

Impacts of Saudi Hegemony on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

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Abstract The events of the 2016 summit of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Turkey demonstrate how Saudi Arabia's role within the organization has been transformed from leadership into a hegemonic one, a process that has been unfolding over five decades. As a strong voice in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia has employed a range of diplomatic strategies, in accordance with its national interests, to influence the OIC and its member states. Based on the analysis, this paper argues that Saudi Arabia has been able to exert hegemonic control over the OIC due to the organization's structural make-up, its reliance on Saudi funding, as well as dominance in bilateral affairs with majority of the OIC members.

Keywords Saudi Arabia · Hegemony · Leadership · OIC · Foreign policy

Introduction

International organizations (IOs) are a modern phenomenon that has emerged as a result of evolutionary processes. They are formed to develop coordinated international objectives that states could not otherwise pursue individually. In a dynamic world where forces shift, ideas change and human needs multiply; the process of institutionalizing human relations has an ever-increasing significance. Thus, numerous IOs have appeared, and existing ones have expanded their membership; however, IOs also contract through members. Some may leave organizations, as in Brexit, or be suspended, as (has) happened to Fiji, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth of Nations.

IOs are created for a variety of reasons. For example, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was set up to promote a regional security agenda for member states against the perceived communist threat from China. A common external threat perception provided a

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strong foundation for the continuity of ASEAN. Other IOs are based on economic interdependence. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) endeavors to promote cooperation mainly in areas of human security, for example, poverty alleviation (Ahmed 2013). In contrast, the members of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are bonded together by a common religion. This is a unique aspect, as religion does not serve as the glue for other IOs. The significance of Islam was highlighted by the shared sense of hurt and injustice that followed the 1967 Arab-Israeli war which ended with Israeli control over Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem—the third holiest site in Islam.

Notwithstanding the common sense of injustice, state behavior in any IO is governed by state-centric interests of each member. And the more powerful states tend to gain the upper hand. The United Nations has perfected the process to respect the interests of its most powerful member states by giving veto rights to the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) (Clark 2011). But there are other ways of pushing state interests in any IO that does not require formal veto rights, as will be discussed below in relation to Saudi hegemony over the OIC. Ironically, there have been no studies into this question. This paper aims to address the existing gap in the literature by analyzing the Saudi role in the OIC and implications for the organization as a viable international body.

A major reason for neglecting Saudi Arabia in the scholarship on hegemony could be that it has several different characteristics comparing to hegemons such as the USA, India, South Africa, and Brazil. Home to the two holy Muslim cities, the Kingdom has religious prominence in the Muslim world. It however does not enjoy dominance in other spheres of influence, for example, in terms of GDP volume, military might, and size of the country and population, in the Muslim world. In terms of economy, Saudi Arabia is the third largest economy among the OIC members, behind Indonesia and Turkey with a GDP of US\$646bn in 2015 (WB 2016). Looking at its military strength, Turkey is considered among countries with strongest armed forces in the world (Batchelor 2015). Regarding the size of the country, Saudi Arabia is smaller than other Muslim states like Kazakhstan, Algeria, and Sudan. In addition, with its population of 31 million, it is smaller than that of Indonesia and Pakistan (PRC 2015). Nonetheless, the Kingdom enjoys prominence in the Muslim world, especially in international affairs, and this fact demands more examination.

Hegemony comes in different shapes and sizes. The word “hegemony” originated from the Greek expression “*hegemonia*,” meaning the dominant status of one element over others within a system (Yilmaz 2001, p. 194). Here, it is important to refer to Gramsci’s work on hegemony because he engages with dominance of one over the other, not only through force but also through ideas (Bates 1975). In his thesis on false consciousness, Thompson has explored Gramsci’s notion of hegemony by arguing that “irrationalism is not simply the fault of the subject, but of the structures of thought that are employed throughout society and which therefore have some kind of hegemonic force over the subject” (2015, p. 451). There are obvious parallels between Gramsci and Thompson’s work. This approach lends itself to the study of relations between states, especially in a system of IOs. This approach is especially relevant when discussing the role of an explicitly religious state in an organization that has coalesced around the notion of religious unity.

It is argued in this paper that Saudi Arabia’s role within the OIC has transformed from that of leadership to a hegemon. This paper dissects the complex phenomenon of hegemony. At the regional level, economic and/or military powers follow a range of strategies to meet their ambitions. Typical regional strategies are labeled hegemony and leadership (Destradi 2008, p. 6). According to Bhasin, “leadership does not reflect only one country’s national interest; it

reflects the common interest of a group of states in a global order” (Bhasin 2008, p. 10). In IOs, a hegemon tries to dominate weaker states.¹ A hegemonic power prioritizes its own values and interests over those states that are weaker in economic or military terms. Thus, hegemony, by its very nature, enables a powerful state to impose and spread its moral, political, and cultural values on weak states (Yilmaz 2001, p. 194).

