
TAJIKISTAN: SAUDIS GIVE LOANS TO BUILD SCHOOLS, BUT WHY?

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Saudi Arabia has pledged to fund to build 66 schools in Tajikistan in a formidable gesture of soft power projection.

Asia-Plus news website reported on October 2 that the lower house of parliament has ratified a loan agreement with Saudi Arabia to provide \$35 million toward the building of the general education schools.

Shortage of school places has for many years been an acute problem in Tajikistan. Even in Tajikistan, teachers at middle schools routinely find themselves with classrooms holding up to 40 students.

That the money to solve the problem should have come from Saudi Arabia has come as something of a surprise in view of the fact that the Tajik authorities have long been fighting a robust rearguard action against the perceived ascendancy of Islamic piety in society.

Whether Riyadh has included any stipulations about the kind of religious instruction to be provided in the schools is not known. But the Saudi ambassador to Tajikistan did reveal in a recent interview that in addition to two universities, his government plans to fund the creation of six religious schools in the country, so the desire to propagate the faith is evidently on the agenda.

The real motivation may be like elsewhere, however.

In the same interview, the ambassador, Abdulaziz bin Mohammed Al-Badi, bragged at how his country's concerted diplomatic overtures have successfully culminated in the expulsion of Iran and its agents.

This is a great victory for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its wise leadership, he said.

What, in specific terms, beyond projecting its own reputation in the region, Saudi Arabia expects in return for this largesse is a matter for conjecture.

One widely circulated theory is that Riyadh now expects Dushanbe to use its veto power in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or SCO, to bar Irans bid to seek full membership. While often derided as little more than a security affairs talking shop, the SCO gained some heft this year with its inclusion of India and Pakistan among its roster of members.

Still, if the leading SCO nations, China and Russia, were to insist firmly on Irans full membership — and that is far from given — it hardly seems likely Tajikistan would be prepared to withstand the pressure either of those parties could apply.

Kaynak/Source: