

# **PAKISTAN'S EVOLVING DIPLOMATIC LANDSCAPE: NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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## **Abstract:**

Pakistan's engagements in the Middle Eastern region have been marked by a dynamic interplay of historical events, geopolitical complexities, and strategic recalibrations. Against the backdrop of a perpetually conflict-prone Middle East, this research employs a rigorous case study methodology, seeking to illuminate the nuances and complexities inherent in Pakistan's diplomatic relations. Focused on navigating challenges and seizing opportunities, the study illuminates key diplomatic events, strategic shifts, and economic collaborations that have shaped this enduring relationship. In the context of the Middle East, a region marked by geopolitical complexities and historical conflicts, Pakistan's role emerges as pivotal. The case study unfolds the intricate dynamics of Pakistan's diplomatic evolution against the backdrop of the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq's upheavals in 1991 and 2003, and the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. Moreover, this study scrutinizes the Middle East's heightened militarization and the close ties between Middle Eastern states and arms-producing governments. As the region grapples with internal and regional instabilities, the paradox of abundant oil and gas resources juxtaposed with political, social, and economic underdevelopment is examined—a phenomenon referred to as "Middle Eastern exceptionalism." Through this exploration, the research seeks to provide insights into how Pakistan strategically navigates the complex Middle Eastern terrain, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced and opportunities harnessed in its diplomatic endeavors.

**Key Words: Pakistan's diplomatic relations, Middle Eastern geopolitics, Strategic, Economic collaborations and Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

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## **1. Introduction:**

Middle East is an important region on the world map, being a politically unstable and almost war-torn region, which is still in search of right political system for its governments and is confused between the two systems of democracy and autocracy, due to this reason it has been in the limelight in the field of international relations.

There are many multifaceted internal as well as external reasons for the deep social and political turbulence in the Arab world. Though these unfortunate political conditions are a product of extreme involvement of external powers and non-state actors (extremist groups) but the regional peace and harmony is a responsibility of member states, which entirely depends on the states' practices and interest regarding issues and conflicts. Due to this Social instability in the region has increased in form of civil turmoil and clashes. "The problem of our time is not how to keep nations peacefully apart but how to bring them actively together"<sup>1</sup>. Middle East is the exact example of this statement where the diverse differences and numerable selfish interests do not allow the regional states to come close and eradicate these differences. Such conditions have had spillover effects in the internal individual state matters and Middle Eastern states have witnessed several civil uprisings and wars. Current power configuration in New Middle East holds vast impacts for the global economic order as well as Pakistan, and thus this study is significant to the international relations. The current political turmoil in Middle East, with all its underlying causes and the effects are analyzed in the research as all these factors will contribute to the region's transformation & future power configuration.

Embarking on a detailed exploration of Pakistan's diplomatic journey, this research centers around a comprehensive case study to dissect key diplomatic events, strategic transformations, and regional collaborations that have played a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's dynamic engagement with Middle Eastern nations over the past five decades. In present context Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran are of crucial importance, because both have remained Pakistan's allies during the past, and both stand as regional competitors for power with the US influence over the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have clashed over time over different geo-political issues such as the interpretations of Islam, oil export policy, aspirations for leadership of the Islamic world and relations with the US and the West, and all these issues are of major relevance to Pakistan.

Pakistan's diplomatic engagement with the Middle East has long been shaped by historical ties, religious affinity, and economic interests. Moreover, these relationships have evolved significantly in recent years, influenced by shifting geopolitical realities. While Pakistan's historical connection to key players like Saudi Arabia and Iran provides crucial context, it is essential to recognize that contemporary challenges demand a more dynamic and strategic approach. Pakistan's foreign policy must now navigate complex alliances, energy

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<sup>1</sup> David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1943).

dependencies, and the rising influence of non-state actors in the region. These developments highlight the need for a shift from a history-centric narrative to one that examines the practical implications of these alliances on Pakistan's future diplomatic posture.