In this paper, Saudi hegemony is assessed in light of Sandra Destradi’s framework wherein hegemony is divided into the categories of hard, intermediate, and soft—which can all be deployed simultaneously. “Soft hegemony” is defined as the situation when a state produces common norms and values to be able to achieve its national interests (Destradi 2010, p. 920). Here, a hegemon in pursuit of dominance can use a range of means by using diplomatic channels, and exchange programs involving diverse actors are prominent examples. This is similar to the concept of “benevolent hegemony,” under which policies and actions of a dominant state benefit all stakeholders (Ibid: 920). In “intermediate hegemony,” a hegemon provides material benefits and rewards—such as aid and military support—to align subordinate states with its interests. While, increasingly, hegemonies try to create a community of nations in which everyone is motivated towards collective objectives, they still try to dominate these systems. To achieve their objectives, hegemonies also employ hard hegemonic strategies of coercion, such as sanctions, threats, and political pressure, to elicit conformity from other states (Ibid: 918). Hence, “in contrast to leadership, the ends and interests of the hegemon are still at the forefront” (Ibid: 920).

The Context

The present context for Saudi hegemony originates in the so-called Arab Spring. In 2010, a Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, self-immolated as a protest against the authorities. This individual act triggered a mass movement leading to the resignation of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. From Tunisia, there were widespread spillover effects in the Middle East. This phenomenon of popular protest against authoritarianism resulted in the downfall of long-entrenched regime in Egypt, while in other parts of the Arab world, social protests have either been contained with brute force or have plunged into civil war (Notten 2014).

Sunni-Shia sectarianism has been a prominent feature of post-Arab Spring conflicts in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has often taken on the leadership role for the Sunni side. In 2011, the Sunni-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), under the aegis of Saudi Arabia, sent troops to crush the resistance of Shia majority protestors in Bahrain (Mabon 2013). In the Syrian conflict, Iran and Hezbollah are aiding the minority Alawite regime of Assad while Qatar and Saudi Arabia are backing Sunni rebels (Notten 2014). Meanwhile, Yemen has become another regional conflict hotspot after the removal of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Saudi Arabia was closely watching developments in Yemen and facilitated the mediation

¹ *The Index of State Weakness in the Developing World* defines weak states as “countries that lack the essential capacity and/or will to fulfill four sets of critical government responsibilities: fostering an environment conducive to sustainable and equitable economic growth; establishing and maintaining legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions; securing their populations from violent conflict and controlling their territory; and meeting the basic human needs of their population” (*Index of State Weakness in the Developing World* 2008, p. 3). However, in this paper, the authors use a simplistic definition comparing states based on the following indicators: size of GDP, per capita income, military strength, geographical size, and population.

via GCC in the period following the 2011 Yemeni uprising (Rieger 2017, p. 4). In March 2015, Saudi Arabia spearheaded a coalition as diplomatic cover for its efforts to crush Houthi rebels, which the Saudis claimed were sponsored by Iran. The UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, all members of the GCC, duly joined the coalition. After initially resisting to join the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), Oman succumbed to the pressure from other GCC members and joined in December 2016. Saudi Arabia blames Iran for civic disturbances and conflicts in the region and has pledged to counter what it sees as Iranian expansionism. Riyadh's determination to contain Iran's influence has turned the region into a battleground for a high-stake power struggle (Bejamin Soloway 2016).

In its quest to maintain regional supremacy, Saudi Arabia continues to employ all possible strategies and means to roll back Iranian influence in the Middle East. The OIC forum is an important part of this strategy.

OIC's Creation and Limitations

In the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War and the attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in 1969, Muslim leaders from around the world came together in Rabat with the intention of forming a collective voice for Muslims and protect Muslim interests (Sheikh 2003, p. 36). Prior to this, localized pan-Islamic political movements such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had expressed a desire for a unified voice for the Muslim *ummah*, but no formal body had been created. With 57 member states representing 1.6 billion Muslims, the OIC now is the second largest IO after the UN and is, theoretically, well placed to play a much-needed role in dealing with issues of peace and security (Sharqieh 2012, p. 162). Despite the urgency of issues facing the Muslim world, however, the OIC has failed to deliver.

Bilateral disputes often pose serious challenges to the effectiveness and survival of IOs. In this regard, a prominent example is SAARC where the India-Pakistan conflict has practically sabotaged this regional forum (Ahmed 2013, p. 144). The OIC has also fallen short of living up to its mission, largely due to tensions between its members. During the 1980s, a decade marked by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the war between Iraq and Iran, rifts began to emerge within the Muslim world. In 1991, fewer than half of its members attended the Dakar summit of the OIC (Haynes 2001, p. 153). By that time, member states of the OIC, particularly Iran, had grown skeptical of the organization's potential to foster cohesion across the *ummah*. It had become obvious that even if its members were united by a common religion, they were still divided by political and ideological disagreements (Akbarzadeh and Connor 2005). Modes of governance are a case in point: the Gulf Region is home to either absolute or constitutional monarchies, while democracy is prevalent in the world's largest Muslim countries: Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Sectarian differences pose further challenges to the OIC (Mabon 2013, pp. 51–52). These have only got worse in recent years due to the Saudi-Iran power struggle in the Middle East.

Conflicting foreign policies and interests also inevitably lead to troubles at bilateral levels and within IOs. The OIC is a victim of divergent interests from within. Some such as Turkey and Malaysia promote a functionalist approach involving cooperation in non-controversial areas. While, Saudi Arabia and Iran seek to use the forum for spreading their ideological/sectarian influence in the Muslim world (Johnson 2010). Such contradictory approaches have come sharply into focus in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. As Sharqieh highlights, "Iran's support for the Syrian regime and Saudi support for the Bahraini government illustrate [that]

realpolitik has a strong religious and sectarian resonance in the Muslim world” (2012, p. 174). Nasr (2015, p. 61) points out how these dynamics led to the Arab states and Iran supporting different factions in Middle East conflicts:

Arab states and Iran both saw threats and opportunities in the Arab Spring. Their attempts to manage and manipulate that tumult intensified sectarianism and entwined domestic security concerns with the regional rivalry between the Sunni camps of Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies (and also Turkey) and Iran, Iraq, and their Shia allies.

The OIC has directed much of its energy towards conflict resolution. In particular, the organization has made efforts to resolve internal conflicts in the Philippines, Thailand, Iraq, and Somalia. Sharqieh (2012) notes that the OIC played an effective role as mediator leading to meaningful dialogs and formation of local institutions for conflict resolutions in Thailand and the Philippines. At the bilateral level, the OIC has had a mixed record. It has had to intervene in cases of bilateral armed conflicts between its members, in the case of East Pakistan-West Pakistan and the Iran-Iraq War. In the former, the OIC was successful in resolving the tensions between Pakistan and the newly created Bangladesh from East Pakistan. During the Iran-Iraq War, however, the OIC set up a committee led by General Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, but failed to secure agreement on a ceasefire (Al-ahsan 2004, p. 139). It is clear that the OIC’s efforts were more successful in post-war periods when there were clear winners and losers.

The dynamics of ongoing confrontations create entirely different challenges, as do the sectarian proxy wars in Syria and Yemen. The organization has not intervened in conflicts involving proxies between Iran and Saudi Arabia because it does not recognize sectarianism and continues to label such conflicts as terrorism-related.² The OIC’s situation is further complicated in these examples due to Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the impact this has on the sensitivities of sectarian polarization within the Muslim world. Ultimately, however, the organization’s inability to handle confrontation within the Muslim world is undermining the legitimacy that it had gained through successful mediations in some of the abovementioned disputes.

During the past decade, there have been some important developments at the OIC. These included the realization of long-standing issue of institutional reforms. In 2005, the OIC adopted a 10-year plan to expand its focus to dealing with contemporary challenges facing the Muslim world in the form of terrorism, Islamophobia, poor governance, and economic marginalization. Prior to this, the OIC had a narrow focus: Palestine, poverty alleviation, and promotion of education. During the 10-year tenure (2004–2014) of Secretary General Ekmeleddin Mehmet İhsanoğlu of Turkey, the organization shifted its focus to address its own limitations. Consequently, the OIC’s visibility increased through regular observatory reports on Islamophobia with its first publication in 2007. However, it appears that Saudi hegemony, in pursuing a sectarian agenda, has derailed most of that progress.

² Although not a recent phenomenon, the issue of how to combat terrorism lacks consensus within the international community. Here, by consensus, we do not simply mean signing of agreements/conventions etc., but joint actions. Similar is the position of the OIC, which, in the early 1990s, produced an agreement in which all members agreed to abstain from allowing their territories to be used for terrorist activities. The agreement was merely a “face-saving” step that camouflaged inherent divisions within the OIC, especially when there were accusations of cross-border terrorism directed at Iran and Sudan. Thus, the agreement could not produce concrete actions via OIC.

Saudi Hegemony

From the start, Saudi Arabia viewed the OIC through a geopolitical lens. It simultaneously sought to assert its leadership by taking the initiative in outlining common goals that the organization could pursue under its direction (Destradi 2008, p. 23). Among the common goals was to determine mechanisms to counter the “threat” that Israel posed to OIC member states. Simultaneously, the Saudis also sought to counter the rise of Egypt’s Pan-Arabism. Then, the Kingdom started to use its Islamic credentials for countering Gamel Abdul Nasser’s Pan-Arabism through Pan-Islamism (Sheikh 2003, p. 36). Iran paid little attention to the OIC during its initial stages (Mabon 2013, pp. 51–52), and there was no other member state willing to challenge Saudi Arabia’s leadership aspirations; none could match its economic power or its respected standing among the *ummah*. Indeed, the submissiveness of the majority of the OIC member states provided the Kingdom *carte blanche* to claim the leadership role of the organization. According to Ahmad, “the institutionalized leadership role that Saudi Arabia carved out for itself within the governing structure of the OIC, as well as its role as the organizations’ financier, ensure that the kingdom exercises a leading voice within the Muslim world” (2008, p. 131). Saudi Arabia’s dominant role within the OIC provided the Kingdom a springboard for a strategic transition from regional leader to a hegemon.

To date, the Kingdom continues to exercise soft hegemony over the Muslim world. This is both intentional and procedural. The OIC’s institutional structure supports this, as does the fact that Saudi Arabia is host to the International Islamic Fiqh Academy. The academy provides theoretical and practical guidance on Islamic Sharia globally; thus, its presence in Saudi Arabia strengthens the Kingdom’s legitimacy vis-à-vis Islamic knowledge and jurisprudence. Saudi Arabia seeks to project its version of Islam (conservative version commonly known as “Wahhabism,” although the Kingdom refrains from using this term) across the Muslim world (Hoodbhoy 2016, p. 58). During the 1970s, the Saudis began to export Wahhabism through funding for madrassas and construction of mosques around the world. According to one estimate, the Kingdom has invested around US\$100 billion on promoting its ideology through financial assistance to mosques, madrassas, and cultural institutions within and outside the Muslim majority countries (Dorsey 2016). The Kingdom has used both bilateral and multi-lateral mechanisms to ensure what Gramsci calls the dominance of ideas through promotion of Wahhabism (Bates 1975). In 1986, in response to Iranian questioning of the legitimacy of the Saudi regime (ridiculed as “palace dwellers” promoting “American Islam”), King Fahd decided to change the title of Saudi monarchs from “king” to “custodians of the Two Holy Mosques” (Ottaway 2008, p. 55). This initiative was self-evidently an attempt to buttress Saudi’s religious credentials and legitimacy.

Further, Saudi Arabia employs soft hegemon strategies for the realization of its goals through various means of socialization. Most of that is in the form of massive Saudi funding for the promotion of Wahhabism, but it also occurs through the training of *ulema* (Muslim clerics) from around the world. Legitimacy for training *ulema* comes naturally to Saudi Arabia as home to the two holiest cities for Muslims. There are many other mechanisms through which the Kingdom gets to exert its authority over the Muslim world. One such is the *hajj* quota allotted for each Muslim state. With the largest Muslim population, Indonesia received a quota of 211,000 in 2013 comparing to 143,368 for the second largest Muslim country, Pakistan (Soloway 2015). Saudi Arabia makes decisions on *hajj* allocations following bilateral agreements. Scholarships for students from Muslim countries are another example. In 2012, Saudi Arabia’s Islamic University sponsored 2053 students from 130 countries for programs in

Islamic Studies (Toumi 2012). As the two largest Islamic countries, Indonesian and Pakistani students receive most of the scholarships for programs in Saudi Arabia. It is a systematic way of promoting its values in the Muslim world.

Funding is a pivotal lever of Saudi influence and reach; economically weak states are susceptible to Saudi influence. As an outcome of its funding for institutions across the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia has been able to gain leadership of several of those institutions. For instance, Ahmed Yousif Ahmed Al Draiwesh, a Saudi national who only speaks Arabic, is the President of Pakistan's International Islamic University (Hoodbhoy 2016, p. 60). In Indonesia, the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in Jakarta is a branch of the Iman Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University and is directly managed by Saudi Arabia. According to Meuleman, the institute, established in 1980, aims to "promote [the type of] conservative Islam that is dominant in Saudi Arabia" (Meuleman 2011, p. 250).

