



Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

# Stabilizing Pakistan-Gulf Relations in the post-Yemen Crisis Period

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## Stabilizing Pakistan-Gulf Relations in the post-Yemen Crisis Period

Yemen Krizinin Ardından Pakistan-Körfez İlişkilerine İstikrar Getirmek

برقراری ثبات در روابط پاکستان و کشورهای حوزه خلیج فارس پس از بحران یمن

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## SUMMARY

- The advent of a new government in Pakistan in August 2018 provides an opportunity for Islamabad to revise its ties with GCC.
- In the arena of trade, Pakistan remains fully devoted to finalizing a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the GCC in an effort to increase bilateral trade and take advantage of all prospects such as Crown Prince Salman's Vision 2030-related investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia and various ventures related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan.
- Diplomatic ties between Pakistan and the Gulf took an upward trajectory when Pakistan joined the "Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)" also known as the Muslim NATO, in late 2015.
- Pakistan has a significant Shia population (20 percent), therefore, even a slight shift towards any one regional rival can have severe repercussions in the form of sectarian strife within the country which is already prone to sectarian violence.
- Pakistan continues to pursue India-centric foreign and security policies and observes each incremental step in GCC-India relations with serious concern.

**Keywords:** GCC, Iran, Migrants, China, India, Yemen

## ÖZET

- Pakistan'da Ağustos 2018'de yeni bir hükümetin iktidara gelişi İslamabad'a Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi (KİK) ile olan bağlarını gözden geçirme fırsatı vermektedir.
- Ticari anlamda Pakistan, Velihaht Prens Muhammed bin Selman'ın 2030 vizyonuyla ilintili yatırımlar ve Çin-Pakistan Ekonomik Koridoru'nun sunduğu fırsatlar gibi alanlarda bütün tarafların ekonomik kazanımlarının artması için KİK ile serbest ticaret anlaşması imzalamakta bütünüyle kararlıdır.
- Pakistan ile Körfez arasındaki diplomatik ilişkiler, Pakistan 2015 yılı sonlarında "İslam NATO'su" olarak da bilinen "İslam Ülkeleri Terörle Mücadele Koalisyonu"nun parçası olmasıyla ivme kazanmıştır.
- Pakistan %20 gibi bir oranla önemli bir Şii nüfusa sahiptir. Bu durum, zaten mezhep çatışmasına teşne olan ülkenin herhangi bir bölgesel rakibe en ufak bir meyli sonucunda ciddi sonuçlarla karşı karşıya kalmasına neden olabilir.
- Pakistan, Hindistan odaklı bir dış politika ve güvenlik politikası takip etmeyi sürdürmekte ve KİK ile Hindistan arasındaki ilişkilerde her artışı derin bir kaygıyla izlemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** KİK, İran, Göçmenler, Çin, Hindistan Yemen

## چکیده

- روی کار آمدن دولت جدید در پاکستان در اوت ۲۰۱۸ فرصتی تازه در اختیار اسلام آباد قرار داد تا به اتخاذ رویکردی جدید در روابط خود با شورای همکاری خلیج فارس بپردازد.
- در عرصه تجاری، پاکستان به منظور افزایش بهره مندیهای اقتصادی همه طرفها از فرصتهای حاصل از مواردی از قبیل سرمایه گذاریهای مربوط به طرح چشم انداز ۲۰۳۰ شاهزاده محمد بن سلمان در عربستان و کریدور اقتصادی چین - پاکستان، مصمم به امضای قرارداد منطقه آزاد تجاری با شورای همکاری خلیج فارس است.
- پس از اینکه پاکستان در اواخر سال ۲۰۱۵ به "ائتلاف نظامی اسلامی ضد تروریسم" ویا به تعبیر دیگر "ناتوی اسلامی" پیوست، روابط دیپلماتیک این کشور با کشورهای عضو شورای همکاری خلیج فارس به سرعت رو به گسترش نهاد.
- پاکستان دارای جمعیت قابل توجهی از شیعیان (در حدود ۲۰ درصد) است. این بدین معنی است که هرگونه دگرگونی اندک در نزدیکی این کشور به یکی از رقبای منطقه ای می تواند تبعات جدی برای این کشور در پی داشته باشد. چه اینکه می تواند سبب شعله ور شدن آتش اختلافات مذهبی در منطقه ای شود که اساسا مستعد بروز خشونت‌های مذهبی است.
- پاکستان همچنان درحال پیگیری یک سیاست خارجی و امنیتی هند محور است. از این روی هرگونه گسترش روابط هند و کشورهای عضو شورای همکاری خلیج فارس موجب افزایش نگرانی های پاکستان خواهد شد.

