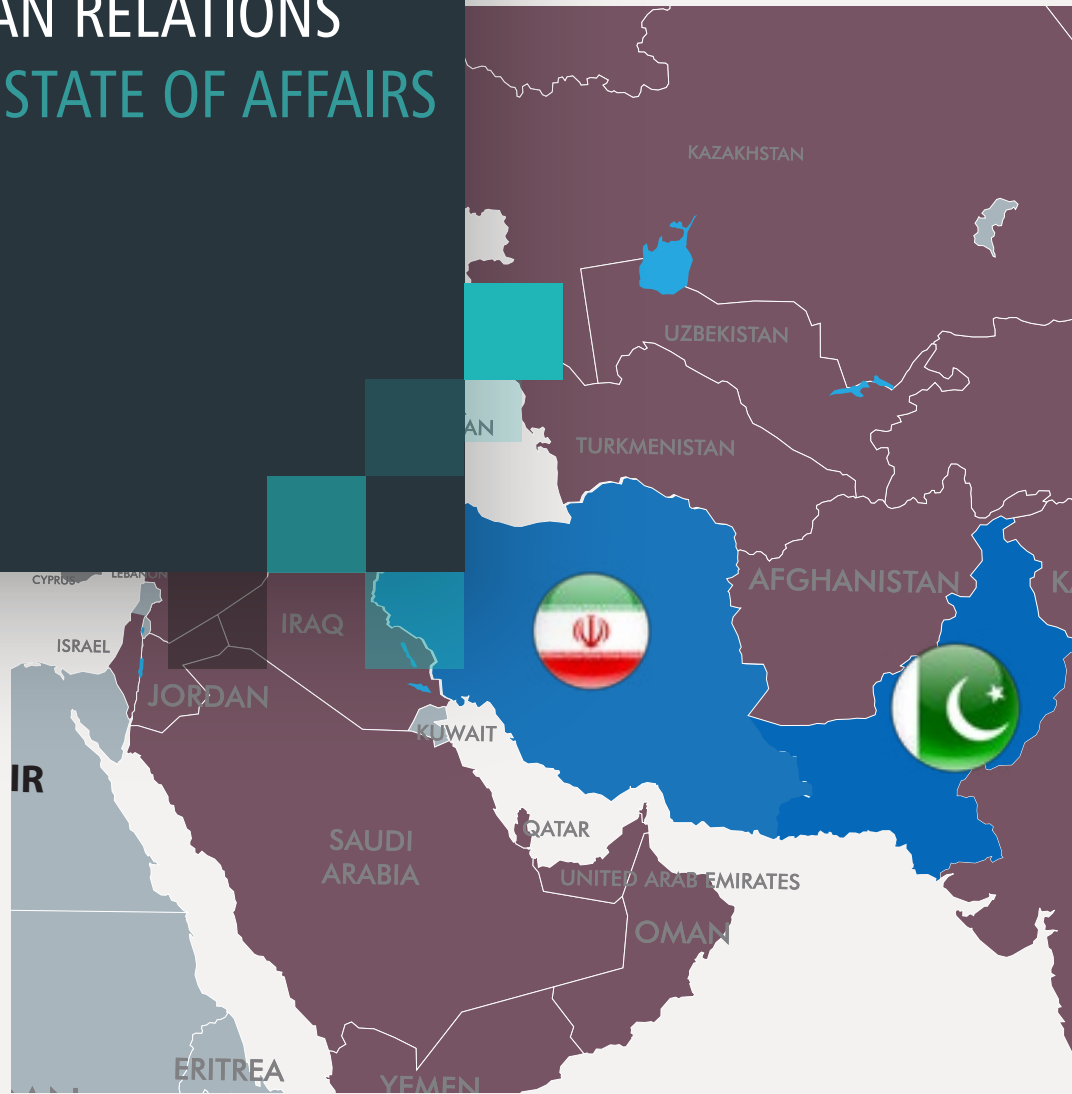




Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

IRAN - PAKISTAN RELATIONS THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Umer Karim





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Prepared by : İsmail Sarı

Editor : Sara Kök

Graphic Design : Hüseyin Kurt

Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

Oğuzlar, 1397. St, 06520, Çankaya, Ankara, Türkiye Phone: +90 (312) 284 55 02-03 | Fax: +90 (312) 284 55 04

e-mail : info@iramcenter.org | www.iramcenter.org

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Iran - Pakistan Relations: The Current State of Affairs

