

The Pakistani mediation in the war between the US and Iran

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During the war between the US and Israel with Iran in 2026, Pakistan has positioned itself as the "lead mediator" to broker an end to the US-Israeli war against Iran. Pakistan is hosting talks and serving as an intermediary for backchannel diplomacy between the warring parties.¹

Pakistan hosted the first round of face-to-face talks between the US and Iran in 47 years in April 2026; the talks ended without a breakthrough, but also without a breakdown. Iran, US agreed to a two-week ceasefire on April 8, the truce was later extended indefinitely and remains in place.

Pakistan is currently involved in several active conflicts, including military operations against Afghanistan, a longstanding dispute with India, and an internal insurgency. Pakistan is trying to change its image from a strategic destabilizer mired in conflicts with its neighbors to a peacemaker. It is a well-calculated move designed to serve Pakistan's internal and external interests.²

Pakistan signed a defense agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2025, according to which an attack on one of the countries will be considered an attack on its friend as well.³

Iran has attacked targets in Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, by virtue of its commitment, has deployed fighter jets and air defense systems in Saudi Arabia, thus essentially becoming a party to the conflict.

Although it appears that Riyadh has been on board with regard to Pakistan's diplomatic initiative with Iran, if Iranian attacks restart against Saudi Arabia, Riyadh will expect Pakistan to actively contribute to its defense under their security agreement.⁴ Despite of this complex reality, Pakistan is accepted by Iran and the US as a mediator in the conflict between them.

The role of mediation is used by Pakistan as a "survival strategy", as Pakistan fears that the continuation of the war and its expansion into a regional war will undermine its internal stability. A broader confrontation between the US and Iran could disrupt trade routes, deepen energy pressures, inflame sectarian tensions and further destabilize Pakistan's sensitive border regions with Iran.

Pakistan's motives and interests

Pakistan views stability in the Gulf as closely tied to the country's own economic and security interests. International prestige is also at play for the Pakistani government as they work to end a conflict affecting the entire world.⁵

The Economic Component - Pakistan faces chronic deficits, pressure on its foreign exchange reserves due to global energy prices, and a huge external debt that is weighing heavily on the budget.

The country is operating under stringent recovery programs from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which require broader taxation and the removal of subsidies. Despite strict reforms and some growth in exports, the poverty rate remains very high and inflation is eroding the purchasing power of its citizens.

Pakistan's economy relies heavily on its Gulf allies, primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to avoid default. In exchange for signing the Saudi-led defense agreement (SMDA) and deploying troops and missiles, Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with an \$8 billion financial aid package. This aid included cash deposits in the Central Bank of Pakistan and oil supplies on favorable credit terms. Saudi economic aid has enabled Pakistan to meet international debt obligations and prevent the country's foreign exchange reserves from collapsing.

Over 95% of Pakistani migrant workers work in the Gulf countries. The remittances these workers send to their families in Pakistan are the country's largest and most significant source of foreign exchange, and are critical to balancing the national balance of payments.⁶

About 6 million Pakistanis live and work in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the leading destination, employing over 2.6 million Pakistanis alone. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also major destinations. Saudi Arabia issues work visas to hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis every year.

Therefore, Saudi economic aid for Pakistan, which is in a prolonged economic crisis, is a vital lifeline, and Pakistan's policy in the current crisis is largely driven by its dependence on economic aid from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The economic and humanitarian threat - Pakistan, which is in a deep economic crisis, is already dealing with millions of refugees from Afghanistan. Another mass influx of refugees from Iran (including Iranian refugees alongside Afghan refugees who lived in Iran and are now being deported or fleeing) could create an unprecedented humanitarian burden that the government in Islamabad would not be able to finance.

The threat to Pakistan's national security and internal stability

The threat in Baluchistan - The 900-kilometer-long border between Pakistan and Iran crosses the ethnic Baluch population on both sides, and is a source of ongoing friction between the countries. The continuation of the war in Iran could lead to an

influx of refugees who will try to cross into Pakistan. As a result, Baluchistan could become the focus of a humanitarian crisis and lead to an escalation of the conflict between the authorities in Islamabad and the Baluch separatists. Turning this region into a battlefield or a center of a humanitarian crisis creates a series of direct threats for Pakistan that threaten the stability of the country.⁷

The weakening of Iranian control over the Sistan and Baluchistan province (due to war or internal instability in Iran) will allow separatist Baluchi terrorist organizations, such as the BLA (Baluchistan Liberation Army), to expand their area of operation.

Pakistan fears that the collapse of enforcement on the Iranian side will turn Iranian territory into a rear base from which deadly attacks against Pakistani security forces and against Chinese targets in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan will emanate.

The frontier between Pakistan and Iran is defined not merely by border security management, but also by a massive, deeply entrenched illicit economy. At the core of this border economy lies the smuggling of heavily subsidized Iranian petroleum products and trade of food supplies into Pakistan's Baluchistan province. This trade is not a peripheral criminal activity; it is an industrial scale enterprise.⁸

The lack of border control will allow rebel organizations to take control of drug, fuel, and weapons smuggling routes, and tax them to finance the purchase of weapons and the recruitment of new fighters.

Pakistan also fears that, alongside the influx of innocent refugees, extremists such as Jaish al-Adl (a Sunni Baluch organization operating against Iran) or ISIS-K (ISIS-K) could infiltrate its territory from Iran. These terrorist operatives could use the refugee camps in Baluchistan as a breeding ground for recruiting members and establishing clandestine cells inside Pakistan.

The danger of igniting sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites -

Pakistan has an estimated population of 259 million, of whom 96% to 97% are Muslim. Of these, the vast majority are Sunni (between 80% and 85% of the total population), the minority is Shiite with estimates ranging from between (10% and

15% of the total population). Pakistan has the world's second largest Shia population after Iran.

