

Iran Pakistan Relations in the Context of Upheavals in the Region from 1979 to 1989

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Abstract

The geo-location and geo-politics during the Cold War and American sponsored alliances led to close relations between Pakistan and Iran. The secular outlook of early leaders of Pakistan and Iran also underpinned the good relations between the two countries. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had personal and friendly relations with the Shah of Iran, however, later on misgivings appeared between them from July 1977 onwards there were great upheavals in the region- Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran. The fall of Shah and emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini completely changed the scenario and internal and external politics of Iran. Both Zia-ul Haq and Ayatollah Khomeini wanted to Islamize their countries but in their own way. In foreign policy Zia was pro-while Khomeini was anti-West and imperialism. Pakistan became a front-line State in the US sponsored war in Afghanistan against Russians. Pakistan also toed the Saudi (Wahabbi) line and Madrassas prospered in Pakistan while Iran backed the Shia minorities in Pakistan. The Sunni-Shia divide in Pakistan also impacted the relations between Zia's Pakistan and Khomeini's Iran. There was also a war by proxies of Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Iran, Islam, Pakistan, relations, revolution

Introduction

The last quarter of 1977 onwards proved to be a time of great upheavals and turmoil in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. General Zia-ul Haq toppled the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) through a military coup d'état on 5th July, 1977 and on 4th April, 1979 Bhutto was hanged (Paracha, 2016). A communist coup took place in Afghanistan in 1978 and at the end of 1979 Russian forces entered into Afghanistan (Fearn, p-13, 2007). Throughout the 1980's, proxy war continued in Afghanistan which had a great bearing on the happenings in Pakistan and Iran. In Iran a successful revolution took place against Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979 and an Islamic form of government was formed. From 1980 to 1988 there was a bloody war between Iran and Iraq (Fatemi,

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2021). Since the revolution, Iran has undergone through many trials and tribulations but its Islamic polity is still intact. All these tumultuous events strongly influenced the relations between Pakistan and Iran.

Bhutto and Shah's Bonhomie and Turns and Twists in Relations

Some of the main reasons for Shah's close relations with Pakistan could be that the Shah felt insecure and uneasy with the threat of Communism and Arab nationalism in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. US influence, geographic location and geo-politics during the Cold War led to the close ties between Pakistan and Iran (Vatanka, p-11, 2017). Pakistan's leaders- both civilian and military from 1947 to 1977 were secular in outlook and Bhutto too was a forward looking maverick. While Shah who was a despot in political matters, however, he wanted to modernize and Westernize Iranian society. Earlier, the Shah had helped Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 wars between Pakistan and India. Shah also supported Bhutto in curbing the insurgency in Pakistani Baluchistan in 1970s. Bhutto tried to bolster up the ties with the Shah through personal contacts and relationing. But there occurred turns and twists in these relations when Bhutto increased links with the Arab countries. In February 1974, the Islamic summit was held in Lahore which the Shah didn't attend. According to Alex Vatanka, "Iran had gotten rich because of influx of petro-dollars and Shah looked upon Pakistan in a patronizing manner while Pakistan was in trouble and fought for its existence (Vatanka, p-11, 2017). According to Rafi Raza, "Shah and his family had a supercilious demeanor towards others which ultimately led to his downfall" (Raza, p-229, 1998). When Bhutto was going to be hanged, most of the leaders of the world asked for clemency and Shah received a letter from Bhutto to save him. Bhutto wrote, "I am willing to prove my intentions (to ul-Haq) by leaving Pakistan and come to live in Iran. I consider Iran my second home. My wife is Iranian- and I have always considered you my friend" (Qazilbash, 2017, p-140). Earlier Bhutto had said that 'Shah' knew about the military coup d'état in Pakistan. Bhutto and Shah's bonhomie and their ambivalence later on was somewhat lukewarm but they had not completely parted ways.

Zia's Yearning for an Islamic State and Relations with the 'Shah'.