### **The Complex Tapestry of Conflict: Unraveling the Dynamics of the Middle East**

The Middle East is one of the most conflict-prone regions. Conflict in the Middle East is a recurring feature in international politics, academic literature, and current news coverage. The century old Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most enduring conflicts across the globe<sup>2</sup>, Iraq in 1991 and 2003, as well as the bloodiest interstate war of that period Iran-Iraq, 1980-1988. The region is also encircled by other long term conflict areas which include Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, the Caucasus, and Sudan. Moreover, as a result of internal and regional instabilities Middle East has become the most militarized region over the globe and almost all the Middle eastern states hold close and vital ties with arms-producing governments (Loneragan 1997). A wide variety of literature on international water disputes of Middle East is prominently available. Middle East is a region that lacks political, social and economic development despite having rich oil and gas resources. 63% of the oil reserves are said to be in Middle East, but still the region lacks development and prosperity. Due to this the region is often referred to as “Middle Eastern exceptionalism” which means that the region has certain unique characteristics which make it prone to economic chaos and political conflict. Since the cold war era began interstate conflicts and civil wars have remained central conflicts in the region.

### **Oil Politics**

World's oil industry rests in the Middle East and makes it the world's center of gravity economically and geographically. Oil holds vast significance for all the powerful states of the world, especially the regional states, for both the importers and exporters of oil in and outside the region and thus this oil has profound implications for the domestic and international order. The political economy of Oil in Middle East is its most profitable source. Oil is the most valuable of the resources that states of Middle East are blessed to have. It is the best available source to feed its people living on an arable land. It is a major source of earning foreign exchange and in case of enough exploration and availability of oil it can also be utilized as a fuel supply. In Middle East oil production is done at local level. The production of oil is isolated from other economic productions because of its capital concentration and the technology used. Thus, it becomes less devastating to local pattern of life. The wealth derived from oil resources, rather than fostering state development, has distorted national economies and influenced the foreign policies of states governed by autocratic and puppet power elites<sup>3</sup>. This phenomenon, often associated with neo-imperialism, presents unique socio-economic impacts that distinguish it from other forms of exploitation. The contemporary dynamics of the oil industry have undergone a transformative shift, altering the power dynamics between exploiters and the exploited.

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<sup>2</sup> Rashid Khalidi, "The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure," in *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-20.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; repr., New York: Random House, 1937), vol. 1, 937.

The influx of oil revenues has had a dual effect, contributing to a decrease in legitimate political participation. Central state power erosion has allowed non-state actors to wield influence, resulting in illegitimate political participation. The fascination of imperialist powers with the strategic importance of oil has driven geopolitical interests in the region. Paradoxically, oil has played a role in catalyzing revolutions, ushering in shifts from autocratic regimes towards democratic governance in several states. In essence, the game of oil, with its complex interplay of economic, political, and geopolitical factors, remains a pivotal force shaping the destiny of nations in the modern era.

### **Oil and Money in the Region**

Oil, a double-edged sword in the Middle East, has not only fueled conflicts but has also ushered in a significant influx of wealth for oil-exporting states. The surge in oil prices, triggered by the oil revolution and the Iranian revolution, brought unprecedented amounts of money, enabling states to bolster military capabilities, stimulate economic growth, and enhance living standards. However, the rapid and unpredictable nature of this wealth also led to negative consequences, as substantial funds were diverted towards armament, armed groups, and weapons build-up, creating regional implications. Beyond the Middle East, the global economy faced concerns in 1973, anticipating economic depression due to the continuous rise in oil prices, impacting major oil-importing states. Notably, the 1970s oil revenue surge fueled a significant development: the extensive expenditure on arms development and supply, shaping the new Middle East of today<sup>4</sup>. This diversion of oil revenue, particularly in Iran and Iraq, fueled the Gulf Wars and strengthened leaders like Saddam Hussein. Despite the economic blessings and opportunities, oil's exploitative dimensions have imposed high economic, political, and social costs, with global repercussions felt in shifts of power, geopolitical realignments, and regional conflicts.

### **A Conflict Prone Region**

The Middle East, historically characterized by anarchy and conflict, is poised for continued turmoil, with the emerging nature of conflicts rooted in both regional and international tensions. Throughout history, oil has been wielded as a weapon in these conflicts, exemplified by Israeli sabotage of oil installations in 1948 during the struggle for Palestine and Arab states using oil as a weapon in the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Six-Day War in 1967<sup>5</sup>. However, the ineffectiveness of the oil weapon is attributed to factors such as the non-Arab OPEC members' interest in expanding oil production during embargoes, the role of oil companies in mitigating embargo effects, and internal disagreements among Arab governments. This shift in dynamics led to the rise of non-Arab oil-producing states, notably Iran, which sought to topple Arab governments, as seen in the Iran-Iraq war. The post-Cold War era in the Middle East is marked by the persistent impact of oil on regional conflicts, with uncertainties arising from inter-state conflicts, revolutionary rhetoric, the Arab Spring's upheavals, economic disparities, sectarian tensions, and the influence of non-state actors fueled by external powers' interests in the region's oil resources.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Corbett, "Oil Shock of 1973–74," *Federal Reserve History* 22 (2013): page number.

<sup>5</sup> Pnina Lahav, "The Suez Crisis of 1956 and Its Aftermath: A Comparative Study of Constitutions, Use of Force, Diplomacy and International Relations," *BUL Rev.* 95 (2015): 1297.

## **Significance of the Study**

The Middle East, perennially at the center of global attention, holds immense geopolitical significance and influences global political stability and the economy, primarily through oil politics and regional conflicts. Recent years have witnessed widespread revolutions, insurrections, and social movements, contributing to heightened instability in the region. The oil-rich states of the Middle East possess the capacity to sway the entire world economy, as evidenced by the historical impact of oil crises and embargoes in the 1970s. Looking ahead, the New Middle East appears increasingly volatile and unstable. Pakistan's strategic engagement with key players like Saudi Arabia and Iran becomes pivotal, given their status as survivors amidst political turmoil and emerging competitors with divergent geopolitical and ideological stances. This study underscores the importance of Pakistan's economic engagement with the Middle East, propelled by diplomatic ties, as regional stability is integral for Pakistan to foster and promote diplomatic relations with states in the region.

The findings of this paper underscore Pakistan's delicate balancing act in the Middle East, particularly in managing its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, these findings must be better integrated into the broader discussion on how Pakistan's actions align with its geopolitical goals. For example, Pakistan's neutrality in the Saudi-Iran rivalry, while pragmatic, also exposes vulnerabilities in terms of economic and security cooperation. This underscores the need for Pakistan to diversify its alliances, moving beyond traditional partnerships and engaging with emerging powers in the region. Such an approach can help mitigate the risks of over-reliance on a few key states and expand Pakistan's strategic options. Finally, the structure of the article has been refined to present a clearer, more organized argument. The conclusion ties these discussions together, offering a balanced assessment of the risks and opportunities Pakistan faces in navigating the evolving Middle East.

## **Trends of Politics in the Region:**

Since 1970 Middle East has gone through many political turning points which led to circumstantial regional developments and shifting power balances that have been discussed below in detail.

### **Shifting Power Balance during the Pre-9/11 Middle East:**

#### **Iranian Revolution 1979**

The Iranian revolution was a major turning point in the history of Middle East as it laid the seeds for rise of Iran as a major regional power in Middle East. It was an Islamic revolution led by Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini and it proved favorable for Iranian image<sup>6</sup>. Iran's image rose as a strong Muslim state that stood against westernization and foreign interventions. As a result, drifts took ground in the US-Iran relations. However, after the revolution Iran emerged as a major regional actor with a lot of influence over the people of Middle East due

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<sup>6</sup> Silvia Seyedin, "Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution: His Ideas and Acts," *Études sur la Région Méditerranéenne* 24 (2015): 121-132.

to its Islamic rhetoric.

**Iran-Iraq War 1980-88**

Another major turning point in the Middle East politics was a war that erupted between a major Arab state and a major rising non-Arab state: Iran and Iraq have had hostile relations due to

- I. Persian-Arab divide.
- II. Sunni-Shia drift. (Majority Shia population in Iran and majority of Sunni population in Iraq).

Iraq was a regional power in 1970s<sup>7</sup> and the rise of Iran after the Islamic revolution led to power struggle between the regional states. As both were oil rich countries the war prolonged for eight years. Even after the war was over the both countries confronted each other effectively despite the economic war burdens. By the time both Iran and Iraq went under economic stress and Iran also faced us economic sanctions, but its influential image kept rising.

**Invasion of Kuwait 1991**

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in the 1990s marked a pivotal event triggering international intervention in the Middle East. Iraq, burdened by economic challenges stemming from the prolonged war with Iran and high defense expenditures, invaded Kuwait to overcome financial losses and evade repayment demands<sup>8</sup>. Regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Gulf Cooperation countries, viewed Iraq under Saddam Hussein with a complex lens. While Iraq had previously contained Iran, ensuring a balance of power in the region, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in the 1990s posed a direct threat to Saudi Arabia's pipelines and oil resources. This aggression, coupled with Saddam's use of weapons against his own people, instilled fears of WMD proliferation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The invasion led to Iraq's isolation from the entire Middle Eastern region and eventually paved the way for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, resulting in the total collapse of the country and the subsequent emergence of Iranian influence in the power vacuum left by Iraq's downfall.

**Second Gulf War**

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, led by the U.S. under the pretext of pre-emptive self-defense, marked the Second Gulf War with extensive regional involvement<sup>9</sup>. While regional states did not endorse the invasion, none desired the continuation of Saddam Hussein's regime. Iran and Syria, although pleased with the end of Saddam's rule, harbored concerns about potential U.S. success leading to broader regime changes in the Middle East, particularly in Iran and Syria. Iran, viewing the U.S. as a greater adversary than Iraq, shaped its foreign policy around these apprehensions. Syria, having historical tensions with Saddam's Iraq, was

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<sup>7</sup> Claudia Wright, "Iraq: New Power in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 2 (1979): 257-277.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Warbrick, "The Invasion of Kuwait by Iraq," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1991): 482-492.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "The American Invasion of Iraq: Causes and Consequences," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2007): 9-27.

content with his regime's demise but feared a ripple effect on Baath party rule, fostering its alliance with Iran. Saudi Arabia initially remained distant but became deeply concerned as Iraq's Sunni marginalization and the rise of Iran-backed Shi'a unfolded. Sunni insurgency, initially supported by private Saudi resources, led to Saudi Arabia's alliance with Jordan, UAE, and Egypt in the Arab Quartet, united against the rise of Iranian power and Shi'a dominance from Iran to Iraq, marking the rough emergence of current regional blocs amid sectarian tensions.

### **Shifting Power Balances in the Post 9/11 Middle-East:**

The last two decades have witnessed transformative shifts in inter-state relations and power balances in the Middle East, largely influenced by changing U.S. policies, which have historically been a key driver of the region's politics. The monumental impact of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 prompted a significant alteration in U.S. foreign policy, with a shift from preemptive intervention to a heightened focus on combating terrorism as the paramount threat to U.S. security. This change in U.S. agenda led to the War on Terror, commencing with the invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent occupation of Iraq. The Middle East found itself facing a dichotomy, where states were pressured to align with the U.S., or face threats of regime change, as seen with Syria and Iran. The U.S. also introduced a democratization agenda, viewing terrorism as a byproduct of repressive states, even though the original terrorist objectives were torrid Muslim lands of foreign domination, especially Western influence. This shift has significantly shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and changing US policy altered the entire regional order and left dramatic transformations and wide consequences:

- It destroyed the power of Iraq as a major regional Arab state actor. The part played by Iraq in region's politics was diminished. This led to a vital power vacuum in such critical circumstances. This vacuum entirely transformed the regional power symmetries. Currently in Iraq the part of a state actor has been played by a non-state group.
- It left a major power vacuum; this vacuum was taken by a sectarian civil war and insecurity rather than going democratic. This sectarian civil war led to destruction Iraqi lives, infrastructure and livelihoods and also drew regional states into the conflict.
- Third, it brought U.S. on foot military in Middle East with a long US occupation of Iraq with a forceful regime-changing agenda in the region.

This regime change agenda then also laid invisible seeds for revolutions as a silent wave of freedom and rights started blowing as spillover effect throughout the region that later emerged in the form of Arab uprisings.

### **Arab Spring**

Arab spring, a term popularized by the west is the major turning point on the political landscape of Middle East. It was a series of protests and uprising that began from Tunisia in

2011 and soon spread throughout Middle East<sup>10</sup>. These uprisings are marked by economic difficulties and political turbulence leading to conflict (in some cases even civil war). The Arab Spring, despite its initial aspirations for democratic transitions, has ushered in profound and complex consequences across the Middle East, with enduring implications. One of the defining features is the rise of people's power, challenging once-unassailable monarchies. The uprisings successfully overthrew authoritarian regimes, marking the end of a generation of entrenched leaders and paving the way for political diversity. However, this political transition has led to confusion among voters due to the emergence of a plethora of political parties, spanning ideologies from rightists and left-wing organizations to liberals and Islamists. This political explosion has underscored the nascent and evolving nature of democracy in the region. Simultaneously, deep-seated divisions, previously suppressed by authoritarian regimes, have surfaced, including the Islamist-secular and Sunni-Shia divides. These divisions have fueled civil wars and conflicts, turning the Middle East into a hub for proxy wars. Economic chaos, exacerbated by the absence of substantial economic reforms, further plagues the region, hindered by political unrest, unemployment, and a deterrence of foreign investment and tourism. The lasting implications of the Arab Spring continue to shape the multifaceted landscape of the Middle East.

