



Leadership Contestation and Foreign Policy Fragmentation among Muslim States on the Palestinian Issue

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Abstract

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The Palestinian issue has long been regarded as a symbol of normative solidarity and the collective commitment of the Muslim world to global justice. However, in practice, the foreign policy responses of Muslim-majority states toward Palestine demonstrate significant variation. This article aims to analyze the fragmentation of these responses and to explain the political factors shaping such differences within the broader dynamics of leadership in the Muslim world. This study employs a qualitative comparative approach using structured focused comparison and process tracing to examine representative cases reflecting four major response patterns: resistive–confrontational (Iran and Turkey), diplomatic–multilateral (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar), pragmatic–normalization (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco), and minimal or low-profile (Oman). The findings reveal that fragmentation is not merely a reflection of differing attitudes toward Palestine, but is closely linked to domestic legitimacy strategies, regime stability considerations, and states' positions within regional and global political structures. The Palestinian issue functions as a strategic reference in foreign policy formulation, where Muslim states calibrate normative commitments with national interests and international alliances. This study contributes to international relations literature by offering an empirical analytical framework to understand the variation of Muslim states' responses, demonstrating that religious solidarity does not automatically translate into a unified foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian issue is one of the most persistent and symbolic issues in the politics of the Muslim world. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Palestine has not only been understood as a territorial conflict, but also as a symbol of anti-colonial struggle, the collective identity of the Muslim community, and moral legitimacy in global politics (Khalidi, 2006). In various international forums, such as the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Muslim-majority states have consistently expressed normative support for the rights of the Palestinian people. However, behind this apparent uniformity of statements, the foreign policy responses of Muslim states toward the Palestinian issue exhibit significant variation. Empirically, support for Palestine is not articulated in a single, coherent policy pattern. Instead, Muslim states respond through diverse approaches, ranging from resistive and confrontational stances, diplomatic and multilateral engagement, normalization of relations with Israel, to cautious and minimalistic approaches. This variation indicates that the Palestinian issue functions not only as an agenda of normative solidarity, but also as a strategic arena in which Muslim states articulate national interests, domestic legitimacy, and their positions within regional and global political structures.

A number of previous studies have highlighted the roles of identity, ideology, and interests in shaping the foreign policies of Muslim-majority states toward Palestine. Some states, such as Iran and Turkey, demonstrate their support through strong rhetoric, diplomatic opposition to Israel, and the mobilization of political identity, often associated with claims of ideological leadership in the Muslim world (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007; Yavuz, 2020). In contrast, countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar adopt diplomatic and multilateral approaches by emphasizing international law, mediation, and humanitarian assistance (Anwar, 2021; Roberts, 2017). Meanwhile, several Arab states—including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco—have pursued a pragmatic approach through the normalization of relations with Israel since 2020, reflecting a shift toward regime stability considerations and economic interests (Miller, 2021). In addition, some states adopt a minimal or low-profile approach, such as Oman, by positioning the Palestinian issue within a framework of diplomatic caution and geopolitical risk management (Worrall, 2020). Although existing literature has examined these variations in policy responses in a partial manner, it remains limited in providing a systematic analytical framework to understand the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses in a comparative perspective, particularly in relation to the dynamics of leadership in the Muslim world. Therefore, there is a need to explain how these variations not only reflect differences in policy orientation, but are also closely related to leadership contestation, domestic legitimacy, and the structure of global alliances (Wendt, 1999; Walt, 1987).

Based on this context, this article aims to analyze the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue and to explain the political factors that shape

these variations within the broader dynamics of leadership in the Muslim world. This study employs a qualitative comparative approach, utilizing structured focused comparison and process tracing to examine a set of representative cases reflecting four main response patterns: resistive–confrontational, diplomatic–multilateral, pragmatic–normalization, and minimal or low-profile. This approach enables a more systematic understanding of how the Palestinian issue functions not only as a matter of international justice, but also as a strategic arena for the articulation of national interests and political positioning of Muslim states within an evolving global order.

These cases are selected because they represent distinct and observable variations in Muslim-majority states' foreign policy responses toward Palestine. Iran and Turkey illustrate a resistive–confrontational pattern rooted in identity politics and leadership claims; Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar represent diplomatic–multilateral engagement through international institutions, humanitarian assistance, and mediation; the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco demonstrate pragmatic normalization shaped by regime security and economic interests; while Oman reflects a minimalist or low-profile strategy based on caution, neutrality, and risk management. Thus, the selected cases are not intended to represent all Muslim states statistically, but to capture the main patterns of response fragmentation within the Muslim world.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue. The unit of analysis is the foreign policy of Muslim-majority states toward Palestine, observed through official statements, diplomatic decisions, and relevant international practices. This approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of variations in foreign policy as the result of interactions between political identity, domestic interests, and the structure of the international system, which are difficult to adequately capture through quantitative methods (George & Bennett, 2005).

The primary method used is structured focused comparison, a case comparison technique that applies a common set of analytical questions across all selected cases. These questions focus on three main dimensions: (1) how states define the Palestinian issue in terms of identity and national interests; (2) which domestic and international factors influence policy choices; and (3) how these responses reflect states' positions and leadership strategies within the Muslim world. This method allows for the systematic identification of patterns of similarity and difference across cases, while maintaining sensitivity to each country's historical and political context (George & Bennett, 2005). This study compares four main patterns of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue: (1) resistive–confrontational (Iran and Turkey), (2) diplomatic–multilateral (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar), (3) pragmatic–normalization (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco), and (4) minimal or low-profile (Oman). Case selection is conducted purposively based on criteria such as variation in foreign policy

orientation, level of involvement in the conflict, relations with major powers, and degree of domestic political stability. The objective of this comparison is not to produce statistical generalizations, but to develop an analytical understanding of the patterns of fragmentation in Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

To complement the cross-case comparative analysis, this study employs process tracing to identify the causal mechanisms linking national identity, domestic political pressures, international alliance structures, and foreign policy choices toward Palestine. This analysis is conducted by tracing sequences of events, policy changes, and official narratives that evolve within each case. This method enables a deeper explanation of why states with particular characteristics adopt confrontational, diplomatic, pragmatic, or minimal approaches (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). The data are drawn from both primary and secondary sources, including official government statements, foreign policy documents, United Nations resolutions, speeches by political elites, reports from international organizations, and relevant academic literature. Primary documents include official statements from foreign ministries, presidential or royal speeches, communiqués of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, relevant United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, and official diplomatic statements issued during major Gaza escalations. These sources are cross-checked with reports from international organizations and peer-reviewed academic literature to strengthen source triangulation. Data collection is conducted through document analysis and policy text analysis. The data are analyzed qualitatively through thematic categorization based on the four established response patterns, as well as interpretation grounded in the selected theoretical framework. The validity of the analysis is ensured through source triangulation and consistency of argumentation patterns across cases (Yin, 2018). Analytically, this study employs constructivism, regime survival theory, and strategic alignment as interpretive frameworks to explain the variation in Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue. These approaches are used in a complementary manner to highlight the roles of identity, domestic legitimacy, and global alliance structures in shaping foreign policy, without the intention of formally testing or developing new theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Fragmentation and Leadership Contestation in the Muslim World

The fragmentation of the Muslim world in responding to the Palestinian issue reflects differences in national interests, geopolitical orientations, regime priorities, and leadership ambitions among Muslim-majority states. Religious solidarity does not necessarily translate into uniform foreign policy outcomes. Broadly, four main patterns can be identified: a resistive–confrontational approach represented by Iran and Turkey; a diplomatic–multilateral approach adopted by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar, which

relies on international forums and humanitarian assistance; a pragmatic–normalization approach pursued by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco through the establishment of relations with Israel; and a minimal or low-profile approach exemplified by Oman, which adopts a cautious and non-confrontational stance.

These patterns demonstrate that the Muslim world is not a unitary actor, but rather a fragmented arena shaped by diverse political calculations, strategic considerations, and domestic legitimacy needs. The Palestinian issue remains symbolically important for Muslim societies, yet each state translates this symbolic importance into different policy choices. For some states, Palestine functions primarily as a moral and humanitarian concern. For others, it becomes an instrument of diplomacy, a source of domestic legitimacy, or a platform for projecting regional and ideological leadership.

