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POLICY BRIEF

SAUDI ARABIA'S HOLD ON PAKISTAN

MADIHA AFZAL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have had a close relationship through the decades, during both Pakistan's military and civilian regimes. Saudi Arabia has offered generous economic assistance to Pakistan, and the two countries have cooperated on defense matters.
- Since the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has exercised enormous influence on Pakistan behind the scenes through its funding of Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandi madrassas (religious seminaries), which teach a more puritanical version of Islam than had traditionally been practiced in Pakistan. While the funding is not directly traceable, scholars and analysts report that much of this funding to madrassas comes from private sources in Saudi Arabia. Central to this is the flow of Saudi money to madrassas that trained the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s, but the funding both predated and outlasted the Afghan jihad.
- The Saudi funding of Pakistan's madrassas derives from Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran ambitions and its bid to control the version of Islam, and specifically Sunni Islam, taught and practiced in Pakistan.
- Two historic events in 1979—the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—increased Saudi influence in Pakistan thereafter. The Iranian revolution bolstered Saudi incentives to control Sunnism in Pakistan, and the Soviet-Afghan war gave the Saudis a mechanism to do so, through the funding of madrassas.
- While the Saudi-Pakistan relationship is certainly durable, it has not been unconditional. In a surprising move, in April 2015, soon after receiving a $1.5 billion Saudi loan, Pakistan's parliament voted overwhelmingly to stay neutral in the Saudi intervention in Yemen against the Houthis. Iran was central to Saudi Arabia's Yemen intervention, as Riyadh sees the Houthis as being supported by Tehran. Pakistan's response to the intervention, then, is a clear reflection of how it delicately balances its relationship with Saudi Arabia and with Iran, while affirming its friendship with and support for Riyadh.
- In recent months, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan have formed an opportunistic friendship, forced in some ways by Pakistan's most recent debt crisis and Khan's desire to stay away from Western aid, as well as by MBS' troubles with the West after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. The relationship grew closer with the crown prince's February 2019 visit to Pakistan, during which he signed $20 billion in memorandums of understanding, and was given a no-expenses spared, red-carpet welcome by both Imran Khan and the chief of army staff.

- The bottom line: Saudi Arabia has succeeded in changing the character of Pakistan's religiosity in a bid to expand its influence in the Muslim world, and in its mission to counter Iran. Yet Saudi influence has its limits—Pakistan is skillful at balancing its relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and while its relationship with the latter is on balance the stronger one, it still manages to "wriggle free" of having to overtly pick sides in the Iran-Saudi dispute.

Pakistan's largest mosque is the Shah Faisal Masjid, built with a $120 million grant from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For a few years after its completion in 1986, it was the largest mosque in the world. It quickly became one of Pakistan's best-known structures, surpassing many centuries-old buildings of historic significance—appropriately symbolic, perhaps, of rising Saudi influence in the country.

Since the 1970s, the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has been marked by large official flows of money from the Kingdom to Pakistan, including aid and relief—well in the billions of dollars, though there is no clear tally of the total. In the wake of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Pakistan after its 1998 nuclear test, for example, Saudi Arabia provided the country with free oil for three years. Another significant marker of the relationship was the joint Saudi-American funding of the Afghan-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, money with which Pakistan armed and trained the mujahedeen that fought the war.

The close relationship between the two countries has persisted through Pakistan's democratic and military leaders, from Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's co-chairing of the Islamic conference in Lahore in 1974 (with Saudi King Faisal's blessing), to the Afghan jihad during President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, to the relief given to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government in 1998 in the wake of U.S. sanctions. The Kingdom has given refuge to exiled Pakistani political leaders, including Sharif, who fled there when he was overthrown by the military in 1999.

In 2017, then-Saudi Defense Minister and current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MBS, named Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif the first commander-in-chief of the multicountry Islamic Military Counterterrorism Coalition he had created in 2015. In recent months, the relationship between Pakistan's new Prime Minister Imran Khan and MBS has grown close; MBS made a splashy first trip to Pakistan as crown prince in February 2019, signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) worth $20 billion to help Pakistan's struggling economy, and leaving Khan with a feather in his cap.

