THE OIC AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
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Basic Background on OIC

- The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the second-largest international organization in the world, after the United Nations (UN), and is the world's only international, inter-governmental organization whose membership and *raison d'etre* are defined by religion. Founded in 1969 after an attack on the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the OIC currently has 57 member-states united by the mission specified in the organizational charter: namely, "*the consolidation, preservation, and expansion of the umma* as a transnational community of the Muslim faithful."[1] (italics added)

- The 21st century has seen a measurable expansion in the OIC's global brand, activism, and influence on core issues defined in the organization's charter. OIC countries tend to vote as a block in the UN and to cooperate in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In mid-2013, the OIC established a Permanent Observer Mission to the European Union (EU) in Brussels, which works collaboratively with the OIC's Permanent Observer Offices to the UN in both New York and Geneva.

Parameters of OIC Engagement in Conflict Resolution

- OIC leadership has moved significantly over the last decade to increase the organization's engagement in conflict resolution within the specific parameters of the OIC Charter, whereby the OIC is tasked to protect the "national rights, dignity and independence of all Muslim peoples in different countries of the world including the non-Muslim states."[2]
- Towards the goal of protecting the interests of the world's approximately 1.5 billion Muslims, OIC engagement in conflict resolution has focused exclusively on issues involving Muslim-majority countries or Muslim-minority communities in sub-state, inter-state, and international violence.
- OIC conflict-resolution efforts are built on the OIC Charter's subordination of commitment to UN principles and structures to support for Islamic religious principles. Especially salient in this regard is the mission of the OIC's Independent Permanent Commission on Human Rights, which is tasked to promote "the civil, political, social and economic rights enshrined in…universally agreed human rights instruments*, in conformity with Islamic values.*"[3] (italics added)

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Relevance of OIC Conflict Resolution Strategy for Global Peace, Order, Universal Human Rights

- Many of the world's most geopolitically complicated and geostrategically significant conflicts fall within the parameters of what the OIC identifies as mission priorities—in the Middle East (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Israel and Palestine), in Africa (Nigeria, Somalia, Central African Republic), in Asia (Kashmir, Philippines, Thailand), and in Europe (Bosnia). Given the geography of current global disorder and violence, and given the OIC's stated mission and priorities, the nature and effects of OIC engagement in conflict resolution deserve consideration, in order to assess the plausible concern that OIC involvement may limit the possibilities for durable peace arrangements that conform to international human rights law and for sovereignty principles crucial to global order and security.

- Until now, US policymakers have paid minimal attention to patterns of OIC engagement on conflict resolution, largely overlooking the effect of OIC leadership and leading OIC member-states on the organization's involvement in conflict zones with direct security and strategic value for the United States. Instructive examples are as follows: (1) leading OIC members states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) have provided direct and indirect support (intelligence, weapons financing, territorial respite) for members of Hamas and ISIS (now, The Islamic State; formerly, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant); (2) the main opposition candidate, fielded by the country's main *secularist* and *rightist* parties, to Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in that country's presidential elections in August 2014 is Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, who served as architect of the expansion in OIC conflict-resolution activities during his 2004-2014 tenure as OIC Secretary General; and (3) current OIC Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani, former Minister of Information and Minister of the Hajj in Saudi Arabia, has moved, declaratively and operationally, to build out the OIC platform for conflict-resolution activities.

OIC Conflict Resolution: Programmatic and Operational Evolution

- The OIC Charter "exhorts its Member States party to any conflict to seek peaceful solution through mediation, the use of good offices, arbitration, conciliation or judicial settlement…, in cooperation with other international or regional organizations with the objective of preserving peace and security to settle disputes peacefully."[4]

- The OIC does not have a single body that manages conflict resolution. Instead, conflict-resolution efforts have been directed almost exclusively by the OIC's main executive organ, the Council of Foreign Ministers,[5] supported by initiatives from a combination of OIC organs, the most important of which are the Humanitarian Organisations Council (oversight of OIC member-state efforts to engage civil society in response to humanitarian concerns), the Islamic Community of the International Crescent (responsible for humanitarian and medical assistance), and the Islamic Development Bank (promotion of economic development and social progress through a range of financing tools).

- Beginning in the 1990s, OIC leadership began to experiment with various member-state initiatives for conflict prevention and resolution, through dialogue platforms—e.g. the OIC's Summit in Iran in 1997 launched the ongoing initiative of a Dialogue of Civilizations.

- **Operational Shift.** The tipping point for systematic programmatic expansion of OIC conflict-resolution activities came under Ihsanoglu's tenure as Secretary General. Ihsanoglu organized a brainstorming session in Damascus in 2004 to develop OIC structures to address "…the numerous conflicts taking place *within the Muslim world*, [by] developing OIC's mechanisms for conflict resolution, including establishing future peacekeeping capabilities.[6] (italics added) In 2006, the OIC Council of Ministers endorsed "…efforts to promote dialogue of cultures and civilizations, Arab, Islamic, and European cooperation and cultural diversity, to implement and strengthen the mechanism of the Islamic World Cultural Strategy and to highlight *the Islamic view on cultural diversity and ways to deal with international changes.* "[7] (italics added)

- **Priorities and Approach.** Three priorities have come to define the evolution of OIC conflict-resolution mechanisms, strategy, and cases, especially over the last decade: (1) the effort to improve capacity and efficacy in conflict-resolution efforts; (2) the move to develop self-financed, autonomous OIC conflict-resolution (i.e. independent from UN organs) mechanisms involving either the organization as a whole or collaborative efforts by particular member-states; and, (3) the unwavering focus on conflicts that are perceived to be critical for the interests of the global Muslim community, the *umma*, with minimal demonstrated interest in conflict resolution in cases where Muslims are unaffected.

- **Operational Mechanisms.** The rubric of conflict resolution for the OIC encompasses the following types of operations: fact-finding missions to conflict zones, participation in international diplomatic negotiations and/or representing Muslim parties to conflict, assignment of OIC special envoy and/or contact group to conflict case, public declarations and statements, financial assistance for humanitarian relief, leveraging OIC member-state votes in international organizations on specific conflict cases, mediation services to conflict parties (usually when intra-Muslim conflicts), participation in international (e.g. UN) and/or regional (e.g. African Union) peacekeeping forces.

Geography and Selected Cases of OIC Involvement in Conflict Resolution

South and East Asia: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kashmir, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand

West Asia/Middle East: Iraq

Europe: Bosnia, Bulgaria

Africa: Central African Republic, Mali, Somalia, Sudan

Summary of types of engagement: appointment of Special Envoys of Secretary General of OIC to countries in which there is conflict; fact-finding missions; OIC public statements and condemnations of

violence against Muslims or, in cases involving Muslim-Muslim violations, against sectarianism; offers of mediation between governments and non-Muslim minority groups (militant groups, non-governmental organizations); internationalization of conflicts to bring attention to condition of Muslims, through global fora such as the UN and the OSCE, including bloc voting to influence and/or change positions of international community on specific conflicts; provision of humanitarian and development assistance targeted for Muslim populations; member-state contribution to international peacekeeping forces.

Preliminary Conclusions on Capacity and Effects of OIC Conflict Resolution

Capacity Deficits. OIC conflict-resolution efforts remain ad hoc and reactive, so efficacy in creating conditions for peacemaking and/or durable peacebuilding and conflict transformation remains measurably low in terms of definitive outcomes that terminate violence and conflict and, especially, that produce durable, post-conflict solutions. Systematization of existing conflict-resolution mechanisms into operational categories (i.e. mediation, negotiation and/or good offices, fact-finding missions, humanitarian and crisis relief and development and reconstruction initiatives) could significantly enhance conflict-resolution outcomes, as could integration and cooperation of OIC efforts with existing international and regional undertakings.

Capacity Strengths. The OIC has been most effective in using the particular identity of the organization *qua* global, transnational, Islamic actor, to appeal to extremist and/or separatist and/or militant Islamist groups (e.g. Taliban in Afghanistan, Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Philippines) involved in conflicts; in internationalizing conflicts and violence involving Muslim populations by mobilizing OIC member-states as voting bloc for UN General Assembly resolutions on conflicts involving Muslims (e.g. Bosnia), by leveraging member-state positions in international organizations (e.g. the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) on conflicts involving Muslims (e.g. Ngorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia), and by media initiatives representing the real and perceived victimization of Muslim communities in conflicts and violence (e.g. Bosnia, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Sudan); and humanitarian relief and/or economic development and reconstruction initiatives underwritten by the OIC and/or individual OIC member-states.

Tensions between OIC Conflict Resolution and International Order. Paradoxically, the OIC's comparative strength as a conflict-resolution agent is also the main cause for reasonable doubts and serious concerns about the engagement of the OIC in conflict resolution within the parameters of peace and order built on accepted standards and norms of international law.

On the one hand, the OIC has particular credibility with Muslim (states and non-state actors, as well as minority communities) parties to conflicts, based on shared faith and religious identity. Furthermore, in cases of sectarian (intra-Muslim) violence, the diversity of the OIC member-states (a reflection of pluralism within Islam) offers a model for non-violent, sectarian cooperation and collaboration.

However, the conflict-resolution potential of the OIC is severely constrained by the *raison d'etre* and organizing principles of the organization, as outlined in the OIC Charter, which: (1) give explicit and implicit preference to the unity and interests of the *umma* over any other organizing unit (e.g. the state) of international relations; (2) define a Muslim as having unconditional belief in Islam; and (3) commit to

Muslims living according to the principles of sharia law.

Furthermore, insofar as the OIC leadership has explicitly stated that the organization is committed to conflict-resolution activities in cases involving Muslim-majority countries or Muslim-minority populations, the capacity of the OIC to engage in conflict-resolution activities that make for durable solutions *grounded in the norms, practices, and structures of international law (especially, international human rights standards premised on principles of universality)* appears to be limited, at best, and deleterious, at worst, for global peace and order.

The implications are sobering. OIC interests in conflict resolution fall squarely within some of the world's most complex and dangerous conflict zones, including cases of violent conflict over control over natural resources and cases involving the intersection of religious-freedom violations, democracy deficits, and terrorist activities (e.g. Central Asia, the Middle East, East Africa). Considering the exceedingly mixed record of leading member-states in the OIC (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan, and, increasingly, Azerbaijan) in countering the global spread of violent extremism, in rule-of-law treatment of non-Muslim religious minorities and "non-conforming" Muslims, as well as in respect for the sovereignty of neighboring countries, the pattern and effects of OIC conflict-resolution activities deserve considerable attention by international policymakers.

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[1] O'Toole, Kevin J. "Islam and the West: the Clash of Values," in *Global Change, Peace and Security* Vol. 20 (Issue 1): 31.

[2] Yusuf, Imtyaz. "The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World," 331. Yusuf, I. 2007. "The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World," in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27(2), 331.

[3] http://www.oic-oci.org/is11/english/Charter-en.pdf.

[4] Salah, T. "The Role of the OIC in Mediation and Facilitation: Challenges and Successes," in OIC Journal (2011, 16): 19.

[5] http://www.oic-oci.org

[6] http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35051&no_cache=1#.U8lZgbF8R3A

[7] O'Toole, 31-34.