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Pakistan & the Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019

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Abstract

The forthcoming ‘Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019’ in Malaysia affords tremendously high economic, political, social and strategic opportunities to the Muslim world in general and Pakistan in particular. The summit being an outcome of troika of Muslim states, notably Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan, aspires to rope in more Islamic countries under its umbrella with the passage of time. Interestingly, the major Arab Muslim states - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt – have not been made part of this group. The likely participation of states considered hostile to Saudi Arabia, like Qatar and Iran, has dramatically given birth to Saudi reservations about the agenda of the summit. Pakistan, by virtue of its deep Islamic, cultural and economic ties with Riyadh, finds an increasingly challenging path ahead while charting out its foreign policy priorities. Pakistan, however, for a number of reasons is bound to move ahead to play a pioneering role in the summit since, many issues on the summit’s agenda, notably countering Islamophobia, Kashmir crisis, and revival of Islamic civilization, carry great significance as far as economic, political, ideological and strategic priorities of Islamabad are concerned. Pakistan, while aligning its interests with the Muslim states taking part in the summit, must not ignore its relationship towards other Muslim states. Likewise, succumbing to foreign pressure and withdrawing its firm commitment to the summit will be extremely disastrous for Pakistan in the long run. It should, however, tread a careful path keeping its national interests as its overriding concern and priority.

The upcoming ‘Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019’, which will be held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC) from Dec 19-21, presents a unique and timely opportunity for Pakistan from the perspective of building alliances for support against India. The Summit, which seeks to brainstorm ‘concrete solutions’ to the Muslim world’s problems, is a special initiative of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The idea for the Summit, as well as the additional countries to be invited to it, was discussed by Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan on the sidelines of a ministerial-level OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) meeting in 2018. In September 2019, Imran Khan, Erdogan and Mahathir Mohamad also met on the sidelines of the UNGA and jointly discussed Kashmir for the first time. They decided that they would invite Iran, Qatar and Indonesia to the December KL Summit and also agreed to create a media outlet on the model of Al-Jazeera to counter rising Islamophobia all around the world. These agreements reached at these meetings were not fully disclosed, so other states would not take offence. Later two more meetings were held in November, in Kuala Lumpur and Doha, featuring representatives from Malaysia, Turkey and Pakistan.

A 72-year-old former Malaysian civil servant, Samsudin Osman, who has also served the Malaysian Government from 1969 to 2006 and has remained Chief Secretary - the most senior bureaucratic post- in the Malaysian hierarchy has personally delivered invitations to both Iran and Pakistan. It highlights the significance attached to the KL Summit by its organizers. Mazrunki bin Haji Yahya Deputy FM of Malaysia and special envoy to both Pakistan and Iran also met Javad Zarif recently.

Mahatir had earlier tried to rope in Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, to attend the summit, but Widodo turned down the request given his close business ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Now, Vice President of Indonesia Ma’ruf Amin, who is considered religious among the political circles, is going to represent Indonesia in Kuala Lumpur.

Besides, Mahatir, who is hosting the Summit, other leaders, who have confirmed their participation in the inaugural episode of KL Summit are Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Prime Minister Imran Khan, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Iranian President Hasan Rouhani.

The Summit’s agenda is multifaceted, focusing on revival of Islamic civilization, technological development in the Muslim world, countering Islamophobia and also major issues of oppression of Muslims such as Palestine and the Rohingya crisis. Notably, the conference is to discuss the Kashmir issue as well.

Given Malaysia's invitation to Iran for attendance and absence of key countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Summit is clearly emblematic of ever-progressing and evolving geostrategic bloc rivalries between Muslim states.

The GCC members, who are opposed to this initiative, led by Saudi Arabia are presently lobbying Pakistan against attending it. However, a careful assessment of the Summit and its objectives show that Pakistan stands much to gain by attending and utilizing the opportunity in terms of gaining strategic partners - especially against India.

After India revoked Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) autonomy on August 5, 2019 and illegally annexed it, GCC did not back Pakistan. The UAE declared Kashmir India's 'internal matter' and visits by UAE and Saudi Arabian Foreign Ministers to Pakistan in September witnessed no condemnation of India either. In more practical contexts, the GCC in the same month secured several large investment deals with India and Bahrain and the UAE conferred their highest national civil awards to Indian Prime Minister Modi.