According to intermediate hegemonic strategy, rich countries employ funding to promote their foreign policy interests in countries and regions important to them. Foreign aid distribution is often guided by the short-term political and security interests of donor countries (Brown and Gravinghold 2016; Radelet 2005). Here again, the Kingdom exerts its dominance via the OIC and its subsidiaries, which are heavily reliant on Saudi funding, and with Youssef bin al-Ottaimeen, a Saudi national, as OIC Secretary General, the organization is now completely under the Kingdom's control. This is unprecedented because the Kingdom on previous occasions had passed on the option to appoint the Secretary General, a policy that changed with the appointment of Iyad Madani in 2014 (succeeded by another Saudi al-Ottaimeen in 2016). Saudi Arabia is home to the OIC Secretariat, and several of its subsidiaries, including the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), headquartered in Jeddah. The IDB aims to enhance economic cooperation among OIC member states and in 2008 had US\$2 billion in capital (Zuhur 2011, p. 169). The IDB has set up the Islamic Corporation for Development of the Private Sector, and within Saudi Arabia, it has led to the creation of the Iwan Real Estate Development Company and the Anfal Stock Exchange (Ibid: 169). In 2006, the Saudi government provided US\$1 billion to IDB's poverty alleviation program, which operates in Africa and Asia (Johnson 2010). Saudi Arabia also hosts the headquarters of Islamic Solidarity Fund, which was established as an OIC organ in 1974, for emergency relief to majority Muslim countries and promotions of Islamic values in Muslim minorities. All of these offer avenues for Riyadh to allocate funds in pursuit of its strategic and political goals. These are also examples of benevolent hegemony.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's intermediate hegemonic strategy is evident through direct material benefits in the form of economic aid and military support that it provides to subordinate states—mostly Muslim majority states. Saudi Arabia has been one of the biggest sources of funding, through both formal and informal channels, to Sunni majority Muslim countries, for example Egypt, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan. King Faisal (r. 1964–75) promoted the philanthropic goals of Islam, and by 1993, the Kingdom spent 5.3% of its GNP on foreign aid (Zuhur 2011, p. 169). According to one report, Saudi Arabia has given US\$22.7 billion in aid to Arab countries, mostly to Egypt and Yemen (*Arab News*, 19 May 2015); among other recipients are Bahrain, Palestine, Jordan, and Oman.³ In the three decades between 1985 and 2015, Saudi Arabia spent US\$130 billion in foreign aid (Kechichian 2016). In 2016, the Saudi government announced an aid package of \$122 million for Pakistan

³ Traditionally, Saudi aid has been limited to the Muslim world, which Riyadh views as its sphere of influence, but since 2006, some aid has also been given to non-Muslim countries, such as Cambodia (Barton 2006).

as reward for joining the IMAFT (Rana 2016). Pakistan's government decision has been against the parliament's wish to maintain neutrality in this conflict.⁴ Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, including Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE, also provided \$12.5 billion aid to Egypt in 2015 (*Al Arabia*, 13 March 2015). Egypt is a key Saudi ally through which the Kingdom has been advancing its cooperation with Israel (Hannah 2016a,b). Riyadh's intermediate hegemonic strategy has borne fruit. All of these recipients of Saudi aid have aligned themselves with the Kingdom foreign policies, especially within the OIC.

While maintaining an intermediate hegemonic strategy on one hand, Saudi Arabia has also shifted to a "hard hegemony" stance by employing means such as sanctions, threats, and political pressure to ensure compliance. Thus, Riyadh hosted the OIC's fourth extraordinary summit in Mecca in August 2012 in order to push its strict agenda against Bashar al Assad's government in Syria. The meeting was attended by 15 heads of states,⁵ all of them Sunni majority states except for Iran, and most heavily dependent on Saudi funding. A decision was reached to suspend Syria's membership (OIC 2014). In what appears to be the norm at the OIC, only Iran's then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad objected to the decision (Alsharif 2012). If the idea was to isolate and pressure Assad's regime by suspending Syria's OIC membership, then it did not work. Syria was able to denounce it as a violation of the OIC Charter's article on non-interference in internal affairs of members. It continues to enjoy the aid of its traditional allies Lebanon and Iran. Hence, Riyadh afterwards decided to cancel US\$1 billion of US\$3 billion aid promised to the Lebanese army and take other measures (Barnard 2016). Suspending Syria's membership has also been counter-productive for the OIC as an institution because now the OIC cannot be directly involved in conflict resolution—its key objective.

With the Middle East beset by multiple violent conflicts, it is not surprising that international transfers of weapons to the region have been increasing. Through its direct engagement in Yemen's civil war and in response to the perceived Iranian threat, Saudi Arabia has assumed a more prominent military presence in the region. From 2011 until 2015, 27% of the arms transfers to the Middle East went to Saudi Arabia through purchases from the USA, the UK, and Spain. This is a 275% increase on its weapon imports from 2006 to 2010. Saudi Arabia is now the second largest market, trailing only India, in the weapon trade, importing 7% of the world's weapon trade (Fleurant et al. 2016, pp. 2–8). In comparison, although successfully safeguarding its nuclear program, Iran has been unable to match the level of Saudi weapon imports due to the UN arms embargo. Iran has had to take recourse to testing its missiles to demonstrate its military strength. In March 2016, Iran successfully tested two ballistic missiles (Erdbrink 2016). Following successful dialog with the USA on the nuclear issue, Iran is more hopeful of purchasing hardware, especially from Russia, but Tehran simply does not have the spending power of the Saudis. The rapid Saudi investment in military hardware points to Riyadh's intention of becoming a military power in the region. It is also an indication of a policy shift in Riyadh in relation to Saudi defense self-reliance.