Pakistan had witnessed two martial laws before (General Ayub and General Yahya) who were secular and liberal in outlook and who kept religious parties at the fringes of Pakistani politics. Prior to Zia, Bhutto was also a forward looking and modern man. In Pakistan, there were demonstrations by 'Pakistan National Alliance' against the allegedly

rigged elections, earlier in 1977. The PNA (Pakistan National Alliance) was mostly spearheaded by conservative and Islamic parties. “The idea was to prepare the ground for the full implementation of Islamic laws and culture’- an initial step in Jamaat leader and scholar Abdul-Ala Maudoodi’s overall thesis on the formation of an Islamic State” (Paracha, 2013). The slogan of PNA was Nizam-i-Mustafa (Islamic system). Taking advantage of the chaos and mood of the demonstrators, Zia intervened and took power through a military coup. He strengthened the half-hearted religious policies of Bhutto and Pakistan’s body-Politik underwent a complete change. In his drive towards Islamization Zia turned towards the change in culture, law, education and economy of Pakistan. A federal Sharia council of religious law court was created to determine cases based on the teachings of Quran and Sunna (Wynbrandt, 2009, p-216). In fact, Zia tried to Islamize every fabric of Pakistani society.

Zia ul-Haq ascendency as a President of Pakistan had mixed feelings in Iran during the Reza Shah’s period. Gone was Shah’s close friend Zulfikar Bhutto with whom he had bonded well since the Ayub era albeit there were periods of intense disagreement/ Here was an Islamist (Zia ul-Haq) who went on the other way round. Zia ul-Haq had deposed Bhutto but the old problems of Pakistan’s poor economy and reliance on foreign aid and weapons persisted. The sanctions were imposed by Carter administration in April 1979 on Pakistan under the Symington amendment were because of the country’s nuclear program. When Zia asked for more financial aid from Shah, “he was condescendingly informed that Pakistan needed to improve its economic performance and launch reforms (Vatanka, 2017, p.130). It seemed Shah was not willing to be as generous to Zia ul-Haq as his forerunner Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Shah had also been cultivating relations with New Delhi. The Ul-Haq military regime feared that in the near future Iran and India would have tangible overlapping interests – such as the idea of the Indian Ocean Economic Community – to the detriment of Pakistan (Vatanka, 2017, p.131). During this period Reza Shah was also going through his own internal troubles that had put Shah’s rule in jeopardy. The close relations of Zia ul-Haq with Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf States also didn’t go down well with Reza Shah.

Zia- Shah and the Carter Administration:

Jimmy carter had campaigned for his first term in office as President of United States by highlighting the cause of human rights around the world and dangers of proliferation of nuclear weapons. On

April 6, 1979, the Carter administration once again suspended aid to Pakistan, this time pursuant to the Symington amendment against countries importing unsafeguarded enrichment technology (Haas, p.160, 1998). Pakistan foreign affairs adviser Agha Shahi and President Zia Ul-Haq denied that Pakistan was pursuing nuclear weapons Programme. Zia similarly responded to a Newsweek query, “Absolutely not... it’s pure fiction. We don’t want to make a bomb.... Our bill has just gone over US\$1 billion a year.... By the end of this decade, we must have nuclear energy” (Haass, 1998, p.160). President Carter’s administration drifted towards friendship with India by paying a visit to India in January 1978 and ignored Pakistan. The Pakistanis protested by drawing attention to the double standard of Americans for ignoring India’s nuclear Programme. President Carter had also visited Iran in 1979 and toasted the Shah with “Iran under the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, your majesty, and to your leadership and to the respect, admiration and love which your people give you” (Evans, 2008, p.126).

Reza Shah Pahlavi also asked Zia ul-Haq to curb Pakistan’s nuclear program. Shah had envisaged Iran to be the pre-eminent power in the Middle East and a nuclear Pakistan was a challenge to his regional dominance. Shah offered his services to resolve the nuclear dispute between the Pakistanis and Americans. Pakistanis considered it interference in their internal matters and were not too pleased by Shah’s efforts to put a finger at Pakistan’s nuclear Programme. It was clear that after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia ul-Haq would continue Pakistan’s nuclear programme despite severe restrictions.

