

FIFTY YEARS APART, THE STORY OF TWO OIC FIASCOS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: OIC

India's [most recent encounter with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#) (OIC) bears an uncanny resemblance to India's failed attempt to gain entry to the inaugural session of the same grouping held in Rabat, Morocco, in 1969 and for much the same reasons. In the earlier episode New Delhi lobbied fiercely to wangle an invitation to the meeting. However, on Pakistan's insistence the invitation that had been extended was withdrawn and India was denied membership of the OIC despite its insistence that as the country with the third largest Muslim population in the world it deserved a seat at the "Islamic" table.

I remember writing an oped at the time that New Delhi's bid for membership of the OIC was both morally wrong and politically futile. As a country whose foundational philosophy was based on secularism, it was inappropriate for India to join an organisation whose defining criterion was shared religious identity. In India's case this applied to all organisations that used religious criteria to define themselves, whether they be Muslim, Hindu, Christian or Buddhist.

What did we gain at OIC, asks Congress

Further, since India's membership of the OIC would be perceived as a powerful refutation of the basis on which Pakistan was created, it was bound to object stridently to India's induction into the organisation. Pakistan had great leverage with the conservative Arab monarchies for ideological reasons and because of the fact that its military was willing to provide the Arab monarchies with well-trained soldiers for hire that the latter needed to protect their insecure regimes.

Pakistan at that time also had close relations with Iran and Turkey with whom it shared membership of CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation, formerly the Baghdad Pact) and an anti-Soviet and pro-U.S. orientation. Consequently, Islamabad had much greater clout within OIC circles than did New Delhi and was in a position to thwart Indian attempts to attain OIC membership. As it turned out, my prediction came true. New Delhi's attempt to gain OIC membership led to unnecessary humiliation that could have been avoided had South Block acted with greater forethought.

The situation today is both different and similar to 1969, and this was clearly reflected in India's latest experience with the OIC. In an apparent gesture of goodwill, the organisers of the OIC Foreign Ministers meeting in Abu Dhabi, which in effect meant the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia invited External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj as the guest of honour and keynote speaker (*picture*) despite Pakistan's objections. This was both a reflection of India's growing economic and political stature internationally and the desire on the part of the Gulf monarchies to cultivate New Delhi in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by India's expanding economy and its technologically skilled workforce.

However, this is where the difference between 1969 and 2019 ends and the similarities kick in. The impact of Ms. Swaraj's speech, especially her denunciation of terrorism that was clearly aimed at Pakistan, was more than neutralised by a number of events that followed her address. First, the Abu Dhabi declaration issued at the end of the meeting did not contain even a simple expression of thanks to the Indian External Affairs Minister for addressing the plenary session of the assembly. Furthermore, it failed to mention the fact that Ms. Swaraj was the guest of honour

at the meeting and delivered the keynote speech. This omission was very glaring in view of the fact that the document mentioned all sorts of unimportant issues, such as the UAE hosting the 2020 Expo in Dubai.

The week after: on India-Pak relations

Second, to add insult to injury, the document's only reference to the India-Pakistan stand-off stated that the OIC welcomes the "positive initiative undertaken by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan to hand over the Indian pilot as a gesture of goodwill to de-escalate tensions in the region". The Pakistani "initiative" was given a very positive twist by decontextualising it totally. There was not even an implicit reference to the primary reason that led to the most recent India-Pakistan conflagration, namely, Pakistani support for terrorism as witnessed most dramatically by the attack in Pulwama that killed 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel.

Third, what was even more galling from the Indian perspective was the resolution on Kashmir that accompanied the Abu Dhabi declaration. This included the phrase "Indian terrorism in Kashmir" while condemning what it called "atrocities and human rights violations" in the State. It is clear from this sequence of events and the wording of the documents that emanated from the OIC meeting that despite the invitation to Ms. Swaraj, the leopard has not changed its spots and that Pakistani influence within the organisation has diminished only marginally.

At OIC meet, India flays terror funding

Once again, the Ministry of External Affairs, instead of prematurely celebrating the invitation to Ms. Swaraj to address the Abu Dhabi conference, should have thought long and hard before advising the Minister to accept the invitation. It was particularly incumbent upon the Ministry of External Affairs to do so in light of the resolutions passed by the OIC over the years regarding Kashmir and India-Pakistan issues which had always favoured the Pakistani point of view. It appears from hindsight that the External Affairs Minister's participation in the OIC Foreign Ministers' conclave, like the Indian attempt to gain admission into the Rabat conference in 1969, was nothing short of an avoidable fiasco.

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