite minority within Pakistan. It also needs to be wary of unrest among ethnic Balochis in Pakistan and neighbouring Iran.

Although China has backed the IMAFT, its investment projects through the China Pakistan Economic Cooperation (CPEC) will be affected if sectarian strife and violence increase. The CPEC-led investments have benefitted Pakistan enormously through increased economic activity and foreign investments. This rare and valuable optimism about Pakistan's economy in the international sphere will be dampened by any further violence.

Similarly, ties with Russia are improving after many decades of stalemate. Defence cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened based on joint military exercises, Russia's sale of four Mi-35M attack helicopters to Pakistan and the recent visit of its Deputy Chief of General Staff to the North and South Waziristan regions.⁷ Pakistan's improving economy could very well give Russia the opportunity to increase trade in goods

⁷ Russian military delegation visited the North and South Waziristan area in March 2017. This is the first ever visit by a foreign delegation to the conflict zones in Pakistan.

and services, and enhance investments in the service industry. Even as Russia's economy has weakened, due to international sanctions and low oil prices, it still has considerable power to influence global affairs. However, if the IMAFT military alliance does involve itself in Syria, where the Russians are supporting the government of Bashar-al-Assad, there may be a serious effect on bilateral relations. The wounds of the Afghan War and Pakistan's support of the United States during the Cold War have not been forgotten in Moscow. Therefore, Pakistan will need to tread carefully in the Middle East.

.