The outcomes of the Arab Spring have displayed a remarkable diversity, shaped by a range of factors that diverted the revolutionary process from a straightforward path toward democratic transition<sup>11</sup>. While some countries like Libya and Syria descended into civil wars, Egypt and Tunisia embarked on uncertain transitions. Simultaneously, powerful monarchies in the Middle East remained largely unaffected, preserving the status quo. The lack of consensus among protesters regarding the preferred political-economic model for replacing old regimes played a pivotal role. Disagreements over the immediacy and nature of reforms, from immediate to gradual, further complicated the situation. In some cases, like Morocco and Jordan, people sought reforms but under their existing rulers. The absence of a clear political path post-uprisings, particularly in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where people aimed to overthrow their presidents and establish free elections, contributed to the complexity. Demands for social justice and economic development lacked a unified vision, with differing opinions on privatization, liberal reforms, and religious economic norms. Political parties emerging post-Arab Spring promised jobs but lacked concrete economic policies. Additionally, the persistent influence of despotic rulers' legacies, including powerful state structures, secret services, and crony capitalists, hindered the healthy development of political transitions. Therefore, the Arab Spring revolutions have re-revealed a historic lesson that revolutions are unpredictable, and it takes years to get to their clear consequences. Undoubtedly the 2011 Arab uprisings are a catalyst for long lasting changes whose final outcomes are yet to be seen however the near-term impacts of Arab Spring have laid the seeds for the new Middle East.

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<sup>10</sup> Abdul Qadir Mushtaq and Muhammad Afzal, "Arab Spring: Its Causes and Consequences," *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* 30, no. 1 (2017): 1-10.

<sup>11</sup> Imad Salamey, "Post-Arab Spring: Changes and Challenges," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2015): 111-129.

### **Rise of ISIS:**

The rise of terrorist groups in the Middle East, including the resurgence of Al-Qaeda and the emergence of ISIS as a powerful non-state actor, has profound implications for the region's politics<sup>12</sup>. The genesis of ISIS can be traced back to the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and 2012. As power vacuums were created due to political and religious divisions, ISIS found fertile ground to assert its authority. With a real political and social foundation in Iraq, ISIS has become a significant threat to the stability of the Middle East. Its impact extends beyond the region, affecting various aspects of life. In Syria, for instance, ISIS forces schoolteachers to indoctrinate children with its beliefs instead of focusing on standard curriculum subjects like math and science, resorting to violence against those who dissent. The group justifies its actions by claiming a divine mandate, employing a strategy summarized as "Kill to Control." The role of Bashar-ul-Assad of Syria in the expansion of ISIS is notable, as his forces avoided bombing Raqqa, the city later established as ISIS's capital, suggesting a tacit interest in the rise of the extremist group. Assad aimed to showcase the potential dire consequences of his regime's downfall and position himself as a preferable alternative to the West compared to the leadership of ISIS's Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi. Moreover, ISIS has been expanding its networks effectively throughout the world through social media including West particularly Europe. Its cells are also working in Pakistan. In a nutshell ISIS is the biggest threat to peace and stability in Middle East and its relationship with all other states of the world.

### **Joint Military Exercises**

Middle East states have been involved in a number of military exercises in the recent years. Not only regional states but also other powers of the international system have been part of these military exercises. Militarism has ever remained a strong feature of Middle Eastern politics; in fact, the states of Middle east share closest links with the arms-producing states of the world. With the passage of time, it has become a more prominent feature due to rise of non-traditional security threats. During the recent years a rapid increase in military exercises has been witnessed due to the following reasons:

- Increasing number of armed terrorist organizations.
- Rise of non-traditional security threats.
- Iranian power and negative impacts of Iranian policies over the region.

However, every state holds her own security and strategic reasons for these military exercises.

### **Recent Exercises**

The recent military exercises included all types of armed weaponry and air, ground, and naval forces as well.

- Cleopatra 2014 maneuver was a military exercise held in 2014 in French waters in which large number of naval forces of France and Egypt went for military cooperation.

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<sup>12</sup> Luna Shamieh and Zoltan Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," *AARMS—Academic and Applied Research in Military and Public Management Science* 14, no. 4 (2015): 363-378.

