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## Profiling Türkiye's New Role in OIC: Complementing or Competing?

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### Abstract

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the second-largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations (UN). However, over the years, OIC has been criticized for its inability to address issues that jeopardize the interests of Muslims. This paper focuses on Türkiye's new role in OIC. The objective of this paper is to analyse how Türkiye has undermined the domination of Saudi Arabia in OIC. Qualitative single method of case study explains how Türkiye's soft power approach undermined the Saudi Arabia hegemon in the organization. Primary data (through interviews) and content analysis were adopted as the method of gathering data in this study. The findings were analysed through a three-level perspective; individual, state and international environment. The Social-Constructivism theory was used as a guide in investigating Türkiye's motivation on propagating its influence in the OIC. The finding of this study illustrates that Türkiye's soft power agenda slowly have divided the OIC member states to follow Türkiye's passion for populist issues and transparency. For future research purposes, the possible topic related to OIC such as human rights and the traditional patrimonial system of 'big brother' and 'little brother' practiced could be replaced with relevant leadership style.

**Keywords:** Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), Regional Organisation, Saudi Arabia, Soft Power, Türkiye

### Introduction

Whilst many international organizations that were formed in the 1960s was based on collective defense such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or for cooperation in maintaining security like the Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN); the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), on the other hand, express the aspirations of Muslim unity (Kayaoglu, 2015). In contrast with other IOs, religion was the key feature that binds the OIC member-states together (Akbarzadeh & Ahmed, 2017). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, Muslim communities were disintegrated, and the need to have an institution to carry the notion of *ummah* led to the birth of OIC on September 25, 1969 in Rabat, Morocco.

In general, three significant circumstances prompted the establishment of the OIC. Firstly, post-World War II opened the way for colonized nation-states seeking independence (Kayaoglu, 2015). During this period, existing organizations appear to be biased towards colonial power and Western orientation; consequently, the necessity to promote Islamic politics, culture, and ideology through a relationship with other post-colonial countries appears to be significantly more appealing. Secondly, Saudi Arabia was concerned about regional geopolitical developments in the region that could jeopardize its foreign and security policies. Thirdly, the creation of Israel in 1948 astounded the Muslim world. During the Six-Day War in 1967, the Palestinian and Muslims lost the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of Rock to Israeli occupation. One of the factors that led to the defeat of Muslims in protecting the Al-Aqsa Mosque was the civil war in Yemen caused by ideological differences between pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, which gave Israel the upper hand in conquering the situation in the war as help from Arab states fell short and was delayed. This incident highlighted the need for Muslims to have an organized institution to express their concerns about Muslim rights.

Fast forward, currently there are two dominant actors in the OIC namely, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. Both are the original members of the OIC. Saudi Arabia was always perceived as the big brother by the other OIC members due to several reasons. Arab Saudi role in promoting Islamic teaching, providing scholarships to Muslim scholars, and serving as the custodian of Mecca and Madinah, being the most tangible contributor in the OIC, and host other subsidiary organs like Islamic World Bank – had turned Saudi Arabia into a hegemonic position in the OIC. Whether Saudi Arabia perceives itself as the big brother, most of the OIC member states have high hopes and expectations from the Saudi Arabia to be the voice of Muslims.

Despite Saudi is perceived as the big brother, OIC has been criticized for its inability to address issues that jeopardize the interests of Muslims. Even though almost half its member-states were living in the conflicts area, the slow progress of the action taken by the OIC seems to frustrate the Muslim world. Until now, the Palestinian grievances that drove its inception have remained unresolved, and the situation has deteriorated as Israel ruthlessly expanded its occupation of Palestinian lands. Additionally, the Muslim world is confronted with additional challenges in the twenty-first century, including poverty, conflict, war zone, social growth and integration, refugee's crisis, economic disparities, and Islamophobia. The directive of the OIC was more inclined towards Saudis aspirations (Hamdan, 2021). Rather than focusing on the collective issues of the Muslim world, the agenda the Saudi chose was confined to its regional and geopolitical interest. This circumstance created an opening for other member-states to continue addressing other critical concerns in the Muslim world. Türkiye is one of the OIC countries active and vocal in addressing these issues.

Türkiye's participant in OIC has changed from merely as an observer in the organization to a more active player. –Türkiye's footprint may be seen in any event involving Muslim populations, keeping with its "Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy" agenda. Türkiye is the humanitarian champion, sheltering nearly 4 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in its territory (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, 2020). In 2020, Türkiye spent approximately USD7.6 million on the Syrian refugee crisis within its border (Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, 2020). Besides that, Türkiye assertively expressed its view on humanitarian diplomacy. During the 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) debates, Türkiye openly addressed the pivotal points of Palestinian, Rohingya, Uighur, and Syrian conflicts.

When the Gulf Countries Cooperation blocked Qatar in 2017, Türkiye was the first country to send its humanitarian and military support assistance despite an adverse reaction from the Saudis. The roles of Türkiye and Saudis in the organization cause friction in the member-states stance in the OIC (Hamdan, 2021). Thus, additional research is required to ascertain if the internal competition amongst the OIC's primary players contributed to the organization's ineffectiveness. Nonetheless, it is necessary to investigate whether Türkiye's soft power objective is solely for the benefit of the ummah; and whether this competition eventually benefits the member-states and Muslim people worldwide.

### **Literature Review on Soft Power**

Power in international relations has traditionally been defined and assessed in easily quantifiable 'hard' terms, often understood in the context of military and economic might. Hard power is deployed in the form of coercion: using force, the threat of force, economic sanctions, or inducements of payment. In contrast to the coercive nature of hard power, soft power describes the use of positive attraction and persuasion to achieve foreign policy objectives. Soft power shuns the traditional foreign policy tools of carrot and stick, seeking instead to achieve influence by building networks, communicating compelling narratives, establishing international rules, and drawing on the resources that make a country naturally attractive to the world.

Joseph Nye, the originator of the concept, initially set out three primary sources of soft power as he developed the concept. Nye's three pillars of soft power are: political values, culture, and foreign policy. Robert Dahl (1957) argued that the interpretation of power was a relationship among actors such as individual, state actors and non-state actors. The parameter might be in terms of the basis of the power, the mechanism chosen to utilize the power, types of power, targeted respondents and probabilities of changes. Later, Lukes (2005) defined power relations as actors' capacity to make significant impacts by pursuing their interests, regardless of whether the outcome is beneficial or damaging to the other party. The early research of power resonated with the realist worldview that preached state actors relied on a self-help system in the anarchical international realm.

The emergence of a soft power couple with specific historical, geographical and political context (Benhaim & Öktem, 2015). The authors argued that emerging countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Türkiye emphasized the soft power approach as a complementary asset to the paramount strategy of traction regional influence in the contemporary geopolitical timeframe. Although soft power takes longer to manifest its benefits, its presence can act as a force multiplier to ensure others' cooperation rather than coercion (Nye, 2018).

When other countries are persuaded that a nation's ideals or policies are legitimate, indeed desirable, then the "soft power" of that nation is increased. As a theoretical concept, soft power means taking on increasing importance and relevance. Many countries have recognized the significance of using soft power tools and resources to engage in competitive politics of attraction, legitimacy, and credibility. This is because compatibility with other nations' values and interests can be as important as the exercise of hard power to achieve a nation's desired objectives.

Even though most of the literature emphasis on Saudi Arabia leadership in Islamic World, its hegemonic role within the Muslim nations, its benevolence through financial aids to Islamic countries and defending its interest at global platforms – emergence of Türkiye as rival to Saudi Arabia is still uncharted area of study. Furthermore, most previous literature connects power as the tenet of the realist school and is paramount to sovereign states'

survival. This paper view power into a more positive narrative in constructivist approach such as, self-identity, and soft power attributes in influencing international cooperation.

