



# POMEAS

Project on the Middle East and the Arab Spring

## Pakistan and the Arab Spring: No scenario for Muslim cooperation

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In January 2011, the Arab World appeared in flux. Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 had unleashed a myriad trend of social tumults, and sent shockwaves across the region. In return, the external actors had to adjust to the new Arab World that was unfolding at their doorstep. Like their counterparts in the United States, the European Union, and almost every country that formed a part of the international community, the Pakistani authorities battled with the same set of complications: what if the Middle East and North Africa evolved into a system of regional relations less compatible, or diametrically at odds, with Pakistan's preferences? Guided by this rationale, the former Foreign Secretary Shamsad Assad proclaimed that, while Pakistan confronted a host of domestic challenges, it had 'no time to focus on international issues.'<sup>1</sup> Shamsad had spoken these words prior to the regional flare-ups, leading one to the evaluation that, even before the Arab Spring, Pakistan had no interest in entanglement. Accordingly, Pakistan continued to follow a cautious approach to this region of troubling change: given the wide array of problems Pakistan was facing at home, the Arab Spring was the least of its concerns. In hindsight, this statement is rightly deconstructed as a rhetorical shield to guard the actual, wait-and-see approach that allowed for a strategic reflection on how Pakistan should reframe, interpret and make sense of the prospects of the future Arab World. The words of the Foreign Secretary served as a template for political action, only when a hands-off approach preserved, or promised to forge, advantageous conditions.

Pakistan then championed the longevity of entrenched dictatorships, or came to be at loggerheads with them, in light of several factors – chief amongst which was the security of energy and petroleum supplies. As Pakistan's current Minister for Water and Power articulated, Khawaja Mohammed Asif, energy was the country's 'number one challenge, even a bigger challenge than terrorism.'<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the dilemma of steering the country of the quagmire of this energy crisis weighed heavily on Pakistan's policies. Another regional interest, to which Islamabad tried to obtain a basic assurance, was the fate of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the American troops, and that the political fabric of Kabul be reconstructed to a pattern palatable to its interests. As it will be discussed below,

the executive team in Islamabad operated cautiously: far from hurrying into ironclad alliances, it formulated a foreign policy that was characterized by a degree of caution and pragmatism to realize the above-outlined objectives.

As the relevant sections will demonstrate, the shifting political landscape in the Middle East also had Pakistan trot a fine line between Riyadh, its closest Sunni ally, and Tehran, an important neighbor with whom Islamabad shares a volatile border. This paper will investigate the circumstances under which the Pakistan's Peoples Party until 2013, as well as the Muslim League thereafter, balanced the Saudi-Iranian dynamics or gravitated towards either orbit. It will argue that to what extent Pakistan operated under Saudi pressure depended upon the incumbent administration's platform, the support from the electorate, as well as the larger political and economic interests vested in the conflict-zone.

A balanced appraisal of Pakistan's response to the Arab Springs confirms that it has been fundamentally prudent. When Bouazizi's self-immolation in February 2011 triggered a revolutionary wave of urban protests that is still shaking the Arab World, Pakistan followed country-based ad-hoc policies, rather than an overarching 'grand' strategy. Its foreign policy was characterized by caution, pragmatism and an eclectic approach to crises. This study will examine under in what ways and under what kind of conditions Pakistan reacted to this sea change, and connected its objectives with the world of actual policy outcomes.

### **Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and petroleum-political leverage that never was**

When the Libyan Uprising erupted on 15 February 2011, Pakistan demonstrated a mode of indifference: accepting Gaddafi's position as legitimate, they dismissed the National Transition Council's (NTC) claim to be the real representative of the people, stipulating that the NTC did not hail from a strong platform to govern Libya.<sup>3</sup> It seemed as if Islamabad lacked any reason to embark on an active pursuit of regime change and alter the political landscape: neither forcing out Gaddafi's volatile leadership nor ushering in a pluralistic government, it reasoned, would serve its interests.