Iran, whose ties with India have historically been based on purely economic relations, meanwhile has lost its position as a major oil supplier to India as Delhi complied with unilateral US sanctions against Tehran. Leading Iranian clerics have since August 5 condemned India's actions in Kashmir as a form of oppression of Muslims. Additionally, the Iranian Parliament (Majlis-e-Shura) passed a resolution condemning Indian oppression in Kashmir and declaring that support for Kashmir was a responsibility of Ummah.

Notably, Iran's Ambassador to India in September expressed Iran's interest in building an LNG pipeline along CPEC to China due to India's adherence to US sanctions on Iran.

Similarly, Iran's enemy Israel recently invited India to join a proposed Israel-GCC trade corridor connecting the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

Turkey's Erdogan also raised Kashmir as an international issue, decrying India's draconian lockdown and urging the UN to resolve the dispute. India in return sought to punish Turkey for its Kashmir stance, joining the GCC and Israel in condemning Turkey's operation in October against the Kurdish PKK terrorist group in Syria. India also cancelled a defence contract with Turkish firm.

Prime Minister Mahatir, moreover, categorically criticized Indian actions in Kashmir in his speech at UN General Assembly in September 2019 saying India had "invaded and occupied Kashmir". He later refused to retract his criticism, despite threats from India of ending Malaysian palm oil. India was Malaysia's third-largest export destination in 2018 for palm oil and palm-based products worth \$1.63 billion.

Given the pro-India stance of the GCC on the Kashmir dispute, which is of great importance to Pakistan strategically and ideologically, Pakistan should not be sensitive to GCC demands that it does not develop a closer rapport with states that have been supportive of the freedom struggle in Kashmir.

Additionally, given the increasing convergence in the policies of Turkey, Qatar and Iran in recent times due to the GCC and Israel's joint hostility to them, Pakistan stands the chance of becoming part of a coherent bloc of Islamic powers.

Turkey and its close ally Qatar - whose ties are based on mutual support for the transnational Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement - are rivals of the GCC, who see Erdogan as a threat to their influence in the Sunni world. The GCC have in past ardently opposed the Brotherhood and have cooperated with Israel to depose the Muslim Brotherhood government in a coup in Egypt in 2013.

In Libya, Turkey and Qatar back the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli which has roots in the Brotherhood while the GCC, Egypt and Israel back General Khalifa Haftar's 'Libyan National Army' which seeks to 'purge' Libya of the Brotherhood.

Notably, the Muslim Brotherhood has historically sustained positive ties with Iran. The Brotherhood's offshoots in Palestine, armed movements and political groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are armed and supported by Iran to resist Israeli occupation and prevent its expansion in Gaza.

Despite differing stances over the Syrian War (2011-present), Hamas and Iran after a brief period of dispute in 2012 restored relations in 2014 while Hamas ties with Saudi deteriorated due to Saudi Arabia's growing ties with Israel. Iran has, meanwhile, outreached towards the GNA in Libya, forming diplomatic ties with it and is accused by the GNA's rivals of arming it as well.

Regarding the KL Summit, Malaysia has stated that Al-Jazeera is sponsoring the event. Al-Jazeera is owned by Qatar and is pro-Muslim Brotherhood. It is a highly influential news network and this can be seen from the fact that shutting down al Jazeera was one of the numerous GCC demands made to Qatar after their embargo against it in June 2017.

This shows Malaysia's growing alignment with Turkey, Qatar and Iran. Additionally, Malaysia has its own issues with the GCC. Firstly, the accused of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, Jho Low, has been granted asylum in the UAE, which is seen by Malaysia as a sign of the UAE's hostility. Malaysia also recalled its troops from Saudi Arabia last year.

Malaysia has in an implied way suggested that the KL Summit could be a replacement for the OIC and expresses optimism for its growth. Upon Erdogan and Mahatir's initiative, Iran was invited despite not having attended previous meetings held in Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur and Khartoum.

In these circumstances, Malaysia's alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and its state backers becomes clear.

There are also other issues on which there is a deep divide between the GCC and its rivals in Turkey, Qatar, Iran and, increasingly, Malaysia: the so-called 'Deal of the Century' being prepared by Zionists for Palestine.

The GCC supports the 'Deal of the Century' proposed by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who represents Israeli interests in the White House and desires that the GCC financially supports the Deal. The Deal is opposed by all Palestinian factions as leaked details of it confirm its unjustness and opposition to the goal of actual Palestinian statehood in any form.

Iran and Turkey oppose the Deal and Qatar due to reliance on Iran and Turkey has made no commitment toward it either. Malaysia also does not approve of the Deal.