## Method

### Qualitative Method (Interviews)

This paper adopts a qualitative method. Primary data is obtained through in-depth interviews with experts on the subject matter. For this study, 4 selected respondents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, personnel from Türkiye embassy, the government representative, views from subject matter experts such as academics and institutions, were vital because it gave a different and unbiased explanation on this specific issue. Respondents' interviews' inputs were essential to strengthen and provide examples or debate if contradicted from the finding based on previous articles or studies. The participants involved in the in-depth were characterized anonymously to avoid any conflict that might cause harm to the respondents. The details were as follows

Respondent 1: RA, Undersecretary

Respondent 2: RB, Academician-cum-Author

Respondent 3: RC, Former Diplomat

Respondent 4: RD, Embassy Representative

The qualitative research approach aided in explaining and exploring the OIC's effectiveness and the roles Türkiye and Saudi Arabia played in the organization. This study also used a single method study to focus on OIC performance based on two dominant states actions.

### Findings and Discussion

In 2019, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) celebrated its golden anniversary. The OIC was established during the Special Summit for Al Aqsa in Rabat, Morocco September 25, 1969. Even though the Palestinian issues galvanized its establishment, the condition of Muslims worldwide also contributed to the initiative. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and World War II, most Muslim states gained their independence through self-determination. The situation left the Muslim community scattered without any platform to express their concern and interest in Islamic related issues. Hence, the OIC's establishment is the solution resulting from the need of the Muslims to have a venue to uphold the Islamic teaching and tradition. Throughout the past 50 years, the organization has witnessed the progression of the Muslim *ummah* predicament from the Palestinian plight and Muslim solidarity to refugee issues, poverty, terrorist, and Islamophobia. The membership has gradually doubled from 26 member states to 57 member states. As the membership criteria were loose-fitting during its early day, the vulnerable Muslim majority countries saw a bandwagoning opportunity to attach themselves to the other Muslim counterpart through the OIC (Kayaoglu, 2015 & Bacik, 2011). Subsequently, the organization must face the internal baggage attached to new members.

On top of that, the international community repeatedly practised double standards among Muslims, especially after 9/11 (Özkan, 2017). For example, in 2017, the European



Court of Justice ruled banning wearing headscarves to the workplace<sup>1</sup>. The decision has affected the minority Muslim women in Europe trapped in discrimination and racism. The development of negative perceptions of Muslims globally has challenged the OIC to counter the problem and defend its effectiveness. Sangiovanni (2021) contended that exogenous and endogenous factors determine an organisation's effectiveness. Exogenous influences include prolonged conflict, wars, economic depressions, and external intervention, whereas endogenous elements include organizational structures, hegemonic states, size, adaptability, and centralization (Sangiovanni, 2021).

As a coping mechanism for the world's changes, OIC changed its name from Organization of Islamic Conference to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation<sup>2</sup>. The first charter came into force in 1972 covered only the basis of the organization's establishment, such as the principles, objectives, component structure, membership application, and ratifications. Realizing the pressing issues that lingered among its member states, the current charter, ratified in 2008, has given the organization a broader mandate than its primary focus on the Palestinian's plight with the addition of the organization's new organ, subsidiary, and affiliation to support the implementation of the OIC's programs<sup>3</sup>. For instance, as a supporting mechanism to the pledged made on human rights and fundamental freedom, particularly the rights of the vulnerable person (women, children, elderly), that mentioned in Para 14, Article 1: Objectives and Principles, the earlier version of The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, which was condemned by the Western as unfair and conflicted with the United Declaration of Human Rights 1948, was revised. The latest version was adopted in 2020, rebranding the name as the OIC Declaration on Human Rights (ODHR). The ODHR was significant because it reflects Muslim states' desire to reject the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR) and limit universal freedoms through Sharia law. By defining variations in women and family, freedom of speech, sexual orientation, and gender issues, the instrument provides a more improved and contemporary formulation of OIC member states' perspectives on human rights than the Cairo Declaration. The OIC's positions on these issues were clearly stated in the ODHR, which strengthened the organization's commitment and allowed member states to defend their activities against Western criticism (Kayaoglu, 2020).

The OIC was gradually converted from a single-issue organization to promoting broad-based collaboration in the Muslim world due to the new initiatives (Kayaoglu, 2015). As the organization's membership grew, the OIC had to undergo structural changes to adapt to the needs for the organization to become more institutionalized. The organization started with three initial bodies: the Conference of Kings and Heads of State, Conference of Foreign Ministers, and General Secretariat and subsidiary organ. Although new initiatives were introduced at each summit and the ICFM throughout time, they were always unstructured and unsystematic until the OIC's amended charter in 2008 formalized them. The principles organs of OIC had expanded from three to eleven bodies, consisting of the former three,

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<sup>1</sup> EU workplace headscarf ban 'can be legal', says ECJ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39264845>

Accessed on 18th January 2022

<sup>2</sup> RB, 2021

<sup>3</sup> RB, 2021

standing committees, executive committees, International Islamic Court of Justice, Independent Permanent Commission of Human Rights, Committee of Permanent Representatives, Specialized Institutions, and Affiliated Institutions<sup>4</sup>. The Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial (COMCEC), for example, was responsible for addressing the OIC's member states' economic and development concerns. COMCEC mandate assisted the OIC members in focusing on issues in a dynamic and up-to-date way for the prosperity of Islamic countries (Mottaghi & Khoy, 2016). The headquarters is located in Ankara and chaired by the Turkish President. In a nutshell, OIC has prepared to evolve from its original mandate and corresponding framework, which was designed for a limited set of responsibilities, to its more current expansive roles<sup>5</sup>.

In 2016, OIC's launched The OIC – 2025 Programme of Action. The ambitious ten-year plan has identified 107 programs under 18 priority areas to suit United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 2030. The selection of the priority areas, ranging from Palestine and Al-Quds, Counterterrorism and extremism and Islamophobia, Moderation, Cultural and Interfaith Harmony, Peace and Security, Women Empowerment, Joint Humanitarian Action, Human Rights, Good Governance and Accountability, Media & Public Diplomacy to Climate Change, Poverty Alleviation, Trade & Investment, Agriculture & Food Security, Employment, Infrastructure & Industrialization, ST&I, Education, Health, Digital Information Structure, and Institutional Reforms, uphold the same inherent relationship between peace and development<sup>6</sup>.

Despite all the initiatives and structural reform, OIC's faced a similar problem with other IOs, especially balancing the organizations' member states' national interest and collective voice of the *ummah*<sup>7</sup>. Besides that, the exogenous factor, especially the Arab Uprising, the relationship among its members outside the OIC sphere and external intervention have slowed down the outcome's progress.

This paper explored how domestic affairs and systematic international factors influenced modern Türkiye's soft power discourse in its foreign policy. During Türkiye's independence in 1923, Kemal Attaturk, a western-oriented leader, focused on building up the nation in the unstable anarchic international realms; hence, he channelled its foreign outlook towards the Western alliance (Ingle, 2020). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Türkiye focused on the hard power elements. For example, during the Cold War, Türkiye fought with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to block the expansion of the communist block into Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. However, at the beginning 21<sup>st</sup> century, the direction of Türkiye's foreign policy shifted from a realist camp to more towards active engagement and cooperation with the world (Benhaïm & Öktem, 2015).

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) accession to power in 2002 marked a turning point in Türkiye's foreign policy soft power strategy (Cerami, 2013). Three factors became the determinant for the changes. Firstly, the external factor driving this discourse was that the Turkish branded themselves as the bridge between the West and the East, where most Muslim populations live. Thus, it is crucial to promote the moderate Muslim identity through soft power (Çevik, 2019). Secondly, Türkiye adopted soft power elements based on historical, geographical, and cultural similarities. The 'zero problems with neighbours' helped Türkiye

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<sup>4</sup> Article 5, Chapter III, Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

<sup>5</sup> RB, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Article 4, OIC-2025 Programme of Action, Progress Report 2018-2019

<sup>7</sup> RA & RC, 2021

build its nation brand successfully. Given its affiliation to the countries during the Ottoman Empire, Ankara's approach prioritized nurturing trust with the neighbours. Hence, it increased its emergence as a regional power. Third, political stability and economic prosperity boosted its ability to foster the soft power agenda setting in its foreign policy. For instance –, a political system that values freedoms and liberties that ensures fundamental rights and freedoms, transparency, and democracy are the most crucial traits that pave the way for a country to achieve soft power status and become an attraction (Kalin, 2011). Türkiye's democratic experience is one of the most critical aspects of its soft power agenda. Despite its ups and downs throughout history, Turkish democracy has strengthened and gained popular trust, which significantly impacts Türkiye's regional and global reputation.

