

The OIC at Fifty: Between Hope and Despair

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Introduction

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, formerly known as Organization of the Islamic Conference and popularly known as the OIC, was born on the basis of a resolution adopted at a Muslim summit held on September 22–25, 1969 in Rabat, Morocco in response to an arson attack on the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. In 1972 at a conference of Islamic foreign ministers, the OIC formalized its charter. During the almost half-century of its existence the institution has grown a great deal: it is now “the second largest inter-governmental organization after the United Nations” with 57 members representing over 1.5 billion people.¹ During the Cold War in a bipolar world scenario, the institution was hardly visible in international politics, but now almost all major countries and international organizations maintain direct liaisons with the OIC. However, where does it stand in terms of contemporary international politics? Has it fulfilled its expectations? What was its potential fifty years ago, and how much of this potential has been realized? Are there new opportunities for the group? What are the difficulties in the institution achieving its full potential? In this article, we will survey and analyze the OIC’s major activities in order to find out.

Born at a juncture of history when most newly independent Muslim majority nation-states were ideologically divided, traditional religious identity provided the OIC with a unique platform. Member countries declared in the charter their commitment “to be guided by the noble Islamic values of unity and fraternity, and affirming the essentiality of promoting and consolidating the unity and solidarity among the Member States in securing their common interests at the international arena; and to adhere our commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter, the present Charter and International Law.”² Member states also wanted “to achieve close cooperation and mutual assistance in the economic, scientific, cultural and spiritual fields, inspired by the immortal teachings of Islam.” The Muslim desire for unity is based on Qur’anic guidance which was first accomplished under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the 7th century CE.³ The idea survived until the early 20th century through the institution of the khilafah (Caliphate). However, a new situation emerged in 1923/24 when the institution was abolished by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Muslim leaders responded to the abolition by holding conferences and discussions on the idea of Muslim unity. Two conferences were held in 1926; one in Cairo (May 13–19) and the other in Makkah during the annual pilgrimage (hajj) (June 7–

July 5).⁴ One of the major difficulties in creating a platform of Muslim unity was that most of the Muslim world at that time was directly or indirectly under European colonial domination. However, following WWII, when many independent Muslim-majority nation states appeared on the world map, a new more conducive environment was created, and the OIC was established. The arson attack came as a catalyst in this regard.

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Among its members, there were capital-rich, labor-scarce countries on the one hand and there were manpower-rich, capital-scarce countries on the other. Their co-operative ventures could have become a model for development for the rest of the world. However, that has not happened: the organization has not evolved to become a significant player either in international politics or in the area of economic co-operation. In this paper we will briefly analyze the expectations the institution has generated, the obstacles it has encountered and the achievements it has carried out since its establishment and their consequences.

The Achievements and Failures of the OIC on Political Issues

The OIC was founded with a declaration of Muslim co-operation in supporting the Palestinians gain their historical and legitimate rights. OIC countries felt the need for such a coordinated effort because of the Israeli occupation of historical Palestine, the Israeli violation

of UN resolutions and the U.S. and other Western countries' implicit support for Israeli actions. Although Palestinians were opposed to the creation of the state of Israel in their homeland and demanded a unified Palestine in a secular setting, by 1974 due to their military defeat and the recommendation of other Arab and Muslim countries they agreed to accept a two-state solution. The Palestinians also agreed to accept only 22 percent of historical Palestine according to its pre-1967 borders. As a result, with OIC backing, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) received recognition from the international community to represent stateless Palestinians: it also became an observer at the UN General Assembly. Soon, with the backing of OIC countries, the Palestinians also succeeded in declaring Zionism, the ideology responsible for the establishing the state of Israel, a racist ideology.

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On its part, however, Israel became even more aggressive in fighting against the Palestinians and establishing its legitimacy as a Jewish state in Palestine. In this conflict Israel defeated not only the Palestinians, but all the OIC countries put together. The OIC's only success was to get the PLO observer status at the UN and adopt a number of non-binding resolutions at the UN General Assembly, including one that declared Zionism a racist ideology. In the clash between Zionism and the Palestinians, however, Israel has been able not only to keep the



PLO from the lands in Palestine, but also to create division within the OIC. Egypt was the first member-country to break with the OIC and the Arab League to establish relations with Israel in 1978. In response to Egypt's unilateral approach toward Israel, the OIC issued a statement declaring the agreements between Egypt and Israel "a blatant departure from the Charter of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and a violation of international law and United Nations resolutions." It declared its decision to "suspend the membership of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the Organization of the Islamic Conference and all its agencies and bodies up to the time when the reasons that provoked this suspension are eliminated."⁵ The OIC also urged all member states to sever their diplomatic and economic ties with Egypt. Most OIC member countries followed this recommendation.