Thus, given the pro-India, pro-Israel position of the GCC, on major Islamic issues, it is evident that Pakistan bears the GCC no moral obligation vis-a-vis forging alliance with GCC's rival states. To forge such alliances is, in fact, both necessary and prudent given that many different kinds of commonalities have already become visible in the policies and interests of Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Malaysia.

It is also important to note that the GCC has little actual leverage over Pakistan. Huge and wasteful expenditures on futile policies e.g. the war in Yemen only resulted in strategic losses. Foreign mercenaries - especially from Sudan - could not capture sufficient territory from the Houthis in the north where they are now stronger and can strike Saudi oil infrastructure at will.

The Jamal Khashoggi incident last year also led to Saudi Arabia's isolation from traditional ally USA's military-intelligence community, as the CIA unequivocally stated that MbS ordered it.

Similarly, many extremist groups in a pursuit to erase Muslim heritage from Jerusalem are lobbying against the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa mosque, located on Haram el-Sharif also known as the Temple Mount, the third holiest site for Muslims. These actions, however, have not received any explicit condemnation from Riyadh or GCC so far. Revival of Islamic heritage being one of the aims of the KL Summit has enormously boosted the confidence of the public in the favour of Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood - both considered anti-Israel groups in the region - that are backing the KL Summit. GCC silence on American decision to declare

Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has further outraged the Muslim world that now wishes to turn towards other ways to pursue the interests of Ummah, tarnishing the image of Saudi Arabia as a leader of Sunni world.

The IMF had even prior to the August 17, 2019 Houthi drone attack on a major Saudi oil field predicted a 7% budget deficit for Saudi Arabia. Since then, sensitive Saudi oil assets have been struck again, such as the Aramco attack on 14 September. Saudi Arabia relies excessively on oil exports for its foreign exchange reserves, its federal budget and the subsidies it provides to its populace.

Saudi Arabia is thus in a weak and unstable state, which demands it to focus excessively on its economy, particularly MbS' ambitious 'Vision2030' modernization agenda for diversifying it. The reform of Saudi economy specially demands less spending on expensive military hardware, for whose handling the Kingdom additionally needs to hire foreigners, and more spending on adjusting Saudi economy away from oil-reliance. This is a shift that will take a long time and requires security. With this in mind, recent posturing by Saudi indicating it desires de-escalation of tensions with Iran becomes clear as a sign of realization of growing instability within the Kingdom.

Toward this end, Saudi Arabia due to its own requirement of foreign labour, both skilled and unskilled, is thus unlikely to 'punish' Pakistan by deporting Pakistani labourers or taking similar harsh steps.

Similarly, the UAE is known for its hesitance in backing up the Saudis in their efforts to pressurize other countries and swiftly backing out of endeavours, where it has extended support. The UAE backed a separate Yemeni faction (the South Yemen separatists) which deposed Saudi-backed Abdurrabbuh Mansour Hadi from Aden in August 2018, making it the second time the Saudi-backed Yemeni leader was deposed after the Houthis toppled his government from Sanaa in September 2014. Hadi government returned to Aden in November 2018 after a deal with UAE sponsored faction, but six of its key ministers weren't allowed to return because of what was said to be obstacles set up by the Emiratis. The UAE in August also signed a maritime border cooperation pact with Iran in August despite accusations against Iran by the Saudis, Israel and the US that it was responsible for earlier attacks on GCC shipping.

Thus, even in the scenario where Saudis attempt to use pressure tactics against Pakistan, the UAE may well take its own course seeing little chance of it succeeding to pull Pakistan away from the Turkey-Iran-Qatar-Malaysia bloc.

Pakistan can, however, achieve enormous benefits out of this summit. Malaysia has expressed its desire to buy the PAC JF-17 Thunder aircrafts from Pakistan. Similarly, Iran is mulling over purchase of PAC MFI-17 Mushshak trainers from Pakistan. Materialization of these contracts will boost Pakistan's defence industry. Likewise, there are reports that both

Turkey and Malaysia are willing to sign business investment plans with Pakistan. It would provide much-needed benefits for Pakistan's dwindling economy.

Pakistan also has much to gather from the summit, like Turkey, Malaysia and China have repeatedly supported Pakistan at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Pakistan, being on the FATF grey list, needs unwavering backing of its allies to counter Indian influence calling for Pakistan's placement on FATF black list. Riyadh, on the other hand, has always maintained neutrality on the issue. Similarly, it is Turkey that always comes to rescue Pakistan at the platform of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Keeping in view these two matters of immense political significance, Pakistan should not put the KL summit on the back burner.