Meanwhile, four factors had challenged Türkiye's soft power progression between 2015 and 2020. Firstly, on the domestic level, the resignation of the former Prime Minister of Ahmet Davutoğlu in May 2016 and the unprecedented, attempted coup against the Turkish government and the President in July 2016 has created mistrust among the Turkish elites. Secondly, the number of Syrian refugees who seek protection in Türkiye has grown due to the prolonged civil war in Syria. The civil war has escalated with the involvement of many state and non-state actors, thus alarming the security threats for Turkish. Thirdly, on external development, the Türkiye-EU accession negotiation was halted after the human rights commissioner for the Council of Europe accused Türkiye of infringing on media freedom and influencing the judiciary system, which was totally against the law and the EU Copenhagen criteria membership eligibility (Council of Europe, 2017). President Erdogan declared a state of emergency under the pretext of securing public order and propagation of terrorism to control unprecedented events that could lead to another coup. Fourth, Turkish – NATO relations was on the brink when Türkiye withdrew from the joint exercise after Turkish founder Kemal Atatürk was labelled the exercise's antagonist (Reuters, 2017). The domestic and external factors between 2016 to 2017 have called for a recalibration of Türkiye's foreign policy approach in the international realms.

Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was quoted in 2018 illustrating its foreign policy as leaning towards the moral compass, placing humans as the pillar and new ideas as the enterprising elements and subsequently cultivating through proactive action (Türkiye's Foreign Policy, 2021). Subsequently, Türkiye launched its new Enterprising and Humanitarian – *Peace at Home, Peace in the World*, foreign policy model in 2018. The new foreign policy model aims to assert Türkiye initiatives to promote stability and prosperity in its region and beyond. Under the new flagship, the President has the authority to determine, execute and monitor Türkiye's foreign policy implementation in ensuring effectiveness and transparency (Sobaci et al., 2018). As a result, several institutions were given a broader mandate to become the Türkiye soft power agent. For example, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency coordinates Türkiye foreign grand and aids, The Yunus Emre Institute, responsible for Turkish cultural diplomacy, Turkish Television and Radio network that conveys and implements Türkiye's soft power agenda setting.

Even though soft power has helped Türkiye establish its nation branding and spread its influence, contrary to the realism camp doctrine, a state using its hard power such as military capability rather than soft power can successfully diminish governments' influence in the international arena. The effect of soft power, which requires persuasion to attract, usually requires a lengthier period and is bounded with limitation (RC, personal communication, 2021). The utilisation of hard power, on the other hand, is outside the purview of this research. The respondents that participated in the interview session had a mixed view on the



subject. Most of them concurred a sense of leadership competition or struggles in the roles of Türkiye and Saudi Arabia in the organization. However, the impact was minimal, except for one event in which Türkiye's President refused to attend the Islamic Summit in Mecca in 2019 after Türkiye accused Saudi Arabia of being involved in the murder of Saudi national Jamal Khashoggi in Ankara (Al Monitor Staff, 2019). Rohde (2019) concurred that the relationship between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia has shifted from rivalry to hostility after Jamal Khashoggi's incident.

Other than that, regardless of any circumstances involving the countries outside the OIC's sphere, Türkiye's delegates continued to get the same privilege inside the OIC organisation, like being positioned among the top five countries during the ceremonial of addressing the country's statement session (RA, personal communication, 2021). Unlike Iran, Türkiye's representative hardly received any visa restriction allowing them to participate in the OIC's event held in Jeddah. Even though Türkiye initiatives hardly managed to relegate the Saudi's influence in the organization, RA, RB, RC identified Türkiye's soft power agenda setting, especially in humanitarian issues, has eventually impacted the member states in the organization.

