[Saudi Crown Prince’s Pakistan visit](https://nation.com.pk/16-Feb-2019/saudi-crown-prince-s-pakistan-visit" \t "_new)

Dr Ali Awadh Asseri February 16, 2019 the Nation

The Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, will travel to Pakistan this month to pledge a historic Saudi investment in Pakistani economy. This will be his second visit to Pakistan, and it sets the stage for a major strategic shift in relations between the two brotherly Muslim nations, which have always enjoyed an incomparable level of understanding and friendship based on common religious, cultural and social values.

Pakistan is a great nation. Having served as the Saudi ambassador there during the tumultuous period from 2001 to 2009, I am a witness to its trials and tribulations in dealing with the challenging implications of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. So, in a recent visit to Islamabad, I was pleased to learn that this country of over 200 million people has achieved enormous successes in combating terrorism and chalked out an effective course of action against extremism under the National Action Plan.

Saudi Arabia is the religious destination of all Muslims of the world, but, apart from this ever-lasting religious link, the level of mutually shared love and respect between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is exceptional. Throughout my tenure as Saudi ambassador to Lebanon (2009-16) and retirement from diplomatic service since then, I have always cherished the wonderful memories of the time spent in Islamabad, especially the lasting bonds with Pakistani friends. So, returning to this great country after a decade, sharing old memories and enjoying local hospitality, was really a homecoming for me.

I was part of a delegation from the Riyadh-based International Institute for Iranian Studies, which interacted with various Pakistani think tanks and concluded an agreement with a public sector university. There is a newfound realisation among the Saudi educated elites, shared equally by state authorities, about Pakistan’s renewed significance arising out of its geo-strategic location at the crossroads of East-West and North-South trade corridors. This realization is reinforced by the progress in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Saudi Arabia is also diversifying its global economic linkages with China, Central Asia and South-East Asia and, therefore, understands the strategic value of Pakistan’s deep-sea Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. Therefore, it increasingly perceives CPEC as a great opportunity in the emerging Southwest Asian geo-economic setting, which must be fully harnessed by investing in the future of Pakistan as its pivot. Hence, the recent talk of the Saudi-Pak Economic Corridor, for which the traditionally friendly bilateral setting is already most conducive. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have closely cooperated to achieve the common goals of regional peace and stability, including in Afghanistan and Kashmir. They have always stood shoulder to shoulder with each other in difficult times. For instance, during the first Gulf War, Pakistani armed forces guarded the Saudi frontiers. And, after the 2005 earthquake, Saudi Arabia established an air corridor to provide emergency relief to the victims in Kashmir. This traditional spirit of reciprocity continues to manifest in the Pakistani leadership of the 41-member Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism and the upcoming Saudi investment package for Pakistan.

In the past, Pakistan provided security support to Saudi Arabia in times of need, and Saudi Arabia provided economic support to Pakistan in difficult moments. This pattern of relationship will persist. Moreover, Saudi support has never been conditional to any change of government or leadership in Pakistani politics. It has, therefore, again taken the lead in confronting Pakistan’s current economic problems by offering a generous support of $6 billion, including $3 billion each for balance of payments this year and deferred payments on oil import annually.

This time, however, Saudi Arabia is also looking for long-term stakes in the country by undertaking major investments in its economic sectors that are considered most viable by Saudi state and private enterprises. This is part of its current national efforts to diversify economic linkages across Asia, especially with traditionally friendly and strategically significant Muslim nations like Pakistan.

For the purpose, a high-level delegation of Saudi state officials and businessmen, led by the Energy Minister Khalid Bin Abdul Aziz, visited Pakistan last month to finalise the various agreements and modalities to implement and enhance the cooperation between the two countries nations in the fields of oil refining, petrochemical, mining and renewable energy in Pakistan.Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is expected to conclude major agreements in these and other fields, including a 10-billion dollars worth oil refinery in Gwadar and further multi-billion dollars investments in petrochemical complex, mining and renewable energy sectors. There are parallel efforts under way to boost bilateral trade, especially by reinforcing the links between the Chambers of Trade and Commerce of the two countries. Last October, in order to increase the level of bilateral trade, which remains stagnant at merely $3 billion annually, the two countries had also agreed to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement.

Under the visionary leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a major modernisation drive as part of the Vision 2030, which offers a great opportunity for the skilled Pakistani workforce, especially in the IT sector, to contribute to Saudi industrial and futuristic city projects like NEOM.

Like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan confronts the challenge of a large urban educated youth with genuine economic needs and aspirations. This creative and talented segment of the population, if employed in Saudi Arabia, will contribute many times more to remittances received from there annually, than over a million menial workers currently employed in the Kingdom. Let me conclude by saying that the time-tested Pak-Saudi ties have overtime come a long way, and all indicators suggest a progressive pathway in the foreseeable future for tangible progress in mutual trade and investment. There is also no doubt that under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan will develop by leaps and bounds and its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia reach new heights.

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