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Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts?

Ibrahim Sharqieh

Abstract

This article examines the potential of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to contribute to mediation of conflicts in the Muslim world. Based on interviews with OIC senior officials and government officials from Iraq and the Philippines, as well as research involving other primary and secondary sources, the author analyzes four cases in which the OIC participated in mediation efforts: the Philippines, Thailand, Iraq, and Somalia. The article concludes with an assessment of the advantages and challenges of including the OIC in such mediation efforts, as well as recommendations related to capacity-building and inter-organizational partnerships that might enhance the potential for the OIC to play a constructive role in conflicts involving the Muslim community.

In its 38th ministerial meeting held in Astana, Kazakhstan in July 2011, the OIC officially changed its name from the “Organization of Islamic Conference” to the “Organization 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 interdependent global community. With 57 member states representing 1.6 billion Muslims around the world and a history of mediation in conflict zones, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the second largest international organization after the United Nations (UN), is well placed to contribute to the prevention, management, and resolution of world conflicts. Despite a number of challenges, the OIC has already scored notable successes in mediating a number of deep-rooted conflicts, especially within member

states. Nonetheless, the Organization has not yet reached its full potential in terms of mediating and resolving international conflicts. Reforming its processes through capacity building and other means, as well as revising its mediation approach (i.e., building partnerships with other international organizations), the OIC will become better able to contribute to the resolution of seemingly intractable conflicts, especially in places where the Muslim community is involved.

History of OIC Mediation Efforts

The OIC has long played an important role in mediation and conflict resolution, in particular taking action in countries that are members of the OIC or intervening when a Muslim community is part of a conflict. This paper presents four cases as examples of the OIC's involvement in mediation: Philippines, Thailand, Somalia, and Iraq.

Philippines

Insurrection in the Mindanao region began when the Philippines gained independence in 1964, with the country's Muslim community in the south meanwhile calling for self-determination. In 1970, the conflict became violent, with Nur Misuari, the leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), leading the charge against the Government of the Philippines (GOP) (Wilson 2009).

OIC intervention in this conflict began in 1972 with its first fact-finding mission to the Southern Philippines. The OIC later used this mission's report, in 1974, to issue an appeal calling on the GOP and MNLF to engage in negotiations toward a peaceful solution to the crisis while preserving the sovereignty of the Philippines and its territorial integrity (Ihsanoglu 2010).

The OIC's insistence on treating the conflict within the framework of the territorial integrity of the Philippines helped determine the type of approach – peace negotiations – that would be used to settle the conflict. Indeed, Buendia (2004) suggests that one major reason

Mindanao was prevented from seceding was the pressure that the OIC applied on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – rival to the MNLF and advocates of secession. The OIC insisted that addressing the cause of the Muslims in the southern region could only be achieved through a negotiated settlement with the Government of Philippines. Furthermore, the OIC refused to recognize the MILF as the sole representative of Muslims in the Philippines in the 2003 OIC summit meeting in Malaysia, thereby weakening the party and its call for secession (Buendia 2004).

Through its intensive mediation efforts, the OIC was able to bring the GOP and MNLF to a peace agreement in 1996 that emphasized the general framework for peace in the south and appointed Nur Misuari as Governor of the autonomous southern region. However, Parliament failed to ratify the agreement, leading to a new wave of fighting that ended with the arrest of Misuari for raising arms against the state (Ihsanoglu 2010).

The trust both parties held in the OIC allowed the organization to intensify mediation efforts once again. Ultimately, the GOP accepted the OIC's offer of re-starting the peace process and launching a new fact-finding mission. Furthermore, the GOP reacted favorably to the OIC's appeal and moved Misuari from prison to a hospital and later to a more comfortable detention house (Ihsanoglu 2010). To achieve tangible outcomes, OIC mediation extended its scope, speaking directly to multiple stakeholders; its 2006 fact-finding mission met with Parliament and a variety of civil society organizations. Furthermore, the mission visited Sulu Island – where fighting was still taking place – and negotiated directly with the parties to reach a ceasefire.