A range of factors have contributed to a more assertive (if not aggressive) foreign policy thinking in Riyadh. As noted above, the Arab Spring and the wars in Yemen and Syria made Saudi Arabia fearful of Iran's reach into the Middle East, and uneasy about instability within

⁴ After Pakistan was hit by floods in 2010, the OIC generated US\$1 billion in aid with major contributions from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait, and Qatar (Zuhur 2011, p. 169).

⁵ The kings of Bahrain and Jordan and presidents of Egypt, Iran, Yemen, Pakistan, Tunisia, Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, Sudan, Bangladesh, Uganda, and Turkey attended the summit.

its own borders, especially among its Shia population in the Eastern Province. Policy making in Saudi Arabia is also the purview of a limited number of people. Key personalities in decision making include the Crown Prince, Deputy Crown Prince, and the Foreign Minister, all of whom need the approval of the King (Partrick 2016; Rieger 2017). A change in the top leadership presents prospects of change to reflect the personality and orientation of new incumbents. Following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, King Salman took over as the head of the state. This appointment accelerated the shift away from what was widely dubbed a foreign policy based on “pragmatism” and consensus (Al Tamamy 2012, p. 147) to one that is much less risk averse and unpredictable. Many observers have pointed to one man as instrumental for this shift. According to Karim (2017, p. 72), “Saudi Arabia has witnessed a centralization of power in the office of the deputy crown prince [Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud], which has amounted to a shift ... in foreign policy”.

In April 2015, Mohammad bin Salman (born in 1985) was made the Deputy Crown Prince and became the youngest Defense Minister in the world. By virtue of his age and lack of experience, he is known for his aggressive and swift policy maneuvers. Mainly due to the centralization of power in his office, Mohammad bin Salman was the front man of the government in matters from economic reforms to important foreign policy decisions, such as the creation of the IMAFT. Furthermore, the appointments of non-royals to key positions like the Foreign Minister (Abdel Al-Jubeir) and the head of the General Intelligence Presidency (Khalid bin Ali Al Humaidan) have strengthened the decision-making authority of Mohammad bin Salman because non-royals have no authority within the House of Saud (Ibid: 76–77). His growing influence precipitated his election to the post of the Crown Prince in June 2017.

While King Salman’s decisions may seem rash, they are not a complete departure from those of his predecessor. King Abdullah (2005–2015) had already demonstrated an awareness that Saudi soft power needed to be complemented with hard power. Saudi Arabia used military power in 2009 against Houthis, and in 2011, it sent troops to protect the monarchy in Bahrain (Al Tamamy 2012, p. 148; Mabon 2013, p. 71–72). It was clear that the Arab Spring and the perceived Iranian expansionism had tested the limits of the Saudi soft power. In that sense, the formation of the IMAFT under King Salman’s reign was the consolidation of an already existing pattern, albeit much more forcefully. Mohammad bin Salman announced the creation of IMAFT in December 2015, and since then, it has grown from 34 to 42 member states, including almost 70% OIC member states. It is clear through the mandate that the Kingdom wishes to obtain a greater leadership of the Muslim world as the leader of the alliance to coordinate military operations. IMAFT has the full backing of the USA to counter Iran’s increasing influence in the Middle East. This viewpoint was overtly expressed in the joint statement issued following President Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017:

The two leaders affirmed their determination to unite and integrate efforts between the United States-led Global Coalition Against ISIS with Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism ... The two leaders also agreed on the need to contain Iran’s malign interference in the internal affairs of other states, instigation of sectarian strife, support of terrorism and armed proxies, and efforts to destabilize the countries in the region (White House 2017).

Saudi Arabia has steadily transitioned from a leadership role in the OIC to that of a hegemon. Its recent military interventions, direct in Yemen and indirect in Syria, could be construed as an “empire” strategy as defined by Destradi (2008), but Riyadh has averted such a categorization by playing upon its legitimacy as a leader within the Muslim world.

According to Destradi (2010, p. 929), it is rare that a state would simultaneously follow soft/intermediate/hard hegemony and leadership strategies, but as this study illustrates, Saudi Arabia attempts to do just that. Through a range of means, Saudi Arabia has come to shape its worldview in countries under its dominance. Riyadh's strategic transition to become an interventionist power in the Muslim world, both through and without the mechanism of the OIC, has serious implications for the organization.

