

A Brief History of Iran-Pakistan Pre-Islamic Revolution Relations:

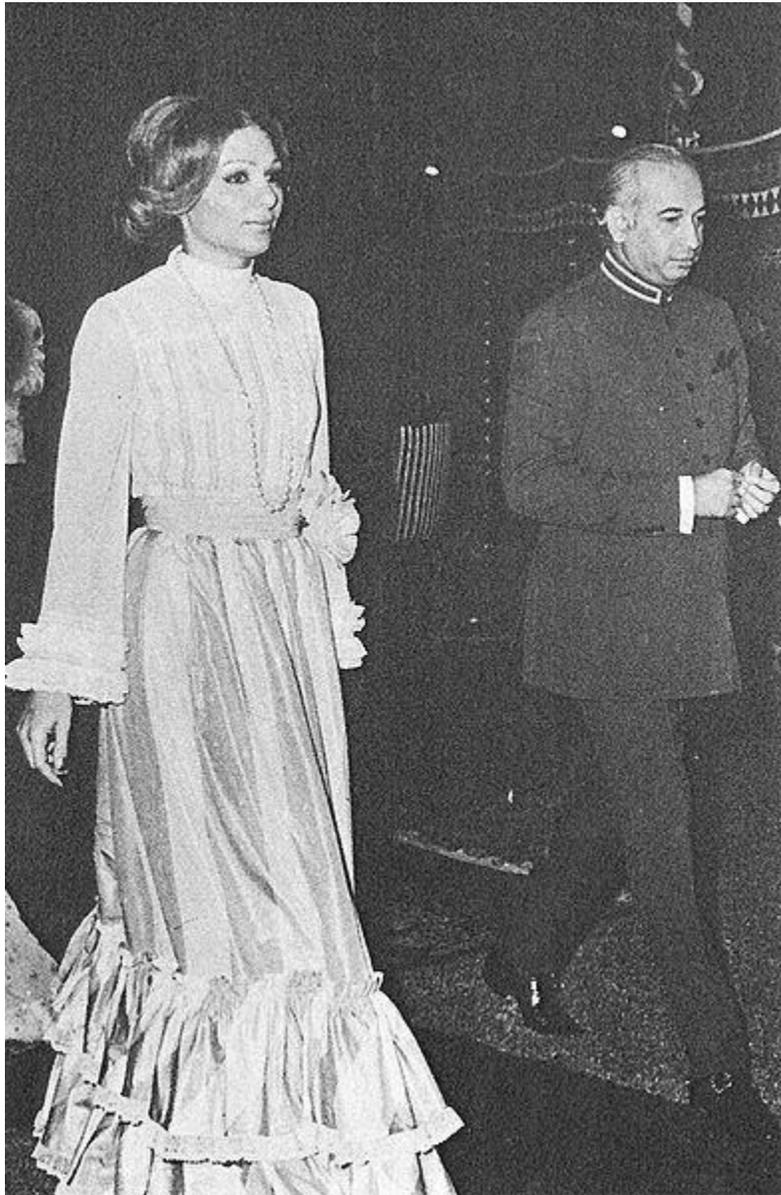
When Pakistan gained independence in 1947, Iran was the first country in the world to internationally recognize Pakistan as a sovereign nation and Shah of Iran was the first head of state of any country who came to Pakistan on a state visit in 1950. Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, being a Shia himself, was a great supporter of strong relations between Iran and Pakistan since the beginning. He debated the idea of close Iran-Pakistan relations in his meetings with people in his political circle as well as publicly. Iran was also the new neighbor of Pakistan, which further gave boost to Mr Jinnah's case for strong Pakistan-Iran relations. Mr Jinnah appointed Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan as the first Pakistani ambassador to Iran. In 1949, Pakistan's first PM Mr Liaquat Ali Khan made his first state visit to Iran and cemented Pakistan's strong relations with Iran in the years to come. In May 1950, a treaty of friendship was signed by Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr Liaquat Ali Khan and the Shah of Iran.



Iskander Mirza, the first Governor General of Pakistan, with a young Shah of Iran.

Pakistan's friendship treaty with Iran also had geopolitical implications, since Pakistan found Shah of Iran a natural ally as a counter to Egypt's Pan-Arab ideologist Abdel Nasser, who was being [supported](#) by the Indian government. Many Arab monarchies at the time were also allied with Shah of Iran. Pakistan-Iran relationship at the time went well beyond geopolitics since both had granted each other MFN status for easy trade and there was also some military cooperation between both in Baluchistan. Since both Iran and Pakistan were pro-U.S. at the time, both entered U.S.-led Central Treaty Organization ([CENTO](#)) which was meant to be a defensive alliance against Soviet Union. Despite having Turkey, Iraq and UK in it, CENTO was largely a failure and is considered by most experts as one of the [least effective](#) Cold War alliances. Iran under Shah also played a role in the [Indo-Pakistani war](#) of 1965, providing Pakistan with medical help including nurses as well as a gift of 5,000 tons of petroleum. Iran also nearly imposed an embargo on Iranian oil supplies to India for the duration of the war. Iran again played a vital role in Pakistan's [1971 conflict](#) with India, this time supplying military equipment as well as diplomatic support against India. The Shah of Iran condemned the Indian attack on East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as aggression and in an interview he reiterated his support for Pakistan, saying "We are one hundred percent behind Pakistan". Iranian Prime Minister [Amir-Abbas Hoveida](#) wasn't far behind, saying in a speech that "Pakistan has been subjected to violence and force." Moreover, throughout the conflict Iranian leadership repeatedly expressed its opposition to the dismemberment of Pakistan. Iran under Shah also helped Pakistan quell an armed

uprising in Baluchistan in 1973 and provided Pakistan military hardware, including thirty [Huey cobra](#) attack helicopters, as well as intelligence sharing and \$200 million in aid. The armed uprising was successfully defeated by Pakistan within 3 years. Shah had even proposed the idea of a confederation of Iran and Pakistan with a single army and with him as head of the state. The Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 played a major role in changing Iran's views towards Pakistan and compelled Iran to make friendly advances towards India.



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto with Queen of Iran Farah Pahlavi in 1972



An Iranian postage stamp, issued in 1976, features Pakistan's founder Jinnah

Islamic Revolution Hits Iran:

The first signs of tensions between Iran and Pakistan were observed when in 1974 Iran's Reza Pahlavi refused to attend the second [Islamic Summit](#) that was being held in Lahore because of the presence of Libya's Gaddafi. The then Pakistani PM Mr Bhutto and his soft corner towards the Arab world annoyed the already frustrated Shah. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto played the Arab card very well. Before the Islamic Summit of 1974, Pakistan had not received direct financial aid from any Arab country but the Islamic Summit (also sometimes referred to as Lahore Summit) immensely improved Pakistan's ties with the Arab world and Arab money started flowing in. After the military coupe in Pakistan and hanging of Bhutto, the new Pakistani head of state General Ziaul Haq, whose government was ideologically conservative, also adopted a pro-Arab approach after efforts towards building trust with Tehran proved futile. Two years after Ziaul Haq came to power, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution hit Iran with full force. This was the time when the romance between Iran and Pakistan went downhill. The new Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khomeini pulled Iran out of CENTO and ended Iran's close relations with the United States. In the first few months, Pakistan and Iran pretended to be partners; in 1979 Ziaul Haq famously said "Khomeini is a symbol of Islamic insurgence" which was reciprocated by the Ayatollah, in a letter, declared Pakistan an Islamic friend and called for 'Muslim unity'. Even though Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognize the new revolutionary regime in Iran, Pakistan-Iran relations couldn't get back on the right track because by 1981 Ziaul Haq had once again allied Pakistan with U.S. and opened up backdoor links with Israel while Iran continued to remain staunchly anti-U.S. and anti-Israel.

Since 1987, Pakistan has steadily blocked any Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons but at the same time Pakistan has supported Iran's view on the issue of its nuclear energy programme, maintaining that "Iran has the right to develop its nuclear programme within the ambit of NPT." In 1987 Pakistan and Iran signed an agreement on civil nuclear energy cooperation, with Zia-ul-Haq personally visiting Iran as part of its "Atoms for Peace" program. Pakistan officially announced its own nuclear capability

on 7th September 1998. Before making the announcement, the then Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif sent a secret courier to Israel via Pakistani ambassador to United Nations [Inam-ul-Haq](#) and Pakistan Ambassador to the U.S. Dr. [Maliha Lodhi](#), in which Pakistan gave complete assurance to Israel that Pakistan would not transfer any aspects of its nuclear technology or materials to Iran in any scenario. In 2005, evidence provided by the [IAEA](#) proved that Pakistani cooperation with Iran's nuclear program was limited to "non-military spheres" and was entirely peaceful in nature.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, Pakistan officially stayed neutral but Iran's attempts to [export](#) the Islamic Revolution were being seen with increased suspicion by Sunnis in Pakistan. Once it became clear that Saddam Hussein is going to invade Iran, Pakistan immediately deployed its military contingent to protect the Gulf states against the Iranian threat, placing around 40,000 military personnel in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Zia regime [secretly sold](#) U.S.-made weapons (including Stinger missiles) meant for Afghan Mujahideen to Iran and made huge profits. It is also worth noting here that both Iran and Pakistan supported the anti-Communist struggle of Afghan Mujahideen while Soviet Union, after invading Afghanistan in 1979, declared support for Saddam's Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, which opened up new doors for Iran-Pakistan relations. While Zia had allied Pakistan with U.S. and [officially](#) maintained neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war, he understood well that Pakistan could not afford to mess up its relations with Iran, a neighbor, for the sake of U.S. and therefore he saw helping Iranians covertly as a mutually beneficial way to maintain Pakistan's ties with Iran. And indeed, Pakistan's help proved to be decisive for an Iranian repulsion of Iraqi forces. Stinger missiles provided by Pakistan made their impact and greatly improved Iran's position in the '[Tanker War](#)'.

