



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Pakistan's Policy of Neutrality and Saudi Iranian Rivalry during the Syrian Crisis**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper makes an attempt to find the Pakistan's proclaimed position of neutrality during the period of escalated rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syrian crises after Arab Spring 2011. If Pakistan managed to stay neutral, then how Pakistan maintains its policy of neutrality during the worst times in the region's history. By using John Scott's model of Documentary Analysis, we explore the nature of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syrian crises. Syrian crisis presents a unique situation under which Pakistan's neutral policy will be tested under extreme circumstances. From the perspective of the concept of neutrality, it is argued that Pakistan tried to maintain a strict neutral policy towards Syrian Crisis. Even over the Syrian military's unverified use of chemical weapons, Pakistan powerfully condemned the United States' decision to intervene in Syrian crisis against the Assad regime. Pakistan has also criticized other Western powers by stressing on the political solution of Syrian crisis, which shows a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy to Western world. The goal of this research is to measure the scale of Pakistan's neutrality by reviewing Pakistan's position on Syrian Crisis.

**KEYWORDS** Iran, Neutrality, Pakistan's Foreign Policy, Saudi Arabia, Syria

**Introduction**

Middle East has remained one of the most important regions for Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan has been playing a role of mediator in resolving the tensions between the regional players in the Middle East. Hence, neutrality towards the Middle Eastern affairs has remained major part of Pakistani policy, especially vis-à-vis traditional and historical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The nature of Pakistan's proclaimed neutral foreign policy can be measured through the analysis of a wide range of issues, events, and episodes. The emergence of Arab Spring was a major event in the history of Saudi- Iranian rivalry, which intensified the Saudi- Iranian competition for regional dominance (Muzaffar, Khan & Yaseen, 2017). A series of anti- government protests, armed rebellion, and uprisings spread across the region which challenged the power dynamics of the Middle Eastern politics. Amidst the turmoil of the Arab spring, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been involved in assisting the opposing groups within the domestic political conflicts. In their quest for the power in regional affairs, both the rival countries engaged in proxy wars by providing funds, arms assistance and public support in order to legitimate their claim for the Islamic leadership in the Middle East.

In addition to Saudi Arabia and UAE, Pakistan gives great importance to the strategic relationships with other countries in the Middle East, particularly Iran, Egypt and Syria in formulating the strategic and diplomatic policies (Mustafa,2007). As (Khan, 2013) describes in his research article that Pakistan's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia remained balanced over the years. Pakistan's relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia are based upon mutually benefitted interests, such as Gulf economic assistance to Pakistan is associated

with Pakistan's support for Arab dynasties in the domain of security. As Pakistan is the only country with nuclear capability and strong military in the Muslim world, its role in the Middle East is very vital (Kamal, 2013).

A report, entitled 'Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War,' published by F. Gregory Gause in 2014, evaluates that the crisis in Syria, Yemen and Iraq is the key element behind the recent Arab Cold War, which has intensified the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to dominate the regional affairs (Gause, 2014). Their ongoing Sunni-Shi'ite proxy wars in different parts such as in Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Iraq, have divided this region into two camps on the basis of different political ideologies. This ideological division has significant implications for Pakistan's foreign policy.

The goal of this research is to measure the scale of Pakistan's neutrality by reviewing Pakistan's position on Syrian Crisis. Syria is selected due to the direct use of proxies by Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian conflict. While discussing Iran and Saudi Arabia as key regional players, this research would investigate the question, is Pakistan really neutral toward Middle East? If yes, then to what extent and why Pakistan's foreign policy is neutral towards these key players of the region, especially in the face of extreme situations.

### **Historical Background**

Syria is one of the states in the Middle East where Saudi Arabia and Iran have extended their involvement to increase their influence through direct proxies. The Syrian Crisis started in March 2011, when protests started to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This protest movement was part of the Arab Spring that emerged in Middle East to unseat autocratic leaders in the region. The crack down on protestors by Assad forces led to the eruption of violence in Syria. Resultantly, 500,000 people were killed and millions were displaced. According to reports published by United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 5.6 million children and 13.1 million people have been severely affected by the Syrian civil war (UNICEF, 2018). Furthermore, according to United Nations Security Council briefing, a humanitarian disaster has emerged in Syria, as 11.7 million needed humanitarian assistance and more than 5.6 million people started living as refugees (UNSC, 2019). Historically, a century ago, the land of Syria was a pivotal battleground for international and regional forces during and after the World War I (WWI). Syria, a parliamentary republic, got independence from France in 1946. The country saw a series of military coups due to political instability and inexperienced rulers. In modern Middle Eastern settings, interventions by the regional and international powers have always shaped and reshaped the importance of Syria in Middle Eastern politics (Khouri, 2018). Since 2011, Syria has been at receiving end due to the interplay among local, regional and international powers. In the forthcoming post war period, Syria is expected to reshape the other fragments of the Middle Eastern affairs.

