

Country-specific Studies (1)

STUDIES on IRAN

Responses, Articles

**Foreign Policy Research Centre
NEW DELHI (India)**

Complaisant Pakistanis, Condescending Persians:

Orientalist Observations on Iran-Pakistan Relations

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Only a fortnight after Soviet tanks arrived on Christmas Day in Kabul, the American columnist, sometime presidential speechwriter, and full-time realist, Bill Safire (1927-2009), took cudgels with what was touted as the Carter doctrine in *The New York Times* wherein he queried what if the Red Army, should it lose more men and material than tolerable during an occupation, were to press further south to 'clean out the sanctuaries' of Afghans inside Pakistan.¹ Zia-ul Haq, till his (still) unsolved disappearance in fire, ash, and mangoes, was careful to keep the 'water in Afghanistan boil[ing] at the right temperature.'² His successors have heeded him when simmering both kettles, Afghan and Indian. And while that godless superpower did not violate Pakistan's sovereignty, its god-fearing arch-rival was to do so a generation later at Abbotabad. In his touchingly titled, *Pakistan: a hard country*—favourable, unsurprisingly, with Pakistan's pseudo-anglicised literati—Anatol Lieven states that the unravelling of the house that Jinnah built could occur by the direct footprint of US troops on Pakistani soil for it would split the barracks, and, *a fortiori*, Believers within, into pragmatic Pétainists and pious mutineers. Neither Providence nor Jefferson's 'manifest destiny' heirs have done anything of the sort.

Among the confection of conspiracies purveyed about Zia’s elimination was one that both pilot and co-pilot of the ill-fated PAK1 transporter were Twelver Shi‘is who, charismatically charged as is their salvational wont, were intent on avenging the killing of Shi‘i leaders and followers in an increasingly *salafised*, Sunni state—an ostensible grievance foregrounded in a polarised Pakistan where the rule of law was enforced by an unlawful leadership. In reality it was a ‘mad mullah’ on Pakistan’s western front whose mesmerised minions sought to export their Islamic interpretation of renewal (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*) eastwards, and who were in no mean measure responsible for communal carnages now erupting in Karachi and elsewhere. They continue to date.

Further, in November 1979, it may be pointed out, fell the beginning of the Islamic new-year and (fifteenth) century. It also heralded the destruction of the British Council and USIS libraries as well as the American embassy in Islamabad. Pakistani mobsters, enraged Muslims to a man, had done so upon learning from Khomeini’s calumny broadcast that ‘it is not beyond guessing that this is the work of criminal American imperialism’ in reference to the troops who had raided, and therefore defiled, the Grand Mosque and its precincts (*haram sharif*) in Mecca.³ The raiders were Saudi forces and the raided Saudi messianists, the former backed up by Pakistan’s SSG commandos specially flown in at Riyadh’s request. The enraged who were bussed in from neighbouring Rawalpindi to do the torching were students, Pakistani and Iranian, belonging to the Jama‘at-e Islami and other outfits.⁴

But Washington, clearly, is not the only one to have violated the sanctity of Pakistan in the early hours of May 2, 2011. A reticent report in *The New York Times* in 2010 declared how Iran’s intelligence minister, Heidar Moslehi, laconically announced that a Pakistan-based Iranian diplomat absconding for over two years was freed after Teheran ‘took the initiative’ in ‘complex intelligence operations’ to secure his release pursuant to Pakistan failing in the same.⁵ A year earlier, in October 2009, eleven Revolutionary Guards were arrested for illegally entering Pakistan. This came in the wake of the most audacious attack launched by Sunni-Baloch dissidents who go by *Jundallah* (‘soldiers of Allah’) which left dead the *Pasdaran*’s deputy-commander of ground forces plus six senior commanders, nine officers and important tribal chiefs, both