Following Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, Pakistan-Iran had a new fallout. Both countries diverged on their policies in Afghanistan, with Pakistan explicitly backing the Sunni Taliban regime while Iran was opposed to the idea of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Since India was supporting the enemies of Taliban, the Northern Alliance, the Afghan theater became a reason for closer ties with India and Iran. It is also important to note that during this time Pakistan was having very close relations with U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel - the three countries Iran's revolutionary regime hated the most. While Benazir Bhutto tried to iron out Iran-Pakistan relations by paying a lengthy visit to Iran in 1995, the growing Iranian proxy militia presence in Pakistan generated further distrust in the Pakistani public regarding Iran. Relations of both countries hit another snag when in 1998 Taliban forces captured Mazar-i-Sharif where thousands of Shias were allegedly massacred and then later when Iran accused Taliban of kidnapping its diplomats and killing them. The killing of the Iranian diplomats resulted in Iran amassing its troops on the Afghan border and threatening to attack the Taliban government in Afghanistan. In 1998 Iran [accused](#) Pakistani troops of war crimes at [Bamiyan](#) in Afghanistan and claimed that Pakistani warplanes had, in support of the Taliban, bombarded Afghanistan's major Shia stronghold.

After 9/11, Pakistan joined America's War on Terror and Iran initially supported removal of Taliban government from Afghanistan but became wary of the U.S. designs

and feared that U.S. wanted to encircle Iran. This diluted of goodwill created between U.S. and Iran under Khatami government in Tehran. Under the Musharraf era, Pakistan-Iran ties significantly improved. In 2001 Hassan Rouhani, the current President of Iran, paid a visit to Pakistan where Pakistan and Iran [decided](#) to refresh their relationship and approach Afghanistan with a new understanding. In 2002, Mohammad Khatami visited Pakistan which further [helped](#) in [improving](#) relations between both countries. Khatami's 2002 visit was the first visit to Pakistan by an Iranian head of state since 1992. Khatami also [delivered](#) a speech on "Dialogue Among Civilizations" at [The Institute of Strategic Studies](#), a Pakistani think tank.

Kashmir Issue:

Iran has consistently supported Kashmir's freedom struggle and sympathizes with and endorses Pakistani stance on Kashmir. Ayatollah Khamenei had visited [Jammu and Kashmir](#) in the early 1980s and delivered a sermon at Srinagar's Jama Masjid mosque. In 2010 Ayatollah Khamenei [appealed](#) to Muslims worldwide to support the freedom struggle in Kashmir and equated the dispute with the ongoing conflicts in Middle East region.

The Present:

Chabahar Spy Network:

The present relations between Iran and Pakistan have been marred by distrust and lack of divergence of interests in some key areas. On 3rd March 2016, Pakistan arrested an Indian naval intelligence officer [Kulbhushan Yadhav](#) working for Indian intelligence agency R&AW, who was using his cover name **Hussain Mubarak Patel**, from Baluchistan province in a counter-intelligence operation. Pakistan charged him with espionage and terrorism activities and on 10th April 2017, Yadhav was [sentenced](#) to death by a Field General Court Martial (FGCM). India has also [accepted](#) that Mr Yadhav is affiliated with Indian Navy. Mr Yadhav was based in Chabahar, Iran from where he operated for years, posing as a businessman. The reason Mr Yadhav was able to operate from Iran is probably because of close India-Iran defense ties, as per India-Iran [defense agreement](#) of 2003. Indian intelligence [maintains](#) heavy presence in [Chabahar](#), where India is engaged in port project in partnership with Iran which is also meant to be a [counter](#) to Pakistan and China's Gwadar port project.

In Pakistan, Kulbhushan Yadhav was running a whole network of agents and informants and while Pakistan has taken down most of the network, there still appear to be some sleeper cells. Another link of Mr Yadhav's Chabahar spy network is [Uzair Baloch](#), the notorious gangster from Lyari of Karachi, who is currently in the custody of Pakistan Army. While Uzair Baloch has been accused and has since confessed to hundreds of murders in Karachi as well as extortion, kidnapping, etc, Pakistani intelligence community has also pointed him out as a [part](#) of Kulbhushan Yadhav's Chabahar network and is believed to have been actively involved in espionage activities against

Pakistani state and Pakistan Army. But the [twist](#) in this case was that Mr Baloch was not only spying for Indian intelligence agency R&AW but was also spying for Iranian intelligence [MOIS](#). In fact, initially when Mr Baloch was arrested from Pak-Iran border, Iranian authorities reportedly claimed him as their own and wanted his custody; they backed their claim by pointing out Mr Baloch is carrying Iranian passport, which was true. Recently it was also [reported](#) in Pakistani and Indian media that Iran has asked for access to Mr Kulbhushan Yadhav, although these reports were later [rejected](#) by Iranian envoy to Pakistan. Mr Baloch these days is waiting for his trial which will be held in a [military court](#).



