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Addressing Saudi Arabia's Concerns to Facilitate Security in Afghanistan

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The key to peace in Afghanistan does not lie with the U.S., but it might be in the hands of the regional powers and those who have an interest in this region. While one cannot overlook the significance of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East and how it has affected Afghanistan and continues to do so, a sustainable and durable solution to the situation in Afghanistan can be achieved through a regionally determined consensus. With peace talks gaining momentum, the Afghan government is seeking all the alliances it can garner to face the looming prospect of what an impending U.S. withdrawal from the country might hold. When Riyadh began mediating between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban in 2008, it reflected a call for a more regional approach to address the Afghan war.² Indeed, other regional players like Pakistan, Iran, India, and Russia have a significant influence on peace and security in the region, and Afghanistan in particular.

In this context, this essay seeks to articulate Saudi Arabia's role in shaping security in Afghanistan. Questions it attempts to answer include: What role does Saudi Arabia currently play? How constructive can this role be? How can Afghanistan harness Saudi Arabia's motivations concerning its leadership and power in South Asia, relationship with Pakistan and Iran, and Riyadh's public image among the Muslims living in the region, to utilize Saudi Arabia's regional influence to Afghanistan's advantage with regard to the country's security?

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2. Irichsen, Kristian Coates. "The Persian Gulf States and Afghanistan: regional geopolitics and competing interests." National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), January, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24905253>

The first section of the essay aims to identify the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's view on security in Afghanistan. The second section explores the Kingdom's security concerns pertaining to Afghanistan. The third section examines Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan and its consequences for Afghanistan. Finally, the fourth section outlines policy recommendations for the government of Afghanistan to harness Saudi Arabia's role in the peace process more optimally.

Saudi Arabia's Perspective on Peace and Security in Afghanistan

Understanding Saudi Arabia's policy is highly important for Afghanistan's security, not because it can or has the ability to help ensure security in Afghanistan, but also because it can spoil any progress if its interests are not taken into account. Saudi Arabia asserts itself as the champion of Islamic countries and proclaims itself to be the political and ideological center of the Islamic world. Therefore, due to its regional political as well as ideological context, it is one of the crucial stakeholders concerning peace and security in Afghanistan, especially in managing its relations with its neighbors, Pakistan and Iran.

Saudi policy towards Afghanistan is shaped and continues to be influenced by three main factors: its ideological ally, the Taliban; its regional rival, Iran; and its strategic partner, the U.S. Saudi Arabia is one of the U.S.'s closest allies in the Middle East and has backed the Taliban since the 1980s. Along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia was among the only three countries that recognized the Taliban regime in the 1990s.³ Maintaining a foot on either side of the political fence has allowed the Kingdom to maintain a significant role during peace negotiations with the Taliban.

However, the image of the Kingdom is changing slowly as it is demonstrating closer ties with the U.S. and is welcoming change in both ideological and political visions in its national and foreign policy⁴. While the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), is introducing new perspectives into the ultra-conservative Kingdom with a series of reforms, the Kingdom and

3. "Who Are the Taliban?" BBC News, 26 May 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718>

4. Alyas, Fatimah. "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations." Council on Foreign Relations, December 07, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>

the U.S. are now closer than ever.⁵ This might mean that both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia want their preferred regime governing Afghanistan, to counter their common adversary, Iran.⁶

Saudi activities in Afghanistan since the 1980s have had a strong ideological component,⁷ expanding its influence in Afghanistan as a leading Sunni state in the Islamic world. On the other hand, Iran has laid claim as being the center of the Shia Islamic world and is feeding its political power by influencing Shia communities in Islamic societies. The clash of the two in Afghanistan was palpable during the civil war of the 1990s and in the democratic period since 2001. This can explain one of the reasons why Saudi Arabia continues to maintain closer ties with the U.S. while also supporting and allowing private funds to be channeled to the Taliban, a group that aligns with its ideological ambitions in Afghanistan.⁸ Carlotta Gall of The New York Times described this dual policy as “the conflicting needs within the kingdom,” and argued that “the dual tracks allow Saudi officials plausibly to deny official support for the Taliban, even as they have turned a blind eye to private funding of the Taliban and other hardline Sunni groups.”⁹

Hence, peace and security of Saudi Arabia is made contingent on its gains and losses in Afghanistan specifically, and the Islamic world in general. Essentially, Riyadh views the Taliban as a leverage to be used against Washington DC (and Tehran), while maintaining close ties with the U.S. to ensure that it is on the same page when it comes to their common enemy-Iran.

