COMMENTARIES

Entwined Fronts: The Saudi–Pakistan Defense Pact and Hamas's Penetration of Pakistan

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

On 17 September 2025 Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement in Riyadh. The joint declaration, broadcast by the Saudi Press Agency, contained a remarkable clause: "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both." Such language mirrors the collective defence commitments of formal alliances and signals a sharp elevation of Saudi–Pakistani security ties. Historically, Islamabad has acted as a de facto security provider for the Kingdom, deploying troops during the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s and maintaining close defence ties through training and arms sales. Yet this new pact is different: for the first time, the relationship is framed in terms of symmetry, not hierarchy, with Saudi Arabia positioned as an equal partner in deterrence.

At almost the same time, a Washington-based think tank, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), released a report highlighting Hamas's growing entanglement with Pakistan, particularly in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The report underscored that while the international community has focused on demilitarising Gaza after October 7, 2023, PoK risks becoming both an ideological and logistical safe haven for Hamas. In February 2025, major conferences in Rawalakot and Mirpur brought together Hamas envoys and Pakistan-based jihadi organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Their joint rhetoric equated the Palestinian and Kashmiri struggles as a single front.

The convergence of these two developments the formalisation of a Saudi–Pakistan defense pact and the symbolic embedding of Hamas in Pakistan's jihadi ecosystem, points to a significant reordering of the security landscape in South Asia and the Middle East. Together, they harden Pakistan's deterrence posture, elevate its standing in the Islamic world, and constrain the manoeuvring room of regional powers, particularly India and Israel. They also cast a shadow over multilateral connectivity projects such as the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC), which now faces additional uncertainty—not because either Riyadh or New Delhi desires it, but because regional turbulence could easily derail its progress.

A Pact with Historical Resonance and Strategic Novelty

For decades, the Saudi–Pakistani security relationship operated on implicit understandings. Pakistani military personnel were embedded in Saudi defense forces, and Riyadh provided crucial financial support to Pakistan in times of economic crisis. Yet the arrangement was asymmetrical: Pakistan provided muscle, Saudi Arabia provided money. The new pact alters the optics, if not yet the operational reality. By declaring that aggression against one is aggression against both, Riyadh and Islamabad have adopted a framework evocative of NATO's Article 5.

The motivations are multiple. For Saudi Arabia, the agreement projects deterrence toward Iran and enhances its credibility in the Islamic world at a time of mounting criticism over normalisation dialogues with Israel. For Pakistan, the pact boosts its regional status, suggesting that its nuclear arsenal, though not explicitly mentioned, adds weight to the deterrent umbrella now nominally shared with Riyadh. The symbolism is powerful: a nuclear-armed Pakistan and a wealthy, diplomatically central Saudi Arabia, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Notably, Saudi leaders simultaneously emphasised that relations with India remain "stronger than ever." This dual signalling illustrates Riyadh's delicate balancing act: shoring up Islamic solidarity without sacrificing its economic and technological partnership with New Delhi. For Riyadh, India remains a far more valuable long-term partner economically and in terms of security technology than Pakistan could ever provide.

Hamas in Pakistan: From Symbolism to Embedded Networks

Parallel to the defence pact, Hamas has made striking inroads into Pakistan's political and militant ecosystem. The MEMRI report documented how Naji Zaheer, the personal representative of Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al, lives openly in Pakistan, honoured by local authorities. On 5 August 2025, Pakistan's ambassador to Qatar, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Muhammad Aamer, met Hamas spokesperson Basem Naim in Doha. In that meeting, both sides explicitly framed Palestine and Kashmir as parts of the same battle.

Events on Kashmir Solidarity Day (5 February 2025) highlighted the operational and symbolic integration. In Rawalakot, the "Kashmir Solidarity and Hamas Operation Al-Aqsa Flood Conference" brought together Hamas figures including Khalid Qaddoumi, Hamas's representative in Tehran, alongside Pakistani jihadi leaders such as Talha Saif (brother of JeM chief Masood Azhar) and senior LeT commanders. Leaders of JeM and the Jammu and Kashmir United Movement (JKUM) pledged to coordinate closely with Hamas in pursuit of jihad in both Palestine and Kashmir. A similar conference in Mirpur featured Hamas representative Sheikh Mahmoud Yousef Al-Shabki, who drew direct parallels between Gaza and Kashmir.

These interactions extend beyond rhetorical solidarity. By intertwining narratives, Pakistan-based groups provide Hamas with ideological legitimacy, logistical cover, and potentially even material support in recruitment, training, and finance. Calls from Pakistan's largest religious-political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, to open a Hamas office in Islamabad underscore the mainstreaming of these ties.

Interlinked Fronts: Riyadh, Islamabad, and Rawalakot

Viewed together, the defence pact and the Hamas penetration are not isolated phenomena. They form part of a broader repositioning of Pakistan within the Islamic world. By aligning with Riyadh in a formalised pact, Islamabad strengthens its deterrent profile. By hosting Hamas representatives and integrating them with local jihadist groups, it bolsters its ideological credentials as the vanguard of Islamic resistance.

For Saudi Arabia, this duality is functional. It allows Riyadh to posture as both a defender of the Islamic ummah and a pragmatic economic partner for powers such as India. Yet the risks are real: if Hamas uses Pakistani territory as a platform, Saudi Arabia may find itself indirectly linked to terrorist networks, complicating its diplomacy with the West and Israel.