Uzair Baloch, seated in the middle of two hooded Rangers troopers, pictured as he's taken away in a paramilitary vehicle

Another link in the Chabahar network is Uzair Baloch's close aide Mullah Nisar, who was also recently [arrested](#) from Pak-Iran border after a gunfight. Mullah Nisar is believed to be a confidante of Uzair Baloch and may divulge more critical intelligence which may prove helpful for Pakistani intelligence community to track down last remaining links of this spy network.



The only photograph available of Mullah Nisar, believed to be the 'Right hand man' of spy-gangster Uzair Baloch

Iran Proxies In Pakistan:

Another boiling point in Pakistan's relations with Iran is active Iranian subversion in Pakistan via its proxies and consistent attempts to export its 'Islamic Revolution' to Pakistan via subversion of Pakistani Shia population while at the same time creating divisions among Sunnis. This is a model that Iran has already used in other Middle Eastern states and is still using it in countries like [Bahrain](#), etc. In Lebanon, Iranian proxy Hezbollah now [sits](#) in the government, is the most powerful player in Lebanon and actively runs Lebanon's foreign policy. In this way, Iran has carved a state within a state in Lebanon via its proxy Hezbollah. In Syria, Iran has done something similar by sending in Hezbollah units to support Assad-backed forces to crackdown on West-backed rebels with increased air support from Russia. The same model that Iran has already successfully used in other countries, where it first destabilizes them and then tries to take over the country or at least gain as much power & influence as possible via its proxies, is already being quietly applied on Pakistan.

In Pakistan, individuals like Faisal Raza Abidi not only openly talk about but have already raised private Shia armies while at the same time praising Pakistan Army to avoid heat, a tactic similar to how Hezbollah took control of Lebanon while appeasing the Lebanese Army. Faisal Raza Abidi has been accused to be involved in several killings of Sunnis in Karachi, his stronghold, and was recently [arrested](#) over double murders but was later [released](#) on bail.

On the other hand, while Pakistan has banned militant groups like [Sipah-e-Muhammad](#), other more subversive groups that have been accused of having deep links with Tehran as well as taking Iranian funds, like Imamia Students Organization ([ISO](#)), continue to operate in Pakistan with [impunity](#). Another heavily Iran-influenced group is Majlis Wahdat Muslimeen ([MWM](#)), that presents itself as a 'Muslim unity' group but its top members have consistently supported Tehran over Islamabad in all significant matters. In 2015 prominent MWM leaders were [arrested](#) for allegedly lambasting Saudi Arabia, one of the closest allies of Pakistan, and creating sectarian tensions while calling for support for Houthis, which directly undermined Pakistan's interests since Pakistan has since the beginning recognized, in line with international community, the legitimate Yemeni government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi which is fighting against

Iran-backed Houthis led by Ali Abdullah Saleh. The arrested MWM leaders have since been [released](#) on bail.

Iran has also recruited Pakistani Shias to fight its proxy war in Syria alongside Hezbollah and Assad forces. For this purpose, Iran formed the [Zainabiyoun Brigade](#), which is still operating in Syria. Under this recruitment drive, Iranian spies as well as diplomats quietly recruited Pakistani Shias who were disgruntled with the state. Many of these Shias had lost a family member or relative in last 8 years in the sectarian killings in Pakistan with quite a significant presence of the Hazara Shia community as well. These people were led into the trap by Iranians who offered them high-paying jobs and a new home for themselves as well as their families. Most naive people believed the promises and agreed to leave Pakistan for Iran, where they were coldly told to go fight in Syria and in exchange Iran would give their families a place to live. Most of these people had little choice but to move ahead. Some who later returned were arrested by Pakistani security services. Others expect to be either buried in Syria or in case of survival hope to spend the rest of their days wherever Iran fits them in; whether a refugee camp somewhere in Lebanon or a small house on the outskirts of Iran, no one can guarantee. Unfortunately, Pakistani government has since not raised this issue publicly with Iran, even though Iran has not been shy to [threaten](#) Pakistan, which it recently did when it threatened to strike into Pakistan to hit alleged terrorist camps, something which Pakistan's eternal enemy India [praised](#).