- Friendship bridge 2015 was a military exercise held by naval forces of Egypt and Russia for promoting their military cooperation.
- Ramses 2016 in March of 2016 was also a military exercise involving military cooperation between Egypt and France.
- Eagle's salute was also a joint military exercise held in the Red Sea Waters. In this the naval forces of Egypt, US and UAE participated. This military exercise included activities such as defensive and offensive sailing formations, reconnaissance and strategies dealing with hostile targets.
- North Thunder, military exercise held in March 2016 said to be the largest military exercise in the history of Middle East. It had large participation including 20 nations from Middle East including Egypt, GCC and also Pakistan. PM Nawaz Sharif visited this military exercise as well. It was largest of military exercises in the region without only respect to participation but also with regard to the use of arms, weapons, tanks, fighter jets and large military forces.
- Bright Star 2017 was a biennial military exercise involving the United States and Egypt, held in Egypt. The exercise aimed to strengthen military cooperation and improve readiness between the participating forces.
- Gulf Shield 1 was another military exercise held in the Gulf region in 2017. It involved the participation of several GCC nations and aimed to enhance maritime security and cooperation among the naval forces.
- Zayed 3 another joint military exercise conducted in 2018 between the UAE and Egyptian armed forces. The exercise aimed to improve interoperability and joint operational capabilities.
- Phoenix Express 2018 was an exercise focusing on improving regional cooperation, maritime domain awareness, information-sharing practices, and operational capabilities among North African, European, and US maritime forces.
- Iron Union 12 held in January 2019, was a joint military exercise between the UAE and US forces, focusing on enhancing combat readiness and bilateral military cooperation.

The recent military exercises in the Middle East reflect a response to the changing nature of security threats in the region. With the rise of terrorism and non-state actors eroding state control, there is a growing need for well-equipped and joint military cooperation to address cross-border threats. These exercises involve a wide range of military equipment, including naval, ground forces, helicopters, armored vehicles, and fighter jets, showcasing the commitment to modern and technologically advanced defense capabilities. The evolving goals of military exercises now focus on combating terrorist organizations, necessitating training in strategies employed by these groups, such as guerrilla methods and desert warfare. Notably, new international parties, including France and Russia, have become involved, driven by the attacks launched by terrorist organizations based in the Middle East. European nations, threatened by refugee flows and direct attacks, are actively participating in military exercises, contributing to the formation of anti-terrorism coalitions. The North Thunder exercise, in particular, is seen as a demonstration of Saudi influence in the region, countering Iran's advocacy of revolutionary ideas and support for militias. The aim is to establish blocks

and alliances to counterbalance power politics in the region and confront shared security concerns.

### **Pakistan's Relations with Middle East:**

The diplomatic relations between the Middle East and Pakistan are anchored in two critical commonalities: geo-political significance and religious affiliation<sup>13</sup>. Both regions hold immense geo-strategic importance—Middle East for its oil and gas resources and Pakistan for its strategic location. The majority populations in both areas follow the Islamic faith, fostering a shared religious affiliation based on the concept of "ummah." Despite sectarian differences, such as Sunni-Shia distinctions, the religious bond remains strong. Pakistan's Sunni majority establishes robust relations with Sunni Arab states in the Middle East, notably Saudi Arabia. Both regions have been central in international relations, drawing major power interests. Currently, they grapple with a common challenge—extremism or terrorism. Significant people-to-people interactions exist, with numerous Pakistanis residing in the Middle East and vice versa. Military exchanges are routine, and Pakistan's active involvement is driven by security, economic, and geo-strategic imperatives. Despite challenges, maintaining neutrality in regional conflicts among Middle East states, Pakistan's positive engagement in the region is underscored by cultural, religious, and economic exchanges, further solidified by the annual pilgrimage of Pakistani Muslims to Saudi Arabia for Hajj.

During the 1950s, Pakistan aligned its foreign policy with the United States, influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War. In 1960, Pakistan transitioned to an independent foreign policy, establishing stronger ties with Middle Eastern states. In 1955, Pakistan joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a security alliance with Middle Eastern states. This shifted to economic cooperation with the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964, comprising Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey<sup>14</sup>. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, RCD dissolved but revived in 1984 as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto adopted an independent foreign policy in 1970, fostering balanced relations with resource-rich Middle Eastern states, irrespective of their internal regional hostilities. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, Pakistan, under General Zia-ul-Haq, tilted its foreign policy towards conservative Arab monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, neglecting Iran. This shift was influenced by shared conservative Islamic ideologies, economic assistance, and support for the Afghan resistance against the USSR. Under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (1988-1990), Pakistan attempted to balance its foreign policy by improving relations with Iran, Libya, and Syria, reflecting the democratic government's support for democracy and Iran's revolutionary rhetoric. In the 1990s, under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan supported the US and Arab states during the Gulf War against Iraq, enhancing its global image as the first Muslim state with nuclear capabilities. General Pervez Musharraf's regime (1999-2008) saw Pakistan aligning with the US in the War on Terror post-9/11<sup>15</sup>. Relations with the Middle East were tested but also strengthened,

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<sup>13</sup> Khalida Qureshi, "Pakistan and the Middle East," *Pakistan Horizon* 19, no. 2 (1966): 156-166.