Should Libya's massive reserves of crude oil, however, not have prompted Pakistan to assist in the installment of a more amiable government in Tripoli? This assumption holds some truth, yet it also comes with a caveat. In contrast to popular belief, the value of Libyan oil does not lie in its quantity; even before February 2011, Libya only exported about \$1.6 million barrels of oil per day, which amounts to only 2% of the world's oil production.<sup>4</sup> The value is in its quality: it exports a certain type of oil that could be used with little refinement, whereas the Saudi petroleum, for instance, has to be refined into gasoline.<sup>5</sup> Due to its sheer price, however, this quality holds little importance for Pakistan. For instance, the Libyan crude oil was priced at \$79.67 per barrel in 2010 and \$112.89 in 2011, while the Saudi product was sold at \$75.56 and \$104.06, and the UAE petrol at \$78.10 and \$106.21, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the Libyan oil prices that would become a dampen on the wallet, Pakistan does not have the facilities to process the product into gasoline or fuel oil, and is therefore forced to import more expensive refined products. In this sector, too, Libya has never been an 'important' trading partner, since Libya is not a leading supplier of refined petroleum. Instead, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates remain Pakistan's top three trading partners: the Saudi gasoline, for instance, was sold at the fixed price of 83.5 Saudi Royal Riyal between 2009 and 2013 - which is roughly around \$22.25 across five years.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, prior to sanctions in 2010, Libya sold its refined products from 31.8 Libyan dinars, or \$23.85 - a considerable difference in price for a Pakistan that is battling with the aftereffects of the global recession.<sup>8</sup> Although Kuwaiti gasoline remained fixed at the high rate of 11.4 Kuwaiti Dinars in 2011 (tentatively \$38,79), there is an interesting reason why Pakistan imported 1/6 of its oil from Kuwait in 2011, spending close to \$2 billion on importing three million tons of diesel fuel and one million ton of furnace oil.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan had secured an arrangement with Kuwait at the peak of the financial crisis that put the Kuwaiti supplies on a two-month deferred payment plan. Gasoline from Kuwait was then flowing in very affordable prices.

After Gaddafi's death on 20 October 2011, Pakistan's position shifted for reasons closely related to these dynamics. It remained cautious not to get sucked into an event, out of which the country could not garner any remedies to allay its energy crisis; yet, Pakistan did not eschew the idea of cooperation per se. Before it

granted official recognition to the NTC as the sole representative of the Libyan people,<sup>10</sup> Pakistan pursued a wait-and-see approach, but finally initiated full diplomatic relations on 3 November 2011 following Libya's African neighbors (excluding Algeria) and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, when the Libyan representative to the ICCI expressed in June 2013 his country's willingness to explore investment opportunities in construction and infrastructural development, Islamabad did not ignore this as undesirable information.<sup>12</sup> The Libyan embassy in Islamabad was issuing around 150-200 visas per day in the summer of 2013 for those in need of employment.<sup>13</sup> When

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the civil war erupted again in May 2014, however, the authorities in Islamabad paused their business transactions, once again exercising caution vis-à-vis what seemed to be troubling change in an irrelevant country.

Pakistan's silence in Egypt and Tunisia, too, was due in no small part to their tenuous economic relations. Although Egypt is the largest non-OPEC oil producer in Africa, it is also the largest oil consumer of the continent, accounting for more than 20% of its total oil consumption: indeed, total oil consumption grew by an annual average of 3% over the past decade, outpacing production capacity since 2010.<sup>14</sup> To add fuel to the flames, Egypt's refinery output had embarked on a sharp decline in 2009, and would eventually decline by 28% between 2009 and 2013. Since the country imported petroleum products to whet the appetite of its domestic consumer, it was naturally in no condition to satisfy Pakistan's need for refined petroleum. Furthermore, Egypt's natural gas production had remained on a similar downward spiral since 2009, causing the government to divert natural gas supplies from export to local markets.<sup>15</sup>

Production of petroleum had also been on decline in Tunisia from its peak of 120,000 barrels a day in mid-1980s, and would eventually drop down to 60,000 barrels a day in 2013. Protests in 2011 also hampered the projects to revamp the oil production capacity, often

driving away foreign investors who could not have their development plans approved by the Tunisian parliament. Tunisia's oil refinery had also failed to meet the domestic demand for consumption since 2011: while Tunisia's exports of refined petroleum to Pakistan amounted to 32.72% of its total exports in 2010, it did not even make it Tunisia's list of exports in 2011 and 2012.<sup>16</sup> For Pakistan then, Tunisia lacked any sort of economic value.

When grappling with the upheavals in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, Islamabad shunned formulations of any policy-lines that would have required a commitment to activism. Pakistan did not conduct any lucrative, financial transactions with these countries, and showed hesitance to get sucked into the tumultuous events that unfurled within their borders.

