



The Fragmentation of the Muslim World and the Politics of Strategic Cooperation: From Ideological Solidarity to National Interest

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ABSTRACT

The political idea of a unified Muslim world rests on a powerful proposition: shared Islamic identity can provide a basis for political solidarity, collective security, economic cooperation, and diplomatic coordination. Yet contemporary Muslim-majority states display substantial divergence in security preferences, alliance choices, economic strategies, and regional priorities. This article examines why common Islamic identity has not produced sustained strategic unity and under what conditions Muslim states nevertheless cooperate. Drawing on neorealism, constructivism, and regionalism, it argues that Islamic solidarity has not disappeared; rather, it has been transformed from an objective of political unity into a strategic resource selectively activated when compatible with national interests. The study employs qualitative comparative analysis and structured comparison of four forms of cooperation: the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Saudi-Iran strategic accommodation, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Developing-8 (D-8). The analysis shows that universal institutions are constrained by divergent threat perceptions and sovereignty concerns, while narrower and functional arrangements are more capable of producing actionable cooperation. Contemporary Muslim regionalism is therefore best understood as strategic cooperation without comprehensive strategic unity. Solidarity supplies normative legitimacy; national interest determines the scope of cooperation; and institutional design determines its durability.

Introduction

The fragmentation of the Muslim world is a persistent puzzle in international relations. Few international communities possess such extensive religious, cultural, historical, and social linkages, yet these commonalities have not generated a coherent strategic bloc. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), founded in 1969 after the Al-Aqsa Mosque fire, remains the principal institutional expression of pan-Islamic solidarity and today comprises 57 states. Its mandate covers political, economic, humanitarian, scientific, cultural, and security cooperation. Nevertheless, the organization operates through sovereign states whose interests frequently diverge. The OIC therefore embodies the central tension examined in this article: transnational identity exists alongside sovereign national interest. [1]

The central argument is that the Muslim world has not moved from solidarity to its complete disappearance. Rather, Islamic solidarity has been strategically reconfigured. States continue to invoke shared Islamic identity, particularly around Palestine, humanitarian issues, cultural cooperation, and diplomatic legitimacy, but they increasingly determine the practical content of cooperation through

security calculations, economic interests, regime security, and relations with external powers. Recent work on Middle Eastern foreign-policy alignment similarly identifies hedging, neutrality, coalition-building, and strategic recalibration as important responses to regional uncertainty. [2]

This article asks: Why has shared Islamic identity failed to produce sustained strategic unity? Under what conditions does solidarity become practical cooperation? And does fragmentation represent the decline of pan-Islamism or its transformation into interest-based regionalism? The article advances four propositions: shared identity facilitates normative solidarity but does not itself produce strategic alignment; cooperation becomes more durable when concrete security or economic interests converge; narrower institutions are generally more capable of actionable cooperation than universal bodies; and identity becomes strategically salient when it complements national interests.

The article contributes by integrating realist and constructivist insights and by distinguishing universal multilateralism from bilateral, minilateral, and functional cooperation. It uses the OIC, Saudi-Iran rapprochement, GCC, and D-8 as contrasting cases. Additional evidence from contemporary Middle Eastern security, Pakistan's geoeconomic orientation, and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is used comparatively.

Conceptualizing the Muslim World

“Muslim world” is a normative and political expression rather than a unified political unit. Muslim-majority states differ in regime type, strategic culture, economic structure, national identity, military capability, and threat perception. The OIC itself is an intergovernmental organization of sovereign states rather than a supranational authority. Its charter simultaneously promotes solidarity and cooperation while affirming sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. This institutional compromise is crucial: it makes Islamic solidarity compatible with the modern state system, but it also limits the extent to which collective identity can override national interests. [3]

Constructivism explains why identity matters. Shared Islamic identity can shape perceptions of legitimacy, obligation, commonality, and diplomatic appropriateness. It can provide governments with a language through which cooperation is justified. Yet identity does not mechanically determine interests. States interpret identity through domestic politics and strategic circumstances. The literature on sectarianism within the OIC shows how identity can even become a source of division when governments instrumentalize sectarian narratives for geopolitical purposes. [4]

Realism supplies the complementary explanation. Under anarchy, states prioritize survival, autonomy, and security. Shared religion does not eliminate balancing, hedging, alliance formation, or competition. The result is a layered politics in which Islamic identity and national interest coexist but do not carry equal weight in every issue area.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The article combines neorealism and constructivism through the concept of strategic cooperation. Neorealism explains why states calculate relative power, external threats, and autonomy. Constructivism explains why identity influences legitimacy and perceptions. Strategic cooperation is the mechanism connecting these variables.

The proposed framework is: shared identity → perception of commonality → compatibility of interests → strategic convergence → institutionalized cooperation. Threat perception, regime security, economic interdependence, external alignments, and institutional design intervene at each stage. Where identity is strong but interests diverge, cooperation tends to remain rhetorical. Where interests converge but identity is weak, cooperation may still occur but is likely to remain transactional. Where identity and interests reinforce one another, cooperation is more likely to become institutionalized.

