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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

War Against the Houthis: Pakistani Military's Minimum Threshold for Involvement

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The most important question is not whether Pakistan will support Saudi Arabia, but what circumstances would persuade Islamabad to move from defensive assistance to active combat. There is no publicly established, automatic threshold requiring Pakistan to launch air strikes or deploy *ground troops* against the Houthis. The Makkah agreement states that an armed attack against one signatory shall be regarded as an attack against all. Pakistan's Foreign Office has also described the agreement as defensive in nature and not directed against any country. The actual response would depend on the circumstances of an attack, consultations among the partners and the decisions of Pakistan's authorized leadership.²

Four Threshold of Pakistani Military Involvement

Mentioned below are the thresholds can be envisaged:

- **Defensive Assistance:** This is the least escalatory and most politically sustainable option. Pakistan could assist Saudi Arabia in strengthening air defense, protecting military installations and critical infrastructure, improving surveillance, sharing intelligence and providing technical or logistical support. Pakistani personnel could also help

operate or maintain defensive systems, subject to the agreed mission and rules of engagement.

If Pakistani aircraft were authorized to intercept incoming missiles or drones threatening Saudi territory, that would constitute a more direct military role, but it would remain distinguishable from offensive strikes inside Yemen. Such a mission would require clear operational authorization and safeguards against escalation.

- **A Sustained Campaign Against Saudi Arabia:** Repeated attacks causing significant casualties, disabling major infrastructure or threatening the kingdom's ability to defend its territory could increase pressure on Islamabad to provide more substantial military assistance. The case would become stronger if Saudi Arabia formally requested assistance under the agreement and the three partners agreed on a coordinated response.

Even then, the distinction between intercepting incoming threats and attacking their sources would remain crucial. Pakistan could expand its defensive contribution without automatically accepting a mission to destroy Houthi military capabilities inside Yemen.

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² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Message to the Nation by the Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister on the Signing of the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement," August 10, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/message-to-the-nation-on-the-signing-of-the-makkah-joint-defence-agreement>

- **A Direct Attack on Pakistani Personnel:** If Pakistani troops, aircrew or military installations in Saudi Arabia were deliberately attacked, Islamabad would face a more immediate obligation to protect its personnel and respond within the applicable legal and operational framework. Depending on the circumstances, this could involve force against those responsible for the attack.

However, even this would not automatically justify an unlimited campaign. Any response would need to be necessary and proportionate to the threat, consistent with international law and authorized through Pakistan's command and decision-making structures.

- **A Decision to Participate In Offensive Operations.** Air strikes against Houthi launch facilities, command centers or other targets inside Yemen, or the deployment of Pakistani ground combat units to fight Houthi forces, would represent a major escalation.

Such a decision would require a much higher level of political and strategic justification than defensive assistance. Islamabad would need to establish why these operations were necessary to protect Saudi Arabia, what their objectives were, how long they might last, what risks they posed to Pakistan and how the country would disengage.

A general promise of solidarity with Saudi Arabia should not be interpreted as a standing authorization for an open-ended war.

Air Power and Ground Forces: Two Different Calculations

The use of air power and the deployment of ground troops carry different costs and risks.

Air defense is comparatively easier to define as a limited mission. Its purpose can be restricted to protecting Saudi airspace and designated installations against incoming threats, but fighter aircraft used to attack the Houthis in Yemen would expose Pakistan to a different set of risks, including retaliation, mission expansion and the possibility of becoming involved in a prolonged air campaign.

Ground combat is more problematic. An expeditionary force entering Yemen would face difficult terrain, dispersed adversaries, uncertain front lines and the possibility of a protracted insurgency. The experience of previous interventions in Yemen demonstrates how quickly a seemingly limited military undertaking can become an expensive and politically damaging commitment.

Pakistan must also consider the security of its own forces, the availability of reserves and the opportunity cost of deploying combat formations abroad. Its armed forces have responsibilities on the international border with Afghanistan, along the eastern frontier and in counterterrorism operations at home.

A ground deployment should therefore be considered only under exceptional circumstances, with a clearly defined mission, a credible command arrangement, an agreed legal basis, appropriate force protection and a realistic exit strategy. Protecting Saudi territory is one thing; attempting to determine Yemen's political and military future is quite another.

The Domestic Political Dimension

Pakistan's experience in 2015 offers a useful precedent. When the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen became a major regional issue, Pakistan's parliament called for neutrality in the conflict while emphasizing the need to protect Saudi Arabia if its territorial integrity were threatened. That distinction remains relevant. Pakistan can stand by Saudi Arabia without assuming responsibility for every aspect of its military strategy.

Any decision involving sustained offensive operations or a major ground deployment should be explained to parliament and the public. The government must demonstrate that the proposed action serves Pakistan's national interests, complies with its international obligations and does not expose the country to disproportionate costs.

Public support cannot be taken for granted. Pakistanis may sympathize deeply with Saudi Arabia's security concerns while remaining apprehensive about a war that could worsen relations with Iran, disrupt trade and energy

supplies, and divert military resources from domestic priorities.

The government should not allow operational secrecy to become a substitute for political accountability. Details that would compromise military effectiveness may remain confidential, but the purpose, broad limits and strategic rationale of a deployment should be explained.

Can Pakistan avoid being sucked into a wider war?

Pakistan's best option is to define its contribution around the defense of Saudi territory, rather than the defeat of the Houthis as a military and political movement.

This would involve three parallel efforts:

1. First, Islamabad should agree with Riyadh and Ankara on explicit defensive missions, rules of engagement and procedures for authorizing any expansion of operations. The three partners should distinguish between assistance to Saudi air defense, the protection of Pakistani personnel and participation in offensive operations in Yemen.
2. Second, Pakistan should keep diplomatic channels with Iran open. Communication does not require Islamabad to endorse Houthi attacks or accept Tehran's interpretation of the conflict. It would, however, reduce the danger of miscalculation and help convey that Pakistan's defensive commitments are not intended to open a new front against Iran.
3. Third, Pakistan should continue to advocate de-escalation and a political

settlement in Yemen. Military pressure may be necessary to stop attacks on Saudi territory, but it cannot by itself resolve the underlying political conflict. A negotiated settlement remains the more sustainable route to securing the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb maritime corridor.

Pakistan should also coordinate with Türkiye, whose foreign minister has publicly ruled out an offensive role while discussing defensive assistance to Saudi Arabia. This provides a useful basis for defining a collective response that strengthens deterrence without committing all three partners to a ground war.³

Conclusion: Defending Saudi Arabia Without Regional Escalation

Pakistan's denial of reports alleging PAF fighter jet operations against the Houthis helped prevent a dangerous misperception. However, the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement raises broader questions about the circumstances warranting military intervention. A sustained threat to Saudi territory, a formal request for assistance, or an attack on Pakistani personnel could prompt a response, but would not automatically justify offensive operations in Yemen. Pakistan must balance its security commitments with national interests, relations with Iran, and the imperative to prevent wider regional conflict.

The real test of the Makkah agreement will not be how quickly its signatories enter a war, but whether they can deter aggression, defend one another and prevent a regional crisis from becoming a wider conflict.

³ Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey's Foreign Minister Says Ankara Weighing Saudi Defense Support, Rules Out Offensive Role," Reuters, October 8, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/turkeys-foreign-minister-says-ankara-weighing-saudi-defence-support-rules-out-2026-10-08/>