#### **Undying support for the al-Khalifa dynasty – promise of a Pak-controlled Kabul?**

When the uprising in Bahrain erupted, the then President Zardari emphasized his country's support for the al-Khalifa government, stating that the upheavals engendered instability and were to be condemned.<sup>17</sup> Immediately after the initial exchange of fire, advertisements started to appear across Pakistani media, calling for 'army drill instructors, anti-riot commanders and retired police with previous army and police experience' on 'urgent requirement' for Bahrain's National Guard.<sup>18</sup> By late April, early May 2011, 2500 Pakistanis had been recruited into National Guards, increasing its size by 50%.<sup>19</sup>

This active involvement is somewhat attributed to parlous economic conditions; indeed, Bahrain's reservoirs of petroleum and natural gas, coupled with its capacity to unleash a steady flow of these commodities,

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weighed heavily on Pakistan's stance on the matter. For instance, Bahrain constantly ranked amongst the top ten import origins of refined petroleum to Pakistan - the 5th in both 2010 and 2011. Bahraini oil was fur-

thermore priced at \$106 per barrel in 2011 - very modestly priced in comparison to OPEC petro-giants (see above).<sup>20</sup> To look after its own key interests, Pakistan then stepped forth to prevent the further radicalization of counter-regime mobilization.

The defense of the status quo was not only connected to economic interests; the prospect of Shia empowerment had also evolved into a source of vexation for the region's Sunni powers. When the Shia masses threatened to march towards Bahrain's presidential palace, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia feared that al-Khalifa might accommodate them at the negotiating table and launch a dialogue on political concessions to prevent the situation from deteriorating any further.<sup>21</sup> Saudi Arabia was particularly vulnerable to spillover effects from Bahrain, since its own Shia population resided along the border with the Gulf kingdom, in eastern, oil-rich swathes of territories. Riyadh's fear was that, if al-Khalifa set a 'promising' precedent for the Bahraini Shias, the Saudi Shias, too, might be motivated into action. To quell this threat, Riyadh launched an antirevolutionary campaign: far from consisting of only acts of aggression, this campaign included social packages on housing, employment opportunities and medical benefits, the estimated value of which amounted to \$11 billion.<sup>22</sup> Worries about Shia empowerment, however, were not only linked to such domestic issues; they quickly shaded into thoughts of Iranian fifth column activism. Contending for supremacy in the Gulf and Central Asia had been a staple of Iranian foreign policy since the reign of the Qajar Shahs through the Pahlavi period and into the Islamic Republic under Khomeini.<sup>23</sup> If effectively manipulated, these Shia uprisings could bring Iran closer to realizing this objective. The offer of an Iranian assistance, for instance, would not only allow the Shia factions to take a less arduous path to their conclusion, but also furnish Iran with leverage in the region. Tehran could then sweep in at the back of these 'Shia versus Sunni' protests and flex its muscles over the Gulf monarchies.<sup>24</sup>

There was another development around this time that led Riyadh to take such measures to neutralize Shia discontent: the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. American troops were leaving Baghdad without a stable government or a security apparatus, creating a power vacuum in Iraq that both Saudi Arabia and Iran were ambitious to fill in.<sup>25</sup> This is why the urban protests in Bahrain surfaced at a sensitive time: if the Saudi authorities remained locked within

an internal struggle, Iran could carry on with a deterministic thrust towards its neighbor and place itself on an advantageous footing. Furthermore, this scenario evoked the specter of a Middle East gradually coming under Iran's influence – and turning Riyadh's darkest nightmare into an even darker reality.

Then why did Pakistan throw its weight behind the Saudi Kingdom in Bahrain? Upon a superficial glance, one is tempted to label this course of action as being heavily Saudi-indexed. That the Saudi requests guided a blind Pakistan into the battle-zone is, nonetheless, an incomplete analysis, especially if one considers the traditional platform of President Zardari's Pakistan's Peoples Party (PPP). Historically, the PPP tended to emphasize Pakistan's freedom of action from Saudi Arabia, and not cultivated a bond of trust with the House of Saud.