MADRASSAS

As visible as Saudi influence on Pakistan has been, it has been just as important behind the scenes. The flow of money to madrassas (religious seminaries) that trained the mujahedeen in the 1980s both predated and has outlasted the Afghan jihad. The money cannot be traced easily to Saudi Arabia—Pakistan's madrassas receive private donations, and they flatly deny Saudi funding sources, but scholars and analysts report that it is private money from Saudi Arabia that is funding Pakistan's Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandi madrassas. Both the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith traditions of Islam are more puritanical than the traditional Sufi Islam practiced in South Asia; the more extreme of the two, the Ahl-e-Hadith tradition, is essentially the same as the Salafi or Wahhabi Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Vali Nasr has drawn a clear link between Pakistan's madrassas, the rise in sectarianism and Sunni militancy in the country, and Saudi funding.[1] He states, for example, that the reported rise in the number of madrassas between 1975 and 1979 in Pakistan was supported by money from the Persian Gulf monarchies, thus predating the Afghan jihad.[2] He also notes that 1700 out of

nearly 2500 registered madrassas in Pakistan in 1996 were receiving support from non-Pakistani sources.[3] Nasr argues that Saudi funding of Pakistan's madrassas was part of its "anti-Iranian regional policy," its agenda to promote "its version of Sunnism through Islamic education," and to control the "intellectual and cultural life" of the Muslim world. He argues that Saudi Arabia was not alone in these ambitions—that Iraq also had a similar motivation—saying that both countries had "a vested interest in preserving the Sunni character of Pakistan's Islamization."[4] Even the placement of Pakistan's madrassas was part of Saudi anti-Iran policy, he notes, quoting an observer: "if you look at where the most madrassahs [sic] were constructed you will realize that they form a wall blocking Iran off from Pakistan."[5] Conversely, Pakistan's Shiite madrassas are reported to receive funding from Iran.

According to one estimate, the number of madrassas in Pakistan tripled between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s.[6] The exact numbers of these seminaries are in dispute, because many madrassas in Pakistan continue to be unregistered, but they number in the thousands. Pakistan's madrassas came under worldwide scrutiny after September 11, and although initial reports pegged them in the tens of thousands, a set of academics have used survey data to show that madrassas are far less prevalent in Pakistan than sources have claimed, and that they only account for a very small percentage of student enrollment (less than 5 percent in most areas of the country).[7] Regardless, many madrassas are ideological, teach a biased view of the world, and their students display a low tolerance for minorities and a preference for jihad. And the significance of madrassas extends beyond their numbers: Madrassa graduates go on to become preachers in mosques and teach the compulsory Islamic studies course in public schools.[8] A small number of hardline madrassas in Pakistan have been directly connected with militancy and terrorism, including the Dar-ul-uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak, run by the (late) Islamist leader Sami-ul-Haq.

The number of madrassas in Pakistan continued to increase beyond the mid-2000s. According to a U.S. Consulate cable to the State Department in 2008 on extremist recruitment in South Punjab, money directed toward the Kashmir earthquake after 2005 through charities such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (Lashkar-e-Taiba's charity organization) and the al-Khidmat Foundation, including from Saudi Arabia, "was siphoned off to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in southern and western Punjab to expand these sects' presence in a traditionally hostile, but potentially fruitful, [extremist] recruiting ground. The initial success of establishing madrassas and mosques in these areas led to subsequent annual 'donations' to these same clerics, originating in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates."[9] The cable links the "exponential" growth in madrassas in this area during this time to increased recruitment of militants.

The cable goes on to discuss the quantity of the funding and to identify their sources more precisely: "[Pakistani] government and non-governmental sources claimed that financial support estimated at nearly 100 million USD annually was making its way to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in the region from 'missionary' and 'Islamic charitable' organizations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ostensibly with the direct support of those governments."[10]

All this has changed the kind of Islam practiced and taught in Pakistan, which had traditionally had more of a Sufi bent. While the roots of the Deobandi tradition go back to madrassas founded as part of the Islamic revival in 19th-century India, the Deobandis fundamentally oppose Sufi or "folk" Islam and its central concept of intercession by saints (the Barelvi tradition subscribes to this notion). The Ahl-e-Hadith tradition is even more puritanical and is also linked to extremist groups: two militant groups in Pakistan, the Kashmir-focused Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the anti-Shiite Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, subscribe to the Ahl-e-Hadith interpretation. Markaz-al-Dawah-al-Irshad, the LeT's madrassa in Muridke, is an Ahl-e-Hadith seminary.

