

Gen. Raheel Sharif leaves for Saudi to lead Islamic military alliance

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Islamabad: Pakistan's former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif left for Riyadh today to head a 41-nation Islamic military alliance after getting the government's approval, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said amidst concerns here about the Saudi-led grouping.

File pic of Gen. Raheel Sharif

Asif told Geo News that Sharif had been "given permission to head the military alliance after completion of all legal formalities and requirements" by the federal government.

Media reports suggested that the 60-year-old former chief of army staff was granted approval to serve as head of the alliance for three years.

A military source, while speaking to Dawn.Com, said approval for Sharif's departure had also been granted by General Headquarters Rawalpindi according to established procedures.

Sharif, who has army chief for three years till his retirement on November 29, 2016, left for Riyadh today on a special aircraft and was accompanied by his wife and mother.

It was not immediately clear if the government had discussed its decision with opposition parties, which recently expressed serious misgivings regarding the issue in light of the possibility that the alliance may be used against Iran, Dawn reported.

The news also seemed to go against what the defence minister himself had assured Parliament of on April 13, the report said.

Asif had informed the house that the Saudi government would hold a grand meeting in May, where it would unveil the alliance's Terms of Reference (ToR).

"Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and former COAS Gen Raheel Sharif will attend the event," he had said.

He had further said that the former COAS would formally apply for a No Objection Certificate after the ToR was made public.

He also said that the ToR and the aims and objectives of the alliance would be presented to Parliament before a formal decision would be made on whether Pakistan should become a part of it or not.

The 41-nation armed coalition was initially proposed as a platform for security cooperation among Muslim countries and included provisions for training, equipment and troops, and the involvement of religious scholars for devising a counter-terrorism narrative.

Since news of the alliance first surfaced, there have been concerns in Pakistan about its nature and how it may affect a pre-existing parliamentary resolution on Yemen passed unanimously by lawmakers calling for "neutrality in the conflict" in 2015.

On April 13, Asif had told the National Assembly: "We will stick to our prerogative when it comes to Yemen, and the agreement we have will remain binding."

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