Sunni and Shi‘i. Teheran, publicly implicated Pakistan, alongside Israel and the United States, for this massacre.⁶ The Guards seriously mulled about urging Islamabad to permit them to enter and hunt down those perpetrators. Such cross-border violations, then, now and in the offing, cannot be ruled out. Teheran, albeit privately, held Islamabad responsible for the 1998 sacking of its Mazar-i Sharif consulate and slaying of eleven diplomats (*VEVAK* operatives in all probability) by the Taleban following which they departed to slaughter a large number of Hazara Shi‘is.⁷

That Iran could make short shrift of Pakistani sovereignty, predicated on its low estimation of Pakistan and Pakistanis, politically and socio-culturally, is stale fare for those in the know. Teheran, admittedly, was the first state to recognise the newly-created dominion in August 1947. (It may be pointed out here that Afghanistan, unlike Iran, opposed the inclusion of Pakistan in the newly-established United Nations.) An Iran-Pakistan Friendship Treaty was signed in February 1950 during the Shah’s official state visit to its eastern and western wings.⁸ Pakistan had no national anthem three years into its existence. A tune was swiftly adopted given the impending arrival of the Pahlavis. No lyrics, however, were available for a further two years until the selection committee approved those penned by the famed *muhajir* poet, Hafeez Jullundhari. Although formally recognised as an Urdu paean, the composition is readily intelligible to a Persian speaker for only one of its fifteen lines is, strictly, in Urdu while the remaining lyrics are but Persian, a satisfactory compromise given that Bengali and Urdu agitators in both wings demanded the song to be in their respective language. A national anthem was only officially adopted after the Shah’s visit, four years later, in 1954.⁹ And a national carrier, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), was formed a year later, which will be touched upon below.

From the outset, immense store was set by the fact that both Muslim neighbours shared historical, geographic, mercantile, spiritual and literary linkages. Pakistan was more than enthusiastic to be considered the core region of what is the ancient and medieval Indo-Iranian oecumene. It is a contention, admittedly, not unjustified. General surveys in publications make this plain, whether scholarly or ‘popular’-official, some of which were authored by Pakistani intellectuals, patriots still heady in the first flush of

having forged the then largest Muslim polity in the world. It was a given that they—*muhajirs* who had migrated from India to constitute the cerebral cadre of this new Muslim Zion—were keen to distance themselves from their inexorable and unavoidable commonalities with the Indian (read Hindu) peninsula and now contrive ties with their religious brethren near abroad.¹⁰ This precipitous gaze westward has spawned cock-eyed Pakistanis whose blind-spots dilated with the injection of Pakistan Studies in the national curriculum after 1973, the prescription of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto for a dejected citizenry of a dismembered society.¹¹

Much water had flowed under the bridge by then: Imperial Iran was politic and sailed a steady course in its relations with Pakistan and its Indian foe. The Iranians, actually, were quietly proud of the fact that they had balanced and cordial relations. In a democratic, non-aligned India, the moral voice of the Afro-Asian world, the Shah sought an effective counterbalance against the radical, anti-royalist rhetoric of Nasser and his Arab acolytes.¹² But Teheran made clear its stance on Kashmir by culturally couching its prejudice as: ‘Ninety per cent of the people of Kashmir are Muslims and have ties of common culture, tradition and religion with Iran [which] cannot remain indifferent to their lot.’¹³ (Press TV, as an aside, enjoys wide-spread viewership in the Vale or Indian-administered Kashmir, whose indignant residents certainly warm to the outbursts of an audacious Ahmadinejad disparaging the Holocaust or Muslim *munafiqs* (‘hypocrites’) devoid of credibility and credo (*iman*), a pervasive notion after the 1979 revolution, especially among Pakistanis, both indigenes and working-class expatriates in the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, who glowingly extol the austere ayatollah or modest mayor for their principled politics compared to the venality and cupidity of their Arab and Pakistani suzerains.