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative comparative analysis, structured and focused comparison, and documentary analysis. The cases were selected to represent four different modes of cooperation: universal multilateralism (OIC), bilateral strategic accommodation (Saudi-Iran), subregional security minilateralism (GCC), and functional economic regionalism (D-8). The study is analytical rather than statistically representative; its purpose is to identify mechanisms explaining variation in cooperation.

From Pan-Islamic Solidarity to the Sovereign-State System

The modern politics of Muslim solidarity developed within a sovereign-state system. The OIC illustrates this compromise. It institutionalized a common Islamic political identity while accepting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states. Consequently, it was never designed as a supranational Muslim government. Its broad membership includes states with different regime types, strategic orientations, and external alliances.

This helps explain the gap between symbolic unity and strategic coordination. Bacik argues that the OIC's institutional weaknesses include the absence of costly membership requirements and an effective rule-enforcing mechanism. Bakan and Katılmış likewise

conclude that intra-regional and extra-regional factors have constrained OIC effectiveness. [5] The issue is therefore not the absence of solidarity but the difficulty of converting solidarity into enforceable commitments.

Sources of Fragmentation

First, Muslim states possess different threat perceptions. Some regard Iran as a major security concern; others prioritize stable relations with Iran because of geography and economic interests. Some prioritize relations with the United States; others seek greater autonomy through China, Russia, or regional partnerships. These divergent threat assessments make comprehensive strategic unity difficult.

Second, regime security and domestic politics influence foreign policy. Governments must consider elite interests, public opinion, economic performance, and political legitimacy. A state may strongly endorse Muslim solidarity rhetorically while pursuing an external partnership that serves immediate security or economic requirements. Research on Pakistan's strategic choices during the 2025–26 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict illustrates the simultaneous pressures of geopolitical competition, economic vulnerability, sectarian sensitivities, and competing alliances. [6]

Third, geoeconomics increasingly shapes regional relations. Trade corridors, investment, energy, logistics, technology, and connectivity provide concrete incentives for cooperation even when political differences remain. Recent research on Pakistan's geoeconomic shift and Gwadar emphasizes economic security, regional connectivity, infrastructure, and investment as components of contemporary state strategy. [7]

Fourth, external powers shape regional choices. Muslim states operate within a wider international system involving the United States, China, Russia, and Europe. Strategic hedging allows governments to obtain benefits from multiple relationships without committing to a single bloc. This flexibility often conflicts with the idea of a unified Muslim strategic alignment.

The OIC: The Limits of Universal Solidarity

The OIC is the strongest institutional expression of pan-Islamic solidarity. Its historical development and current agenda demonstrate that Islamic identity remains politically significant. It provides a diplomatic platform for Palestine, humanitarian issues, cultural cooperation, development, and selected economic and scientific initiatives. [1]

Its weakness lies in the breadth of its membership. States have different strategic interests and different relationships with external powers. Universal consensus therefore tends to produce general declarations rather than costly collective action. The OIC should not consequently be judged simply as a failure. Its durability demonstrates the continued value of Islamic identity as a diplomatic resource. Its limits show that universal identity does not remove sovereign-state competition.

The appropriate lesson is institutional differentiation. The OIC can provide broad political representation while smaller coalitions under or alongside the wider Islamic institutional framework pursue specific areas such as food security, disaster response, technology, health, trade, mediation, and counter-terrorism.

Saudi-Iran Rapprochement: Strategic Accommodation

The Saudi-Iran agreement of March 2023 is a critical case of strategic accommodation. The two governments agreed to restore diplomatic relations, reopen missions, respect sovereignty and non-interference, and reactivate existing security and economic agreements. The process followed earlier dialogue hosted by Iraq and Oman and was facilitated by China. [8]

The significance of the agreement lies not in the disappearance of rivalry but in its management. Both states had incentives to reduce the costs of continued confrontation. Saudi Arabia had strong reasons to prioritize regional stability and an investment environment supportive of economic transformation; Iran had incentives to reduce diplomatic isolation and manage its surrounding security environment. The agreement thus demonstrates that strategic interests can overcome entrenched rivalry without requiring ideological convergence.

The case also clarifies the role of identity. Both states could frame the agreement through principles associated with Islamic and regional solidarity, but the actual durability of cooperation depended on concrete interests and institutionalized diplomatic mechanisms. Identity supplied a language of reconciliation; national interest supplied the incentive.

GCC: Minilateral Security Cooperation

The GCC illustrates the advantages of a narrower institutional setting. Its six members share geography, economic interdependence, and overlapping security concerns. Its objectives include coordination, integration, and interconnection in political, economic, financial, trade, and security fields.

The GCC has experienced serious internal disagreements, demonstrating that minilateralism does not eliminate national interest. Yet its narrower membership reduces the number of conflicting strategic preferences and permits deeper coordination than is generally possible in a 57-member institution. The case therefore supports the proposition that institutional scale matters: narrower organizations can translate common interests into more operational cooperation.

The GCC also shows that cooperation is contingent. When threat perceptions diverge, cohesion weakens. Its value lies not in producing permanent unity but in providing a mechanism through which states can coordinate when their interests overlap.

D-8: Functional Economic Regionalism

The D-8 provides a different model. Established in 1997, it brings together Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan. Its central focus is economic cooperation. The organization demonstrates that Muslim-majority states can cooperate without agreeing on security policy or regional geopolitics.

Functional cooperation reduces sovereignty costs. States can pursue trade, investment, transport, industrial development, agriculture, and technology while retaining independent foreign policies. This is increasingly important in an era of geoeconomics. Economic cooperation can generate practical interdependence even where political disagreements remain.

The D-8 therefore challenges the assumption that fragmentation means failure. It suggests that the most sustainable forms of Muslim cooperation may be functional, issue-specific, and economically grounded rather than comprehensive political alliances.

Comparative Discussion: Strategic Cooperation without Strategic Unity

The four cases reveal a spectrum. The OIC represents broad normative solidarity with limited enforcement. The GCC represents narrower cooperation with stronger common security incentives. The D-8 represents functional economic cooperation with limited political demands. Saudi-Iran rapprochement represents bilateral strategic accommodation in which rivalry is managed because interests converge.

The pattern is best described as “strategic cooperation without strategic unity.” Muslim states increasingly cooperate through overlapping arrangements rather than through one comprehensive political organization. Bilateral partnerships, minilateral coalitions, economic forums, and issue-specific mechanisms coexist.

Recent studies supplied for integration into this article reinforce this interpretation. Research on regional foreign-policy alignment identifies alignment, hedging, neutrality, and coalition-building as responses to strategic uncertainty. Studies of U.S.-Iran rivalry and escalation emphasize fragmented security architectures, strategic mistrust, and competing alignments. Research on Pakistan highlights national-interest calculations under external pressure. Geoeconomic studies emphasize connectivity, infrastructure, and economic security. The Pakistan-Afghanistan case demonstrates how expectations of strategic affinity can be replaced by pragmatic security management when interests diverge. [2, 6, 7]

The climate-governance study supplied for integration provides a useful institutional comparison: broad participation does not necessarily produce effective implementation where commitments remain voluntary and enforcement is weak. This parallels the OIC's distinction between normative consensus and operational capacity. [9] The deepfake and disinformation study is peripheral to the central argument but is relevant to the wider information environment in which contemporary strategic narratives and diplomatic legitimacy are contested. [10]

Geoeconomics and the Future of Muslim Cooperation

The rise of geoeconomics may provide a more practical basis for Muslim regionalism than ideological unity alone. Trade corridors, energy markets, investment, ports, logistics, food security, technology, and digital infrastructure create concrete interests that can survive political disagreement.

Pakistan's geoeconomic debate illustrates this transformation. Recent research argues that economic resilience, regional connectivity, investment, and infrastructure increasingly form part of national power. The Gwadar case similarly emphasizes the potential of connectivity among South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. [7] Such projects can create functional interdependence among states that disagree on broader geopolitical questions.

The same logic applies across the wider Muslim world. Economic cooperation does not require identical views on every conflict. States can trade while disagreeing politically, coordinate infrastructure while maintaining different security partnerships, and develop investment networks without surrendering sovereignty. Geoeconomics therefore provides a pathway toward incremental integration.

Implications for Muslim Regionalism

Five implications follow. First, the OIC should distinguish political representation from operational cooperation and support smaller coalitions for specific policy areas. Second, institutional design should recognize strategic diversity rather than assume permanent consensus. Third, economic integration should receive greater attention because material interdependence creates constituencies for continued cooperation. Fourth, regional mediation and crisis-communication mechanisms should be strengthened, building on the lessons of Saudi-Iran dialogue. Fifth, Muslim regionalism should be conceptualized as plural: the OIC can provide universal representation, subregional institutions can manage security, economic organizations can promote trade and connectivity, and bilateral partnerships can address specialized strategic interests.

The objective should therefore not be the unrealistic creation of a single Muslim strategic bloc. A layered architecture is more compatible with sovereignty and national-interest calculations. Such an architecture would convert fragmentation into differentiated cooperation.

Conclusion

The fragmentation of the Muslim world is real, but fragmentation does not mean the disappearance of cooperation. The central conclusion is that Islamic solidarity has been transformed rather than eliminated. Muslim states remain part of a broader normative community while acting as sovereign units pursuing security, economic, diplomatic, and regime interests. National interest generally determines when solidarity becomes operational.

The OIC demonstrates the continuing diplomatic value of pan-Islamic identity but also the limits of universal institutions. Saudi-Iran rapprochement shows that strategic accommodation can emerge between rivals when the costs of confrontation rise. The GCC illustrates the advantages of minilateral cooperation under shared geographic and security conditions. The D-8 demonstrates the potential of functional economic cooperation without political uniformity.

The future of Muslim regionalism is therefore unlikely to be determined by a choice between solidarity and national interest. The more important question is how states can institutionalize cooperation without requiring uniformity. The answer lies in strategic cooperation: solidarity provides normative legitimacy, national interest provides incentives, and institutional design provides the mechanism for durability. Contemporary Muslim regionalism is thus best understood not as the failure of solidarity, but as its strategic transformation.

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