By some estimates, 80 percent of the madrassas in Pakistan are now Deobandi.[11] Pakistan's two main Islamist parties, the Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam and the Jamaat-e-Islami, follow the Deobandi tradition, which came out of the madrassa at Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, founded in 1866 in colonial India. The Taliban, too, follows an extreme version of the Deobandi faith. Vali Nasr argues that Saudi Arabia is responsible, both intellectually and financially, for the Deobandi resurgence across the Muslim world.[12]

And while Saudi Arabia has had a close relationship with Pakistan's Deobandi Islamist parties, this alliance has also had its limits. Pakistan's political Islamists try to not be overtly sectarian, and, according to Nasr, that pushback has led Saudi Arabia to look elsewhere to fulfill its sectarian ambitions in Pakistan—specifically, to the Ahl-e-Hadith Ulema, thereby empowering them.[13]

In general, the "Saudi-ization" of Pakistan and the changing nature of the country's religiosity are driven from the ground up—through the influence of madrassas and the Ulema—rather than from the top down, despite Zia's overt alliance with the Saudis in the 1980s and his Islamization of the country's laws and curricula at the same time. This means that the Pakistani state—though the establishment is predominantly Sunni—never took on an explicitly sectarian character or followed a specific Islamic tradition, for that matter. This, of course, makes sense given the non-theocratic nature of its government, but it is a nuance that is useful to state explicitly.

THROUGH THE DECADES, A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICIANS AND THE MILITARY

Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto held the second Islamic summit—a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—in Lahore in February 1974. King Faisal, the chairman of the OIC, was present; Bhutto was named co-chairman. The February dates were picked by Faisal (prompting the Shah of Iran to refuse to attend). Bhutto wanted to appease the Saudis, not least to beef up his own Islamic credentials at home—he was under constant political pressure from the country's Islamists during his tenure, owing at least partly to his personal lack of religiosity. "Mr. Bhutto is so anxious to please the Arabs that he's even started talking about the 'Gulf' without a hint of the all-important adjective 'Persian,'" the Shah is reported to have said about him.[14] King Faisal is also said to have influenced Bhutto's decision later that year to name Ahmadis, a persecuted religious minority, as non-Muslim.

Two historic events in 1979—the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—increased Saudi influence in Pakistan thereafter. The revolution in Iran increased the Saudi imperative to cultivate Pakistan's Sunnism, and the Afghan jihad and the training of mujahedeen that Pakistan embarked on gave the Saudis a vehicle to do so, via the funding of Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Pakistan. These madrassas served up both the manpower and ideology that fueled the Afghan jihad. Sources suggest that the number of madrassas grew exponentially during this time. According to Mariam Abou-Zahab, "mosques and deeni [religious] madrassas with sectarian affiliations were built everywhere [during this decade], often on state lands."[15]

This perfectly complemented Zia's parallel Islamization project in Pakistan, in which the Jamaat-e-Islami was his accomplice as he set out to Islamize public school curricula. Zia also amended Pakistan's penal code in that decade, instituting death as a punishment for blasphemy, and introduced draconian (and markedly Saudi-like) punishments such as stoning to death for adultery and cutting off hands for theft—although the most extreme of these have not been carried out.

Through the decades, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have cooperated on defense; the military-to-military relationship was strong before, and continued to be after Zia as well. In addition, there is speculation of a nuclear partnership between the two countries,

though both deny it.[16] And Pakistan has had a strong economic relationship with Saudi Arabia that has continued through its military and civilian regimes. The countries trade with each other at high volumes, with Pakistan enjoying a surplus over Saudi Arabia. Over the years, more than 2 million Pakistanis have travelled to Saudi Arabia to work;[17] their remittances help Pakistan's economy, and the siphoning of zakat (charitable giving) from those remittances and earnings toward madrassas also significantly benefits Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has also helped bail out Pakistan's economy at multiple points. It helped in 1998 after Pakistan's nuclear tests and resulting economic sanctions, as mentioned above. In 2014, Saudi Arabia gave Pakistan a $1.5 billion loan to shore up its economy.[18] Both times, Nawaz Sharif was in power. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal has described Sharif as "Saudi Arabia's man in Pakistan."