Iran supported Pakistan in its 1965 and 1971 wars against India. The Shah favoured Pakistan, materially and psychologically, in its 1965 misadventure. Deeds, not words, need not always matter for the latter, when bluntly put, at least convey transparency: Sunni, Hanafi Turkey refused to despatch ‘fellow brother’ troops to assist Pakistan in September 1965 for its military spokesman declared that, ‘we are keeping them for Cyprus.’¹⁴ A year earlier, in July 1964, Pakistan had joined Turkey and Iran to

form the Regional Co-operation for Development (R.C.D.). Putatively to combat the ‘Red menace’, all three, non-Arab, Muslim states located along the southern tier of the USSR assembled on the platform of shared religio-cultural values only to be distracted and dispersed by domestic exigencies or external expediencies. And the harsh realisation must have dawned by now on others forming alliances solely calculated on the confessional coefficient whose multiplier effect has yielded only embarrassing dividends, be it the Arab League, Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) or the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC).

It would be cynical to merely point out R.C.D.’s achievements such as bartering Pakistani bananas for Iranian buses; visa-free travel for short stays; reduction in surface postal rates to local rates; and travelling exhibitions. A genuine achievement was the construction, with West German assistance, of an aluminium smelting plant in Arak, and its joint ownership by both governments plus an American corporation.¹⁵ Moreover, a shaken Shah who had just watched his neighbour descend into civil war in 1971 was determined, as was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to prevent Balochistan from ‘doing a Bengal’. Bhutto, bolstered after his 1973 state visit to Tehran, launched an all-out assault on the provincial leadership, one which lasted until 1978 and in which Iran provided funding and hardware appreciably.¹⁶

Road, rail, and sea links among all R.C.D. states were definitely expanded and enhanced. Part of the proposed Karachi-Teheran-Ankara ‘Asian Highway’ was completed extensively but not entirely.¹⁷ A vestige of this era of co-operation is the N-25 artery between Karachi and Quetta which is still remembered as the RCD highway. An air agreement to form a common R.C.D. airline never took off. By now, PIA was a success story, even by public sector standards, and, as London’s Foreign Office noted, it was loathe to merge with Iran Air or THY, both of whom had limited international networks and prestige than their Pakistani counterpart.¹⁸ (These were halcyon years as Indians and Pakistanis now ruefully recall PIA’s stewardship under Air Marshal Nur Khan and Air India’s under J.R.D. Tata.)

Pakistani aviation’s superiority was no match for Persian pride in their ‘Great Civilisation’ (*tamaddon-e bozorg*). A point broached by irritated Iranians towards those

opposed to their nuclear programme is that it certainly behoves the status of an ancient nation with an unbroken historical continuity stretching over three millennia and one which has never invaded any of its neighbours for well-nigh half a millennium. These historical verities are then followed up by elaborating on a ‘ramshackle Pakistan’ which is, ‘corrupt, unstable, historically pro-American and basically artificial nation-state’ whose atomic arsenal goes unchallenged.¹⁹ These are captious but compelling conclusions.

Turning to correctives, it merits rectifying here that the much-maligned ‘Kalashnikov culture’ berated by Pakistanis was one abetted and funded by not just Americans exploiting Pakistan as a cold-war proxy. For it was another sponsor closer home who has been responsible since 1979 for the spilling of blood and fomenting bad blood between Muslim sectarians. As mentioned earlier, it was Khomeini’s Iran which sought to export its theocratic radicalism as well as become the self-styled representative of Pakistan’s Shi‘is in the wake of Zia ul-Haq’s avowedly Sunni Islamisation moves. Zia’s encouragement to Sunni hardliners, by permitting the Arab funding of militias and *madrasas*, was a direct response to initial Iranian instigation.²⁰ The routine kidnapping and murdering of Iranian diplomats, especially during the 1990s, by Sunni militants with tacit ISI support, has shifted from urban centres to Balochistan. There the scenario is further worsened with persecuted Hazara Shi‘is ensconced among brooding Sunnis nursing secessionist tendencies across their linguistic homeland which straddles both republics to form the largest province in each of them.²¹

