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Pakistan and the Sunni Gulf

Overtures to Pakistan from the Sunni Gulf appear to be linked to the conflict in Syria.

By Umar Farooq
April 17, 2014

Recent months have brought Islamabad a flurry of visits from leaders of Sunni gulf nations, prompting many observers to question just what Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif might be getting the already embattled country into.

Pakistan's 190 million inhabitants include around 26 million Shiites, giving it the largest population of the minority Muslim sect's adherents after Iran. While Pakistan has officially tried to remain on the sidelines of the regular Shiite-Sunni flare-ups in the Middle East over the last few decades, backroom deals with Sunni monarchies like those being signed recently have not gone unnoticed domestically.

Pakistan is already witnessing unprecedented levels of sectarian violence, with more than 1,700 killed since 2008. The armed groups responsible for the bloodshed were born out of the global sectarian tensions that followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which produced the first modern Shiite theocracy.

Now, as the three-year-old civil war in Syria is encouraging Muslim nations to form Shiite and Sunni blocs, there is concern that if Pakistan were to join the fray globally, things could go from bad to worse domestically.

Bahrain's king, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, smiles down on traffic in Pakistan's capitol Islamabad from hundreds of banners lining the streets, a reminder of the ruler's visit last month, the first by a Bahraini ruler in 40 years.

The words "Pakistan welcomes you!" are emblazoned across the top, although that is more an aspiration than reality.

The details of Khalifa's visit were kept deliberately vague, with the Pakistani Foreign Office describing discussions between the "brotherly countries" centering around "bilateral, regional and international matters of mutual interest." What little information that did emerge was worrying to some Pakistanis, like the pledge to increase the "export of Pakistani manpower to Bahrain." That's something that has ended badly in the past.

In 2011, when largely Shiite protesters began demanding that Bahrain move towards a constitutional monarchy, thousands of ex-soldiers and police officers were recruited from Pakistan with the promise of Bahraini citizenship. The Pakistani security personnel shouted orders at Bahrainis in English and Urdu, becoming the face of a brutal crackdown by the state that engulfed Shiite villages in perpetual clouds of tear gas.

But Bahrain's domestic troubles pale in comparison to the explosive war in Syria, which has drawn thousands of Sunni jihadists, including Al-Qaeda's leadership, into a conflict Islamists see as an apocalyptic confrontation with Shiite Islam, in this case the forces of Bashar al-Assad and neighboring Iran.

With prospects for a negotiated settlement fading, the rebels are in need of weapons and expertise to get them out of a stalemate. Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar have set up camps to coordinate the training of Syrian rebels, but are in need of instructors and equipment.

That likely prompted a rare February visit to Pakistan by Saudi Arabia's crown prince Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who doubles as the defense minister. Over three days in Islamabad, al-Saud met the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the President Mamnoon Hussain, and the country's top military leadership.

His prize: a 180-degree shift in Pakistan's policy towards the war in Syria, which had previously been one of neutrality. A joint statement called for "the formation of a transnational governing body with full executive powers enabling it to take charge of the affairs of the country." In other words, Pakistan now stands with Saudi Arabia in demanding the departure of Bashar al-Assad.

A few weeks later, \$1.5 billion was transferred to Pakistan's state bank by an unnamed "brotherly country," giving the rupee its largest boost in years. When word leaked the funds had come from Saudi Arabia, many in Pakistan began to connect the dots with other rumors about Pakistan's shift in policy.

A long-delayed pipeline meant to carry natural gas from Iran to energy-starved Pakistan has effectively been killed by Nawaz Sharif's government. Pakistan has not built any of the 781 km

pipeline on its side that it's contractually obligated to complete by December 2014, and stands to incur a daily fine of \$3 million next year.

Meanwhile, there are rumors Pakistan is planning to provide Saudi Arabia with expert trainers and equipment for the Syrian rebels.

Officials have been coy on the details, but responding to inquiries in February, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson admitted it was looking to sell the Gulf kingdom the JF-17 Thunder, a fighter jet developed jointly with China, and other unspecified equipment.

That equipment is thought to include the Anza, a heat-seeking, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile designed with China and manufactured locally. It's the equivalent of the American Stinger missile, which was used to equip jihadist fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan three decades ago. The U.S., which is also supplying the Syrian rebels with light arms and communication equipment, is reportedly reluctant to hand over its own shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles for fear of where they might end up.

Thousands of Pakistani troops, who now have more than a decade of experience fighting insurgents in the country's war against the Taliban, may also make their way to Saudi Arabia to train the rebels.

All of that prompted criticism by Pakistani lawmakers, who grilled the foreign minister last month about what their military could play in the Syrian war. "We are afraid this amount has a link with the Syrian situation," Syed Khursheed Shah, who leads the opposition in the National Assembly, told reporters. The prime minister himself weighed in, categorically denying that any troops would be sent to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain.

But the rumors have persisted, including one story that Pakistan might deploy nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia if Iran goes nuclear itself. While Pakistan has vehemently denied that story – which does indeed seem far-fetched – the fact is, Pakistan owes Saudi Arabia a favor.

Pakistan's decades-long nuclear weapons program finally yielded a weapon in 1998, prompting severe sanctions by the United States, which were only lifted when the country's cooperation was needed following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Beginning in 1998, Saudi Arabia began supplying Pakistan with 50,000 barrels a day of free crude oil, worth nearly \$2 billion.

In fact, Pakistan's military-to-military cooperation with Saudi Arabia goes back five decades. Between the 1960s and 1980s, tens of thousands of Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia, working under Saudi command. Pakistani fighter pilots trained their first Saudi counterparts, and in 1969 flew jets that successfully repulsed incursions by Yemeni forces. Pakistani engineers built Saudi fortifications along its border with Yemen, meant to keep out Shiite Houthi fighters to the south.

During the first Gulf War, Pakistan toned down the presence of 15,000 troops in Saudi Arabia, ordering them away from the frontlines, fearing a backlash from Saddam Hussein, and sectarian groups at home.

It was during those decades that the sectarian groups now plaguing Pakistan first emerged.

In 1980, military ruler Zia ul Haq instituted the Zakaat Ordinance, which forced Shiites and Sunnis alike to turn over 2.5 percent of their income, as was required under Islamic law, to the state to be spent on charity. Pakistan was engulfed in protests by Shiites, who objected to the state's interference in their religious practices. Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's leader, convinced Zia ul Haq to exempt Shiites from the law.

That movement spawned the Tehrik-e-Jafria, a Shiite group sworn to protect the minority's rights. Sunnis saw the group as a front for the Iranian regime, and by 1985, hardliners had formed their own group, called Sipah-e-Sahaba. In 1990, one of that group's founders, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, was killed, and in return, Sunni militants killed the Iranian Consul General.

In 1997, a bomb killed the head of the Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba group; in return, Sunni militants killed an Iranian diplomat in the city of Multan. Later that year, the Iranian cultural center in Lahore was also bombed, and five Iranian soldiers training in Pakistan were killed.

Today, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a splinter group of the Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba, has claimed responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of Shiites in the city of Quetta, killed in bombings and brazen attacks on buses carrying pilgrims to Iran, Iraq and Syria. Dozens of Shiite and Sunni clerics have been gunned down in Pakistan this year alone, in tit-for-tat assassinations each blames on "foreign interference."

"There is no doubt the differences are being instigated," said Muhammad Amin Shaheedi, the head of Pakistan's largest Shia political party. "It's terrorism being fanned by others, outsiders who are taking advantage of the situation."

Ahmed Ludhianvi, head of a Sunni group that formed after Sipah-e-Sahaba was banned in 2002, has exactly the same view. "Some foreign powers are trying to bring Pakistan to the brink of civil war," he says. "This bloodshed began after 1979."

To be sure, Pakistan's sectarian militants are now operating on auto-pilot, and the idea that Iran and the Sunni Gulf monarchies are to blame seems farfetched. But if Pakistan's pivot away from Iran continues and it finds itself mired in a sectarian war in Syria, those domestic militants could become proxy warriors in a conflict that has already killed hundreds of thousands in the Middle East.