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GROWING TENSIONS IN THE OIC: A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), established with the aim of upholding Muslim solidarity along with supporting the cause of emancipation of Palestine people, is now facing growing tensions among its member states. The normalisation process centring around establishing ties with Israel by the four OIC member states and the subsequent development of discontent, either supporting or objecting to the initiative, have brought the issue of division within the OIC to the forefront. This is not the first time the unity of the organisation has been questioned, which has often been challenged by the theological split, sectarian divide, identity politics and overlapping lines of disputes. Though religious fault-lines have long been used as a prism to comprehend the underlying divisions within the OIC, the recent tensions within the organisation signal shifting geopolitical realities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the power redistribution, where new issues are emerging, challenging the unity of the largest Muslim organisation. Based on a qualitative research method, the paper studies the aspects of emerging tensions in the OIC and explains the issues from a geopolitical perspective.

Keywords: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, OIC, Middle East and North Africa, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

The recent normalisation of ties of four Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states with Israel and the subsequent development of factions either supporting or objecting to the initiative has brought the issue of growing tension within the organisation to the forefront. Morocco has become the latest member state and the fourth country within a year after the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Sudan, agreed to normalise their relationship with Israel, evoking a mixed bag of reactions among the Muslim community. While some OIC members such as Palestine, Iran, Malaysia, and Pakistan have been critical of the deals, others including Egypt and Oman have welcomed the normalisation process. This has questioned the concept of Muslim unity in the OIC, which was established more

than fifty years ago with the objectives of upholding solidarity of the Muslim world, protecting the Islamic holy sites, supporting the cause of the Palestinian people, eradicating different types of discrimination and enhancing economic cooperation among the member states.¹

OIC, the second-largest intergovernmental organisation after the United Nations (UN) with 57 members, has been the prime platform of the Muslim world established not only to bring interdependence and stability but also to fulfil the diplomatic and economic interests of the Muslim majority countries.² Comprising almost one-fourth of the global population and holding significant human as well as natural resources, the establishment of the OIC was envisioned for peace, development and economic prosperity among the Muslim community around the globe. The OIC Charter, which was adopted on February 27, 1970, also stressed solidarity among the Muslim community, strengthening cooperation in diversified areas including political, economic, social, cultural and scientific fields and also extending support to all Muslims to safeguard their national interest, dignity and human rights.

Since, the Palestine issue, and to be specific the incident of the attack on Al Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem in 1969, was one of the prime reasons behind the inception of the OIC, the emancipation of the Palestine people along with establishing sustained peace in the Middle East peace had been the core agendas of the organisation.³ However, since its inception, OIC has not been fully successful in doing proper justice to the cause based on which it was created. On top of that, the organisation has been experiencing growing tensions among its member states due to some new developments, among which, the normalisation of relations with Israel by various Muslim countries is perhaps the most significant one. On August 13, 2020, the Government of Israel and the UAE announced to normalise their relations. The agreement between the two countries, known as the “Abraham Accords”, was

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¹ Toni Johnson, “The Organization of the Islamic Conference”, Council on Foreign Relations, updated June 29, 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/organization-islamic-conference>.

² Gulam Mustafa and Nusrat Bano, “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC): Challenges for the Islamic World,” *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, no. 1 (March 2020): 01-11.

³ M. A. Lirong and HOU Yuxiang, “Analysis on the Potential of Strategic Cooperation between China and OIC under the “Silk Road Strategy” Framework,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (In Asia)* 9, no. 1 (2015).

the first approach to the Arab-Israel peace process since the 1994 Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty, in which both parties took on “full normalisation of relations”.⁴

Establishing formal diplomatic relations demonstrates a significant change in the collective perspective of the Muslim community in keeping Israel isolated to exert pressure on the Palestine cause. Along with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco also initiated the normalisation process, which is in stark contrast with the OIC’s position on the Palestine cause, exposing a schism among its member states. This has not been the first time the unity of the organisation is put in question. It has often been challenged by divergent interests from varied historical experiences, theological splits, sectarian divides and overlapping lines of disputes. Religious fault-lines have long been used as a prism to comprehend the underlying divisions among the Muslim countries vis-à-vis with in the OIC. However, the recent tensions within the organisation signal a changing geopolitical architecture in the MENA and the fluid power redistribution, where fresh issues are emerging, stressing the unity of the largest Muslim organisation.

Several studies have provided a geopolitical analysis of the MENA region. Dina Rashed⁵ has talked about different resources of power—geographic location, demography, mineral and economic wealth—of the MENA region and how these resources helped to shape the conflict. Ioannis Th. Mazis⁶ has provided an in-depth analysis of the role of critical actors like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, UAE, Iran, Palestine, Israel, etc., in the political and security architecture of the Middle East. From the standpoint of regional and extra-regional actors, Bülent Aras and Şaban Kardaş⁷ have outlined the primary drivers and emerging characteristics of the new Middle Eastern geopolitics. They have claimed that the cycle of insecurity and instability, which has profoundly changed the MENA region's international ties, has shaped the regional security environment. The discussion of Joshua S. Krasna⁸ has also pointed out the geopolitical and strategic dynamics in the modern-day Middle East and how different Middle Eastern actors

⁴ Robert Barron, “What Do Normalized Israel-UAE Relations Mean for the Region,” United States Institute of Peace, August 14, 2020.

⁵ Dina Rashed, “Geography, Resources and The Geopolitics of Middle East Conflicts,” *E-International Relations*, updated May 24, 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/05/24/geography-resources-and-the-geopolitics-of-middle-east-conflicts/>.

⁶ Ioannis Th. Mazis, 2013. “Geopolitical Analysis of The Greater Middle East System in the Present Juncture,” *Regional Science Inquiry*, Hellenic Association of Regional Scientists, no. 1 (June): 163-171.

⁷ Bülent Aras and Şaban Kardaş, “Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (2021): 397-402.

⁸ Joshua S. Krasna, “It’s Complicated: Geopolitical and Strategic Dynamics in the Contemporary Middle East”, *ORBIS* 63, Issue 01 (2019), 64-79.

are simultaneously playing different games, affecting the political and security architecture of the region. The author has labelled the Middle East as a complex system that cannot be understood using simplistic, single-factor reasoning.

A number of authors, namely Meliha Altunışık Benil⁹ and Marianna Charountaki¹⁰ have emphasised the Iran-Turkey relations and how cooperation and competition coexist between these two contending regional powers who are both OIC member states. Benil's work has highlighted how religious and ideological identities are embedded in the structure of rivalry and competition. Charountaki has talked about the ethno-ideological and socio-political differences in the form of sectarianism in the relationship between Iran and Turkey.

