

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rivalry to Rapprochement: The Impact of Saudi-Iran Rapprochement on Sectarian Conflict between Sunnis and Shia in Pakistan

Husun Jamal ^a Bilal Shaukat ^b

Abstract: The paper focuses on the Saudi Iran rapprochement implications on sectarian conflict in Pakistan, a nation that had been dragged in the center of Saudi Iran rivalry over time. On the basis of the in-depth interviews conducted with academicians, religious theorists, policymakers, journalists, and security personnel, it examines how the decades of external funding which includes backing of the Wahhabi-based Sunni groups by Saudi Arabia and Shia organisations by Iran has consolidated religious identities and destroyed interreligious toleration. The results indicate that although open acts of sectarianism have reduced, its legacy of external patronage through madrassas, religious institutions, radical groups, continues to exist as a latent threat. The sectarian war in Pakistan is not a direct extension of Saudi-Iran rivalry but rather an instrumentation that is perpetuated by local interest groups aimed at attaining political influence. The rapprochement therefore provides a chance to dilute external sources of sectarianism, but unless there are domestic reforms the systems in place that perpetuate conflict and intolerance will continue to flourish.

Keywords: Sectarian Conflict, Regional Politics, External Sponsorship, Madrassas, Religious Intolerance

Introduction

Few rivalries in modern history have crossed borders, transformed societies and left wounds as deep as Saudi-Iran rivalry. What started as a fight over the regional leadership in the wake of Iranian Revolution of 1979 has now become an extended geopolitical and ideological struggle. This competition has occurred on battlefields in Yemen and Syria and in the madrassas and mosques of Pakistan as well as through diplomatic confrontation. Pakistan, which has a varied sectarian makeup and was both dependent on Saudi and Iranian patronage, is a distinct victim of this confrontation. The very recent normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Iran through Chinese mediation, therefore, offers a good opportunity to reflect whether the decades of enmity and its ruinous overflow into the sectarianism of Pakistan can now be transformed into peace.

To grasp the consequences of this phenomenon, one has to know some history of sectarianism. Typical explanations attribute the Sunni-Shia division to the succession crisis of the 7th century after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Shia followers believed in succession of leadership through the family of the Prophet through Ali, whereas the Sunnis preferred the nomination based on the principle of consensus among companions (Abdo, 2017; Shuster, 2007). The martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala in 680 C.E. also solidified Shia identities deeper and preached a message of resistance against oppression (Nasr, 2007).

In spite of the fact that the causes of Sunni -Shia conflict were initially political, states have since then adopted the causes as a means to achieve security and power. This was especially so in Saudi-Iran contest. Before 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran, under the Shah, had a strategic alliance in the pro-U.S. order and acted in concert against the Soviet influence (Eslami & Amani, 2023). This dynamic was altered under

^a MS Scholar, Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

^b Lecturer, Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

the Islamic Revolution where Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the monarchies in the Gulf and pledged support to export the revolutionary ideals. It was not mere theological enmity but the long cold war that was characterized by events like the Mecca clashes of 1987 and the Saudi oil policy that was directed at containing Iran (Grumet, 2015; Jahandad & Mustafa, 2022; Ahmadian, 2023). Looking at the periods of detente, there was a trend that they were temporary, and in this case, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the structural jolt that caused tensions to flare again (Nakhavali, 2022).

The downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime totally transformed this balance of power through removing Iraq as the third component of the regional equilibrium. The irony of Baghdad eliminated, Riyadh and Tehran scrambled to increase influence in Iraq and the Gulf (Aarts & Duijne, 2009). Most notably, Iran used sectarian ties to deepen itself into the Iraqi polity, which is dominated by Shia, and this raised the Saudi fears of being encircled (Heba, 2009; Fisher, 2016). This was not really a theological contest but rather a matter of exercising strategic interest through sectarian frames (Aarts & Duijne, 2009).

The second big rupture was the Arab Spring that overthrew authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and generated new power vacuums. The two states increased their use of proxies both to the Houthis in Yemen and the Hezbollah in Lebanon to militia in Syria and Iraq, making the conflicts interdependent proxy wars (Lane, 2023). The execution of Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in 2016 and consequent trampling of the Saudi embassy in Tehran demonstrated how local developments could develop into cross-border crises and deepen the rivalry (Botelho & Payne, 2016).

This competition has been continuously spilling over to Pakistan whereby the deep cultural and religious connections are found amid them and the delicate sectarian environment. The balancing act that Pakistan practices, fostering the strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia and at the same time sharing borders and history with Iran has not been quite easy to maintain (Faheem et al., 2021). Under the General Zia-ul-Haq regime in the 80s, this rivalry was manifested through direct sponsorship to sectarian actors: Riyadh sponsored the Sunni-Deobandi networks whilst Tehran nurtured the Shia political/religious groupings (Ahmar, 2007). In this decade, militant organizations like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Sipah-i-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP) were formed, which transformed the tensions that lay on the inner surface into sectarian violence.

External funding and internal institutions have integrated across the decades in Pakistan to entrench sectarianism in the country. Foreign money and ideological backing were sent into the madrassas and militant groups (Sewag, 2015; Ghazali & Hussain, 2021). Poor governance, politicization of religion and local fights contributed to maintenance of violence. An example such as the armed mobs in the district of Hangu in 2001, who attacked with rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns should make one wary of how a local conflict can go out of hand in a sectarian-riven environment (Rauf & Ullah, 2017). As Shah (2014) notes that sectarian intolerance has run deep through the realms of education, politics and government, leaving lasting wounds on the Pakistani social fabric.

Against this background a breakthrough was achieved with news that Saudi Arabia and Iran will restore diplomatic relations, marking a radical new direction in relations after decades of hostility. China, which brokered the deal, saw its opening of embassies, renewal of the 2001 security cooperation pact, and economic promises of collaboration (Abbasi & Akhtar, 2023). Even though mediation was not attempted for the first time, Pakistan itself tried in the previous 2016 and 2019, the success of Chinese initiative revealed the evolving balances of power in the international system. In the case of Pakistan, the rapprochement carries with it opportunities but also some uncertainties: it can limit external financing of sectarian militancy, but internal systems of sustaining sectarianism can well endure.

Even though the influence of Saudi-Iran rivalry on Pakistan, specifically on proxy wars, export of the ideology, and foreign patronage of sectarian organizations, has already received the excessive coverage in

literature, there has been a visible dearth of analysis on how the process of Saudi-Iran reconciliation has impacted the sectarian environment in Pakistan. This article aims at filling that gap by considering the role that the recent détente is likely to play in changing Sunni-Shia relations in Pakistan mediated through China. The central research question is as follows: What is the effect of Saudi Iran rapprochement on Sunni Shia conflict in Pakistan?

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses the Regional Security Complex (RSC) model developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever to examine what Saudi Iran rapprochement would mean to sectarian conflict in Pakistan. RSC theory postulates that security is mostly forged at regional level as states neighboring one another have interrelated security interactions. The hostilities between states, e.g. Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the Middle East go beyond bilateral hostilities to include proxy wars, ideological competition in addition to sectarian mobilization. In this complex, insecurity in one state easily flows across the borders to affect other states anyway, creating an interconnected chain of security.

The Saudi-Iran competition is the typical example of a regional security complex. Both the states seek hegemony in the region with a combination of hard power including military aid and proxy militias, and soft power including religion and ideology. Their conflict has seldom been contained within their perimeter and instead has spread to the war in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon where sectarian factions have been used as tools of strength. RSC theory sheds light on how such proxy conflicts spread far beyond and escalate these hostilities further and make it harder for peace to reign.

Pakistan is an especially weak point in this overall security network. The sectarian disparity with a strong majority Sunni group and a high proportion of Shia population in Pakistan has been allowed to introduce a surface by external support as Saudi Arabia supports Sunni groups and Iran supports Shia ones. This foreign intervention has made local divisions more pronounced, has converted sectarian identities into places of bloody struggle and has perpetuated the cycle of insecurity. With the help of RSC theory, whether the Saudi-Iran rapprochement has the potential to break this pattern of proxy-competition and help in defusing sectarian tensions in Pakistan is discussed in the paper.

Methodology

This paper used the qualitative research design to address the matter of the repercussions of Saudi-Iran rapprochement on the sectarian conflict in Pakistan, as the method of qualitative research inquiry makes it possible to ascertain perceptions, narratives, and social processes at the micro-level, rather than providing aggregate generalizations. This was done through in depth interviews involving 28 purposively selected interviewees which consisted of academicians, religious leaders, journalists, policy makers and practitioners as well as intelligence officials. It was carried out on a non-probability purposive basis to obtain the respondents having relevant knowledge and life experiences of sectarianism, thereby, enriching the research. Interviews provided the participants with a chance to provide a detailed outlook. Analysis of data was undertaken using thematic analysis, analyzing key themes that were collected from interviews conducted with various respondents. This contextualizing and multidisciplinary approach has assisted in comprehending the Saudi-Iran deal and how these sectarian relations may change in Pakistan in a more contextual and depth wise manner.

Analysis

The following are the key themes drawn from field data are analyzed in this section, highlighting the impact of Saudi-Iran rapprochement on sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia in Pakistan.

The sectarian war in Pakistan linked to KSA and Iran is perpetuated by parties that use religion in the interest of politics (Interview data)

Rather than being based on the traditional rivalry between and the competition between the Saudi Arabia and Iran, the respondents claimed that the sectarian conflict in Pakistan is largely driven by the domestic political actors who mobilize religious identity in their political interest. These groups take advantage of the wider Saudi-Iran divide as a ready-made framework within which to position their activities and position themselves as crusaders of sectarian interest at the expense of actual local power dynamics, electoral positioning, and access to financial or organizational support.

The respondent further argued that they placed their agendas in the discourse of transnational competition; they can justify violence, mobilize local communities along sectarian lines and, ultimately, enlist external and local patronage. This indicates that sectarianism in Pakistan is not merely a product of extraneous geopolitics but part and parcel of local politics in which the sectarian war is based upon sectarian advantage calculation, politics of control and guaranteeing survival.

Sectarianism is a dying trend in Pakistan, but it is also a concern that threatens to loom above the Pakistani state. The propagation of Wahabism by the Saudi and Shiaism by the Iranians has sapped the intrareligious toleration at the societal level (Interview data)

The respondents pointed out that sectarianism in Pakistan, though no longer a violent widespread issue as it was in the past decades, nevertheless, continues to linger as an eventual source of instability that continues to hover over the state. They said that the past history of Saudi Arabia in helping to spread Wahhabism and Iran in keeping Shiaism has made historical traditions of tolerance among people of different religions within one religion very bad and the mistrust between such people has not been wiped out despite the fact that the outward conflict has been overcome.

It further says that although sectarian violence has comparatively reduced over the last a few years, these external factors have had a residual impact on the ideological dimension that perpetuates latent disunity in society. This means that sectarianism is no longer regarded as an urgent problem but more of an undercurrent that may come back when there is political turmoil or regional tension, thus, it is an emerging trend that keeps on posing some problems to the campaign of promoting religious harmony and building a cohesive and united Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia funds Sunni madrasas that promote the variant of Islam known as Wahhabi, Iran funds Shia institutions and political groups. This outside interference has also contributed to growth of sectarian violence and insecurity in Pakistan (Interview data)

The respondents noted how external intervention of the Saudis and Iranians have been instrumental in fuelling the fires of sectarianism in Pakistan by funneling finances to opposing religious sects. They observed that the funding of madrasas by Saudi Arabia of Wahhabi fold of Islam, and the funding of Shia madrasas and political parties by Iran have reinforced double identities by establishing sectarian identities and deepening polarization both at the societal and political fronts.