**کلید واژه ها:** شورای همکاری خلیج فارس، ایران، مهاجران، چین، هندوستان، یمن

### Introduction

Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have a close relationship initially built on religion and strategic ties but it has grown to include economic relations. However, amongst the GCC countries, Pakistan's relations are more pronounced with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Currently, the relationship is premised on three main elements: politics, security, and economy. The economic relations encompass the Pakistani migrant community which constitutes a significant presence in the region. The military relationship includes training and security cooperation and the political relationship acts as an umbrella. Each of these elements presents their own unique set of challenges and opportunities for the future.

Despite a history of strong relations, challenges have been exacerbated due to a mismatch of expectations on either side. In 2015, relations faced a setback when Pakistan was unable to accommodate Saudi's request to station troops for the Yemen war, due to constraints at home. Another challenge that needs to be addressed is trade. Pak-GCC trade has been on a downward trajectory. For instance, while exports of goods and services to the KSA were \$447,530 in 2016, they fell to \$316,763 in 2018. However, the most dangerous challenge Pakistan faces, and increasingly so, is balancing its relations between regional rivals the KSA and Iran.

The Saudi-led coalition started its mission in Yemen in 2015 – the sole purpose was to protect the civilians in Yemen from the Houthi militia and to prevent Yemen from becoming, according to Riyadh, an Iranian subsidiary. While the UAE, in particular, was vocal when Pakistan declined to send troops for the war, though Saudi's displeasure was clear, KSA officials did not explicitly admonish Islamabad. Moreover, Pakistan went on to participate in North Thunder, a military drill held in northern Saudi Arabia in March 2016. Additionally, General Raheel Sharif, the former Chief of Army Staff of the

Pakistan Army, was designated the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Military Alliance. In early 2018, a deputation of troops was also sent to the KSA to help secure the Saudi borders. Even though Imran Khan's objections as an opposition leader were one of the main reasons why troops were not deployed to Yemen back in 2015, in his official capacity, in his new role as Prime Minister, he has been forthright against the Houthis and has on several occasions stated that Pakistan "always stands by Saudi Arabia".

The advent of a new government in Pakistan in August 2018 provides an opportunity for Islamabad to revise its ties with GCC. Presently, Pakistan is in dire need for financial aid to avoid a complete International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout. For that, investment from the GCC, especially the KSA seems like an ideal solution. In order for this to happen and for Pakistan to showcase that it is an ideal investment, Islamabad must ensure stable relations with the GCC.

Addressing existing challenges is necessary to build a more sustainable and robust relationship. Starting from the need to stem the declining quality of the Pakistani workforce through training workshops designed to cater to GCC needs. In the arena of trade, Pakistan remains fully devoted to finalizing a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the GCC in an effort to increase bilateral trade and take advantage of all prospects such as Crown Prince Salman's Vision 2030-related investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia and various ventures related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan.

All this said, since every relationship is a two-way street, the GCC also needs to recognize their mutual interest in helping Pakistan set its house in order to establish its role as a unified, powerful regional bloc. This paper will concentrate primarily on ties with Qatar, the KSA and the UAE, through a futuristic lens and will focus on the challenges faced in Pakistan-GCC relations, how to address these challenges and the opportunities for embracing a better relationship.

## Brief Overview of Pakistan-Gulf Relations after 2015

As mentioned previously, the Pak-GCC relationship, particularly with the KSA and the UAE plummeted somewhat in 2015, after Pakistan's refusal to send troops to partake in the Saudi-led war in Yemen. The Pakistani parliament remained neutral as the Saudi-led coalition struck Houthi targets in Yemen as part of Operation Decisive Storm because it did not want to be drawn into the larger sectarian conflict between the KSA and Iran.

This decision of non-involvement prompted Gulf countries such as the UAE and Kuwait to criticize Pakistan. The UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs on 11 April 2015, stated that this action was "contradictory and dangerous and unexpected from Islamabad". Saudi Arabia, however, chose to remain silent and continued to maintain relations with Pakistan. This was evident in the 2015 Saudi military exercise involvement. It also indicated the importance Saudi Arabia gives to Pakistan – at least as a strategic partner.