Within this fragmented landscape, the resistive and confrontational approach adopted by Iran and Turkey can be understood not merely as an expression of normative solidarity with Palestine, but as part of a broader identity strategy and a claim to ideological leadership within the Muslim world. In this context, the Palestinian issue serves as a central arena for contesting regional and symbolic legitimacy (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007; Yavuz, 2020). By adopting a more vocal and confrontational position toward Israel, Iran and Turkey seek to present themselves as defenders of Palestine and challengers of what they perceive as an unjust regional order.

From a constructivist perspective, foreign policy is not driven solely by material interests, but also by socially constructed identities, norms, and meanings (Wendt, 1999). This perspective helps explain why Muslim-majority states may respond differently to the same Palestinian issue despite sharing a broad religious identity. In this framework, both Iran and Turkey utilize the Palestinian issue as a platform to project themselves as primary defenders of the Muslim community. Their policies toward Palestine are therefore shaped not only by strategic calculations, but also by the meanings they attach to Islamic solidarity, regional justice, and their own perceived roles in the Muslim world.

For Iran, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict constitutes an integral part of its post-1979 revolutionary identity. Iran consistently rejects the legitimacy of Israel’s existence, referring to it as an illegal Zionist regime that occupies Palestinian land and violates the rights of the Palestinian people (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007; Valeri, 2020). This rejection is not merely symbolic rhetoric, but is institutionalized within domestic policy and national legal frameworks. Iran has enacted various regulations prohibiting economic and social relations with Israel as a manifestation of its ideological commitment to anti-Zionism (Ramazani, 2004). From a constructivist perspective, this position demonstrates how Iran’s revolutionary identity shapes a persistent perception of Israel as a colonial and illegitimate entity (Wendt, 1999). Thus, for Iran, the Palestinian issue is not simply a geopolitical matter, but part of a broader moral narrative and normative state identity. Through its consistent anti-Western and anti-Israeli stance, Iran seeks to present itself as an alternative leader of the Muslim world, independent from Western hegemony and

pro-Western Arab regimes. Furthermore, Iran's support for Palestinian resistance groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad forms part of its forward defense strategy and the expansion of regional influence within the framework of regional power competition (Hinnebusch, 2018). This support also reinforces what is commonly referred to as the Axis of Resistance, positioning Iran at the center of a resistance bloc against Israel and its allies (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Therefore, the Palestinian issue serves a dual function for Iran: as a geopolitical instrument and as a source of moral legitimacy within the Muslim world.

In contrast to Iran, Turkey does not reject the existence of Israel *de jure*, but it consistently opposes Israeli occupation practices and policies in Palestinian territories. The Turkish government emphasizes that ending the occupation, protecting Palestinian rights, and respecting international law are essential prerequisites for resolving the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (Murinson, 2012; Öniş, 2019). This position reflects a form of normative delegitimization of Israeli occupation practices, although it does not extend to existential rejection as in the Iranian case.

A concrete empirical illustration of this position can be seen in Turkey's rhetoric and diplomatic activism after the Gaza escalation. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly condemned Israel's military actions in Gaza and framed the Palestinian question as a moral and political test for the international community. Turkey also brought the Palestinian issue into international and Islamic forums, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations, while calling for a ceasefire, humanitarian access, and stronger international pressure on Israel. These actions show that Palestine is not only treated as a humanitarian issue by Turkey, but also as a diplomatic platform through which Ankara projects itself as a vocal defender of Muslim communities.

This approach is closely linked to Turkey's ambition to position itself as a successor to leadership in the Muslim world following the Ottoman legacy. In the literature on Turkish foreign policy, this orientation is often associated with neo-Ottomanism, referring to efforts to revive Turkey's historical role as a protector of Muslim communities and a central actor in the region (Yavuz, 2020). In this context, the Palestinian issue becomes a key symbol in constructing such an image, both regionally and globally. Thus, Turkey's position combines normative solidarity, leadership ambition, and strategic calculation in its broader foreign policy toward the Muslim world.

2. Diplomatic–Multilateral Approach

The second pattern in the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue is the diplomatic–multilateral approach, adopted by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar. Unlike the resistive–confrontational approach pursued by Iran and Turkey, this pathway emphasizes normative advocacy, international forums, humanitarian assistance, and mediation, without direct confrontational engagement with Israel. This choice does not reflect passivity or neutrality. Rather, it represents a rational

strategy to balance domestic pressures, global power structures, and national political–economic interests.

