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Conflict among Muslim Nations: Role of the OIC in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract: The OIC has always attempted to resolve conflicts among its member states by peaceful means. During the early years of its existence, the OIC performed better particularly in resolving the conflicts between PLO and Jordan and between Bangladesh and Pakistan perhaps because of capable and sincere leadership. However, it failed miserably in the 1980s and 1990s to resolve conflicts related to Iraq. Although the Qur'ānic ideas of mediation within the members of the *ummah* are generally understood by Muslims, the OIC has not always been able to translate them into practice to bring peace among conflicting parties. Had the OIC undertaken the task strictly on the basis of fairness and justice, perhaps, the wars of 1991 and 2003 could have been avoided.

Although the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) stands to foster cooperation among Muslim states in economic, social, and cultural fields, its prime objective is to "promote Islamic solidarity among member states (Article II A-1)." Conflict resolution among member states, therefore, is one of the principal functions of the OIC.

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 Organization (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. This paper examines some of these conflicts and analyses the role played by the OIC in regulating conflicts among its member countries.

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The Approach

In the area of conflict resolution, the OIC has inherited two traditions: the Islamic tradition of about 14 centuries and the legacy of the League of Nations and the United Nations. The Qur'ānic guidance on the issue is:

> ... if two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them; but then, if one of the two [groups] goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably [with them]: for verily, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are brethren. Hence [whenever they are at odds,] make peace between your two brethren, and remain conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy (49: 9-10).

It is interesting to note that the Qur'ān does not romanticize human behaviour. Believers are human beings and, as such, are prone to fighting. The unique characteristic of the believers, as depicted in the Qur'ān, is that they make peace among themselves. Did the OIC follow this guidance to promote peace among its member states?

As an international organization, the OIC also had the legacy of the League of Nations and of the United Nations. These organizations used negotiation, good offices, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration methods in conflict resolution and these constitute lessons for the OIC. These methods of conflict resolution are in conformity with the principles of Islam. Which of these methods did OIC use in resolving conflicts among its member states?

This study examines the role of the OIC in regulating the conflicts among its member states and evaluates the nature of its mediation attempts. In dealing with these conflicts, however, the OIC seems to have been powerless due to lack of legitimacy under the current international political system. The OIC has not always been able to translate them into practice to achieve peace among conflicting parties. Occasionally, the OIC has sought assistance or cooperated with other international organizations such as the UN in resolving these conflicts, and yet such attempts have not always been successful. This paper evaluates these dilemmas of the OIC. Terms such as dispute, crisis, and conflict have been used interchangeably to express disagreements between two or more members of the OIC.

PLO – Jordan Conflict

The first internal conflict that the OIC encountered was the conflict between PLO and Jordan in 1970. PLO was not a regular member of the OIC at that time, but was an emerging force against the Israeli occupation of Palestine representing a significant segment of the Palestinian population. Jordan, having accommodated a large number of Palestinian refugees, claimed to be the legitimate political representative of the Palestinian people. While Jordan was more pragmatic in dealing with Israel, the PLO at that time had a revolutionary approach to confront Israel. This difference in approach brought the two parties into a direct armed confrontation in 1970. An understanding of the conflict demands some references to recent history of the area.

The establishment of the state of Jordan could be traced to post WW I period in the area. The British defeated the Osmanlis (Ottoman) with the support of some local tribesmen under the leadership of Sharif Hussein who came to prominence as the representative from the Ḥijāz to Osmanlī parliament. In 1921, his son, Abdullah, was installed as the Amir of Amman with a grant of 5,000 pound subsidy by the British. The British also helped Abdullah to create an army. In 1946, Abdullah declared himself the king of the area under his control. He also extended his support for the British effort to establish the state of Israel in the area. He strongly opposed the Arab League proposal of creating the state of Palestine in 1948. Instead, he formally declared the creation of the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan in 1949. In 1951 Abdullah was assassinated by a Palestinian gunman. Most Palestinians were angry at Abdullah's role in creating the state of Israel in the area.

However, it was a fact that most Palestinians sought refuge in Jordan particularly after the 1967 war. Palestinian refugees wanted to continue their struggle against the Israeli occupation of their land, and attempts were made to use Jordan as their base to attack Israeli targets. On its part, Jordan was not willing to let Palestinians use its land. By then the Palestinians had formed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to streamline their struggle against Israeli occupation. This brought PLO and Jordan into direct confrontation. In 1970, an armed conflict occurred between the two groups. The Jordanian army crushed the PLO in Jordan. After the outcome of

the conflict was decided in the battlefield, two fellow members of the OIC, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, played a significant role in patching up the differences between the two sides. The PLO was expelled from Jordan but agreements were made in Cairo and Amman according to which both parties were given specified roles in Palestinian politics. The PLO gradually received international recognition as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. In a resolution, the OIC expressed its appreciation for the efforts of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in seeking to reconcile two of its members.[1]

Almost no information on the process of mediation was made public, but from the OIC resolution it is clear that Egypt and Saudi Arabia used their good offices to reconcile between the two conflicting parties. The individual role of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and President Abdul Nasir of Egypt definitely played the most significant role in the negotiation. Both leaders were genuinely concerned about the Palestinian problem, and conflicting parties were convinced about their sincerity. As a result, the conflict was resolved to the satisfaction of both parties.

