

OIC: A Voice for the Muslim World?

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The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was established in 1969 with the goals of representing the Muslim world and support cooperation among Muslim nations and is the largest transnational Muslim organization representing 57 Muslim countries. Institutions like the OIC are needed not only for political reasons but also because of the feeling of alienation, insecurity and dispossession among the Muslim masses. This feeling is caused by the rapid process of tortured modernization and international politics that surround the relationship between Muslim societies and the major power players of the modern world. Furthermore, the Euro-centric historiographies of our educational systems make it virtually impossible to place non-Western histories on world history charts. History is assumed to begin with Greece and end somewhere on the two sides of the Atlantic.

Newly emerging networks of communication including the OIC are seen as potential voices for the Muslim world. Such voices are direly

needed to express the concerns of Muslim societies to foster peace, justice, and equality. The omnipresent reality of the voices of wisdom, compassion, and moderation was a leitmotif of the classical Islamic tradition, which has succeeded in overcoming its own eccentric and extreme sides. Today, the Muslim world is a world without a centre. It seems to have lost its spiritual dignity and magnanimity. It wants to join a battle in which there are no winners. It is a world without a voice.

Obviously, there cannot be one single voice for a world as vast and complex as the Muslim world. No single person, institution, or government can claim to speak for the entire Muslim world. What I have in mind is not a central authority that issues fatwas or makes declarations on issues of concern. Rather, it is something that will embody the ideal of finding the middle path of the Islamic tradition where the Muslim world will once again see itself as the "middle community" (*ummatan wasatah*). It is the "middle way" of traditional Islam "defined by that sophisticated classical consensus which was worked out over painful centuries of debate and scholarship."¹

Not one but many voices of the "middle way" have to emerge to reflect the rich diversity as well as the multifaceted concerns and anxieties of Muslim communities the world over. This is what is happening in different parts of the Muslim world. Countless Muslim organizations, small and big, conservative and liberal, local and international, are converging on the necessity of such platforms where the voices of moderation, wisdom, mercy, and serious thinking can flourish. They are seeking the "middle path" to make sense of everything from the Danish cartoon saga to the mindless killings in Iraq.

The Third Extraordinary Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit held in Mecca on 7-8 December 2005 has brought to the forefront the question of whether it can serve as a voice for the Muslim world in its struggles to cope with the political and spiritual challenges it faces. Though the OIC has been severely criticized for its ineffectiveness, as the cartoon crisis in Denmark shows, the author argues that it is bound to play a critical role in the relations between the Muslim world and the West especially at a time when the former is struck with a sense of distrust, dislocation, and dispossession.

OIC or the saga of an international organization

Can the OIC be such a platform? Given the OIC's rather uninspiring past in the last four decades, it is hard to give an answer in the affirmative. Like many other Muslim organizations, the OIC is hampered by numerous political, economic, and structural problems. Since its establishment in 1969 and official launching in 1972, the OIC has consistently failed to live up to its promise, i.e., to represent the Muslim world on a global scale, increase economic and scientific cooperation among Muslim

nations, and find a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian problem. In none of these areas did the OIC deliver. It failed over and over again and each failure led to further failure of many similar attempts. Its ineffectiveness in the massacres of Bosnia, Grozny, Palestine, Fallujah, to name a few, made the OIC further removed from the minds and hearts of Muslims across the world. Sadly, it became a joke: saying "O! I see!" and then doing nothing became the motto for the OIC.²

The political and structural problems surrounding the OIC and similar transnational institutions in the Muslim world are manifold and do not lend themselves to neat categorizations. The tension between the modern nation-state and any transnational organization that questions its legitimacy is clearly present in OIC's ongoing struggle and often disappointing failure to get its 57 members to commit themselves politically and act on key issues unanimously. Most of the member states have their own national agenda and lack the political will needed to address the issues of the Muslim world without the "rhetoric of blame"³ and without the patronage of one or another super power. Even the name of the OIC has its problems. The word "conference" is out of place if the OIC is defined as a permanent organization. The word "Islamic" is too value-laden and susceptible to rival interpretations and often, useless discussions of what makes something "Islamic."⁴

Today, the allegiance of Muslim nations to their nation-states, which are constructs of power rather than embodiments of their values and aspirations, runs deeper than we may like to think. The rising Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms in Turkey, state nationalism in Pakistan, political nationalism in Iran, the forced nationalism of resistance in Palestine, regional nationalisms in the Arab world and the numerous other forms of "nation-statism" make it almost impossible for transnational identities and institutions to take root in Muslim countries. The legacy of colonialism, the mental geography of the nineteenth century, and the return of the empire in more oppressive and subtle ways preempt the possibility of forging larger and more universal codes of allegiance.

But it is precisely because of such concerns that institutions like the OIC can and should play a constructive role in overcoming the mental and spiritual trauma created by the crisis of the nation-state on the one hand, and secular modernism and globalization on the other hand. Despite its rather disappointing past, the OIC has a chance to bring the diverse voices in the Muslim world together and work towards a shared sense of common destiny. This is urgently needed at a time when the cost of the irresponsible and unjustified acts of a few is higher than ever for the entire Muslim world.

