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Report – Webinar

“OIC at 50: Strengthening Partnership and Future Prospects”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a commemorative webinar titled *“OIC at 50: Strengthening Partnership and Future Prospects”* on September 24, 2020 celebrating 50 years of the establishment of OIC. Honorable Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Foreign Minister of Pakistan and Honorable Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimeen, Secretary General OIC, addressed the webinar through messages recorded especially for the occasion. The speakers at the webinar included: Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the OIC, Ambassador Rizwan Saeed Sheikh, Mr. Khalid Rehman, Director General, Institute of Policy Studies and Mr. Ahmed Qureshi, Executive Director, Youth Forum for Kashmir.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Research at the ISSI, who stated that the OIC’s existence is based on the idea that there is an ideological commonality among its members that is stronger than any differences. As momentous changes have swept across the Muslim world over the past decade, the OIC has emerged as an important voice defending the dignity and rights of its members. OIC has consistently taken a principled stand on two of the longest standing disputes of the Muslim World - Kashmir and Palestine. In both cases, OIC’s support and stand on these disputes has been a source of strength for the people in Indian occupied Kashmir and Palestine, who have waged a heroic struggle against the forces of occupation.

In his introductory remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that the OIC is a unique platform for voices within the Muslim world. The OIC has been active on many issues that involve Muslims around the world including issues such as rights of Muslims, terrorism, and Islamophobia. The Director General was of the view that no organization can function faster than its member states and the effectiveness of the OIC is dependent upon the effectiveness of its member states. He further stated that for Pakistan, OIC has been of a phenomenal support throughout its fight for the Kashmir cause. Pakistan has always considered the OIC as an important forum for political support on Kashmir.

In his message at the occasion, H. E. Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimeen stated that the OIC is committed to serve the priority issues at the heart of member states and its political agenda includes Palestine, Jammu and Kashmir dispute, Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Myanmar along with a number of issues of paramount importance.

Regarding developments in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and the entire Sahel region, he said the OIC has always stressed on the importance of working out peaceful solutions through dialogue and understanding, national reconciliation processes, and remains ready to support any effort to that end. He also highlighted the initiatives that the OIC has taken to combat radicalism and intolerance, to fight against Islamophobia and defamation of religion, and efforts for counter-terrorism mechanisms. For this purpose, the OIC established the ‘Voice of Wisdom Centre’ and the Islamophobia Observatory to project the true picture and peace efforts promoting values of Islam. Shedding light on joint initiatives, he said that during the Covid pandemic, the level of solidarity between the intergovernmental institutions is evident in commendable OIC action and response at this time of crisis. OIC institutions also launched a set of initiatives within the framework of joint responses and humanitarian measures supporting member states during the ongoing crisis.

H. E. Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, in his message, stated that spurred by the tragic event of the arson attack at Al Aqsa over fifty years ago, twenty five Muslim countries got together to give practical shape to their resolve to safeguarding collective interests, to promoting common values and advancing shared objectives. He said that the OIC is the embodiment of the age old ideas of Islamic solidarity inherent in the notion of the Ummah. It is a concrete manifestation of hopes and aspirations of Muslim states to speak and act in unison and have a collective voice on world stage and to have enhanced salience in global affairs. In its journey of half a century, the OIC has made significant strides, and today, with fifty seven members representing 1.5 billion Muslims spanning four continents, the OIC is the second largest grouping of nations after the United Nations. The OIC he said has served as a forum to raise voice and galvanize support for the beleaguered and oppressed Muslim peoples be it in Palestine or illegally Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir. He also said that Pakistan as a key Muslim state and the largest at the time of independence has always had the Ummah and its interests close to its heart. Pakistan is one of the founding members of the OIC and as one of its seminal members; it has played a significant role in its development and evolution.