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In fact, Islamabad had tailored its policies towards a certain end, and not rushed in blindly. The most potent driving force, in this regard, was the calculation that the fate of Iraq in 2011 would determine the fate of Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal in 2014. In order to reconstruct the political fabric of Kabul to a pattern palatable to Pakistan, the power had to be transferred to a Sunni administration. This meant that this process could not be upended by Iran. Infusing manpower into the Saudi-led campaign then served an indirect, albeit a clear purpose: it would secure Riyadh's backing for Islamabad's vision for the Afghan reconciliation.<sup>26</sup> As discussed above, had Saudi Arabia become engulfed with sectarian conflict and unable to counter the inevitable showdown in Iraq with Iran, this would have jeopardized the future of Afghanistan to the detriment of Pakistan's interests.

Many analysts heavily criticized this intervention, arguing that it would intensify the sectarian tensions at home and thus commit the country to an enormous peril. Since the Pakistani recruits were tasked with suppressing the Shia in Bahrain, they quickly became the face of the brutal crackdown engineered by the Sunnis.<sup>27</sup> Advancing into deepening commitments with

Saudi Arabia, these analysts feared, could be interpreted by the Sunni radicals as the rise of anti-Shiism in the executive branches, and therefore create deeper fault-lines between the two sects. Pakistan was already bogged down by sectarian clashes within its borders, especially in the province of Baluchistan that stretches along the border with Iran. Baluchistan was already replete with revolts due to a host of socio-economic grievances (such as scarcity of water and underdeveloped infrastructure), its volatile location (along the borders with Iran and Afghanistan), and neglect from central administration.<sup>28</sup> The province had also become a hotbed of militant extremism, serving as an operational ground for rabidly anti-Shia organizations, such as Soldiers of Sahabah (Sipah-i Sahabah), the Army of Jhangvi (Lashkar-e Jhangvi) and the Army of the Khorasan (Lashkar-i Khorasan). Furthermore, the fact that Pakistan currently plays the host to about 26 million Shias out of a population of 190 million, the largest population of the Muslim sects adherents, makes it possible that localized incidents could easily spiral out of control into nation-wide flare-ups.<sup>29</sup>

One strong case in point, for instance, is that Lashkar-i Jhangvi retaliated with brazen attacks on buses carrying pilgrims to Iran, Iraq and Syria around Quetta, killing at least 200 Shiite in December 2013.<sup>30</sup> Lashkar-i Khorasan furthermore launched attacks upon the Makron region, the coastal division of the province with 700-km coastline on the Strait of Hormuz, where the overwhelming percentage of the Pakistani Shias resides.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that deploying troops against the Bahraini Shia would escalate sectarian tensions at home would have entered the calculus of the Pakistani leadership. Granted, a country that had been witnessing unprecedented levels of sectarian violence should have viewed entanglement with a measure of unease. Lust for political clout, however, often trumps over a country's commitment to humanitarian principles; in this case, too, the latter fell by the wayside in the race to the top. The turmoil in Baluchistan could have given pause to the Pakistani administration that was at times inclined towards precaution - but only when it served its own agenda. Islamabad was wary of the potential outcome of the revolutionary wave that was shaking Bahrain, and mobilized to preserve stability under the status quo. It might have fostered an illusory stability that rested on a precarious footing; yet, it guaranteed a Pakistan-friendly political landscape.

### **The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Assad and a shifting Pakistan**

Pakistan once again entertained a policy of strict neutrality when the Syrian civil war erupted on 15 March 2011. Islamabad confined the sphere of its activism to the parameters set by the UNSC Resolution 2043 of 21 April 2012 that created the United Nations Special Mission in Syria; in accordance with its mandate, Pakistan championed the cause of '[monitoring] a cessation of hostilities of all sorts by all parties...and [supporting] the implementation of the 6-point plan to end the conflict in Syria.'<sup>32</sup> Yet, Islamabad remained unrelenting in its opposition to military intervention or airstrikes against Bashar al-Assad.

For Pakistan, Syria was relevant due to Bashar al-Assad's cordial ties with the administration in Tehran. Since the proposal of the UNDP Report 'Peace and Prosperity Gas Pipelines' in December 2003, Pakistan and Iran had been engaged in deliberations over the construction of a pipeline that would transport Iranian natural gas to Pakistan. This project was set to commence in October 2012, and be completed by December 2014.<sup>33</sup> For Pakistan, this was a matchless opportunity on two fronts. First of all, as a result of the sanctions imposed following Bin Laden's capture in Abbottabad in May 2011, its energy industry was virtually in shambles. This deal with Iran promised to build it back up within a considerable short period of time. Also, cooperation with Iran was likely to buy political capital with the Shia communities across Pakistan.