Bangladesh–Pakistan Conflict

The next challenge that the OIC encountered was the conflict between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The conflict between the two countries originated when both entities constituted one independent nation-state from 1947 to 1971. Muslims from the extreme western and extreme eastern parts of India jointly fought against the British colonial administration and Indian nationalism. However, after independence, military and bureaucratic elite, who came mainly from Western Pakistan, gained control over Pakistani politics, and deprived the common people of their legitimate rights. Freedom-loving East Pakistanis were the first to rise against the military-bureaucratic oligarchy of Pakistan. As early as 1948, it was reported in the *Constituent Assembly Debates* that, "a feeling is growing among the Eastern Pakistanis that the Eastern Pakistan is being neglected and treated merely as a 'colony' of Western Pakistan."[2] Soon, East Pakistani representatives in the Constituent Assembly identified two issues of disagreement with West Pakistani representatives. East Pakistanis felt that, by declaring Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan, the importance of their language

(Bengali) was being undermined. Some also believed that attempts were being made to transform the numerical majority of the Bengalis in Pakistan to a minority status.

The claim for Urdu being the only national language was supported by the fact that Urdu was the only language that was generally understood in all regions, while it was not the language of any particular region of Pakistan. On the other hand, the argument for Bengali was that Bengali was the language of the majority of the population of Pakistan and in many respects was a more developed language than Urdu. Therefore, many Bengalis expected their language to be at least one of the official languages of Pakistan. However, most leaders seemed to have been more concerned about the unity and stability of the new country since it consisted of two separate territories divided by an enemy land. They believed that a linguistic division would only set the two geographically divided territories further apart. There was little discussion in the Constituent Assembly on the question of language, and the bureaucracy-dominated central government attempted to resolve the issue by force.

This eventually led to a civil war in 1971. During the civil war, the OIC Secretary General, Tengku Abdul Rahman, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, visited both parts of Pakistan in an effort to find a political solution to the conflict. The Secretary General was accompanied by representatives from Kuwait and Iran. When the OIC delegation attempted to visit India, where most of the leaders of *de facto* Bangladesh had taken political refuge, the Indian authorities prevented them from entering the country on the ground that the OIC had earlier expelled the Indian representative from its First Islamic Conference in 1969.[3] As a result, the mission failed.

The OIC renewed its effort to mediate, now between two independent Muslim nations, after Bangladesh became officially an independent country at the end of 1971 following the military defeat of Pakistani armed forces in the Eastern wing of Pakistan. The general approach of the OIC clearly indicated its commitment to democratic values. In a resolution, the OIC decided to entrust:

> the Secretary General with the duty of contacting Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, in Islamabad, and Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, in Dacca, in order to arrange for a meeting between them and a

> delegation of six members, of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers consisting of Algeria, Iran, Malaysia, Morocco, Somalia and Tunisia ... to bring about agreement, conciliation and brotherhood between the two elected leaders in an atmosphere of Islamic brotherhood, freedom and dignity, as well as to study ways and means of assisting both leaders to solve the problems.[4]

The Secretary General, Tengku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, established contact with both Pakistani and Bangladeshi authorities. But the process was not very smooth. Tengku Abdul Rahman later recalled in an interview:

> I was then in Cairo.... I immediately sent a letter [to Bangladeshi authorities] through the Indian ambassador. The reply I received was from the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. It said that since we [the OIC] had not cared during the earlier suffering, Bangladesh authorities do not find themselves in a position to receive us.[5]

However, when the Indian authorities were reminded of earlier OIC efforts, they apologized to the OIC Secretary General and the process of reconciliation began.

The Secretary General attempted to arrange a meeting between the Pakistani and Bangladeshi leaders in Makkah during the annual pilgrimage. But the Bangladeshi leader declined to sit with his Pakistani counterpart until the latter officially recognized Bangladesh as an independent country.[6] The Pakistani leader, on the other hand, was under tremendous public pressure opposing the idea of recognition. He, however, took the advantage of calling for an OIC summit conference to discuss the results of the 1973 war between Israel and a number of Arab countries.

