

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE
(OIC):
NATIONS IN SEARCH OF UNITY

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Introduction

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) represents 56 member states with a combined population of 1,310.0 billion or close to one quarter of the world's total. The membership of the OIC covers ten geographical areas consisting of the Far East, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran and the Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, North Africa, West Africa, Horn of Africa, Europe and South America. By accepting Suriname to join as a full member and agreeing to Guyana becoming observer, the OIC extended its geographical domain to include South America. The inhabitants of the OIC regions enjoy highly diversified socio-cultural backgrounds, and, with the exception of the bond of religion, there are very few features that tie them together. Because of its universal character, Islam does not operate in a limited space or circumscribe only to a chosen group of people; rather it encompasses the whole universe as its sphere of influence and includes all types of people as its adherents. Despite geographical barriers, Islam has become a unifying force, comprising people with different cultural, linguistic, social, and racial attributes.

During the last two decades, the rise of globalization and the end of the Cold War has brought Islam and Muslims into the global stage. The aggressive nature of the west as formulated in the propositions of clash of civilizations and the end of history has further divided Muslims in responding to Western challenges. As a cocktail group of divided ideologies and western orientation, the OIC will continue to experience difficulties in agreeing on a unified platform for resolving internal problems as well as resisting external pressures. However, the adherence of the OIC to the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty has

avoided discussions of domestic issues in member countries.¹ This in turn weakened the capacity of member states to enhance cooperation and increase contacts among Muslims within the boundaries of the OIC. Commenting on the Muslim world, Ismail al-Faruqi sums up the situation as follows: "Unfortunately for itself and for the world, it is still far from developing or deploying its capacities in the interest of God's cause. Indeed, it is keeping a very precarious balance between using its own capacities for its own development; and wasting those capacities on futile endeavors at home and constructive endeavors for the benefits of non-Muslims."²

The aim of this paper is to examine briefly some of the emerging trends in OIC member countries in the light of the current internal and external challenges facing Muslims. Despite the fact that more than three decades have passed since its inception, the OIC has yet to deliver on fulfilling the dream of millions of Muslims who long for decent living and greater cooperation among member states, and significant effort has been made so far to enhance understanding and bridging differences between them. Previous summits of the OIC have not been fruitful in conflict management and increasing cooperation among Muslims. Because of the limited scope of this paper, our main concern will be directed at providing readers with a macro view of the socio-economic progress and human development in the OIC member countries.

The OIC: Early Initiatives

The motive for the establishment of the OIC is rooted in the Quranic concept of al-Tawhid, or unity, which Muslims also interpret to mean one nation or one community. In the Qur'an,

﴿قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ﴾

¹ A detailed history of Islam and the development of Muslim societies can be found in Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

² Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), 153