In December 2012, Glenn E. Robinson, an Associate Professor at the US Naval Postgraduate School, in his research article, 'Syria's Long Civil War' discusses the detailed history and investigates the historical factors behind the current Syrian crises. He writes that when the Arab nationalist socialist Baath party seized power in 1970, Hafez al-Assad, a member of Socialist Ba'ath Party and Allawi minority in Syria brought political stability to the country. Furthermore, he explains that Alawite is a branch of Shiism, covering ten percent of the total population in Sunni majority state. Besides Alawite, the population is comprised by Christians, Kurds and other subdivisions of these minorities (Robinson, 2012). In 1976, Hafez al-Assad interfered in Lebanon's civil war with the extensive regional and international support to back Lebanon's Christians. Resultantly, this gave rise to the rapid growth of Islamist politics throughout the region and low intensity civil war continued for a long time which brought the Assad government to the brink of breakdown. After the death of Hafez al-Assad, his son, Bashar al-Assad became the president of Syria after referendum in July 2000 (Zirulnick, 2011). Since 2011, after the emergence of the so-called "Arab Spring", anti-government demonstrations broke out against Assad's minority based authoritarian regime. The current crisis in Syria was escalated due to the rise of numerous

political and armed opposition groups, when the Assad's troops killed protestors who were writing anti-regime slogans on walls in the town of Dara 'a (Mumtaz, 2015). Subsequently, after 2011, the non-violent Syrian uprising was rapidly exploited by the regional and international forces, which fractured Syria internally. Besides other jihadist groups within the opposition, Syria's underground Muslim Brotherhood has been the part of current Syrian crisis. Subsequently, Syria has become a battleground for the regional and international powers, where a wide range of warring parties are fighting their active military battles to seek control of the Levant region. These activities and involvement of different actors show Syria's historical, geopolitical, and strategic importance in the Middle Eastern region.

### **Literature Review**

The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future written by Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr in 2006 presents a logical and historical background of sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran by associating the roots of contemporary conflicts of Middle East with the death of Holy Prophet (PBUH) in dates back to 632 A.D, when the disagreement was appeared over successor. He sees the current conflicts in Muslim world as an undergoing alteration between the different sectarian and religious communities in Middle East by comparing it with the Protestant-Catholic conflict that became the source of transition to modernity in the western world. He believes that historical and theological factors have changed the doctrinal conflicts into political disputes by fueling the sectarian difference. Formerly, regional and western commentators have been overstated the sectarianism as the major factor behind the rivalry of these two states, however, Shia-Sunni tensions, particularly, within clerical establishment, are a factor in Saudi-Iran relationship (Nasr, 2007). Furthermore, King Abdullah noted in an interview that sectarian differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran are a "matter of concern" but not a "matter of danger". Meanwhile, these two regional powers have also displayed the inclination towards pragmatic collaboration due to the convergence of interest in different areas of conflict in the region, such as, in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iran have shown determinations to mediate and mitigate sectarian tensions, even though local dynamics had been quickly undermined the efforts of rapprochement of these regional rivals (Slackman, 2009).

Paul Aarts, Gerd Nonneman in 2007 write a book titled Saudi Arabia in the Balance, which not only investigates the impacts of domestic, regional and international policies of Saudi Arabia on world affairs but also discusses the contemporary understanding of Saudi Arabia as a kingdom and debates on the future direction of regional affairs of Middle East. This book further perceives the political factionalism as a certain factor in the deterioration of bilateral relationship of Saudi Arabia and Iran (Nonneman, 2005). Many research studies have been analyzed the different variable drivers to understand the variation in the bilateral relationship of two rival states, as Gulf commentator noted that fluctuation in foreign policy approaches of both countries is the ultimate outcome of the regional changes rather than the expression of the national interests (Hanizadeh, 2008).

Another book titled, A New Structure for Security, Peace, and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf by Seyed Hossein Mousavian, perceives the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as one of the major challenges to the peace and security at regional and international level. He describes different prospects and possibilities to resolve the contemporary tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, this book throws light on opportunities by envisioning normalized, friendly and diplomatic relations between two rivals (Mousavian, 2020).

