

REPORT



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Mediation in the Persian Gulf: Initiatives, Strategies & Obstacles

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Report-Mediation in the Persian Gulf: Initiatives, Strategies & Obstacles



**Islamabad Policy Institute,
Pakistan**

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INTRODUCTION:

Prime Minister Imran Khan has launched an initiative to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The effort has been undertaken to prevent the current tensions from spiralling into a military conflict between two very important countries of the Gulf Region. Such an eventuality, it is feared, could have serious repercussions not only for the two countries, but also for the region and the world at large.

Therefore, the government's initiative for defusing the tensions is both timely and welcome. Mediation is an essential tool for peacebuilding. However, it needs to be acknowledged that it is a difficult task, given the nature of the conflict in the Gulf, and that dialogue will be required at all levels to reach and eventually sustain peace. Additionally, critical and new thinking would be required for this initiative to progress.

Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI), therefore, organized a round table conference on October 10, 2019 to take stock of the situation, assess the prospects of the Pakistani initiative particularly in view of similar efforts in the past, and make policy recommendations.

The event was attended by diplomats, representatives of think tanks, academicians, and media persons. The panel included Pakistan's former

ambassador to Iran Mr Asif Durrani, Prof Syed Qandeel Abbas from School of Politics and International Relations, (Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad), and Mr Ali Mehr, an Arab Affairs scholar and analyst. Former Foreign Secretary Mr Aizaz Chaudhry delivered the keynote and also presided over the session. Executive Director IPI Prof Sajjad Bokhari set the tone of the discussion with his opening remarks.

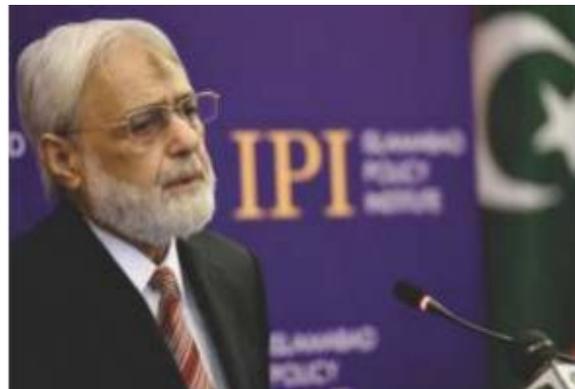
The presentations were followed by a lively Q&A session.

KEY POINTS OF PRESENTATIONS

Prof Sajjad Bokhari

Executive Director Islamabad Policy Institute

- Middle East is witnessing one of the most challenging situations since the World War II. The region is largely unstable and ridden with multiple crises that have political, security, economic and humanitarian dimensions. It is unclear what direction would these crises take. The future is as unpredictable as politics of this region.
- Tensions between Iran and the United States plus its Arab allies aggravated sharply after President Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was also endorsed through UN Security Council Resolution 2231.
- US subsequently re-imposed sanctions on Iran as part of a “maximum pressure” policy, whereas Tehran has reviewed its commitments to limit uranium enrichment activity under the pact and has begun enriching uranium beyond the terms of its 2015 nuclear deal.
- The situation has been further complicated by security incidents in the region over the



past few months. Initially there were attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Oman and more lately there was a missile-and-drone assault on Saudi Arabia’s largest oil processing facility and a ground assault on Saudi forces in bordering area of Najran by the Houthis.

- The attack on Aramco plant was claimed by Houthi rebels, yet US, Saudi Arabia and their allies pointed fingers at Iran. Iran denied being responsible. It has warned that any retaliatory attack targeting it will result in an “all-out war.” Meanwhile, a new naval coalition to protect Gulf waters has been created, which so far comprises Australia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates.
- Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani offered an olive branch to Iran’s neighbours saying Tehran was willing to “extend the hand of friendship and brotherhood”.

However, he has asked Western forces to leave the security of the region to the countries in the neighbourhood.