Saudi Arabia’s Security Concerns *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan

Saudi Arabia’s security concerns in Afghanistan revolve around the legitimacy of its leadership in the Arab world, and its economic, geopolitical and ideological rivalry with Iran. As Shahrbanou Tajdakhsh explains, the Persian Gulf security complex is something to be concerned about when attempting to

5. Ibid.

6. Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou. “The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran and Saudi Arabia’s Rivalry Projected.” Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2013. <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=5850>

7. Bruno, Greg. “Saudi Arabia and the Future of Afghanistan.” The Foreign Policy, December 10, 2008. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/saudi-arabia-and-future-afghanistan>

8. Gall, Carlotta. “Saudis bankroll Taliban, even as king officially supports Afghan Government.” The New York Times, December, 06, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/asia/saudi-arabia-afghanistan.html>

9. Ibid.

solve the long-lasting security disaster in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Since Saudi Arabia is seeking security dominance in the Middle East, it is compelled to be involved in the politics of all the countries that can impact regional security dynamics.¹¹

In this regard, Saudi Arabia's most aggressive rival is not Israel but Iran, because of Iran's dramatic gains in terms of influence and attention as a strong political player in the Islamic world. Thus, the Kingdom tries to contain and counter Iran's expansion in the Middle East and Afghanistan. For instance, Saudi Arabia intends to build an Islamic educational and cultural complex in Kabul with an estimated cost of approximately USD 100 million, to rival the Khatam Al-Nabyyeen religious site and Islamic University established by a Shia/Iran influenced cleric.¹² The Saudi established complex will serve as a seminary and a grand mosque. This demonstrates the continuance of the rivalry between the two regional powers even as the U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan looms. Some argue that this state-of-affairs has the potential to sow the seeds of another civil war arising for the two countries' desire to ensure that their interests and investments in the region remain intact, and secure.

The Iran–Saudi Arabia contestation in Afghanistan has multi-layered dimensions with deep roots in politics, religion and geopolitical rivalries. If not addressed through long-term effective policies, this contestation can prove more detrimental to peace, development and security in the region. While the ideological rivalry with Iran is a legitimate concern for Saudi Arabia, there are more security threats from Iran that causes Riyadh to become more involved in Afghanistan. Iran has recently forged a closer relationship with the Taliban, which after years of covert operations finally came to light in 2016,¹³ and again in 2017.¹⁴ In May 2018, U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, allegedly asked Iran to suspend its relationship with the Taliban after declaring that Tehran has been supporting Taliban to destabilize

10. Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou. "The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rivalry Projected." Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2013. <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=5850>

11. Salama, Vivian. "Saudi Arabia and Iran Battle for Power in the Middle East." NBC News, November 10, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/saudi-arabia-iran-battle-power-middle-east-n819041>

12. Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou. "The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rivalry Projected." Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2013. <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=5850>

13. Izazullah. "Iran supports, funds Taliban: officials." Central Asia News, August 29, 2016. http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/29/feature-02

14. Basiri, Amir. "How Iran aides the Afghan Taliban under America's nose?" The Hill, June 01, 2017. <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/313100-how-iran-aides-the-afghan-taliban-under-americas-nose>

Afghanistan's security.¹⁵ This is a concern for Saudi Arabia because it threatens the influence of the Kingdom over the Taliban, and consequently, Saudi Arabia's influence in Afghanistan.