Historically, the current dynamics of the regional rivalry can be understood through the fruitful insight of the regional in pre-1979 period. Formerly, during 1960, under the Shah regime in Iran, both states, without a significant turmoil, had maintained good relationship by sharing common security concerns against the anti-monarchist agenda of Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser.

Neutrality has been existed as an important concept throughout the history of international relations as a political, legal and military strategy. (Goetschel, 1998). The meaning of neutrality has evolved from a purely legal concept to a broader political interpretation that creates more ambiguity regarding the status and role of neutral states. Neutrality, as a loosely defined concept, has been regarded differently by different adherent states that claim to observe this principle due to the changing international system at regional and international level. In international law, neutrality is seen as a legal status which involves some roles and duties on the part of neutral states towards belligerents and on the part of belligerents towards neutrals and emphasize on a position of non-participation in respect of conflicts between rival states.

Syrian crisis as the outcome of Arab Spring where neighboring forces are providing important patronage to the opposing parties in the Syrian civil war. For example, Iran, Iraq and Lebanese-backed Hezbollah movement are in support of the Assad regime, while on the other hand, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar are behind the opposition forces. The conventional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria is motivated by geopolitical ambitions rather than spiritual difference over religious beliefs. (Barnes-Dacey, 2013) mentions in his article that regional engagements in Syria are the product of strategic determinations. These changing aspects of Saudi- Iran rivalry in Syria can be drawn from 2003 Iraq War, which has set a stage for the new competition for regional hegemony. Additionally, this internal ongoing civil war has become the pivotal international and regional battleground where the regional and foreign powers such as, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United States and United Arab Emirates are fighting either directly or indirectly since 2012 (Khouri, 2018). The collapse of pro-Iranian regime and the formation of friendly Sunni regime in Syria would create possibilities for Saudi Arabia and its allies to not only expand their influence over Shia- dominated Baghdad but also a Sunni state in Syria would help them to strengthen their positions in Lebanon by consolidating pro-Saudi actors in different regional conflicts (Hassan, 2013). From this perspective, the regional nature of Syrian crisis is directly linked to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which disrupted the regional order in favor of Iran. In the aftermath of the Iraq war, Iran became the dominant power in the region by exploiting the invasion and afterward expanding its influence in Syria and Lebanon. However, Saudi Arabia saw the Syrian crisis as a means to reverse the post-2003 regional order, and an opportunity to dislodge Iran's increasing power in Syria which could create domino effect by weakening Iran's hold in Iraq and Lebanon (Mazzetti, 2016).

Historically, Saudi Arabia and Syria do not have much in common, but occasionally both nations have found some opportunities for the strong partnership as, in 1990, during the Gulf crises, Syria sent thousands of military troops to Saudi Arabia to contribute to the international coalition against Saddam's invasion of Kuwait (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). Moreover, the relationships between Saudi Arabia and Syria have never been directly contentious but in 2005, after the assassination of Rafic Hariri, a Saudi-backed former Lebanese prime minister, Saudi Arabia adopted an open anti-Syrian stance by blaming Syrian government for this political assassination and putting pressure on Syrian president to withdraw from Lebanon. Moreover, reports emerged blaming Syrian-backed Hezbollah for the assassination of Hariri (Macdonald, 2010). Although, Saudi Arabia has already been countering the uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia by establishing itself as an anti-revolutionary actor during the Arab Spring, but it sided with regime change forces in Syria by providing huge financial assistance and armaments to anti-Assad militant groups (Wagner, 2013). Similarly, due to the personal, sectarian, and, above all, political reasons, Saudi Arabia is a strong supporter and backer of several rebel groups in Syria, which have been insisting on removing Alawite-dominated regime (Syria crisis: Where key countries stand, 2015). Likewise, by perceiving Syria as Tehran's most important strategic regional asset, Saudi Arabia, with other Arab states, has become the most vocal regional actor which is openly backing a regime change in Syria (Alam, 2018). In other words, Syria is seen as the strategic core of the Middle Eastern region and the most influential factor in determining future of regional balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although, from mid-