Impacts on the OIC

Although often labeled a “talk fest,” there is no denying that the OIC has significant potential for tackling grave challenges facing the Muslim world (Johnson 2010). These challenges range from extremism and radicalization to poverty and illiteracy. In the 2015 Human Development Index, many OIC members are ranked among countries with low human development, including Niger at the very bottom of the list (UNDP 2015, p. 50). There are various factors responsible for the troubles faced by the OIC. At its inception, the shared faith of Islam and a shared sense of indignation against Israel acted as unifying forces for the organization. Over the past five decades, both of these factors have lost potency. First, common religion can no longer serve as a source of unity. Instead, it is increasingly a source of tension due to sectarian differences among members. Two leading OIC members—Saudi Arabia and Iran—each advocate one of the two competing sects in Islam.⁶ According to Haynes, “two decades of strong oil revenues gave various states, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, the financial ability to prosecute aggressive foreign policies in which a separation of political, diplomatic and religious goals was difficult to make” (Haynes 2001, p. 154).

Second, since the late 1970s, several member states have changed their positions to contradict one of the founding imperatives of the OIC, i.e., a unified diplomatic challenge to Israel's occupation of Palestine. As a result of defeats in wars with Israel and subsequent peace agreements, Egypt and Jordan began to drift from their initial positions on Israel. In 1979, the OIC faced initial hiccups when Egypt's membership was revoked due to its peace agreement with Israel.⁷ A 1981 OIC resolution demanded the economic boycott of Israel, but several of its members, among them Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey, continue to maintain diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. Most recently, the 2016 OIC summit concluded with a resolution calling for an absolute ban on products from illegal Israeli settlements. However, the gulf between rhetoric and reality is an open secret.

Further cracks in Muslim unity stem from reports of undisclosed talks and collaboration between Israel and Saudi Arabia. A decade ago, Yizraeli uncovered secret talks between Saudi and Israeli officials concerning Iran and Palestine (Yizraeli 2007, p. 78). Recent developments, in particular the Iran nuclear deal, have also provided new momentum for dialog between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The International Atomic Energy Agency's confirmation that Iran had completed all prerequisites for ensuring the peaceful use of its nuclear program raised the prospect of Iran emerging from its international isolation. This was seen by both Riyadh and Tel Aviv as a threat. This has pushed them closer together; indeed, they both voiced their opposition to the nuclear deal (Spencer 2015). Given the shifting strategic

⁶ According to an estimate, 87–90% of all the world's Muslims are Sunnis and about 10–13% at Shia (Naji and Jawan 2013, p. 5).

⁷ Egypt's membership was reinstated in 1984.

environment, it is apparent that Israel and Sunni Arab states view a resurgent Iran and currents of radical Islamism as more pressing issues than that of Palestine (Hannah 2016a,b). This creates the prospect of some sort of rapprochement between the Saudis and Israelis. A softening in the Saudi's position is evident in their turning a blind eye to security aspects of the recent Egypt-Israel peace treaty. In April 2016, Cairo reciprocated by attempting to transfer to the Kingdom two islands lying in between the two countries—Tiran and Sanafir. Their controversial handover has been stopped by an Egyptian judge (Walsh 2016). In any case, these developments provide an indication of the emergence of a United Arab (Sunni)-Israel front against Iran.

Saudi Arabia has effectively used its political influence to isolate Iran. Riyadh has firstly been able to generate a unified voice against Iran through the GCC and the Arab League. In March 2016, both the GCC and the Arab League declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization, which the Iranian authorities rejected as capitulation to Israel. Meanwhile, Jordan has shifted its posture towards Iran. In April 2016, Amman summoned the Iranian ambassador to raise concerns about Iran's involvement in the internal affairs of Arab countries, while simultaneously recalling its ambassador from Tehran. The timing of this decision was suspicious and led many observers to assume pressure on Amman from Riyadh (Toumi 2016). Amman continues to receive Saudi funding for development projects⁸ and, since the late 1950s, has been enjoying close cooperation with Saudi Arabia (Nevo 1994). In response, Tehran made overtures to Kuwait in an attempt to improve relations with the GCC countries, but its proposal for Kuwaiti mediation between Iran and Riyadh was knocked back (Toumi 2012). In this sense, Saudi Arabia, through a "diplomatic offensive" has managed to create a lobby against Iran (Hannah 2016a), leaving Tehran friendless in the Middle East.

Nonetheless, this Saudi policy was most clearly illustrated at the 13th OIC summit held in Istanbul in April 2016, where Saudi Arabia succeeded in generating a consensus on its anti-Iranian policy. Although it may seem that Iran was surprised at the outcome of the 2016 OIC summit, the writing was on the wall after a meeting of OIC foreign ministers in Jeddah in February 2016. The Saudi government urgently called the meeting in the aftermath of the attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran and the termination of bilateral relations. Thirty-seven member countries (around 65%) accepted Riyadh's invitation. The main agenda item was discussion of Iran's role vis-à-vis the internal affairs of Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia. The OIC foreign ministers "rejected and condemned Iran's inflammatory statements on the execution of judicial decisions against the perpetrators of terrorist crimes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (OIC 2016b, p. 4), a statement which informed the tone of the debate at the 13th OIC summit.⁹ The final communique of the OIC summit has four paragraphs (30–34) criticizing Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis terrorism and turmoil in the Middle East (OIC 2016a). Not surprisingly, Iranian foreign ministry issued a strong statement condemning OIC's decision by saying that the organization had "in effect put itself at the service of the objectives of a single country [Saudi Arabia]" (*Dawn*, 23 January 2016).