The Second Islamic Summit Conference was called in Lahore in February 1974, and in the process the Pakistani leader recognized Bangladesh as an independent nation and invited its leader to the conference. Bangladesh responded positively, and since then both Bangladesh and Pakistan are active participants in OIC activities.

However, the OIC has not been effective in resolving other crises and conflicts among its member states. 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. Most of these issues involved two or more members of the OIC. On the contrary, on many occasions the OIC itself became victim of disputes among its member states. 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.

Iran–Iraq War

The OIC acted quickly to mediate between Iran and Iraq when they went into conflict in the early 1980s. As soon as the war broke out between the two countries in September 1980, the Foreign Minister's Conference of the OIC met in an extraordinary session in New York during the UN General Assembly session. A goodwill mission, headed by Pakistani President Ziaul Haq, was formed "in the hopes of bringing the warring parties to negotiations."[7] Ziaul Haq immediately visited Tehran and Baghdad to persuade the leaders of the two countries to settle their dispute peacefully. Ziaul Haq was joined by the PLO leader, late Yasser Arafat, for the same purpose. But their attempts did not succeed.

The OIC continued with its efforts, and during the Third Islamic Summit Conference, held in Makkah/Taif in January 1981, the mission was reshuffled and renamed. Under its new name, Islamic Peace Committee, now headed by the Guinean Revolutionary leader Ahmad Sekou Toure, was composed of the heads of governments of Bangladesh, the Gambia, Pakistan, the PLO, Senegal, and Turkey. After the death of President Sekou Toure in 1983, the Gambian President Dawda Kairaba Jawara led the Islamic Peace Committee. The Summit Conference called both parties to cease hostilities and declared that the OIC had agreed to "form an Islamic emergency force entrusted with the task of ensuring the implementation of the ceasefire, should the need arise."[8] Iran had already announced its boycott of the conference on the ground that it would never sit with the representative of what it called aggressor Iraqi regime. The Iraqis, on the other hand, not only tried to convince the Summit Conference

that Iran was responsible for the conflict; it also secured OIC's approval to host the following Foreign Minister's Conference in Baghdad.

The Islamic Peace Committee, however, went on with its efforts to bring the war to an end. The powerful Committee visited both capitals and made a number of proposals based on the principle of nation-state sovereignty. It identified that the *Shāṭ'al-'Arab* waterway was the main issue of disagreement between the two countries. It, therefore, proposed that the decision on the waterway be placed to a committee composed of OIC members acceptable to both parties; it also proposed to continue negotiations for peaceful settlement of other disputes between the two countries. The Committee proposed a cease-fire date with a timetable for the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Iranian territories. The Committee also proposed that the cease-fire and the withdrawal "shall take place under the supervision of military observers drawn from member countries of the OIC." It urged both countries to exchange declarations of non-interference in internal affairs of the other country. The Peace Committee firmly affirmed that the "OIC countries will guarantee the observance by both sides of the commitments undertaken on the basis of the package peaceful settlement and, if necessary, maintain observers on both sides of international frontier for a certain period."[9]

Neither Iran nor Iraq paid much attention to these proposals. The Iranians demanded the OIC to first identify and punish the aggressor in the conflict. Iran wanted the OIC to do this without participating in its meetings. Iraq, on the other hand, remained part and parcel of the OIC system. The 12th Foreign Minister's Conference was already scheduled to be held in June, 1981 in Baghdad. The Iranians requested a neutral venue for the conference, but the request was rejected on the ground that Iran had earlier boycotted the Third Islamic Summit Conference, which was held in Makkah/Ṭā'if, Saudi Arabia. At the inaugural session of the 12th Conference of Islamic Foreign Ministers, the Iraqi President declared that:

> Iraq is relieved of any moral or legal responsibility for the continuation of the conflict: the responsibility lies squarely on the officials of Iran, for they have so far not exerted any serious and sincere efforts to halt the conflict and reach a peaceful, just and honorable settlement in this dispute.[10]

At the end of the conference, the OIC decided to make the statement of the Iraqi president a part of its official document because it contained "useful guidance for the Organization."[11] Thus the OIC lost its credibility to be a mediator in the conflict. Yet, the OIC continued its moribund efforts to bring an end to the war.

Outside of the OIC's official efforts, one of its member states, Algeria, attempted to mediate between the two conflicting parties as soon as the war began. However, its Foreign Minister, Muhammad Benyahya, who had earlier brokered a major agreement (1975) between the two countries, was killed in a plane crush in Iranian sky when he was travelling from Istanbul to Tehran to discuss the matter with Iranian authorities. As a result, the effort collapsed at a very early stage of the initiative.

Other than the OIC, the UN was also involved in bringing an end to the war. The UN Security Council adopted a number of resolutions beginning with the Resolution 479 of September 1980 calling for the cease-fire. However, it too took almost eight years to really make the cease-fire effective, through the Resolution 598 of 1987. In a resolution of its own the OIC expressed its "satisfaction on ending the war," and "hoped that they [the conflicting parties] redouble their efforts in their direct negotiations under the auspicious of the UN Security Council and their strong determination to implement it thoroughly."[12] The OIC also expected a "just, permanent and comprehensive settlement of the conflict." It emphasized the urgent need for the release of prisoners of war in accordance with the Geneva Convention through the UN and other relevant international bodies. Thus, the OIC acknowledged its inability to resolve a major conflict in the Muslim society.

Background to Iran-Iraq Conflict

Some historians would like to trace the origin of the Iran-Iraq problem very early in history,[13] but the historical differences in the relations between Arabia and Persia seem to have been exploited in the conflict between Iran and Iraq than they really were.[14] Origins of the recent Iran-Iraq conflict should rather be traced to the 20th century. Like Jordan, contemporary Iraq also was carved by the British colonial administration following World War I. In the process certain communities such as the Kurds were denied statehood. Also, the

question of *Shāṭ'al-'Arab* waterway was not settled to the satisfaction either of Iran or of Iraq. As a result the countries in the region took advantage of their relative strengths and weaknesses of their neighbours to define their international borders.

In 1975, the King of Iran, Muhammad Reza Shah, took the advantage of his cordial relationship with the United States to "negotiate" a treaty with Iraq by adopting the *thalweg* principle in *Shāṭ'al-'Arab* waterway although traditionally Iraq had controlled the waterway. Since most of the waterway flows from Iraq, Iraqi leadership seemed to have accepted the treaty as an "interim solution" only.[15]

Within years (February 1979) Iran witnessed a revolutionary change, and that apparently changed the perception of both countries on the issue. Iraq seemed to have found the opportunity to revise the 1975 treaty, for Iran now was openly against the United States, and therefore, had no military and diplomatic support from the US or any other Western powers that it enjoyed earlier. As one author puts it, "by mid-1980, the Iraqi leadership had obviously concluded that the menace posed by Iran could best be countered by transposing the dispute from the sphere of ideological and psychological warfare to military action – and that such undertaking was feasible."[16]

Iraq began to accuse Iran of provoking Iraq and prepare the ground for an all out assault. According to one author:

> Iran first launched a series of assaults on a number of cities within Iraqi territory ... (then caused) the sudden explosion of a bomb at a peaceful gathering of students at the University of Mustansiriya in Baghdad on April 1, 1980. Very soon, this was followed by attempts on the lives of Tariq 'Aziz, Deputy Prime Minister, and Latif Nasif Jasim, Minister of Culture and Information....[17]

This claim, however, seems to have been exaggerated mainly because, as another author puts it, the "total absence of any Iranian military preparation was unmistakably obvious in the first few weeks of the war."[18]

To prove their point, however, Iraqi authorities arrested a *Shī'ah* religious leader, Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr, and his sister on the ground that they were involved in anti-state activities. Baqir al-Sadr reportedly died in the Iraqi prison a few weeks later. This created a

heavy tension among the *Shī'ah* population in Iran.

On their part, the revolutionary leaders in Iran seemed to have been busy consolidating the revolution. They were still fighting against whom they considered internal enemies of the revolution. Simultaneously, they continued with their rhetoric not only against the United States, but also began to raise their fingers against most Muslim regimes in neighbouring countries.

Iraq seems to have taken full advantage of this situation. One observer of the situation summarizes the Iraqi perception before the war as follows:

1. The Iraqi leadership believed that the Iranian armed forces were in disarray following the revolution and they were in no position to defend the country.
2. The Iraqi leadership wanted to take advantage of this situation of the Iranian revolutionary government to alter the 1975 agreement to re-establish total Iraqi sovereignty over *Shāṭ' al-'Arab* waterway, and also to take control over a number of islands in southern gulf.
3. Iraq also believed that the people of the Iranian territory of Khuzistan, who spoke Arabic and which Iraq officially called Arabistan, would welcome an Iraqi "liberation" of their territory.
4. The belief that the regime of Ayatullah Khomeini would collapse soon.
5. The Iraqi regime also expected to become a regional power by championing the "Arab cause" after defeating Iran.[19]

However, in public, Iraq justified the attack on Iran claiming that it was carried out in self-defence. In supporting its action, Iraq cited a case in international law saying that its action was "a necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means and no moment of deliberations."[20] Iraq was building up its troops along the Iranian borders since April 1980. On September 4, 1980, the Iraqi president officially accused Iran of violating and bombing Iraqi territories, and dispatched troops to capture one of the islands in the Gulf, and on September 7, 1980, he sent a warning note to Iran on the subject. The all-out formal Iraqi assault began on September 22, 1980.

