

Who's Behind the Attacks in Iran? Pakistan Has to Choose Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

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*Historically, Pakistan has no feud with Iran and the latter was the first to recognize Pakistan when it gained independence in 1947, but siding with Saudi Arabia will keep Iran at arm's length from Pakistan. A terrorist attack targeted a bus carrying Iranian Revolutionary Guards troops in southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan that killed 27 and injured many. **The attack was immediately claimed by Pakistan-based Jaish Al-Adl (Army of Justice), which Iran believes is funded by Saudi Arabia.***

For years, Iran and Saudi Arabia used Pakistan as a battleground for their proxy sectarian war and when Pakistan started to support the Sunni Taliban organization in Afghanistan, it erected problems for "Shia Iran".

Pakistan stole Saudi Arabia's attention in parallel with the US' regional policies. The US turned to Pakistan as a strong ally in latter half of 20th century for two key reasons: The Iranian Revolution in 1970s and "Soviet invasion" of Afghanistan. For Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's proximity to Iran was among motives to build sustainable ties with Islamabad.

In the wake of Wednesday's attack, Iran demanded Pakistan take action against the local militant group or face retaliatory measures. Revolutionary Guards Commander **Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari** accused "Pakistan's security forces" of Wednesday's attack on Iranian armed forces, in remarks state TV aired Saturday.

"Pakistan's government, who has housed these anti-revolutionaries and threats to Islam, knows where they are and they are supported by Pakistan's security forces", said Jafari.

"If Pakistan fails to punish them in the near future, Iran will do so based on international law and will retaliate against the terrorists", he warned.

Jafari said Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are conspiring with the US and the Zionist regime to foment attacks such as Wednesday's suicide bombing.

Jaish Al-Adl was formed in 2012 out of the Jundallah ("Soldiers of God") militia, which waged a deadly insurgency for a decade before it was severely weakened by the capture and execution of its leader Abdulmalek Rigiby Iran in 2010.

When the Washington led 'international community' turned its heat up on Saudi Arabia over Jamal Khashoggi's murder, Pakistan gave a warm hand to Riyadh. **As a strategic ally of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan's first overseas trip was made to Riyadh.** Aside from pledging of \$6b to Pakistan months ago, **Mohammad bin**

Salman who visited Islamabad this weekend along with his over one thousand entourage including investors and government officials, laid bare a surprise investment package.

Saudi Arabia plans to invest up to \$20b in Pakistan especially in the energy sector and building up a new oil refinery in coastal city of Gwadar. Authorities in Islamabad said that two five star hotels had been ordered to cancel all advance bookings to reserve rooms for the prince's entourage. Civil aviation authorities have been told to reschedule flights during the prince's arrival and departure.

Just like other powers seeking concessions in return for huge funds, Saudi Arabia's financial assistance with Pakistan is not void of conditions. As a nuclear-armed power, Pakistan is viewed beyond an ordinary country by Riyadh.

Recently, the US Senate introduced proposal to block Saudi Arabia from possessing nuclear weapons in the future. The financial crisis-hit Pakistan is in high demand of foreign aids which Saudi Arabia knows how to resolve in exchange for what Pakistan has and Riyadh not.

Saudi officials' visit comes as regional tensions heightened after neighboring India accused Islamabad of harboring militants behind a deadly attack in Indian-administered Kashmir. At least 41 paramilitary troops were killed in a suicide blast Thursday, with Indian media reporting that Pakistan-based Islamist group Jaish-e Mohammad had claimed responsibility.

In the past, Pakistan and Iran have exchanged mortar shells in the border regions. In March 2018, Islamabad claimed that several mortar shells had been fired from Iran that hit Pakistan's Panjgur district.

Wednesday's suicide attack in the border region of Iran is widely believed to have been carried out in connection with MBS's visit of Islamabad. Saudi Arabia might want to destroy Pakistan's ties with Iran on the brink of MBS's visit or Israel might seek to throw the responsibility of the blast on Saudi Arabia ahead of its Pakistan visit. The visit of Saudi officials from Islamabad which Iran tried to normalize with, will only add insult to the injury of latest Iran attack.

The Iran attack was plotted just ahead of the landmark state visit to Pakistan in order to downplay the reactions from Pakistani government that was heavily-engaged in welcoming Saudi officials.

On February 11, the Jerusalem Post wrote quoting Russian and Iranian media that Israeli troops are collecting intelligence on Iranian military movements around the Persian Gulf.

According to Iran's Tasnim news agency, Israeli troops are operating out of a US Air Force base in Shind and in the western Afghanistan province of Herat, some 75 kilometers from the Iranian border and were collecting intelligence on Iranian movements around the Persian Gulf region.

Russian Sputnik quoted an expert on Israel as saying that the Israeli troops were operating under the framework of American forces stationed there and that the activity was carried out with the knowledge and approval of the Afghan government.

Unlike before, Iran openly warned Islamabad of "paying a heavy price" for the incident. Iran is cautious in the war of words with Pakistan because it realizes that other elements are

subtly or tacitly exploiting Pakistan's territory to attack on Iran. The Islamic regime doesn't wish to add another enemy to the list. On the other hand, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan announced in August 2018 that it backs Iran in its row with the US over nuclear deal.

In one of Jaish Al-Adl's latest operations in October 2018, it abducted 12 Iranian security personnel near Zahedan along the Iran-Pakistan border. In that incident, Pakistani security forces helped Iran recover at least five of the 12 abductees from the armed group.

In December last year, a powerful car bombing hit the port city of Chahbahar, which left four police officers dead and 42 others wounded. In December 2010, 41 people were killed and 90 others wounded after a suicide attack near a mosque in Chahbahar. Other recent raids include the deadly attack in Ahvaz that killed 29 people.

Iran, more or less, feels hurt with attacks on Shia Muslims in the region. Shia Muslims in Pakistan have long been kidnapped, killed and violently attacked even in the large cities. Many Shia Muslims have been forced to leave Pakistan and take refuge abroad due to such threats. Shia Muslims have also suffered brutally in parts of Afghanistan as powerful blasts have killed dozens in each attack which have often been claimed by Islamist groups based in Pakistan. Besides Pakistan, Afghanistan also serves as battlefield for proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran.

In Pakistan, Saudi Arabia carries more influence than Iran, but in Afghanistan, Tehran has gained stronger foothold as compared to Riyadh.

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