Continued Iranian Aggression Against Pakistan:

While Iran has threatened strikes into Pakistan publicly for the first time, Iran has been attacking Pakistani territory for a long time now. In last few years, there has not been a single year when Iran didn't attack Pakistani territory. Here's a timeline from 2014 onwards of Iranian attacks into Pakistani territory: [2014](#), [2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#). Moreover, Iran [attacked](#) Pakistani territory with mortars mere hours after India claimed '[surgical strike](#)' into Pakistan in 2016, which unsurprisingly was praised by India. The response of the current Pakistani government to unprovoked Iranian aggression, apart from appeasement, has been mostly [timid](#). Although Pakistan has [formed](#) a joint border management system with Iran to avoid further similar incidents, such initiatives have been taken [before](#) but have failed to stop Iranian aggression against Pakistan.

On the same day of Iran's most [recent](#) mortar attack into Pakistani territory, Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif [congratulated](#) Iranian President Hassan Rouhani for winning his second term. Just a couple of days later, Pakistani Opposition leader and chief of PTI Mr Imran Khan was [found](#) lambasting PM Nawaz for not taking a stand for Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas at the [Riyadh Summit](#). The absurdity of the situation is quite evident; with the current leadership and no reforms in diplomatic and bureaucratic structure, Pakistan is bound to continue to move forward with failed policies based on misreadings and miscalculations.

Some Convergence on Afghanistan:

Pakistan and Iran, for now, have both so far followed two parallel policies in Afghanistan where both engage with U.S.-NATO backed Kabul regime led by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah while at the same time supporting Afghan Taliban in different ways. While Iran has been directly [supporting](#) Taliban insurgency by [arming](#) and [funding](#) Taliban as well as providing [safe haven](#) to Taliban leaders and their families, Pakistan maintains moral support for the Afghan Taliban and has offered medical care and sanctuary to some pro-Pakistan Taliban leaders in the past. While Pakistan's moral support for Afghan Taliban exists because of Kabul regime's extremely pro-India and anti-Pakistan policies and while Pakistan has never supported Taliban only to undermine U.S.-NATO, Iran's pivotal support for Taliban is based on very different factors since Iran doesn't need to worry about Kabul's pro-India policies as Iran-India are already closely allied. So what drives Iran to support Taliban? Here are some applicable answers:

1. A hatred for U.S. and West as a whole which compels Iran to undermine its interests wherever it can, like Putin's Russia does.
2. Fear of being encircled by U.S. but these fears may be overblown since U.S. is definitely not leaving the region as long as Afghanistan continues to be the hub of terrorism.
3. Iran's expansionist nature. Iran just can't stop expanding its influence and Tehran's interests, not fear, may be the leading factor behind this expansionism. Since Iran feels the Kabul regime is too influenced by the West, it feels it is necessary to protect its interests by actively supporting Taliban in the mineral-rich Afghanistan.
4. The [rise of ISIS in Afghanistan](#) also ultimately plays into Iran's interests, which Iran points out as a valid reason behind its support for Taliban, even though ISIS has never attacked Iran. Ever. ISIS has [attacked Israel](#) but not Iran. Not once. ISIS has also repeatedly [attacked](#) Pakistan and Pakistan has also been actively fighting against ISIS branch in Afghanistan, ISIS-K; Pakistan recently [hit](#) several terrorist camps in Afghanistan.



Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei

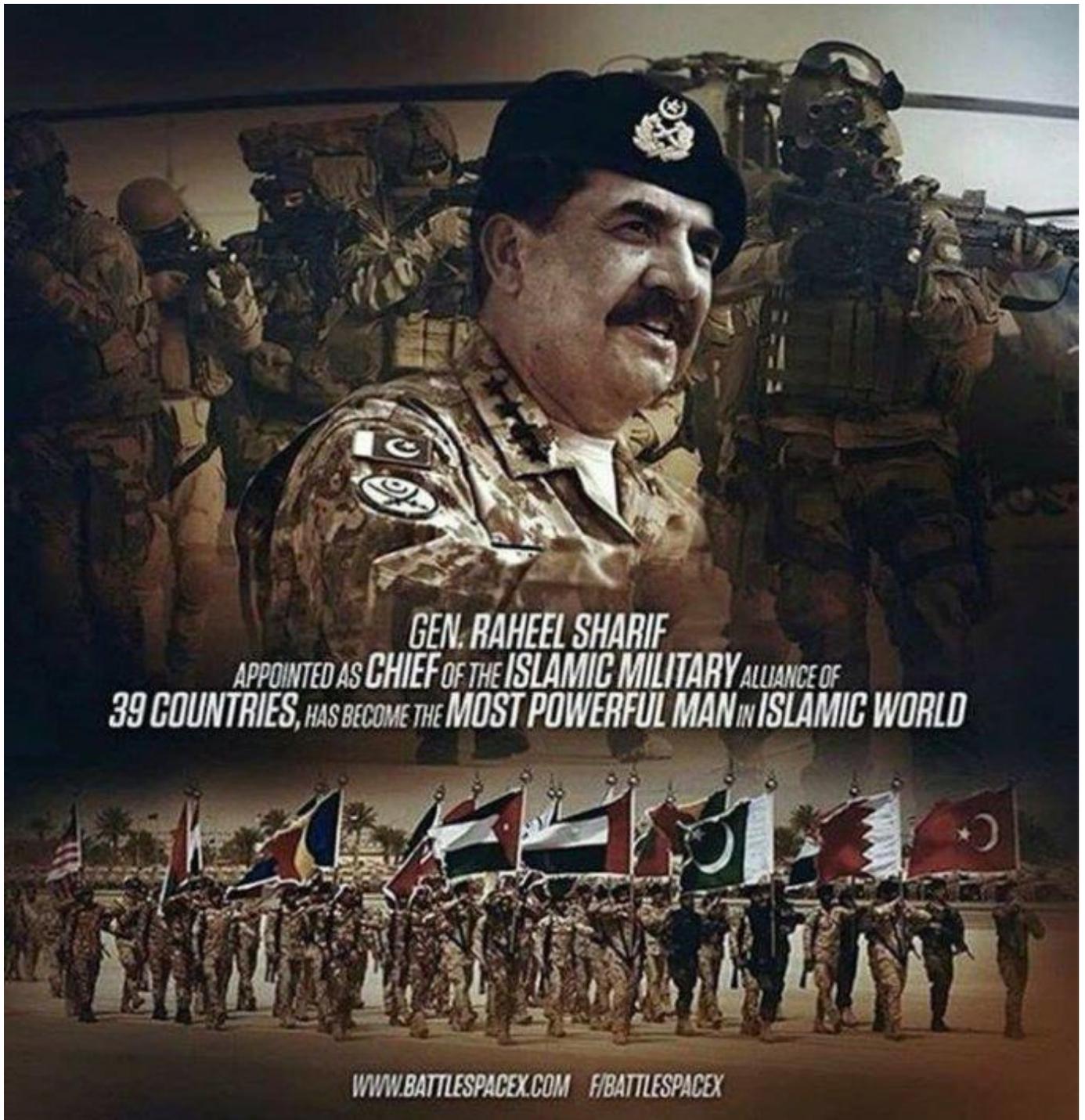


Afghan President Ashraf Ghani with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani

All in all, while both Iran and Pakistan have some convergence of interests in Afghanistan, it's not much. Iran and Pakistan both have very different reasons for supporting the Taliban. While Pakistan is worried about Indian influence and anti-Pakistan activities in Afghanistan, Iran has no such worries. Pakistan should also not forget that another party [supporting](#) the Taliban is [Russia](#), a close ally of both Iran and India. While Pakistan has [improved](#) its relations with Russia recently, they're still nowhere as strong as Russia's ties with Iran or India. Russia, on its part, has its own [interests](#) behind its support for Taliban. Among Taliban too, there's a growing segment of fighters and commanders who see Iran and Russia, both anti-U.S., as more reliable allies than Pakistan, which joined America's War on Terror and is now increasingly seen among Taliban ranks as unreliable at best and treasonous at worst. For all these reasons and more, Pakistan cannot afford to rely on Iran and Russia alone for its Afghanistan policy and would eventually need to protect its interests not only from West-backed Kabul regime and India but also from other allies of Afghan Taliban.

Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI):

Pakistan's leadership of IMAFT was a tough decision for Pakistan to make but it was absolutely in Pakistan's interests for reasons I have explained in an [article](#) from March. But this decision ruffled feathers in both Tehran and New Delhi. For a whole year Iran quietly lobbied in Pakistan via its proxies and mouthpieces (such as the political party PTI, which [opposed](#) Gen. Raheel's appointment at IMAFT) to make Pakistan reject the Saudi offer to lead IMAFT, similar to how Iran lobbied Pakistan to reject Saudi request to send troops for Yemen, which Pakistan [did \(initially\)](#). When lobbying didn't work and Pakistani government went on to [allow](#) former Pak Army Chief General Raheel Sharif to lead IMAFT, Iranian envoy to Pakistan [publicly](#) voiced Tehran's concerns. When Pakistan requested Iran to join IMAFT, Iran [rejected](#) that offer.



Riyadh Summit:

The fallout from President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia and his [speech](#) at Riyadh Summit is still being felt in Pakistan, both in media as well as in politics and diplomatic circles. While some Pakistani analysts have resorted to unnecessary fear-mongering about a looming war on Iran, the truth may be somewhere

in the middle. While it is true that Trump-led U.S. has been pushing for an Arab-Israel alliance against Iran, their common enemy, it is also true that U.S. itself, at least for now, is unwilling to play a direct role in this alliance. This is evident from the [statement](#) from U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson where he hinted that U.S. is still open to talks with Iran and Hassan Rouhani's re-election has practically cemented this. Trump-led U.S. has also so far kept U.S. part of the Iran nuclear deal ([JCPOA](#)), which Trump during his campaign said he wanted to 'tear up', even though Iran has been clearly [violating](#) the deal. It is clear that U.S. is not interested in war on Iran. But this doesn't mean there will be no pressure on Iran. Indeed, U.S., Israel and Arab allies will put more pressure on Iran to rein in its [proxies](#) and end its [ballistic missile programme](#), both of which along with possible-in-future Iranian nuclear weapons are also a credible threat to Pakistan and this is why Pakistan has consistently stood against Iran's nuclear weapons programme.