Bearing in mind the state of play in the region at present, the theme of the 2016 OIC summit, namely "unity and solidarity for justice and peace," reflected a considerable degree of wishful thinking on the part of the OIC leadership. While the Iranian delegation was

⁸ In addition, Saudi Arabia has been providing funding for construction of new mosques in Jordan ((Nevo 1994, p. 108).

⁹ There were false reports, for example, in *Iranian Diplomacy* (17 April 2013), that Saudi Arabia had earlier refused visas to Iranian officials for the emergency meeting held on 21 January 2016. At the meeting, the Iranian delegation was led by its Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi.

successful in preventing the public reading of the four critical paragraphs at the concluding session, this was mere face saving for Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. During his address, Rouhani had warned that “any divisive move” would be unacceptable and “no message which would fuel division in the Islamic *ummah* should come out of the conference” (*Iranian Diplomacy*, 17 April 2016). Rouhani’s plea fell on deaf ears because the groundwork for the summit had been done at the OIC meeting held earlier in Jeddah. Rouhani and his Foreign Minister, Zarif, were left with no choice but to opt out of the closing ceremony of the OIC summit (Akbarzadeh 2016).

The Saudi influence on OIC members has also increased through the formation of the IMAFT. All IMAFT member states are also OIC members, now entangled in a Saudi-led security organization under the umbrella of fighting terrorism. This has helped Riyadh solidify its position in relation to many Muslim states by drawing them into its sphere of influence and promoting its definition of terrorism. Not surprisingly, Iran and its allies are seen as key sponsors or perpetrators of terrorism in the region. This parallel structure, through the overlap of membership between IMAFT and OIC, has helped enhance Riyadh’s weight in OIC deliberations.

Furthermore, OIC’s heavy reliance on Saudi funding has made the organization susceptible to Saudi Arabian machinations. Although it is intended to be a representative body of the whole Muslim *ummah*, Sunni countries dominate its many institutions. None of the OIC’s six subsidiaries are based in a Shia majority country.¹⁰ Similarly, 24 OIC-affiliated and specialized institutions are based in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, and Sudan. The OIC has made no attempt to broaden its institutional base to include mainstream Shia majority countries: Iran and Iraq. This feature detracts from the stated claim of representing the global Muslim community and highlights an institutional bias.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a desire to guide and even corral the *ummah*. Since the creation of the OIC, Saudi Arabia has been able to exercise significant influence over the Muslim world. While some of the Kingdom’s hegemonic behavior is benevolent, largely benefiting most Muslims states, especially in the area of poverty alleviation, Riyadh uses the OIC to counter challenges to its dominance of the *ummah*. Due to the OIC’s structural make-up and its reliance on Saudi funding, the Kingdom can exert control over the organization and exercise significant hegemonic influence. The Saudis have been on the front foot to counter Iran’s influence in the Middle East and beyond. The OIC serves Saudi interests as it seeks to consolidate its influence. The emergence of the IMAFT has further facilitated Saudi influence on many OIC members by drawing them into a security organization and adding another level of reliance on Riyadh.

It is rare that a state would simultaneously follow soft/intermediate/hard hegemony and leadership strategies, but as this study illustrates, Saudi Arabia attempts to do just that. Relying on its status as the guardian of the holy sites, and using its oil wealth, Saudi

¹⁰ The Statistical, Economic, Social Research and Training Center for Islamic Countries is based in Ankara, Turkey. The Research Center for Islamic History, Art, and Culture is based in Istanbul, Turkey. The Islamic University of Technology is based in Gazipur, Bangladesh. The Islamic Center for the Development and Trade is based in Casablanca, Morocco. The International Islamic Fiqh Academy and Islamic Solidarity Fund and its *waqf* are based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Arabia employs multiple hegemonic strategies internationally to build on the status quo and expand its influence in the Muslim world. Its soft power influence is particularly valuable in creating a worldview in the less developed member states through the promotion of its version of Islam—propagation of its interpretation of Islam and values, i.e., Wahhabism. This also plays a role in gaining large support for its control of the OIC. Through its military interventions, direct in Yemen and indirect in Syria, the Kingdom has revealed its hegemonic ambitions, albeit with acquiescence from most Muslim-majority states. It is the combined effect of various Saudi strategies within and without the OIC that continue to impede the OIC from achieving its main objective—unity within the Muslim *ummah*. As argued in this paper, Saudi Arabia's role within the OIC has transformed from leadership to hegemony because it is using the organization as a political tool for achieving its national interests, especially against Iran.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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