Iranian and Pakistani religious minorities, since 1979, in both heterogeneous societies, have seen a sharp deterioration in their security and status as a crude and narrow exclusivism came to characterise the identities and agendas of both Islamic republics. In so doing, non-Muslims in both states, historically long-standing communities whose contribution to public life has been completely out of proportion to their numerical strength, have chosen to emigrate or exist under immense duress. Conversion, a time-honoured option across Muslim lands, is perennially on the cards to bypass the bane of fearful or impoverished living. Bahaism and Ahmadism, both universal, proselytising faiths deemed heresies by Muslims in the main, have borne the

brunt for nearly a century and half. Attempts to decimate them have, thankfully, not succeeded. Pakistan, however, is not averse to the presence of Bahais for they openly maintain communal and worship centres. Covertly, however, is how Jews reside in Pakistan, unlike Iran, where they pass off as Christians or Parsis.²² In Iran they are officially recognised and conduct their affairs overtly if precariously. Pakistan indeed is unique for even in Arab states Jews do not, indeed need not, seek recourse to dissimulation for survival. The predicament of Pakistani Hindus is marginally better than that of their Jewish compatriots. Christians and Sikhs in both countries manage tenuously if tactfully. Zoroastrians, a penurious remnant in the land of their origin, remain a fast-dwindling albeit flourishing minority as Pakistan's (but also India's) Parsis.²³ But just as comfortably placed are Pakistani Isma'ilis who face numerous restrictions in a Twelver Shi'i Iran. All Pakistani Shi'is, whether Twelvers or those of other denominations, are able to offer worship across the country as well as in Islamabad—modern Teheran, the capital of an Islamic republic and former OIC summit venue, lacks a Sunni mosque for some 10% of its national populace. Muslim diplomats, predominantly Sunnis, it is reported, gather at the Pakistan embassy's school for offering weekly Friday prayers.²⁴

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1. 'William Safire, 'Questions Mr Carter must answer,' *The New York Times* (Jan. 14, 1980), p. A17; repr. *The Times of India* (Jan. 19, 1980), p. 8.
 2. Mohammed Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's untold story* (Barnsley, 1992), p. 12.
 3. John Kifner, 'Khomeini accuses U.S. and Israel,' *The New York Times* (Nov. 25, 1979), p. 1; for an authoritative analysis consult Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: the forgotten uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine* (New York 2007; repr. London, 2008).
 4. 'Pak mob burns US embassy,' *The Times of India* (Nov. 22, 1979), p. 1.
 5. Alan Cowell, 'Iranian diplomat in Pakistan is freed,' *The New York Times* (Mar. 31, 2010), p. 1.
 6. Milan Vesely, 'Alarm sound in Washington over Iran-Pakistan border hostilities,' *The Middle East*, 406 (Dec. 2009), pp. 24-25.
 7. C. Christine Fair, 'Pakistan's relations with Central Asia: is past prologue?' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, 2 (2008), p. 206.
 8. Shirin Taher-Kheli, 'Iran and Pakistan: Cooperation in an area of Conflict,' *Asian Survey* 17, 5 (May, 1977), p. 475.
 9. Pak national anthem tune but no lyric,' *The Times of India* (Jan. 1, 1954), p. 4.
 10. Several edited works, yearbooks or popular works afford a flavour of this outlook for which see R. E. M. Wheeler, *Five Thousand Years of Pakistan: an*

Archaeological Outline (London, 1950); *Pakistan Today and Tomorrow* (Karachi, 1951); *Iran: neighbour, brother, friend...* (Karachi, 195[?]); *Crescent and Green: a miscellany of writings on Pakistan* (London, 1955); the sumptuous album produced by the official Pakistani panel commemorating the 2,500th anniversary celebrations of Cyrus the Great at Persepolis in October, 1971 which was compiled by Ahmad Nabi Khan, *Iran and Pakistan: the story of a cultural relationship through the ages* (Karachi, 1971); B. A. Dar, ed., *Iran Pakistan: a common culture* (Islamabad, 1977); S. Minhaj ul Hassan and S. Abdolhossain Raeisossadat, eds., *Pakistan-Iran relations in historic perspective* (Peshawar, 2004).