2008-2011, Saudi Arabia tried to improve its relations with Syria by adopting the policy of rapprochement as King Abdullah visited Damascus in October 2009 (Butters, 2009). In August 2012, Saudi Arabia hosted the summit of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to isolate Syria on diplomatic front and to support the rebel opposition against the Assad regime (Alsharif, 2012). Meanwhile, in June 2011, Arab League, 22-members gathering of majority Arab nations, for the first time, criticized openly the violence in Syria by urging United Nations to take action against Assad regime (Guardian, 2011). Soon after the strong condemnation by Arab League, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait protested by recalling their ambassadors from Damascus and by strongly criticizing the deadly crackdown by Assad's government. Subsequently, Arab League expelled Syria after accusing Asad of war crimes in deadly crackdown on opposition forces. Moreover, in September 2013, as Syrian regime allegedly used chemical weapons against opposition forces, Arab League conducted a special meeting of foreign ministers to insist international community and United Nations to take deterrent actions against the Syrian Government (Jazeera, 2013). Subsequently, above mentioned actions by Saudi Arabia and its allies deepened and accelerated regional confrontation between two camps of nations roughly allied to either Iran or Saudi Arabian sides. Due to the series of engagements in overlapping regional conflicts, increasing divisions within Syrian opposition's Sunni groups and emergence of more extremist groups – that might create threats for Saudi's own domestic stability- Saudi Arabia revised its policy by maintaining an unusual arrangement worth billions of dollar, with Central Investigation Agency (CIA) for the training of rebel forces against Assad's regime (Mazzetti, 2016). Overall, Saudi Arabia, with other Gulf Arab states, considered the regime victory in Syria an establishment of Iranian-led Shia dominance mini-Persian empire, starting from Afghanistan through Iran, Iraq, Syria to southern Lebanon (The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Middle East, 2006)

### **Material and Methods**

This article measures the scale of neutrality in Pakistan's foreign policy towards Syrian Crisis. Rather than scrutinizing every aspect of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia or Pakistan-Iran relationship, we chose to focus on salient events in which Pakistan has vested interests to achieve favorable results. In this case, we will explain series of events that happened in Syria within the defined period of time and evaluate Pakistan's position on these issues. In order to answer research questions, the researchers pursued an analytical and descriptive route by reviewing extensive literature and different research studies on the topic. This article has qualitative scope, as Syrian crises would be analyzed by using John Scott's model of Documentary Analysis to explore the nature of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Pakistan's position on these issues. By applying this research method, Syrian Crisis would be discussed in its contemporary contexts for the better understanding of war of influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, given the historical background of Syrian Crisis, Pakistan's foreign policy behavior will be examined thoroughly by applying the framework of defined indicators of neutrality. By analyzing the multiple dimensions of this issue, a perfect continuity and suitable assessment can be drawn regarding the factors behind Saudi-Iran rivalry and Pakistan's claim of neutrality.

There are multiple indicators of neutrality which can help in measuring state's position of neutrality towards Middle East. These indicators are derived from international law of neutrality and international treaties particularly, the Paris Declaration of 1857, the Hague Convention 1907 No. V & XIII with respect to the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land and in Naval. Selected indicators of neutrality are given below.

- First, non-participation in military alliance, which means a neutral state always avoids entering into any military alliance in case of conflict between belligerents.
- Second, neutral state may not augment the war making capacity of any belligerent by keeping itself away from the conflicts.

- Third indicator of neutrality is to mediate and mitigate sources of tensions between belligerents.
- Fourth, neutral states refuse to provide any military assistance to any belligerent state.

### **Role of Iran in Syrian Crisis**

Syria and Iran have always maintained strong relations since the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. Meanwhile, during the Iran-Iraq war 1980-88, after Libya, Syria was the only Arab state that supported Iran diplomatically and rhetorically due to the common animosity against Saddam's regime in Iraq. Common hostility against Israel, deeply distrustful relations with US, and joint support for Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas are some of the reasons for a strong relationship between Syria and Iran (Terrill, 2011). Moreover, the relations between Hezbollah and Iran was reinforced after 2003, when Iraqi factor became an emphatic component, as Iran-backed Shia segments that assumed mainstream power in Iraq, which further increased Iran's regional influence by adding new dimensions to the Syrian crisis (Khouri, 2018). This alliance between Iran, Syria and Lebanon is the outcome of Iran's regional Arab strategy which was developed during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s (Robinson, 2012). By expanding its influence over Iraq after US-invasion in 2003, Iran increased its presence across different parts of the Arab region and took Syrian conflict as an opportunity to forge strong relations with both states and non-state actors in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Turkey, Palestine, and elsewhere (Buren, 2015). Moreover, since 2012, Iran has been supporting different militias and paramilitary groups in Syria and Iraq to further enhance its regional influence against Saudi-Arabia. A joint report on Iran's strategy in Middle East, published in 2013 by Institute for the Study of War, identified an extensive, expensive and integrated strategies to retain Assad regime, and to pursues its expansionist aspirations by keeping its ability to use Syrian territorial as well as aerial routes (Fulton, 2013). The report further notified the role of Iranian security and intelligence agencies services, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Quds Force and law enforcement forces in helping the Iranian military to assist Assad's position in Syria. Moreover, in April 2012, Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Lebanese Hezbollah, openly acknowledged the role of Hezbollah in protecting Iranian strategic interests to maintain Assad's regime through a well-trained force (Fulton, 2013). Moreover, the commander of Iranian revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) did not see the uprising against the Assad's regime in Syria as the result of Arab Spring like in Tunisia and Egypt, but observed it as a plot designed by Iran's regional rivals to banish an important Iranian ally (Crisis Group interviews, 2019). Resultantly, thousands of Islamic Revolutionary Guards have been sent to fight alongside Assad's armed forces to win the civil war in Syria (Qiblawi, 2019).