Some authors have also underscored sectarianism and identity politics as major sources of instability in the greater Middle Eastern region as well as OIC. Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Shahram Akbarzadeh¹¹ have argued that Iran and Saudi Arabia have exploited identity politics in the form of sectarianism to advance their geopolitical agenda, which has put the idea of Muslim unity along with solidarity within OIC in deep peril. Based on 3 cases: suspension of the membership of Syria from the OIC, the 2016 OIC summit, and the Houthi issue, the authors have highlighted the Saudi-Iran rivalry and how it adversely impacted the unity of the OIC vis-à-vis Muslim unity. A publication by Council on Foreign Relations¹² also focused on sectarian conflict and how it is rooted in several Muslim states. It has also discussed how the tensions between Shiites and Sunnis, exploited by regional rivals like Iran and Saudi Arabia, could alter the future of the Middle East.

On the contrary, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel,¹³ in their paper, have argued that sectarianism fails to describe the current turmoil in the Middle East adequately; instead, they have argued that the current disorder is the outcome of a number of developmental crises brought on by the breakdown of state authority. They have acknowledged the presence of religious identities in Middle Eastern politics but

⁹ Meliha B. Altunışık, "Iran-Turkey Relations: Between Rivalry and Competition," in *Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Imad Mansour and William R. Thompson, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Marianna Charountaki, "Turkish-Iranian Relations Under the Lens of The Syrian Crisis: A New Era for Middle Eastern Politics," in *Book Cover Iran and Turkey International And Regional Engagement In The Middle East* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 167-212.

¹¹ Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)", *Territory, Politics, Governance* (August 2019): 01-18.

¹² Council on Foreign Relations, *The Sunni-Shia Divide* (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed 29 July 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/sunni-shia-divide/#/>.

¹³ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (August 2017).

claimed that the state actors had politicized these identities for their political gain. The authors blamed the toxic brew of authoritarianism, state repression, economic stagnation and kleptocracy for the chaotic situation in the Middle East.

Only a handful of studies have highlighted the issue of the recent normalisation of ties between Israel and four OIC member states. Mahjoob Zweiri¹⁴ has discussed the new wave of normalisation and argued that the relationship between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain has a significant impact on the region that affects all paradigms, from geopolitics to economics. He also argued that the region's most enduring feature of the normalisation deal would be geopolitical. Omar H. Rahman¹⁵ has discussed the emergence of GCC-Israel relations in the changing Middle East from a geopolitical perspective. Although most of the Gulf governments have not recently established or developed ties with Israel, recent shifts in regional politics have provided certain GCC members with a new strategic reason to warm up to their former foe. The author argued that the Saudi-UAE axis has deviated from the Arab world's longstanding policy of putting Palestine first in order to form an alliance with Israel, driven by a variety of regional concerns and the necessity to keep the US involved in their security.

The scholarship available has almost exclusively focused on the turmoil and conflicts in the Middle East and, to some extent, the MENA region, not the OIC. Apart from the work of Ahmed and Akbarzadeh mentioned before, the recent literature (Hassan, Bin-Nashwan and Muneeza¹⁶; Mousavi Asl and Zamani¹⁷) on OIC mainly highlights the economic aspects and human rights issues of the OIC member states, and there has been a dearth of literature on the growing tensions within the organisation. To fill this literature gap, the paper looks into the aspects of emerging tensions in the OIC and attempts to explain the issues from a geopolitical perspective. The research question the paper investigates is: How is the changing geopolitical dynamics fuelling tension in the OIC? The paper follows a qualitative research method that is descriptive in nature. Based on the existing literature

¹⁴ Mahjoob Zweiri, "The New Wave of Normalization: Shifting Sands or a Major Earthquake?", *Arab Reform Initiative*, updated September 16, 2021.

¹⁵ Omar Rahman, "The Emergence of GCC-Israel Relations in a Changing Middle East", Brookings, updated July 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-emergence-of-gcc-israel-relations-in-a-changing-middle-east/>.

¹⁶ M. Kabir Hassan, Saeed Awadh Bin-Nashwan and Aishath Muneeza, "OIC Economies During the COVID-19: Implications And Recommendations", in *Towards A Post-Covid Global Financial System*, ed. M. K. Hassan, A. Muneeza, A. M. Sarea, (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022), 37-50.

¹⁷ Seyed Hasan Mousavi Asl and Seyed Ghasem Zamani, "Validating the Tendency of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to Take an Introspective Approach to the Field of Human Rights", *Comparative Study on Islamic & Western Law*, (2021).

collected from academic books, journal articles, reports, and online sources, the paper makes an attempt to answer the research question from an interpretivist perspective. It is divided into five sections, including the introduction and conclusion. Followed by the introduction, the second section deals with the genesis of OIC and the Palestine issue. The third section sheds light on the issues evoking tensions in the OIC, and the fourth section explains the issues from the geopolitical perspective. The paper concludes in section five.

2. Genesis of the OIC

This section primarily deals with the genesis of the OIC. It looks into the aspect of the linkage between the origin of the OIC and the Palestine issue. It also briefly discusses different features of the OIC, including its objectives, agenda, and summits, which are crucial to understanding the dynamics of power relations among the member states of the organisation and their convergent and divergent issues and interests.

As mentioned earlier, OIC was established based on the incidence of the Al-Aqsa Mosque aggression in East Jerusalem. On 21 August 1969, a Christian Australian, named Denis Michael Rohan, set fire to the mosque, which is regarded as the third holiest shrine for the Muslim community, causing extensive damage. The arson incident caused agonized reactions throughout the Muslim world. To note, the plight of the Palestinian people caused by the Israeli authority and the aggression on the Al-Aqsa Mosque directly engendered the efforts to create an umbrella organisation for the Muslim majority countries.¹⁸ On the same day, the Grand Mufti of Palestine called on the global Muslim leadership to discuss the matter by arranging an emergency Islamic summit. As a consequence of extensive diplomatic efforts, the first Islamic summit was convened in Rabat in September 1969, where representatives from 24 Muslim countries responded positively and attended. In March 1970, six months after the convention, the First Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers was held in Jeddah, where the decision was made to set up a permanent secretariat. Subsequently, in 1972, the first OIC charter was adopted.

During the past years, the agenda of the OIC summits have gone through various changes. For example, the agenda of the first Islamic Summit (held in 1969) was Islamic solidarity, political dialogue for conflict resolution, territorial integrity,

¹⁸ Johnson, "The Organization of the Islamic Conference".

and respect for independence and sovereignty of the OIC countries. The agenda of the 14th and last Islamic Summit (held in 2019) encompassed improving institutional capacities and legal framework for economic development, facilitating the ways of doing business among the OIC member states, enhancing market competitiveness by assimilating with the global value chain, observing elections, etc. While state security received importance during the Cold War period, issues related to economic development and mutual cooperation have received priority in the post-Cold War period.

Over the years, various issues relating to Palestine have received the top priority in the OIC's summit and agenda. The organisation always condemns Israeli aggression against the Palestinians. Although the Palestine issue remains at the core of the OIC agenda, the contribution of the organisation to protecting the country and its holy places from Israeli aggression is minimal. Nevertheless, in its 46th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers in 2019, a resolution titled "the Cause of Palestine, Al-Quds Al-Sharif, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" was put forward to reassert the centrality of that cause for the Islamic community. Dozens of resolutions, statements, and reports have already been adopted by OIC in this regard.

3. Growing Tensions among the OIC Member States

Since its inception, the OIC has been struggling due to different fragmentation on ideological grounds and hustling for power by its members. Influential members like Saudi Arabia and Iran have tried hard to expand their control in OIC for a long time. Additionally, Turkey and, to some extent, Malaysia have also expressed a similar sort of desire. Turkey managed to increase its influence in the organisation during its 10-year tenure when Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu was in office as the OIC Secretary-General. This was expressed through increased donations from Turkey during that time.¹⁹ Differences in opinion regarding the OIC's actions, or lack of action regarding various issues have also created a rift among many of the members. This has been evident in the cases, *e.g.*, the suspension of Syria's membership, the Kashmir issue, the development of alternative and strategic partnerships like the Astana Trio, and the blockade on Qatar. Even Turkey's handover of the OIC chairmanship to Saudi Arabia in a relatively low profile OIC foreign minister's conference instead of the head of the states' 14th Islamic Summit was also considered a manifestation of a cold relationship between the two. The recent

¹⁹ Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the OIC", 01-18.

normalisation of ties between Israel and several OIC member countries has become the latest event demonstrating the growing tensions in OIC. The section details some of the contentious issues and developments in the OIC, showing the growing tensions among the member states.

3.1 Suspension of Syria's Membership from OIC and the Saudi-Iran Rift

On August 16, 2012, OIC suspended the membership of Syria from the organisation on the grounds of the Syrian government's suppression of internal opposition, a move that vividly displayed the Saudi-Iran rivalry within OIC. The latter, along with Algeria, objected to the decision, terming it an unjust and unfair move. In the words of the Iranian FM Ali Akbar Salehi at that time, "Iran opposed suspending Syria's membership as it was against the Charter of the OIC. Before making any decisions, Syria should have been invited to the summit to discuss and defend its position."²⁰ The rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia widened when the leaders from more than 50 Muslim countries accused Iran in the 13th OIC Summit in Istanbul of supporting terrorism and interfering in regional states' internal affairs, including Yemen and Syria, and condemned its aggressions against the missions of the Saudi Arabia in Tehran and Mashhad.

3.2 Discontent regarding Kashmir Issue

The difference centring around the Kashmir issue was another event in which a divergent position among the OIC member states was manifested. For some time, Islamabad has been criticizing OIC for its inaction in pressuring India. The country had shown its frustration with Riyadh's repeatedly ignoring its requests to convene an OIC Council of Foreign Ministers special meeting. Even in a television news appearance on August 04, 2020, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said that the inaction of the OIC regarding Kashmir would compel Pakistan to host a rival meeting bypassing the OIC. This came as a surprise moves from Islamabad, considering its past record of strong bilateral relations with Riyadh in the areas like security, military, trade and finance. However, disagreement between the two countries has been growing for some time now. It escalated due to India's invitation as a Guest of Honour to OIC's 46th Foreign Ministers' Meeting in March 2019. Pakistan boycotted the speech by withdrawing its representation from the round table. Meanwhile, Turkey appeared as a strong advocate for the Kashmir issue, and Turkish President Erdoğan assured his country's support to the position of Pakistan

²⁰ "Iran Condemns Suspension of Syria's Membership in OIC", *Iranian Diplomacy*, August 16, 2012.

on Kashmir. The country also supported Pakistan in the OIC against India on the issue and hosted an international conference on Kashmir on November 21, 2019, in which it severely criticized India's move to revoke Article 370 and expressed grave concerns about the future of Kashmir.²¹

Iran also took a similar stance on the Kashmir issue. Although Iran always balanced its ties with India and Pakistan, Iran's Supreme Leader, along with a group of its grand ayatollahs, condemned the Indian government in this regard.²² The polarized position of the countries regarding Kashmir once again brings forward the tensions in OIC.

3.3 *Emergence of the Astana Trio*

Syrian civil war has been an indication of the decline of the US prominence in the Middle East and the rapid evaporation in the ability and willingness of the US to shape the events in the Middle East by their military presence that leaves a gap in the region and allowed the alternative powers, such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran to fill in. There is no denying that the presence of Russia in the geopolitical scenario bears great significance to the overall strategic relationship in the Middle East. The war in Syria provides a unique opportunity for Russia to increase its footprint in the Middle East and push itself as one of the key players in the region's power dynamics. The moulding of a strategic partnership involving Russia, Iran, and Turkey under the banner "Astana Trio" signals an emerging alliance targeting to lead the Syrian reconciliation process. In spite of having conflicting viewpoints and contradictory goals in Syria, these three countries now pledge to work towards a common direction.²³ Iran's military objective of keeping its forces vis-à-vis influence in Syria is in contrast with Russia's strategy to stabilize the region in order to retain its strategic interests, like protecting its air and naval bases, maintaining relations with Israel, and preserving its decisive and key power image in the region. On the other hand, both Turkey and Iran perceive Syria as a part of their strategic interest, and both are now taking shots to build a strategic partnership with Russia that will serve their long-range interests in the Middle East.²⁴ The emergence of this

²¹ Abhinav Pandya, "Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Recent Activism on Kashmir is Motivated by Turkey President's Caliphate Dreams," updated November 25, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/recep-tayyip-erdogans-recent-activism-on-kashmir-is-motivated-by-turkey-presidents-caliphate-dreams-7695671.html>; Riyaz ul Khaliq, "Turkey Hosts International Conference on Kashmir", *Anadolu Agency*, December 12, 2021.

²² Fatemeh Aman, "Iran Issues Rare Criticism of India over Kashmir", *Atlantic Council*, August 30, 2019.

²³ "Astana Trio: Turkey, Iran, Russia Pledge to Cooperate in Syria", *Daily Subah*, July 08, 2021.

²⁴ Krasna, "It's Complicated", 64-79.

strategic partnership among Iran, Turkey and Russia catalyses tensions since it could challenge Saudi Arabia and its allies dominated OIC.

3.4 The Blockade on Qatar

Saudi Arabia, along with three other Muslim countries—Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE—cut diplomatic, trade and travel ties with one of the member states of OIC, Qatar, in 2017. The quartet imposed the blockade accusing Qatar of supporting extremist groups in the region, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and highlighting its close tie with their common regional foe Iran. Yemen, Libya and Maldives later rallied behind Saudi Arabia and curtailed all relations with Qatar. Regarding the blockade, the OIC released a statement in June 2017 urging Qatar to cease any support of terrorist groups, their activities and media incitement.²⁵ In response to the blockade, Turkey sent additional troops to its military base in Qatar to deter any possible military intervention. The country, also established a new food logistic line via Iran, enabling Qatar to withstand the blockade. Though Saudi Arabia and its allies lifted the ban in 2021, bringing an end to the three-and-a-half-year dispute, the development regarding the blockade severely hampered the Gulf unity and exposed the growing tensions among some of the member states of the OIC. The split in the GCC has resulted in facilitating stronger relations between Qatar and Turkey, who are sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, along with pushing Qatar into closer relations with Iran also against its rivals Saudi-UAE axis.²⁶ The core differences that divide Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE are still very much present today, including the lack of trust between them. They still have contrasting policies towards Turkey and Iran, as well as geo-strategic contestation of power distribution among themselves.²⁷

3.5 Convening the Kuala Lumpur Summit

With the theme, “The Role of Development in Achieving National Sovereignty”, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Bin Mohamad, inaugurated a new forum for Islamic countries in December 2019. The summit was attended by 450 Muslim scholars, intellectuals and thinkers along with state leaders from all over the world. One of the significant aspects of the summit was the

²⁵ “OIC Calls on Qatar to Abide by its Commitments”, *Arab News*, June 05, 2017.

²⁶ Jeffrey Feltman et al., “The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America’s Role in the Changing Region”, Brookings, updated January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-geopolitics-of-the-middle-east-americas-role-in-a-changing-region/>.

²⁷ Samuel Ramani, “The Qatar Blockade is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives on”, *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2021.

prominent role of Iran, Qatar and Turkey and the absence of representatives from Saudi Arabia, indicating a division among the Muslim countries who are all members of the OIC. While this forum was advertised to promote economic cooperation, better address issues of conflict, extremism and oppression, and the unification of the Muslim world, this was also seen as an alternative effort to change narratives for the Muslim community and challenge the status quo. Some analysts perceived the move as a step towards creating an alternative platform to the OIC, dominated by Saudi Arabia.²⁸ Core countries that attended that summit had perspectives on various issues facing Muslim countries that are in sharp contrast with Saudi Arabia's views and priorities.²⁹ Mahathir Mohamad also said that the summit could turn into a much grander initiative down the road, suggesting a potential competitor to the OIC.³⁰ During the summit, without mentioning the name of the OIC, President Erdoğan said that lack of implementation had been one of the biggest problems faced by the Organisation. His criticism reads, "If we still haven't made any progress regarding the Palestinian cause, if we still can't stop the exploitation of our resources, if we still can't say "stop" to the fragmentation of the Muslim world over sectarianism, that's why."³¹

This Kuala Lumpur initiative was not welcomed by many OIC members, including Saudi Arabia. Yousef al-Othaimen, the OIC Secretary-General, in an interview, stated that convening meetings outside the aegis of the OIC was against the interests of the Islamic community and the summit would rupture Islamic unity.³² Pakistan was regarded as one of the pioneers of the summit, but Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, decided not to attend the summit at the last minute. While mentioning the reason behind that move, Pakistani FM Qureshi underscored the concerns of Saudi Arabia that the meeting might introduce a new bloc that would compete with OIC.³³ This was done allegedly under pressure from Saudi Arabia. However, in response to the lukewarm behaviour from Saudi Arabia on the issue of Kashmir, Pakistan did suggest the possibility of an alternate bloc.

²⁸ Kabir Taneja, "The Muslim 5 Summit and the OIC take on India's Citizenship Bill Protests", *ORF* 24 (December 2019).

²⁹ Giorgio Cafiero and Khalid Al-Jaber, "Kuala Lumpur Summit: A challenge to Saudi leadership?" Middle East Institute, December 10, 2019.

³⁰ Cafiero and Al-Jaber, "Kuala Lumpur Summit".

³¹ Joseph Sipalan and Rozanna Latiff, "Progress of Non-Muslims 'Left us in Lurch'", Malaysia Tells Islamic Summit," *Reuters*, December 19, 2019.

³² Sipalan and Kalin, "Progress of non-Muslims".

³³ Asad Hashim, "'Neutral' Pakistan pulls out of Malaysia summit of Muslim nations," *Al Jazeera*, December 19, 2018.

3.6 Tensions Centring around Normalisation of the Ties with Israel

A few member-states normalisations of ties with Israel is the most recent series of events demonstrating the growing tensions in the OIC. This is not the first time OIC member countries decided to normalise their ties with Israel. The first OIC country to sign a peace deal with Israel was Egypt in 1978, for which it was expelled from the OIC in 1979. Though it was readmitted in 1984, the incident exposed the divergence in the OIC, which worsened by the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement. Later, in the recent incidents of normalisation, right after the UAE inked the deal with Israel, Iran issued a statement calling the normalisation process a “stab in the back” of all Muslims. Turkey also reacted negatively and warned to sever its diplomatic ties with the UAE. Rallies and demonstrations were held in Pakistan condemning the deal, and the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs cautiously reacted to the deal by saying it would have “far-reaching implications”. On the other hand, countries like Bahrain, Oman, and Egypt welcomed the deal without any reservation, while Saudi Arabia remained silent regarding the accord. Bahrain later normalised its relationship with Israel, which was followed by Sudan and Morocco. The reaction of another OIC member state, Kuwait, was also pessimistic regarding the development and affirms that “Kuwait maintains its position and will be the last country to normalise with Israel.”³⁴

4. Geopolitical Explanations of Growing Tensions in OIC

The geopolitical analysis does not predict when an event, crisis, or conflict will occur, which results in drastic changes in the geopolitical map. But such an analysis can draw people’s attention to the conditions that are likely to bring change in the geopolitical architecture.³⁵ Geopolitics works as a bridge between geography and strategy. It is based on the assumption that almost all incidents of international politics, ranging from war to peace, occur in a distinct time and place, in specific environmental and geographical circumstances. In the same line, it also establishes links as well as causal relationships between geographical settings and key actors mainly to articulate specific strategic priorities.³⁶ The study of geopolitics takes into account the strategic issues concerning crucial resources, significant elements of political and economic developments and the political systems that have strategic

³⁴ Tyler B. Parker, “Why Kuwait Rejects Normalization with Israel”, Fair Observer, updated August 18, 2020; “Normalisation with Israel: Where do Middle Eastern countries stand?”, Middle East Eye, updated August 19, 2020.

³⁵ Saul B. Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

³⁶ Mackubin Thomas Owens, “Geopolitics, Con and Pros”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 19, 2015.

stakes. The discussion of geopolitics underscores the major strategic issues, and the conflicts present in the territory. Above all, geopolitics provides some guiding principles for setting strategic choices based on geographical factors, underlying international relations and political interactions.³⁷ Given the currency of geopolitics in explaining the conditions that catalyse division and articulating strategic choices, employing geopolitical analysis is crucial in understanding the rising tensions in the OIC.

The recent tensions in the OIC, especially centring around the normalisation of ties between Israel and some of the OIC member states are not arbitrary. Basically, its root can be traced back to the sectarian divide between the Shiite and Sunni and the identity politics associated with it. The tension between Shiite-dominated Iran and Sunni-inhabited Saudi Arabia has been one of the persistent features of Middle Eastern politics. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, religion, based on Shiite ideology, was brought to the forefront of Iran's state identity, and the country became an Islamic Republic. In his pursuit of gaining support for the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of the revolution, clashed with the Sunni ideology of Islam and started criticizing the Wahhabi Saudi monarchy as the "decadence" of Islam. With his staunch denouncement of the Saudi regime as "un-Islamic" and characterization of their Islam as "American Islam", Khomeini tried to give a strong message to the Muslim world that Shiite ideology would be the dominant voice of Islam.³⁸ The revolution fuelled the sectarian differences between the Shiite and Sunni sects, which were already in place for a long time. Since the revolution, Saudi Arabia has been considering Iran as one of its biggest threats in the region, not only ideologically but also politically. For that, it readjusted its foreign policy with reference to a new "enemy image" portraying Iran as the destabilizing factor, the view that was reflected in its position in the OIC.³⁹ The Iranian revolution also forced the US to revisit its policy priorities in the MENA region and redefined its strategic allies in the region.

4.1 The Changing Geopolitical Realities and the Competing Strategic Orientations

Nevertheless, religion occupies only a fraction of the Shiite-Sunni divide and cannot be a catchall explanation of all problems in the region or within the OIC.

³⁷ Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography*, 15.

³⁸ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran Friends or Foes?*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Mohamed El Mansour, "U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East since the 19th Century," accessed September 20, 2020, <https://teachmideast.org/articles/u-s-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-since-the-19th-century/>.

³⁹ Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the OIC," 01-18.

This problem has a more significant and complex geopolitical and geostrategic explanation, which is influenced by political objectives and rivalries, class dynamics, national identity, economic interest, along with state fragility.⁴⁰ Some of the rulers in the Muslim countries with a lack of democratic values have long been accused of manipulating the sectarian identities in the MENA region in order to protect their regimes.⁴¹ In this regard, the 2011 Arab Uprising could be marked as a significant turning point in the politics of the region and the survival of the authoritarian regimes, which led to renewed tension and new proxy wars in the region.⁴² The event vigorously jolted the long-standing leadership base of many Muslim countries. During that time, both Saudi Arabia and Iran had been accused of exploiting sectarianism to protect their regimes and retain their influence in the region by diverting public opinion.⁴³ The sectarian rhetoric used by both countries played a crucial role in broadening the division between the Shiite and Sunni bloc in the whole region in general and in the policy calculation of OIC in particular.

Currently, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in supporting conflicting parties in different proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. The tension between these two further accelerated when missile strikes attacked the oil processing plants of Saudi Arabia at Khurais and Abqaiq in September 2019, drastically reducing the kingdom's oil production in the space of one night. The responsibility was claimed by Iran-backed Houthi rebels who have been fighting against the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Such destabilizing activities are considered a turning point that forced Saudi Arabia to rethink its own security in the region and redefine its potential security partners who will come to its defence in case of similar attacks in the future.

A year before the oil-processing plant attack, in an interview with a US-based magazine in 2018, Saudi Crown Prince MBS said that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei "makes Hitler look good", a statement demonstrating a bitter relationship between Riyadh and Tehran.⁴⁴ In that interview, he also gave a statement that reads "I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have

⁴⁰ Hashemi and Postel, "Sectarianization: Mapping"; Ömer Taşpınar, "The Sunni-Shiite Divide in the Middle East is about Nationalism, not a Conflict within Islam," Brookings, December 31, 2018.

⁴¹ Taşpınar, "The Sunni-Shiite Divide".

⁴² Simon Mabon, "Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the quest to securitize Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 5 (2018) 742-759; Marwan Bishara, "The End of the Saudi Era," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2020.

⁴³ Hashemi and Postel, "Sectarianization: Mapping"; B. Aras and E. Yorulmazlar, "Mideast Geopolitics: The Struggle for a New Order," *Middle East Policy* 24, Issue 2, (2017), 57-69; Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the OIC," 01-18.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *The Atlantic*, April 02, 2018.

their own land.”⁴⁵ That statement was also very significant because no Saudi leader had previously spoken so boldly in public about Israel's right to exist. This was translated into a sign of the growing relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel in the wake of the former country's conflict with Iran.

So, the mounting dispute with Iran basically goes beyond the sectarian division and identity politics which brings Saudi Arabia close to its once arch-nemesis Israel in the Middle East. While Iran declares Saudi Arabia and its allies as the partner of the US and Israel, Saudi Arabia now considers containing Iran and its proxies should be one of its top priorities, an overlapping sentiment shared by the US and Israel. The country and its allies now accept that the wars in Syria and Yemen are fights against Iranian influence in the region. They also perceive the existence of a “so-called” radical axis, consisting of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas and their activities in the Middle East as a direct threat to the safety and security of the whole region. Besides, both Saudi Arabia and Israel were severely frustrated with the policies of the Obama administration of the US. The nuclear deal reached between Iran and international powers in 2015 was perceived as a major setback by both Saudi Arabia and Israel, who opposed that deal, dreading possible augmentation of Iran's political legitimacy in the region. Now, the ruling authority in Saudi Arabia fears that any alteration in the status quo in the Middle East power setup⁴⁶ due to the rise of Iran and its allies, would directly challenge its authority in the region in particular, and over the Muslim Ummah in general.⁴⁷ Therefore, the changing geopolitical dynamics coupled with the US's Middle East policy of containing Iran and its allies by normalizing ties with Israel represents an opportunity for Saudi Arabia and its partners to maintain the Sunni-led dominance in the region, leading to divisions among the Muslim countries vis-à-vis in the OIC.

4.2 Emerging Actors in the Geopolitical Landscape of the MENA Region

The politics in the Middle East is now becoming more complex due to the emerging actors. The rise of Turkey is a glaring instance in this regard, the emergence of which can be vividly seen since the Arab Spring in 2011.⁴⁸ In the last

⁴⁵ Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince”.

⁴⁶ This power setup has been in place since the historic Roosevelt-Ibn Saud agreement in 1945. See: Andres Glass, “FDR Meets with Saudi King, Feb. 14, 1945”, February 14, 2019, Politico, September 20, 2020.

⁴⁷ Ramzy Baroud, “Arab-Israeli Normalisation: A Desperate Attempt at Isolating Iran,” Middle East Monitor, June 03, 2019.

⁴⁸ Buğra Süsler, “Turkey: An Emerging Middle Power in a Changing World?” *LSE IDEAS Strategic Update* (June 2019); Şaban Kardaş, “Prospects and challenges of normalization in Turkey – Israel relations: A Turkish view,” Hypotheses, August 27, 2012, <https://ovipot.hypotheses.org/15714>.

decade, Turkey has started to shift its focus away from the EU and NATO toward the MENA region and trying to become a major player in the political calculation of the Muslim world by taking on a firm stance to support various Muslim causes. From the Turkish side, an expectation can be seen that the country could become a role model for the emerging regimes following the Arab Spring with its “moderate Islam”, “democracy” and “market-oriented economy” outlook, in which, the country could provide support towards the like-minded actors, without alienating its opponents, thus increase its influence in the region.⁴⁹

Turkey has successfully managed to exploit its strategic geographical location and “enterprising and humanitarian” foreign policy to maintain open channels with the Muslim countries in the region.⁵⁰ This has enabled Turkey to garner considerable soft power and promote its image in the international arena. The country has been keeping a good relationship with Saudi Arabia without isolating Iran, despite having an enduring rivalry with the latter one.⁵¹ Moreover, Iranian support after the failed coup attempt in Turkey, and the Iranian FM Javad Zarif’s visit to the country’s territory in 2016 helped to warm up the relationship between the two. Turkey has mobilized against the Assad regime. Yet it is still able to work with Russia and Iran in Syria. Besides, Turkey is also reaching out to Muslim countries outside the region. It is steering its economy with its Vision 2023, aiming to become one of the top ten global economies in the coming years by boosting its trade, and transforming its health care, energy and transport sectors.⁵² The country has already made a significant achievement in the fields of technology and space industry, along with economic development.⁵³ The recent discovery of natural gas, estimated to be 320 billion cubic metres, also gives Turkey’s economy a further boost in its desire to achieve its vision, allowing it to reduce its dependence on others for its energy supply.⁵⁴ It is believed that President Erdoğan’s motivation to make Turkey a key regional player stems from his Islamist background and his nationalist desire to advance Turkey’s position in the region in particular and among

⁴⁹ Krasna, “It’s Complicated,” 64-79; Altunışık, “Iran-Turkey Relations”; Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, “Sectarianism and the OIC,” 01-18; Jeff Feltman et al., *The New Geopolitics*; “Academic Webinar: Geopolitics in the Middle East,” Council on Foreign Affairs, October 27, 2021.

⁵⁰ A. Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Humanitarian Diplomacy: Objectives, Challenges and Prospects”, *Nationalities Papers* 41, No. 6 (November 2013): 865–70; “Turkey’s Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy,” accessed September 22, 2020, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa>.

⁵¹ Altunışık, “Iran-Turkey Relations”.

⁵² Muhammad Hussein, “Vision 2023: Turkey and the post-Ottoman anniversary,” *Middle East Monitor*, February 12, 2018.

⁵³ Volker Perthes, “The Dynamics of Disorder: Power Shifts and Geopolitics in the Middle East,” in *What's Next - Essays on Geopolitics that Matter*, ed. Ian Bremme and Douglas Rediker (World Economic Forum, 2013), 18-25.

⁵⁴ Motasem A Dalloul, “Turkey is Becoming a Superpower,” *Middle East Monitor*, August 24, 2020.

the Muslim countries in general, which in its spirit, constitutes the revival of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁵

The growing relationship of Turkey with other Muslim countries is a testament to President Erdoğan's overarching ambition to assert a key role in the Muslim world. For instance, the relationship between Turkey and Pakistan is getting warmer day by day. The latter's relationship with Saudi Arabia suffered a blow when Pakistan criticized OIC for its inaction on the Kashmir issue, bringing it closer to Turkey. It was surprising to note when the Foreign Minister (FM) of Pakistan said, "I am once again respectfully telling the OIC that a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers is our expectation. If you cannot convene it, then I'll be compelled to ask Prime Minister Imran Khan to call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on the issue of Kashmir and support the oppressed Kashmiris."⁵⁶ In response, Saudi Arabia withdrew a US\$1 billion interest-free loan it had extended to Pakistan in November 2018. Though Pakistan later reaffirmed its relationship with Saudi Arabia, the diplomatic spat centring around the Kashmir issue hints that if Pakistan reconsiders its relation with Saudi Arabia, it might consider consolidating its ties with an alternate bloc that will include Turkey. President Erdoğan also raised the Kashmir issue in the 75th UNGA, which was highly praised by Pakistan, indicating a warmer relationship between the two.⁵⁷ Turkey's relationship with Bangladesh, which had suffered considerable friction since the beginning of the war crime trial in Dhaka in 2012, also began to improve in 2016. Turkey's response to the Rohingya refugee emergency has helped to put the relationship back on a stable platform, from which both countries can benefit. Both Turkey and Bangladesh are now enjoying a good connection with the regular exchange of high-level visits.

What is more, Turkey's strained relationship with the US on the issue of Kurdish involvement in Syria has added a new dimension to the politics of the region. Turkey considered the US's support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) a threat to its territorial integrity. Besides, Turkey was also not happy with the US's support to Fethullah Gülen, whom Turkey accused as the mastermind behind the 2016 failed coup attempt

⁵⁵ Lindsay Hughes, "The United Arab Emirates and Israel Normalise Ties – And Divide the Middle East", Future Directions International, August 20, 2020; "Turkey, a Regional Superpower Surrounded by Europe, Arab states & Persia", *JBIC Today*, May 2020.

⁵⁶ Indrani Bagchi, "As Saudi Arabia Snubs Pakistan on J&K, Cracks Appear in Ties," *The Times of India*, August 11, 2020.

⁵⁷ Islam Uddin, "Pakistan Lauds Turkish Leader for Raising Kashmir at UN," *Anadolu Agency*, September 23, 2020.

against the government. Political analysts now believe that these developments have pushed Turkey toward Russia, and to some extent, towards Iran.⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia and its allies now fear that if President Erdoğan succeeds in building new strategic partnerships with other Muslim countries and the global powers, that might challenge its position as the de facto leader of the Muslim community in general and the OIC in particular. The Islamic Summit, hosted by Malaysia in 2019, and attended by Turkey, Indonesia, Qatar and Iran, signposted a deepening divide in the Muslim world, where Saudi Arabia and its close allies in the Gulf region were not invited. Although the aspirations of these countries through the Islamic Summit in Malaysia have not been realized to the fullest, and there remain uncertainties regarding the future of the summit after the regime change in Malaysia, such an initiative is likely to pave the way towards multipolarity which was in the making for the past few years. In the coming days, it is likely there will be more than one dominant actor representing the Muslim world. And given Turkey's antipathy towards the normalisation of UAE-Israel and Bahrain-Israel relations and its backing up to Qatar against the Saudi Arabia-led blockade, it can be said that Turkey's rising profile adds a new dimension to the growing tensions in the OIC in the coming days.

4.3 The Reality and Perception of US's Engagement in the Middle East

The Middle East remains one of the priority areas in US foreign policy. But the US strategic interest in the region changed during the time of Donald Trump's administration which was marked by a reduction of the US military presence and posture in the region, at the same time, retention of its strategic position by bolstering Israel's relation with the Muslim countries. One of the major reasons for that was exerting pressure on Iran and its proxies, which the administration considered a top concern for its National Security Strategy.⁵⁹ Following the costly debacle in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the US administration has shown less interest in militarily engaging in the Middle East which has deepened as a result of the cost of the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides, following the shale oil revolution, the US has now become a leading producer of oil in the world, hence, less reliant on Saudi Arabia or Gulf countries for its energy security and less interested in the

⁵⁸ Altunışık, "Iran-Turkey Relations".

⁵⁹ Marcus Montgomery, "Pentagon Clarifies US Priorities in the Middle East," accessed September 15, 2020, http://arabcenterdc.org/congressional_corner/pentagon-clarifies-us-priorities-in-the-middle-east/; Jack Thompson, "Trump's Middle East Policy", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 233 (October 2018); Giancarlo Elia Valori, "The Current Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East", *Modern Diplomacy*, February 05, 2019.

Middle Eastern energy market.⁶⁰ After Trump's departure, the Biden administration's return to the Paris Climate Agreement signifies the lower importance of the Gulf energy supply in the US energy security policy vis-à-vis national security. Though the US still remains the ultimate security guarantor of Israel, this might not compel the US to protect the security of its Muslim allies, which the country used to provide previously.⁶¹ Therefore, the US's promotion of the potential bloc consisting of Saudi Arabia and its allies and Israel is an attestation to change the status quo of Israel's formal diplomatic relations with the Muslim countries that resulted in the normalisation of the diplomatic tie between Israel and the OIC member states. This normalisation comes with visible concessions from the US, like UAE's arms deal with the US, Morocco's claim to recognize its sovereignty over Western Sahara, and Sudan's removal from US's state-sponsored terrorism list.

At present, the US foreign policy priorities hover around the Far East and confronting its peer competitor China and Russia by strengthening traditional security alliances like NATO, along with forging new alliances like AUKUS and QUAD, in which neither Saudi Arabia and Israel nor any of US's gulf allies are part of.⁶² Besides, there is a possibility that the US decision to return to Iran's nuclear deal will drive Saudi Arabia and its allies more to Israel. Therefore, the security and development of Israel and some of the US's gulf allies are tied to consolidating their own relation and strategic cooperation.

4.4 Geo-strategic and Geo-economic Interest of the OIC Member States

One of the founding objectives of the OIC was the protection of the Palestine people, which brought together the Muslim states under the umbrella of the organisation. However, some of the OIC member countries are now putting their national interests, especially, strategic, economic and military interests, above Muslim solidarity that was based on the firm stance against the normalisation of relations with Israel. They have become less concerned about Israel's role in Palestine and more focused on internal and domestic issues based on economic, political, security and strategic agendas.

⁶⁰ Kimberly Amadeo, "US Shale Oil Boom and Bust", *The Balance*, May 01, 2020.

⁶¹ Perthes, "The Dynamics of Disorder," 18-25; Rahman, "The Emergence of GCC."

⁶² According to the US's National Defence Strategy, 2018 and US National Security Strategy, 2017, the country is primarily concerned about the revival of great-power competition with Russia and China. For details, see Ali Wyne and Colin P. Clarke, "In the Middle East, Russia and China Expand Their Influence," Rand Corporation, September 18, 2020.

For some of the Muslim countries, who are keen to diversify their market, Israel is a country with a strong economy in the region and sophisticated military technology, and normalizing ties with it will allow them to establish security and trade relationships with it. Besides, some of the member countries of the OIC eye security benefit from Israel's surveillance technology and intelligence sharing, which the countries believe could play a handy role in protecting their own regimes. According to the media report, the UAE is already a leading consumer of Israel's technology.⁶³ What is more, they are now taking a great deal of interest in the Israeli health sector, agriculture, irrigation, water supply and nuclear development fields, as they are trying to diversify their economies.⁶⁴ In addition, the growing impression of the US's disengagement in the Middle East and its lack of support for the security concern of its Muslim allies is making the countries anxious about their own safety and security, who are now trying to fill-up the future US vacuum in the region, by establishing ties with Israel in order to make their system future-proof. The intention of putting national interest over Muslim solidarity is catalyzing tensions among the supporting and opposing sides within the OIC.

Israel has also taken the opportunity and covertly nurtured its foreign relations with some of the Muslim states in the region for a long time. In 2015, the UAE allowed Israel to diplomatically engage in the International Renewable Energy Agency in Abu Dhabi. The sultanate of Oman Qaboos bin Said hosted the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu along with Mossad intelligence chief Yossi Cohen in October 2018. In the same month, the Culture and Sports Minister of Israel, Miri Regev, paid an official visit to Abu Dhabi, which indicated the Gulf nation's inclination to develop its relations with Israel. Her visit was followed by the visit of Ayoub Kara and Yisrael Katz, Israeli Communications and Foreign Minister to Abu Dhabi and Dubai in 2018 and 2019, respectively. The UAE business leaders were also reaching out to Israel to expand economic relations. Israel also participated in UAE's flagship Dubai Expo 2021, in which the Israeli pavilion was prepared by its different ministries to showcase the country's agriculture, energy, and cyber technology. These initiatives translate Israel's eagerness to work with some selective Muslim countries with whom it shares a common interest.

⁶³ Amos Harel, "A Year into Normalization Deal, Israel's Hope for Geopolitical Change Fades," *Haaretz*, August 16, 2021.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Sazhin, "From war to peace... (Israel and United Arab Emirates normalise relations)," *The International Affairs*, September 11, 2020; Ryan Bohl, "What's Driving Muslim Countries to Normalize Their Ties With Israel?" August 25, 2020, accessed December 14, 2021, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/whats-driving-muslim-countries-normalize-their-ties-israel>; Zweiri, "The New Wave."

The Covid-19 pandemic provided another opening for Israel to consolidate its relationship with its Muslim counterparts. In May 2020, the first commercial flight from the UAE went to Israel with 16 tons of emergency aid to help Palestinians battle the Covid-19 pandemic. Both countries then announced to work together on their fight against the virus.⁶⁵ These high-level official visits and covert economic ties demonstrate the persistent diplomatic efforts of Israel with some of the OIC member states in its pursuit of normalizing diplomatic relations with the Muslim world.

Besides, Israel always considers Shiite-led Iran an existential threat to itself and the destabilising force in the region; the same outlook, shared by Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and its allies. And, for the Gulf states, Israel is a potential hedge against the declining role of the US in the Middle East as well as a wealthy trading partner with a strong economy. Therefore, the relationship between the Muslim countries with Israel has been developing mainly based on interest, not values.⁶⁶ The shared view, along with their respective strategic and economic interests, helped Israel quietly cultivate ties for years with some of the OIC member states that paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and member states, which ultimately deepened tensions in the Muslim world.

