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## Issue Brief

# The Middle East in a Flux: How Should Pakistan Respond?

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Ever since the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Middle East has remained mired in a variety of crises. The region's problems only worsened in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring." Apart from destabilizing the domestic political order in several Middle Eastern states, the "Arab Spring" also affected the regional balance of power, with Iran emerging as the main beneficiary. Saudi anxieties at the increasing Iranian influence have only exacerbated in the wake of Iran-US nuclear deal. This state of affairs in the region has caused challenges for non-Middle Eastern countries as well. Pakistan, due to its geographic proximity and close ties with most of the regional players, is faced with particularly serious challenges.

### **Challenges for Pakistan**

The situation in the Middle East has created challenges for Pakistan at both foreign policy and internal security levels. The biggest foreign policy challenge is to balance its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran – the two protagonists in the Middle East crisis. Historically, Pakistan has adopted a policy of neutrality towards conflicts between Muslim states. "We do not interfere and we do not take sides," said Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesperson recently, reiterating the country's policy towards disputes between Muslim states. However, the Saudi request for Pakistan's military assistance in the Yemen war has put Pakistan in a difficult situation: acceding to the request would not only entail departure from neutrality, it would also antagonize Iran; declining the request, on the other hand, could annoy Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, which hold enormous economic significance for Pakistan, as they host millions of Pakistani workers whose remittances are mainstay of Pakistan's economy. Confronted with this challenge, Pakistani government has so far tried to navigate carefully by declaring to remain neutral but at the same time expressing its commitment to maintain its solidarity with Saudi Arabia in its difficult times.

The crisis in the Middle East has created challenges also for Pakistan's internal security, mainly in terms of risk of increase in sectarian violence, violent extremism and terrorism. As the crisis in the Middle East has played out mainly along sectarian (Shia-Sunni) divide, Pakistan, which has had its own sectarian problem, faces the risk of increase in sectarian violence due to the possible spillover from the Middle East. The rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq can fan violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan where due to the state's concerted anti-terror efforts terrorist elements are finding it increasingly difficult to operate. The crisis in the Middle East has rendered the Palestinians even more vulnerable to Israeli brutalities as Arab states, which hitherto would champion the Palestinian cause, have become

embroiled in their own problems. Large scale Israeli atrocities against Palestinians can fuel violent extremism throughout the Muslim world including Pakistan. These enhanced security threats are also a challenge for Pakistan's economy, which has recently started showing signs of improvement after several years. A particularly worrisome dimension is the risk for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar Port projects. Pakistan's economy could also suffer, and in a big way, if any political upheaval in the Middle East forces Pakistani workers to return home, thereby ending the remittances bonanza that the country has enjoyed for several decades.

### **How Should Pakistan Respond?**

Pakistan's current challenge of charting an independent course stems from its economic problems. Tackling its economic problems should be a priority for the country if it were to chart a more independent course of action in its foreign relations. Pakistan also needs to rethink the basis of its foreign policy. Even in its relations with Muslim countries, it should focus more on its internal strengths – competitiveness of its economy and its human resources, for example – rather than relying simply on religious affinity. Pakistan should also focus on building capacities of its internal security apparatus to enable them to deal with an increasing array of threats. To deal with these threats, however, it will also have to ensure that no foreign country can use Pakistani soil to wage a proxy war against any other state. To be specific, Pakistan should talk to Saudi Arabia and Iran to make them realize the huge cost that it has paid due to sectarian violence. We should also support a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.