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Issue Brief

Pakistan's Mediation Efforts in Saudi-Iranian Tensions

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Building and maintaining close friendly relations with other Muslim states is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy. In case of a conflict between Muslim states, Pakistan has always remained equidistant. In the case of recent escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pakistan not only took a balanced approach but also tried to mediate between the two sides. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, accompanied by Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif, visited Saudi Arabia on January 18, and Iran on January 19, 2016. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said he considered ending the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran a sacred mission, and that Pakistan was proud to have taken up the role of a mediator.

Though initially some quarters had doubts about the success of Pakistan's mediation efforts, subsequent developments have proved that the decision was timely and fruitful. Not only were the Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff received warmly, their mediation effort was appreciated in both Riyadh and Tehran. In Riyadh, the Prime Minister held talks with the Saudi King, Salman bin Abdulaziz, and in Tehran, he met the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani. In both meetings, he urged his hosts to resolve the differences peacefully, emphasising that a conflict between two major Muslim states would only damage the larger interests of the Muslim Ummah. In Tehran, he also said that Pakistan was willing to host a meeting between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran responded positively to the Prime Minister's mediation offer. The Prime Minister said that Iran and Pakistan had agreed to appoint a 'focal person' on the issue, while Saudi Arabia would also be approached to do so. Pakistani leadership's effort was appreciated by other Muslim states as well, particularly Turkey.

After meetings with the Saudi and Iranian leaderships, the Prime Minister noted that leaders in both countries had said that they did not consider each other to be enemies. These are encouraging signs. Although the escalation of tensions was tempestuous, the situation has not deteriorated since, which has generated hopes that common sense and wisdom would prevail.

This is not for the first time that Pakistan has tried to mediate between estranged Muslim states. In fact, the country has a history of undertaking such initiatives. Pakistan had tried to mediate between Iran and Iraq during their 8-year war (1980-1988). It was due to Pakistan's efforts that an ice-breaking meeting between the late Saudi King Abdullah and the then Iranian President, Hashmi Rafsanjani took place on the sidelines of OIC Summit in Islamabad in 1997. The meeting is believed to have paved the way for the subsequent thaw in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The recent Pakistani initiative, however,

has as much to do with the country's internal security and economic imperatives as it does with foreign policy considerations.

Any escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the resultant increase in sectarian polarisation and political instability in the broader Middle East region is bound to have serious security and economic repercussions for Pakistan. Pakistan has had a history of sectarian violence. Most analyses identify Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East and its spill-over into Pakistan as one of the main reasons for the rise of this phenomenon in Pakistan. If Pakistan can play a role in reducing Saudi-Iranian tensions, it could also promote sectarian harmony in Pakistan. On the other hand, a decision to side with either side would generate bad faith and fuel sectarian tensions in the country.

Even bigger threat for Pakistan is economic. Pakistan is believed to be on the cusp of an economic turnaround. Helped by a good GDP growth rate, increase in foreign remittances and lower oil prices, the economy has made some impressive strides in recent years. It has received a shot in the arm in the form of the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC has been billed as a potential game changer not only for Pakistan but also for multiple regions in its neighbourhood. But for the CPEC to come to fruition, security is a must. Political instability in the region due to Saudi-Iranian tensions and its spill-over into Pakistan can thwart country's efforts to reap the dividends of the CPEC. Pakistani leadership's effort to mediate between two Middle Eastern powers' conflict was therefore timely.

It is important for Pakistan to maintain strong traditional ties and solidarity with Saudi Arabia because it has stood by Pakistan through thick and thin. At the same time, after the US-Iran rapprochement, new avenues are opening up for Pakistan, especially the completion of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, cooperation in the energy sector, enhanced trade and collaboration in the CPEC. All these new opportunities should be seized, and should not be allowed to become a victim of the turmoil in the Middle East. Pakistan should stay the course of a balanced policy towards two major Middle Eastern powers, and continue to demonstrate moral high ground by pursuing diplomacy for mediation and conciliation.