Based on the finding, it is argued that Türkiye's enterprising humanitarian foreign policy was exploited as a tool of influence to promote facts and aspirations. Propagating is an influence tool that can be imposed during the play the soft power approach, as this is the best scenario for a group of parties to receive support and aid regardless of their previous conflict and factions.

Firstly, the propagating instruments can foster idealism and perspective toward concerns or beneficial elements to Türkiye. Türkiye's agenda attracting others can be seen in its relationship with the Qatar blockade in 2017. Türkiye was the first country to send assistance either on food supply or military to help Qatar self-sustained during the period. Trust has been developed quickly due to mutual help and assistance, which has aided in developing an important strategic alliance between them. It is not overly focused on militarization, but interactions developed under the pretext of humanitarianism and human rights have been highly appreciated and embraced by all sides (RA, RB and RC, personal communication, 2021). In this regard, the action has provided access and possibilities to enhance and consolidate relationships, create new political ties, and consolidate existing relationships (Altunışık, 2019). In contrast, RD contended that Türkiye's new foreign policy model was designed to ensure regional security balance, resulting in Türkiye peace at home. As Türkiye's strategic location as a hub country, it faces a repercussion of any conflict within the region.

Secondly, Türkiye adopted the propagating strategy to promote the state capacities in the OIC and gain credibility and esteem through its enterprising humanitarian foreign policy. Furthermore, it also introduced the state capabilities in the OIC and got recognition and prestige. Success in propagating would bring about a new affiliation to the state as it provides Türkiye's support and ability as a means of bargaining negotiations and strong positive perceptions towards Türkiye. For instance, Türkiye is actively involved in mediation either in the United Nations, the OIC or its capacity; the ability to influence through propagate would increase trust between the mediators and the parties involved and increase the conflict's solution (RD, personal communication, 2021).

Thirdly, Türkiye's new foreign policy model is a vital factor in boosting Turkish identity and values and establishing a positive image of Türkiye among OIC members. Although the goals are for the general population, President Erdogan's administration can mitigate the

issue among people who share similar geography, culture, and beliefs (Altunışık, 2019). These politics and rhetoric by Türkiye generated Saudi Arabia's interest in revisiting its approach to handling the OIC related issues to maintain its current game plan.

The other impact of Türkiye soft power's agenda in its foreign policy towards OIC was prioritizing pressing issues of the Muslims instead of being confined to narrow issues like a sectarian rivalry. Even though the OIC's establishment's initial cause was linked to the backdrop of Palestinian's self-determination, containment of Pan-Arabism and set a foothold of Muslim global interaction and politics, after 50 years, the organization's compass is still on the Palestinian struggle. However, as the global challenges grew more complex in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, contemporary issues such as civil war, territorial integrity, human rights, refugees, irregular migration, poverty, terrorism and Islamophobia started to spur the organization domain. OIC's 57 member states spanned over four continents, with such landmass, the most crucial waterways and strategic chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea and the world's crude oil reserve are located within the geographical boundaries of OIC's member states. These blessed came with challenges of conflict within the OIC's geographical (RD, personal communication, 2021). For instance, the political crisis in Sudan, civil war in Yemen, and refugees' exodus had caused many OIC's member states to remain adversely affected by numerous internal and external conflicts (Hashmat, 2011).

Realizing these grave issues eroding the Muslim world wide's image, freedom and right to life, Türkiye believed the organization should serve as the venue to protect the interest of vulnerable Muslims because it should step up and have a better reputation to address the challenges effectively (RD, personal communication, 2021). For example, Türkiye has actively voiced and supported Azerbaijan over its Nagorno Karabakh dispute with Armenia in any OIC's platform like Islamic Summit and ICFM. Even though it can be viewed as protecting its natural interest somehow, Türkiye's direct involvement was in solidarity with OIC's member state. Besides that, Türkiye was also concerned over the plight of minorities Muslim in non-Muslim countries. Even though under-reported, Türkiye played a significant role in the issue of the mass shooting in Christchurch that occurred in 2019 (RA, personal communication, 2021). Türkiye convened an emergency conference to discuss the mosque massacres in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the rise in Islamophobic violence (Türkiye Calls OIC Meeting, 2019).