Shah’s Decline, Rise of Clergy

The Shah was monolithic and absolutist and he had alienated different Strata of the Iranian society. The clergy were incensed at his rapid Westernization, the liberals wanted freedom of speech and press, the Communist (Tudeh party) wanted more equal society and the *baazaris* (shopkeepers and businessmen) were frustrated by decline in growth and inflation. The most vocal of them was Ayatollah Khomeini. He was born in the holy city of Khomein in 1902 and studied to become a religious scholar. From the beginning Khomeini advocated the increasing role of Shia clergy in the Iranian politics. Sandra Mackey in her book, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam and the soul of a nation* writes that, “Khomeini’s ideological thinking was based on the concept of Velayat-e- Faqih. Khomeini’s Velayat-e faqih developed two major and interrelated

concerns of Shia Islam in Iran: the economic, political and cultural invasion of the West and the issue of justice. Its conclusion called for an Islamic government to replace the unjust Iranian monarchy” (Mackey, 1998, p.233). Khomeini believed that in the presence of unjust rulers and cruel system, it’s the duty of theologians to take over the reins of power. Khomeini was inspired by Plato’s concept of philosopher-King as the most suitable person to rule a country. His philosophy and lifestyle can be deemed as revolutionary in a society where the Shia clergy was usually kept out of politics. In fact, the clergy were disengaged from politics leaving the matters of the State to the secular world. However, by the 1960’s several Shia leaders had come to the conclusion that the Clergy had to be part of the political life and society just like the one which the Holy Prophet had done during his time. The foremost revolutionary who made everyday politics a part of his life was none other than Ayatollah Khomeini.

Pakistan’s Overtures towards Khomeini before the Revolution

For Pakistan the end of rule of Reza Shah was unpredictable and risky as Shah had been close ally of Pakistan since the country’s independence. Pakistan’s relations with Shah had several ups and downs but he was a known figure and Pakistani governments knew how to deal with him. He helped Pakistan financially and militarily for decades and helped solve Pakistan’s disputes with Afghanistan. However, Zia-ul-Haq knew that Reza Shah was in deep trouble domestically and not in a position to dictate events as he pleased. As Iran’s revolution in-waiting progressed in the winter of 1978, Islamabad had established contact with the Khomeini camp (Vatanka, 2017, p.148). Zia’s government tried to cultivate relations with Khomeini’s associates while Khomeini was in Paris before the revolution. Pakistan sent Khursheed Ahmed (Cabinet Minister) in late December, 1978 to see Khomeini in Paris. Ahmed met Imam Khomeini on January 14, `979 (Alam, 2004.p.53).

Zia ul Haq and Khomeini: A difficult Relationship

The two great advocates of Islam or Islamic values and Principles were very much different and alike in many ways. Zia Ul-Haq was influenced by the teachings of Jamaat -e-Islami and its founder Maulana Abul ala Maududi and his Islamist policies continue to affect the country to this day. Although Zia-Ul-Haq was part of military establishment which was very liberal and secular in the early years of Pakistan after independence, but his fundamentals were different. Religion played a

particularly prominent role in Pakistani politics only after the 1970's. Ayatollah Khomeini was a born Islamist, educated at Qom, he was unflinching in his attitude towards the cause of Islam. Zia Ul-Haq combined the elements of Islamism with pragmatism by keeping the line of communications open with possible adversaries. Zia ul-Haq and Pakistan could not certainly afford an inflexible attitude owing to Zia's and Pakistan precarious position in the region. While Khomeini was much more fanatical in his approach, he certainly had a much wider support of Iranian society and Iran could play the oil card in international affairs very well. However, the two Islamists did try to steer their countries to divergent paths with grave consequences for the people of both the countries. General Zia ul Haq instituted the 'Islamization' of Pakistan to bolster both his domestic and international legitimacy. Domestically he catered to the growing Sunni Islamic revivalist movement (to be distinguished from the Islamist extremist movements) to the detriment of the Shia minority (Haleem, 2010, p.15). Zia's constricted policies changed the society and intolerance grew in Pakistan.

Pakistan became one of the first countries to recognize the Islamic Revolution of Iran. When Iran decided to withdraw from the Cold War alliance of CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) in 1979, Pakistan also followed suit and became a member of Non-Aligned Movement. Foreign affairs adviser Agha Shahi told the press that the alliance had "lost its meaning with the withdrawal of Iran but (Pakistan) had been moving independently to that position anyway (Kux, 2000, p.237). The old Cold War alliances were being rendered obsolete and new alliance and conflicts were taking shape. Although RCD was not disbanded and would later change to ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) in 1985 but it didn't remain a vibrant organization.

