

WHAT IS THE ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION (OIC)?

May 2013

By Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou*

- The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is a multi-lateral, inter-government organization currently comprised of 57 member-states” and recognized internationally as the official institutional voice of “the Muslim world.” Drawing from the organizational and operational model of the United Nations (UN), the OIC is the second largest inter-government organization in the world after the UN. The OIC has a global footprint: current member-states are drawn from four continents—Asia (28), Africa (26), South America (2), and Europe (1)—and include countries with both Muslim-majority populations and non-Muslim-majority demographics. Several states and non-state entities enjoy observer status, as do international organizations such as the UN, the Arab League, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).
- The OIC was founded in 1969 as the Organization of the Islamic Conference—the official change to the current name and logo occurred in 2011—through the initiative of the government of Saudi Arabia, which brought together Muslim heads of state and government from around the world in an Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat, Morocco. Today, key member-states that provide the executive and administrative, intellectual, financial, and personnel support that sustains the OIC are Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan.
- According to the 2013 report of the Statistical, Economic, and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (a subsidiary organization of the OIC, located in Ankara, Turkey), 2010 census data estimate the total population of OIC member countries at approximately 1.563 billion people, or 22.7% of the world’s population.

WHAT IS THE OIC’S MISSION? HOW & WHERE DOES THE OIC PROMOTE ITS MISSION AND AGENDA?

- The Permanent Headquarters of the OIC is located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where the organization’s executive organ, the General Secretariat, directs a broad network of OIC bodies, subsidiary and specialized organs, standing committees, and affiliated institutions.
- The current Secretary General of the OIC is Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a Turkish academic and career diplomat serving his second, consecutive term in the post (2005-2014). The Secretary General implements all decisions of the two main OIC organs: the Islamic Summit (a meeting every three years attended by monarchs and heads of state) makes all policies designed to achieve the goals of the OIC Charter and the considers issues of concern for member-states and the world Muslim community; the Council of Foreign Ministers (an annual meeting of Foreign

* *Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou is Co-Chair of the Southeastern Europe Study Group and the Study Group on Muslims and Democratic Politics at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University.*

Ministers of OIC member-states) reviews progress on OIC strategic planning and policies, and adopts policy resolutions.

- The OIC's core mission is to "galvanize the Ummah into a unified body"—to strengthen the solidarity and cooperation of the universal community of Muslims—through political, economic, and social initiatives. All OIC Charter declares that all member-states are committed to "the purposes and principles of the UN Charter."
- Under the rubric of "modernization and moderation," Sec. Gen. Ihsanoglu has led a significant expansion in the vision and activities of the OIC, based on the passage in 2005 of a Ten-Year Program of Action for the 21st Century (TYAP) and the adoption of a revised OIC Charter. Accordingly, there has been a significant uptick in OIC activities in UN fora, European Union (EU) bodies, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), along with the strategic growth in OIC presence and activities with the US government, think-tank policymakers, and media opinion-makers. Focal areas of activity have been human rights, countering terrorism and violent extremism, and cultural diplomacy and religious dialogue.

WHY DOES THE OIC MATTER FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW AND INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

- The OIC Charter is categorical about the organization's core mission of activating the Ummah as a unified body and promoting the interests of the Ummah. The OIC Charter is equally clear that member-states of the OIC are committed to "the purposes and principles of the UN Charter."
- There are questions about the compatibility between the OIC's commitment to universal human rights under international law, in general, and to international religious freedom, in particular, when considered within the context of the OIC's 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, because "all rights and freedoms identified in the Declaration "are subject to the Islamic Sharia;" because all member-states affirm human rights "in accordance with the Islamic Sharia;" and because states are empowered with the determination of human right, which are thereby diminished as inherent and inalienable to the individual.
- Two OIC organs and bodies raise serious questions about the organization's full support for international law and the universal human right of international religious freedom: the Observatory of Islamophobia spearheads the effort to combat "defamation of religions," the equivalent of a global blasphemy law, by actively engaging in bilateral relations with non-OIC governments and in international bodies, such as the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council; the Permanent Commission on Human Rights qualifies its promotion of civil, political, economic, and social rights stipulated in international human rights law according to "conformity with Islamic values" and in service to "the interests of the Islamic Ummah."