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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Pakistan's Tightrope Act in the Houthi–Saudi War

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The denial of reports that Pakistani fighter jets are operating against the Houthis is more than a rebuttal of a newspaper story. It is a signal that Islamabad wants to honor its defense commitments to Saudi Arabia without being drawn into an open-ended conflict in Yemen.

Pakistan is entering a particularly delicate phase in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The two countries have longstanding strategic, economic and religious ties, reinforced by their recently strengthened defense cooperation under the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement. Yet Saudi Arabia's confrontation with the Houthis in Yemen presents Islamabad with a difficult question: How far can Pakistan go in defending its Saudi ally without becoming a combatant in another regional war?

The issue came into sharp focus on 8th of October 2026, when Pakistan's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting rejected reports attributed to The New York Times that Pakistan Air Force (PAF) fighter jets were being employed in operations against Houthi forces in Yemen. The ministry described the claims as "fake and fabricated" and cautioned international media against speculative reporting about the deployment of Pakistani forces.

The denial deserves attention. It reflects Pakistan's determination to distinguish its commitment to Saudi security from participation in offensive military operations

against the Houthis. That distinction may prove critical to Islamabad's relations with Riyadh, Tehran and the wider region.

Why was the Official Clarification Necessary?

Reports of Pakistani fighter jets participating in attacks on the Houthis could not be treated as an ordinary dispute over military reporting. They touched directly on the interpretation of Pakistan's defense commitments, its regional diplomacy and the potential consequences of entering an expanding conflict.

First, the allegation suggested that Pakistan had crossed an important threshold: moving from helping protect Saudi territory to conducting combat operations against an adversary based in Yemen. Even if the aircraft were reportedly engaged in countering drones and missiles, their actual mission would matter. Intercepting incoming projectiles over Saudi territory is fundamentally different from striking Houthi launch sites, command centers or other targets inside Yemen.

Second, the report risked creating expectations that Pakistan would participate directly in Saudi Arabia's military campaign. Once such a perception takes hold, Saudi Arabia's adversaries may regard Pakistani forces and installations as legitimate targets, irrespective of Islamabad's own description of its mission.

An official denial was therefore necessary to establish a public boundary around Pakistan's involvement. It also warned international

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media that claims concerning the operational employment of Pakistani forces should not be treated as established facts merely because they are attributed to anonymous officials.

There is, however, an important distinction between rejecting a particular report and explaining the full scope of military cooperation. The ministry's denial settles the government's stated position on the allegation; it does not, by itself, disclose every detail of Pakistan's deployments, rules of engagement or contingency planning. Those questions require clarification through authorized channels.

The Makkah Agreement: Commitment Without a Blank Check

Pakistan's defense relationship with Saudi Arabia is not new. Pakistani military personnel have served in the kingdom in training, advisory and other defense-related capacities for decades. The strategic relationship has survived numerous regional crises, partly because both sides recognize its importance beyond any single conflict. The Makkah Joint Defense Agreement adds another dimension to this relationship. Its precise obligations, however, must be distinguished from assumptions about what an alliance automatically requires.

A mutual defense arrangement does not necessarily mean that every member must participate in every offensive operation undertaken by another member. The legal and operational implications depend on the agreement's actual provisions, the circumstances triggering its application and the decisions taken by the participating governments.

For Pakistan, the central question is whether defending Saudi Arabia requires striking the Houthis inside Yemen. It does not automatically follow that it does. Saudi territory, airspace, military installations, energy infrastructure and civilian population centers can be defended without Pakistani forces necessarily participating in a ground offensive or conducting air strikes against targets in Yemen.

The distinction between *territorial defense* and *offensive operations* is therefore not merely semantic. It is the basis on which Pakistan can fulfil its commitments while limiting the geographical and political scope of its involvement. Islamabad should make this distinction explicit to its Saudi partners. A credible defense commitment requires clarity about what assistance Pakistan will provide, under what circumstances and within what operational limits.

The Iranian Dimension

Pakistan cannot formulate its policy towards the Houthis without considering Iran. Tehran's support for the Houthi movement has given the Yemen conflict a wider regional dimension, although the Houthis also have their own political interests and decision-making structures.

Pakistan and Iran share a border and have important interests in preventing instability along it. Their relationship has experienced serious strains, including cross-border security incidents, but both countries have reasons to avoid another confrontation. If Pakistani aircraft were to conduct offensive operations against the Houthis, Tehran could interpret the action as Pakistan joining a Saudi-led military campaign against an Iranian partner. That perception could damage bilateral relations and complicate cooperation on border security and regional stability. The consequences would extend beyond diplomatic exchanges. An escalating confrontation could place additional pressure on Pakistan's western security environment at a time when Islamabad has strong reasons to avoid simultaneous crises on multiple fronts.

Pakistan must consequently resist the temptation to view the Yemen conflict exclusively through the lens of its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. Supporting the security of a close ally is compatible with maintaining diplomatic relations with Iran. Participating in an offensive campaign against an Iran-backed movement would make that balance considerably harder to sustain.

