

The OIC and India: signals of a re-think

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ON THE eve of his recent visit to India, in an interview to an Indian newspaper, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia remarked that "India should have an observer status in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference similar to that held by Russia." He added it would be "beneficial" if India's entry was proposed "by a nation like Pakistan."

In the absence of a transcript, it is difficult to visualise the context of the question and the answer. On the face of it, it suggests the OIC (or at least its most important member) is now inclined to offer India an observer status after having done it for Russia. It also suggests a preferred procedural methodology. This hints at an element of tentativeness about the suggestion and makes it a trial balloon. That it was so, and was quickly punctured, is evident from the reaction emanating from Pakistan. Any country that wished to acquire observer status with the OIC, said the official spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad, "should not be involved in any dispute with a member state."

The OIC's interaction with India has a history. The Organisation itself is a product of the Islamic Summit Conference held at Rabat on September 22-25, 1969. The provocation for that gathering was the desecration of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia was personally instrumental in having India invited to the Conference. He accepted the argument that the desecration of the third holiest place in Islam was a matter of concern to all Muslims, not merely to "Muslim states" and that India, with its very large Muslim population, was entitled to be concerned. However, since the gathering was an inter-governmental one, only the Government of India could be invited. Consequently, India participated in the third session of the Conference, on the afternoon of September 23. The Chairman of the Conference, King Hasan of Morocco, interrupted the scheduled order of speakers to give the floor "to the Amba-

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sador of India who is representing his country after the Conference has decided that India should be represented." The speech of the Indian delegate forms part of the official transcript of the Conference.

Subsequent developments, and the antics of the then President of Pakistan, are too well known to bear repetition. It resulted in the forcible exclusion of the Indian delegation from the subsequent sessions of the Conference. Furthermore, the Declaration of the Conference was ingeniously crafted to show them as "Representatives of Moslem Community of India."

No invitations were extended to India in subsequent years and the domestic political backlash of the Rabat incident persuaded most people in India to wish away the OIC and its activities — till about 1990 when Pakistani diplomacy discovered it to be a fertile ground for focussed anti-Indian resolutions. Faced with the practical necessity of countering these, Indian diplomats in various places were instructed to interact with OIC officials to draw attention to the Indian side of the case. The exercise resulted in some softening of positions but made little dent on formal resolutions.

The Charter of the OIC was finalised in March 1972 and was registered with the United Nations on February 1, 1974. The OIC claimed and was accorded the status of an inter-governmental organisation. The U.N. General Assembly routinely adopts by consensus a resolution every year on cooperation between the U.N. and the OIC. In an essentially practical gesture, with perhaps some tinge of symbolism, India never

sought to oppose this consensus.

Many moons later, and in a changed and changing world, a process of reassessing the position of the OIC vis-à-vis India was gingerly initiated, first by Sudan and then by Qatar. The onset of regular talks between India and Pakistan furthered the re-think in the expectation that it would save many OIC members from the distasteful task of taking positions.

In the meantime Russia, driven by imperatives of the situation in Chechnya, sought to reduce hostility in the Muslim world by making overtures that were accommodated for a variety of reasons. Hence the offer of observer status that was avidly accepted. The Russians, like some others, had discovered that a "Muslim cause," to make progress in the OIC, needed a sponsor within the Organisation.

In this background, the Indian government has not reacted publicly to King Abdullah's exploratory suggestion. It is, of course, possible to ignore the OIC since the peak of its unfriendly activities is in any case behind us and is unlikely to be revived. On the other hand, however, an India that is no longer besieged, may well consider responding differently.

If the debate is to be reopened, it needs to go back to the beginning. If India was an original invitee, the question of offering it an observer status should not arise. Instead, it should be a simple matter of restoring the founder-membership that was taken away from India by a sleight of hand that did no credit to those who did it, or assisted it in any manner. In fact, the offer and acceptance of an alternative status would reval-

idate what was done in 1969. For this reason, it should be rejected.

The debate is also about recognising India's uniqueness: it is not a part of the Muslim world but is not away from it; not a Muslim majority state in statistical terms yet host to the second largest community of Muslims in the world; not a society focussed on Muslim welfare only but one in which Muslims, as an integral part of a larger whole, get the attention that every other section does.

The Indian experience of a plural society, secular polity, and democratic state structure is, in fact, relevant to all societies that are not homogenous. It offers an alternative to the multicultural model that is now under stress in many Western societies. India is a salad bowl, of pluralism in thought and action.

Two questions inevitably arise. Would the OIC be willing to travel far enough on this question? Would India be prepared to retrieve its full membership of the club?

It has been evident for some time that the individual members of the OIC have indulged in some introspection about the Organisation and its activities. Malaysia took the lead in this; so did Turkey in some measure from its unique position of a constitutionally secular state that is also overwhelmingly Muslim in terms of its demography. Iran did likewise in the Khatami era. In recent months King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative of convening first a conference of Muslim intellectuals, and then of OIC heads of government, to review and re-think the objectives of the grouping. The outcome, regrettably, was less than adequate.

The Indian position, on its part, is grooved in the experience of 1969 and has been reinforced by the negative perceptions generated by the OIC in its parrot-like reiteration of resolutions that even Pakistan, in its present diplomatic posture, would find of little use. Despite this, there may be a case for thinking beyond the obvious.

The OIC accounts for about 29 per cent of the total membership of the U.N., 47 per cent of the African Union, and 100 per cent of the membership of the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO). Nearer home, three of the seven members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are in the OIC and so are three ASEAN states, with two others (Philippines and Thailand) attending meetings as guests. The OIC, therefore, is a factor of relevance in multilateral gatherings and does influence the outcome of elections to U.N. bodies, and their decisions.

Geography is relevant. Muslim countries and societies form the immediate and proximate neighbourhood of India in South, South East, Central, and West Asia. Contacts with Muslim countries figure prominently in our external relations. These for the most part have a substantive economic content, and considerable potential in terms of our developing capabilities. They have a bearing on our strategic environment.

The challenge now is to define the contours of policy that would energise these relations, in an imaginative renewal of existing commitments, in terms of the present-day imperatives. The aim should be to (a) expand areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, (b) minimise areas of misperception or divergence of interests, and (c) maximise advantages that may accrue to India.

Many years back the Islamic Development Bank was permitted to operate a programme in India. Similarly, some interaction has taken place with the cultural affiliates of the OIC. This can be developed as part of our cultural diplomacy. The aim should be to show not the Muslim face of India but the Indian face that has a Muslim dimension also.

Neither an ostrich-like posture of ignoring the OIC nor an avid embrace would serve India's purpose. Incremental interaction, and a quiet insistence on the restoration of the original membership, would be a better alternative.

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