The Mecca Forum and the extraordinary summit

It is with these concerns in mind that the OIC held a meeting in Mecca on 9-11 September 2005 under the able leadership of the new OIC Secretary-General Prof. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu. The meeting, called the "Forum of Muslim Scholars and Intellectuals Preparatory to the Ex-

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traordinary Session of the Islamic Summit Conference," was convened by HE King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah had called the meeting to address the issues of "unity" and "joint action" and set the Muslim world free from its "state of impotence and disunity it is suffering from." A similar call had been made at the tenth Islamic Summit Conference held in Putrajaya, Malaysia, October 2003, where the establishment of a Commission of Eminent Persons from the Member States was decided "with a view towards formulating a strategy and plan of action to enable the Muslim ummah to meet the challenges of the twenty first century, to adopt measures and programmes to disseminate the ideas of enlightened moderation in Islam, and to make recommendations to reform and reorganize the OIC System in order to provide it with new visions, goals and objectives."⁵ The Commission of Eminent Persons consisting of 18 persons from 18 Muslim nations held a meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan, May 29, 2005 and issued a 15-page report on the current situation of the Islamic world. The report highlighted many of the issues raised at the Mecca Forum.

The main agenda of the Mecca Forum was the reform and restructuring of the OIC in view of the current problems in the Muslim world. In the Forum, the participants discussed a long list of issues and made a number of suggestions. The themes of the forum were divided into three main areas: political, economic and scientific, and cultural-intellectual. Each panel proposed a vision, evaluated the current situation and challenges, and made suggestions as to how to achieve the projected goals. One of the themes that came up recurrently was the lack of political will on the part of member states to implement the numerous resolutions of such meetings. The gap between what is said and what is done was highlighted as a major defect undermining the credibility of the OIC and similar institutions.

The recommendations of the Forum were submitted to Heads of State in the Third Extraordinary OIC summit held in Mecca, 7-8 December 2005. Fifty-seven presidents, prime ministers, or their representatives attended the Summit. The Forum and the Summit produced three documents: the Mecca Declaration, Final Communiqué and the 10-year Programme of Action. One of the central messages of the Summit was striving for unity and solidarity among Muslim nations, fighting against terrorism and extremism of all kinds, and recovering the middle path of moderation. Corruption, poverty, illiteracy, and lack of transparency and political accountability in Muslim countries were singled out as among the most pressing issues. It was also emphasized that unity among Muslim nations should be strengthened and that Muslim countries should play a larger role in all the major international organizations.⁶

The other issues discussed included the formation of a joint Islamic solidarity fund, cooperation among NGOs, curbing extremism and preventing ethnic and sectarian clashes, establishing a balance between security and freedom, giving a larger role to women, ensuring the protection of human and minority rights in Muslim countries, combating terrorism and Islamophobia, improving relations between the Muslim world and the West, increasing economic and scientific cooperation among the OIC members states, investing more in education, and opening new offices of the OIC in places where Muslims live as minorities.

Giving just a list of the above issues attests to the enormity of the problems faced by the Muslim world today. They point to the urgency of taking action to stop the further alienation and frustration of Muslim communities throughout the world. In the absence of proper representation, such lingering problems are bound to result in chaos and further destruction. At this point, the Danish cartoon crisis gave the OIC a unique chance to play the role of a credible negotiator between Europe and the Muslim world. It was important for the OIC to make a plea of calm and moderation in the name of the Muslim world. Even though these calls did not have an immediate impact on street demonstrations, they helped start a number of official initiatives to address the crisis at an international level. OIC became the main institution to convey the message of the Muslim masses to the halls of European Union, and this is no small matter for the global representation of Muslim issues in the West.

Institutions like the OIC, if endowed with a proper vision and equipped with the necessary means, can make a difference to alleviate some of the pain suffered by millions of people within and outside the Muslim world. Otherwise, the hard realities of poverty, corruption, impotence, mistrust, anger and indifference are bound to continue to produce confused minds and hardened souls. Reversing the course of events for the better will be a historic moment not only for the Muslim world but for all the children of Adam.

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**Statesmen from
OIC member
states at the
Mecca summit,
8 December
2005**

Notes

1. T. J. Winter, "Poverty of Fanaticism" in *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*, ed. Joseph E. B. Lumbard (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), 294.
2. For a history of the OIC and its structure, see Abdullah Ahsan, *The Organization of the Islamic Conference: An Introduction to an Islamic Political Institution* (Herndon: IIIT Publishing, 1988).
3. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 18.
4. Cf. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Kylie Connor, "The Organization of the Islamic Conference: Sharing an Illusion", *Middle East Policy* 12 no. 2 (Summer 2005): 80. See also Sohail H. Hashmi, "International Society and Its Islamic Malcontents," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 13 (Winter-Spring 1996): 13-29.
5. From the opening speech by Prof. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the Secretary-General of the OIC, Mecca, 9 September 2005.
6. The Summit details and documents can be found on the OIC website <http://www.oic-oci.org>.