The Future:

Following the Riyadh Summit where representatives of 56 countries including U.S. and Saudi Arabia passed a joint declaration against global and regional terrorism as well as Iran's proxy terrorism while stressing on the need for Muslim countries to play a leading role in eradicating terrorism from their soil, Pakistan must plan its own policy backed up by a viable strategy. While Pakistan has successfully ridden itself of Taliban insurgency, there are still sleeper cells in the country. Moreover, there are still groups and individuals (like Abdul Aziz of Red Mosque, etc) with whom Pakistani state would have to deal with sooner or later. These groups and individuals, if not dealt with wisely, can become future [proxies](#) of Pakistan's enemies. Then there is ISIS recruitment drive in Pakistan, where many people have been arrested in recent past for either directly plotting attacks for ISIS or having ISIS links. Most [recent](#) are the arrests from Karachi by Pakistan's counter-terror forces where five people, including a university professor, were nabbed over ISIS links. Then there's sectarian terrorism where Iran's proxies are heavily involved and which is expected to increase in near future as Iran and Saudi Arabia both play the religion card against each other in the international arena and as Pakistan increasingly becomes a part of Middle East theater with its inclusion and then leadership of IMAFT. Here some people would argue that Pakistan should not involve itself in Middle East but I would retaliate by saying that Pakistan cannot afford to leave [vacuum](#), which will be quickly filled by India. Pakistan is the only nuclear Muslim majority state and a regional power. Pakistan is also one of the leading players in China's game-changing [Belt And Road](#) initiative and one of the main pillars of the new multipolar world order. Pakistan should move ahead wisely and play itself out as a regional power and a future superpower. To do that, Pakistan needs proactive diplomacy and an effective policy backed up by a well-war-gamed strategy for Middle East. It must be reiterated that leaving vacuum isn't an option.

Policy Change For Middle East:

Pakistan's old policy of neutrality in Middle East has been repeatedly beaten by the test of time. Pakistan currently risks alienating both Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Iran is

already in open [defense](#) and [geostrategic](#) alliance with India, it is alienating Saudi Arabia that Pakistan needs to worry about. Alienating Saudis would mean Pakistan will also be alienating 55 other countries including U.S. While Pakistan's [relations](#) with U.S. are still fraught, Pakistan can use its ties with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's own growing influence in the South Asia region to improve its ties with U.S. Not to mention the spiritual connection of the majority in Pakistan with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's own old defense ties with Saudi Arabia. It is evident that in the Middle East theater, Pakistan needs to take a clear stand and that stand would likely see Pakistan working closely alongside Saudi Arabia as a renewed global effort against terrorism gets started.

The Neighbor Factor and Pakistan-Iran Bilateral Relations:

Pakistan will need to take a page out of Tehran's playbook and tell Tehran that Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and leadership of IMAFT should not be a problem for Iran if Iran's strategic alliance with India isn't a problem for Pakistan. For a long time Iran has been a two-faced friend to Pakistan; it has been quietly facilitating India in its hybrid war on Pakistan while Tehran's representatives told Islamabad that there's no reason for Pakistan to worry. Pakistan will need to offer Tehran to maintain bilateral relations and work on common interests, such as in Afghan theater, in exchange for Pakistan ensuring that Pakistan's territory isn't used against Iran. Since Iran is Pakistan's neighbor and Pakistan would wisely not want to engage in open conflict with Iran, Pakistan will need to stress it to Iran that it is best for both countries to continue bilateral engagement. If U.S. or Saudi Arabia raise any concerns about Pakistan and Iran relations, Pakistan can always point out Iran's strategic and defense partnership with India, a country that also happens to be a [strategic partner](#) of U.S. and has good relations with Saudi Arabia. Surely if India's strategic and defense alliance with Iran isn't a problem for U.S. and Saudi Arabia, then Pakistan-Iran's bilateral relations shouldn't be either.

Pakistan will need to continue to engage in bilateral trade and border management operations with Iran and try to work on common interests but from the position of strength.