Another concern for Saudi Arabia is its rivalry with some other Arab countries over political leadership and influence. The recent shift of policy and attitude towards the Taliban has shown that Saudi Arabia wants to isolate Doha and gain key alliances in the Arab world through the Afghan peace negotiations. While Qatar's engagement in Afghanistan's peace negotiations has provided Doha with global recognition as a peace facilitator, Saudi Arabia has focused on damaging Doha's reputation by insinuating that the Qatar-Taliban relationship is, in fact, leaning towards state-sponsored terrorism.¹⁶

Recent statements by high-level Saudi officials that bear an aggressive anti-Taliban tone are aimed at clearly differentiating between Doha and Riyadh's policies towards terrorism. This seeming change of attitude towards Taliban is not unique to Saudi Arabia. It has also been witnessed in the Taliban's relations with Egypt, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, for in the past two years, the communication between these countries and the Taliban has been increasingly strained and limited.¹⁷ In his September 2017 commentary,¹⁸ Samuel Ramani argued that "Saudi Arabia's aggressive anti-Taliban rhetoric aims to highlight a distinction between its policies and those of Doha's," adding that "[a]s the Taliban's relationships with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey have become increasingly strained in recent months, Saudi Arabia's resolute anti-Taliban stance helps Riyadh consolidate its vital regional alliances and isolate Qatar's position on Afghanistan from the Middle East consensus."

The Saudi Arabia–Pakistan Relationship and its Impact on Afghanistan

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have sought to develop extensive economic, cultural, ideological, political and military-security relations since Pakistan's founding. The

15. Ramani, Samuel. "Managed Instability: Iran, the Taliban, and Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, November 14, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/managed-instability-iran-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>

16. *Ibid.*

17. Ramani, Samuel. "What's behind Saudi Arabia's turn away from the Taliban?" *The Diplomat*, September 07, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/whats-behind-saudi-arabias-turn-away-from-the-taliban/>

18. *Ibid.*

two countries' joint involvement in Afghanistan goes back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the mujahideen era when the Kingdom and the U.S. backed Islamist militants through Pakistan and against the communist governments during 1980s.¹⁹ Additionally, Pakistan, with its strong military, has been working closely with Saudi Arabia, providing military assistance and training. The recent Saudi-led Islamic anti-terrorism coalition is headed by Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff, General (Retd) Raheel Sharif.²⁰ The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which was initially formed with strong commitments of both countries, now comprises 41 members and has pledged its commitment to counter terrorism in the Islamic world.

Pakistan has been also receiving large volumes of aid from Saudi Arabia. While there is no concrete record of the full extent of this aid, it has been estimated that "Saudi Arabia delivered perhaps half of the multi-billion-dollar stream channeled through Pakistan to the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen" during the 1980s.²¹ Most recently, Saudi Arabia has agreed to provide Pakistan with USD 3 billion support for a year and an additional loan worth USD 3 billion in deferred payments for oil imports to help address the economic crisis Pakistan is currently experiencing.²² During MbS' recent visit to Pakistan, the two countries agreed on investments worth USD 20 billion and deals were signed to improve the South Asian country's ailing economy.²³

What Saudi Arabia is attempting here is a two-pronged strategy: firstly, Riyadh is creating a major power in Tehran's neighborhood to counter the extent of the latter's influence. Secondly, Saudi Arabia is aiming to influence the Islamic world through its support for Pakistan, a country that has steadily strived to create an Islamic identity for its state. Hence, Saudi Arabia's investments in

19. Kenner, David. "Saudi Arabia's Shadow War." *Foreign Policy*, November 06, 2013. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/06/saudi-arabias-shadow-war/>

20. Boone, Jon. "Former Pakistan army chief Raheel Sharif to lead "Muslim Nato." *The Guardian*, January 08, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/08/former-pakistan-army-chief-raheel-sharif-lead-muslim-nato>

21. Blank, Jonah. "Defining the Relationship: What Pakistan and Saudi Arabia Want from Each Other." *Foreign Affairs*, June 16, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/pakistan/2015-06-16/defining-relationship>

22. Johnson, Kay, and Shahzad, Asif. "Saudis offer Pakistan \$6 billion rescue package to ease economic Crisis." *Reuters*, October 23, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-saudi/saudis-offer-pakistan-6-billion-rescue-package-to-ease-economic-crisis-idUSKCN1MX2FA>

23. "Mohammed Bin Salman Arrives in Pakistan". *Aljazeera English*, February 17, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-arrives-pakistan-190217061720354.html>

its relationship with Pakistan provide the Kingdom with a conducive diving board to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