<sup>14</sup> Mussarat Jabeen and Muhammad Saleem Mazhar, "Security Game: SEATO and CENTO as Instruments of Economic and Military Assistance to Encircle Pakistan," *Pakistan Economic and Social Review* (2011): 109-132

<sup>15</sup> Zamir Akram, "Pakistani-US Relations after 9/11: A Pakistani Perspective," *Geo. J. Int'l Aff.* 3 (2002): 115.

particularly after Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided significant aid for earthquake victims in 2005. During the PPP government (2008-2013), Pakistan negotiated agreements with Qatar for natural gas and initiated the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. The changing dynamics in the Middle East, marked by the Arab Spring, posed challenges to Pakistan's traditional balanced approach. The aftermath of the Arab Spring led to internal grievances and regional turmoil in the Middle East. Pakistan faced a dilemma in balancing relations between states and regional blocks, impacting its foreign policy in the evolving circumstances.

**Navigating the Saudi-Iran Dilemma for Pakistan:**

The Middle East today is divided into two prominent blocks: one led by revolutionary forces, notably Iran, supporting change and funding movements like Hezbollah and ISIS, and the other led by rightists, primarily Saudi Arabia, advocating monarchy and preserving the status quo<sup>16</sup>. Saudi Arabia and Iran's longstanding hostility, rooted in factors such as the Persian-Arab divide, Shiite-Sunni sectarian split, oil reserves, interpretations of Islam, and regional power dynamics, poses a dilemma for Pakistan to maintain a neutral foreign policy<sup>17</sup>. Pakistan values its sacred ties with Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest places, and strong economic relations. However, navigating this delicate balance amid regional tensions remains a complex challenge for Pakistan.

**Exploring Strategic Alliances: Pakistan's Balancing Act in the Middle East:**

Situated between two regional heavyweights, Pakistan grapples with a delicate foreign policy balancing act. On one side, Iran's geographical proximity and resource abundance offer strategic and economic incentives for Pakistan, as demonstrated by the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project initiated in 1995. While construction delays were influenced by pressures from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, recent geopolitical shifts, such as the Iran-U.S. nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions, have created a more favorable environment for Pakistan to resume work on the gas pipeline. However, maintaining neutrality amidst Middle Eastern interstate conflicts remains a diplomatic challenge for Pakistan. Despite historical ties with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's refusal to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015 underscores its commitment to non-partisanship and a sensible foreign policy approach. This stance was reiterated in the wake of heightened Saudi-Iran tensions, following the execution of Shia cleric Nimr Al Nimr in Saudi Arabia in January 2016, where Pakistan refrained from taking sides in the regional dispute.

**Pakistan's Diplomatic Role in Mediating Middle Eastern Tensions:**

Pakistan's recent diplomatic initiatives, particularly in mediating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, reflect a strategic effort to dispel perceptions of abandoning its neutrality policy. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran seek positive relations with Pakistan, presenting an opportunity for Pakistan to leverage this advantage. While engaging in military

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<sup>16</sup> Simon Mabon, "Constructing the Enemy within: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sectarian Identity in the Gulf," *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (2015): 535-553.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Karasik, "The GCC and the New Middle Eastern Cold War," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, July 24, 2017.

cooperation with Saudi Arabia, as seen in the Saudi-led military alliance, Pakistan simultaneously welcomed Iran's invitation to participate in the Chabahar port development deal. Recognizing the potential consequences of disharmony in relations with Iran, Pakistan remains committed to staying neutral in the Iran- Saudi hostility, avoiding sectarian drift and the associated risks of increased terrorism. As Iran undergoes transformative changes, with lifted sanctions and enhanced economic prospects, Pakistan acknowledges the imperative of maintaining positive ties for its own counter-terrorism efforts and large-scale economic projects like CPEC and the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Pakistan's foreign policy makers emphasize the need to keep the country aloof from regional sectarian conflicts while further pursuing robust economic ties with Iran to counterbalance regional dynamics and curb Indian influence in the region.

### **Strategic Imperatives for Pakistan: Navigating Economic Opportunities in the Changing Regional Landscape**

Pakistan's contemporary national interests, emphasizing counterterrorism, economic development, and countering Indian influence, necessitate a balanced and cordial approach towards the Middle East, particularly with both oil giants, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Amidst regional shifts, India's strategic initiatives in Afghanistan, exemplified by its significant investment in the Chabahar port, raise concerns for Pakistan. India's diplomatic maneuvering, capitalizing on Iran's changing international status post-sanctions, establishes economic relations and secures an alternate trade route that bypasses Pakistan, countering China's influence through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. With Afghanistan also part of this dynamic, India commits to investing in a rail link connecting Iran, Afghanistan, and India, further complicating regional geopolitics. As Pakistan grapples with internal challenges, it's crucial to prioritize strategic engagement with the Middle East, securing economic interests through projects like CPEC and the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, in alignment with broader foreign policy goals.

Pakistan, endowed with a geo-strategic location, stands at the crossroads of significant economic prospects emanating from mega projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation, China-Pakistan Electricity Cooperation, the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, and collaborative ventures concerning the development of the Chabahar port. These projects offer a multifaceted solution to Pakistan's challenges, encompassing counterterrorism, economic upliftment, and the mitigation of regional power dynamics, particularly in response to India's influence. The Iranian ambassador reassures that Chabahar and Gwadar ports are complementary, presenting a collaborative opportunity rather than a rivalry. Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's PM's adviser on foreign affairs, expresses the nation's contemplation of linking the two ports and constructing a road link to Chabahar, reflecting the potential for cooperative economic gains. Pakistan's participation in Chabahar is viewed as crucial, both for regional trade policy influence and as a countermeasure against India's route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, skepticism persists, questioning the feasibility of Chabahar's development amid uncertainties, including potential political changes in Iran, security issues in Afghanistan, and economic viability in the face of China's direct access to Central Asian markets. Thus, Pakistan's foreign policy needs to be farsighted and meticulously evaluated to

navigate these intricate economic opportunities.

### **Middle East Diplomacy and Security Challenges: Efforts for Peace**

Pakistan, with its neutral foreign policy, is urged to play a pivotal role in easing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran<sup>18</sup>. A well-organized diplomatic campaign, in collaboration with China and D8 countries, including major Muslim states, is proposed. The escalating threats in the region, such as the rise of ISIS, Iranian power, and the Iran-Russia partnership, pose significant challenges for Pakistan's relations with Middle Eastern states<sup>19</sup>. While Iran is accused of sponsoring terrorism, its aspirations to become a regional power and counter the U.S., coupled with Russia's alliance, present complex dynamics. The shifting landscape in the Middle East, with terrorism spreading and recent attacks in Saudi Arabia, necessitates a concerted political solution for stability, emphasizing the need for a change in Syria's government. This research therefore underscores the common threat of terrorism and advocates for a collective effort to address the complex challenges in the region. One thing that should be kept in mind is that the goal of humanity and religion is not funding destruction and bloodshed, rather it is to counter such elements that promote bloodshed. The goal of every state thus should be to defeat terrorism in the Middle East.

### **Conclusion:**

Pakistan finds itself at a crucial juncture where its foreign policy must adeptly navigate the complex web of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Balancing relations with regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran, while addressing the emerging influence of India in Afghanistan through projects like Chahbahar, is paramount for Pakistan's national interests. As the region grapples with rising terrorism, the challenge of ISIS, and the intricate dynamics of Saudi-Iran tensions, Pakistan's neutral stance, coupled with diplomatic initiatives, emerges as a vital factor for regional stability. The commitment to economic projects like CPEC and the Iran Pakistan gas pipeline, along with collaborative efforts to ease tensions between key players, positions Pakistan as a potential peacemaker in a volatile region. The nation's diplomatic acumen, supported by engagements with China and D8 countries, can play a pivotal role in fostering cooperation and mitigating the multifaceted challenges that define the Middle Eastern landscape.

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<sup>18</sup> Shabbir Hussain, "Pakistan's Policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran," *Pakistan Horizon* 69, no. 3 (2016): 81-94.

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Waqas Akhtar, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy Choices: Revisiting the Iran-Saudi Arabia Dilemma," *South Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (2015): 221-235.