About the Author:

Umer KARIM

Education

- PhD in Political Science and International Studies (2nd Year)
Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham
- M.Phil Pakistan Studies (2015)
National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad
- Masters in English Literature (2013)

Area of interest

His main research areas is Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy and Saudi Politics. His focus is on the evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy since the ascension of King Salman and how Saudi foreign policy has been affected by the changing decision making patterns and power hierarchy within the Kingdom. He also works on International Relations of Middle East with topics varying from Saudi-Iran relationship, Syrian conflict, Turkey in Middle East and Pakistan's engagement within the Middle East. In the past he has worked on Arab Spring and the principle of humanitarian intervention specially the concept of Responsibility to Protect. Social movements and the role of discourse within social movements has also been an arena of research.

Özet

İran-Pakistan ilişkileri zaman içerisinde evrilmekte; iki komşu arasındaki bağlar bir yandan iki taraflı güvenlik endişeleri ve stratejik çıkarlar diğer yandan da iki ülkenin siyasi kimliklerindeki değişimler tarafından şekillendirilmektedir. Şah rejimi döneminde iki ülke uyumlu siyasal bakış açıları ve Soğuk Savaş sürecinde Amerika'nın liderlik ettiği siyasi blokta yer almaları sebebiyle güçlü müttefikler olageldiler. İslamî Devrimle birlikte İran milli kimliği radikal bir değişim sürecinden geçti ve özü itibarıyla çatışmacı bir siyasi vizyonun doğuşuna sebep oldu. Bölgedeki ayrışan jeopolitik çıkarlar ve ittifaklar iki ülkeyi birbirinden daha da ayırdı. İran'ın Hindistan'la yaptığı güvenlik anlaşması ve Pakistan'ın da Suudi Arabistan'la güçlü bağları ilişkilerin daha da karmaşıklaşması ve zorlaşmasına katkıda bulundu. Sınır ötesi güvenlik tehditlerinin filizlenmesi ve Pakistan'daki Şii cemaati politize etmeye yönelik girişimler her iki ülkeyi de birbirine temkinli yaklaştırmaya yöneltti. Bu gelişmeler iki ülkenin ekonomi ve enerji sahalarında ilişkileri güçlendirme çabalarına ket vurulmasında önemli etkenlerdendir. Ancak bu farklılaşmalar, iki tarafın da muhtemel bir çatışmanın ölümcül sonuçlarından farkında olması sebebiyle, karşı karşıya gelme durumuna yol açmadı. Hepsini bir yana iki ülke de ikili sorunları ortaya koyacak bir mekanizma gelişmeyi başaramamıştır ve bu sebeple ilişkiler gergin bir rekabet ortamında seyretmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Hindistan, Pakistan, Suudi Arabistan, Soğuk Savaş

Summary

The Iran-Pakistan relationship has been evolving over time. Ties between the two neighbors have been shaped by bilateral security concerns and strategic interests on one hand and flux in political identity of the two states on the other. Iran and Pakistan were strong allies during the time of the Shah Regime as they had a harmonious political outlook and shared membership in the American led political block during the Cold War. With the Islamic Revolution, Iranian national identity underwent a radical change and gave birth to a political vision that was confrontational in essence. Diverging geopolitical interests and alignments in the region moved the two nations further apart. Iranian security accord with India and Pakistan's strong ties with Saudi Arabia further contributed to making the relationship complex and uneasy. The burgeoning of cross border security threats and attempts to politicize Pakistan's Shiite community made both states wary of each other. These developments have been critical in impeding efforts to enhance ties in the economic and energy fields. These differences have not however led either state to confront the other as they both fully realize the near disastrous consequences of such a conflict. Nonetheless, they have also failed to develop a mechanism to address bilateral issues and thus a tense competition epitomizes the state of bilateral affairs.

Keywords: Iran, Indian, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Cold War.