Dealing With Iran From a Position Of Strength:

To make Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations work, Pakistan will need to deal with Iran from a position of strength. So far, Pakistan's civilian and military leadership has avoided giving any public statements calling out Iran's close alliance with India, which directly and indirectly undermines Pakistan's regional as well as domestic interests. Pakistan's leadership also didn't publicly call out Iran on how Indian spy terrorist Kulbhushan Yadhav was able to operate from Iran for decades since it is impossible that Iranian intelligence was unaware. Iran's own espionage activities against Pakistan via spies like Uzair Baloch have raised considerable concerns in Pakistan's intelligence community. Iran's recent unprecedented threats of launching surgical strikes against alleged terror camps within Pakistani territory have also angered Pakistani public as

well as Pakistani military. Weak leadership in Islamabad with its old beaten policies has, so far, largely allowed Iran to get away with things which no other country would allow.

The changing global dynamics and the regional situation are indicative of the dire need for Pakistan to abandon its old policy of non-stop appeasement towards Iran and devise a comprehensive strategy to back a well-thought-out new policy to deal with Iran from a position of strength.

Crackdown on Iran's proxies in Pakistan:

To deal with Iran from a position of strength, Pakistan will need to devise a strategy to crackdown on Iran's proxies in Pakistan. This crackdown would not necessarily need to be violent. Pakistan will need to cut Iranian funding for Pakistan-based groups as well as block Iranian recruitment drives in Pakistan. Leaders of militant proxy groups will need to be neutralized and the groups themselves will need to be disarmed, dismantled and de-radicalized before those who haven't been involved in any crimes could be released back into the public. Those who are involved in crimes like targeted assassinations of Sunnis, etc should be tried in military courts and hanged. Pakistan will also need to consider sanctioning Iranians who are directly involved in funding terrorism in Pakistan.

Militant proxy groups are not the only proxies of Iran in Pakistan. Iran has also penetrated deep into Pakistani politics as well as in the media and think tank establishment. While extremely pro-Iran papers and thesis are being published by some think tanks in Pakistan, pro-Iran mouthpieces can be found all over Pakistani mainstream media busy giving a shoulder to Tehran's narrative in Pakistan. Many of these pro-Iran mouthpieces have successfully played their role in creating increased suspicion among Pakistani public regarding Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's other Gulf allies. This manufactured suspicion eventually ends up undermining Pakistan's interests. This is not to say that Saudi Arabia hasn't funded madrassas in the past and played a role in growing Sunni extremism in Pakistan. But much of that funding has since been blocked by Pakistan and many of those madrassas have since been [shut down](#). Saudi Kingdom itself has faced incredible backlash all over the world for their funding of madrassas which preach extreme Sunni Islam. Saudis have learned, with time, that it is much beneficial to invest their money in [other areas](#). But on the other hand, Iran's penetration into Pakistani society already runs far deeper than Saudi's at any point in history. While Pakistan will need to forcefully take down Iran proxy militant groups, at the same time Pakistan will also need to try to cut back Iranian influence in Pakistani politics, media and think tanks; influence which is detrimental to Pakistan's interests and has already done significant damage. The state possesses several non-violent ways to achieve this objective.

Afghanistan Theater:

Pakistan will need to work alongside Iran and Russia, two of the biggest backers of Taliban, in Afghanistan as U.S. [encourages](#) India to increase its influence in Afghan theater. But while Pakistan's interests somewhat converge with Iran's in Afghanistan, Pakistan will also need to be ready to prevent Iran and Russia from hijacking the Taliban movement in the future, which would be a huge blow to Pakistan's interests. So far Iran has been consistently supporting Taliban with cash and arms but has also managed to escape international scrutiny thanks to the [unwillingness](#) of Obama administration as well as Iran's own [strong ties](#) with Kabul regime and India.

In short, while Pakistan's and Iran's interests in Afghanistan somewhat converge in the short-term, they will clash with full force in the long-term. For this reason, Pakistan needs to be fully prepared in advance.

Conclusion:

Pakistan-Iran relations before the Islamic Revolution in Iran were friendly and based on common interests. For decades Iran and Pakistan cooperated and engaged in bilateral and regional ties and Iran offered Pakistan material and moral support during Pakistan's early wars with India. But since the takeover of Iran by the Ayatollahs, it has drifted towards away from Pakistan and towards India and somewhere in the early 2000s Iran began to see India as a strategic partner. Since then Iran has consistently engaged in behavior that has undermined Pakistan's interests; at first covertly and more recently quite publicly as a resurgent hybrid expansionist Tehran feels emboldened by the legitimacy given to it by the Obama administration as well as by [successes](#) on the Syrian front. All the factors discussed above compel Pakistan to reconsider its approach towards Iran, Iran's proxies in Pakistan as well as Pakistan's policy in Middle East. Pakistan should not remain fearful of power projection and should start acting like the regional power and a future superpower it imagines itself to be. Pakistan must follow a policy of carrot and stick with Iran and should work towards its interests in Afghanistan and the Middle East simultaneously while controlling the security situation within its territory. Dealing with Iran from a position of strength will help Pakistan move towards achieving its domestic and regional interests.

This article is the property of the author Faran Jeffery, who is a security analyst and a commentator on geopolitics and foreign policy.