Though the Foreign Office has welcomed first-ever 'Open Discussion' on the deteriorating human rights situation in India-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir by the OIC's Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission, yet it is deemed too little too late by Pakistanis who are convinced that Pakistan should look towards other avenues for generating pressure on India for the resolution of Kashmir issue. Public opinion in Pakistan is at largely unfavourable towards Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states for their neutral position on Kashmir.

At the second Ministerial meeting of the Kuala Lumpur Summit, held in Doha, Foreign Minister of Pakistan Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that 'the challenges of climate change, terrorism, governance, development and the surge in Islamophobia warrant a comprehensive and integrated response'. The statement gives credence to the fact that the Kuala Lumpur Summit seeks to find an all-encompassing solution to the problems faced by Muslim Ummah. Pakistan can be a primary beneficiary of the initiative since it is confronting all the challenges expounded by Foreign Minister Qureshi above.

The 'Muslim-5 Initiative' is a laudable development given the states taking the initiative account for more than 50% of the total GDP of Muslims states, 18% of the total geographical land of the Muslim world, and more than half of the Muslim world population. The states are also rich in natural resources, like top producers of natural gas- Qatar and Iran - are a part of it. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the bloc will have a dominant say in steering the vehicle of Muslim Ummah. Pakistan, however, should make the most of benefits out of this godsend opportunity.

Pakistan, being an energy-hungry state, has always remained heavily reliant on foreign oil markets, notably from those of Gulf States. Pakistan is also increasingly dependent on naval trade owing to low border trade with its neighbours. Ongoing crisis in the Persian Gulf has raised Pakistani suspicions about the continuity of smooth passage of shipments through the Strait of Hormuz. Fortunately, the Islamic countries taking part in the Kuala Lumpur Summit are located at close proximity to the strategic maritime chokepoints in the world, like the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, the Strait of Malacca and the Bosphorus. This will allay Pakistan's concerns about the possible disruption in its maritime trade.

Pakistan has been grappling with over a million Afghan refugees present on its soil because of perpetuation of decades long civil-war in Afghanistan. It is an opportune time since Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan is also visiting Geneva to attend the first-ever Global Refugee Forum (GRF) meeting this month. The Kuala Lumpur Summit envisions playing a pioneering role to deal with refugee problems in the Muslim world. Turkey, a driving force behind the summit, is also facing many threats owing to instability in Syria and large influx of refugees into its territory.

Pakistan, therefore, is definitely going to get increasingly high benefits out of this initiative especially because OIC, the largest Islamic organization to address Muslim issues, has never paid any significant heed to sort out refugee crisis in the Muslim world.

India has been diverting attention of the world from the ongoing grave human rights violations in Occupied Kashmir on the pretext of terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Lately, India and Japan in their newly established diplomatic framework ‘two-plus-two dialogue’ have expressed serious concerns about the threats posed to regional peace by terrorists operating from Pakistani soil. These Indian tactics have exceedingly taken away the focus from the plight of the Kashmiris by stifling their voices and strangulating their desires for freedom from brutal Indian forces, who have been maintaining the siege of the Valley for around four months now. The Indian approach on Kashmir dealing with it as a terrorism problem has fueled Islamophobia. The Kuala Lumpur Summit, with its aim to deal with rising Islamophobia around the world, will surely address these misgivings regarding Pakistan while countering Islamophobia simultaneously.

A new leadership of the Muslim world is emerging. This is born out of the realization that OIC is no more effective as a forum to pursue the causes of the Ummah and due to changing geo-political scenario. It is now expected that Turkey and Malaysia would soon rearrange the power structures of Muslim world. Both have common agenda, ambitions, ideology and allies. The first manifestation of this new grouping came during 2017 boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, when Turkey openly supported Qatar to defeat the boycott and Qatar also gravitated towards Iran. That struggle between Turkey and KSA was also evident during the Khashoggi affair. Moreover, Turkey, which is turning away from Europe has its eyes firmly on East and has not hidden its ambitions of reviving the glory of Ottoman days of its leadership of the Muslim world. Turkey’s claim to leadership is backed by its large economy, sophisticated technology and a strong military. Malaysia, meanwhile, has a strong economy, and enjoys geographic advantage, besides being able to attract the region and the world towards itself through business. Pakistan cannot afford to ignore these realities.

Given the detailed pros and cons of the KL Summit 2019, it becomes obvious that Pakistan has much more to gain than lose in siding with this emerging alignment in the Muslim

world. It will uplift Pakistan's morale and will boost its confidence in dealing at the international stage.

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