

The Saudis and Pakistan's strategic shift on Syria

Financial Times, The 'A' List. 5 March 2014.

By Ahmed Rashid.

At the behest of Saudi Arabia, [Pakistan](#) has made a strategic shift from its so far neutral position on Syria's civil war - to one that portends to back the Syrian rebels and even provide them with arms through Riyadh.

The shift will have serious regional consequences as it has already deeply antagonised Iran, which supports the Syrian regime, and angered Pakistan's large Shia community which could prompt further sectarian conflict. It is also bad news for [Afghanistan](#), where Pakistan-Iran rivalry may restart once [US troops leave](#) that country.

[Saudi Arabia](#) is on a diplomatic offensive to woo all those Muslim states who have held a neutral position - to one where they fall in line with the Gulf Arab states that want an interim government in Damascus and the resignation of [President Bashar al-Assad](#). All the Gulf states are petrified of Iran, fear its potential nuclear weapons capability and deeply distrust the Americans for their recent overtures to Tehran.

However, if Saudi Arabia which practices Wahabbism - an extreme form of Sunni Islam - gets its way, it could put more Muslim states on a collision course with [Shia Iran](#). It would also involve them in taking sides in the Shia-Sunni divide that has escalated recently and has already plunged the Middle East and Pakistan into sectarian bloodbaths.

Further divisions along sectarian lines are dangerous in what is already a fragile Muslim world, because they further polarise Islamic countries and turn Shias into more of a persecuted minority everywhere. That means the plight of other minorities in Arab states such as Christians and Jews could be further jeopardised.

Media reports say that the Saudis would buy small arms from Pakistan's arms industry and that it would recruit more Pakistani retired soldiers and policemen for the [Gulf state of Bahrain](#) that has been facing long months of unrest as Shia protests against the Sunni ruling family have escalated.

The Sharif government has denied these reports, but western diplomats say the shift in Pakistan's policy is real. Islamabad has maintained a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Muslim countries, which makes any intervention in the Syrian conflict on the side of Saudi Arabia hugely controversial.

All the major opposition parties have already slammed the government for what its leaders called "a policy about-turn" and there is uproar that the government refuses to outline its intentions. Since January there have been at least five visits by members of the Saudi royal family to Islamabad including the Saudi foreign and deputy defence ministers, culminating in the two-day visit of Saudi Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz on February 15 just after Pakistan's new army chief General Raheel Sharif had visited Riyadh. Pakistan has always been close to the Saudis, despite Iran's concerns. In the 1980s at Riyadh's request Pakistan deployed tens of thousands of troops to protect the royal family and that appears to be happening again in Bahrain.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is particularly close to the Saudis, who rescued him from a long jail term in December 2000 when he was incarcerated by the previous military dictator General Pervez Musharraf. Mr Sharif then spent years in exile in Saudi Arabia where he also developed extensive business interests.

However, Iran considers itself the guardian of millions of Pakistani Shias who make up some 20 per cent of the total population. Tehran has long accused Pakistan of housing anti-Iranian militant groups such as Jandollah and others while Islamabad accuses Iran of hosting Baluch rebels fighting the Pakistan army for an independent Baluchistan. This murky tit-for-tat conflict on a long and open desert border has become blatantly aggressive recently.

In mid-February, just after Prince Salman's visit, Iran threatened to send its forces into Pakistan to retrieve five Iranian border guards who had been kidnapped. On February 24 Pakistani Taliban tried to blow up the Iranian consulate in Peshawar but were foiled. In October last year 14 Iranian border guards were killed by an anti-Iran group based in Pakistan.

This escalating rivalry may well also play out in Afghanistan where both countries have a bitter history and have backed different sets of ethnic warlords since the 1970s. Pakistan's backing of the Taliban in the 1990s almost led to Iran going to war with both the Taliban and Pakistan.

All the regional countries in the 1990s - but primarily Iran and Pakistan - fuelled the bloody civil war in Afghanistan that eventually led to al-Qaeda taking up residence there and the terror network launching the September 11 2001 attacks.

So far both Iran and Pakistan have refrained from any major confrontation in Afghanistan, but if relations worsen this could change once US and Nato troops leave Afghanistan. Iran is the only regional country that is adamant that the US does not leave behind a residual force after it pulls out.

The crises in Syria and Iraq are now creating serious consequence for the entire Muslim world, but so far the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation and other Muslim bodies have failed to play any role in trying to bring peace. It is time leading Muslim states led a peace offensive rather than one that further escalates the ever deepening sectarian divide in the Muslim world.

The writer is the author of five books, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink - the future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan'