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## BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY : THE MIDDLE EAST FACTOR

### Introduction

Foreign policy of any nation-state is a complex and dynamic political course that she pursues in relation to other states with a view to promoting and protecting her national interests. Foreign policy objectives of a particular state are derived mainly from national interests, geopolitical setting, perception of global environment having bearing on domestic development concerns. Domestic factors, particularly ethnicity, values, norms and tradition, elite perception, political changes and economic compulsions also determine the foreign policy posture of a state. More importantly in the present world of interdependency and fast communication, external and domestic forces have mutual constituencies in each other. Interaction between and among these factors and the resultant force determine the foreign policy postures of any nation at any particular point of time.

Bangladesh's relation with the Middle Eastern Muslim countries is a case in point. Bangladesh was born in a rather inhospitable international environment. Specially her independence from another Muslim country, namely, Pakistan was seriously misperceived by the Islamic countries, particularly by the Arab states. Bangladesh however, tried to assuage the Arab sentiments adopting various strategies, namely, direct appeals to the Arab states, use of the

South-East Asian Muslim states as intermediaries and unequivocal support to the Arab and Palestinian cause. The measures adopted by Bangladesh soon began to bring dividends and by the end of 1973 she got recognition from as many as 13 Arab countries.<sup>1</sup>

However, the turning point in Bangladesh-Middle East relation in term of getting support of Arab lobby and much needed resources for development did not come until the violent political change in 1975 when substantive development in her relations with the Arab states took place. The question may arise as to what motivated Bangladesh to continue her efforts for developing relations with the Arab states despite somewhat adverse attitude showed by most of the Arab countries during the independence struggle of Bangladesh in 1971. What were the actual problems of Bangladesh-Middle East relations at the initial stage? How were they resolved? What is the importance of Middle East for Bangladesh, in other words, what place does Middle East occupy in Bangladesh foreign policy?

The present paper in an attempt to answer some of the questions in historical perspective by analysing the causes of earlier distrusts and mistrusts. The paper will also analyse the present trend of Bangladesh-Middle East relations both from political and economic perspectives.

### **Bangladesh's Compulsions**

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971 in a complex international political and economic scenario. In immediate post-independent era Bangladesh had to face formidable challenges both of political and economic nature from internal and external sources. The country was caught up by severe economic crisis and the nation was passing through a series of traumatic events. For consolidation of national independence, rehabilitation and reconstruction of war-ravaged economy and to step up the pace of economic and social

1. Nurul Momen, *Bangladesh The First Four Years* (From 16 December 1971 to 15 December 1975), 1980, pp. 181-184

development the country needed national cohesion, political stability and uninterrupted flow of external aid. The close relationship that had developed with Soviet Union, other communist countries and India during and after the war of independence apparently fell short of meeting Bangladesh's growing needs of external resource inflow and Dhaka had to take initiatives to broaden her external support base

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*Guided by her internal compulsions Bangladesh had to broaden her domestic support base by developing relations with the West and the Arab world.*

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by developing relations with other group of countries, particularly with the West and the Arab countries. And high priority was put to develop relations with the Middle East countries for a number of reasons.

a. The unprecedented price hike of oil in 1973 followed by the world-wide recession made the international aid climate cloudy and complex. Almost during the same period the oil rich Arab countries, thanks to the oil boom, emerged as potential donors to provide aid to the least developed countries, particularly to the fellow Muslim countries and Bangladesh looked toward the Arab world as possible donors who could meet a significant part of her massive aid requirements. And Bangladeshi policy planners were convinced that development of relations with the Arab countries might ease the economic hardship of the new state.

b. Bangladesh wanted to enhance her international prestige and position by getting recognition from more and more countries and becoming members of various international organizations / bodies, including the Organization of the Islamic Conference for which strong Arab support was required.

c. Although India was directly involved in the war of independence of Bangladesh and helped in all possible ways, soon the honeymoon

period was over, the relation between the two countries was deteriorating. Meanwhile the threat perception of Bangladesh underwent significant changes leading her to develop close linkage with the Arab world and China.

d. Bangladesh had a number of unresolved problems with Pakistan, including repatriation and division of assets. Considering the Arab influence over Pakistan she wanted to seek Arab assistance in resolving those issues.

e. The oil boom in early 1970s accelerated economic activities in many Arab countries and the region turned as one of the lucrative markets for labour—both skilled and unskilled. Many Third World countries started to export their manpower to this part of the world and Bangladesh with her huge unused labour force looked to the Middle East as a potential market for employment of her nationals and for earning urgently needed foreign exchange.

f. On the domestic front there was a growing demand on the part of the traditional Muslims for developing fraternal ties with the Arab countries stemming from shared religious and cultural values and the government could not ignore it.

As a result soon Middle East emerged as an important factor in Bangladesh foreign policy and became a major preoccupation for the policy planners and decision makers.

### **Cause of Misperceptions**

As it has been mentioned earlier the national independence movement of Bangladesh was widely misperceived by the Arab countries and in spite of her vast majority of Muslim population (about 85 percent) she had to live in near isolation from the Arab world, the main custodian of Islam, for a long time. It was mainly because of the following factors :

(a) Pakistan created a wrong impression in the Arab world about the political developments in her erstwhile eastern wing and most of

the Arab states were confused about the situation in the then East Pakistan and were not clear about the birth of Bangladesh.

(b) Pakistan as the largest Muslim country enjoyed sympathy and special consideration to the Arab world and the creation of Bangladesh was considered as a dismemberment of the former and an attempt to divide the Islamic world.

(c) The international aspects of Bangladesh's independent movement, particularly the total support by the Soviet Union and an early recognition by Israel<sup>2</sup> also created wide misperceptions in the Arab world. The role of India (who was considered as an erstwhile enemy of Pakistan), her direct involvement in the war of independence and the presence of Indian troops in Bangladesh<sup>3</sup> also made many Arabs suspicious.

(d) The emphasis placed on *secularism*, by constitutionally declaring it as a state principle displeased many quarters in the Arab world, particularly the conservatives who took it as a deviation from Islam and closing to atheism or communism.

Not all the Arab states did however hold similar views in regard to the independence of Bangladesh. There were Arab countries who expressed sympathy and supported the movement in various ways either directly or indirectly. While countries like Saudi Arabia,

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2. The independent movement of Bangladesh had attracted Israeli support, The leadership in Tel-Aviv voiced its sympathy for the new Republic and recognised her in early 1972 when Bangladesh was not yet recognised by any Arab country. Although Bangladesh categorically rejected the Israeli recognition and emphasised her unwillingness to have any relations with Israel, it aroused considerable Arab ire. see, *Times of India*, 11 September 1972.
  3. The presence of Indian troops in Bangladesh was short and temporary. During the visit of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to India in February 1972 it was agreed that the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh territory would be completed by 25 March 1972. But actually the withdrawal was completed even earlier by mid of March 1972. See *Times of India*, 2 March 1972.

Jordan and Libya categorically refused to establish any relation with the Dhaka government at the initial stage, rather they advocated for early reunification of Pakistan in various forums including the OIC.<sup>4</sup> Others including Iraq, Algeria, South Yemen and Egypt sympathised with the struggle of the people of Bangladesh and extended support in various forms and ways. However, the formal recognition even by those Arab countries who supported the war of independence of Bangladesh was delayed by prevailing misperception.

### Political Relations

Although from the very beginning of its emergence Bangladesh drew attention of the international community and within one year of independence got recognition from about 100 countries, the support from the Arab countries was discouraging as indicated earlier. Upto the end of 1972 among the Arab countries only Iraq and Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen recognised Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> Efforts were made to develop relations with the Arab states, special envoys were sent to different Arab capitals and many Arab leaders were invited to visit Bangladesh. The reported Israeli recognition to Bangladesh (later rejected by Bangladesh) on January 4, 1972 made many Arabs suspicious and left the Dhaka government in an awkward position. Nonetheless, Bangladesh continued her efforts to improve relations with the Arab states. In January 1972 a four-member delegation headed by Mollah Jalaluddin visited Cairo to attend the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference.<sup>6</sup> Communications were also made with Iraq, South Yemen and Algeria. In December 1972 Bangladesh signed a Barter Agreement of Tk. 18 crore with Egypt, (although Egypt had not yet formally recognised Bangladesh.) The visits of

4. Third Islamic Foreign Ministers' Conference, Jeddah, February/March 1972, Resolution No. 9/3.

5. Nurul Momen, *op. cit.* p. 183.

6. Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, *Bangladesh's External Relations The Strategy of a Small Power in a Subsystem* (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis), Australian National University, May, 1980, p. 239

Hassanein Heikal, Chairman, Board of Editors of *Al Ahram*, Hassan al-Zayyat, the Egyptian Foreign Minister and Mohamed Yazid, Special Envoy of the Algerian President to Dhaka in early 1973 were important events in opening new Bangladeshi inroads to the Arab world.

Bangladesh's entrance into the Non-aligned Movement and the participation of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the fourth Summit Conference held in Algiers in September 1973 was, in fact, a landmark in Bangladesh-Middle East relations. Sheikh Mujib made personal calls on King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, President Sadat of Egypt, Col. Gaddafi of Libya and the Lebanese Prime Minister. These helped in removing many earlier misgivings about Bangladesh. Soon after the Algiers Summit two important Arab countries, Egypt and Syria, recognised Bangladesh.

The outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war in October 1973 created an opportunity for Bangladesh to express her solidarity with the Arab people. Bangladesh strongly condemned the Israeli aggression and sent 100,000 pounds of tea to Egypt and Syria as 'a token of love' to "the Arab brethren",<sup>7</sup> followed by a medical team sent to Syria to aid the war victims. Bangladesh position in the Arab-Israeli war and her strong support to the Arab cause received wider Arab recognition and immediately after the war Jordan, Kuwait and North Yemen recognised Bangladesh. In fact, by the end of 1973 Bangladesh was able to earn Arab confidence and to improve her relations with the Arab world significantly. In his address to the nation on the Victory Day (16 December) of 1973, Sheikh Mujib mentioned, "during the recent Arab-Israeli war Bangladesh extended a helping hand as comrades-in-arms to the Arabs. As a result, the people of the Arab world have accepted Bangladesh as a true friend."<sup>8</sup>

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7. *Ibid*, p. 226

8. Sheikh Mujib's Address to the Nation on the Victory Day of Bangladesh, 16 December 1973, *Bangladesh Documents*, Vol. 2, No. 2 October-December 1973, p. 14

Bangladesh's inclusion into the world Islamic body—the Organization of the Islamic Conference—and her participation at the second Islamic Summit Conference at Lahore in 1974 was a triumph of Bangladesh foreign policy. Bangladesh expressed her solidarity with the Islamic world and unequivocally supported the Arab and Palestinian cause when the leader of the Bangladeshi delegation said, "We must regain our right over Jerusalem. We salute the brave martyrs and valiant heroes of the Ramadan War, who by their valour and their sacrifices, destroyed many myths and created new executive conditions with all promise that right and justice will eventually triumph".<sup>9</sup>

On the eve of the Islamic Summit at Lahore, Bangladesh was recognised by Pakistan, Iran and Turkey and, later on, by Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman. In fact, after the Lahore Conference Bangladesh maintained wider connection with the Arab countries. In early 1974 the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh visited Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar, while Bangladesh received President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and the Foreign Minister of North Yemen. Since 1974 the Arab countries even those who had not yet recognised Bangladesh, displayed considerable flexible attitude toward Bangladesh and were in favour of developing economic ties with her. During the devastating floods in 1974 Saudi Arabia donated \$10 million as disaster relief to Bangladesh, although she was not yet recognised by the former.<sup>10</sup>

The August coup in 1975 created a favourable atmosphere for developing relations with the Arab world. And the Arab support was very significant to the new regime because of her threat perceptions both from internal and external sources, particularly from immediate

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9. Speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Second Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore on February 24, 1974, *Bangladesh Documents* Vol. 2, No. 3 January-March 1974, p. 22

10. See, *Times of India*, 20 August 1974



neighbours. At the same time some important steps, including change in some fundamental clauses of the Constitution of 1972, were taken ostensibly to satisfy some quarters in the Arab world and in consonance with the bulk of the Islamic constituency within the country. Thus *Secularism*, a basic principle of the state was replaced by *Absolute Trust and Faith in the Almighty Allah*.<sup>11</sup> A new clause was also

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*Although since 1974 the Arab countries displayed considerable flexible attitude and were in favour of developing relations with Bangladesh, until the violent political changes in 1975 the relations were not developed in real terms.*

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added to the Article No. 25 in the Constitution relevant to external relations expressing the solidarity with the fraternal Islamic countries:

The State shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve, and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

The new leadership also repeatedly expressed its solidarity with the Muslim countries and willingness to improve relations with them. The then Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator Major General Ziaur Rahman declared in a public meeting in Dhaka in May 1976. "We have religious, historical, cultural relations with all the Muslim countries of the world and we want to further strengthen our relation with them".<sup>13</sup>

President Zia made a brief stop-over in Saudi Arabia in 1976 and in July 1977 he paid an official visit to the Kingdom, which in fact, laid the foundation for further development of Bangladesh's

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11. *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh 1972*. The Proclamations (Amendment) Order, Order No. 1 of 23 April 1977 Article No. 8, p. 153

12. *Ibid*, Article No. 25, p. 154

13. Address at Suhrawardy Uddyan by Major General Ziaur Rahman, Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator on 1 May 1976.

relations with the Arab world. Since 1977 visits at different levels became common phenomenon for Bangladesh-Middle East relations. Bangladesh also received crucial support from the Arab and Islamic world in time of needs. For example, when Bangladesh contested for the Security Council seat her candidature was supported and endorsed by the 9th Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference held in Dakar in 1978.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually, Bangladesh developed a close friendly relations with the Arab world both in political and socio-economic fields. Bangladesh's unequivocal support to the Arab and Palestinian cause and the constructive role played by her in defusing conflicts and tensions drew wider attention and sympathy in the Arab world which, in turn, helped to strengthen her position and to promote her prestige in the Arab and Islamic world. More importantly this relationship appeared to be based on continuity free from vulnerability to the changes of governments in Bangladesh. Rather firm and persistent policy pursued by different governments in regard to various issues and events in the Middle East helped Bangladesh to acquire her rightful position in the comity of Islamic nations.

In regard to the Palestinian issue Bangladesh's position was strong, unequivocal and persistent and the stand was strictly observed and pursued by different governments irrespective of their political visions and orientations. Bangladesh strongly believes that just and lasting peace in the Middle East is possible only through restoration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinians to have a state in their homeland and withdrawal of all Israeli forces from all occupied Arab territories. This principled position taken by Bangladesh was highly regarded in the Arab and Islamic world and as a recognition she was elected members to the Jerusalem Committee both at the Ministerial and Summit levels. She was also elected to the 8-member Non-aligned Committee on Palestine. As members of all these committees Bangladesh plays an active and constructive role

14. Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, *op. cit.* p. 249

towards speedy and comprehensive solution to the core problem of the Middle East crisis.

However, Bangladesh has to face a number of constraints in pursuing her policy toward the Palestinian issue. Palestine has always been in the centre of Arab politics and every Arab state, by and large, tried to use the issue for its own purpose and interest. As Bangladesh wants to be friendly with all Arab countries and tends to avoid involvement in intra-Arab disputes and rivalries, often it is very difficult for her to take any stand which might jeopardize her relation with the involved states. Nonetheless, there is no denying the fact that Bangladesh's position in regard to Palestinian issue is persistent and unequivocal and is well regarded by the Arab and Palestinian peoples.

Often Bangladesh has to face a number of difficulties in realizing her policy vis-a-vis various issues and events in the region. For example, the American hostage crisis in Iran in 1979 was a major concern for Bangladesh. As Bangladesh was nurturing her growing relations with the Middle East countries the issue of American hostage held in Tehran by Irani nationalists contained the potentials of straining Bangladesh's relation with the United States or Iran or both. However, after an initial period of confusions Bangladesh categorically urged Iran to release the American diplomatic personnel held in Tehran according to the principles of international law and conventions. At the sametime Bangladesh did not support the US proposal to impose economic sanctions against Iran.<sup>15</sup>

Bangladesh was gravely concerned over the hostilities that broke out between Iran and Iraq in September 1980 because of her close fraternal relations with both the countries. From the very outbreak of the war Bangladesh called on the parties to cease hostilities

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15. Statement by Bangladesh at the Security Council Meeting on 31 December 1979, *Bangladesh Documents*, Vol. 3, No. 2, October-December 1979, p. 30.

and solve the dispute through peaceful negotiations. At the third Islamic Summit in Taif in January 1981 Bangladesh proposed concrete measures to bring about an immediate cessation of hostilities and a just and honourable settlement of the dispute in accordance with international law.<sup>16</sup> As a member of the Islamic

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Peace Committee to end the Iran-Iraq war and in her individual capacity Bangladesh continues her efforts to end the hostilities that has been continuing for more than five years.

Bangladesh always puts high priority on solidarity among the Islamic countries and prefers peaceful resolutions of all conflicts in the Middle East. As Bangladesh is overwhelmingly dependent on external aid she can not afford to annoy or dissatisfy any of the donors, either the West or the Arab world. A peaceful, politically stable and viable Arab world can serve her interest best both in maintaining peace and security and in continuing the pace of socio-economic development.

### **Economic Ties**

As the Middle East emerged as a major political factor, its economic importance could not be overlooked and with the widening of political linkages Bangladesh developed economic ties with the Middle East countries, particularly with the oil-rich Arab countries who, by now, have turned into a major source of the country's external assistance.

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16. Address by President Ziaur Rahman at the Third Islamic Summit Conference, 25-28 January 1981, Taif, Saudi Arabia, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh).

nce. As it was mentioned by the Ministry of Planning in 1978.<sup>11</sup> A new group of donors has emerged in the recent past in the Middle East. Assistance from the OPEC sources has been increasing substantially.<sup>17</sup> According to the External Resource Division during 1971-1978 the OPEC countries (Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) disbursed a total aid of \$186.3 million to Bangladesh (grants plus loans).<sup>18</sup> In June 1980 aid from the OPEC source totalled \$386.3 million, while in June 1984 the amount increased upto \$745.9 million. As table-1 shows, the total commitment of

**Table: 1. Commitment and Disbursement of Aid From OPEC Countries**  
(From December 17, 1971 to June 30, 1983) (in million US dollar)

	Commitment			Disbursement			7 as
	Grant	Loan	Total	Grant	Loan	Total	% of 4
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Iran	—	12.5	12.5	—	12.5	12.5	100.0
Iraq	8.4	127.0	135.4	8.4	58.3	66.7	49.3
Kuwait	—	158.6	158.6	—	79.9	79.9	50.3
Libya	1.0	—	1.0	1.0	—	1.0	100.0
Saudi Arabia	471.9	165	636.9	377.3	47.2	424.5	66.7
UAE	17.2	96.2	113.4	17.2	75.0	92.2	81.3
Total	498.5	559.3	1057.8	403.9	272.9	676.8	64.0

Source ; The table is prepared from data received from *Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh* (As of June 30, 1983), External Resources Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, p. 99.

17. *Seven Years of External Assistance to Bangladesh*, External Resources Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, June 1978, p. 3

18. *Ibid*, Table 9, p. 35

aid from the OPEC countries from 17 December 1971 to 30 June 1983 was \$1057.8 million with \$478.5 million as grant and \$559.3 million as loan. The total disbursement was \$676.8 million i.e. about 64 percent of the total commitment. If compared with other sources the share of aid received from OPEC is not high (about 6 percent only). But as Table-2 shows the major share of aid received from the OPEC countries comes as grant which Bangladesh needs most for her economic development. The share of grants in total aid received from the DAC Countries, Multilateral Agencies, Centrally Planned Countries and Others are 62.6, 37.2, 9.7 and 36.7 percent respectively, while the share of grant in OPEC's aid is more than 67 percent. Only Saudi Arabia contributes more than 94 percent of the total grant received from the OPEC source.<sup>19</sup> Another important characteristic

**Table 2. Aid Received from Different Sources (million US dollar)**  
(From 1971 to 30 June 1984)

Sources	Grant	Loan	Total	2 as % of 4
1	2	3	4	5
1. DAC Countries	3927.5	2342.3	6269.8	62.6
2. International/ Multilateral Agencies	1268.9	2137.9	3406.8	37.2
3. Centrally Planned Countries	40.8	377.9	418.7	9.7
4. OPEC	463.5	226.9	690.4	67.1
5. Others	219.3	378.1	597.4	36.7
	5920.0	5463.1	11383.1	52.0

Source : The table is prepared from the data available in "Bangladesh Arthanaitik Zariip 1984/85 (Bangladesh Economic Survey) 1984/85," Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, pp. 222-225.

19. *Bangladesh Arthanaitik Zariip* (Bangladesh Economic Survey) 1984/85, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, p. 211

**Table 3. Manpower Employment in Middle Eastern Countries  
(1976-1985) No. of persons**

Year	Algeria	Bahrain	Iran	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Libya
1976	—	338	281	587	—	643	173
1977	11	870	339	1238	—	1315	718
1978	17	762	982	1454	—	2243	2394
1979	25	827	4	2362	73	2289	1969
1980	3	1351	2	1927	127	3687	2976
1981	—	1392	—	13153	66	5464	4162
1982	21	1993	—	12898	220	7244	2071
1983	—	2470	—	4932	127	10302	2215
1984	—	2325	534	4701	—	5677	3386
1985	—	1634	146	1469	—	3860	452
[Upto June]							
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>13962</b>	<b>2288</b>	<b>44721</b>	<b>613</b>	<b>42724</b>	<b>20416</b>

Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Yemen	Total	Total Overseas Employment	ME as % of TOE
113	1221	214	1989	—	5559	6087	91.3
1492	2262	1379	5819	—	15443	15725	98.2
2877	1303	3212	7512	—	22756	22809	99.7
3777	1383	6490	5055	—	24254	24485	99.0
4745	1455	8695	4895	—	29815	30573	97.5
7351	2268	13384	6418	—	53658	55787	96.1
8248	6253	16341	6862	—	62151	62762	99.0
11126	7561	12942	6616	236	58527	59320	98.6
10111	2763	20587	5302	494	55880	56754	98.4
4264	2385	17311	4325	156	36002	36119	99.6
54104	28854	100555	54745	886	364045	370321	98.3

Source : Table is prepared from the data received from the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, Dhaka.



of the aid received from the OPEC countries is that major share of the aid comes as commodity aid. For example, upto 30 June 1983 out of the total aid received from the OPEC source, \$ 331.6 million [about 50 percent] was as commodity aid while the amount of project aid was \$ 250.2 million.<sup>20</sup> The aid received from the Middle East countries are being utilized in such important projects and installations of the national economy as the Ashugonj Fertilizer Factory, Manu River Project, Power Project, Railway Rehabilitation Project, Chittagong Urea Factory, Machine Tools Factory, Jaipurhat Limestone Mining Project, proposed Jamuna Multipurpose Interconnector (bridge) project and so on.<sup>21</sup>

The oil rich Arab countries in the Middle East not only emerged as a major source of external aid to Bangladesh, but gradually the region had also turned as potential market for Bangladeshi labourers—both skilled and unskilled. But as the government failed to adopt any appropriate policy on overseas employment, Bangladesh had to lose about half a decade to enter into the Middle East labour market. And as a late-comer she had to face a number of difficulties in seeking jobs to her nationals in various Middle East countries. Nonetheless, with intensive efforts soon Bangladesh was able to achieve remarkable success in securing employments in various Arab states and the number of employees increased steadily in the following years. As table 3 shows, in 1976 the total Bangladeshi manpower employment to various Middle East countries was only 5559 persons, while in June 1985 the number increased upto 36,4045 i.e more than 65 times. And Middle East constitutes the major share of total overseas employment of Bangladesh. As the Table shows, the share of Middle East in total overseas employment varies from 96.1 percent to 99.7 percent since 1976 to 1985. Upto June 1985 Bangladesh secured overseas jobs for

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20. *Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh* (As of June 30, 1983) External Resources Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh Dhaka, Table-11, p. 104

21. For details see, *ibid*, pp. 120-122

370,321 citizens and out of them 364,045 people i.e. about 98 percent were employed in various Middle East countries.

With the increasing outflow of manpower to the Middle East countries the remittances also increased significantly. As Table-4 shows in 1976 total remittance was only about 36 crore taka, while for 1983 the amount was about 1,581 crore taka i.e. an increase of about 44 times. At the end of 1984 the total remittances amounted Taka 5,826.6 crore and turned as the second largest contributor to foreign exchange earnings next to Jute.<sup>22</sup> By 1982-83 the remittance almost equalled the value of total merchandise export of Bangladesh and came closer to half the total foreign aid received.<sup>23</sup>

Table : 4 : WES Remittances

Year	Amount in crore Taka.
1976	35.85
1977	125.16
1978	165.59
1979	266.74
1980	523.81
1981	686.35
1982	1173.84
1983	1581.08
1984	1268.18
Total	5826.60

Source : Bangladesh Bank

22. *Bangladesh Observer*, 5 February 1985

23. A.M.A.H. Siddiqui, *Economic and Non-economic Impact of Manpower Migration. An Overview*, Paper presented at the Second Session of the Center for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB), Panel of Foreign Policy Research, August 8, 1985, Dhaka, p. 21

The remittances also afford considerable support to the balance of payments of Bangladesh. If there would have no remittances the current account deficit for the year 1982-83 would have been higher by about 45 percent. The remittances also play an important role in the import budget of Bangladesh. For the financial year 1981-82 about 20 percent of total import of the country came under Wage Earners' Scheme.<sup>24</sup> As the overwhelming majority of the Bangladeshi workers are employed in various Arab countries, Middle East plays an important role in getting remittances and more than 75 percent of total remittances that the country receives comes from the Middle East countries.

As Bangladesh's prime preoccupations in her Middle East Policy were to ensure the inflow of more aid and to increase the remittances by seeking more jobs for her nationals, the trade sector was either neglected or did not get proper attention. Bangladesh's trade with the high income oil exporting countries (Oman, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) is very negligible. In 1982 the merchandise exports from Bangladesh to those countries constituted only one percent of the total export while for the same period about 10 percent of the country's exports went to the East European non-market economies.<sup>25</sup> However, initiatives at different levels were taken to increase the volume of trade with the Middle East countries. And as a result economic ties with different Arab states have been expanded. Upto 1975 Bangladesh had joint economic commissions only with Iraq, but now she has such commissions with a number of important Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Moreover, Bangladesh has general technical or economic and technical cooperation agreements with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>26</sup>

24. *Ibid*, Table-V, p. 22

25. *World Development Report 1984* World Bank, ( Oxford University Press )  
Tables-12 and 13 pp. 241-242

26. *Bangladesh Observer*, 11 December 1984

Bangladesh exports mainly tea, jute, jute goods, fish and fish preparations, fruits, vegetables live animals, sanitary fittings and readymade garments to the region. As annexure—I shows in 1976-77 Bangladeshi exports to 20 Middle East countries was Taka 626,130,000 i.e. about 9 percent of the total export, but overtime the volume steadily increased and in 1980-81 it amounted Taka 1,985,670,000 which equalled to about 15 percent of the total export. During the year 1983-84 Bangladeshi export to Middle East was Taka 4,244,922,000 i.e more than 20 percent of the country's total export.<sup>27</sup>

Bangladesh imports mainly petroleum and petroleum products from the Middle East countries. As it is seen from annexure-2, Bangladeshi imports from the area varies at different times, from 8.5 percent to the total import in 1975-76 to the highest 22.4 percent in 1981-82. But in recent years Bangladesh's import from the region

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has considerably decreased. Although the share of import from Middle East is not so high in the country's total import bill, trade with the area is very significant and important for Bangladesh because a major share of the import bill is paid through loans and grants.<sup>28</sup>

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27. For details of Bangladesh export to the Middle East, see, *Annual Export Receipts 1983-84*, Statistical Department, Bangladesh Bank, Table-11, pp. 53-200