OIC mediation in the Philippines showed a high level of persistence and long-term engagement with the conflict and its parties. Recently, the OIC re-engaged with the parties to explore the chances of implementing the 1996 peace agreement, identify obstacles facing its execution, and provide recommendations on how to overcome them. To do so, the Islamic

Development Bank (IDB), in coordination with the OIC, donated \$16 million to the MNLF for poverty alleviation and reconstruction of infrastructure in the Southern Mindanao region. Furthermore, five joint working groups were established – sharia and the judiciary, the political system and representation, education, natural resources, and issues of economic development – to oversee implementation of the 1996 final peace agreement in their respective assigned topics and provide recommendations to move the implementation of the peace agreement forward (Al-Saadi 2007).

While the OIC was able to broker a peace agreement between the MNLF and the GOP, it is obvious that implementation, as in most peace agreements, remains a challenge for the OIC, particularly as it lacks a mechanism to enforce the agreement. Demonstrating long-term commitment to finding a just solution for the conflict is not, in itself, sufficient to ensure long-term peace. The OIC therefore needs to be more innovative in paving the road for successful implementation of the 1996 peace agreement or for the creation of a new agreement. Finally, it is unclear how sustainable the impact of OIC mediation has on the parties themselves. This has been demonstrated by the arrest of Misuari in November 2001, after which the MNLF resumed violence and significantly undermined the viability of the 1996 agreement. According to Baruah (2002) the November violence indicated that “Misuari and his supporters still have fight left in them.”

Thailand

There are approximately four million Muslims in Thailand, 80% of whom live in the five southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun (Smith 2004). Instability in southern Thailand reached a new level in 2004 with violence breaking out after attacks against army and police units. Subsequently, violence intensified when 80 Muslim youth suffocated while they were being held in detention in army trucks (Smith 2004). In response to the heightened tensions, Thailand imposed martial law in most Muslim areas.

While some foreign security analysts try to understand the connection between the conflict in southern Thailand and global *jihadist* movements like Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (Liow 2004), reports in the Muslim world view the conflict as primarily between an oppressive Thai Buddhist state and its repressed Muslim minority (Yusuf 2007). The Muslim community called for a change to the status quo by identifying a number of demands, including the establishment of an autonomous government in the south, recognition of their language and culture, and control of their resources and developments.

The OIC intervened in 2005 after receiving an invitation from the Thai government to do so (Thai Government Public Relations Department 2005). The OIC's mission focused on observation and assessment of the condition of Thai Muslims in the southern region. The OIC focused mainly on mediation, capitalizing on its diplomatic leverage with the Thai government and credibility with the Muslim community. According to the OIC (2005), its efforts were focused on easing "the obstacles facing negotiations on allowing Thai Muslims to enjoy their acquired rights as citizens. It would also aim at halting security authorities' acts of violence and oppression against them, so as to support the efforts to enthrone peace and stability in Thailand, within the framework of respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Furthermore, the OIC sought to help discredit stereotypes and misconceptions that often form obstacles to dialogue, understanding, and resolution. The OIC delegation concluded that unrest in the south was neither the result of religious discrimination against the Muslims nor was it rooted in the religion itself; instead, it could be traced to culture and historic neglect of the south (*Bangkok Post* 2005).

In 2006, the Thai government changed its approach with the south from the use of force to negotiation and dialogue, especially after interim Prime Minister Sarayud Chulanont offered an apology to the Muslims in that region (Yusuf 2010, 49. See also, *The Nation* 2006). In 2007, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu visited Bangkok to express his appreciation

for the change in the government's approach and to offer cooperation in resolving the crisis through economic, social, and education initiatives. Furthermore, Ihsanoglu used his leverage with the Thai Muslim community, asking them to respect the law and then asking the government to equip them with equal rights (*The Nation* 2007).