Türkiye populist discourse went beyond the OIC's forums. For example, during the 74<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Third Plenary Meeting General Debate, Türkiye consistently addressed the problem that arises within the Muslim globally, including the Jammu-Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, Palestinian territorial integrity and self-determination, Rohingyas statelessness, conflicts in Afghanistan and hatred speech, discrimination and defamation towards Muslim (United Nation General Assembly, 2019). In contrast, Saudi Arabia refrained from focusing on these issues profoundly during the same event. Instead, it condemned Iranians publicly and accused them of sponsoring the terrorist attack on Saudi Arabia oil facilities.

Another contributing factor for Türkiye's popularity is Türkiye's discourse related to the broader Muslim challenges. Türkiye's popularity has increased due to its soft power strategy balancing and modernizing the OIC (Kayaoglu, 2015). According to RA, RB and RC, the significant impacts of Türkiye's behaviour through its soft power were indirectly divided the OIC's member states to support Türkiye or Saudi Arabia discourse in the organization. Contrary to the claim, RD contended that Türkiye's agenda was solely to maximise the OIC's capacity as an international actor. Since Arab Uprising in 2011, Saudi Arabia discourse on the

OIC's agenda has inclined towards its rivalry with Iranian and protecting the Middle East regional security. Some of the member states, on the other hand, expected the OIC's debate and finding the solution on the pressing issues of the *ummah*, and a broader agenda, rather than narrow issues, should be tackled (RB, personal communication, 2021).

Türkiye's and Saudi Arabia discourse strategies have divided the OIC's member states into several blocs (RA, RB, and RC, personal communication, 2021). In this matter, the sense of competition between two dominant members in the organization is inevitable. Acknowledging that Saudi Arabia influenced the organization is hard to challenge, Türkiye looked for alternative partners to steer the OIC attention to the particular vital issues facing the global Muslim community (RA, RB, and RC, 2021). One of the initiatives for these alternative partners was the Kuala Lumpur Summit hosted by Malaysia in 2019. The dignitaries who attended the event were the Heads of the States of Türkiye, Qatar, and Iran. The summit's aimed to offer various Muslim leaders to address social, political, and economic issues in the Muslim world. It attempted, for instance, to propose countermeasures against extremism and Islamophobia (Waikar & Osman, 2020). Even though the summit organizer denied the allegation of sidelining the OIC, the biggest critiques were from Saudi Arabia, who claimed the summit was a potential alternative to the OIC, as such were concerned that their religious image over the Muslim world would be challenged.

On the other hand, Türkiye saw the summit as an alternative platform to reinforce the OIC unity by effectively capitalizing on the OIC organ. Criticizing the slow action taken by the OIC has prolonged the suffering of the Muslims in conflicts. Türkiye moderate approached and believed has gained support from member states who wanted a solution and fast action on the *ummah* issues.

According to RA, Türkiye's soft power discourse of transparency and elucidation in the OIC contributed to the fourth element that increased Türkiye's influence in the organisation. By giving an example of how Türkiye leader or representative selection of words and clear explanation during any debate, meeting and unofficial discussion, the proposed ideas has attracted the member states without any prejudice. Unlike some member states who have to convince the attendees with further deliberation, Türkiye moderates public diplomacy enticed member states to follow their vision on Muslim solidarity. Kayaoglu (2015) concurred that Türkiye strategies of issue-specific and instrumental engagement pacified the member states and gave Muslims hope to ensure their concerns were raised in the international arena. One example that portrayed Türkiye's seriousness with the OIC capability was The OIC – 2025 Programme of Action. The action plan was launched during Türkiye tenure as the chairman of the Islamic forum from 2016 to 2019. It was set as the guiding principle for the organization.