28. For details of Bangladesh Import from Middle East, see *Annual Imports Payments 1983-84*, Statistical Department, Bangladesh Bank, Table-11, pp. 48-156

As the Arab world has turned into one of the most lucrative markets particularly for consumer goods, Bangladesh has a tremendous scope to increase her export to this area. But for the lack of political understanding at the initial stage she had to face a number of difficulties in promoting trade relations with the Arab countries. Upto 1976 only a few Arab countries had their missions in Dhaka and the communication with this part of the world was very poor and negligible. Although Biman, the national airlines of Bangladesh started its operation to Saudi Arabia in 1978 and subsequently to other Arab countries and few Middle East Airlines included Dhaka at their network, it could not meet the growing requirements in carrying passengers and cargo. Moreover, there were other difficulties to expand trade through air traffic and economically it was not feasible. The introduction of regular bimonthly shipping service between Bangladesh and the Red Sea ports in early 1985 was, undoubtedly an important milestone in developing trade relations with the Arab countries.<sup>29</sup> But still the transportation system is poor and inadequate to meet the growing requirements.

Another major bottleneck of developing trade with West Asia is that Bangladesh did not adequately explore markets for her goods in the region and Bangladeshi goods and services are not familiar to most of the Arab countries. And it was expressed by many trade experts. In April 1985, during his visit to Bangladesh Sheikh Ismail Abudawood, President of the Union of Arab Chambers also expressed the same view when he said that most of the Arab countries were not aware of what Bangladesh could offer them.<sup>30</sup>

Measures may be taken to make Bangladeshi goods and products familiar to different Arab countries. And for that matter arrangements may be made to exhibit Bangladeshi goods in different Arab capitals. Frequent visits of trade delegations at different levels may

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29. *The Arab News*, 26 March 1985

30. *Bangladesh Observer*, 21 April 1985

also be helpful in exploring new areas of economic cooperation and promotion of trade.

The Arab states, who always looked toward West for expanding trade relations, are now seem to be interested in promoting trade also with the developing countries, particularly with the Muslim countries and Bangladesh should take steps to explore all possible avenues to expand her trade with the fraternal Muslim countries in the Arab world.

As Bangladesh will direly need external aid with increased volume for her socio-economic development, the remittances will continue to play a vital role in national economy and the country will have to increase her export to generate her own resources, the Middle East will undoubtedly continue to play a crucial role in the future socio-economic development of the country.

### Conclusion

The climate of mutual mistrust that prevailed at the initial stage in Bangladesh Middle East relations has been cleared and through persistent efforts Bangladesh has developed a close friendly relations with all the Arab countries on the basis of Islamic fraternity and brotherhood. And eventually Middle East has turned as one of the important factors in Bangladesh foreign policy. Bangladesh puts high priority in developing relations with the Arab world and every regime in Dhaka irrespective of their political postures and ideological affiliations have considered the Arab support—both for internal development and in international support—vital.

Bangladesh strongly and unequivocally supports the just cause of the Arab and Palestinian people and is in favour of peaceful resolution of all disputes and problems in the Arab world. It is true that Bangladesh with all her limitations and constraints can hardly influence the course of events in the Middle East or can put sufficient pressure on the parties concerned for solving the core problem of the area, but

as a member of various specialised committees formed by the OIC and the Non-aligned Movement she can play an important role in easing tensions and maintaining peace and security in the region.

As the economic importance of the Middle East for Bangladesh can not be overemphasised, the government will have to explore all possible avenues to ensure the inflow of aid with added volume and increased remittances from the region and to vigorously seek markets for her goods and products in the Arab world. Bangladesh should also try to sign trade protocols with friendly Arab countries which may offer Bangladeshi goods an edge over others in the Arab market. In the field of manpower employment Bangladesh may coordinate her

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*For a country like Bangladesh, having hardly any leverage on regional politics on Middle East it is very difficult for her to articulate a foreign policy by which the Middle East factor can most effectively be used for her national interest.*

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labour policy with the manpower importing Arab countries through the Islamic Centre for Vocational Training and Research in Dhaka. It is obvious that better political understanding, mutual trust and complementarity in relationship will be the preconditions for expanding and promoting economic ties with the Arab world. Bangladesh should take initiatives to expand her relations with various Arab countries, because although she claims to be friendly with all, her ties, both political and economic, are, in fact, confined with few major Arab states.