خلاصه

روابط ایران و پاکستان در طول زمان شاهد فراز و نشیبهایی بوده است. پیوندهای دو کشور همسایه همواره از یک طرف تحت تأثیر نگرانیهای امنیتی و منافع استراتژیک آنها و از طرف دیگر در سایه تغییرات اساسی در هویت سیاسی آنها شکل یافته است. در دوران رژیم شاه رویکرد سیاسی دو کشور نسبت به همدیگر سازگار بود و هر دوی آنها در طی دوران جنگ سرد در یک بلوک سیاسی به رهبری آمریکا قرار داشتند. از اینرو آنها به دو متحد قوی در منطقه تبدیل شدند. بعد از انقلاب اسلامی ۵۷، هویت ملی در ایران دستخوش تغییرات اساسی شد و با توجه به ماهیت ذاتی انقلاب، یک دیدگاه سیاسی ستیزه جویانه ای در ایران به وجود آمد. ایجاد شکاف در منافع و انتلافهای ژئوپلیتیک در منطقه سبب دوری هرچه بیشتر این دو کشور از هم شد. امضای توافقنامه امنیتی با هندوستان توسط ایران و پیوندهای قوی پاکستان با عربستان سعودی نیز موجب پیچیدگی بیشتر روابط تهران و اسلام آباد گردید. ظهور تهدیدات فرامرزی و تلاش برای سیاسی کردن گروه های شیعه در پاکستان هم باعث شد رویکرد دو کشور نسبت به هم محتاطانه باشد. در نتیجه، تلاش برای تقویت روابط طرفین به ویژه در زمینه های اقتصاد و انرژی با موانع مهمی روبرو گردید. با این حال و با توجه به اینکه هر دو کشور نسبت به نتایج خونبار یک درگیری احتمالی آگاه بوده اند، این تفاوتها به تقابل شدید طرفین منجر نشد. علاوه بر این، دو کشور نتوانستند مکانیزمی برای حل مشکلات دو جانبه ایجاد کنند و در نتیجه روابط آنها تاکنون در یک فضای ملتهب رقابتی به حیات خود ادامه داده است.

کلمه های کلیدی: ایران، هند، پاکستان، عربستان سعودی، جنگ سرد.

Introduction

The Iran-Pakistan relationship has revolved around the pivot of security and respective strategic interests. Political and economic engagement between the two countries has always proceeded under the shadow of this security paradigm. The eminence of the security establishments of both countries within the decision-making apparatuses has given further credence to national security in determining the nature of bilateral ties. Pakistan's strategic interests in the region have clashed with those of Iran whether it's the case of Afghanistan or the broader outlook of Middle Eastern politics. The outlook of both states towards the region is connected with their national security. This makes it a difficult task for both states to develop strong political ties with regional actors that fundamentally differ in their strategic outlook and by extension don't understand the security concerns of others. The trust deficit between both neighbors has been the ultimate outcome amplified only by assumptions that the "other" is harboring and facilitating elements detrimental to their respective national security. In such a state of affairs, proponents of a stronger political and economic engagement within both states have to take a back seat as the main concern of decision makers remains to maximize national security. A structural change in regional politics that can re-calibrate security notions of states, as well as an alteration in decision making processes and actors within both Iran and Pakistan, can ultimately affect the security oriented nature of this relationship.

The trust deficit between both neighbors has been the ultimate outcome amplified only by assumptions that the "other" is harboring and facilitating elements detrimental to their respective national security.

This article will analyze how the relationship between both states is shaped by the intersection of regional political configuration with national security and domestic politics. Conflicting security interests of the two nations will be analyzed and key

issues concerning the national security of both states which contribute to complicating bilateral ties will also be evaluated.

Historical Context and Political Trends

The literature on Iran-Pakistan relations is replete with the notion that both countries are bonded by strong religious, political and cultural ties. Iran was the first country to formally accept Pakistan. Both nations also shared a common outlook in their foreign policies. They became members of the Baghdad Pact, supported each other against their hostile neighbors and were equally threatened by the Soviet Union. The nature of the relationship changed after 1971. Iran emerged as a regional power owing to oil revenues and the British departure from east of the Suez while Pakistan became politically weak after the creation of Bangladesh¹. Nonetheless, a cooperative and cordial relationship remained between both nations until the fundamentals changed with the Islamic Revolution in Iran. After 1979 both nations followed their opposite routes to Islamization and their differing ideological base increasingly influenced their political outlook towards each other². The Islamic Revolution changed Iranian foreign policy and exporting the revolution became its fulcrum which was highly problematic for its Arab neighbors along the Persian Gulf. Pakistan, on the other hand, shared strategic interests with these Arab Kingdoms especially in Afghanistan³. This diffraction on the Afghan issue and support of opposite camps by both countries had a negative impact on their bilateral relations⁴. During the 1990s only one attempt was made by then premier Benazir Bhutto to mend the relationship by importing gas from Iran but political uncertainty within Pakistan and heightened levels of sectarian violence didn't bring any thaw in the relationship⁵.

