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The Pakistan-Saudi Spat: Hitting the Kingdom Where It Hurts

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A rift between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia throws deepening fissures in the Muslim world into sharp relief. Coupled with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and myriad conflicts in the Middle East, the dispute poses serious challenges to Saudi Arabia's quest for geopolitical and religious leadership of the Muslim world.

Pakistani FM Shah Mahmood Qureishi has stirred a regional hornet's nest by challenging Saudi leadership of the Muslim world.

Complaining about lack of support in its conflict with India over Kashmir from the Saudi-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which groups 57 Muslim-majority nations, Qureishi suggested that his country would seek to rally support beyond the realm of the kingdom.

In doing so, he was hitting Saudi Arabia where it hurts the most and at a particularly sensitive moment in the kingdom's quest for religious and regional hegemony.

Saudi Arabia, together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is seeking to counter Turkish and Iranian quests for dominance.

Qureishi threw down his gauntlet eight months after Pakistani PM Imran Khan withdrew under Saudi pressure from participation in an Islamic summit in Kuala Lumpur convened by the kingdom's rivals, including Qatar, Turkey, and Iran.

Adding insult to injury, the Pakistani-Saudi spat evolved as the kingdom was coming under pressure to follow the UAE in recognizing Israel and forging diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.

President Donald J. Trump's son-in-law, [Jared Kushner](#), who stage-managed the UAE-Israeli move, insisted shortly after the announcement that "it is an inevitability that Saudi Arabia and Israel will have fully normalized relations."

The [UAE-Israel agreement](#) may not have taken Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to extend Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank completely off the table, but it could do so *de facto*.

Netanyahu has insisted that his plans, suspended as part of Israel's deal with the UAE, would only be implemented with US endorsement. A UAE threat to rupture diplomatic relations if Israel were to move ahead would likely prevent the US from giving a green light.

Saudi Arabia, however, is certain to want a *de jure* rather than a *de facto* end to any prospect of sovereignty—a demand that is key to Palestinian re-engagement in efforts to end the conflict with Israel.

In a twist of irony, [Arab News](#), the kingdom's foremost English-language newspaper, this week celebrated Muhammad Asad, a Jewish convert to Islam, as "the pioneer in the establishment of friendly relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia."

Perceptions of that relationship have clearly changed over time.

"Pakistani elites have a bad habit of taking Saudi support for granted given what Saudi has done for Pakistan over the decades. Well the party is over, and Pakistan needs to deliver value to this relationship. It's no longer a free lunch or a one-way street," tweeted [Ali Shihabi](#), a former banker and analyst who frequently echoes the kingdom's view.

Following in the UAE's footsteps without a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is supported by the Palestinians could magnify the challenge to Saudi leadership posed by its regional distractors.

Saudi Arabia fears that any challenge to its leadership could fuel demands that the kingdom sign over custodianship of Mecca and Medina to a pan-Islamic body.

The custodianship and Saudi Arabia's image as a leader of the Muslim world is what persuaded Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) to reach out to Israel in the first place—primarily to use that as well as his embrace of dialogue with Jewish and Christian groups to bolster his tarnished image in Washington and other Western capitals.

Pakistani persistence in its challenge of the kingdom is likely to persuade the UAE to come to Saudi Arabia's aid by increasing pressure on the South Asian state. Like the kingdom, the UAE was quick to help ease Pakistan's financial crisis shortly after Khan's 2018 electoral victory

The UAE response would be driven less by solidarity with Riyadh and more by its own geopolitical and religious soft power rivalry with Turkey and Iran, two countries that reacted vehemently to the Emirates' recognition of Israel.

The criticism came as supporters of the move encouraged the UAE public to report critics to the public prosecutor's office.

"If you see anyone (inside the UAE, citizens or expats) violating Emirati moral regulations such as promoting #antisemitism, disrespecting the UAE decisions or its leadership on social media – REPORT to Attorney General Office via official App of @UAE_PP," tweeted Emirati businessman Hassan Sajwani. (The tweet has since been deleted.)

Prince Muhammad is likely to see Qureshi's challenge as an attempt to exploit domestic Saudi sensitivities. For all his efforts to shift legitimization of the ruling family from religious to nationalist endorsement, he still feels that he needs clerical support for his at times controversial actions.

Saad Jabri, a former Saudi intelligence operative who fled to Canada, charged in a recent lawsuit in a Washington court that MbS had sought a *fatwa* or Islamic ruling justifying his assassination by a squad that included agents suspected of killing journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 in Istanbul.

Saudi Arabia has [denied the allegation](#), suggesting that Jabri had fled the kingdom to duck allegations of corruption.

Analysts believe Jabri was referring to an opinion issued weeks before Khashoggi's killing by [Saleh Fawzan](#), one of the kingdom's most prominent Salafi scholars known for his anti-Shiite views. The *fatwa* allegedly justified the killing of those who disobeyed the Saudi ruler but made no mention of Jabri.

Subtle clerical resistance to the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic highlights the sensitivity of Qureshi's questioning of Saudi Arabia's religious leadership.

The government has cracked down on religious figures who failed to toe the line of overall clerical support for its efforts to combat the pandemic.

Authorities reportedly arrested in March Sheikh Abdullah Saad, an Islamic scholar, after he posted online an audio clip criticizing the government for banning Friday prayers. Saad argued that worshippers should be able to ask God for mercy.

An imam in Mecca was fired at about the same time after he expressed concern about the spread of the virus in Saudi prisons.

Saad and the fired imam were believed to reflect a broader sentiment in Saudi Arabia's religious establishment that has largely been cowed into acquiescence and submission.

Scholars Genevieve Abdo and Nourhan Elnahla reported that the kingdom's Council of Senior Clerics had initially drafted a *fatwa* describing the closing of mosques as a violation of Islamic principles. They said government pressure had persuaded the council not to issue the opinion.

By targeting one of the Saudi Crown Prince's greatest sensitivities, Qureshi hoped to persuade him that supporting Pakistan was in the kingdom's interest.

Qureshi's challenge may not do the trick, but it did get MbS's attention.

Recently, the Saudi Crown Prince sent a plane to Pakistan to pick up Maulana Tahir Ashrafi and his family for a visit to the kingdom, according to well-placed Pakistani sources.

A prominent Pakistani cleric with close ties to the kingdom, Ashrafi arranged for a fence-mending trip to the kingdom by Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's powerful military commander.

The measure of Gen. Bajwa's success may be expressed in dollars and cents rather than in an official statement. Financially strapped Pakistan has so far waited in vain for a response to a request for a delay on payments for Saudi oil imports.

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