Other Mediation Efforts

We have already mentioned some unsuccessful mediation efforts on the part of the OIC. The Non-aligned Movement also attempted to mediate in the conflict, but like the OIC its efforts also met with failure. It has also been pointed out that the war at last ended through the mediation by the United Nations. It is instructive to examine in greater detail the way in which the issue was handled by international bodies.

The United Nations Security Council met four days after the official beginning of the war (September 26, 1980). Two days later it adopted Resolution 479 calling for a cease-fire. But the resolution lacked persuasive wordings to convince the warring parties to adhere. In fact, as Gary Sick has rightly pointed out, "during the first six years of the Iran-Iraq war, most of the actions of the Security Council varied between leaving things much as they were or making them worse."[21]

The Security Council even refused to use the term "war" to describe the state of affairs between the two factions. It used the term "situation," perhaps because it wanted to avoid "the Security Council's responsibility under the UN Charter to determine if an aggression had occurred." And under such circumstances, it would have to identify the aggressor, which it wanted to avoid. Perhaps, "the superpowers and others concluded that their interests could best be served by letting the two regimes exhaust themselves on the battlefield."[22]

Resolution 479 also failed to call for Iraqi withdrawal from Iranian territories, which the UN Security Council normally does under such circumstances. It may be pointed out that during the early days of the war Iraq made significant gains in capturing Iranian territories. This indicates a clear bias in favour of Iraq by members of the Security Council. Quoting a United Nations source, Gary Sick says:

> Iraqi Ambassador to the UN Ismat Kittani was able to delay the first formal Security Council meeting on the war by promising that Iraq would quickly 'solve' the problem. Arab sources who were in contact with the Iraqi leadership in the first days of the war claimed privately that Iraq's war strategy was consciously modelled on Israel's six-day campaign in 1967.[23]

Officially, the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim, after consulting

the President of the Security Council, appealed to both parties to "exercise the utmost restraint and to do what they could to negotiate a solution to their difficulties" and to "desist, as a first step towards a solution of the conflict, from all armed activity and all acts that may worsen the present dangerous situation and to settle their dispute by peaceful means."[24]

Iraqi responses to these calls have been more prompt and diplomatically mature as compared to those of Iran. The Iraqi representative to the UN secured an invitation to address the members of the Security Council even before Iran had formally responded to the Security Council proposals. In his speech, the Iraqi ambassador attempted diplomatically to corner Iran by accusing Iran of violating the 1975 Algiers Agreement, and for attacking Iraqi territory. In his response to the Secretary General's letter, the Iraqi President took a diplomatic offensive and explained Iraq's willingness to abide by the cease-fire proposal and became a "good guy" in the eyes of the members of the Security Council. On its part, Iran responded to the letter a few days later rejecting the resolution and squarely blamed Iraq for imposing the war on Iran. Iranian leadership also demanded punishment for the perpetrators in the conflict. Iran seemed not to care for diplomatic sophistication at all. It rather antagonized many international observers by continuing its revolutionary rhetoric not only against the United States and Israel, but also against the neighbouring Muslim countries.

Within a few years, however, the Iranian leadership recognized the need for sophistication in diplomatic relations. In 1984 a diplomatic offensive was launched with a briefing by the leader of the revolution to officials of Iranian foreign missions, but that was of little use. Meanwhile Iraq seemed to have become desperate in achieving military victory in the conflict. It launched indiscriminate attacks on Iranian cities targeting mainly civilians and using chemical weapons to achieve its goal. But because of Iran's isolation from the international community, no action was taken against Iraq. The Security Council condemned the use of chemical weapons, but took no action against such a heinous crime. Also, when the US shot down an Iranian commercial aircraft, Iran was not able to muster enough support in the UN to condemn the US. In the battle field, both Iran and Iraq gained occasional victories throughout the eight

years of the war, but they were not able to translate them into permanent gains and to impose a military solution to the problem.

Eventually the war ended because of the importance of safe shipping through the Gulf, and to secure oil supply from the region. Both countries were compelled to accept the UN Resolution 598 of 1987 to end the war. Yet, it took more than a year for both parties to officially accept the Resolution. The main issue of conflict, the question of *Shāṭ' al-'Arab* waterway, was left for the countries involved to resolve. In April 1990 (perhaps when he was contemplating an attack on Kuwait), the Iraqi President wrote to the President of Iran inviting the latter to negotiate the final status between the two countries.