The Islamic Revolution changed Iranian foreign policy and exporting the revolution became its fulcrum which was highly problematic for its Arab neighbors along the Persian Gulf.

After 9/11 Pakistan's close cooperation with the US in the war on terror and the US presence in Afghanistan didn't help to improve Iran-Pakistan relations. During the time of President Musharraf, Pakistan's relations with Iran remained essentially uneasy due to the US factor⁶. The democratically elected government of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) tried to assert civilian supremacy in the domain of foreign policy by pro-actively engaging with Iran in trade and energy sectors. This approach from Pakistan was a break from a traditionally cold policy towards Iran and perturbed the Saudis who pressured the Pakistani military to remove the government⁷. The most important development during the PPP governmental tenure was the approval of the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project⁸. This activism ended with the departure of the PPP government and the new Pakistani government of Nawaz Sharif, an old ally of Saudi Arabia, took a rather cautious approach towards Iran. Saudi aid of \$1.5 Billion to Pakistan eased the economic concerns by providing the much-needed money for energy and infrastructure projects as well as raising the foreign exchange reserves of the country⁹. This development alongside the imposition of international sanctions on Iran further hampered the planned construction of the IP pipeline and there has been no development in this regard even after four years¹⁰. This makes it evident that regional political machinations and strategic interests not only impact upon Pakistani foreign policy making but also steer its economic policies. This also suggests that only a revision of Pakistani strategic interests and alignment in the region can potentially change this trend.

Conceptualizing the Relationship

Putnam's theoretical construct of "Two-level games" is partially helpful in understanding the approach of the two countries. In addition to the systemic variables that influence the outlook of nations towards each other in a typical neo-realist way, a multiple number of domestic variables ranging from local politics, social groups, public perception, civil society and nature of legislation, all determine the foreign policies of states¹¹. The systemic or regional political aspect has been the dominant variable in the case of foreign policy making for both Iran and Pakistan. Decision making at this level, which is increasingly security

oriented and influenced by diverging strategic interests, dictates the trajectory of bilateral ties. Moreover, the nature of power structures in Iran and Pakistan differ from that of modern democratic western states and have political dynamics specific to them. Iranian Supreme Leader with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Pakistan's Army are the major stake holders in matters of national security of both nations respectively¹². This problematizes Putnam's concept which advocates for political contestation and maneuvering between nations at one level and internally within domestic actors on the other level and the result is an agreement between the two levels¹³. The domestic fold in both countries considers the monopoly of their security establishments over foreign policy making as nearly normative and this results in a rather neo-realist policy making focused on maximizing security. Yet, in the case of Pakistan, democratization has brought a change within this calculus and makes Putnam's assertions more amenable in the recent context. The Pakistani parliament's refusal to send troops for the Saudi led military campaign in Yemen is one of the examples where the debate at the second level (Parliament) has essentially set the terms on the first level¹⁴.



If we discuss the bilateral relations in the context of exogenous or systemic variables, there has been a convergence and connection between geopolitics of the Middle East as well as of South Asia. Iran and Pakistan lie at the borders of their respective "Regional Security Complexes" (RSC). This entails that principally the security environment in both of these regions is dictated and affected by different actors and stakeholders distinct to each region. The geopolitics of both regions has revolved

around their respective member states and the tussle for power has been rather intra-RSC and not inter-RSCs¹⁵. The changing nature of relations between the countries in the two regions and the transformation in their respective political power index has connected the two RSCs, even more¹⁶. Still, the level of this linkage has not reached to an extent where we can question the relevance of the border lines or buffer zones between these RSCs.