Pakistan has a long history of sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shias dating back to the 1980s. Pakistan has experienced waves of violence between Sunnis and Shiites in the past.

In the days after Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in an Israeli airstrike, protests erupted across several cities, including Karachi and Islamabad, leaving more than 20 people dead as demonstrations turned violent and crowds attempted to storm the US consulate in Karachi.⁹

These events underscore how a prolonged Iran war, particularly if framed in ideological or religious terms, could amplify sectarian mobilization and political agitation within Pakistan.¹⁰

There is concern that large numbers of Shiite refugees arriving from Iran could reignite the Sunni-Shiite conflict in the country.

Implementation of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Defense Agreement

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have maintained strong political, economic, and security ties over the past decades. The Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed in Riyadh on September 17, 2025, by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia marked a major formalization of this relationship.¹¹

On April 11, 2026, Pakistan made its first overt military move under the Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) and deployed air defense forces and fighter jets in Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan sent a squadron of 10 to 18 Chinese-made JF-17 fighter jets and US-made F-16s. The Pakistani force includes pilots as well as ground crews.

Pakistan has also deployed air defense units and the Pakistani missile batteries have been fully integrated into Saudi Arabia's multi-layered air defense system. However, despite being integrated into the Saudi system, these missile units operate under a direct and independent Pakistani chain of command .

Pakistan has made it clear to Tehran and Riyadh that the Pakistani forces stationed on Saudi soil will focus solely on defending Saudi installations and will not participate in any active attack against Iran.

The Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) as a leverage - Pakistan is using its military commitment to Saudi Arabia to deter Iran from further escalation, and Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar sent a clear message to Tehran that Pakistan was committed to the agreement with Saudi Arabia. This move forced Iran to demand (and receive) guarantees that Saudi territory would not be used to attack it, thus creating an Iranian interest in maintaining Pakistan as a mediator and not turning it into a direct enemy.

Establishing a diplomatic "safety net" and regional blocs - Pakistan is leading a move to include countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the mediation efforts to end the war and create a joint political bloc. The Islamabad meeting of the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt in March 2026, was an important step in implementing this policy of Pakistan.

Establishing such a bloc helps Pakistan present its involvement in Saudi Arabia not as part of the American-Israeli axis against Iran, but as a broad effort by Muslim countries in the region working to end the war and restore security and stability to the region.

Why did Pakistan become the primary mediator between Washington and Tehran?

Common interests and a common border: Pakistan shares a land border of about 900 km with Iran and maintains sound political, security and economic relations with it, although there are also controversial issues between the countries .

Pakistan has close ties with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Persian Gulf, open channels of communication with the US, and its mediation initiative has the blessing of China, which is an ally of both Iran and Pakistan. Therefore, Iran does not see

Pakistan as the ideal mediator, but in the current strategic circumstances, Pakistan's alternative seems to be the least bad option.

Relations with the US: Pakistan was a key ally of the US (with Major Non-NATO Ally status). However, in recent decades, relations have cooled significantly, against the backdrop of close ties between Pakistan and China, including in the military and nuclear fields .

Despite the complex relations in the past, Pakistan maintains close security ties with the US and the Trump administration.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Sharif and army chief Asim Munir have maintained cordial ties with Trump since last May, when Islamabad and New Delhi engaged in a brief but deadly military escalation. The US leader later took credit for "ending" the war."¹²

The Pakistani army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, leverages personal ties and informal channels with the US administration and President Trump's entourage . Pakistan, in this sense, is trying to bypass the institutional diplomatic channels and create influence through a combination of personal diplomacy and accessibility to decision-making centers in Washington.

Since the US-Iran diplomatic ties were severed, the Pakistani embassy in Washington has been handling Iranian interests vis-à-vis the US.

Chinese influence on Pakistan's policy

China is Pakistan's most important strategic partner. Their relationship is based on confronting the common enemy - India . The war in Iran and its expansion into a regional war poses a risk to China's strategic projects. China has invested billions of dollars in the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC), which passes through Baluchistan and ends at the Gwadar port, which gives China direct access to the Arabian Sea. The CPEC is a central part of China's "Belt and Road" initiative. Increasing instability, suicide attacks by Baluch rebels who oppose the Chinese presence, and the spillover of fighting from Iran endanger Chinese investments.

China has openly encouraged Pakistan to expand its diplomatic role and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged Islamabad to "step up" mediation efforts between Iran and the United States and help stabilize the region, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz.¹³

Summary

Paradoxically, Pakistan, which itself has achieved nuclear military capability despite international sanctions and is accused of supporting Islamic terrorism, is mediating in a conflict in which the US and Israel are trying to prevent Iran from arming itself with nuclear weapons and to bring about an end to its support for Islamic terror organizations.

The Pakistani mediation initiative is being used as a "survival strategy." Pakistan fears that the collapse of the US-Iran mediation talks and the end of the ceasefire will lead to a regional war that will force it to choose a side and in accordance with the defense agreement, it will be required to align itself with the Saudi Arabia and the American-Israeli axis.

Such a situation could place Pakistan in direct conflict with its neighbor Iran, with all the negative consequences that may accompany it.

Furthermore, Pakistan fears that any comprehensive regional war will lead to waves of refugees, economic shocks (oil), and undermine its internal stability.

Notes

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⁸ Muhammad Faisal, The Strategic Impact of an Iranian Regime Collapse on Pakistan Middle East Policy Council, March 31, 2026.

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¹⁰ Saira Bano, Iran war puts Pakistan in a strategic squeeze, ASPI, March 13, 2026.

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