In this article, the term diplomatic–multilateral approach refers to the use of international organizations, multilateral forums, international legal norms, humanitarian mechanisms, and mediation channels as the main instruments for expressing support for Palestine. It is not used here as a formal theory, but as an analytical term to describe a pattern of foreign policy behavior among states that prefer institutional and diplomatic channels over direct confrontation. Within this framework, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar utilize international institutions as arenas for legitimacy, political protection, and sustained advocacy for the Palestinian issue (Hinnebusch, 2018).

This approach allows these states to maintain visible support for Palestine while avoiding the risks associated with direct military or diplomatic confrontation with Israel and its major allies. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar can therefore express solidarity with Palestine, respond to domestic Muslim constituencies, and preserve their normative commitment to Palestinian rights, while still maintaining broader economic, security, and diplomatic relations with powerful external actors.

At the domestic level, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar face strong public pressure to support Palestine. Solidarity with Palestine forms an integral part of the political and moral identity of Muslim societies in these countries. However, direct confrontation with Israel risks generating tensions with the United States, a hegemonic actor that consistently supports Israel. Such tensions may have adverse consequences for economic stability, investment, security, and domestic political conditions (Walt, 1987; Anwar, 2021). Therefore, the diplomatic–multilateral approach functions as a form of safe zone strategy. In this article, safe zone strategy refers to a foreign policy posture that enables states to express visible support for Palestine while avoiding direct military confrontation, severe economic retaliation, or diplomatic isolation from major powers. Through this strategy, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar can openly express support for Palestine while avoiding escalation with major powers or generating unfavorable political–economic repercussions (Hinnebusch, 2018).

From the perspective of middle power diplomacy, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar seek to position themselves as balancing actors that rely on norms, international law, and mediation rather than military power (Anwar, 2021; Kamrava, 2020). These states do not possess direct interests in the armed Palestinian–Israeli conflict and are not geographically proximate to the conflict zone (with the partial exception of Qatar at the regional level). This allows them to adopt the role of norm entrepreneurs that promote peaceful solutions grounded in international law. Variations in regional stability and geopolitical configurations also shape these policy choices. Indonesia and Malaysia are relatively distant from the Middle East conflict and operate within stable regional environments, while Qatar, despite its location in the Gulf, adopts a mediation-based foreign policy to avoid regional escalation (Kamrava, 2020).

Indonesia consistently frames the Palestinian issue within the principles of international law and multilateralism. Through forums such as the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Indonesia advocates for the recognition of an independent Palestinian state, the implementation of a two-state solution, the designation of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and the cessation of occupation and violence (Anwar, 2021). At the same time, Indonesia allows space for Israel within the framework of a two-state solution, reflecting a non-confrontational normative approach. This stance aligns with Indonesia's long-standing foreign policy doctrine of free and active, which emphasizes support for international justice without alignment with any major power bloc (Anwar, 2021). Beyond political diplomacy, Indonesia also provides humanitarian assistance, diplomatic training, and educational scholarships for Palestinians as part of its capacity-building diplomacy (Hinnebusch, 2018).

Malaysia follows a similar path by emphasizing advocacy for Palestine through United Nations resolutions, consolidation within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the provision of humanitarian assistance to Gaza. Malaysia regularly condemns Israeli military actions; however, such condemnation remains within the framework of international diplomacy and is not translated into direct confrontation (Hinnebusch, 2018). This approach is often understood as normative Islamic diplomacy, combining religious solidarity with considerations of domestic stability and international relations. Support for Palestine serves to strengthen domestic political legitimacy, while the multilateral pathway shields Malaysia from broader geopolitical repercussions.

Qatar plays a more complex role through mediation diplomacy. It acts as a mediator in ceasefire negotiations, provides financial and humanitarian assistance to Gaza, and hosts political dialogues between conflicting parties. Within the framework of soft power diplomacy, Qatar leverages global platforms—including international events such as the FIFA World Cup 2022—to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine without adopting a confrontational stance (Kamrava, 2020). Qatar's distinctiveness lies in its ability to maintain communication with multiple actors, including Israel and various Palestinian groups, thereby preserving its position as a relatively neutral mediator. This strategy enables Qatar to play a significant role in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict without undermining its strategic relationship with the United States.

