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Issue Brief

The Utility of the OIC in Solving Conflicts in the Muslim World

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September 27, 2016

"All Member States shall settle their disputes through peaceful means and refrain from use or threat of use of force in their relations"¹

This is part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Charter.

But, is this being adhered to?

The OIC does have a stand. It issues statements and holds regular meetings. There is no doubt that the organisation is active. But its effectiveness is questionable.

In the current setting of today's world, states have sought international forums in which they can defend and protect their interests. In so doing, they have paved the way for the emergence of international organisations of a regional nature having quite different goals and whose geographic, political and economic diversity speaks for itself, for example: the Arab League, the African Union and the Arab Maghreb Union. However, none has managed to bring together all the Islamic States of the world. The only one that has taken Islam as the agglutinating element of the organisation, regardless of any geographic and cultural characteristics, is the OIC

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, is the second-largest inter-governmental organisation after the United Nations and has a membership of 57 states spread over four continents. The organisation is the collective voice of the Muslim world with a mandate to ensure, safeguard, and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world. This forum was established upon a decision of the historical summit that took place in Rabat, Morocco on Rajab 12, 1389 Hijri (September 25, 1969) as a result of criminal arson of Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem. In its 38th ministerial meeting held in Astana, Kazakhstan in July 2011, the OIC officially changed its name from the "Organisation of Islamic Conference" to the "Organisation of Islamic Cooperation." This change is not solely semantic, as it also reflects the OIC's intention to engage more seriously with a growing number of parties in an increasingly inter-dependent global community. It is well-placed to contribute to the prevention, management, and resolution of world conflicts.

The main objectives and commitments laid down in the Constitutional Charter of the Islamic Cooperation are to improve and strengthen Islamic friendship and solidarity among Member States; protect and defend Islam's true image and prevent its defamation; promote dialogue among civilisations and religions; strive to achieve integrated and sustainable human development, and ensure the well-being of the Member States. Furthermore, the Charter safeguards the right to self-determination and non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States, as well as their sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

However, inter-state tensions between member states have caused many problems. Saudi Arabia and Iran both are an integral part of the OIC. Both also vie for regional supremacy. Tensions between both the countries have always existed, but recently, they have hit an all time high. Anybody studying the architecture of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East would not be surprised at Saudi Arabia announcing the severing of diplomatic relations with Iran in the aftermath of the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran by violent protestors, who were demonstrating against the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. In a domino effect, Gulf countries and Saudi allies broke off or downgraded their relations with Tehran, including Kuwait, the UAE and even Sudan.

Recently, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued an angry rebuke to "blasphemous" Saudi Arabia, calling on the Muslim world to question its management of Islam's holiest sites ahead of Hajj 2016. In response, Saudi Arabia's top cleric stated that Iranians are "not Muslims". Consequently, after the two regional rivals failed to agree on security and logistics, for the first time in nearly three decades, Iran's 64,000 pilgrims did not attend the hajj in Saudi Arabia.

Since its inception, the OIC has witnessed a number of conflicts between two or more of its member states including the conflicts between Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Jordan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, and between Iraq and Kuwait. While in some cases the OIC has successfully brought the two conflicting parties together, in others it has failed to achieve its goal.

The OIC did not seek to intervene in any other conflicts among its members in the 1970s. It

never attempted to mediate the disputes between Egypt and Libya, or those between Libya and Sudan. It did not attempt to intervene on the questions of Western Sahara or Kurdistan. In fact, on many occasions the OIC itself became a victim of disputes among its member states.

A leading reason for the failure of the OIC to act as a unifying force would be the mistrust and realpolitik among the member states. As mentioned previously, the OIC's leading members – Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan – prevent it from taking action that would harm the interests of their allies, placing their own narrow goals above those of the organisation.

At its Eighth Conference of Foreign Ministers (1977), held in Tripoli, Libya, for example, three members - Egypt, Iran, and the Sudan - did not participate on the ground that they did not have diplomatic relations with the host country. The OIC's failure in conflict resolution was particularly exposed in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war.

Moreover, presently, Iran's support for the Syrian regime and Saudi opposition to the same illustrates that this realpolitik has a strong religious and sectarian resonance in the Muslim world. Others have noted these divisions within the organisation, and the lack of a clear, unified strategy.

Another pressing problem the OIC faces is that it only engages with influential local leaders. The OIC has primarily pursued a track one approach to mediation, yet should supplement its efforts by considering track two, approaching community leaders in particular to contribute to the resolution process. It should not forget that there is a wide range of potential contributors to peaceful resolutions that it can and should involve to gain more support for its efforts. These contributors include religious leaders, tribal figures, public opinion writers, academics, and civil society representatives.

Essentially, while some countries, such as Turkey and Malaysia, envision the organisation as a forum for a cultural agenda pushing moderation, others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, want a more political agenda including the spread of theocratic influence.²

The real challenge for the OIC is to involve transforming its efforts from ad hoc reaction to crises to more sustainable and systematic mediation. This challenge requires institutionalising

the process of mediation and systemising the organisation's mediation approach.

The OIC needs to recognise its responsibility. It must acknowledge its duty to its member states by contributing to lasting solutions to their conflicts. The OIC should realise that it is mediating not only to benefit these countries, but also to justify its existence and long-term interest in functioning as a forum for member states to meet and work to solve their problems.

The Muslim world can ill-afford any further escalation in a turbulent region already riven with civil wars, terrorism and sectarian clashes. In Syria alone, over 250,000 people have been killed and over 10 million have become refugees in civil strife since February 2011.

The OIC is the sole collective platform for Muslims. If the member states succumb to petulant and petty disputes then the whole organisation will become redundant. The on-going internal blame game needs to stop.

As the age old saying goes "United we stand, divided we fall".

Muslims do not need a new platform. They need to reinvigorate the existing one.

The Middle East has become an epicenter for terrorism and war. It is sending shockwaves all across the world. The internal players - all members of the OIC have failed to resolve the issues and have themselves paved way for external players to interfere in the region. The latter have their own vested interests so a solution from their end is not possible.

If a tenable solution is to be found, it has to come from within the internal players themselves. These states need to come together and draft a road map for sustainable peace in the region. They need a common ground, a common platform. The OIC must provide this platform.

Notes and References

¹ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Charter.
<http://www.oic-oci.org/is11/english/charter-en.pdf>

² Sharqieh, Ibrahim. "Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts?." *Peace and Conflict Studies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 219-236.