In addition, RB and RD claimed that Türkiye's soft power discourse, primarily humanitarian, resonated with its public domain. As Türkiye is geographically located in an area prone to disaster or conflict, coupled with Islamic rules and tradition, the Turks viewed humanitarian crisis with an empathic consideration (Guo, 2020). Since 2014, Türkiye has hosted 3.6 million Syrian refugees in the country. Besides that, countries like Somalia, Colombia, Afghanistan and Bosnia Herzegovina also received humanitarian assistance from Türkiye (TIKA Report, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, the respondents have a mixed view on the capability of Türkiye's soft power discourse to challenge Saudi Arabia position in the OIC. RA and RC contended that even though Türkiye's action might cause an imbalance in the organization, the impact was minimal because of the organizational structures and Saudi Arabia vital traits of religious credentials and generous funding. Furthermore, RB argued that Türkiye's enthusiasm for

having alternative cooperation among member states outside the OIC's sphere usually resulted in disappointment. The Developing Eight (D-8) was created, for instance, as a response by Muslim countries to global economic exclusion (Özkan, 2017). The D-8 was founded by Indonesia, Türkiye, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt and Nigeria in 1997. All of those countries are also the OIC's members. Türkiye has been the organisation's main driver, including hosting the organization headquartered in Istanbul. However, after 25 years, the organization was far from reaching its objectives due to the non-existence of Saudi Arabia involvement (Özkan, 2017).

Next, Türkiye raised its popularity in the OIC and international arena through transparency and high priority on contentious issues like humanitarian conflicts. RA argued that Türkiye's humanitarian strategy is embedded with its Islamic belief and cultural tradition, and the argument was strengthened by previous studies done by Guo and Giley. In addition, both RB and RD concurred that Turk's emphatic traits were nurtured from their personal experiences involved in the Syrian refugees' and conflict within their border. In contrast, Sukla (2020) contended that the Türkiye action was an attempt to displace Saudi Arabia as the voice of Muslims.

Kayaoglu (2015) argued that Türkiye and Saudi Arabia have a different interpretation of *ummah* solidarity seemed to create a power struggle between the countries. Türkiye's standpoint of solidarity is based on moderating and modernization of OIC that can illustrate the socialization of *ummah* in the international community, while Saudi Arabia's version of solidarity ensures its national interest, especially in the religious credential. However, RB contended that the uniqueness and strength of both countries somehow generated positive competition especially issues with the plight of the *ummah*. For example, the Türkiye-African Summit 2021 initiative, which aims to increase economic cooperation between Türkiye and African states from USD30 billion in 2021 to USD50 billion in the coming years (Farouq, 2021), has resulted in Riyadh committing USD80 billion in foreign aid to Africa in the form of loans, grants, and investment to aid economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic (Economic Intelligent Unit, 2021). The aids and foreign investments from both countries were desperately needed by the affected OIC member states to ameliorate the post pandemic survival.

## Conclusion

Like any other organization, OIC has its limitation on balancing the states interest and the broader spectrum of Muslims needs. Even though the organization was the product of a like-minded Muslim nation that wanted to strengthen its identity through Islamic cooperation, the geographical location of member states from four continents carried different aspirations and expectations from the organization. Some states find the OIC the genuine arena for Islamic unification; some wanted to leverage their foreign policy, while the rest sought protection from the more robust states in the organization. Türkiye's OIC strategies indirectly challenge Saudi Arabia by gaining effect by selecting the populist issues, especially on humanitarian challenges, propagating through influencing and transparent and elucidate. Its soft power agenda slowly divided the member states to follow Türkiye's passion for populist issues and transparency. From the finding, Türkiye's tenet on humanitarian assistance reflected the domestic motivation of the Turks who embedded the Islamic teaching and culture in their life. With Erdogan as the President, Türkiye discourse on humanitarian would continue to prosper as part of his *Fard -Al-Kifayah* obligations. As a whole, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia have different opinions on the solidarity of the *ummah*; nonetheless, the

struggle between them implicitly benefits the member states on specific agendas like aid and assistance.

### Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author1 and Author2 did the writeup of the article, did the analysis and interpretation of the results. Author1 did the editing work and overlook the writeup of the whole article whereas the Author2 carried out the data collection.

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