- Pakistan, which has legitimate political, economic and security interests in the region, cannot remain completely removed from the effects of developments in the Gulf. Therefore, it is important that Pakistan's interests be secured in the face of unpredictable circumstances.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan, following his meetings with US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, started a mediation initiative. He discussed it with Iranian President Rouhani in his meeting on the sidelines of UNGA. Mr Khan has been carrying the initiative ahead although he has been cautious about its prospects.

Amb (R) Asif Durrani

Former Ambassador of
Pakistan to Iran

- Monarchies in the Arab world are scared of Iran especially after the Arab Spring because of two reasons - i) Iran is the only country in the neighborhood with a semblance of elections ii) Iranian system challenged the Czars of the time and has been supporting freedom movements.
- Iran has a tendency of expressing views about its neighborhood.
- Iran is not isolated. Therefore, Iran is being treated as a threat by its Arab neighbours.
- Middle East is under strong external influence (the United States). US has been a factor of instability in the region.
- Pakistani society was influenced by the Iranian Revolution and the counter-push by Saudi Arabia.
- Pakistan, however, maintains neutrality in the Gulf politics. Its declaration of neutrality in Yemen War is one such instance.
- Pakistan has no dispute with Iran, although there have been differences in perceptions.
- Due to recent high level engagements, the level of respect for each other (between Pakistani and Iranian leaders) is



growing and there is a steady improvement in bilateral ties.

- The Saudis have realized that they are stuck in Yemen war and have suffered massive losses. The situation has sparked off an arms race in the region, besides adding to the tensions. Therefore, they have now started giving signals of desire for détente.
- For Saudi Arabia - Iran rapprochement, both sides would need to take Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). Iran needs to raise the Saudi trust/comfort level. The starting point can be Yemen, where Iran needs a rethink in its policy.
- It should be recalled that Saudis rejected Pakistan's last mediation initiative in 2016, whereas Iranians accepted it.
- There is room for optimism, but one needs to be realistic in view of the complex nature of Saudi-Iran rivalry.

Prof Syed Qadeel Abbas

Assistant Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, QAU



- It is high time for Pakistan to assert its diplomatic weight to defuse rising tensions.
- Pakistan is best suited for the mediator's role given Iran's distrust for European Union countries and certain other states seeking this role. One ought not forget Pakistan is running the Iran interests section at its embassy in Washington in the absence of an Iranian diplomatic mission there. Pakistan, moreover, has no direct dispute with either of the countries although Iranian have doubts about Islamabad's inclination towards Riyadh and appointment of Gen (R) Raheel Sharif as the chief of Saudi led counter-terrorism force.
- There is, moreover, growing distrust between US and Islamabad, but President Trump has expressed confidence in Pakistani leadership for such a role.
- There have been some strains in Pak-Iran ties over the past few years because of terrorist attacks on both sides of the border. Pakistan, meanwhile, has concerns about Indian presence in Iran. That aside, there is still significant space available for Pakistan to effectively play its role as a mediator.
- While undertaking the mediation initiative, Pakistan can pursue both change oriented and narrative oriented strategies. Under the change oriented strategy both sides can be enabled to manage their conflict, whereas under the narrative oriented strategy Pakistan could work to dispel the impression that Saudi-Iranian spat is a sectarian one. It instead needs to be highlighted that their dispute is nothing but a power contest in the region. The change in narrative about the dispute, will make its resolution easier because resolving a dispute of sectarian nature is more difficult.

Mr. Ali Mehr

Arab Affairs Analyst

- The dispute in the Gulf is more of a Saudi-Iran conflict instead of an Arab – Iran row. Iran has good relations with number of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.
- Dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran is, however, deep rooted and cannot be easily resolved. Prime Minister Imran Khan is advised to act as a messenger instead of a mediator between the two.
- KSA signalled its readiness for rapprochement after attack on Aramco run oil field and processing facility to prevent any further attacks.
- The Saudis believe that the biggest threat to their national security is from Yemen. Therefore, under the effort being launched by Prime Minister Imran Khan urgent attention should be paid to some settlement of the Yemen conflict.
- De-escalation in the situation would also benefit Iran.
- The biggest challenge to the peace initiative is from US, which has huge influence over Riyadh. US would not like the mediation effort to succeed because it wants to keep Iran embroiled in tensions with its neighbours.
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Pakistan should join hands with Iraq and Oman for making joint efforts for peace in the region.