Evolution of Relations with changing patterns of regional security

Pakistan has been a long time strategic partner of Saudi Arabia. Not only have the relations between the leadership of the two states been cordial but the Pakistani Military has also acted as a security guarantor for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia on the other hand always supported Pakistan financially in times of economic turbulence¹⁷. Iran always had its concerns regarding this Pak-Saudi special relationship. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia backed opposite religious groups within Pakistan. This resulted in the sectarian confrontation between these groups that reached a peak in the 1990s¹⁸. It is interesting to note that starting from the late 1990s Saudi Arabia and Iran were involved in a process of political dialogue that amounted to a political rapprochement between them¹⁹. Yet, on Pakistani soil, their respective proxy elements were actively involved in targeting each other. Regional politics became even more complex when the Iranian President Khatami visited India. The trip was consequential as both countries agreed that their strategic outlooks were in harmony and needed to be further boosted through strong economic engagement and defense ties²⁰. This proximity between India and Iran was built upon a similar strategic viewpoint over Afghanistan, whereas Iran and Pakistan have always supported different elements within Afghanistan owing to their diverging strategic interests there²¹. India has always been averse to Pakistani influence within Kabul and built strong connections within elements of the Northern Alliance. These fundamental differences between Iran and Pakistan over Afghanistan made it imperative for India to have a strategic foothold within Iran. Energy and infrastructure projects were

initiated that involved construction of a gas pipeline between Iran, Pakistan and India, Chahbahar Port in Iran and the Zaranj-Delaram road between Afghanistan and Iran²². This formally introduced the Indian factor into Iran-Pakistan relations that contributed towards an increase in the mutual distrust between the two neighbors. The disordering of the Afghan political environment in the post-Taliban era and subsequent involvement of different regional actors with their respective strategic concerns as well as shared security considerations further intertwined the geopolitics of the Middle East with South Asia. Since the nature of Iranian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are conflicting it opens the field for both countries to vie for a closer partnership with other regional actors having a more harmonious strategic outlook. This has been a reason for Indo-Iranian cooperation vis-à-vis Afghanistan and similarly Pakistan's relative proximity with Saudi Arabia. The American invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring created a political vacuum in the region which has intensified Saudi-Iran rivalry putting Pakistan in a different position. Pakistan's joining of the Islamic Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) and its former army chief General Raheel Sharif's appointment as its head have not been taken positively by Iran. This has further strained Pakistan's balancing act vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia²³. The effect of regional political events on bilateral ties has been compounded by three critical issues between Iran and Pakistan. They have clouded the bilateral relationship in the past but the increasingly confrontational politics of the Middle East has magnified their sensitivity.

The disordering of the Afghan political environment in the post-Taliban era and subsequent involvement of different regional actors with their respective strategic concerns as well as shared security considerations further intertwined the geopolitics of the Middle East with South Asia. Since the nature of Pakistani and Iranian interests in Afghanistan are conflicting it opens the field for both countries to vie for a closer partnership with other regional actors having a more harmonious strategic outlook.



Cross-Border Attacks by Baloch Militants in Iran

Cross-border activities and their ramifications for the security situation, specifically in the border provinces of Pakistani Balochistan and Iranian Sistan and Baluchestan have problematized the neighborly relations. In the case of Iran, the major concern has been the activities of Jundullah a Baloch-separatist organization and its off-shoot Jaish al-Adl. Both militant groups have been involved in a plethora of terrorist attacks on IRGC members as well as civilians. Iran has often accused these groups of having sanctuaries across the border in Pakistani Balochistan and after every attack the members of these outfits slip back into Pakistan²⁴. Recently, Jaish al-Adl killed and kidnapped Iranian border guards. In response, the Iranian Army Chief threatened to strike against the militant safe heavens inside Pakistan²⁵. This threat from Iran came at a time when Pakistan had been engaged in a low-intensity border conflict with India, Indian and Pakistani troops have been targeting each other²⁶. On the other hand, Pakistani security personnel clashed with the Afghan National Army in Northern Balochistan near the Pakistani border town of Chaman which resulted in civilian casualties²⁷. The Iranian ultimatum infuriated Pakistani public opinion as it was perceived that Iran is not acting on its own but has

