The Arab Gulf influence over Kabul

What is the issue?

The Arab Gulf is assured to become an important player once again in an Afghanistan under the shadow of the Taliban.

What is the role of OIC in Afghan issue?

> *The OIC is an alliance of currently 56 countries with Islam as the state religion and those in which Muslims form the majority of the population. Occasionally, members would also be admitted in which Muslims are only a minority but play a significant role for the country.*

- Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Pakistan were the only three countries that had officially recognised the previous Taliban government in 1996, until its fall in 2001.
- In 2021, Pakistan hosted a special session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to address the crisis in Afghanistan.
- It was attended by both the Taliban and Saudi Arabia.
- India played host to foreign ministers of Central Asian states where Afghanistan topped the agenda as well.
- All the attending countries including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan which are also OIC members chose to prioritise deliberations with New Delhi.
- Within the OIC, there have been other fractions specifically among the Gulf States, which are now spilling over on the issue of Afghanistan and determining influence over the country's new regime.

> *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a political and economic alliance of 6 Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. It was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1981 to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Arab and Islamic cultures.*

How are the Gulf countries competing for influence over Afghanistan?

- **Qatar's growing influence**- In 2010s, Qatar became the mediating force on Afghanistan.
- Doha hosted the official Taliban political office from 2013 to allow negotiations with the U.S.
- Qatar's new role on Afghanistan gave it significant diplomatic and political visibility the world over.

- India’s first point of official public diplomatic contact with the Taliban took place in Doha in August 2021.
- **Uneasiness among the traditional power centres**- In West Asia, Qatar’s growing influence was causing unease in the traditional power centres in the UAE and Saudi Arabia on issues such as the Qatari leadership’s support for political Islam and organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

What fundamental changes were caused in the Gulf Council?

- **Friction with Qatar**- In 2017 the UAE and Saudi Arabia initiated an economic blockade against Doha in the hope of disallowing it from pursuing its geopolitical designs which later ended in 2021.
- This led Qatar move closer towards Turkey and Iran.
- Today, both Qatar and Turkey are bidding to operate a landlocked Afghanistan’s airports under the Taliban regime.
- **Qatar’s power rise**- Qatar’s approach in geopolitics was also making it more powerful and influential with the U.S.
- To weaken this, the Saudis played a central role during the recent OIC special session and repaired their broken relationship with Pakistan.
- But in 2019, at the height of Islamabad–Riyadh tensions, the Qatar offered Pakistan a 3 billion dollar bailout because of the Pakistan’s unreliable ‘kingmaker’ status in Afghanistan and influence over the Taliban.
- **UAE’s decision**- The UAE has recently decided to allow former Afghan government officials find sanctuary in the country, but reportedly curbed their participation in political activities, including on social media.

Does India recognise the growing influence of the Arab Gulf?

- In 2015, Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the UAE in 34 years.
- Abu Dhabi is expected to be his first foreign visit in January 2022.
- Over the past decade, India has recognised the importance of middle powers in the Arab Gulf to a fast-evolving global order, from fighting against terrorism to newer diplomacy challenges such as Afghanistan.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/vying-for-influence-over-kabul/article3805937ece

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