But the relationship, while certainly durable, has not been unconditional. In a surprising move, in April 2015 (during a Sharif government, and soon after receiving the $1.5 billion loan in 2014), Pakistan's parliament voted overwhelmingly to stay neutral in the Saudi intervention in Yemen against the Houthis. This seemed to take Saudi Arabia by surprise, since it had listed Pakistan among the countries joining its coalition, fully assuming Pakistan would come to its help in Yemen. While Pakistan said it would not send troops or supplies to Yemen, it did reiterate that it stood "shoulder to shoulder" with Saudi Arabia.[19] Iran was central to Saudi Arabia's Yemen intervention, as it sees the Houthis as being supported by Tehran. Pakistan's response to the intervention, then, is a clear reflection of how it delicately balances its relationship with Saudi Arabia and with Iran, while affirming its friendship with and support for Riyadh. Not unsurprisingly, the pro-Saudi Islamist parties, including the Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam, and fundamentalist groups such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa led large street protests in Pakistani cities against parliament's decision.[20]

MBS AND IMRAN

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan have formed an opportunistic friendship in recent months, forced in some ways by Pakistan's most recent debt crisis and Khan's desire to stay away from International Monetary Fund loans, as well as by MBS' troubles with the West after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. As the writer Mohammed Hanif put it, "the prince is playing with Pakistan and India because he is being temporarily snubbed by the boys and girls of the West, the ones he really wanted to play with."[21]

Khan attended the Saudi investment conference in October 2018, which many countries pulled out of after the Khashoggi murder. He came away with $6 billion in debt relief—$3 billion in direct loans and $3 billion in deferred oil payments. The relationship grew closer with the crown prince's February 2019 visit to Pakistan, during which Pakistan gave the prince a royal welcome, with a formation of jets welcoming his plane into Pakistani airspace, both the prime minister and chief of army staff present to receive the prince with a red carpet, and with Khan breaking protocol and personally driving MBS to the prime minister's residence, where he stayed. No expense was spared for the visit, which lasted barely over a day—the prince brought eight luxury cars, gym equipment, and furniture with him. Large banners welcomed the prince even in cities he did not visit—"we welcome His Royal Highness to his second home," said a banner in Lahore. In Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the government declared a public holiday and heightened security, establishing as many as a thousand police checkpoints and deploying elite force commandos.

MBS, who had brought along 40 top Saudi businessmen for the visit, signed $20 billion in MOUs, including in energy, oil refining, and mineral development. The exact conditions for these deals are unknown—but Saudi money is not going to be free. Pakistan's president awarded MBS the Nishan-e-Pakistan, the country's highest civilian

award. MBS rode a horse-drawn carriage to the event at the presidential residence. Khan engaged in extraordinarily flowery expressions of praise for the prince, even saying that the prince would win more votes in an election in Pakistan than Khan himself: "You are extremely popular," Khan said, "if it hadn't been for security reasons, you would have seen thousands and thousands of people on the streets welcoming you."

Iran was not far from the Saudis' minds on the trip; at a live press conference, the Saudi foreign minister launched into a tirade and called Tehran the chief supporter of terrorism in the world. Pakistani television channels hushed to mute his remarks.

It was partly President Trump's tweetstorms against U.S. aid to Pakistan that pushed Khan into the Saudis' arms; so have Khan's own populist promises of reduced dependence on the West. But the Khashoggi episode has played a significant role as well, and Khan's willingness to overlook that has won him MBS's friendship and financial backing. In fact, such is Khan's desire to appease MBS that Pakistan's federal investigation agency has begun investigating those journalists and activists who changed their social media display photos to Khashoggi's face to protest the prince's visit. Still, there is no guarantee that this level of friendship will sustain, dependent as it is on the confluence of these multiple variables. During the prince's visit, Khan earned points domestically by asking for the release of Pakistani prisoners in Saudi Arabia. The prince agreed, yet the next month, Saudi Arabia continued its practice of draconian punishments on foreigners, executing two Pakistanis for drug trafficking.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Saudi Arabia's money buys it influence in Pakistan—especially religious, but also cultural. The Arabization of culture has even become visible on some car license plates in Pakistan's major cities, with Pakistan written in Arabic as "al-Bakistan." As Mohammad Hanif put it, it is a "happy marriage between God and budget deficits."[22] Saudi Arabia has succeeded in changing the character of Pakistan's religiosity in a bid to expand its influence in the Muslim world, and in its mission to counter Iran. Yet Saudi influence has its limits—Pakistan is skillful at balancing its relationships between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and while its relationship with the latter is on balance the stronger one, it still manages to "wriggle free" of having to overtly pick sides in the Iran-Saudi dispute.[23]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madiha Afzal is a visiting fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, and was previously assistant professor of public policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is the author of the book *Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018). Afzal has published in *Public Choice*, and is the author of a USIP special report on education and attitudes in Pakistan, as well as several book chapters, journal articles, and policy reports. Afzal writes for Pakistani and international publications including Dawn, Foreign Affairs, The Cairo Review, Foreign Policy, and The Washington Post. In addition, she consults for various organizations, including the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development, and the U.K. Department for International Development. She has also taught at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.