Implications for India

For India, the developments are deeply unsettling. Following the April 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack, which killed 26 Indian and Nepali tourists, New Delhi launched Operation Sindoor, suspending the Indus Waters Treaty and adopting a doctrine of proactive deterrence. The Saudi–Pakistan pact now creates a perceptual constraint: any future Indian surgical strike deep inside Pakistani territory could be reframed as an affront to Saudi Arabia. While Riyadh is unlikely to intervene militarily against India, the symbolic risk could generate diplomatic costs and international scrutiny.

Moreover, the Hamas–Pakistan nexus intensifies the threat of proxy escalation. By equating Kashmir with Palestine, Pakistani groups expand the legitimacy of anti-Indian militancy, while Hamas gains an external theater for resilience. For Indian decision-makers, this means a dual-front informational battle: countering narratives that portray Indian actions as anti-Islamic while preserving strategic ties with Saudi Arabia. India, however, retains leverage: for Riyadh, New Delhi is a more critical partner than Islamabad in terms of energy demand, economic diversification, and defence-industrial collaboration.

Implications for Israel

Israel faces a similarly complex equation. On one hand, the pact boosts Riyadh’s standing in the Islamic world at a time when Saudi–Israeli normalisation was under quiet discussion. By associating with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia can deflect criticism that it has abandoned the Palestinian cause. On the other hand, Hamas’s embeddedness in Pakistan risks creating a new logistical sanctuary, complicating Israeli intelligence and counter-terrorism planning.

Most notably, the pact plays into nuclear ambiguity. Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, combined with Saudi financial backing, revives speculation about a potential “Islamic deterrent.” For Israel, the optics alone are problematic: adversaries may frame the pact as an embryonic umbrella that indirectly targets Israel, even if Riyadh maintains backchannels of dialogue with Jerusalem. Moreover, despite Israel’s clear military achievements, it is often perceived in the region as a source of instability rather than as a constructive partner. This perception limits Israel’s immediate utility in triangular frameworks with Riyadh and New Delhi, though its technological and security assets may become more valuable over time if regional turbulence stabilises.

Regional and Global Dimensions

Iran is the immediate addressee of the pact, but not the sole one. For Tehran, a Saudi–Pakistan alignment creates anxiety about encirclement. For the United States, the development is double-edged: it reinforces Saudi Arabia’s deterrent posture against Iran but deepens Saudi reliance on Pakistan rather than Washington. China, already Pakistan’s key strategic patron, benefits from the enhanced stature of its “iron brother” in Islamic politics.

Within the Gulf, the pact may embolden other states to recalibrate their defense relationships, potentially complicating India's carefully cultivated ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia under the I2U2 and IMEC frameworks. IMEC in particular is vulnerable: not because Riyadh or New Delhi seek to undermine it, but because heightened regional turbulence, proxy entanglement, and ambiguous signaling could delay or even derail its consolidation.

Policy Recommendations

For India:

- Maintain calibrated deterrence while avoiding actions that could be construed as challenging Saudi assets.
- Deepen diplomatic channels with Riyadh to emphasize shared economic and technological goals.
- Expand intelligence cooperation with Israel and the UAE to track Hamas's activities in Pakistan and PoK.
- Invest in strategic communication to counter the "Kashmir = Palestine" narrative.

For Israel:

- Quietly reassure Riyadh that Israel interprets the pact as defensive, not offensive, while urging de-linkage from Hamas.
- Strengthen trilateral cooperation with India and the UAE in counter-terrorism and cyber defense.
- Enhance monitoring of Pakistani jihadist networks for signs of Hamas logistical integration.
- Recognize that despite its military effectiveness, Israel must also address its regional image as a destabilizer to expand strategic opportunities.

For Saudi Arabia:

- Balance its Islamic leadership role with the need to sustain credible partnerships with India and the West.
- Avoid allowing Hamas an operational presence on its soil, even indirectly through Pakistan.

Conclusion: Strategic Foresight

The Saudi–Pakistan defense pact and Hamas's penetration of Pakistan together symbolize a tightening of Islamic solidarity at a moment of global flux. For Pakistan, they represent both deterrence and ideological legitimacy. For Saudi Arabia, they provide a hedge: projecting Islamic leadership while keeping economic bridges with India, its far more critical long-term partner. For India and Israel, they create new challenges, reduced operational space, amplified proxy threats, and complicated diplomacy. For IMEC and other multilateral frameworks, the pact introduces risk and uncertainty that neither Riyadh nor New Delhi desires, but that could nonetheless jeopardize timelines.

In the coming months, the most likely scenario is rhetorical deterrence without operational activation. Yet the risks of escalation remain: an Indian counter-terror strike misinterpreted as endangering Saudi assets; a Hamas plot hatched from Pakistani soil; or a surge in nuclear rhetoric from Islamabad emboldened by Riyadh's symbolic backing. Each would test the resilience of regional security architectures.

Ultimately, the entwining of Riyadh, Islamabad, and Hamas reveals how Middle Eastern and South Asian theaters are no longer separable. The new reality demands that India, Israel, and their partners adopt multidimensional strategies, combining deterrence, diplomacy, and narrative warfare, to manage an increasingly interconnected security environment.

(The views expressed are those of the author and do not represent the views of CNAWS.)