**[Pak-Saudi relations](https://www.dawn.com/news/1623999/pak-saudi-relations)**

[Huma Yusuf](https://www.dawn.com/authors/252/huma-yusuf)Published May 17, 2021

The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

OPPOSITION politicians recently enjoyed criticising the 19,000 bags of rice distributed in Punjab and KP by a [Saudi aid agency](https://www.dawn.com/news/1623407) as a meagre benefit from a key ally. What this politicking missed was an opportunity to meaningfully debate the future of Pakistan’s relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Such a discussion is much needed. Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, will be key to Pakistan’s economic recovery in a post-Covid context. Pakistani labour needs access to Gulf markets, and Pakistan needs the remittances. The country’s new ‘geoeconomics’ strategy must consider ways in which Pakistan can be an attractive trade partner for its Gulf allies. Pakistan also desperately needs the renewable energy projects that Saudi seeks to back.

While mutually beneficial economic oppo­r­tunities should underpin the future of Saudi-Pakistan relations, the urgency to course correct the relationship lies in shifting geopolitical realities. Analysts until rec­ently had written off Pakistan’s affiliation with the Gulf, citing the former’s budding romance with Turkey, and the latter’s deepening links to India. But that picture is changing.

We have a chance to reframe our ties with Saudi Arabia.

The horrifying [developments](https://www.dawn.com/news/1623960/israeli-strikes-kill-42-more-palestinians-raising-death-toll-to-188) in Gaza and Israel will throw into question Gulf states’ detente with Israel in a bid to unite against Iranian influence. This will make Pakistan — with its firm anti-Israel stance — seem less anachronistic in terms of its alignment with Gulf policy. The divergence on Kashmir (co­m­ing on the heels of differences on Yem­en, Qatar, Iran and Israel) may become the ex­c­eption rather than the trend, and Islam­abad and Riyadh might agree to disagree.

The Saudi-Qatar rapprochement will also enable Pakistan to smooth things over with the kingdom, even while pursuing deeper engagement with Doha, including an LNG deal and plans for defence cooperation and labour market access.

US re-engagement with Iran on its nuclear programme, and upcoming Iranian presidential elections, coupled with Washington’s growing impatience with the Saudi crown prince’s transgressions, should also help soften the sectarian divide that has come to define the Middle Eastern political landscape. This provides Pakistan an opportunity to reframe its ties with Saudi Arabia, recognising that Islamabad’s influence in Tehran may be waning and it can no longer convincingly offer to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran (even as it has to continue balancing these relationships due to the ever-present threat of proxy sectarian conflict).

Pakistan’s greatest value to Saudi Arabia will remain in defence cooperation. But the shifts mentioned mean there will likely be fewer scenarios in which Islamabad and Riyadh don’t see eye to eye on security issues. Counterterrorism remains an area where more coordination is merited, particularly as Pakistan stands on the cusp of a domestic militant resurgence.

The only way to navigate the shifting sands of Middle Eastern geopolitics and ensure that Pakistan’s interests are protected is with a well-articulated, independent and futuristic foreign policy vis-à-vis the Gulf. The recent spat between the [prime minister and foreign service](https://www.dawn.com/news/1623412) highlighted how aspirational this ask might be. As Zahid Hussain wrote on these pages recently, the failures of our diplomats stem from failures in foreign policy positioning — actors are only as strong as the script they’re provided.

And Pakistan’s engagement with Saudi Arabia since 2018 has shown the consequences of a poor script (remember Khan’s clumsy withdrawal at the kingdom’s behest from the conference in Malaysia?). Writing for the Middle East Institute, Arif Rafiq reported that part of the reason why energy projects agreed with Riyadh in 2018 have not come to fruition is because Pakistan was ill-prepared to absorb the funding and implement the projects. That’s the kind of lag that a well-crafted foreign policy would avoid.

A clearer policy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf more broadly, will also articulate the parameters of the much-touted information and cultural ties being pursued with Riyadh. Pakistan’s religio-national identity remains hotly contested. Efforts to Arabise society thr­o­ugh compulsory Arabic-language instru­c­tion and Saudi-funded madressahs have also met with resistance. If the goal is simply to better equip future expat labour or facilitate trade, we should explicitly state that, rather than recast ourselves in the Gulf’s image.

The world is becoming more complex. The US is receding to lick its domestic wounds; China is ascendant, but has yet to clarify its position on many global issues, including the political and sectarian fault lines in the Middle East. Saudi and China are toying with the prospect of closer ties, creating an interesting facilitation opportunity for Pakistan. We cannot afford to muddle through our relationship with Saudi Arabia in this changing scenario; we have much to gain from getting it right, and more to lose if we don’t.

*The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.*

**Twitter:** [**@humayusuf**](https://twitter.com/humayusuf)

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