Later on, Saudi Arabia started to step back from Syrian conflict due to many reasons such as, the rise of Islamic State (ISIS), increasing anti-terrorism policies of West, growing Saudi focus on nearer to border problems, and Mohammed Bin Salman's consolidation of power (Lund, 2017). Currently, the change in the regional political order will ominously shake the balance of power in the Middle East, as, Iran, Syrian Government, Hezbollah, several local non-state actor's militias, paramilitary groups and most importantly global power Russia have designed a successful and multiyear transnational Axis of Resistance, in the favor of Assad's regime (Miller, 2017). Overall, (Newton, 2017) believes that the war for military supremacy in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon has been won by Iran.

### **Pakistan's position on Syria**

The above-mentioned changing state of affairs in Syria presented significant foreign policy challenges for neighboring as well as the non- Middle Eastern countries like Pakistan. Due to the complexity of the issue, Pakistan faced a dilemma in conceiving its foreign policy position to the Syrian crises. Pakistan had to adopt different approaches and policies, as Syrian crises has been transformed from a civil war to military conflict between numerous internal and external actors. Meanwhile, the direct involvement of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Russia, America and Turkey has shaped a diverse set of calculations for Pakistan's

foreign policy decision makers. Resultantly, Pakistan has faced considerable challenges in responding to multiple events related to Syrian crises due to the old geopolitical divergences between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Deterioration in Saudi-Iran relationship has affected Pakistan's neutral approach to the Middle Eastern issues, as, long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran makes it gradually problematic for Pakistan to avoid choosing sides. Pakistan has been continuously advocating for a wide-ranging negotiated solution of Syrian crises.

Samuel Ramani in his article, presents a historical sight of Pakistan's position on Syrian crises and indicates that Pakistani volunteers have been recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to participate in pro-Assad military campaign since the Syrian war officially began in March 15, 2011 (Ramani, 2016). The recruitment of Pakistan's Shi'ite community to fight for the Assad's regime in Syrian civil war has given the Syrian war a new international dimension by widening Shia-Sunni divide in the region. As an article published in Express Tribune, in December 2015, authenticated Iran's involvement in recruiting Pakistan's Shi'ite community through the Zeinabioun, a group that recruits Shias by using social media from the region to fight against rebel opposition in Syria (Reuters, 2015). Furthermore, the Zeinabioun is a unit based on Pakistani Shias who are recruited by IRGC from the Baluchistan's Hazara community, Gilgit Baltistan and tribal areas such as Parachinar, the capital city of Kurram district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, along the Afghan border to fight for Assad's regime (Zahab, 2009). Additionally, it is not a secret now that a numbers of Pakistanis are reported to be buried in Iran with their names, pictures and national identities, who were killed in 2016, fighting in Zeinabiyoun unit in Syria alongside IRGC, Hezbollah and Assad's military (Ahmad, 2017). Subsequently, Pakistan's security circles have shown grievances on these recruitments, as reaction by the Sunni militant groups would further aggravate sectarian divide in Pakistan. Despite the fact that Pakistan is a Sunni majority state and a close partner of Saudi Arabia, Pakistani government has preserved a resilient association with Syrian President Bashar al- Assad. Pakistan's disregard for Western intervention in Syrian internal politics can be explained by historical legacies of Pakistan's rulers. The partnership between Pakistan and Syria can be defined by the close relationship between Assad and Bhutto families, as Bhutto was also in favor of left-wing principles that resembled the Syrian Socialist Ba'ath Party. Moreover, (Ramani, 2016), sheds light on the first historical visit of Syrian head of state to Pakistan during the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Lahore in 1974. The strong alliance between Bhutto and Hafez al-Assad was revealed when Assad fiercely condemned Bhutto's execution in 1979 (Khan, 2012). Afterwards, three Bhutto family member were granted asylum by the Syrian government. Nonetheless, Pakistan and Syria stabilized relations during first tenure of Benazir Bhutto. Likewise, some analysts believe that the relations between Pakistan and Syria are based on strong alliance between Assad and Bhutto families rather than state to state relationship (Ahmad, 2017). Although, some analysts believe that Pakistan foreign policy behavior towards Syrian crisis has not yet been motivated by religious sectarian tendencies, but history shows that during the Pakistan People Party government, Pakistan remained silent over the issues of human rights violations in Syria by Assad's regime. As in August 2001, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Syria over the deadly crackdown on the demonstrators by the Assad's forces, Pakistan joined China and Russia to block voting against Assad's violations of human rights in the United Nations (Imtiaz, 2011). Furthermore, despite the pressure mounted by the Arab League and several international human rights organizations over the bloodshed in Syria, no public statement was made by Pakistan's Foreign Office over thousands of deaths. Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, former foreign minister was reported to explain that the silence of PPP government over Syrian Crises is deeply rooted in Assad- Bhutto alliance during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regime (Imtiaz, 2011). Furthermore, On January 8, 2010, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari officially visited Syria on his two-day visit to offer commiseration to the Syrian President Assad and extend Pakistani collaboration in economic and security spheres (APP, 2010). Meanwhile, in July 2012, Pakistan again backed China and Russia's stance to block a UN Security Council resolution about the sanctions on