Distrust between Zia and Khomeini

Khomeini never took a liking to Zia Ul-Haq and his steps to Islamize Pakistan. In their few personal encounters Khomeini openly showed their disdain for the General and his Islamic idealism (Nasr, 2016, p/283). Earlier Khomeini also asked Zia to spare Bhutto's life but Zia didn't budge. Khomeini a hard man to please and committed to his own ideology disliked Zia ul-Haq's engagement with the Great Satan (United States). Zia Ul-Haq recognized that Iran would not be as forthcoming in his assistance to Pakistan as during Reza Shah's tenure, but he went along maintaining a semblance of good relations with Iran. But before the revolution Zia had gone to Tehran in 1977 and in a meeting with the Shah

had urged him for a crackdown on revolutionary forces. He also sought reconciliation with Iran by using the good offices and influence of his foreign minister Agha Shahi, also a Shia. Agha Shahi also visited Tehran, but his diplomatic initiatives were not successful (Singh, 2009, p.157). It is believed that Khomeini often urged visiting Pakistanis to “get rid of Zia”. In reality, the Khomeini camp from the very beginning didn’t consider ul-Haq an Islamist of any sort but an American pawn (Vatanka, 2017, p.150). In an encounter Zia warned Khomeini that it was not prudent to confront the superpower and Khomeini mockingly replied that his superpower was God and that of Zia-the US (Nasr, p-161). It can be succinctly argued that there was clash of interests and personality between the two leaders. The relationship between Iran and Pakistan was special one at the time of Shah but during the time of Khomeini and Zia ul-Haq there were sharp differences in their strategic outlook and world-view.

External Factors Marring Relations between Iran and Pakistan

The Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution of 1979 altered the difficult relationship between Iran and Pakistan at least on ideological grounds. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United States helped and funded the radical Jihadi Sunni elements to counter the threat of Communism while ignoring the Shia elements in Afghanistan. The Iranian Revolution alarmed the Arab countries and Pakistan because of Khomeini’s dream of exporting the Islamic revolution and toppling the regimes in neighboring countries. With the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the initial message of the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, was not only anti-imperialist but anti-monarchy. He claimed that Islam was incompatible with hereditary monarchies. (Benjamin, 2018). Khomeini openly vented his hostility to the Gulf monarchies with sizeable Shia communities and spoke of spreading the Islamic Revolution. The Saudis were particularly concerned when riots and disturbances broke out in the vital, oil-rich eastern provinces, where Shias formed the majority of the workforce (Murphy, 2014, p.97). In 1984, Iran sent a large number of Shias to Haj (Holy pilgrimage) in Makkah which led to clashes with the Saudi security forces in which large number of Iranians were killed. There were uprisings and protests in Bahrain and Kuwait by Shias. The Saudis loaded with the 1970’s petrodollars began to spread their own ideology of Wahabism (After Maulana Wahab in 18th century) who advocated a strict puritan Islam and a return to fundamentals of Islam. The ideological divide between Saudis and Iranians had become more pronounced since then and the two countries are engaged in proxy wars throughout the region. “Iran

challenged Saudi Arabia's pre-eminent position and status in the Muslim world. This led to large scale pan-Islamization attempts by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States; as well as by Libya and Iraq, to export Sunni Wahabi Islamism to other parts of the Muslim world" (Ahmar, 2010, p.10).

The Sunni-Shia divide in Pakistan:

The Islamic Revolution in Iran bolstered the Shia forces in Pakistan, and it had a huge impact on them. It had a direct impact on Pakistan's Shia community, politicizing their religious identity and emboldening the course of their sectarian mobilization vis-a vis the country's Sunni majority (Fair & Chalk, 2006, p.25). They became fascinated with the Islamic Revolution which was purely Shia and the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini affected their lives. Zia ul-Haq had started his own Islamization programme in Pakistan and laws were passed to change the secular nature of Pakistani society to one purely based on Shariah (Islamic principles). In 1980, General Zia introduced the concept of *Zakat* (alms giving) in which people were required to give 2.5 % on income to the State which could be distributed to the needy and destitute. The Shia organization Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafariya (Movement for implementation of Shia jurisprudence) was founded in 1979 by Mufti Jaffar Hussein. Another prominent Shia, Allama Ariful Hussaini, had been close to Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom and Najaf. The Shias objected to Zia's concept of *Zakat* and urged that *their Zakat* was called *Khums*, which they pay to the clergy instead of the State. When the ordinance for the enforcement of *Zakat* was promulgated, the Shia staged their biggest protest in the history of the country, coming to Islamabad in large procession (Ahmed, K, 2012, p.30). The Shias were eventually exempted from *Zakat* by Zia ul-Haq which showed the increasing influence of Shia community and emboldened them to demand more from the State.