The Iranian President responded positively saying that, "In truth, had the issues raised in your letter been considered eight years ago, and in lieu of soldiers, messages had been dispatched, today the two countries of Iran and Iraq and possibly all the Islamic Ummah would not have been confronted with such tremendous loss and disaster."[25] Through a number of correspondences between the two presidents, without any single face-to-face meeting, both countries agreed to follow the 1975 treaty. This development can hardly be considered a lasting solution to the conflict. This is because despite the maintenance of diplomatic relations between the two countries, their relationship was far from cordial and neighbourly. In fact, Iran and Iraq did not break diplomatic relations even during the eight years of war.

Causes of the Failure of the OIC

Clearly, the OIC had succeeded in resolving PLO-Jordan and Pakistan-Bangladesh conflicts, but it failed to resolve the Iran-Iraq conflict. The question arises as to why the OIC has failed to mediate between Iran and Iraq. In order to evaluate this question one needs first to analyze the successes of the OIC in mediating between Jordan and PLO and between Bangladesh and Pakistan. It has been pointed out already that the OIC mediation succeeded only after the military defeat of one of the warring parties. Therefore, one may suggest that the OIC succeeds only when the conflict is resolved militarily. However, one should not underestimate the role of the OIC in developing brotherly relations between the two earlier warring

factions, which is extremely important in international diplomacy. For it was only after resolving the conflict between Jordan and PLO that gradually PLO received the world recognition of being the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and struggle for the Palestinians could be pursued more effectively. And in the case of Bangladesh and Pakistan, both countries became actively involved in OIC activities. In the case of the Iran-Iraq war, no party was able to gain a decisive victory in the battle field, and that must be the primary reason for the failure of OIC in its mediation efforts.

The backgrounds to the conflicts between PLO-Jordan and Bangladesh-Pakistan were also different. As compared to the Iran-Iraq conflict, these two conflicts were not deeply rooted in history. Jordan was carved as a nation-state by the British following World War I to please one of its supporters during the war. The Palestinians never considered themselves part of the British-created Jordan. Also, after the occupation of their lands by Israel, Palestinians became radical in their attempt to regain their lands from the occupiers, but Jordan never approved such radicalism. As a result, it was easy on the part of the arbitrators to develop working relations between the two warring factions. In the case of Bangladesh-Pakistan, once the military conflict was over, it was not difficult to bring the two parties into negotiations because both were eager to re-establish relations. The Pakistani leadership was having the conscience of guilt for imposing a civil war on the Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis, and the Bangladeshi leadership was eager to get closer to the Muslim world for which it was having difficulties without mending the relationship with Pakistan. Also, the then Secretary General of the OIC, Tengku Abdul Rahman, and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia played significant roles in bringing the two parties into negotiations. As a result, the resolution of the conflict became relatively easy.

The Iran-Iraq conflict was one of the most difficult and historically entrenched problems of contemporary Muslim world. The Islamic Peace Committee set by the OIC was a very powerful one. It included six serving presidents and heads of governments. The OIC also prepared a very comprehensive proposal for a lasting solution to the conflict. The proposals were based on clearly stated principles of national sovereignty and some interim measures for navigation in the *Shāṭ' al-'Arab* waterway.[26] The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in October 1982 endorsing the OIC proposals. Yet, the

OIC failed to persuade the conflicting parties to adhere to its proposals. Iran seemed to have taken the most hard line position. Iranian Prime Minister reportedly said that "[Iran would] accept neither mediation, nor reconciliation, discussion or anything ... Our dispute with [Saddam Hussein] is a dispute between Islam and blasphemy, and as long as Saddam remains in his blasphemy it is essential for us to continue this *jihād*."[27]

Was the Iranian demand for investigation into the conflict contrary to the guidance of the Qur'ān? The relevant verse of the Qur'ān (49:9-10)[28] as quoted earlier, demands *ṣulḥ* or reconciliation between two believers with in conflict "with justice" and to deal with them equitqbly." In most other places where the Qur'ān uses the word *ṣulḥ*, it is generally followed by the word repentance (*tawbah*) after theft (5:39) or after committing a hypocritical act (4:146) or after committing an undesired deed out of ignorance (6:54). The verse 49:9 is followed by the verse that declares that all believers are brothers. As such, whenever they are at odds, make peace between them, and remain conscious of God, so that they might be graced with His mercy. In other words, from the Qur'ānic perspective, the real reconciliation between the two conflicting parties would emerge only when there is a genuine intention to achieve peace.