Amb(R) Aizaz Chaudhry

Director General of ISSI &
Former Foreign Secretary of
Pakistan



- It is very important to rightly assess the problem. The tensions in the region have two dimensions – Iran – US problems and the Saudi – Iran dispute.
- The US charge sheet against Iran is that Tehran doesn't toe its line in world politics; Iran is spreading influence across the region; it opposed regime change in Syria; and is aligned with Russia and China.
- Saudi-Iran rivalry is historic, but has increased manifold over the past years. It peaked with start of Yemen war in 2015.
- Houthis have stood their ground in the war so far and Aramco attack was the turning point in this conflict. Saudis realize they have limitations because their oil assets are vulnerable, while their defense systems have failed to protect them. The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism

Coalition (IMCTC) has its own limitations and Iranian influence is expanding.

- An all-out war will leave everyone vulnerable. US too is realizing its vulnerability in case of hostilities. Iranians are feeling the same pressure. Hence a conducive environment exists for the solution of the conflict. Geo-political environment is shaped in such a way that such effort would be appreciated.
- Space for mediation exists because the parties to the conflict are not on talking terms with each other. Pakistan and Iraq were considered as potential candidates for the mediator's role and eventually Pakistan was considered to be a better option because of its stronger credentials. Therefore, in a way the initiative is not originally Pakistan's own.
- Pakistan has in the past tried to play a similar role – Iran – Iraq war, 2004 during Musharraf era, and 2016. Those initiatives did not progress because the geo-political environment was then not suited for such an activity. But, now the environment is favouring a mediation initiative. Therefore, Mr Imran Khan would find receptive ears during his visits to Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Obstacles to Mr Khan's efforts would come in the shape of:

- Deep and wide mistrust between Riyadh and Tehran.
- US coercive actions against Iran and the global politics in general.
- Worries about expanding Iranian influence.
- Despite the impediments, the problem cannot be left unattended, because the conflict has the potential to expand and have devastating consequences for the region. Moreover, the geo-politics would, otherwise, further cement this division.
- Pakistan has a vested interest in a rapprochement in the Gulf.
- Pakistan should make the Saudi and Iranian leaders realize that should this conflict start it would escalate and expand rapidly to engulf the broader region.
- Solution of the conflict, which is complex and complicated, is not easy. Therefore, Pakistan should seek common ground on which the effort could be further developed. This minimum agenda could include a no aggression pact between the two sides and assurances on uninterrupted oil traffic.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan should in his meetings in Tehran and Riyadh renew his good offices and offer to host dialogue between the two countries including a potential summit level meeting.

ANALYSIS

A major conclusion of the event was that Pakistan government's mediation effort is well timed, in view of the geo-political situation, and that Pakistan has sound credentials with all sides to play an effective role.

The dispute, which Pakistan would seek to address is undoubtedly an intricate one, but the good news is that there is a growing realization on all sides that the conflict has to be at least contained immediately, if not resolved, because any outbreak of war will equally hurt all sides. One could see this desire for a mediatory intervention from the statements of the leaders of the two countries and President Trump as well.

There is, however, also the need to acknowledge the limits of mediation. The effort would be

Conditioned by the geo-political environment, role of US, regional dynamics, attitudes of neighbouring states, and the interest shown by the principal parties to the conflict. Most of these factors would be beyond Pakistan's control.

Furthermore, it is very difficult in such initiatives to measure progress or establish cause-effect relationship.

The speakers have, therefore, rightly called for cautious optimism about the success of PM Imran Khan's effort.

Finally, it needs to be noted that mediation is not just about high level diplomacy. It has to be supported adequately by the civil society and media. Therefore, there is a dire need for this effort to be complemented by a Track-II initiative that could foster wider support for the process.