

Islam as Priority in Saudi Foreign Policy

Madina Abdullaeva

*Lecturer, Political Sciences Department University of World Economy and Diplomacy,
Uzbekistan*

Abstract: The article discusses the backbone role of religion in shaping the domestic and foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia positions itself as the center of the Muslim world and the flagship of Islamic countries. Relations with the Muslim world are considered a priority in foreign policy, which consists of several levels of interaction in the external environment. The Kingdom pursues a proactive foreign policy both on a bilateral basis and at the level of multilateral formats and organizations.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, foreign policy, Islam, OIC, Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia's self-identification as an Islamic political state has defined the priority role in cooperation with Muslim World. The importance of this fact has proven by location of two Muslim holy cities for the whole Islam – Mecca and Medina.

Since the moment of its foundation, the Kingdom has been seeking to use its significant possibilities and resources for the sake of unity among Muslim countries. In order to gain the

Islamic solidarity, the Kingdom took an active part in the formation of Islamic governmental and non-governmental organizations. The international policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) towards the Islamic countries is being built upon the principles of all-Islamic unity and solidarity. In order to implement the unity of Muslim countries as well as to protect and advance their interests by the initiative of the KSA in 1969 the Organization of the Islamic Conference the headquarters of which is located in Jeddah, was established. The Organization of the Islamic Conference as an institutional structure takes the second place after the United Nations Organization by the number of its member-countries (Sheryazdanova & Smagulova, 2013, p. 84.). OIC includes 57 Islamic Countries and the countries which have mostly Islamic population. OIC member countries are spreading from the Middle East up to Latin America, covering 30% of UN member-states and more than 20% of world population (Akhmed, N., 2012.). According to the scientists, the Islamic world was in a real need of such organization, which could unite all Islamic states for close cooperation based on united Islamic political platform in order to influence the world events (Sheryazdanova & Smagulova, 2013, p. 83.).

After the Second World War some Muslim States have begun to put forward the idea of Islamic self-determination and the implementation of its external and internal political course basing on this religion. Iran, Pakistan and Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (Voskresenskiy A., 2016.) have been declaring their own vision of an Islamic state. In this respect, Saudi Arabia could not take the initiative of creating an Islamic organization based on the idea that the true purpose of the state is to serve Islam. Moreover, after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 and arson of Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the King of Saudi Arabia has threatened to declare Jihad if Israel does not liberate the Muslim part of Jerusalem. As we believe, in spite of the anti-Israeli content, the foreign policy of the KSA within the OIC is not limited to the creation of anti-Israeli bloc among Muslim countries, and aimed at financial support of member countries of the organization. This is perhaps the most powerful foreign policy instrument of the Kingdom against Muslim countries following the ideas of Islamic unity and solidarity.

Within the framework of the organization a Joint Action Plan (2016-2025) has been adopted, which includes a joint action of all member-states of the organization for 18 points of burning issues such as the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the fight against counter- terrorism, extremism, radicalization, sectarianist and Islamophobia, peace and security, eradication of poverty and support of the sustainable development and many other issues. There are a number of centers and foundations, with a separate budget located in different member-states of the Organization, among which the Islamic solidarity Fund, providing financial assistance not only to members of the OIC, but to many Muslim communities in other countries located in Jeddah and the Islamic development Bank, mainly under Saudi patronage. More than 25% of the shares of IDB belong to the KSA, while Kuwait, UAE, Libya and Turkey, in aggregate, own 50% of the shares (Voskresenskiy A., 2016.). The presence of Saudi capital in the institutional entities of the OIC directly points to its leadership in this organization.

As we all know, in the list of strategic objectives of KSA financial assistance is in 4th place, while external security, strengthening of unity with the Arab and Muslim world and the ensuring of international stability and peace occupying leading positions (Abdisattorov, B., 2018.). All above-mentioned tasks are interrelated and are being implemented by the Saudi government in the complex and long-term way. Also, one needs to mention that the OIC is not the only mechanism for the implementation of Saudi financial aid to Islamic countries, because the Kingdom operates unilaterally as well. Back in 1974 according to the decree of the King of KSA the Saudi Fund for Development was established with the aim of developing international cooperation of the Kingdom with other countries. Nowadays, the Fund finances a total number of 3,750 projects in 71 countries, of which 41 are the African countries, 25 are Asian, and 5 countries are located in other parts of the world (Saudi fund for Development, 2016.). In modern activity of the OIC is often possible to see the traces of Saudi foreign policy, although this effect seems to be indirect at first and taking into account the interests of all members of the

organization. Muslim religious leaders are sanctioning ideologically the functioning of the OIC, increasing its prestige among the broad masses of those who are religious. Developed and implemented by the principles of international Islamic solidarity with the Islamic religious positions, it gives a theological explanation for mobilizing policy support to OIC from the masses of believers in more than 60 countries, what allows to present a united front (Sheryazdanova & Smagulova). But in spite of all that, the interests of Saudi Arabia are represented more powerful in this organization than the interests of other countries (Kayaoglu, T., 2013.). Leadership in this organization gives more soft power than hard, according to some scholars, the leader of the OIC could serve as a role model for other members of the organization, and also the voice of a leader will act as the voice of the Muslim world before the world powers.

Despite all advantages, one need declares, that there is no united, recognized leader in Muslim world nowadays, although such countries as KSA, Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan are putting forward the positive image of Muslim leader. Those countries are limiting only to their own vision of all-Muslims problems and follow only their own interests. In this context the interests of Saudi Arabia are to create the explanation of the word *Ummah*, or “Muslim world”. For SA *Ummah* is a strictly religious term, which is a part of its foreign policy. The OIC is the perfect place for the Kingdom to spread their religious orthodoxy (Kayaoglu, T.). For the Saudis, their foreign policy consists of the *Ummah*, which means that the presence of the OIC will be a very important direction, because this organization today has no analogues in the coverage of all parts of the Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia was behind the establishment of the OIC, being the most important member of this organization for all time of its existence. The location of the bodies of the OIC in Saudi Arabia, budgetary investments of the Kingdom and its historical legacy made this country a de facto veto-power of the OIC. Historically, KSA has used the OIC to legitimize the Saudi regime in the eyes of the Saudi population and the *Ummah*. The Kingdom has always sought to limit the growing influence of other States within the OIC. Saudi Arabia was behind the establishment of the OIC, being the most important member of this organization for all time of its existence. The location of the bodies of the OIC in Saudi Arabia, budgetary investments of the Kingdom and its historical legacy made this country a de facto veto-power of the OIC. Historically, KSA has used the OIC to legitimize the Saudi regime in the eyes of the Saudi population and the *Ummah*. The Kingdom has always sought to limit the growing influence of other States within the OIC.

Also, KSA has always tried to keep religion and economy in the focus of the OIC, rather than consideration of political and military issues, because religion and economy has been determining the leading role of the KSA in the world. Of the 3,000 decisions and resolutions adopted by the OIC in recent years, only 10% were implemented, and most part of the decisions (90%) is not implemented (Mozharova, V., 2015.). During all the history of existence of the organization and its institutional mechanisms, military conflicts between Iran and Iraq, Iraq and Kuwait have not been resolved, has not been provided substantial assistance in the resolution of the Algerian-Moroccan, the Sudan-Egyptian border and territorial conflicts, military-political situation in Afghanistan, Iraq, the territorial issues between Iran and the UAE, Iran and Bahrain (Auelbaev, B., 2016.).