The pipeline deal should also be seen as a balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia by Zardari: it was meant to shore up Pakistan's ties with the former to reduce the degree of its reliance on the latter.<sup>34</sup> As a center-left, socialist-progressive party, PPP has historically espoused amiable relations with the Soviet Union, China, and Iran, and perceived the Saudi influence on Pakistan's foreign policy with a strong measure of wariness. This policy acts was then in line with Zardari's party platform. Furthermore, when Riyadh suspended oil supplies on deferred payments due to PPP's friendlier approach to its archenemy, this project promised to safeguard Pakistan's industries from their restricted access to the Saudi reserves, and therefore help Islamabad deal with its chronic and severe power outages.<sup>35</sup>

This project was later cancelled in February 2014 under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League. Although judged as impractical, the deal was not unex-

pected: the Muslim League had historically followed a more Saudi-indexed approach to foreign relations, and would have been vexed by the PPP's harmonious relations with Iran. After the 3-day visit of the Saudi crown prince Salman bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, in his capacity as the defense minister in February 2014, Islamabad and Riyadh promulgated a joint statement, calling for 'the formation of a transnational governing body in Syria with full executive powers enabling it to take charge of all affairs.'<sup>36</sup> The defense cooperation meeting was to reach an agreement, whereby Riyadh would purchase military arms, equipment and training instructions for the Syrian opposition. Furthermore, \$1.5 billion was transferred to Pakistan's state-bank a few weeks later, which later turned out to be a Saudi contribution to stabilize the devalued rupee against the US dollar. A Foreign Ministry official also announced Islamabad's plans to sell JF-17 Thunder, a combat aircraft, and ANZA, the shoulder-fired, anti-craft missile that was jointly developed with China – both which will presumably end up at the hands of the Syrian rebels.<sup>37</sup> As anticipated, the Sharif government also rapidly changed tack on the pipeline-deal, cancelling it without having built any of the 781 km pipeline that started to incur a daily fine of \$3 million.<sup>38</sup> In exchange, Islamabad switched sides on the Syrian front, and demanded the departure of Assad.<sup>39</sup>

### ***These developments placed Pakistan directly at odds with the Iranian leadership, who had been shoring up the Assad government since 2011, and raised security concerns.***

These developments placed Pakistan directly at odds with the Iranian leadership, who had been shoring up the Assad government since 2011, and raised security concerns.<sup>40</sup> Forces were already stationed along the Indian border to the Kashmir dispute, and the military still remained embroiled within a protracted struggle against the Taliban in Waziristan since the Taliban's siege of the Karachi airport in June 2014.<sup>41</sup> These had already stretched the defense forces beyond capacity. If the boundary with Iran now needed to be manned as a measure of precaution, Pakistan would not have the ammunition required.

Like for every country, for Pakistan too, then Syria is a serious flashpoint. When marred with such security concerns, why did Pakistan not exercise more precaution? The first idea that comes to mind is that the Muslim League aimed at appeasing the Saudis after five years of the Iran-friendly PPP administration. The deal was indeed forged at a moment most opportune for the House of Saud. Stuck at a stalemate, the Syrian rebels, backed by the Saudi forces, needed extra weapons and equipment, but above all tactical training for combat. Given their decades of experience fighting insurgents in the country's war against the Taliban, Pakistan's military trainers offered the most effective remedy.<sup>42</sup>

Just like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, too, feared the expansion of Iran's sphere of influence in the region, especially since an Iran with a stronger leverage could pose a graver threat in Afghanistan after December 2014. An Iran-friendly government in Syria was also more dangerous than a Bahrain governed by a Shia-dominated parliament. If Assad emerged victorious from the battlefield, he would collaborate with Iran and Lebanon, his two allies in the Levant, creating a contiguous arc of Iranian influence stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. With a foothold in the Levant and a more serious peril to Pakistan's Sunni partners in the region, Iran could assert itself more vigorously in Kabul – undeniably, to the detriment of Pakistan's interests.