Did Iran and Iraq really want to reconcile between themselves? Did one of them behave wrongfully? Or are both equally responsible for the war? Both countries accused each other for starting the conflict. Shouldn't the OIC then have determined first who started the conflict? Chairman of the Islamic Peace Committee, Ahmad Sekou Toure, is reported to have said that the Committee would not act as a court because "judgment on the existing differences would be a very difficult job." But "the war has grieved us deeply," therefore, "this war should be ended through just and speedy measures." He added that, "the devil separates the human beings from each other, but Islam unites them." In response, the Iranian President asked the Committee to "decide who the devil in this case" and "to punish him according to Islamic principles." In reply Sekou Toure said:

> We are not here in order to answer your questions, but rather to give you this message that we want peace and an end to this war. We implore you to go beyond touching on the problem and feel

> assured that no act of sacrifice and effort done in the cause of Islam can be called deceit.... This war is on no account limited to Iran and Iraq but rather other nations and other Muslim brothers are also suffering from the affliction touching them in this war. A peace between Iran and Iraq will undoubtedly make the Muslim Umma happy.[29]

Sekou Toure was definitely right in suggesting that peace between Iran and Iraq would make the *ummah* happy. However, one needs to be realistic about one's expectation. How could any party in a conflict seek reconciliation with the other party which acts wrongfully not only toward its rival, but also toward any genuine reconciliation effort? Pointing to the hostile attitude of the Iraqi regime toward the reconciliation effort, one author says:

> Potentially the most important of these efforts was by the government of Algeria, which had not only brokered the original 1975 border agreement but had also demonstrated its diplomatic skills by mediating the release of US hostages from Iran in January 1981. Algerian Foreign Minister Muhammad Benyahia launched a major effort in early 1982 to seek a diplomatic settlement of the war. On May 3, while Benyahia's aircraft was in Iranian airspace en route from Turkey to Tehran, his plane was shot down by an air-to-air missile from an Iraqi fighter, killing the foreign minister and all the members of his entourage. An Iraqi pilot captured by Iran years later indicated that the Iraqi objective was to blame Iran for the attack and thereby exacerbate its relations with Algeria.[30]

In spite of such clear evidences of Iraqi violations of accepted norms of behaviour, neither the Islamic Peace Committee nor the OIC ever raised any questions about Iraq's conduct during the war. On the other hand, under no circumstances the Iranian accusation of Iraq of being blasphemous could be accepted by anybody involved in a reconciliation effort. Adopting such a strong position would have immediately disqualified the OIC of its status as a mediator.

On his part the President of Iraq attempted to depict the war as a war between Arabs and Persians right from the beginning. And in his effort he received direct and indirect support from a number of other OIC member countries. Among Arab countries, Jordan was most supportive of Iraq from the very outbreak of the war. As compared to Jordan most of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries maintained a low profile. Although the Saudis officially

maintained that, "they (Iranians) were never an enemy in the past. Iran is not an enemy of the Arab people now,"[31] privately they are reported to have supported Iraq's financial needs during the war. Kuwait was, perhaps, most supportive of all in helping Iraq financially. The media in these countries clearly backed Iraq.

Other than these countries Morocco and North Yemen clearly supported Iraq. Most of these countries including Egypt were fearful of Iran's revolutionary stance in international politics. Since most of these countries constituted the backbone of the OIC, it is difficult to understand how the OIC would have followed the Qur'ānic prescription to "fight against the one that acts wrongfully." Was the OIC prepared to investigate to find out who initially acted wrongfully in this conflict? An examination of the stand of OIC's Islamic Peace Committee headed by Sekou Toure clearly suggests that the Committee was not in favour of such investigation. How could the OIC then mediate this conflict?

Many observers have identified personal rivalry being responsible for the conflict. This personal rivalry has been identified in the slogans such as "topple Khomeini" and "liquidate Saddam Hussein" etc.[32] Could the OIC investigate such a theory? The problem with investigating this theory would be OIC's commitment to non-interference into the internal affairs of a member country. Theoretically, the doctrine of non-interference into internal affairs of a sovereign country is definitely good. But if the leadership of one of the member countries violates certain other fundamental principles then what should the international community do? In the case of the OIC, the international community would be the *ummah*. Could the *ummah* possibly follow the Qur'ānic principle in this case and attempt to find out and act against the one who behaved wrongfully in this conflict?

It is not only the OIC but all international organizations in the contemporary world are committed to the doctrine of national sovereignty. This means that even if the leadership of a sovereign nation threatens other nations, the international community is not supposed to take any action against that nation. However, the recent invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) are blatant exceptions to such rules. In the case of Afghanistan, the United States and its allies invaded with the approval of the United Nations, and

in the case of Iraq it did so without such approval. Could the OIC do the same after finding out who acted wrongfully in the conflict between Iran and Iraq? This question is related to another major question: whether the principle of non-interference into the internal affairs of a country should supersede the principle of justice. Had the OIC undertaken the question on the basis of justice, the wars of 1990 and 2003 could have been avoided.