Somalia

State failure in Somalia in 1991 led to a catastrophic humanitarian situation, which included civil war, drought, and famine and led to the loss of over one million lives (BBC 2012). While piracy on the shores of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden triggered international intervention to enforce maritime security, few took note of worsening humanitarian conditions within Somalia. In 1993, the United Nations intervened in reaction to the crisis, but unfortunately the UN-sponsored peace process did not make sufficient progress due to differences between various Somali political groups.

The OIC, for its part, tried to contribute to the efforts to save Somalia by establishing a Contact Group. Due to the complexity of the situation on the ground, however, the Contact Group made almost no progress and, like the UN-led peace process, ultimately reached a dead end. Efforts to provide aid stalled in Somalia with no tangible process, leading Ethiopia to intervene militarily in 2006. This action in fact revived the peace process, and the OIC participated in the negotiation process which led to the signing of the Djibouti agreement of August 2008 between the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), as well as the expansion of the transitional parliament and the election of a new President (Ihsanoglu 2010). Furthermore, the OIC supported peace efforts that followed the signing of the Djibouti agreement and became active in the International Contact Group on Somalia. In addition, at the 2009 Brussels Donors Conference, the OIC pledged \$210 million in various forms of assistance to Somalia (Ihsanoglu 2010).

The OIC also intervened on the ground. In March 2011, the organization established a humanitarian office to improve coordination of assistance with organizations of OIC member states that were operating in the region. In July 2011, a coalition of 38 national and international NGOs was formed and allowed for the creation of a more effective system that aptly divided labor and specialization. The coalition coordinated humanitarian operations in six areas, with a lead agency for each: food; health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); camp management; information and communication; and education and training (Islamic Relief 2012).

In brief, OIC intervention in Somalia contributed to an effective response to the country's disastrous humanitarian situation, especially at a time when the Shabab militant group, which only trusted the OIC to deliver humanitarian assistance, forced many international organizations to leave the region. The organization then provided access to affected areas that were separated from the rest of the world, provided a coordination framework within the organizations of OIC member states, and coordinated and signed Memoranda of Understanding with international organizations, namely the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), to deliver humanitarian assistance to affected areas (OIC-UN 2008).

Iraq

The sectarian tension that followed the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein's regime reached unprecedented levels of violence between the country's Sunnis and Shias. Violence targeted ordinary citizens, holy shrines, mosques, graveyards, and residential areas. With such a widespread and vicious level of violence, a wide national reconciliation process was necessary.

The bombing of the two holy shrines in the city of Samara in 2006 served as a trigger for intensive third party intervention. OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu became personally involved, reaching out to Sunni and Shia leaders and inviting them to a reconciliation meeting in Mecca. Ihsanoglu, known as a reformer, had promised to “re-energize” the organization by making administrative changes, in particular seeking a greater role for Muslim nations in international affairs, including permanent representation in the UN Security Council, and this initiative was a major part of achieving that goal (BBC 2010). To ensure success, the OIC secured support of all shareholders, including Iraqi and other regional and international parties involved in Iraq (Ihsanoglu 2010). Furthermore, the OIC paid close attention to the time and place of the reconciliation meeting. The OIC selected Ramadan, October 2006, and Mecca as, respectively, the holiest month and place for the Muslims. This religious dimension of the time and place added considerable moral pressure on the parties to elicit a cooperative attitude. Approximately 50 Iraqi Muslim scholars representing both the Shia and Sunni communities met, and, after long discussions, signed what came to be known as the Mecca Declaration on October 20, 2006. The declaration “rejected the notion of killing among Muslims and agreed on the principle of inviolability of human soul” (Ihsanoglu 2010). According to an Iraqi official, the OIC’s intervention in Iraq’s sectarian violence was notably successful and contributed to the achievement of a “social peace” in several parts of the country (Author’s interview with Mohamed Al-Dawraki 2011).