3. Pragmatic–Normalization Approach

The third pattern in the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue is the pragmatic approach through the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel, adopted by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. This approach marks a fundamental shift from ideological and normative solidarity toward calculations of national interest, particularly political stability, regime security, and long-term economic development (Acharya, 2018; Lynch, 2022). This policy choice does not emerge in a vacuum, but rather represents a rational response to changes in the structure of the international system and the evolving regional dynamics of the Middle East. From the perspective of pragmatic realism, states are viewed as rational actors that prioritize

regime survival and national interests over transnational ideological commitments (Walt, 1987). Accordingly, normalization with Israel is understood as a strategy to reduce conflict risks, strengthen regional strategic positioning, and secure economic and security benefits.

One of the key factors driving the pragmatic–normalization approach is the structure of global alliances, particularly the role of the United States as the primary security guarantor in the region. States such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain exhibit a high level of dependence on the U.S. security umbrella and political support. Within the framework of bandwagoning strategy, normalization with Israel becomes a means of strengthening ties with Washington while simultaneously enhancing their strategic standing in the eyes of Western powers (Walt, 1987; Barnett, 2021). In this context, the Palestinian issue is increasingly perceived as a geopolitical liability that may hinder global economic integration and strategic relations with major powers. Consequently, normalization is pursued as a way to align foreign policy with the realities of international power distribution (Acharya, 2018). From the perspective of the political economy of foreign policy, states involved in the Abraham Accords view economic stability as the primary foundation of domestic legitimacy. Prolonged conflict with Israel is perceived as potentially disrupting foreign investment flows, international trade, and national economic diversification agendas, such as the UAE’s long-term economic diversification agenda (Lynch, 2022; Fawcett, 2023). Normalization provides access to cooperation in high technology, cybersecurity, defense, energy, and tourism—sectors considered more relevant to sustaining national development than the political costs of maintaining ideological solidarity with Palestine. Within this framework, foreign policy is positioned as an instrument of development rather than as an expression of collective normative identity (Barnett, 2021).

Within the pragmatic–normalization approach, the Palestinian issue is not entirely abandoned, but is reduced to a secondary concern that is no longer a primary prerequisite in foreign relations. These states continue to express rhetorical support for a two-state solution, but without exerting concrete pressure on Israel to end the occupation (Milton-Edwards, 2020). This approach reflects what is often described as interest-based diplomacy, in which foreign policy prioritizes regime stability, economic growth, and strategic positioning over ideological solidarity within the Muslim world (Acharya, 2018; Barnett, 2021). From a constructivist perspective, this shift indicates a transformation in identity from pan-Islamic solidarity toward state-centric pragmatism (Wendt, 1999). Discursively, normalization is often framed as an effort to promote peace, regional dialogue, and Middle Eastern stability. However, in practice, it is not accompanied by effective mechanisms to pressure Israel to comply with international law or to end the occupation of Palestinian territories (Fawcett, 2023; Milton-Edwards, 2020). As such, the discourse of peace functions more as a form of normative legitimation for pragmatic policies than as a substantive conflict resolution strategy.

In the broader context of fragmentation within the Muslim world, this approach stands in structural contrast to both the resistive–confrontational approach (Iran–Turkey) and the normative–multilateral diplomacy of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar. The pragmatic–normalization approach reflects the transformation of the Palestinian issue from a symbol of collective solidarity into a secondary variable in national interest calculations. Normalization is therefore not merely a diplomatic choice, but an adaptive strategy shaped by global power structures, domestic economic pressures, and the imperative of regime stability. Consequently, the fragmentation of Muslim states’ responses to Palestine demonstrates that the conflict has become an arena of compromise between identity, interests, and the structure of the international system (Wendt, 1999; Walt, 1987).

4. Minimalist or Low-Profile Approach

The fourth pattern in the fragmentation of Muslim states’ responses to the Palestinian issue is the minimalist or low-profile approach, characterized by extreme caution, active neutrality, and the avoidance of direct involvement in regional conflicts. This approach does not entirely eliminate a normative stance toward Palestine, but deliberately limits political and diplomatic escalation to prevent the state from being drawn into broader and higher-risk conflicts (Acharya, 2018; Fawcett, 2023). This pattern is consistently adopted by Oman, a Gulf state known for its relatively low levels of domestic and regional conflict. Oman is often perceived as one of the most stable and secure countries in the Middle East and has played a role as a mediator and honest broker in various regional disputes. This stability is also recognized internationally, including by global development institutions that rank Oman as having relatively low levels of insecurity and conflict compared to its neighbors (UNDP, 2022; Fawcett, 2023).

