



Pakistan Caught in the Middle

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Pakistani General Raheel Sharif walked into a hornet's nest when he stepped off a private jet in Riyadh two weeks ago to take command of a Saudi-led, 41-nation military alliance. Things have gone from bad to worse since.

General Sharif had barely landed when Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman dashed the Pakistani's hopes to include Iran in the alliance that nominally was created to fight terrorism rather than confront Iran.

The general's hopes were designed to balance Pakistan's close alliance with Saudi Arabia with the fact that it shares a volatile border with Iran and is home to the world's second largest Shiite Muslim community. General Sharif's ambition had already been rendered Mission Impossible before he landed with Saudi Arabia charging that Iran constitutes the world's foremost terrorist threat.

In a recent interview with the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting television network, Prince Mohammed, who also serves as the kingdom's defense minister, has toughened Saudi Arabia's stance. Prince Mohammed appeared in line with statements by a senior US military official to hold out the possibility of exploiting aspirations of ethnic minorities in Iran to weaken its Islamic regime.

In doing so, Prince Mohammed and General Joseph L. Voltel, head of US Central Command, seemed to raise the specter of increased violence in Baluchistan, a volatile, once independent region that straddles both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border, as well as in the Iranian province of Khuzestan, the Islamic republic's oil-rich region that is home to Iranians of Arab descent.

Ethnic and sectarian proxy wars could embroil rivals China and India in the Saudi-Iranian dispute. The deep-sea port of Gwadar in Baluchistan is a lynchpin of China's One Belt, One Road initiative, and a mere 70 kilometers from the Indian-backed port of Chabahar in Iran, viewed by Saudi Arabia as a potential threat to one of the most important sea routes facilitating the flow of oil from the Gulf to Asia.

The risk of China's initiative as well as its regional rivalry with India becoming a Saudi-Iranian battleground appeared to increase with Prince Mohammed's warning that the battle between the two regional powers would be fought "inside Iran, not in Saudi Arabia."

In his interview, Prince Mohammed not only ruled out talks with Iran but painted the two countries' rivalry in sectarian terms. The prince asserted that Iran, a predominantly Shiite country, believes that "the Imam Mahdi (the redeemer) will come and they must prepare the fertile environment for the arrival of the awaited Mahdi and they must control the Muslim world...." "How do you have a dialogue with this?" Prince Mohammed asked.

Saudi Arabia had already signaled its support for Iranian dissidents when last July former Saudi intelligence chief and ambassador to the United States and Britain, Prince Turki al-Faisal, attended a rally in Paris organized by the exiled People's Mujaheddin Organization

of Iran or Mujahedin-e-Khalq, a militant left-wing group that advocates the overthrow of Iran's Islamic regime and traces its roots to resistance against the shah who was toppled in the 1979 revolution. "Your legitimate struggle against the (Iranian) regime will achieve its goal, sooner or later. I, too, want the fall of the regime," Prince Turki told the rally.

Since then, General Voltel, avoiding any reference to sectarianism, told the US Senate Armed Services Committee, that "in order to contain Iranian expansion, roll back its malign influence, and blunt its asymmetric advantages, we must engage them more effectively in the 'grey zone' through means that include a strong deterrence posture, targeted counter-messaging activities, and by building partner nations' capacity... (We) believe that by taking proactive measures and reinforcing our resolve we can lessen Iran's ability to negatively influence outcomes in the future," General Voltel said.

Prince Mohammed did not spell out how he intends to take Saudi Arabia's fight to Iran, but a Saudi think tank, the Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies (AGCIS) argued in a recent study that Chabahar posed "a direct threat to the Arab Gulf states" that called for "immediate counter measures."

Written by Mohammed Hassan Husseinbor, identified as an Iranian political researcher, the study, published in the first edition of AGCIS' Journal of Iranian Studies, argued that Chabahar posed a threat because it would enable Iran to increase greater market share in India for its oil exports at the expense of Saudi Arabia, raise foreign investment in the Islamic republic and increase government revenues, and allow Iran to project power in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Mr. Husseinbor suggested Saudi support for a low-level Baluch insurgency in Iran could serve as a countermeasure. "Saudis could persuade Pakistan to soften its opposition to any potential Saudi support for the Iranian Baluch... The Arab-Baluch alliance is deeply rooted in the history of the Gulf region and their opposition to Persian domination," Mr. Husseinbor said.

Noting the vast expanses of Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan Province, Mr. Husseinbor went on to say that "it would be a formidable challenge, if not impossible, for the Iranian government to protect such long distances and secure Chabahar in the face of widespread Baluch opposition, particularly if this opposition is supported by Iran's regional adversaries and world powers."

The conservative Washington-based Hudson Institute, which is believed to have developed close ties to the Trump administration, has also taken up the theme of ethnic minorities in Iran. The institute has scheduled a seminar for later this month that features as speakers Baluch, Iranian Arab, Iranian Kurdish and Iranian Azerbaijani nationalists.

Saudi Arabia may already have the building blocks in place for a proxy war in Baluchistan. Saudi-funded ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim madrassas operated by anti-Shiite militants dominate Baluchistan's educational landscape.

“A majority of Baluch schoolchildren go to madrassas. They are in better condition than other schools in Baluchistan. Most madrassas are operated by Deobandis and Ahl-i-Hadith,” said one of the founders of Sipah-i-Sabaha, a virulent anti-Shiite group that is believed to enjoy Saudi and Pakistani support.

Although officially renamed Ahle Sunnah Wa Al Jamaat after Sipah was banned in Pakistan, the group is still often referred to by its original name. The co-founder, who has since left the group but maintains close ties to it, was referring to the Deobandi sect of Islam, a Saudi backed ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite movement originally established in India in the 19th century to counter British colonial rule, and Ahl-i-Hadith, the religious-political group in Pakistan with the longest ties to the kingdom. The co-founder said the mosques funneled Saudi funds to the militants.

The co-founder said the leaders in Baluchistan of Sipah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a Sipah offshoot, Maulana Ramzan Mengal and Maulana Wali Farooqi, enjoyed government and military protection because their anti-Shiite sentiments made them targets for Iran. He said the two men, who maintained close ties to Saudi Arabia, travelled in Baluchistan in convoys of up to ten vehicles that included Pakistan military guards. Policemen stand guard outside Mr. Mengal’s madrassa, the co-founder said.

“Ramzan gets whatever he needs from the Saudis,” the co-founder said. Close relations between Sipah and LeJ, on the one hand, and pro-government tribesmen in Baluchistan complicate irregular government efforts to reign in the militants. So does the militant’s involvement in drugs smuggling that gives them an independent source of funding.

Iran has accused the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistani intelligence of supporting anti-Iranian militants in Baluchistan, including Jundallah (Soldiers of God), an offshoot of Sipah. Jundallah, founded by Abdolmalek Rigi, a charismatic member of a powerful Baluch tribe, was one of several anti-Iranian groups that enjoyed US and Saudi support as part of US President George W. Bush’s effort to undermine the government in Tehran.

Mr. Rigi was captured when a flight he took from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek to Dubai was diverted at Iran’s request to Sharjah in 2010. He was executed in Iran. Pakistani forces have at times cooperated with Iran in detaining militants, including Mr. Rigi’s brother, Abdolhamid Rigi, but have often insisted that they are overwhelmed by internal security problems, and could not prioritize securing the border with the Islamic republic. “Our policy has been consistently anti-Iran,” said Khalid Ahmad, an author and journalist who focuses on militants.

Jundallah’s US contact point in the early 2000s was reported to be Thomas McHale, a 56-year-old hard-charging, brusque and opinionated Port Authority of New York and New Jersey detective and former ironworker, who had travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of his work for a Joint Terrorism Task Force in Newark. Known for his disdain for bureaucratic restrictions, Mr. McHale maintained contact with Jundallah and members of the Rigi tribe in an off-the-books operation.

Mr. McHale, a survivor of the 1993 attack on New York's World Trade Towers, had made a name for himself by rescuing survivors of the 9/11 attack on the towers. He played himself in Oliver Stone's movie, *World Trade Center*, in which Nicolas Cage starred as a Port Authority police officer.

Jundallah ambushed a motorcade of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 but failed to kill him. Mr. Rigi's boyish, grinning face became as a result of the ambush the defining image of Baluch jihad in Iran. A year later, the group bombed a bus carrying Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Jundallah and associated groups such as Jaish al-Adly (Army of Justice), another Sipah offshoot, have since targeted Iranian border posts, Revolutionary Guards, police officers, convoys and Shiite mosques.

General Sharif and Pakistan's position were not made easier with the recent killing by Jaish al Adl militants operating from Pakistani Baluchistan of ten Iranian border guards and with Iran's expressions of displeasure with the general's appointment as commander of the Saudi-led military alliance.

US officials insisted in Mr. McHale's time that government agencies had not directed or ever approved Jundallah operations. The US designated Jundallah as a terrorist organization in 2010, but that did not stop Sunni Muslim militant anti-Iranian operations. In what analysts see as an indication of Saudi influence, Jaish al-Adel issues its statements in Arabic rather than Baluchi or Farsi.

In response, Iran has attacked the militants and raided villages in Baluchistan. Arif Saleem, a 42-year old villager recalls being woken in the wee hours of the morning in November 2013 when bombs dropped just outside the mud walls that surround his family compound in Kulauhi, 67 kilometers from the Pakistani border with Iran. Located in a district that is an epicenter of a low-level proxy war with Iran, Kulauhi's residents survive on subsistence farming and smuggling. "Some buildings collapsed. Luckily, none of the kids were inside those. The blast was so strong, we thought the world was ending," said Saleem, convinced that Iranian planes from an airbase on the Iranian side of the border carried out the bombing.

The specter of ethnic proxy wars threatens to further destabilize the Gulf as well as Pakistan. The Baluch insurgency in Pakistani Baluchistan has complicated Chinese plans to develop Gwadar and forced Pakistan to take extraordinary security precautions. A stepped-up proxy war could embroil Indian-backed Chabahar in the conflict. The wars could, moreover, spread to Iran's Khuzestan and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

Writing in 2012 in *Asharq Al Awsat*, a Saudi newspaper, Amal Al-Hazzani, an academic who has since been dropped from the paper's roster after she wrote positively about Israel, asserted in an op-ed entitled "The oppressed Arab district of al-Ahwaz" that "the al-Ahwaz district in Iran...is an Arab territory... Its Arab residents have been facing continual repression ever since the Persian state assumed control of the region in 1925... It is imperative that the Arabs take up the al-Ahwaz cause, at least from the humanitarian perspective." Other Arab commentators have since opined in a similar fashion.

Fueling ethnic tensions risks Iran responding in kind. Saudi Arabia has long accused Iran of instigating low level violence and protests in it's predominantly Shiite oil-rich Eastern Province as well as being behind the brutally squashed popular revolt in majority Shiite Bahrain and intermittent violence since. Rather than resolving conflicts, a Saudi-Iranian war fought with ethnic and religious proxies threatens to escalate violence in both the Gulf and South Asia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog, a book with the same title, Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, co-authored with Dr. Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario and three forthcoming books, Shifting Sands, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa as well as Creating Frankenstein: The Saudi Export of Ultra-conservatism and China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom.

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