In his keynote address, Ambassador Rizwan Saeed Sheikh stated that the OIC tries to provide a single voice to all the Muslims around the globe. The OIC was founded during the Arab-Israeli war in late 1960s and since then, it has lent institutional voice to concerns and interests of the

Muslims around the world and has become an expression of the pan-Islamic sentiment for the past 50 years. He said that like any international organization, the OIC is also made up of a collection of member states and the effectiveness of its actions will only come according to the response of the member states. He reiterated that for Pakistan, the OIC has played a significant role in raising the issue of Kashmir which has been one of the longest standing items on the OIC agenda since the 1990s. He was of the view that while the OIC is fashioned on the framework of the United Nations and it is not just the second largest international organization, but it also has a whole network of affiliated specialized organizations working under it. However, it does not carry the charter of the UN. He highlighted that OIC independent permanent Human Rights Commission, and more significantly, the Islamic Development Bank are the best performing institutions not only in the Muslim world, but also in the world of international multilateral institutions. It is important to understand that it is not the OIC resolution that is relevant to the issue of Kashmir but the UN resolution itself, and hence, it cannot take kinetic actions. Nonetheless, the OIC is putting its weight behind the issue of Kashmir in the UN, and as the second largest international organization, making the Kashmir cause relevant in the international arena. He further highlighted that although OIC is the second largest international organization, its importance and its space have been occupied by the Arab League in the world. The second issue raised by Ambassador Sheikh was Pakistan's shortcoming in utilizing the OIC as an economic organization like Turkey. He said that Pakistan needs to look at the OIC beyond the narrow lens of the issue of Kashmir and Pakistan-India conflict. Pakistan has always seen the OIC as a political entity. However, it is time that Pakistan sees it as an economic organization and gain from it in terms of trade by exploring prospective market in other member countries. In this regard, Pakistan can utilize the Islamic Development Bank to ease its economic difficulties. It can also explore trade markets in broader regions of the Middle East and West Asia, and Europe through the OIC. Pakistan can make use of the models that are already existing in the OIC that are being leveraged by the missions of Turkey and Egypt in terms of gaining trade, economic, as well as investment opportunities. Raising a concern, Ambassador Rizwan pointed out the growing issue of polarization in the OIC. He pointed out the significant rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In his remarks, Mr. Khalid Rehman stated that fifty years is a sufficient time for an organization to consolidate its position and the OIC has come a long way in becoming a consolidated

platform. Mr. Rehman said that when one looks at OIC from this perspective, it can be deemed reasonably successful to the extent that it provides a platform and continues to stick to a comprehensive charter and a number of organs, runs a secretariat and has an infrastructure in place. From the perspective of population, geographic presence and economic resources, it does represent a major part of the world. It also remains as a forum that has both homogeneity as well as diversity which is an extremely important feature required for a successful multilateral organization. He said that the OIC has spearheaded institutions which are performing successfully and elaborated that the less than satisfactory performance of the organization is due to its internal polarization which then becomes a reason for poor performance. He further said that the organization continues to raise its voice over issues in the Muslim world. Besides all this he said, it has to be said that the organization has not been able to perform effectively and does not enjoy the importance and significance as the second biggest multilateral forum of the world, although the other big multilateral forum has also not performed any better. He elaborated that the reasons behind OIC's less than satisfactory performance are interconnected and the biggest among them is the internal political differences and polarization among member states and also the lack of a proactive political agenda.

While expressing his views, Mr. Ahmed Quraishi, said that the OIC is definitely an impressive multilateral forum and its importance has not diminished. He said that the challenges have intensified and issues like Islamophobia and blasphemy are creating problems and need to be tackled. While shedding light on some of the OIC's achievements, he said that the organization has helped protect Christian and Muslim endowments in the occupied territories. Mr. Quraishi also said that the OIC has kept the Kashmir issue alive and has been the key vehicle giving representation to Kashmir. OIC is the face of Muslim states to the world and a vehicle for the positive contribution of Islam and Muslims to the global civilization. Furthermore, he said that Muslim countries and nations should not be recipients of what all the international system produces but the need to contribute to this international system is important, and the OIC is an effective tool for this purpose. He further said that the OIC can be instrumental in making contributions to the global civilization.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors, ISSI stated that the OIC, despite its constraints, has done what it is capable of doing by raising voice

for the Muslim causes. He said that the OIC has, over the years, developed an array of specialized agencies and subsidiary bodies and has a well-established and functioning institutional framework and it is the second largest international body after the UN. Moreover, he said that the Muslim world is spread over 57 countries, possessing 70% of the world's energy resources and roughly 50% of its raw materials with a nuclear member state. However, it represents only 5% of the world's GDP and most of the member countries are among the world's poorest and backward nations. Furthermore, he said that it is time for introspection and the challenge of implementing the OIC resolutions and the need for the member states to act collectively should be the priority. Pakistan, he concluded, is fully committed to the OIC.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