Another factor was the concern over Pakistan's energy shortages. Given the diplomatic stalemate over Iran and the United States' deliberations on the former's nuclear capacity in early 2014 (before the Rouhani and Obama administrations concluded the interim agreement), the US forewarned Islamabad that this project would incur sanctions upon Pakistan in connection with Iran's nuclear program. Instead, Washington even advised Islamabad to import petroleum from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, thus bypassing the need to enter into deliberations with the Iranian authorities.<sup>43</sup> This consideration pushed Islamabad closer towards Riyadh: when the prospect of a settlement with Iran was fading away, their alliance promised a Saudi-petrodollar infusion into the ailing economy, easier access to refined petroleum products, and military support in the post-NATO Afghan reconciliation.

**The latest flashpoint: Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen**  
Empowered by the revolutions within the larger remit of the Arab Spring in 2011 and later strengthened by the

international ousting of Yemen's dictator Ali Saleh in 2012, the Houthis mobilized against the Saudi-backed Hadi government in March 2015.<sup>44</sup> In reaction to their attempts to take over the central command, Saudi Arabia formed a Sunni military bloc against the rebel forces in late March-early April 2015. Since then, Yemen is being clobbered with aerial bombardment by the Saudi-led offensive, along with UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Egypt. The intervention, dubbed Operation Decisive Storm, has drawn Iran into the conflict, whose is bolstering the Shia Houthis in the periphery against the Sunni center backed by the Saudi-coalition.

In early April 2015, Pakistan still refused to come onboard this coalition, and the nature of its contribution straddled the ambivalent grey-zone. The Prime Minister Sharif promised cooperation on counter-terrorism measures, but remained silent in terms of providing logistical support, or contributing ships, aircraft and troops to restore President Hadi.<sup>45</sup> In another act of defiance, the Pakistani leadership also refused to relocate its embassy from Sanaa to Amen, as the Gulf Cooperation Council had done, to distance themselves from the rebels.<sup>46</sup>

Many analysts averred that the Sharif government could not hold this oppositional ground for long. It is thanks to the Saudi efforts that Sharif is still firmly anchored within Pakistan's political fabric: after General Musharraf ousted him out of power and imprisoned him in 1999, Sharif was welcomed in Riyadh as a guest of the royal family.<sup>47</sup> Also, the Saudis investments in Pakistan's infrastructure have furnished the Kingdom with enough leverage to demand support of any nature. Riyadh supplied petroleum to Pakistan in 1998, when the latter's energy industry was crumbling down due to international sanctions imposed by the international community in retaliation for its nuclear testing.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps needless to mention, the Kingdom still serves as the largest oil supplier to Pakistan and provides employment for a high number of Pakistani nationals.<sup>49</sup>

In many respect, however, it would have been illogical for Pakistan to become entangled in a military operation in Yemen. As discussed above, the Pakistani military is already overstretched. Its border with Afghanistan still remains unstable; the Kashmir region is as restive as ever; and the Baluchistan region that sits on the Iranian-Pakistani border is also simmering with sectarian tensions.<sup>50</sup> The leadership furthermore runs the risk of losing its struggle against the Taliban in

North Waziristan with a permanent, coherent military; if the already-insufficient manpower became diverted to other fronts, the Taliban would almost certainly walk away victorious from the battle-field.

Initially, there was also little support within Pakistan to jump into a war that has acquired such a sectarian edge. Indeed, the conflict in Yemen had evolved into a source of vexation amongst young activists, who express their disquietude with the fact that their country is being used a proxy battleground by Saudi Arabia. They want Pakistan to embrace an image of 'Islamic internationalism,' and do not appear to be afraid of stepping up their efforts to have Islamabad promote reconciliation rather than taking sides in a conflict far away from their country.<sup>51</sup> These activists also put forward that bolstering the Saudi efforts would violate the founding principle of Pakistan - that it was founded as a home base for South Asia's Muslim community and 'not founded on any particular understanding of Islam.'<sup>52</sup> Also, if Pakistan threw its weight behind the Sunni alliance, it could embolden the anti-Shia organizations at home and trigger a new wave of anti-sectarian violence.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, many still anticipated that the Pakistani leadership would be wary of assuming a firmer stance against the Saudi demands and would shy away from rejecting its request outright. After days of debate, however, the Pakistani Parliament voted unanimously in favor of preserving neutrality.<sup>54</sup> Instead of partaking in Operation Decisive Storm, the authorities announced their willingness to engage in proactive diplomacy to bring an end to the crisis. It is significant that the Parliament remained silent on the notion of 'troop deployment' in general; in this sense, this resolution does not rule out the possibility of dispatching ground forces to Saudi Arabia in the event of an invasion of Islam's holy sites, just as it did during the Gulf War in 1991.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Pakistan's posturing towards the crisis in Yemen then proves that its foreign policy is not strictly Sunni-indexed.***

Pakistan's posturing towards the crisis in Yemen then proves that its foreign policy is not strictly Sunni-indexed. As discussed above, the country is already busy with major operations against militant Islamist

supremacists and fears the escalation of anti-Shia tensions. The prospect of loosening sanctions on Iran's oil industry is another factor that renders involvement unpalatable.<sup>56</sup> Islamabad has even lit the green light on continuing the pipeline-project with Iran that had been stalled roughly a year ago, now that it anticipates the lifting of the international embargo. The pipeline will allow Pakistan to reap the earliest harvest of the framework agreement reached between Tehran and the P5+1 countries in early April 2015, and remedy its crippling electricity industry due to its shortage of fuels.<sup>57</sup> The leadership's willingness to go ahead with the project shows that, against the backdrop of these developments, it aims to transform Iran from an uneasy neighbor into, if possible, a lucrative partner. According to the estimates, Iranian reserves are the cheapest supply options for Pakistan.<sup>58</sup>

To be sure, the Sharif government is still torn between balancing its interests in Iran and remaining on good terms with Saudi Arabia. The fate of Afghanistan is also far from being set aside in favor of either Iran or the Sunni powers. Yet, the promise of the opening of the Iranian economy, coupled with the fact that Pakistan presents a market hungry for Iran's energy products, will forge a relationship with deep roots in pragmatism. Although the two could clash over regional clout in the future, their economic cooperation is likely not to let tensions escalate beyond a certain point.

This recent declaration of impartiality therefore demonstrates that the leadership in Islamabad is still capable of keeping together its unwillingness to force things on the ground, if acts of such nature will work towards the country's detriment. Even after days of intense debating at the highest executive level and despite Riyadh's status as a prized ally and a generous donor, Pakistan showed that its foreign policy would further national interests – irrespective of any extraneous considerations.

### **Conclusion: No room for selfless support for Muslim democracies**

Pakistan's profile as a Muslim country does not have an immediate impact on its foreign policy, which is still driven through pragmatic calculations rather than religious considerations. In Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, becoming entangled in the messy politics surrounding changes underway offered no political or financial benefits - which led Pakistan to stand idly on the sidelines. The conflicts in Bahrain and Syria, by contrast, loomed large on Pakistan's agenda for the very reasons that

had peeled away from the luster of intervention in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia: first of all, activism secured the continuous flow of oil from Kuwait and Saudi petroleum fields and thus offered a way to mitigate the effects of Pakistan's energy crisis. Furthermore, it served Islamabad's broader objective of preventing the emergence of Iran's 'Shia axis' that stretches from Baghdad to Beirut, with a regional clout over in South Asia, after the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. Pakistan's recent dilemma over the crisis in Yemen, and the Parliament's ultimate veto against joining the Saudi-led Sunni coalition, showed that the country would not be catapulted into the fold of an international crisis.

This study has shown that Pakistan shunned formulating an overarching strategy towards the Arab Spring

that could be carried out automatically in every scenario. There was furthermore no overall statement of attitude towards these Muslim masses, who succeeded in revolutionizing their countries along democratic patterns or were ultimately crushed by the forceful, and massively bloody, resurgence of dictatorship. Islamabad rather articulated its own vision for the Middle East, and the developments within the broader remit of the Arab Springs furnished its authorities with an opportunity to work for its realization. They attempted to evaluate the developments on a country-by-country basis, utilized the options at their disposal, and accordingly mobilized with prejudice to its perceived set of interests; as with every other issue that concerns the Middle East, the outcome is yet to be seen.

#### Endnotes

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*Project on the Middle East and the Arab Spring (POMEAS) arose in response to the upheavals that started in 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the subsequent developments of an unfolding regional process that mixed disappointments with opportunities. Building on the idea that the processes of academic inquiry, debate and public discussion can contribute to the emergence of a democratic political culture, it aims to initiate a forum open and accessible to people throughout the Middle East and beyond. POMEAS seeks to have impacts on both the discourse of experts and the climate of public opinion.*

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