Furthermore, respondent highlighted that this foreign financial support not only gives them ideological support but also makes them organizationally stronger and abundant in resource and gives them the capability of expanding the ranges of their influence and making their presence felt more strongly in the religious and political dispensation of Pakistan. In the eyes of the respondents, this has led to a cycle of mistrust and competition and ultimately resulted in cycles of sectarian violence and insecurity more broadly. Therefore, although sectarianism is also a national phenomenon in Pakistan, it is highly accentuated by the sustaining effect of Saudi Arabian and Iranian monetary and ideological contributions.

The public mobilisation involving KSA-Iran sponsoring religious groups in Pakistan contributes to sectarian conflicts and serve interests of their states. This assistance more often than not

strengthens the radical wing of every sect, thereby intensifying competition and discord amongst Sunni and Shia (Interview data)

The respondents indicated that public mobilization and the financial sponsorship of religious groups in Pakistan by Saudi Arabia and Iran has played a key role in propagating sectarian conflicts and this aid often becomes an agent of the geopolitical interests of these states, but its recipients are not important. They also noted that this support incurs an outsized benefit on the more extreme elements of each sect, who can use them to become the predominant narrative, appeal to the largest number of supporters and exert control over social lifestyles. Enabling the hardliners, Saudi and Iran patronage only deepen sectarian identity, fuelling a further rivalry among the Sunni and Shia, in a decreasing vicious example of mistrust and conflict. The respondents also commented that this has tilted the balance towards extreme voices and deprived the socio-political arena of a sharing of ground and moderate voices, increasingly open to sectarian polarization and confrontation. Therefore, foreign sponsorship is a factor that stimulates hidden diversity into violent manifestations promoting insecurity and loneliness in Pakistan.

The Saudi and Iranian funded madrassas have succeeded in imposing the Islamic system of education coupled with inculcating the intolerance in the discipline stream of such institution, not directly but over time like a regime with a vested interest (Interview data)

According to the respondents, the madrassas, which have been established in Pakistan by Saudi and Iranian funding have fulfilled a dual role by increasing the degree of Islamic education as well as propagating sectarian prejudices through the curricula and conventions of conduct. Although they do not explicitly bring this process to fore, they claim that it works slowly, like a regime with vested interests that slowly influences the way of looking at the world on the students. By means of selective interpretations of religious texts and focus on sectarian identities, these madrassas develop an attitude of intolerance that naturalizes fragmentation and distrust between Sunni and Shia populations.

According to the respondents, this influence transcends the classroom because graduates of such schools are likely to become clerics, educators, or political figures who can propagate and sustain such sectarian rhetoric in the society. Due to this fact, external financing of madrassas by Saudi Arabia and Iran does not only facilitate religious education but also acts as a channel of ensuring ideological dichotomy and, hence, lead to the long-term survival of sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The Saudi-Iran rapprochement is a political breakthrough of geopolitical value, but its ability is limited in changing the sectarian landscape of Pakistan because structures of conflict are extremely deep-seated. The sectarianism in Pakistan developed into a multilayered phenomenon and is not merely defined by the confrontation of Riyadh and Tehran but rather also by local factions using the sectarian discourse to their political, economic and social advantage. The traces of decades of external sponsorship are embedded in madrassas, political groups, and community discourses, so sectarian intolerance remains a constant undercurrent of society even though overt violence has decreased in recent years. The rapprochement, thus, can only diminish the level of external conflict but cannot be seen, mandate externally, to break down ideological and institutional fundamentals of sectarian division in Pakistan.

Simultaneously, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement also opens a great window of opportunity. Should the lowered geopolitical aggression be reflected in a notable decline of financing the armed sectarian movements, Pakistan might experience a gradual weakening of extremist groups and a possible rebalancing of sectarian relations. However, whether the agency of the Pakistani state can exploit this opportunity to a significant degree depends on how much the Pakistani state will be able to do it. The potential danger of a lack of vigorous reforms in education, governance, and religious regulation is that the vacuum created by the loss

of foreign sponsoring might be readily replaced by domestic actors that persist to feed off of sectarian mobilization. Therefore, the rapprochement will help relieve leverages imposed by outside powers, but it cannot replace local internal changes directed at alleviating the roots of sectarianism.