Concluding Remarks

How does one explain the fact that, in the three case studies of conflict resolution, the OIC succeeded in resolving two crises but failed in the case of the conflict and war between Iran and Iraq? One answer to this question lies in the personalities playing positive roles in the organization. In the two "success" cases, the organization was led by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tengku Abdul Rahman, who used his personal influence and diplomatic skills to draft the conflicting parties to negotiations and to resolve the crises.

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the former Egyptian President, Gamal Abdul Nasir, ably assisted the Secretary General of the OIC in terms of mediation and arbitration. The conflicting parties agreed to their mediation which paid off in the form of conflict resolution. Such towering personalities were missing in the case of the Iran-Iraq conflict. Additionally, the OIC did not, fearing the violation of national sovereignty, adhere to the Qur'ānic principle of investigating and punishing the wrong-doer as a means of conflict resolution.

Admittedly, all international organizations are committed to the doctrine of national sovereignty. However, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 are two exceptions to the rule of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. The OIC did not or could not act similarly in the conflict between Iran and Iraq. Inadvertently, it allowed the principle of justice to be superseded by the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. Despite the earlier successes, the blatant later failures of the OIC caused it to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the common Muslims which certainly does not augur well for the Muslim *ummah* as a whole.

Notes

1. OIC Resolution 1/3.

2. Quoted in Khalid B. Sayeed, *The Political System of Pakistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 64.

3. On the occasion of the First Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat, India had expressed its desire to join the OIC which was granted. However, the membership was cancelled when a non-Muslim appeared to represent Muslims of India at the conference venue. For details, see Shameem Akhter, "The Rabat Conference," *Pakistan Horizon* XXII (1389/1969), 336-340.

4. OIC Resolution 9/3.

5. During the early days of Bangladesh's existence, most official communications with the Bangladesh authorities were made through the Indian Foreign Office. For the Secretary General's interview, see *Impact International* (9 – 22 June 1972), 8-9.

6. Ibid.

7. See Abdullah al-Ahsan, *The Organization of the Islamic Conference: An Introduction to an Islamic Political Institution* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1988), 79.

8. OIC Resolution 6/3-P (IS).

9. For the complete text of the OIC peace proposal, see "Text: the OIC Peace Proposals," in *Impact* (March 27 – April 9, 1981).

10. OIC *Final Communiqué of the 12th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Baghdad, Republic of Iraq,* 28 Rajab – 3 Shaban 1401, 1-5 June 1981. Annex V, ICFM/ 12-81/FC/1.

11. Ibid.

12. Resolution 22/ 17-P.

13. See Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14-28; and J.M. Abdulghani, *Iraq & Iran: The Years of Crisis* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 1-25.

14. The Iraqi president referred to the conflict as the Battle of Qadisiya – the battle in which the Muslim army destroyed the Persian army in the year 635. Obviously, this reference was made with the intention of exploiting common Arab Muslims.

15. Iranians were earlier using the Kurds against the regime in Baghdad, which was a huge headache for the regime, and according to the treaty Iran was supposed to stop assisting the Kurdish insurrection in northern Iraq. For a discussion on the subject, see Ami Aylon, "The Iraqi Iranian War," in *Crisis and Conflicts in the Middle East: The Changing Strategy from Iran to Afghanistan,* ed. Colin Legum (New York: Holmes & Meier, 198, 36-39. Also, see

a statement on the subject by the Iraqi president in Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict,* 101.

16. Ami Aylon, "The Iraqi Iranian War," 37.

17. Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict*, 83.

18. Gary Sick, "Trial by Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," in *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1989), 233.

19. Ibid., 234.

20. Quoted in Ibid, 233.

21. Ibid., 234.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 235n.

24. See the UN Security Council records quoted in Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict,* 87.

25. *The Texts of Letters Exchanged between the Presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Iraq 1990,* tr. Maryam Daftari, (Tehran: Institute of Political and International Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1995), 10.

26. For a detailed description of the proposals, see Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict*, 97-98.

27. Quoted in Ami Ayalon, "The Iraqi Iranian War," 42.

28. The translation is of Muhammad Asad, *The Meaning of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980).

29. Quoted in Majid Khadduri, *The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iraq-Iran Conflict*, 95.

30. See Gary Sick, "Trial by Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," 236.

31. Quoted in Ami Aylon, "The Iraqi Iranian War," 45 by referring to an interview by the Saudi Foreign Minister with the American media CBS.

32. Glen Balfour-Paul, "The Prospects for Peace," in *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historic, Economic and Political Analysis* (Now York: St Martins, Press, 1994), 127.