

POLICY BRIEFING

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation: Defined – for better and worse - by its religious dimension

Abstract

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental organisation with a strong religious element that regroups 57 Muslim or predominantly Muslim member states. Its priorities are promoting the interests of Muslim communities across the world and fighting Islamophobia, especially in the Western world.

The OIC has a loose parliamentary arm, the Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC), based in Tehran. The PUIC has a rather limited role and low visibility, as it merely promotes meetings and dialogue among the parliaments of OIC members and encourages the exchange of parliamentary experiences and best practices.

In June 2013, the OIC inaugurated a Permanent Mission Office to the EU in Brussels to increase cooperation with the EU. The EU-OIC agenda has included issues related to fighting intolerance and promoting interreligious / intercultural dialogue, as well as human rights and humanitarian assistance. A number of other sensitive issues, such as the rights and protection of Christian and other religious minorities in Muslim countries, have not yet been addressed. Some observers have suggested that the OIC may become more conservative vis-à-vis human rights after January 2014, when a new Secretary-General from Saudi Arabia takes the helm of the organisation.

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1. Origins

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental organisation consisting of 57 Muslim or predominantly Muslim member states.

The OIC has a strong religious dimension.

The OIC was in 1969.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental organisation consisting of 57 Muslim or predominantly Muslim member states. The organisation seeks to be the collective voice of the Muslim world (*al-Umma*). Formerly known as the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the OIC has a strong religious dimension that clearly distinguishes it from other international intergovernmental organisations. Among its top priorities are tackling Islamophobia, promoting the interests of Muslim communities across the world and consolidating Islamic states' coordination / collaboration in international fora and organisations.

The OIC is considered the second-largest international inter-governmental organisation after the United Nations. Its headquarters are situated in Jeddah, Saudi-Arabia, and its current Secretary-General is a Turkish diplomat, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, who assumed the post in 2005¹. Under his tenure, the organisation has considerably developed its relations with the outside world. In recent years it has sought closer links with the European Union. Following the model of its mission in New York, the OIC established a liaison office in Brussels last year to foster closer relations with the EU institutions. The Permanent Mission of the OIC to the EU was officially inaugurated in the presence of Secretary-General Ihsanoglu on 25 June 2013. Azerbaijan's former Ambassador to the EU, Arif Mammadov, has been appointed as the OIC Permanent Observer, and a Turkish diplomat, Mehmet Bilir, has been designated as his deputy.

The OIC was established in Rabat, Morocco in 1969, two years after the six-day war and shortly after the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem was set on fire. The OIC's current charter was adopted by the 11th Islamic summit held in Dakar in 2008. The charter established the objectives and principles of the organisation, with the fundamental aim of strengthening solidarity and cooperation among Member States.

2. Organisational structure

The organisation's Action Programme for 2005-2014 promotes tolerance, moderation and reforms.

The objectives of the organisation are listed in its 10-year **Action Programme**, adopted in 2005. The programme envisages the joint activities of Member States; promoting tolerance and moderation; modernising; pursuing extensive reforms in all spheres of activities, including science and technology, education, trade promotion. The charter emphasises good governance, the family values protected by Islam, and human rights in the Muslim world, especially with regard to

¹ The OIC Summit held in Cairo in February 2013 appointed Mr Iyad Madani, the former Saudi Minister of Culture as the next Secretary General as of January 2014.

rights of children, women and the elderly.

The OIC includes the following bodies:

The OIC summit meets every three years.

The Council of Foreign Ministers meets every year.

The General Secretariat is based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia and Iran have held positions of greater influence within the organisation than have more moderate Muslim countries.

- The **Islamic Summit**, composed of heads of state and government of member states. The highest authority of the organisation, the Islamic Summit convenes once every three years to deliberate, take policy decisions and provide guidance. The 12th summit was held in Cairo in February 2013.
- The **Council of Foreign Ministers**. Meeting once a year, the Council considers means to implement the OIC's general policy. It can adopt decisions and resolutions on matters of common interest, and it reviews progress in implementing decisions and resolutions adopted by the Council and the Islamic Summit.
- The **Executive Committee** holds decision-making powers between the ministerial meetings. It was created in 2005 to enhance the OIC's ability to act more effectively and rapidly on matters of international concern to its member states. The Executive Committee is composed of the chairs of the current, proceeding and succeeding Islamic Summits and Councils of Foreign Ministers, the Saudi Foreign Minister and the Secretary-General.
- The Committee of permanent representatives is composed of ambassadors of the member states accredited to the OIC.
- The **General Secretariat** is the executive organ of the OIC and implements the decisions of the two political decision-making bodies. It is based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

A number of secondary organs and institutions have been developed to achieve the OIC objectives in various areas, including culture, science, economics, legislation, finance, sports, technology, education and media, as well as vocational, social and humanitarian topics.