Comparative Advantage

The OIC’s unique ability to influence conflicts in the Muslim world can be seen in three different areas: cultural competency, moral power, and partnerships.

Cultural Competency

Acting as an umbrella for 57 countries to meet and discuss their internal affairs, the OIC has become a “knowledge depot” for the issues and challenges facing its member states.

In addition to its linguistics capabilities (it has representatives speaking languages spoken in all 57 member countries), the OIC has developed a special expertise in the cultural components that drive conflicts in member states (Saleh 2011). The major advantage of possessing these cultural and linguistic skills is the OIC's ability to conduct knowledge-based and culturally sensitive mediation. In remarks at George Mason University, Secretary General Ihsanoglu noted that "regional organizations had greater vested interests in resolving conflicts in their own backyards and a better ability to mobilize home-grown mechanisms to address the root causes of conflict" (Lyons 2011). Furthermore, the OIC's cultural competency has granted the organization access to specific conflict zones that would have otherwise remained unreachable. Due to its rigorous understanding of local Somali culture, for example, the OIC was allowed by the Shabab Movement to intervene in the delivery of humanitarian assistance in their areas of control. The UN's World Food Program coordinated closely with the OIC to deliver food aid in the Shabab controlled area of Somalia. Without the OIC's access, however, the UN would have likely never been allowed to enter, and the humanitarian condition would have worsened.

Moral Power

Unlike intervention by other international organizations like the UN, the OIC conducts its mediation "outside the legal box." That is, there are no legal consequences nor are there forceful resolutions – like Security Council resolutions under chapter seven – if parties refuse to negotiate with the mediator, when that mediator is the OIC. While UN intervention takes a "stick and carrot" approach, OIC mediation takes a "carrot" only – or a carrot and soft stick – approach. Physical force – the stick – is replaced in the OIC's case with moral power. Three major factors make the OIC mediation approach more effective. First, other organizations like the UN already engage in force-based mediation, and the OIC approach could therefore play a complementary role to this approach. Second, entering

mediation on a voluntary basis, in the absence of legality and physical force, may elicit a better response from the conflict parties. They will realize that the final settlement decision is ultimately their own and will therefore not be forced to engage in agreements that they consider counter to their interests. Agreements reached on this basis will likely be more sustainable, as they emerge from the full conviction of the parties themselves. For example, the 2006 OIC-brokered Mecca Declaration between Iraqi Sunni and Shia has survived and contributed a great deal to bridging the divide between the two parties. Third, an approach based on moral power allows for the use of a set of tactics that are not available to other organizations. Applying its moral power in mediation, the OIC – the mediator – can employ moral pressuring tactics like shaming to deter escalatory behavior and honoring to encourage or reward attitudes or actions leading to a constructive resolution.

Partnerships

Though they share many similar causes, processes, and dynamics, conflicts generally develop certain features that make them unique. For mediation, this means that no one approach or single mediator can function for all. Some organizations are able to make a difference in certain conflicts, while others are better suited to resolve different conflicts. Partnerships between international organizations are therefore necessary to respond effectively to the mediation requirements of world conflicts. For its part, the United Nations realized the need for partnering with the OIC to appropriately and effectively respond to conflicts in the Muslim world. In December 2006, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to encourage greater cooperation between the UN and the OIC, specifically “welcoming the efforts of the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in strengthening the role of the Organization in conflict prevention, confidence-building, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation in member States

as well as in conflict situations involving Muslim communities” (United Nations General Assembly 2006).

UN partnership with the OIC is necessary to keep channels of communication open in difficult areas where the UN – and other regional organizations – does not enjoy full access (Saleh 2011). In Libya, for example, the UN’s relationship with the Qaddafi regime deteriorated sharply after the passage of Security Council resolution 1973, which allowed for NATO intervention (UN Security Council 2011). In addition, the regime cut ties with the Arab League when the organization also called for imposing a no fly zone in Libya. The African Union, on the other hand, was considered too close to the regime and therefore lost credibility with the rebels. The OIC, however, was perhaps the only international organization that maintained open channels of communications with both the Qaddafi regime and the rebels. According to senior OIC official Cenk Uraz, the OIC’s intervention in Libya focused on two major points: supporting Security Council resolution 1973 and protecting the integrity of Libyan territory (Author’s interview with Cenk Uraz 2011). In this particular instance, the need for partnership with the OIC became essential when the UN and other international organizations were unable to perform mediation with the regime or the rebels. Ihsanoglu (2011) notes that the OIC, as early as 22 February 2011, condemned the excessive use of force against civilians in Libya, and called on the Libyan Authorities to immediately stop violence against innocent Libyans and emphasized the need to address their claims peacefully and through serious dialogue instead of assassination and blood shedding (Author’s interview with Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu 2011).

Other examples of how the OIC’s unique circumstances enabled the organization to assist in mediation include the Philippines, where the OIC also enjoyed special relationship with the both parties – the government and the rebels – and was therefore able to negotiate successful mediation in 1996. Notably, the Moro National Liberation Front trusted only the

OIC to mediate as a neutral party. As these examples show, partnership with the OIC could play a constructive and complementary role – rather than competitive – to UN efforts to resolve domestic and regional conflicts.

Challenges

Promoting OIC mediation, however, faces a number of challenges. First, there is a challenge of possible duplication of mediation efforts with other regional and international organizations. The Arab League and African Union in particular are active in many OIC member states. Of the 57 OIC members states, 27 are also members of the African Union, 22 countries are members in the Arab League, and seven are members of both the Arab League and the African Union. This double and triple membership of some countries in organizations performing similar mediation work may lead to a conflict of interest and a competition for loyalties. For example, would a country like Morocco be supporting a mediation initiative of the OIC or the Arab League when it holds full membership in both organizations?

A second challenge is that OIC mediation needs to be supported by strong political will. Since he came to office as the Secretary General in 2005, Professor Ihsanoglu has focused through his organizational reform program on involving the OIC in mediating conflicts in its member states. The impact of the Secretary General's mediation activities, however, remains limited without firm political will from member states. This political will should translate to empowerment of the office of the Secretary General by delegating authority and allocating the appropriate financial resources for his mediation efforts. The OIC is set to play a complementary role with other regional and international organizations. Through proper collaboration, mediation can take a multi-method approach, and together such organizations may have greater potential to achieve success in mediating intractable conflicts.

A third challenge would be what Turan Kayaoglu, associate professor at the University of Washington and an expert on OIC affairs, describes as “mistrust and realpolitik among the member states” (Author’s interview with Kayaoglu 2012). According to Kayaoglu, “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 organization.” Moreover, as Iran’s support for the Syrian regime and Saudi support for the Bahraini government illustrate, this realpolitik has a strong religious and sectarian resonance in the Muslim world. Others have noted these divisions within the organization, and the lack of a clear, unified strategy. Haroon Moghul, executive director of the Maydan Institute, an Islamic communications group, argues that “some countries, such as Turkey and Malaysia, envision the organization as a forum for a cultural agenda pushing moderation, while others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, want a more political agenda including the spread of theocratic influence” (Johnson 2010).

Finally, the OIC’s organizational structure has been an impediment to effective mediation and decision-making. According to Kayaoglu (2012), until the reform initiative of 2005 the body’s “intergovernmental structure” required consensus among member states for major decisions to be made, significantly hindering the efficacy of the organization. Moreover, executive power was delegated to the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which met only annually and was thus unable to make decisions at short notice. Again, only with the 2005 reform was the Executive Committee established, allowing a margin of efficiency in the decision-making processes and enhancing the organization’s ability to act as a mediator.