Within a few years, however, the OIC changed its position and took Egypt back into its fold with no explanation. Blaming the organization for the country's expulsion, the Egyptian president claimed that his country had always been committed to both the OIC Charter and the Palestinian cause and was not responsible for Egypt's expulsion and readmission into the organization.⁶ In the process, the Palestinian cause suffered. The OIC, in fact, had deceived the Palestinians by declaring its "jihad" against Israel through establishing the Al-Quds Committee headed by the Moroccan King. It proclaimed the desire to "undertake in all Islamic countries a psychological mobilization of the people through official, semi-official, and popular uses of the mass media" and invited member states to open offices for volunteers "wishing to participate in the jihad for the liberation of the holy land."⁷ On their part, Syria, Libya and Iraq

went further in protecting their "national interests" in Arab politics by creating their own factions within the Palestinian diaspora.

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Like the conflict in Palestine, the Kashmir dispute is another of the oldest unresolved conflicts at the United Nations, as it has been smoldering ever since the latter's foundation. The OIC has adopted numerous resolutions with little impact in reality in resolving the crisis. The crisis in neighboring Afghanistan from the 1980s onwards has also contributed to the deteriorating situation in Kashmir. Overall Kashmir has become another source of constant difficulty for Muslim societies today.⁸

Intra-OIC Co-operation for Economic Growth

The Declaration of the First Islamic Summit Conference held in 1969 made it clear that the leaders of OIC countries were aware of the potential for economic co-operation from the inception of the organization. This awareness is also reflected in the OIC Charter. The first concrete step to this end, the establishment of an Islamic bank, came during the Second Foreign Ministers Conference (1970). Two years later, a Financial and Economic Department was created in the OIC General Secretariat to act as "the nucleus of a specialized agency in the financial and economic fields of interest in member states."⁹ Blaming the developed countries for not having "the political will" to assist in their economic



growth, the OIC declared that “it was necessary for Islamic countries to resort first and foremost to the mobilization and to the revalorization of their national resources, to ensure the economic and social welfare of their people.”¹⁰ The OIC established many agencies, institutions and organizations in order to foster economic co-operation among Muslim countries.

In reality, achievement in most areas of co-operation for economic development has been trivial. The OIC has hardly been able to translate its potential into fruitful co-operation for the development of member countries. For example, one of the earliest issues that the OIC devoted itself to in this regard was the issue of food production. This was a wise move simply because self-sufficiency in food would not only serve a humanitarian cause for the ummah; it would also generate self-confidence for the community. Thus the OIC adopted resolutions on “the Food Situation in OIC Countries” highlighting the need and potential for achieving food self-sufficiency in OIC countries.¹¹ The following year’s resolutions on the subject noted related activities such as the need for funds, sources of funds, the creation of an Islamic Food and Security Fund, co-operation with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and even research findings by SESRTCIC, but in reality very little progress was made in food production. In a resolution on the subject, OIC agriculture ministers noted in 2004 that, “in many Islamic countries the food security situation has not only been precarious but has been showing a deteriorating trend in the recent past.”¹² The resolution then stressed “the need to resort all necessary efforts with a view to ensuring food security in all OIC member countries at the earliest.” But unfortunately, the overall situation

in Muslim countries seems to have deteriorated further since 2004.

The Role of the OIC in Conflict Resolution

In addressing this question, the OIC has primarily attempted to arbitrate in conflicts where both parties are Muslim. This is because as an Islamic international organization based on Qur’anic values, the OIC is the most appropriate institution to mediate. During the early days of its existence, the OIC’s achievements in this area were significant. When a conflict broke out between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Jordan in 1970, Saudi Arabia’s King Faisal and Egypt’s President Jamal Abdul Nasir jointly led an OIC and Arab League initiative to resolve the conflict. They successfully ended the conflict, albeit after the PLO’s military defeat. The PLO agreed to leave Jordan in exchange for a unanimous undertaking by Arab and Muslim countries that the PLO would be recognized as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. The conflict between the PLO and Jordan was thus resolved. Also, in 1974, the OIC was able to resolve the conflict between Pakistan and the newly-independent state of Bangladesh, which had emerged out of a civil war in 1971: also, only after Pakistan’s military defeat. Both countries became equal partners in the international community.

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The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s was the main testing ground for OIC's ability to resolve intra-Muslim conflict. The OIC undertook a mediating role as soon as the war broke out in September 1980. Powerful committees were formed which shuttled between the Iranian and Iraqi capitals but failed even to formulate a framework for the peaceful resolution of the crisis. The Iranian leadership did not seem to trust the OIC.

The OIC formed an "Islamic Peace Committee" and continued its mediation efforts. It proposed a cease-fire date with a timetable for the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Iranian territories. The committee also proposed that the cease-fire and the withdrawal would take place under the supervision of military observers drawn from the member countries of the OIC. It urged both countries to exchange declarations of non-interference in the internal affairs of the other country. But neither Iran nor Iraq paid much attention to these proposals. The Iranians demanded that the OIC first identify the aggressor in the conflict and punish them accordingly. Iran wanted the OIC to do this without participating in its meetings. Iraq, on the other hand, remained part of the OIC system. The 12th Foreign Minister's Conference was already scheduled to be held in June 1981 in Baghdad. The Iranians requested a neutral venue for the conference, but their request was rejected because Iran had earlier boycotted the Third Islamic Summit Conference, which was held in Makkah/Taif, Saudi Arabia. At the inaugural session of the 12th Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers, the Iraqi President declared that "Iraq is relieved of any moral or legal responsibility for the continuation of the conflict: the responsibility lies squarely on the officials of Iran, for they have so far not

exerted any serious and sincere efforts to halt the conflict and reach a peaceful, just and honourable settlement in this dispute." Moreover, at the end of the conference, the OIC decided to make the statement of the Iraqi president a part of its official document because it contained "useful guidance for the Organization."¹³ Thus, the OIC lost its credibility as a mediator.

In order to promote the task further, the OIC established a Wise Persons Council (WPC) with the aim of identifying "mechanisms for conflicts resolution and peace building, strengthening the role of the Organization in the field of mediation and preventive diplomacy." However, the OIC has hardly been effective in addressing these crises

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks and the adoption of the clash of civilizations thesis as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, intra-Muslim conflicts have skyrocketed. This led to the establishment in March 2013 of a specialized component called the "Peace, Security and Mediation Unit (PSMU) at the OIC General Secretariat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It declared that the PSMU would initially focus on capacity-building, after which it would be expected to function principally through monitoring current and potential crisis situations to identify and analyze the major root causes of conflicts and determine the means to resolve them."¹⁴ In order to promote the task further, the OIC established a Wise Persons Council (WPC) with the aim of identifying "mechanisms for conflicts resolution and peace building, strengthening the role of the Organization in the field of mediation and preventive diplomacy." However, the OIC has hardly been effective in addressing these crises.¹⁵



Reforming the OIC

The need for reform within the OIC system of governance was identified as early as 1982. According to one former Secretary General of the OIC, the first phase of reform continued until 1989 when the concern was “to co-ordinate and prevent duplication in the activities of its growing number of agencies.”⁶ It should be noted here that during the early years, most members were so enthusiastic about prospects of the OIC that most wanted to undertake the promotion of various agenda items related to Muslim cooperative achievements and many new organs and agencies affiliated to the OIC were established. Attempts at reforming the organization continued after 1989 but with little success.

Fresh opportunities appeared in 2003 and 2004. In 2003, Malaysia took the chair of the organization and in 2004; the Secretary General was elected from Turkey. These are the two most dynamic nations within the OIC system: Malaysia had already created an image of a model for economic development in the Muslim world and in Turkey a new government came to power in 2002 which generated a lot of hope among young people there. Their joint leadership could have generated dynamism within the OIC too. Interestingly, this was the first time the OIC had an elected Secretary General. Immediately after assuming his responsibility, he began undertaking initiatives for reforming the institution.

Although these two countries had the potential to become engines for development and progress within the OIC system the way Piedmont and Sardinia became for Italy in 19th century Europe, the OIC failed to achieve its goals. It did not have to merge all Muslims

under one national flag; it only needed to initiate a program for cooperation and development similar to that of the European Union. But it also failed to generate the political will needed for this purpose. A high-profile initiative was taken for self-assessment, and the American management company Accenture was engaged, but recommendations made by the assessment body also encountered a similar fate to earlier OIC resolutions. Even in the area of humanitarian assistance to natural disaster-stricken areas, the performance of the OIC was very much negligible. Compared to the OIC, which is composed of many rich governments, a handful of Malaysian and Turkish non-governmental organizations have performed better at responding to natural disasters in the Muslim world.

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The Prospects of the OIC

After listing so many failures on the part of the institution, one might naturally ask whether there are any prospects for the OIC in the 21st century. In our view the OIC had huge potential when it was established, and it still has the potential to play a very positive and effective role in international politics. Although it is the second largest inter-governmental organization after the United Nations, the OIC is relatively unfamiliar to ordinary people. This is mainly because of its lack of effective performance. It had generated hope among many people when it was established but its failure has equally created frustration.