Historically, Saudi Arabia and Iran, both major contributors to the OIC's budget, have been dominant voices. Despite the fact that there are more Muslims living in south and southeast Asia than in the Middle East, Asian Muslims have remained peripheral in Islamic affairs. While Saudi Arabia and Iran maintain their strong positions in the OIC, new powerful voices have emerged in recent years, as Turkey and other 'moderate Muslim states' (including Malaysia, Morocco, and Indonesia) have gained clout in the organisation. These countries have a less political agenda; instead they see the OIC as a forum for promoting good governance, cultural exchanges, moderation and dialogue.

3. Human rights

OIC member states adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) in 1990.

In 2012 a permanent human rights commission was established within the OIC

The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) is a declaration of the OIC member states, adopted in Cairo in 1990, that provides an overview of the Islamic perspective on human rights and affirms Shari'a (Islamic law) as its sole source. The CDHRI declares that it serves as 'general guidance for Member States [of the OIC] in the field of human rights'. Many OIC countries frequently criticise the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for its perceived failure to take into account the cultural and religious context of non-Western countries.

The recent establishment of a permanent human rights commission within the OIC is an important step in implementing the declaration. The first session of the OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission was held in Jakarta in February 2012. According to its charter, 'the Commission shall advance human rights and fundamental freedoms in Member States as well as the fundamental rights of Muslim minorities and communities in non-member States in conformity with the universally recognised human rights norms and standards and with the added value of Islamic principles of justice and equality'.

4. Protecting Muslims and resolving conflicts

The OIC has been involved in efforts to resolve conflicts in countries with Muslim populations.

The OIC has always attempted to resolve conflicts among its member states by peaceful means. During its early years, the OIC performed relatively well in this regard, notably when acting as an intermediary between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Jordan (with the heads of state of Saudi Arabia and Egypt also playing a strong role) and between Bangladesh and Pakistan (with the OIC Secretary-General playing a leading role). These successes may be attributed to the OIC's capable and sincere leadership.

However, in the early 1980s the organisation failed to persuade Iran and Iraq to adhere to the proposals of the Islamic Peace Committee, which it had set up

More recently, the OIC's attempts to facilitate peace-making efforts in the southern Mindanao region between the government of the Republic of Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) have not led to the implementation of the 1996 peace agreement. The OIC's efforts in this conflict have been channelled through its Peace Committee for Southern Philippines (OIC-PCSP), and the organisation has offered a USD 16-million grant to the troubled region through the Islamic Development Bank (IDB),.

The organisation also supports Thailand with conflict resolution in the southern province of Pattani and has been involved in addressing the disastrous humanitarian situation in Somalia.

The OIC is a potentially valuable partner for the EU in conflict mediation, although it currently lacks sufficient resources and political will.

The OIC's promise in the field of conflict mediation in the Muslim world stems largely from its 'cultural competence'² and religious character. This proved an advantage in Somalia, where assistance from an Islamic organisation was more acceptable to the Shabab Movement, allowing the OIC to 'open the way' to other international donors. The OIC may not impose its positions on the conflicting parties through force, but its moral influence has been effective – for example, in the case of the 2006 Mecca Declaration between Iraq's Sunni and Shia leaders. The OIC could serve as a useful partner to the United Nations and other international organisations – such as the EU, the African Union or the Arab League³ – and could play a complementary role, in particular by mediating between its member states or parties to a conflict inside a member state.

For the time being, however, the OIC Secretary-General and his office do not have the necessary financial and human resources or the political support of the member states to mobilise effective mediation missions on their own.

5. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue

In the West, the OIC is best known for its role promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

In its efforts to eradicate Islamophobia, the OIC has initiated a result-oriented dialogue with the West. A resolution sponsored by the OIC was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 24 March 2011. Resolution 16/18 on 'Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief' condemns discriminatory practices against Muslims based on their religion and beliefs. Its adoption marked a defining moment for the OIC, which has searched for various novel ways to combat religious and ideological hatred. The OIC has hosted three follow-up meetings on the implementation of the resolution at experts' level.

The OIC has gained recognition from Western states these efforts, and notably for a series of meetings known as the 'Istanbul Process', a joint initiative related to the above-mentioned resolution and launched in 2011 by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu.

6. Coordinating positions within the UN and its bodies

The OIC aims to coordinate its member states' positions

The OIC Secretariat has tried to extend the organisation's influence by capitalising on the votes that member states enjoy in other international organisations, most notably the UN. Although on many issues, particularly

² Ibrahim Sharqieh: Can the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) resolve conflicts? *Peace and Conflict Studies*, Volume 19, Number 2, pp. 162-179.

³ The following organisations have an observer status in the OIC, the League of the Arab States, the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the African Union and the Economic Cooperation Organisation.

in international organisations, but is not always fully successful in this endeavour.

of an intercultural or interfaith nature, OIC members present a common front, this has not been true for all questions. In November 2012, two OIC member states (Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina) abstained from the vote in the UN General Assembly on whether to grant Palestine the status of a UN non-member observer state. The issue was raised at the OIC's Cairo summit in February 2013, where 'it was stressed that failure to vote for those resolutions submitted on behalf of the OIC at international fora and in particular in the UN and the announcement of positions different from those agreed upon is a departure from the consensus imposed by the duty of Islamic solidarity between Member States'⁴.

7. The Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC)

The Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC) is a loose parliamentary organisation based in Tehran.

Since 1999 the OIC has a loose parliamentary arm in the form of the Parliamentary Union of the OIC member states (PUIC). The PUIC's permanent headquarters are in Tehran and bring together the parliaments of the organisation's 53 member states. The current Secretary-General of the PUIC is Mahmud Erol Kolic from Turkey.

One of its objectives is to promote encounters and dialogue among OIC member states' parliaments and their deputies in order to exchange experiences.

The objectives of the PUIC are described on its website as including⁵:

- 'introducing the sublime precepts of Islam and seeking to disseminate them while emphasising the various characteristics and humanism of the Islamic civilisation;
- 'enhancing and supporting the implementation of the Islamic principle of consultation (Shura) in all OIC Member States, in accordance with the Constitution and circumstances of each member state;
- 'providing a framework for comprehensive and fruitful cooperation and coordination among parliaments of OIC members in international fora and organisations;
- 'promoting meeting and dialogue among parliaments of OIC members and their deputies, exchanging parliamentary experience, discussing economic, cultural, social and political issues of interest to the OIC members,
- 'addressing grave challenges and attempts to impose cultural, political and economic domination, and adopting appropriate recommendations and decisions on such issues;
- 'strengthening contacts, cooperation and coordination with other parliamentary, governmental and non governmental

⁴ The OIC Journal, Jan-March 2013, p. 26. (www.oic-oci.org)

⁵ <http://www.puic.org/new/index.php/about-puic/about-puic1/objective>

organizations, with the aim of advancing common objectives;

- 'fostering coordination among peoples of the world in order to respect and defend human rights and humanitarian principles and establishment peace, based on justice;
- 'confirming that nothing in the present Statute shall authorise the Union or its Organs to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any Member State and whatever is related to these matters in accordance with the OIC Charter and UN Charter.'

8. The EU's engagement with the OIC and sensitive issues

The EU and the OIC have discussed interreligious dialogue, promoting tolerance, humanitarian assistance and human rights.

The consensual adoption of the UN HR Council's resolution 16/18 (2011) — which called for denouncing religious intolerance — marked a turning point in the relations between the OIC and the EU.

Although the EU's primary interests in engaging with the OIC are promoting intercultural dialogue and tolerance and fighting religious hatred, mutual cooperation goes beyond these fields. For example, both the EU and the OIC are 'institutional donors' to the UN Peace-building Commission and cooperate on issues such as Syria in the Human Rights Council. Humanitarian assistance development is also of joint interest, as are questions of religious tolerance. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton addressed an OIC Ministerial meeting for the first time in Djibouti on 16 November 2012. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is also developing contacts with the OIC.

The OIC's 'Ten year Strategic Action Plan', adopted in 2005, enlarged the scope of the OIC's interests to include human rights (by establishing an independent human rights commission within the organisation), women's rights and political participation, civil liberties and social justice. It remains to be seen, however, how this will be implemented after January 2014, when Secretary-General Ihsanoglu cedes his position to the former Saudi Minister for Information, Iyad ben Amin Madani.

The position of Christian and other religious minorities in OIC member states has not yet been fully addressed

The cohesiveness however, of the OIC on these issues is not absolute. That said, both the OIC and the EU have clearly felt that a mutual engagement is beneficial — as was highlighted by a joint statement issued on 20 September 2012 after the video 'Innocence of Muslims' and cartoons from the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* were publicised.

It is advisable that the EU should make use of the engagement with OIC in order to raise also some sensitive issues that are equally important for the EU side such as the rights and protection of Christian and other religious minorities in Muslim or predominantly Muslim states. Tolerance and respect are universal principles that should be mutually promoted and most importantly applied.

Relations between the EU and the OIC have not always been smooth. A

notable bone of contention has been the OIC Secretariat's persistent efforts in recent years to upgrade of the status of the northern part of Cyprus, which is not under the effective control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus. EU Member States reacted strongly to the OIC's decision to grant observer status to the 'Turkish Cypriot State'⁶ after the Annan Plan on the reunification of Cyprus was rejected in 2004. As these Member States considered the OIC's move a contravention of international law⁷, it also impeded relations and cooperation between the OIC and the EU as a whole.

Finally, another challenge the OIC is likely to face in the years ahead relates to the religious split between Muslim Sunnis and Shia. The serious political dimensions of this schism may prove catalytic for the future of the organisation, which could explain the OIC's silence on the issue. And yet the issue cannot be ignored, as the cataclysmic violence taking place in Syria underscores today.

⁶ In 1983 the Turkish-held area declared itself the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'. The status of northern Cyprus as a separate entity is recognised only by Turkey, which keeps around 35 000 troops in the north of the island.

⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 550 (1984) 'Reiterates the call upon all States not to recognise the purported state of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' set up by secessionist acts and calls upon them not to facilitate or in any way assist the aforesaid secessionist entity. Furthermore, the Security Council 'Calls upon all States to respect the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, unity and non-alignment of the Republic of Cyprus'.

Figure 1:

Map of the Organisation of
Islamic Cooperation



Source: <http://www.oic-oci.org/index.asp>