From the perspective of defensive realism, states with limited military capacity and geographically vulnerable positions tend to adopt foreign policies oriented toward conflict avoidance in order to preserve regime survival and national stability (Walt, 1987; Acharya, 2018). For Oman, direct involvement in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is perceived as carrying regional escalation risks that outweigh any potential strategic benefits. Regional geopolitical experience suggests that active involvement in the conflict often results in internal instability, political polarization, security pressures, and economic vulnerability, as observed in several Middle Eastern states. Consequently, Oman prioritizes domestic stability as an existential interest that cannot be compromised for external political symbolism (Worrall, 2020). In the context of the Palestinian issue, Oman continues to express normative condemnation of violence and the suffering of the Palestinian people. However, such statements are delivered in restrained and non-escalatory diplomatic language and are not accompanied by confrontational measures against Israel. This stance reflects what is commonly referred to in the literature as quiet diplomacy—an approach that avoids excessive political publicity while emphasizing discreet communication and diplomatic flexibility (Worrall, 2020). This approach enables Oman to maintain working relationships with various regional and global actors

with opposing interests, while preserving its reputation as a neutral mediator. Within the framework of hedging strategy, Oman does not fully align with any single power bloc, but instead seeks to maintain broad diplomatic maneuverability to ensure long-term security (Acharya, 2018).

Unlike Iran and Turkey, which frame Palestine as a symbol of identity and a basis for leadership claims in the Muslim world, and unlike Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar, which situate the Palestinian issue within a framework of normative and multilateral diplomacy, Oman positions Palestine primarily as a matter of geopolitical risk management. Normative support for Palestine remains present, but it is not transformed into a central or confrontational agenda of foreign policy. From a constructivist perspective, this reflects the way Oman's national identity is constructed around narratives of stability, moderation, mediation, and diplomatic balance, rather than ideological resistance or global normative activism (Wendt, 1999).

Accordingly, the Palestinian issue is treated as an important moral and diplomatic concern, but not as the primary foundation of either domestic or international political legitimacy. Oman's approach shows that Muslim-majority states may support Palestine normatively while still limiting the political visibility and strategic centrality of the issue in their foreign policy. In this sense, Oman's position is not one of indifference, but rather one of cautious engagement shaped by its broader identity as a quiet mediator and a small state seeking to preserve regional stability.

A concrete empirical illustration of this low-profile approach can be seen in Oman's consistent preference for diplomatic language, mediation, and balanced communication rather than confrontational mobilization. Oman has repeatedly affirmed support for Palestinian rights and a peaceful settlement of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, yet such statements are generally framed in restrained diplomatic terms and are not accompanied by escalatory policies against Israel or its allies. This pattern is consistent with Oman's broader foreign policy tradition of maintaining channels of communication with opposing regional and international actors, including in highly polarized conflicts. Its role as a discreet mediator in regional diplomacy demonstrates that Oman tends to preserve diplomatic flexibility rather than construct its foreign policy identity around ideological confrontation.

By adopting a minimalist or low-profile approach, Oman both enriches and reinforces the fragmentation of Muslim states' responses to the Palestinian issue. This approach lies outside the confrontation–normalization spectrum and occupies a distinct space oriented toward security, caution, and regime stability. This fragmentation indicates that variations in the Muslim world's responses to Palestine are shaped not only by ideological orientations or economic interests, but also by historical experiences, security calculations, state capacity, and perceptions of regional risk (Acharya, 2018; Fawcett, 2023). The minimalist or low-profile approach adopted by Oman represents a rational strategy of a small yet stable state in navigating a high-intensity regional conflict. By prioritizing domestic stability and regime security, Oman opts to limit

political escalation while maintaining a moderate normative stance toward Palestine. Within the broader framework of fragmented responses among Muslim states, this approach underscores that the Palestinian issue is variously treated—as a symbol of identity, a tool of diplomacy, a pragmatic opportunity, or a geopolitical risk to be carefully managed (Wendt, 1999; Walt, 1987).

5. Synthesis: Palestine, Fragmentation, and the Crisis of Muslim World Leadership

The fragmentation of Muslim world responses to the Palestinian issue does not only reflect differences in commitment to Palestine, but also reveals the absence of a widely accepted leadership in the Muslim world. In this context, Palestine has become a strategic arena through which Muslim-majority states seek to build legitimacy, strengthen regional influence, and project moral leadership before the wider Muslim community. Iran and Turkey represent the resistive-confrontational pattern because both states use the Palestinian issue as an instrument to present themselves as leading defenders of the Muslim world. This pattern emerges partly from the lack of a strong and widely recognized collective leadership in the Muslim world. Iran links Palestine to its narrative of resistance against the West and Israel, while Turkey uses the Palestinian issue to strengthen its image as an active, vocal, and influential Muslim power.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Qatar represent the diplomatic-multilateral pattern. These states demonstrate strong commitment to Palestine, but their capacity to lead the Muslim world remains limited. Qatar has diplomatic and financial capacity, yet its small population and limited state size restrict its broader leadership projection. Indonesia and Malaysia possess legitimacy as Muslim-majority democratic states and remain vocal on the Palestinian issue, but both still face domestic and regional challenges that limit their ability to emerge as dominant leaders of the Muslim world. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco represent the pragmatic-normalization pattern. These states tend to prioritize economic interests, regime stability, investment, technology, and relations with major powers. As a result, the Palestinian conflict is not allowed to become a major obstacle to their economic growth agendas and strategic partnerships. Support for Palestine is still maintained rhetorically, but their foreign policies are increasingly shaped by calculations of national interest.

Meanwhile, Oman represents the low-profile pattern because of its cautious, balanced, and risk-averse foreign policy character. Oman does not seek to present itself as a confrontational leader, nor does it aggressively promote normalization. This position reflects Oman's diplomatic tradition of neutrality, mediation, flexibility, and avoidance of excessive regional polarization. Thus, the Palestinian issue continues to unite Muslim societies at the symbolic level, but it divides Muslim-majority states at the level of foreign policy strategy. This fragmentation occurs because each state interprets Palestine through its own national interests, state capacity, regime character, economic orientation, and leadership ambition. Islamic solidarity remains important, but it does not automatically produce a unified political stance among Muslim-majority states. This

synthesis shows that fragmentation is not an accidental outcome, but a patterned foreign policy variation shaped by the interaction between identity construction, regime security, state capacity, and strategic alignment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the responses of Muslim-majority states to the Palestinian issue are fragmented into four main patterns—resistive–confrontational, diplomatic–multilateral, pragmatic–normalization, and minimalist or low-profile—each reflecting distinct foreign policy strategies within the Muslim world. These findings clearly answer the research objective by showing that such variation is not merely driven by normative religious solidarity, but is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between political identity, domestic legitimacy, regime survival, and states’ positions within the international system. The empirical analysis confirms that the Palestinian issue functions as more than a moral or symbolic concern. It operates as a strategic instrument through which states construct legitimacy, pursue national interests, and articulate leadership claims in the Muslim world. States adopting confrontational approaches tend to mobilize ideological narratives and identity-based legitimacy; diplomatic–multilateral actors rely on international norms and institutional engagement; normalization-oriented states prioritize economic development and strategic alignment; while minimalist actors emphasize stability and geopolitical risk management. These patterns demonstrate a consistent relationship between theoretical expectations and empirical findings, reinforcing the argument that foreign policy behavior is shaped by both ideational and structural factors.

The main contribution of this study lies in offering a systematic comparative analytical framework that integrates constructivism, regime survival theory, and strategic alignment to explain the fragmentation of Muslim states’ responses. This framework highlights that religious solidarity does not automatically produce a unified foreign policy, but is continuously negotiated through domestic constraints and global structural pressures. In this sense, the study contributes to international relations scholarship by providing a more empirically grounded and theoretically integrated explanation of foreign policy variation in the Muslim world. Nevertheless, this study is limited to selected representative cases and focuses primarily on state-level analysis. Future research is encouraged to expand the number of cases, incorporate longitudinal analysis to capture changes over time, and examine the role of non-state actors in shaping policy toward the Palestinian issue. Further exploration of domestic political processes and public opinion is also necessary to deepen understanding of how internal legitimacy interacts with foreign policy orientation.

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