



An Opening in Abu Dhabi

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(The editorial is based on the article “An opening in Abu Dhabi” which appeared in the Indian Express for 1st March 2019. In this article, we will discuss the significance of Indian participation in OIC session as Guest of Honour.)

The 46th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), is being held in Abu Dhabi. This is the **first time after its inception in the past 50 years, that India has been invited to any OIC meeting as a guest of honor.**

The host member, **United Arab Emirates (UAE) has strongly defended the decision to invite India** as a guest of honour to the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) foreign ministers, despite Pakistan’s strong objection and threat to boycott the event.

The first-time invitation to India to be a ‘Guest of Honour’ at the plenary, especially at a time of heightened tensions with Pakistan following the Pulwama terrorist attack, is a **significant diplomatic victory for New Delhi.**

Engagement with OIC reflects the recent shift in India’s foreign policy to have amicable ties with apparent adversaries — Saudi Arabia and Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, Egypt and Turkey as well as Israel and Palestine.

Background

- **A majority of the OIC member states are countries that have a majority Muslim population.**
- However, some states such as Russia and Thailand that have a significant minority Muslim population are also present at the forum as observer states.
- **While India is a country with one of the largest Muslim populations in the world,** so far, New Delhi has never been able to join the OIC in any capacity. The news of India joining OIC as the guest of honor is significantly reflects upon its relation with Pakistan.
- In the past, the conservative Arab monarchies were happy to turn a blind eye to the

dangers of encouraging political Islam and condoning the Pakistan army's support for terror and religious extremism in South Asia.

- The threat from religious destabilisation to the Arab monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE along with traditional republics like Egypt has created a new framework for India's engagement with the Muslim world and the Middle East.
- **Pakistan had threatened to boycott the meeting if the invitation to India was not withdrawn. It claimed that Turkey was also opposed to Swaraj's speech at the plenary. However, Turkey has backed Bangladesh in demanding OIC reforms to seek India's participation.**
- At present, Pakistan has skipped the inaugural function in opposition of India participating as Guest of Honour.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

- It is the second largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations with a membership of 57 states spread over four continents.
- It endeavors to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world.
- The Organization was established upon a decision of the historical summit which took place in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco on 12th Rajab 1389 Hijra (25 September 1969) following the criminal arson of Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem.
- It has 57 member states and 12 observers including United Nations.

Significance of the Invitation (India-OIC relations)

- **Invitation for India is a welcome recognition of the presence of 185 million Muslims in India** and of their contribution to its pluralistic ethos, and of India's contribution to the Islamic world.
- **The OIC's invitation to India coincides with the recent visit of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, to Pakistan and India.** Reportedly, the crown prince advocated restraint on a host of issues plaguing India-Pakistan relations.
- In the wake of the Pulwama terror attack earlier this month, the role of Saudi Arabia in defusing tensions between the two countries has been termed significant. It's very much possible that the Saudi crown prince may have played an important role in setting up a backchannel effort between India and Pakistan following the Pulwama attack.
- **The OIC offers a platform for Pakistan and India to play out their respective positions on a number of thorny issues and in the process involve the forum for de-escalation purposes.**
- With Pakistan making all efforts to win over Riyadh's and the wider Gulf region's financial and diplomatic support, criticizing the decision to invite New Delhi would not sit well with Islamabad's interests.

- Both India and the member countries of OIC have shared an interest in blunting the edge of religious extremism and terrorism.
- Equally important has been the region's growing economic and energy interdependence with India, which is emerging as the world's third-largest economy and one of the biggest hydrocarbon importers and labour exporters.
- As the region's geopolitics enters a turbulent period, the potential for India as a military partner is also coming into view.

Challenges within OIC

- **Like the NAM and the Arab League, OIC has always struggled to overcome the multiple political contradictions within it.** While the OIC raises concerns about Muslim minorities in non-member states, it could never take up the problems that Shia or Sunni minorities face in countries across the Middle East.
- **Few OIC member states have the time and energy to argue with Islamabad over the merits of the formulations on India** that it brings to the OIC table. Some of New Delhi's friends are trying to block some of Pakistan's anti-India excesses at the OIC. But, things change accordingly.
- **Like Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) again, the OIC is a toothless tiger** when it comes to dealing with squabbles among member states. Since everyone has a veto on what is said, nothing serious can be said, let alone done, about the many serious disputes between the member states that are now shaping the Middle East.
- Except for the Islamic identity, there are very few cohesive factors that bind the member countries to each other.

Way Forward

- **With better engagement with the Arab countries, India should aim to**
 - expand areas of mutually beneficial cooperation,
 - minimize areas of misperception or divergence of interests, and
 - maximize advantages that may accrue to India.
- India has good reason to be pleased that Pakistan can no longer veto India's engagement with critical states of the Middle East. For the emerging forces of political moderation and social modernization in the Middle East, India is a more attractive partner than Pakistan.
- **However, India has to carefully balance its strategy towards the Islamic world by openly form stronger and better diplomatic ties with an overtly religion-based organization.**
- But here is a paradox: In embracing OIC, an overtly religion-based organization, Delhi reduces the salience of faith in India's strategy towards the Islamic world.