4.5 Russian and Chinese Footprint in the Geopolitical Landscape of the Region and the Great Power Competition

MENA region has always been an arena for great power competition. The US's gradual ceding in the region has paved the way for other major players like Russia and China, principal strategic competitors of the US, to increase their influence in the region. This has given rise to the possibility of another great power competition in the region, in which major Muslim countries might try to align themselves with the opposing powers.

Currently, Russia is actively engaged militarily in the region in several places. It is maintaining relations with all the major regional players, including the Sunni and Shiite states as well as Israel. Recent US policy priorities in the MENA region have allowed Russia to take advantage and re-assert its influence there. Indeed, through the instances like the war in Syria, it is now evident that Russia has managed to

⁶⁵ Dion Nissenbaum, "Secret Ties Between U.A.E. and Israel Paved Way for Diplomatic Relations", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2020.

⁶⁶ Krasna, "It's Complicated," 64-79.

replace the US as the key player in the fractured architecture of the region, which is now trying to assuming into a broader role—becoming the regional power broker.⁶⁷

Another key player that is slowly increasing its influence in the MENA region is China, which also has a great stake in OIC.⁶⁸ Though, the primary interest of China in the region is economic, according to WU, the country's interest dominated by six interrelated issues— security, energy, political, strategic, cultural, and economic.⁶⁹ It looks forward to seizing the opportunity to extend trade relations with the OIC member countries by connecting them with the “Silk Road Strategy”. The trade between OIC member countries and China now accounts for approximately twenty per cent of the total trade of the OIC member countries, which is predicted to increase manifold in the future.⁷⁰ Besides, the country is already a leading armed-drone supplier across the region.⁷¹ China's penchant for consolidating relations with the countries located in the MENA region can be aligned with its flagship Belt and Road Initiative, which will touch the borders of the Muslim countries in the region. The increasing presence of China in the MENA region is now becoming a concern for some of the OIC member states that are closely aligned with the US.

One more aspect of China's influence in the region is its growing relationship with Iran. The country remains Iran's top economic partner despite the US sanctions.⁷² At present, Iran's export and import market is totally dominated by China. The withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan with Iran has further reinvigorated this trend. In an agreement signed in March 2021, China agreed to invest US\$ 400 billion in Iran over a 25-year period in return for a reliable supply of oil to support its booming economy.⁷³ This agreement can be considered as an attempt to undermine the US effort to isolate Iran from the international community and undercut US policy in the region. Besides, China is preparing to take a major role in Syria's post-war reconstruction initiatives.⁷⁴ The country's efforts to deepen its partnership with Syria signal its intention to increase its influence in the region, where Iran and Russia can be its strategic partners. In

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Feltman et al., “The New Geopolitics.”

⁶⁸ Lirong and Yuxiang, “Analysis on the Potential.”

⁶⁹ Aras and Kardaş, “Geopolitics of the New Middle East”, 397-402.

⁷⁰ Lirong and Yuxiang, “Analysis on the Potential.”

⁷¹ Alex Gatopoulos, “UAE Gets American Drones as China Ramps Up Sales 19 Sep 2020,” *Al Jazeera*, September 19, 2020.

⁷² Will Green and Taylor Roth, “China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Research Report, June 28, 2021.

⁷³ Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, “China, with \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2021.

⁷⁴ Giorgio Cafiero, “China Plays the Long Game on Syria,” Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020.

December 2019, China joined Iran and Russia to stage a joint naval exercise for the first time of its kind in the Gulf of Oman, a stretch of the Arabian sea that is connected to the Indian Ocean and crucial to the global supply of oil. The objective of the drill was to “deepen exchange and cooperation between the navies of the three countries.”⁷⁵ Though the Chinese Defence Ministry termed the exercise a normal military exchange, this development was viewed by some analysts as a reflection of solidarity with Iran by China and Russia in the face of sanctions by the US, which provides Iran with the possibility of a new military partnership with two major powers.⁷⁶

5. Conclusion

The complexities and tensions within the OIC require a deep understanding of the shifting geopolitical and geostrategic realities, especially in the MENA region. For a long time, the region’s geopolitics was dominated by the Israel and Palestine issue, where the conflict between these two in particular, and the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries in general, determined the overall regional peace and stability. But now, the Israel-Palestine issue can neither be considered as the crux of shared interest of the Muslim states nor the linchpin to the peace and stability in the region. The events in the last decade such as the Arab Spring, wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, the rise of fundamentalism, instability in the oil market, etc., have altered the geopolitical dimensions in which stakeholders are forming new strategic partnerships—motivated by divergent economic, security and strategic interest—rising tensions among the Muslim countries, once who were united under the OIC with the shared vision of countering Israel’s influence in the region and an independent Palestine state. Apparent fractures in the organisation have been visible in some of the incidences. These include the suspension of Syria’s membership from OIC, tussle on the Kashmir issue, consolidation of the Astana Trio, the blockade on Qatar, the Kuala Lumpur Summit, and most recently, normalisation of the ties with Israel that have provided the country with the advantage of consolidating its engagement with Muslim states undermining Palestine’s peace process. These events have vividly exposed the growing tensions among the member states of the OIC and severely damaged the organisation’s credibility as the collective voice of the Muslim Ummah.

⁷⁵ Mark Moore, “Iran Joins Russia and China in Joint Naval Exercises Beginning Friday”, *The New York Post*, December 27, 2019.

⁷⁶ “Iran, Russia, China Stage Joint Naval Drill in Sea of Oman,” *Tehran Times*, December 27, 2019.

The tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia has long been one of the defining factors of OIC's divisions. However, the mounting dispute between these two now goes beyond the purview of the religious and sectarian divide. The common threat perception of "Iran as a region's destabilizer" has brought Saudi Arabia and its allies close to Israel, a demonstration of which was the normalisation of ties of some of the OIC members with the latter one. Besides, the declining US posture in the region has allowed other actors to increase their influence and opened up the possibility of reinvigorating great power competition. Added up to all these signals new geopolitical realities and a recipe for further tensions in the OIC.

The creation of OIC was very significant with the aim to establish peace and sustained security not only among the member states but also in the whole world since it consists of 57 countries and a vast portion of the world population. Unfortunately, the organisation has placed itself in a position marred by the growing difference between its motive and reality. The organisation is facing multidimensional challenges in political, socio-economic, cultural as well as ideational spheres and besieged by divergent interests among its member, challenging the organisation's unity. Besides, the fracturing and restructuring of new alliances and strategic partnerships within the organisation are causing renewed tensions among its member states. These complexities in the OIC can be more accurately understood as rooted in a series of developmental crises mainly stemming from geopolitical realities. While it is true that religion and religious identities had been a salient feature in understanding the divisions among the member states of the OIC, but these identities have been politicised by state actors in pursuit of their political gain, and now, the reading of geopolitics provides the key context for understanding the complexities in the OIC.