Diplomatic ties between Pakistan and the Gulf took an upward trajectory when Pakistan became part of the "Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)" also known as the Muslim NATO, in late 2015. Former Pakistan chief of army staff, General Raheel Shareef, became the head of this force, viewed by many as a compromise for not partaking in the Yemen war. This 41-Muslim nation alliance also opened a gateway for apprehensions for Pakistani policy makers, since Iran, a major power in the region, was excluded in the alliance.

At this point, it is important to note that Pakistan's approach towards Iran and the KSA is a balancing act. This means that while Pakistan maintains deep ideological and military ties with Saudi Arabia, it considers Iran important not only as a neighbour but also as a potential trading partner - the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline is just one example for avenues of cooperation between the two. In 2017, General Qamar Bajwa visited Iran, which was the first visit by a

Chief of Army Staff after two decades. During the meetings, he elucidated that Pakistan's new foreign policy includes better ties with Iran, moreover, better counterterrorism initiatives in the province of Balochistan, where the threat of the Islamic State and other similar elements still exist. Pakistan's diplomatic policies have worked fairly well for Pakistan, in terms of balancing both sides as well as continuing healthy relations with the Gulf countries especially the KSA and the UAE.

Despite a below-par trade flow, since the 1960s, Pakistan and the Gulf States have a healthy strategic relationship. The Pakistani army played a noteworthy part in the establishment and training of Saudi armed forces. In line with implementing its Vision 2030, the KSA has been focusing on its strategic partnership with Pakistan. In November 2017, two Saudi delegations visited Pakistan aiming to explore trade and defence partnerships, and intelligence sharing to combat terrorism. Following their visit, in February 2018, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited Riyadh and discussed the particulars regarding joint military exercises and training military expertise. In return, the Saudi Government showed complete support in combating terrorism with Pakistan.

In 2017 when four GCC states (KSA, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) cut ties with Qatar over allegations of supporting terrorism and particularly its ties with Iran, Pakistan faced another unforeseen circumstance. Pakistan again refrained from taking sides, since it had deep economic ties with Qatar, worth almost \$1.6 billion according to 2017 figures, and a large number of migrants residing in both the UAE and the KSA. If anything, in February 2018, Pakistan sent an army contingent to the KSA on what was called a strictly training and advice mission. At the same time, Pakistan's trade with Qatar increased by 100 percent in 2018. These instances showcase Pakistan's successful balancing strategy. In August 2018, Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Imran Khan in his victory speech made it clear that Pakistan wished to play the role of a



mediator not that of an instigator in the Middle East.

### Problem Areas in the Relationship

#### 1. Migrants

Human resource export to the GCC began on an extensive level in 1975. More than 95% of the Pakistani migrant labour force reside in Saudi Arabia (5.0 million) and the UAE (3.6 million) alone according to the latest figures circa 2018. Qatar caters to almost 160,381 Pakistani migrants.

However, since the crisis hit, there has been a significant decrease in remittances from these countries. For Saudi Arabia, the figures fell from 438 to 409 million US dollars. For the UAE from 414 to 334 million US dollars and for Qatar from 62 to 45 million US dollars.

Today, Pakistan is the second-largest exporter of migrant labour in South Asia, and remittances account for 7% of the country's GDP. Many Pakistanis spend up to USD 9,000 to find a job in countries like Saudi Arabia — in some cases spending fourteen times their monthly salary for the opportunity to work abroad. However, the return on investment can be dismal. Part of the problem derives from the fact that most Pakistani migrants seek employment outside of the government's official channels — raising the cost exponentially. Migrants pursuing jobs in Saudi Arabia are required to work through a licensed recruitment agency in Pakistan and the Saudi embassy, but some skirt this altogether. Amid the growth of aggressive infrastructure projects like the UAE's World Expo 2020 and Qatar's World Cup 2022, the demand for temporary contract labour has accelerated throughout the Gulf. However, at the same time, plummeting oil prices and Gulf-wide nationalisation campaigns — such as Saudi Arabia's 'Saudisation' to partially replace the migrant workforce with its citizens — are likely to slow recruitment.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization routinely administers site visits to survey health and security conditions. At the start

of 2018, submitting work site injury reports became mandatory. In April 2018, a report showcased that 42 non-residents turned to their consulate after the company they worked for had been suspending pays for nearly two months. Abuses against migrant workers encompass misemployment and maltreatment. Migrant domestic workers have always had to face forms of abuse mainly because most work in private homes and a significant number are women. The Qatar-Gulf crisis has also caused additional problems because it has resulted in hindrances in cross GCC travel, delayed passport renewals and denied exit permits. Additionally, for Pakistanis living in Qatar, cross-country travel within the Gulf is proving to be difficult for many migrants are being forced to re-route their travel within these countries.