Afghanistan–Saudi Arabia Security Cooperation

The security cooperation between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia could entail three possibilities: utilizing Saudi Arabia's influence on Pakistan; harnessing Saudi Arabia's assistance to dry out the Taliban's financial resources and encouraging them to join the peace process; enlisting the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) platform; and working towards international cooperation on countering terrorism in the region through platforms such as the Kabul Process.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia evidently enjoys considerable influence over Pakistan. How this influence can help Afghanistan is contingent on how Saudi Arabia wields it to facilitate consensus among the two. Additionally, the benefits it would hold for Saudi Arabia would again be conditional on how the Kingdom manages to remain a close ally of Pakistan's while simultaneously keeping Iran out of the picture, with Tehran unable (or considerably limited in its ability) to influence politico–security changes in the region. More importantly, it depends on how Afghanistan can convince Saudi Arabia to assume such a role.

Financial resources that the Taliban receive from private sources in Saudi Arabia are crucial for the group's operations and activities. Seemingly, Saudi Arabia has turned a blind eye to the issue. Measures by the Kingdom to curb the flow of resources could be effective in applying pressure on the Taliban to join the peace process. Even if the group refuses to do so, it will be an effective measure to weaken them. However, bringing about this turn of events is dependent on the Afghan government and its allies convincing the Kingdom to use this card. That being said, there are two other alternatives for Afghanistan to use in this regard.

First is to convince Riyadh to seek a regional solution for the situation in Afghanistan, using the OIC platform effectively. The OIC is a common platform for all the Islamic counties, and Afghanistan could try to secure Saudi Arabia's support for encouraging the OIC to induce a regional consensus towards bringing peace and security in Afghanistan. In this regard,

the OIC provides a common platform for all the key regional stakeholders-Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

Second, Kabul can take advantage of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Afghanistan-where Saudi Arabia is a participating member-as a common platform. The declaration issued at the conclusion of the second meeting of the Kabul Process held in February 2019 explicitly calls for such security cooperation among participating countries.²⁴

Conclusion

Due to its regional political as well as ideological identity, Saudi Arabia is and will remain one of the most crucial stakeholders in peace and security in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia's role in Afghanistan is directly intertwined with the roles of Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan and how Afghanistan engages with the three. Therefore, the prospects of Afghanistan's peace and security depend on how Kabul harnesses relations with and among these regional countries to its advantage. Moreover, the relationship between Iran and the Kingdom also affects the security in Afghanistan. Iran-Saudi Arabia contestation in Afghanistan has multi-layered dimensions-political, sectarian and geopolitical-which, if not addressed strategically and deftly through long-term policies, could prove detrimental to peace and security in Afghanistan and the region.

For Afghanistan to ensure regional cooperation towards furthering its security, the only sound policy would be to disentangle itself from the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran by remaining neutral in these rivalries. This may be possible only by disallowing proxy groups tied to any of these countries from operating in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Afghanistan can use two existing platforms, i.e. the OIC and the Kabul Process, in its attempts to secure Saudi Arabia's cooperation in enhancing security and peace in Afghanistan. Though indeed a complicated undertaking, given the tensions within Afghanistan and in the region, the two platforms present some possibilities to that end.

24. "The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration." U.S. Embassy Kabul, March 01, 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

Policy Recommendations

- Peace in Afghanistan is imaginable when the regional stakeholders are willing to come to an agreement. While Afghanistan does not have any strong leverage over Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia, Kabul can make effective use of the OIC and the Kabul Process to bring them to the same negotiation table.
- Kabul could influence Pakistan through the IMCTC which enjoys the membership of 41 countries in the Islamic world, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey. If engaged deftly, it could be an effective platform for advocacy and political influence for Afghanistan. Kabul could utilize this platform to convince Saudi Arabia to leverage its influence over Pakistan, another member country, to cease support for the Taliban and to prevent financial resources from flowing to the Taliban.
- For Afghanistan, a stronger national policy with neutral stances on regional rivalries could pave an alternative path towards peace and security in the country and region. If Kabul can untangle itself from the different foreign influences and remain a neutral state, Afghanistan might have more successes in restraining and ending proxies of foreign players in the country.
- Kabul can work to utilize the OIC and the Kabul Process as common platforms for security cooperation.