Syria due to the human rights violations. In August 2012, Pakistan took a strong position on Syrian crises by joining the group of countries that supported the Assad's government in international consultative meeting on Syrian crises held in Iran (Syed, Pakistan backs Syrian govt, opposes foreign intervention, 2012). Subsequently, this clear stance of PPP government on Syria was likely to aggravate its relations with Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and US. Furthermore, Pakistan's foreign office was reported to show great concern over the military action against Syria by the Western powers by asking the world to respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Yousaf, FO briefing: Pakistan opposes military action in Syria, 2013). Due to the above-mentioned events, Saudi Arabia was unhappy about Pakistan's foreign policy behavior towards Syrian Crisis. However, in 2013, as Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) took over the power, Saudi Arabia was successful in managing the balance of relations in its favor. As, in February 2014, after the meeting between Saudi crown prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz al Saud and then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan took a clear shift in its position on Syria by assenting to the formation of a temporary governing body to replace Assad's regime in Syria (Yousaf, Ouster of Assad regime: Riyadh wins Islamabad's support on Syria, 2014). Furthermore, under the Saudi pressure, Pakistan was reported to participate in Syrian Crisis by providing anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank rocket to defeat pro-regime forces (AFP, FO says no plan to provide arms to Syrian rebels, 2014). Resultantly, this apparent shift in Pakistan's position towards Syrian crises made Iran uncomfortable, as Iran's interior minister warned Pakistan that Iran will send troops into Pakistani territory to rescue the kidnapped border guards. Due to Iran's unhappiness, (Haider, 2015) reported that, in a briefing by Pakistan's Foreign Office, Pakistan again marked a significant shift in its stance by rejecting any attempt to topple the Syrian President Assad's government. Furthermore, after the imminent joint air strikes by the United States and other Western countries, Pakistan Foreign Office, at the weekly news briefings, showed grievances and again urged to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria.

Above listed events show that despite Saudi's efforts to weaken Iranian influence in Pakistan, Pakistan had managed to adopt a strictly balanced policy towards Syrian crisis. Analysts believe that despite the death of half a million people by Assad's forces in Syria, Pakistan adopted a nervous position just to appease Iran and Russia (Ahmad, 2017).

### **Analysis of Syrian Crises**

To aid the reader, it is worth mentioning that four indicators of neutrality in Pakistan's foreign policy were outlined after reviewing an extensive literature on neutrality. Contrary to the Yemen crisis, it is pertinent to mention that despite huge division among the regional and global actors, Pakistan had tried to maintain a strict neutral policy towards Syrian Crisis. Although many significant shifts have been observed, as PML-N replaced PPP, but Pakistan's commitment to stay neutral has not been wavered. Even over the Syrian military's unverified use of chemical weapons, Pakistan powerfully condemned the United States' decision to intervene in Syrian crisis against Assad regime. Pakistan has also criticized other Western powers by stressing on the political solution of Syrian crises, which shows a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy towards the Western world. By keeping the consequences of Iraq war in view, Pakistan linked the survival of Assad's regime with the stable Syria and adopted pro-regime policy towards Syria, which has opened new opportunities to strengthen its relations with China and Russia — the leaders of pro-regime bloc in United Nations. Furthermore, the trade relations between Pakistan and Syria had been disrupted due to the downfall in Syrian economy and hike in petrol prices in international market during Syrian crisis.