The importance of Middle East for Bangladesh, both for political and economic reasons is tremendous but at the same time the problems of developing relations with this part of the world are enormous. The existing regional and bilateral issues are being complicated while new problems are emerging. Intra-Arab rivalries, personal antipathy and mutual distrusts are prevailing in the region. For a country

like Bangladesh, having hardly any leverage on regional politics of Middle East it is very difficult for her to articulate a foreign policy by which the Middle East factor can most effectively be used for her national interest. However, Bangladesh should try to maintain good and friendly relations with all the Arab countries by avoiding involvement in existing political antagonisms and controversial issues and conflicts. This however in no way, means that Bangladesh should always pursue a passive policy, to maintain a low profile or to be silent on all issues and events in the Middle East, rather, where there are scopes, she should try to play an active mediative role keeping her neutrality intact and to solve them by exploring her friendly ties with the parties concerned. And it will obviously promote her prestige and position in the Arab and Islamic world, facilitating thereby the promotion of her own national interest.



## Annexure-1. Export to Middle East Countries [ Taka Thousands ]

Country	1975—76	1976—77	1977—78	1978—79
1. Algeria	7733	15052	4285	9502
2. Bahrain	—	—	80	17
3. Egypt	225216	249504	230593	371095
4. Iran	178961	207936	213380	191729
5. Iraq	121546	14071	127160	207663
6. Jordan	—	274	683	—
7. Kuwait	678	3770	154	4123
8. Lebanon	203	—	1975	9801
9. Libya	3292	10877	2	—
10. Morocco	6028	20913	29569	14199
11. Oman	190	—	41	9
12. Qatar	7	233	2976	1937
13. Saudi Arabia	—	3281	5730	7121
14. Sudan	73660	90003	312806	175929
15. Syria	71727	158755	152416	187195
16. Tunisia	3765	38230	5097	4186
17. Turkey	68082	86485	92571	150792
18. UAE	2507	3834	10590	21291
19. Yemen (South)	—	—	362	—
20. Yemen (North)	—	—	23839	3870
<b>Total</b>	<b>763595</b>	<b>903218</b>	<b>1214309</b>	<b>1360459</b>
as % of Total	( 15.8 )	( 9.0 )	( 16.0 )	( 15.2 )

1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84
15825	45339	14041	115809	48115
32	49	233	55	151
214187	255911	292262	388290	580734
573756	796949	566764	618618	2531997
198087	211453	397081	580466	175149
—	1032	—	36313	46410
12520	1151	19158	51588	46416
—	10792	57631	4362	1309
1398	—	—	33509	63384
51882	16790	6885	21249	4,9306
13	124	3717	9110	12180
3508	5475	6883	8959	8980
11863	15187	21530	43130	80636
513952	666644	112749	503639	360382
102320	444019	368769	365869	173492
11072	14354	4512	27298	20883
115382	130851	227599	179734	225078
21235	17832	57907	61784	121721
—	—	—	—	14927
—	15362	11073	36644	44074
1847032	2649314	2168754	3086326	4605324
(16.0)	(19.8)	(14.9)	(16.5)	(22.4)

Source ; Table prepared from data available in *Annual Export Receipts 1983-84*, Statistical Department, Bangladesh Bank, pp. 201-212.

**Annexure 2. Import from Middle Eastern Countries (Taka in Lacs)**  
(Both Cash, Loans and Grants)

Country	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	1978-79
1. Algeria	4	—	—	—
2. Bahrain	—	—	—	—
3. Egypt	1	84	107	280
4. Iran	4410	7662	9085	2815
5. Iraq	1490	102	358	5172
6. Jordan	—	—	—	—
7. Kuwait	—	2593	3400	2039
8. Lebanon	—	—	1	—
9. Libya	—	—	—	—
10. Morocco	—	—	94	—
11. Oman	7202	—	—	—
12. Qatar	259	—	—	218
13. Saudi Arabia	140	2440	3150	4189
14. Sudan	3	—	3	6
15. Tunisia	—	—	—	—
16. Turkey	—	1535	1	146
17. UAE	2748	4429	13280	8720
18. Yemen	—	—	129	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>16257</b>	<b>18845</b>	<b>29608</b>	<b>23585</b>
as % of Total	( 8.5)	( 14.4)	( 13.7)	( 9.4)

1979—80	1980—81	1981—82	1982—83	1983—84
2	26	1	1	—
1033	50	9	39	37
134	382	652	724	864
2179	4412	4227	109	5165
2841	3553	164	53	149
96	—	264	604	31
2290	5282	1719	4508	134
—	—	—	—	2
2	7	—	2	—
—	—	—	—	67
—	—	153	—	—
3641	1808	2652	1563	695
30235	54216	59537	68513	32609
3	5	112	81	811
—	1	—	—	—
1	4	—	1	709
18244	20524	47620	36183	34732
—	—	1	3	9
60701	89270	117110	112384	76014
( 17.1 )	( 21.0 )	( 22.4 )	( 20.3 )	( 12.6 )

Source ; Table prepared from data available in *Annual Import Payments 1983-1984*. Statistical Department, Bangladesh Bank, pp. 162-167