become part of the Indian orchestrated effort to isolate Pakistan and create tension on all of its borders. The Pakistani government expressed its displeasure and shock by summoning the Iranian envoy to Pakistan and protesting over the remarks of the Iranian Army Chief. It is interesting that the statement of the Iranian Army Chief came after the matter was presumably discussed in an amicable manner between the Iranian Foreign Minister and Pakistani officials. Both sides had agreed in their talks to boost the security of the border region and set up a joint security committee²⁸. There might have been two reasons for the Iranian Army Chief taking a tougher line with regard to the attack on border guards. The Iranian military wanted to send a clear message to Pakistan that such actions executed by cross-border elements will not be tolerated in future and Iran can pursue the course of confrontation taken by Pakistan's other two neighbors. Thus, it is pertinent for Pakistan to shore up border security and clamp down on Baloch insurgent groups working against Iran on its soil. The statement could also be located in an Iranian political context where the Iranian President was locked in a war of words with the Iranian military and IRGC during the intense atmosphere of a Presidential Election. Rouhani had warned the Iranian Military and Revolutionary Guards not to intervene in the electoral process²⁹. The Military with this statement might have hinted to Rouhani their vitality in matters pertaining to national security. The elaboration of the domestic factors at play while addressing issues related to national security linked with the foreign policy of the state further makes it evident that foreign policy making of both countries is shaped by multiple factors.

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RAW Activities: Security threat for Pakistan

The chief problem on the Pakistani side also lies mainly in the security domain. Pakistani Balochistan that borders Iran has witnessed a rather less intense insurgency by Baloch separatist organizations. These outfits alongside sectarian organizations have been involved in attacks targeting both security forces and civilians resulting in a large loss of lives. Pakistani authorities view all these happenings as a deliberate campaign allegedly orchestrated by the Indian Intelligence Agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to destabilize Balochistan and deteriorate the law and order situation in the province³⁰. The geostrategic significance of Balochistan has been heightened by the initiation of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that aims to position Gwadar as a regional trade hub and also to develop industry and infrastructure in Balochistan. CPEC can generate enormous economic activity in Balochistan³¹. Meanwhile, the Indians have been involved in developing the Iranian port of Chahbahar which is seen as an Indian attempt to counter Chinese influence in the region and mainly in Gwadar³². Apparently RAW has used Chahbahar as a ploy to move its operatives to Iran and then use it as a base for sabotage and terrorist activities specifically within Balochistan. These apprehensions of the Pakistani security institutions were proven right when they managed to arrest a senior Indian Intelligence Operative Kulbhushan Yadav in Balochistan³³. Later on, he confessed to his involvement in terrorist activities and links with Baloch insurgent groups to deteriorate the law and order situation in the province and also to orchestrate terror incidents in the coastal metropolis of Karachi. Yadav also admitted that he was based in the Iranian city of Chahbahar and had run his network from there³⁴. This raised alarms within Pakistani security circles that Indians are using Iranian soil to carry out anti-Pakistan activities. Interestingly, Yadav was "caught" on the eve of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Pakistan. This made the Yadav issue the focus of the whole tour and prevented Rouhani's attempt to reach

any significant breakthrough in the uneasy bilateral relationship from succeeding³⁵. President Rouhani rejected the notion that this matter was discussed in his meeting with the Pakistani leadership but after his departure from Pakistan, Pakistan's Military spokesperson revealed that the matter was indeed discussed in the President's meeting with the Pakistani Army Chief³⁶. The dust of Yadav's affair had not settled when Pakistani security agencies arrested Uzair Baloch who headed a crime syndicate in Karachi. He admitted his links not only with the Kulbhushan network but also with the Iranian Intelligence³⁷. These revelations have widened the distrust between the security establishments of the two countries. It is very difficult to accept that Iranian authorities were not aware of the activities of RAW operatives and Uzair Baloch's revelations further weaken their case. Unless the security establishments of both countries sit together and try to understand each other's security concerns these issues will linger on and widen the bilateral trust deficit.