The Sunni fundamentalist groups were not pleased with the State's acceptance of Shia demands and they began to oppose the Shias. In small towns, the old Shia-Sunni debate restarted with fury that had become dampened in the past (Ahmed, K, 2012, p.31). Zia ul-Haq concern with rise of Shias in Pakistan and bearing criticism of Khomeini for Pakistan's close relations with Saudi Arabia began to support the Sunni organizations to counter the Shia threat. He and his government gave what can only be called State sponsorship to militant Islamic Sunni sectarian groups, which resulted in a strong anti-Shiaism in Pakistan (Media Group, Dawn, 2017)

The funding of madrassas (religious schools) of different sects increased manifold by Iran and Saudi Arabia in Pakistan. In 1986, an

Indian Muslim scholar, funded by Saudi Arabia, asked the big seminaries in Pakistan to say whether the Shias were Muslims (Ahmed, K. 2012, p.35). “The sectarian lines were drawn as the Shias in Pakistan inspired by the Iranian Islamic revolution refused to subscribe to the Sunni based Shariah laws and demanded that their identity as a separate sect in Islam must be recognized” (Ahmar, 2010, p.6).

The sectarian dimension took a dark turn, as the society became polarized between extreme groups who attacked each other by assassinating prominent people and the moderates who were horrified at the surge in violence. These unfortunate events were taking place as Saudi-Iranian proxy wars in Pakistan and other Middle Eastern countries and this rivalry had not subsided ever since. On 5 August 1988: the Shia leader Allama Ariful Hussaini was gunned down by unknown people in the city of Peshawar. Iran condemned the attack, as Allama Hussaini had been a close associate of Khomeini. The governor of NWFP, whom the Shia community openly accused of being involved in the killing of their leader in Peshawar in 1988, was killed by unknown gunmen in 1991 (Ahmed, K, 2012, p.36). Zia ul Haq died in August 1988 while Khomeini died in June 1989 but the seeds of discord which they sowed still lingers on with even great force.

Conclusion

The early leadership of Pakistan were mostly of Shia sect or secular in outlook therefore they had a natural affiliation with the Shah of Iran. Further, the politics of the Cold War and American sponsored alliances strengthened these ties. There were special relations between Bhutto and the Shah and Pakistan received financial assistance from Iran. But later on, when Bhutto made overtures towards Arab countries, these relations turned to be sour. The Shah also felt that Bhutto was trying to outsmart him in relations with the US therefore he remained indifferent when Bhutto was taken to the gallows.

There was turmoil and upheavals in the last quarter of the 1970s in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran which had a strong bearing on the internal politics and foreign policies of these countries. General Zia who came to power through a military coup d'état yearned for an Islamic State in Pakistan but couldn't develop far-reaching ties with the Shah. When the Shah on American behalf asked the Zia to stop Pakistan's nuclear program, Zia did not move. In fact, Zia was inclined more towards Saudi Arabia and Gulf States where Pakistan's interests lied.

Muhammad Reza shah's autocratic and absolutist rule crumbled due to the struggle and participation of almost all the parties in Iran but Khomeini had the most powerful voice. He succeeded in galvanizing his rule after the revolution and there occurred U-turn in Iran's foreign policy. Internally, both Khomeini and Zia-ul Haq wanted to Islamize their countries but their world-view and foreign policies were quite different. Zia's Pakistan became a front-line State in the US sponsored war in Afghanistan while Iran's foreign policy remained anti-imperialistic and anti US. These opposing stances in foreign policies created frictions and schism in Pak-Iran relations. The personalities of Zia and Khomeini also clashed as Zia was shaky in his views while Khomeini was more committed to his cause. Khomeini could risk any antagonism with the US while Zia was in American camp.

The sectarian differences and terrorism by proxy also deteriorated the relations between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan had Saudi (Wahabbi) line while minority Shia population of Pakistan had the backing of Iran and in consequence thereof Pakistani cities became hotbed of terrorism. There was divergence in the foreign policies of the two countries and Pakistan's interests rested more with the Saudi Arabia, Gulf and the US and Pakistan became a frontline State in US sponsored war in Afghanistan.

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