Enhancing Conflict Resolution and Mediation Effectiveness

As its history shows, the OIC has successfully mediated a number of serious conflicts, many among its member states. However, the next challenge for the OIC will involve

transforming its efforts from ad hoc reaction to crises to more sustainable and systematic mediation. This challenge requires institutionalizing the process of mediation and systemizing the organization's mediation approach. This article concludes with several recommendations related to the process and approach taken by the OIC that would enhance its mediation efforts.

Process

Enhancing the capacity building of the Secretary General's Office.

A central step to building capacity would involve the creation of a well-funded as well as properly staffed and trained mediation unit within the OIC. The OIC Secretary General's desire to have closer involvement in conflict zones is not sufficient to enhance the Organization's conflict resolution portfolio. OIC member states will need to support this desire by granting the proper political will and devoting necessary resources to structurally adapt the organization into one that is more capable to work in mediation.

Establishing an efficient internal protocol that is able to respond to the nature of intervention, mediation, and conflict resolution.

One major principle of such a protocol will be the delivery of sensitive information in a timely manner, avoiding the obstacles of organizational bureaucracy. Designation of a mediation envoy linked to the office of the Secretary General would help establish such a protocol.

Building expert-level connections and institutional linkages with organizations specializing in mediation and conflict resolution.

Establishing these frameworks of collaboration will help facilitate the transfer of critical knowledge and would also boost mediation capacity in the OIC. A number of programs could be created to support this objective including exchange programs, expert short assignments, joint fellowships, joint conferences and events, and visiting fellowships.

Approach

Recognizing the responsibility.

The OIC must acknowledge its duty to its member states by contributing to lasting solutions to their conflicts. The OIC should realize 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. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was correct in pointing out: "We cannot expect others to solve our problems ... This [conflict resolution] is its [OIC's] founding mission. Although everyone acknowledges this mission, there is no mechanism to realize it" (Kardas 2009).

Taking a multiparty approach to mediation.

Especially after escalation, conflicts generally attract the attention of many third parties. The Darfur conflict, for example, has witnessed interventions from multiple parties including the UN, African Union, the OIC, Arab League, and the EU. To make its approach more effective, the OIC, like other third parties, will need to continue to coordinate its efforts with other interveners to ensure that it is complementing rather than duplicating the work of others.

Developing an implementation mechanism of negotiated peace agreements.

Implementation of any agreement usually triggers many challenges that in some cases end up undermining the spirit of the agreement itself. The OIC may want to consider building on its current intervention approach by either providing a road map for the implementation of peace agreements or becoming more closely involved in the implementation itself. The OIC made remarkable success with the 1996 agreement between the Philippine government and Moro Front. However, the implementation of this agreement faced a number of challenges, primarily the development efforts in region. For example, the Islamic Development Bank pledged \$16 million for development efforts, while only \$2 million were actually spent. Also,

it should be noted that later the intervention of OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to facilitate implementation of the peace agreement led to the successful release of Mr. Nor Miswari, Chairman of the MNLF, in 2008. However, much more is still needed to lead to comprehensive implementation of the peace agreement (Author's interview with Ezzedine Tago 2011).

Engaging 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 (on track one and two cooperation, see Allen Nan and Strimling 2004). There is a wide range of potential contributors to peaceful resolutions that the OIC 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.

Capitalizing on its profile of neutrality and impartiality.

At least theoretically, member states perceive the OIC as having no vested interest in specific outcomes of their conflicts. Traditionally, it has been argued that neutrality of the mediator is a key factor for influential and successful mediation (Touval and Zartman 1985). The OIC should make use of its perceived impartiality to further strengthen its role as mediator. In his speech at George Mason University, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu said that “the strength, honesty, credibility, neutrality, and impartiality of the OIC made it an extremely useful player in conflict resolution” (Lyons 2011). The organization's recognized place in the international community can support its ability to facilitate conflict resolution as a neutral mediator.

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