The study also highlights the significance of the need to acknowledge sectarianism in Pakistan as not merely a by-product of Saudi Iran competition. Respondents shared a common theme whereby local actors, especially political elites, clerics, and militant entrepreneurs, use sectarian identities to entrench their power. This shift implies that, even notwithstanding the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, Pakistan will continue being sectarianized unless and otherwise homegrown dynamics are addressed. Policies that enhance the intra-faith dialogue, curriculum regulation of madrassas and empower moderate religious forces are important in stopping the circle of radicalization being sponsored externally, which then finds a channel into the political battle of power.

The Saudi-Iran rapprochement presents Pakistan with a valuable yet constrained chance: to contain incoming streams of sectarian patronage and undermine the ideological acceptability of sectarian militants, even though it cannot eliminate the structural and social disjunctions that have been nurtured over many decades. In the case of Pakistan, accomplishing this goal of sectarian harmony will be tied to not only seizing the external thaw but pursuing formidable domestic reforms that require lopping off the processes by which sectarianism is reproduced. Only if Pakistan closes the gap between geopolitical changes and local dynamics, it could move from managing sectarian conflict to substantially overcoming it.

References

- Abdo, G. (2017). *The new sectarianism: The Arab uprisings and the rebirth of the Shia-Sunni divide*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190649234.001.0001>
- Aarts, P., & van Duijne, J. (2009). Saudi Arabia after U.S.-Iranian détente: Left in the lurch. *Middle East Policy*, 16(3), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2009.00399.x>
- Abbasi, A., & Akhtar, N. (2023). Iran-Saudi rapprochement: Challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 4(4), 199–210. [https://doi.org/10.36902/jdss-vol4-iss4-2023\(199-210\)](https://doi.org/10.36902/jdss-vol4-iss4-2023(199-210))
- Ahmar, M. (2007). Sectarian conflicts in Pakistan. *Pakistan Vision*, 9(1), 1–19. <https://humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/Moonis%20Ahmar-1.pdf>
- Ahmadian, H. (2018). Iran and Saudi Arabia in the age of Trump. *Survival*, 60(2), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448571>
- Botelho, G., & Payne, E. (2016, January 3). Iran's Rouhani: Saudi Arabia can't cover up its great crime of executing cleric. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/03/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-cleric-execution>
- Eslami, R., & Amani, F. (2023). Consideration of the dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia relations (2013–2018). *Iranian Research Letter of International Politics*, 11(2), 25–48.
- Faheem, F., Hussain, S., & Xingang, W. (2021). Sectarian war in the Middle East: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and an unending war for regional hegemony. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 9(3), 1232–1246. <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2021.93123>
- Ghazali, M. A., & Hussain, S. (2021). Iran and KSA using sectarian proxy warfare to counter each other's regional influence: Implications for Pakistan. *Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 1(1), 54–68.
- Grumet, T. (2015). New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry (Master's thesis). *University of Denver*. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1064>
- Jahandad, J., & Mustafa, A. (2022). Saudi-Iran rivalry: A sectarian divide or security dilemma. *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 11(2), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.54690/jcs.v11i2.235>
- Lane, A. (2023, April). Iran's Islamist proxies in the Middle East. *Wilson Center*. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/irans-islamist-proxies-middle-east>
- Nakhavali, M. (2022). *Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry after the Islamic Revolution of Iran* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Belgrade.
- Nasr, V. (2007). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Rauf, A., & Ullah, F. (2017). Sectarian violence in Hangu: Genesis, factors and remedies. *Research Journal of Area Study Center, University of Peshawar*, 34(2), 55–72.
- Sewag, Z. (2015). Sectarian rise in Pakistan: Role of Saudi Arabia and Iran. *South Asia Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1(3), 6–15.
- Shah, N. (2014). Evolution of sectarianism in Pakistan: A threat to the state and society. *South Asian Studies*, 29(2), 441–459.
- Shuster, M. (2007, February 12). The origins of the Shia-Sunni split. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087>