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The Bomb: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan

So what happens if Iran goes nuclear, and Saudi Arabia wants to follow?

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Published: January 22, 2012

Once upon a time Iran was Pakistan's close ally — probably its closest one. In 1947, Iran was the first to recognise the newly independent Pakistan. In the 1965 war with India, Pakistani fighter jets flew to Iranian bases in Zahedan and Mehrabad for protection and refuelling. Both countries were members of the US-led Seato and Cento defence pacts, Iran opened wide its universities to Pakistani students, and the Shah of Iran was considered Pakistan's great friend and benefactor. Sometime around 1960, thousands of flag-waving school children lined the streets of Karachi to greet him. I was one of them.

The friendship has soured, replaced by low-level hostility and suspicion. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, set major realignments in motion. As Iran exited the US orbit, Pakistan joined the Americans to fight the Soviets. With Saudi money, they together created and armed the hyper-religious Pashtun mujahideen. Iran too supported the mujahideen — but those of the Tajik Northern Alliance. But as religion assumed centrality in matters of state in both Pakistan and Iran, doctrinal rifts widened.

These rifts are likely to widen as the US prepares for its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iranians cannot forget that in 1996, following the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, the Taliban took over Kabul and began a selective killing of Shias. This was followed by a massacre of more than 5,000 Shias in Bamiyan province. Iran soon amassed 300,000 troops at the Afghan border and threatened to attack the Pakistan-supported Taliban government. Today, Iran accuses Pakistan of harbouring terrorist anti-Iran groups like Jundullah on its soil and freely allowing Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and its associates to ravage Pakistan's Shia minority. Symptomatic of the grassroot-level change, Farsi is no longer taught in Pakistani schools.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's footprint in Pakistan has grown steadily since the early 1970s. Pakistani leaders, political and military, frequently travel to the Kingdom to pay homage or seek refuge. The dependency on Saudi money grew. After India had tested its Bomb in May 1998 and Pakistan was mulling over the appropriate response, the Kingdom's grant of 50,000 barrels of free oil a day helped Pakistan decide in favour of a tit-for-tat response and cushioned the impact of sanctions subsequently imposed by the US and Europe. The Saudi defence minister, Prince Sultan, was a VIP guest at Kahuta, where he toured its nuclear and missile facilities just before the tests. Years earlier Benazir Bhutto, the then serving prime minister, had been denied entry.

The quid pro quo for the Kingdom's oil largesse has been soldiers, airmen, and military expertise. Saudi officers are trained at Pakistan's national defence colleges. The Pakistan Air Force, with a high degree of professional training, helped create the Royal Saudi Air Force and Pakistani pilots flew combat missions against South Yemen in the 1970s. Saudi Arabia is said to have purchased ballistic missiles produced in Pakistan.

So what happens if Iran goes nuclear, and Saudi Arabia wants to follow?

For all its wealth, Saudi Arabia does not have the technical and scientific base to create a nuclear infrastructure. Too weak to defend itself and too rich to be left alone, the country has always been surrounded by those who eye its wealth. It has many universities staffed by highly paid expatriates and tens of thousands of Saudi students have been sent to universities overseas. But because of an ideological attitude unsuited to the acquisition of modern scientific skills, there has been little success in producing a significant number of accomplished Saudi engineers and scientists.

Perforce, Saudi Arabia will turn to Pakistan for nuclear help. This does not mean outright transfer of nuclear weapons by Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. One cannot put credence on rumours that the Saudis have purchased nuclear warheads stocked at Kamra air force base, to be flown out at the opportune time. Surely, this would certainly lead to extreme reaction from the US

and Europe, with no support offered by China or Russia. Moreover, even if a few weapons were smuggled out, Saudi Arabia could not claim to have them. Thus they could not serve as a nuclear deterrent.

Instead, the Kingdom's route to nuclear weapons is likely to be circuitous, beginning with the acquisition of nuclear reactors for electricity generation. The spent fuel from reactors can be processed for plutonium. Like Iran, it will have to find creative ways by which to skirt around the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – which forbids reprocessing spent fuel. But it doubtless takes heart from the fact that the US forgave India for its nuclear testing in 1998, and eventually ended rewarding it with a nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia had unwillingly signed on to the NPT in 1988. Its position then was that it would be happy to sign up but only if Israel did the same. That, of course, never happened. But Saudi Arabia had no option but to follow the US diktat.

The Kingdom's first steps towards making nuclear weapons are being contemplated. In June 2011, it said that 16 nuclear reactors were to be built over the next 20 years at a cost of more than \$300 billion, each reactor costing around \$7 billion. Arrangements are being made to offer the project for international bidding and the winning company should "satisfy the Kingdom's needs for modern technology". To create, run and maintain the resulting nuclear infrastructure will require importing large numbers of technical workers. Some will be brought over from western countries, as well as Russia and former Soviet Union countries.

But Saudi Arabia will likely find engineering and scientific skills from Pakistan particularly desirable. Since many are Sunni Muslims, the Pakistanis would presumably be sympathetic with the Kingdom's larger goals. Having been in the business of producing nuclear weapons for nearly 30 years under difficult circumstances, they would also be familiar with supplier chains for hard-to-get items needed in a weapons programme. And because salaries in Saudi Arabia far exceed those in Pakistan, many qualified people could well ask for leave from their parent institutions at the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, Kahuta Research Laboratories, and National Development Complex.

Good sense dictates that Iran stops its pursuit of the Bomb. But whether it does or not, Pakistan should stay out of the Iran-Saudi nuclear rivalry. Over and above all this, Israel and the United States must stop threatening to bomb Iran.

Published in The Express Tribune, January 23rd, 2012.

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