The cause of ineffective operation of the organization can be called the very different views and positions of leading states and the basic perception of other centers of the Muslim world. There is no common position among the member states of the OIC, because instead of the ideas of unity and cohesion many members are trying to follow their political and economic interests. From time to time, when Saudi-Iranian relations have been experiencing its best periods, Saudi Arabia has tried to use OIC in its own interests. For example, in 1987, during Haj, as a result of protests and clashes of Saudi and Iran pilgrims, 400 people were killed, mostly Iranians (Kayaoglu, T.). Then, in 1988, at the summit of foreign Ministers of the OIC a resolution, condemning the actions of the Iranian pilgrims and regarded their actions as violation of the

public order, and sabotage, was adopted. One must say that this is not the only case of support actions from KSA to OIC, regardless of the true causes and clarification the positions of the parties. So, during the last summit of the OIC held on April 14-15 2016 in Turkey, the final communiqué condemning the actions of Iran for interfering to the internal affairs of its neighbor and support of terrorist groups was adopted, in connection with succession of events as the result of the execution of prominent Shia preacher in Saudi Arabia, named Nimr al-Nimr.

Today, if nobody openly challenges the superiority of the KSA, it offers other models of an Islamic state same as Pakistan and Iran. It is important to note that Saudi primacy in the Islamic world is primarily a religious authority and financial support to developing economies. To achieve a dominant role in the Islamic world, the KSA uses a variety of methods including the financing of mosques and sending imams to the Muslim community, giving scholarships to students of Islamic Sciences in KSA, the opening of religious schools (madradas) and centers that support Islamic studies in all universities of the world and other actions. To achieve its global mission, Saudi Arabia has opened a network of Islamic institutions such as the World Council of mosques, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, World Muslim League, etc.

It should be noted that before 1990 the role of KSA in OIC has not been challenged by anyone, whereas from this period on new centers of Islamic power began to assert itself, increasingly acquiring their status in the OIC. For example, during the recent summit of the OIC in Turkey (April 14-15 2016) in Turkish press there were signals about the new leader of the OIC in the face of Turkey: "We should not forget that Turkey is the largest member-state of the OIC, its natural leader and big brother" (Kayaoglu, T.). For the return of their leading position and prevention of such statements, KSA has taken active measures, including giving the position of the Secretary-General of the former Minister of KSA Ayadu Madani.

Today, Saudi Arabia uses OIC to legitimize its regime to its citizens and to the international community, most part of which is the Muslim world. The Kingdom is trying to limit participation and the growing influence of other countries claiming to be independent Muslim center in the world using their religious and financial benefits. The Saudi government is trying to prevent the formation of new Islamic centers, which potentially have the opportunity to challenge its leadership and unique position in the Islamic and Muslim world.

We came to the conclusion that the KSA is taking active steps to lead the Muslim world, using its religious and financial capabilities. The Kingdom is also trying to prevent the emergence of new centers of power in the Muslim world, those which present a possible danger to its existence as the only leader of the entire Muslim world. To this end, KSA uses state and international structures that have everything in the Muslim world, such as the Saudi Development Fund and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to advance their soft power and implement their foreign policy ambitions. The leading role in the OIC provides Saudi Arabia with the role of an example for imitation and an exemplary model of state and social order for the rest of the Muslim world and the "unified voice of the Muslim world" in front of the world's centers of power. Also, the Kingdom legitimizes its vision of Islam to the subjects of the KSA and the world Muslim and non-Muslim community through participation in the OIC.

In the short term, there will not be unity in the Muslim world as it is not in the OIC due to the vast geography of Islam and not modest foreign policy ambitions of some Muslim States. Despite the lack of a unified, recognized and exemplary center in the Muslim world, KSA has a privileged position over other states who seek to challenge the leadership of the KSA in the Muslim world and show their way of Muslim development as the most suitable. The so-called "unique" mission of the Kingdom is explained by the fact that the CSA sees itself as a "truly Islamic state" the duty of which is the dissemination and preservation of "pure Islam" among Muslim and non-Muslim countries of the modern world. In this context, it is proposed to strengthen the position of Saudi Arabia in the OIC, and the Islamic (Muslim) world as a whole.

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