

Gulf state religious moderation falls by the wayside in Pakistan

by Dr. James M. Dorsey | January 8, 2021



Silent about rising sectarian violence in Pakistan, Gulf states vying for religious soft power risk exposing the limitations of their concepts of an undefined 'moderate' Islam that is tolerant and endorses pluralism.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have so far turned a blind eye to mounting sectarian sentiment in Karachi and Punjab province against Shiites and Ahmadis, sects viewed as heretics by conservative Sunni Muslims.

[Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan](#) appears to have passed on the opportunity to demonstrate the kingdom's claim to leadership of a Muslim world that adopts principles of religious tolerance and pluralism when he apparently refrained from raising increased sectarian violence in talks with Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi during a visit to Pakistan last month.

The Gulf states' silence is the latest example of a geopolitics and economics-driven refusal to speak out on repression of or discrimination against Muslims in various parts of the world, including China's north-western province of Xinjiang and India.

The silence is particularly noticeable given that the Gulf states have greater influence in Pakistan than in either China or India and in some cases bare a degree of historic responsibility for developments in the world's second most populous Muslim-majority country. Pakistan is home to the world's largest Shiite Muslim majority.

The refusal to speak out highlights the utility of rival religious soft power efforts, not only by the Gulf states but also by Turkey and Iran that often in the case of the energy-rich monarchies seem primarily designed to curry favor with Western governments and influential Jewish and Christian communities and employ their status as models of a vaguely defined form of 'moderate' Islam to position themselves as rival leaders of the Muslim world.

Gulf states likely refrained from standing up for an Islam in Pakistan that embraces minority strands of the faith because it may be interpreted as a goodwill gesture towards Iran. In failing to do so, Gulf states missed an opportunity to dial down tensions in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's refraining from raising the issue is particularly significant given the kingdom's past support for militant anti-Shiite groups in Pakistan and harsh anti-blasphemy legislation that carries the death penalty.

Saudi Arabia, in contrast to UAE and Qatar, has so far passed on providing humanitarian aid to Iran to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. Iran has been hard hit by the pandemic because of government mismanagement and harsh US economic sanctions.

The failure to speak out about sectarian violence in Pakistan also constitutes a missed Saudi opportunity to put the kingdom's best foot forward as US President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office. Mr. Biden is anticipated to adopt a more critical attitude towards Saudi Arabia compared to his predecessor, Donald J. Trump.

"I don't expect anything from Saudis. The militants are an asset for the Saudis as well as the Pakistanis. They have no interest in cracking down on these organizations given geopolitics," said Jaffer A. Mirza, a London-based researcher focused on religious minorities in Pakistan.

Saudi reluctance to speak out against sectarianism played into the hands of Mr. Khan, who has failed to condemn mass protests that denounced Shiites as "blasphemers" and

“infidels” and called for their beheading. Nor has Mr. Khan taken issues with the mushrooming number of blasphemy cases being filed against Shiites in the courts.

Orthodox Sunni Muslims accuse Shiites of blasphemy by refusing to recognize the three ‘righteous’ Caliphs that immediately succeeded Mohammed because they believe that the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali, was deprived of his right to lead the Muslim community. It is that belief that gave birth to Shiism.

Pakistani officials have blamed the mounting tension on increased militancy among Shiite groups supported by neighboring Iran. In August, the government banned a little known group, [Khatam-Ul-Ambia](#), on charges that it was recruiting Pakistani Shiites, on behalf of the Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps, to fight in Syria alongside Iranian forces supporting President Bashar al-Assad.

The anti-Shiite campaign is waged among others by [Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat \(ASWJ\)](#), the successor to the outlawed, anti-Shiite group, Sipah-e-Sahaba that was long backed by Saudi Arabia in its effort to counter the appeal of Iran’s Islamic revolution as well as its sway among Pakistani Shiites.

A [ban on ASWJ](#), that supported Mr. Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in the 2018 election, was lifted at the time.

Asked in 2016 about Saudi support for his group, [ASWJ leader Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi](#) said over a lunch of chicken, vegetables and rice: “Some things are natural. It’s like when two Pakistanis meet abroad or someone from Jhang meets another person from Jhang in Karachi. It’s natural to be closest to the people with whom we have similarities... We are the biggest anti-Shiite movement in Pakistan.”

Mr. Ludhianvi was invited three years later to attend a [Saudi embassy-hosted reception](#) in honor of the visiting imam of the Ka’ba in Mecca, Sheikh Dr Abdullah Awad Al-Juhany, at a time that the ASWJ leader was calling for the [killing of Shiites](#).

A [Shiite news network](#) published pictures of an alleged meeting between Saudi ambassador to Pakistan, Nawaf bin Saeed Al-Maliki, and Mr. Ludhianvi last September.

The rising sectarian tensions in Pakistan raise the specter of the South Asian state becoming again the venue of a low-intensity Saudi Iranian war similar to violence that erupted in the 1980s and 1990s and in more recent years against Hazara Shiites in the province of Balochistan that borders on Iran.

Pakistani Sunni Muslim militants asserted in 2017 that [Saudi money](#) was pouring into militant anti-Shiite religious seminaries that dot the triangle where the borders of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan meet.

[Hazara Shiite protesters](#) this week refused to bury ten coal miners who were kidnapped and executed on Sunday by the Islamic State in a bid to force the government to take responsibility for their protection and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Unconvinced by promises made by Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmed Rasheed, the protesters demanded that Mr. Khan personally come to talk to them.

In response [Mr. Khan tweeted](#) on Wednesday: “I want to reassure the Hazara families who lost their loved ones...that I am cognizant of their suffering & their demands. We are taking steps to prevent such attacks in the future & know our neighbor is instigating this sectarian terrorism.”

The government, rather than acknowledging the attack as part of renewed sectarian violence that is not only on the rise but also being further institutionalized, blamed the violence on nationalist Baloch insurgents allegedly supported by India.

The government has long sought to counter Baloch nationalism and separatism by supporting militant Sunni Muslim groups in the province.

Militants, believed to be Baloch nationalists, raided a security outpost in the remote Harnai district of Balochistan, killing at least seven paramilitary soldiers and wounding several others days before the latest attack on the Hazaras.

Discrimination of Shiites and Ahmadis was further institutionalized with a law passed in July by the Punjab regional assembly that exclusively adopted ultra-conservative Sunni precepts.

Critics, including [Pakistani Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry](#), warned that the law would “plunge us deep into sectarianism and religious extremism.”

[The critics](#) noted that various stipulations of the law such as the banning of allegedly derogatory remarks against holy personages and hate speech, censorship of publications, and the duty to refer to the finality of the Prophet when referring to Prophet Mohammed, were already part of earlier legislation.

“There has been a deafening silence by the elite moderate Sunnis of our country over the increase in prejudice against Shias,” wrote a [Pakistani Shiite, who is considering seeking asylum abroad](#). He could have said the same thing about major Sunni Muslim contenders for religious soft power in bids to become or cement their status as leaders of the Muslim world.

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