A short analysis of the conflict in Afghanistan will illustrate this point. The conflict in Afghanistan originated in the context of the clash of civilizations thesis that appeared in the 1990s. The 9/11 attacks then came which reinforced this thesis. Al-Qaeda's claim of responsibility for the attack and the Taliban's uncompromising stance in defending the al-Qaeda leadership led the U.S. and its allies to invade Afghanistan. However, although the carpet bombing and indiscriminate killing of the civilian population enabled the U.S. and its allies to gain control over the entire country, the U.S. failed to eliminate either al-Qaeda or the Taliban. Initially the success of coalition forces seemed impressive, but soon al-Qaeda and the Taliban began to re-organize and Afghanistan has become prime ground for extremist activities. In our opinion, the OIC had the potential to reduce and permanently eliminate the conflict.

Apparently, foreign troops are in Afghanistan only to assist a democratic Afghan government with its mission to restore the rule of law in the country. But mounting casualties both among local civilians and among NATO troops have demanded the quick withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory. Is there any other mechanism to ensure Afghanistan's transition to stability other than having NATO troops in the country? Could the OIC play any role in the quagmire in Afghanistan? In our view, the deployment of troops from OIC countries might have been useful, mainly because the OIC troops would know Afghan culture better than NATO troops. OIC countries such as Turkey (also a NATO member), Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh might have been more acceptable to Afghans when assisting in the process of restoring order in the country. Some of these countries have already gained a reputation in their

peacekeeping roles in various parts of the world under the UN mandate. The OIC currently does not have a military mandate but creating one should not be difficult: the OIC once decided to create its own peacekeeping forces during the Iran-Iraq war. In fact, empowering the OIC would emphasize the point of Muslim self-evaluation of the conflict. In addition, the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghan affairs would have definitely improved the image of the US in the sight of many Muslims, and this would have enabled the US to peacefully withdraw troops from its territory. In other words, this would have helped achieve mutual trust, which was essential for peaceful civilizational co-existence.

An OIC troop deployment in Afghanistan along with diplomacy would have forced the Taliban and al-Qaeda to find a compromise based on Qur'anic teachings because at least on paper they claim to be fighting for an Islamic system of governance.

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In order to empower the OIC, one has to be aware of the fact that the OIC of the early 1970s is not the same as it is in 2018. The OIC of the early 1970s, particularly of the host country Saudi Arabia, had the political will to organize an assault on Israel in 1973, to carry out an oil embargo against supporters of Israel and to assert Arab and Muslim dignity. Today's



Saudi Arabia is very different from the Saudi Arabia of those days. That is why the first step that the OIC needs to take now is to move the seat of its General Secretariat from Saudi Arabia. Under the original Charter the General Secretariat was supposed to be located in Jerusalem, but since it was under occupation, it was temporarily located in Saudi Arabia. The General Secretariat could now be moved to Turkey which has taken a strong stand against Israeli atrocities on the 70th anniversary of the Nakba or catastrophe, when Israel killed 60 and wounded more than 2,000 while acting against unarmed peaceful Palestinian protesters. Turkey has demonstrated a similar strong stand against Israeli aggression in 2008 and 2014, when the latter took heavy military action against the people of Gaza. The General Secretariat could be moved to Malaysia too where former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who is destined to be the next prime minister, has already announced that he would devote his immediate attention to the problems of the ummah. Overall, Malaysian and Turkish joint leadership should be able to re-establish the OIC on stronger ground.



Endnotes

- 1- See www.oic-oci.org/about
- 2- www.oic-oci.org/is11/English/charter-en.pdf
- 3- On this subject see, Abdullah al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of the Ummah," in Journal: Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Vol. VII, No. 2 (July 1986), 606-616.
- 4- Arnold J Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs. (1925). For Cairo conference see, 81-91 and for Makkah conference 308-319.
- 5- OIC Resolution 8/10-P.
- 6- For a detailed discussion on the subject, see Abdullah al-Ahsan, Ummah or Nation, 113-119.
- 7- See OIC resolution 1/6-P.
- 8- For a detailed discussion, see Abdullah al-Ahsan, "The Never-Ending Kashmir Dispute and Its Implications on the Contemporary Global Governance and Peace," in Al-Shajarah, 22: 1 (2017), 5-34.
- 9- OIC Resolution: 8/3.
- 10- OIC Resolution 3/2 (IS).
- 11- See OIC Resolutions 10/9-E, 12/10-E etc.
- 12- Resolution 1/4 MFSAD (Ministerial Conference on Food Security and Agricultural Development).
- 13- <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=4373&refID=1226>, accessed on January 2, 2019
- 14- See, Peace, Security and Mediation Unit (PSMU) at the OIC General Secretariat in Jeddah, accessed on March 13, 2017, http://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=7863&ref=3192&lan=en.
- 15- For detailed discussion, see Abdullah al-Ahsan, "Conflict Resolution in Muslim Societies: Role of the OIC," in Abdullah al-Ahsan and Stephen B Young, Qur'anic Guidance for Good Governance. (NY: Palgrave, 2017), 193-214.
- 16- Ihsanoglu, 8.



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