Shia Recruitment from Pakistan: Sectarian Objectification of Pakistani Security Institutions

Another issue complicating Iran-Pakistan ties has been the recruitment of Pakistani Shiites for the Syrian civil war to fight for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. These fighters have been recruited under the banner of Liwa Al-Zeinabiyoun by IRGC. This recruitment has been primarily conducted from Parachinar, the headquarters of the Kurram tribal agency which is part of Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas (FATA) along the Afghan border³⁸. Parachinar is a unique case as it's a Shia majority area and is surrounded by Sunni tribal areas that have remained the hotbed of Taliban insurgency until very recently. Parachinar has witnessed a large number of terrorist attacks which have killed hundreds of locals. The sectarian differences may lie at the heart of this conflict but there have been other local issues related to water management that fuelled the conflict³⁹. Until recently Pakistan's government had remained quite lax in improving the security situation and

Parachinar had been described as virtually under siege by some observers⁴⁰. Although the Pakistani state has launched multiple military offensives against Taliban insurgents and cleared their major strongholds in the tribal areas a narrative has developed within the Shiites of Parachinar that the state is not doing enough to protect them⁴¹. These grievances have been exploited by Iran in connection with the narrative of "threat to Shia shrines" in Syria and have resulted in recruitment of these Shias for the Syrian conflict. Pakistani security circles are not happy with these developments as this kind of recruitment can result in reactionary recruitment of Sunni militants and can further exacerbate the sectarian strife in the country. This has compelled Pakistani authorities to ban Ansar-ul-Hussain an organization that was allegedly involved in this recruitment drive in tribal areas⁴². From an Iranian context, this serves the Iranian narrative of being the protector of the Shias all over the world but also an attempt to create elements that can further be utilized as an Iranian proxy within Pakistan, as has been the case in many other countries.

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The recent events in Parachinar are particularly important in this regard. After the death of 72 people in twin bombings in Parachinar, a demonstration by local residents was allegedly fired upon by the paramilitary force "Frontier Corps" (FC) on the orders of its local commandant Colonel Umar. It is pertinent to explain here that the officer cadres of FC are deputed from the Pakistani Army. A sit in by the locals continued for eight days until the Pakistani Army Chief arrived and accepted the demands to beef up security and to remove Colonel Umar. One of the demands was to change the security plan for the area as it was alleged that the FC conduct had been discriminatory⁴³. This was the first time that a serving officer of the Pakistani Army was objectified in sectarian terms and also as a facilitator of terrorists by a Shia news outlet⁴⁴. On the other hand FC, an important security organ of the Pakistani state, essentially being monitored and run by

the military was branded as an organization that had been compromised. The notable factor is the propagation of this rhetoric by the leaders of Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen (MWM) which has roots in the Imamia Students Organization (ISO) and works as a political front to give voice to sentiments of Pakistani Shias. ISO was one of the first Shia organizations that had deep linkages with Iran and MWM is its political extension⁴⁵. This very much shows that Iranian maneuverings through its affiliates in Pakistan are multifaceted. Its key purpose is to have a strong bond with Pakistani Shias and use them as a constituency more amenable to Iranian interests within Pakistani political and social life.

Conclusion

The problem at the core of the Iran-Pakistan relationship has been a lack of politico-economic engagement within the two countries that can bypass their national security concerns. The escalation in the regional political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran on one hand and Pakistani apprehensions regarding Indian engagement with its neighbors to diplomatically isolate it has made matters worse. The increasingly sectarian nature of Syrian and Iraqi conflicts and their implications on the fragile sectarian balance in Pakistan have contributed to complicating matters between the two states. Moreover, decision making in the realm of national security has been a premise of security establishments in both countries. Even if in future, democratic forces are relatively strengthened and have a considerable sway over foreign policy making, the foreign influence in Pakistani politics looks very much to prevail and one cannot expect a significant change in the broader foreign policy outlook of Pakistan. The only way forward for both Iran and Pakistan could be to initiate a political dialogue to first understand the bilateral security concerns and then to alleviate them. This dialogue in the meanwhile must not happen at the cost of economic ties and both countries should make concerted efforts to broaden economic engagement while keeping it separate from security issues. Restarting work on the IP pipeline and completing it should be the first priority in this regard. Only in this manner can a start be made to structure bilateral ties on a more constructive and positive base while reducing the intersectional impact of regional geopolitics dictating national security.

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Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

Oğuzlar Mh. 1397. Sk. No: 14 06520 Çankaya, Balgat, Ankara, Turkey
Phone: +90 312 284 55 02 - 03 Fax: +90 312 284 55 04
e-mail: info@iramcenter.org www.iramcenter.org

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