11. Burzine Waghmar, 'Pakistan Studies: the state of the craft,' *Dawn (Books & Authors Supplement)* (Feb. 26, 2005), p. 5. Online: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3207/>
12. Taher-Kheli, *art. cit.*, p. 476.
13. Taher-Kheli, *art. cit.*, p. 475; a useful survey is Sushma Gupta, *Pakistan as a factor in Indo-Iranian relations, 1947-78* (New Delhi, 1988).
14. W. Hale and J. Bharier, 'Cento, R.C.D. and the Northern Tier: a political and economic appraisal,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 8, 2 (May, 1972), pp. 221, 226n.9.
15. Hale and Bharier, *art. cit.*, pp. 223-25.
16. See generally Hafeez Malik, 'Iran's relations with Pakistan,' *Journal of S. Asian and M. Eastern Studies* 36, 1 (Fall, 2002), pp. 56-71; Shah Alam, 'Iran-Pakistan relations: political and strategic dimensions,' *Strategic Analysis* 28, 4 (Oct.-Dec., 2004), pp. 526-44; Harsh Pant, 'Pakistan and Iran: a dysfunctional relationship,' *Middle East Quarterly* 16, 2 (Spring, 2009), pp. 43-50; and S. Pattanayak, *Iran's relations with Pakistan: a strategic analysis* (New Delhi, 2011). Based on archival sources of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is Alireza Zamaniyan, *Guzidah-i asnad-i ravabit-i Iran va Pakistan (siyasi, iqtisadi, farhangi): 1326 H. Sh. ta 1357 H. Sh.* [Iran-Pakistan Relations, Political, Economic, Cultural: A Selection of Documents, 1947-78] (Teheran, 1996).
17. Hale and Bharier, *art. cit.*, p. 225.
18. B. Yeşilbursa, 'The formation of RCD: Regional Cooperation for Development,' *Middle East Studies* 45, 4 (July, 2009), pp. 646, 659nn40,49.
19. 'Still failing, still defiant,' *The Economist* (Dec. 11, 2004), pp. 23-25; Fred Halliday, 'Iran and the Middle East: Foreign policy and domestic change,' *Middle East Report* 220 (Autumn, 2001), p. 44.
20. Fair, *art. cit.*, p. 219.
21. Zahid Khan, 'Balochistan factor in Pak-Iranian relations: opportunities and constraints,' *South Asian Studies* 27, 1 (Jan.-Jun., 2012), pp. 121-40; Burzine Waghmar, 'Yet another Stan? Talibanisation and Islamic Radicalism in Balochistan and Southwest Asia,' *What Future for Balochistan? Global and Regional Challenges* (The Hague, 2013), pp. 25-27. Online: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/16749/>
22. In conversation with Dr. Michael Nazir-Ali lately Bishop of Rochester, and himself a one-time Karachiite. Also see his 'Christianity in Iran: a brief survey,' *Int. Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 9, 1 (Feb. 2009), pp. 32-40. Patrick Belton, 'Karachi's forgotten Jews,' *The Jewish Chronicle* (Aug. 16,

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[http://www.jsantisemitism.org/essays/Weil%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.jsantisemitism.org/essays/Weil%20(2).pdf). I might point out here that Pakistan extends visa-free travel by issuing a *Pakistan Origin Card* to those individuals who were born and/or resided previously in Pakistan. But former Pakistanis ‘currently holding citizenship or nationality of Israel or India’ are debarred. Online:
http://www.pakmission-uk.gov.pk/nadra/poc_eligibility_details.asp
23. Jamsheed Choksy, ‘How Iran persecutes its oldest religion,’ *CNN Online*, Nov. 14, 2011. Online: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/11/14/opinion/choksy-iran-zoroastrian>
24. As pointed out in the lecture delivered by Houchang Chehabi, ‘The Legal Aspects of Religious Diversity in Iran,’ Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS, London, May 15, 2013. Online:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raPWh9XcPr8&list=PL1z_PGhPjwcrac3fk3gL59gIVGFTOv75e&index=1