During Nawaz Sharif government, to appease Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's anti-Assad position became the reason of sectarian division in Pakistan. As a large number of military volunteers from marginalized Shi'ite community from Parachinar, in Pakistan, had joined Zeinabiyoon, a Shia militant unit operated through social media by IRGC. Previously, Parachinar had already witnessed a number of terrorist attacks that caused hundreds of



casualties in Pakistan. Resultantly, Pakistan adopted an official stance of ‘strict neutrality’ during the Syrian crisis to appease both, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

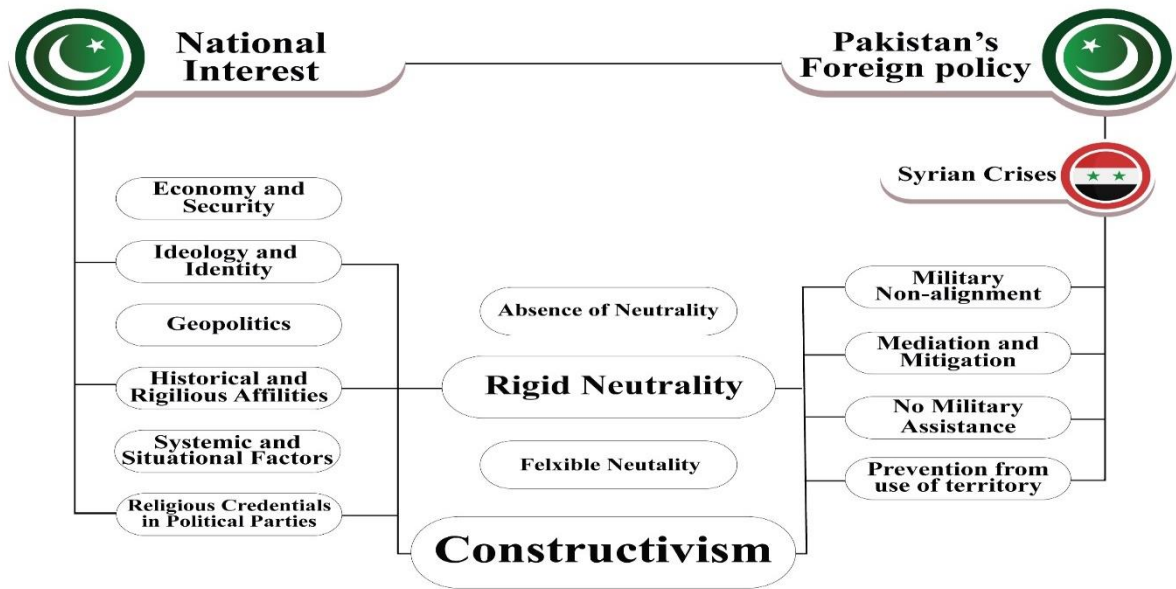


Figure I: Pakistan’s position on Syrian Crises

The above Figure indicates that Pakistan has managed to adopt a strict neutral position towards Syrian Crises. All the indicators of neutrality are readily apparent in Pakistan’s behavior towards the rivalry of Saudi Arabia and Iran during the Syrian crisis. All the indicators of neutrality were followed by Pakistan, which included non-participation in military alliance or military non-alignment, neutrality in augmenting the war making capacity of any belligerent by keeping itself away from the conflict; mediating and mitigating the sources of tensions between belligerents; refusal to provide any military assistance; and obligation to prevent belligerents from use of neutral’s territory to transport troops.

The presence of all indicators of neutrality in Pakistan’s position towards Syrian crisis have led to rigid neutral foreign policy in Syria vis-à-vis the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Figure I shows the multiple factors behind Pakistan’s rigid neutral position in Syria such as ideological factors, historical and religious affinities, and religious credentials in Pakistan’s political ruling parties. Although, sometimes significant shifts have been observed during the PML(N) government in 2014, when PML-N replaced PPP, but Pakistan’s commitment to stay neutral has not wavered. Even over the Syrian military’s unverified use of chemical weapons, Pakistan powerfully condemned the United States’ decision to intervene in Syrian crisis against the Assad regime. Due to multiple factors such as historical and religious affinities and religious credentials in Pakistan’s political parties and ideological reasons Pakistan had managed to adopt a strict and balance neutral foreign policy towards Syrian crisis.

**Discussion**

The data analysis has certainly shown that the perspective of ‘neutrality’ has been the important theoretical perspective of foreign policy to provide an appropriate framework for understanding Pakistan’s foreign policy towards Syrian Crisis. To answer our research questions, we analyzed different factors which influenced Pakistan’s foreign policy behavior. I then assessed whether the concept of neutrality is better suited to explain Pakistan’s foreign policy behavior towards different disputes in the Middle East.

The perspective of neutrality showed how Pakistan pursued and protected its national interest to build a narrative that rationalized Pakistan’s behavior towards Syrian crisis. Pakistan and Middle Eastern states have a symbiotic economic and security relationship, with Pakistani security institutions providing security to the major states in Middle East, while the Middle Eastern states provides largest sources of remittances to

Pakistan. Besides the geographical proximity, historical and religious affinities and continuing cooperation in the security sector, the most significant reason is the presence of a huge number of Pakistani diasporas in Middle East and their share in the total remittances sent back to the country annually.

The question arises: what would be the possible consequences and implications for Pakistan in the long run if Pakistan could not manage to maintain its neutrality towards Saudi Arabia and Iran? Pakistan's position of neutrality towards Syrian crises is the product of a number of internal and external factors. Pakistan's internal security concerns are the major factor behind Pakistan's decision to stay neutral in Syria. Otherwise, Pakistan's decision to side with either side can encourage the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan. Any intensification in tensions between the two rivals would not only promote sectarian polarization but also increase political instability in the Middle East, which is inevitable to have serious economic and internal security repercussions for Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

Economic and ideological factors has been remained the most vital and determining driving forces behind Pakistan's foreign policy behavior towards Syrian Crise. Consequently, Pakistan foreign policy is shaped in the framework of sentiments and necessities. To understand Pakistan relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran it is important to understand the different factors behind the Saudi-Iran rivalry based on long-standing historical, political, ideological differences. Thus, it is not surprising that the history of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria is based on long-lasting structural tensions and aspirations for the Islamic leadership in the region. Along with these factors, sectarian and ethnics differences have divided the Saudi Iranian population towards chronic hostility. The current crises in Syria, is the key element behind the recent Arab Cold War, which has been intensifying the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to dominate the regional affairs. These ongoing Sunni-Shi'ite proxy war in Syria have divided this region into two camps based on different political ideologies. This ideological division has significant implications on Pakistan foreign policy towards Middle Eastern states especially Saudi Arabia and Iran.

it is pertinent to mention that despite the huge division among the regional and global actors, Pakistan had tried to maintain a strict neutral policy towards Syrian Crises. Although many significant shifts have been observed, as PML-N replaced PPP, but Pakistan's commitment to stay neutral has not wavered. Even over the Syrian's military unverified use of chemical weapons, Pakistan powerfully condemned the United States' decision to intervened in Syrian crises against the Assad regime. Pakistan has also criticized other western powers by stressing on the political solution of Syrian crises, which shows a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy to western world. By keeping the consequences of Iraq war in view, Pakistan linked the survival of Assad's regime with the stable Syria and adopted pro- regime policy towards Syria, which has opened new opportunities by strengthening its relations with china and Russia — the leaders of pro-regime bloc in United Nations. Furthermore, the trade relations between Pakistan and Syria had disturbed due to the downfall in Syrian economy and hike in petrol prices in international market during Syrian crises. During Nawaz Sharif Government, to appease Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's anti-Assad position became the reason of sectarian division in Pakistan. As, many military volunteers from marginalized Shi'ite community from Parachinar, in Pakistan, had joined Zeinabiyoon, a Shia militant unit operated through social media by IRGC. Previously, Parachinar had already been witnessed several numbers of terrorist attacks that caused hundreds of casualties in Pakistan. Resultantly, Pakistan adopted an official stance of "strict neutrality" during the Syrian crises to appease both, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of the research paper clearly show that in future there is a need of the use of wider and comprehensive approaches to analyze Pakistan's foreign policy towards Saudi Iran rivalry in Syria. Although, this research paper focuses more on the Pakistan's point of view and its foreign policy behavior, but the greater detail of specific cases can

provide a comprehensive understanding of the cases for the future researcher. Pakistan's bilateral relations in the context of Saudi Iran rivalry in Syria can be examined in future researcher. Moreover, the future researchers can build their work on this research and take it a step forward by including more recent events in their analysis. For example, it would be very interesting to examine the impacts of latest development in Saudi-Iran relationships on Pakistan's foreign policy. The overall implication of this study is to include more cases to examine the factors behind Saudi-Iran rivalry and Pakistan's position towards Middle East.

Furthermore, national identity has been the most central part of Pakistan foreign policy, as observed in the literature review..

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