#### 2. Balancing Saudi Arabia and Iran

Pakistan has always had to walk the tight-rope where KSA-Iran relations are concerned. Pakistan has a significant Shia population (20 percent) therefore even a slight shift towards any one regional rival can have severe repercussions in the form of sectarian strife within the country which is already prone to sectarian violence. Almost 30,000 people have died because of sectarian strife, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal. Hence, despite the Pakistan Army's unsteady correspondence with their counterparts in the GCC after Islamabad declined to participate in the Yemen war, they continued to maintain their neutrality. As mentioned previously, while countries like the UAE and Kuwait admonished Pakistan forthrightly, the KSA was more muted in its response. Even in the Qatar-GCC spat, Islamabad refused to take sides.

In the first six months of his tenure, General Bajwa made it a precedence to showcase Islamabad's neutrality. After his visit to Riyadh in 2017, he made a similar trip to Tehran. In July 2018, Iranian Chief of General Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri visited Islamabad, where both countries renewed their pledge to fight terrorism. Newly elected Prime Minister Imran



Khan has made many bold statements in favour of Iran. In fact, Mr. Javad Zarif was the first foreign minister to visit the new Prime Minister. Notwithstanding the apparent amicability between Tehran and Islamabad, the first country Mr. Khan officially visited was Saudi Arabia on 18 September 2018.

### 3. Trade

Pakistan has always had unyielding trade ties with the Gulf States, especially with the KSA and the UAE. In fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, most of the gulf migrants were Pakistani. By June 2017, around 1.9 million Pakistanis were residing in the KSA, 1.2 million in the UAE, and 115,000 in Qatar. Pakistani expatriates residing in the GCC significantly contribute to the Pakistani economy through their remittances. According to the State Bank of Pakistan figures, Pakistan accumulated around \$1,077.78 million from the UAE and \$1,228.17 million from the KSA and \$98.88 million from Qatar in terms of remittances in the fiscal year 2018. In terms of trade, Pakistan imported \$5.84 billion worth of goods from the UAE, \$1.95 billion from the KSA and \$864 million from Qatar. Likewise, Pakistan exported goods worth \$852 million to the UAE, \$300 million to the KSA and \$42.6 million to Qatar in the fiscal year 2017.

Diplomatic efforts show that despite the Pakistani parliament's refusal to deploy troops in Yemen, there was no disruption in Pak-KSA bilateral relations. Case in point being 2017, when the KSA exhibited its willingness to be part of the CPEC project and fully participate in development programs in Gwadar to strengthen the bilateral trade partnership between Islamabad and Riyadh.

On July 2, 2018, GCC secretary-general Al-Zayani met with the Pakistani ambassador and showed the willingness to restart the dialogue process to conclude the Pakistan –GCC free trade agreement (FTA). The FTA would significantly enhance trade relations with the Gulf States and it would also boost investment in the private sector. The GCC imports 70 of its farm produce. Since Pakistan is essentially an agri-

culture-based economy and given that it is the world's fourth-largest cotton producer, it can easily capture a significant number of market shares of farm products in the GCC economy

During an official visit to Saudi Arabia on 18 September 2018, the Pakistani Government invited the Saudi Government to invest in CPEC projects. In the following weeks, despite opposition from the Pakistani Senate, it was agreed that the KSA would now finance three road and infrastructure projects as well as the Reko Diq mine project.

### Recommendations for Embracing a Brighter Future

Immigrant workers are an important source for gathering market information in the host country. Keeping this in mind, the Pakistani government needs to adopt a more hands-on approach where diaspora affairs are concerned in order to uphold Pakistani economic interests. The Pakistan government must establish emergency funds to recompense workers who have been victims of fraud. Together with the GCC governments, a strict survey needs to take place and companies known for partaking in fraudulent activities such as debt entrapment should be blacklisted.

Stakeholders should invest in educating workers about their rights and responsibilities. Training would help workers avoid being victims of fraud while increasing their competitiveness in the global market and qualifying them for jobs with better job security. Both Pakistan and the host Gulf country should facilitate the supervision of labour force training. Simultaneously, the Pakistani Government should provide the required infrastructure to improve and assess worker basic skills prior to the workers' departure for the host country so the workers meet the required job standards.

Pakistan and the GCC should place more focus on bolstering economic and strategic ties rather than a political one since the former are more sustainable. Security should always be taken in a wider sense not just in military terms.

Physically, Pakistan is the closest non-Arab state to the Gulf, which makes a strong defence relationship an essential component in Pak-GCC bilateral relations. Given Pakistan's active participation in defence expos, it suffices to say Pakistan is apprised of the latest state of the art technology.

Pakistan has a sizeable population comprising of cultural and trade links with the Gulf region. It should turn this fact into an advantage and use it as a foundation for cooperation and integration between communities in the Gulf such as through facilitation programmes in areas such as academia and tourism.

Both the GCC and Pakistan need to safeguard against extremist non-state actors by taking actions such as surveying funding to madrassas preventing them from becoming breeding grounds for violence.

The world is already witnessing the rise of China. This will inevitably result in Chinese expansion into the region. All land routes connected to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) bypass the GCC countries, hence the maritime routes are more appropriate. Thus, the Gulf countries will in all probability be connected to the BRI through their bilateral relations with the countries along the BRI route. Given Gwadar's proximity to the Gulf, the UAE could be a pivot in the initiative. Pakistan can be a facilitator in the GCC-China understanding. CPEC is most suitable for GCC oil and gas exports to China and other countries since it provides China a transit trade route to import oil from the Gulf region.

On the trade front, Pakistan's agriculture sector has huge potential. With the right trade agreements, both Pakistan and the GCC are at an advantage. For example, Pakistan can export its dairy products to the Gulf, which in turn can export energy sources such as petro-chemicals. Similar to the agreement between India and the UAE to increase trade by 60 percent in the next five years, Pakistan and the Gulf countries should also streamline their economic management and hence bolster trade and economic relations.

While Pakistan should constructively respond to rising India-GCC and India-Iran understanding the GCC needs to recognise that Pakistan should not always be viewed as in competition with India because the relations with the GCC also suffer. Hence, the GCC should not use the India-Pakistan understanding as a bilateral issue for pressurising tactics. At the same time, on the KSA versus Iran debacle, the GCC must respect that Pakistan cannot get involved in their bilateral strife.

### Conclusion

While the younger UAE leadership is pragmatic and pursues policies in line with their national interests, Pakistan remains stalled in the old expectations of relations based on sentiments. Moreover, Pakistan continues to pursue an India centric foreign and security policy and observes each incremental step in GCC-India relations with serious concern. Any positive development on this front is taken by Pakistan as a loss and the GCC does not necessarily subscribe to this. The challenge for Pakistan is to reconcile with India's rise and yet be able to offer a unique connection. Hence, Pakistan needs to develop and be a country counted on its merits.

However, external factors have recently had a disproportionate bearing over Pak-GCC relations. These include the growing perception in the GCC that Iran, especially since the 1979 Revolution, is a competitor for influence in the Gulf region and is believed to be the cause of instability; a perception fuelled by US global hegemonic policies. The developing global groupings led by the United States on one side and China/Russia on the other are troubling for smaller states. The US-India decision to team up against what is perceived as the increasing Chinese challenge to the US led global order further complicates matters when Pakistan and Iran (due to hostile US posturing) logically ally with China/Russia. Though the GCC would like to be considered non-partisan, by the order of relations today it is considered to be a part of the US lead order.

Pakistan's inability to actively deploy troops in the Yemen conflict has never been under-

stood nor appreciated by the major GCC players, despite the fact that Iran and Pakistan share a border more than 900 kilometres and Pakistan is already prone to sectarian violence. However, even in this triangular relationship between Pakistan, the KSA and Iran, there is both a challenge and an opportunity. Pakistan could potentially be the bridge of understanding between the GCC and Iran.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is already in its implementation stage. The project will improve Pakistan's economic capacity by providing easy access between the Arabian Sea and the world's largest trading nation: China. The Gulf countries have a unique opportunity to be party to the resultant benefits from the CPEC project. Hence, by taking cognizance of both bilateral factors and extra-regional players, sustaining a dynamic relationship presents a golden opportunity for both Pakistan and the GCC to move their relationship in a positive direction and become constructive contributors in the wider regional economic, political and security architecture.

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