**Is the OIC still relevant?**

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As Pakistan celebrates its contribution to the UN resolution against Islamophobia, it has hosted the 48th OIC Conference of Foreign Ministers (CFM), coinciding with the 82nd anniversary of the Pakistan Resolution. At this moment, one is tempted to ask: what has the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) really achieved in its 50+ years against its Charter obligations? How relevant and effective is the OIC? Where is the OIC heading?

After the UN, the OIC is the largest intergovernmental organization globally. With a membership of 57 states, ranging from highly developed to less developed countries, it is financed by and supposedly represents the interests of 1.8 billion Muslims globally and significant numbers of diverse religious and ethnic minorities. With this population and market size, the OIC is potentially a significant economic and political global actor.

The OIC was formed on September 25, 1969 in response to an arson attack on Al Masjid Al-Aqsa in occupied Jerusalem. For Muslims, it was an attack on the holiest space, a shock, a rude awakening that exposed our vulnerabilities. The OIC’s charter thus specifically commits: “To support and empower the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination and establish their sovereign state with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, while safeguarding its historic and Islamic character as well as the holy places therein …” (Obj 8).

But over the OIC’s 50+ years, has there been any meaningful improvement in the security and well-being of the Ummah as promised by the Charter?

Masjid Al Aqsa’s security remains a grave concern. In 2016, Unesco was moved to express its deep concern and regrets at Israel’s “illegal archeological excavations and works” and demolitions and reaffirmed “the necessity to respect and safeguard the integrity, authenticity and cultural heritage of Al Aqsa/Haram Al-Sharif …” (40 Com 7A 137). The desecration and attacks on Al Aqsa continue with increasing ferocity and frequency. What has the OIC achieved that is meaningful to protect Masjid Al Aqsa?

More broadly, the OIC’s achievements can be tested against key challenges confronting the Muslim community. Palestine (1947) and Kashmir (1948) remain amongst the oldest disputes pending with the UN and OIC. In both instances, they are at their lowest point since 1969, subject to horrific existential terror aimed at eradicating their presence.

Whilst human rights organizations and Genocide Watch have all charged Israel and India with crimes against humanity – apartheid, persecution and genocide, calling for international intervention. Gaza and Kashmir are mass concentration camps, whole communities are systematically terrorized, excluded from international protections and safeguards. And there are other cases. Those facing such atrocities daily are justified in asking: where is the OIC? What is the OIC, which claims to represent them and uphold Islamic solidarity, doing?

Given that the OIC Charter categorically reaffirms support for the rights of peoples as stipulated in the UN Charter and international law (Obj 7), why is the OIC ‘tolerating’ these brazen exceptions to international law? Learning from the West’s rapid response to aid Ukraine, the OIC needs to explain why it has not sanctioned Israel and India to prevent crimes against humanity, which are surely universal red-lines?

In these grave circumstances, the OIC needs to reflect on why and how the OIC could not condemn ‘normalisation’ initiatives? The fact is that ‘normalisation’ denies the gravity of the lived realities of people suffering horrendous injustices, it endorses violence against people denied international protections and it exacerbates their vulnerabilities – ask Palestinians and the Kashmiris. How can the OIC reconcile such conduct with its ‘principled positions’ and references to noble Islamic values (Article 2) and solidarity (3:103) that they have all committed to?

Put ever so politely, it seems that the OIC and its member states are happy running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

These issues and questions point to some very serious issues at the OIC. In over five decades, the OIC has failed to transform its population, economic and market clout into political weight and influence. Its hollowed responses have left the global Muslim community more vulnerable than in 1969 when the OIC was formed, betraying a chronic leadership crisis and the need for reform.

The OIC must critically reflect on its performance against its Charter obligations and the many crises confronting the Muslim community – Masjid Al Aqsa, Palestine, Kashmir etc. Can it truly claim to be representative of the global Muslim community and its concerns? How can it overcome its failure to provide any meaningful voice or support to Muslims fighting for their existence, which demands more than the formation of standing committees, communiques, resolutions and declarations that have all proven to be no more than hollow and inconsequential responses? Why is the OIC failing to realise its potential?

The OIC needs to critically reflect on these issues, its role and relevance, the state of the Muslim community, how representative it is of the Ummah’s concerns and effective at addressing their needs, and reinvent itself accordingly, so that it is representative, relevant and effective. The OIC must muster the integrity and courage to address these questions to implement suitable reforms, which could include the following:

First, establish a principle of collective responsibility. Without such a principle there can be no unified positions or solidarity, and the OIC will remain ineffective and inconsequential, unable to fulfil its Charter mandate that the OIC citizens are financing through taxes on their meagre resources. This includes empowering the OIC to restrain member-states from undermining OIC interests and promises that all have committed to (as per Obj 17).

Second, the OIC needs re-structuring so that it is genuinely and directly engaged with, responsive and accountable to the constituency that it claims to represent. Its representative and deliberative functions need to be strengthened on the EU pattern with human development and well-being (Obj 10) at the heart of its activities and ambitions.

Third, for this purpose, pursuant to Objective 9, establishing the Islamic Common Market is the central priority. The less developed markets provide significant and secure opportunities and returns for investments for wealthier OIC states. As a vibrant economic trading bloc, OIC states would have greater capacity to resist the imposition of illegal and selective political sanctions and the confiscation of investments and properties. This may serve to mitigate the various conflicts of interest that undermine the OIC.

Fourth, pursuant to Article 14 of the Charter, empower the International Islamic Court of Justice as the “principal judicial organ” to resolve all types of OIC-related disputes including Islamic Common Market-related commercial, trade and financial disputes.

Fifth, inserting a collective security provision in the Charter. The concept of security must cover economic, and financial attacks against OIC states such as sanctions, confiscations etc, which are a form of bullying and collective punishment. Again, such convergence would ensure that OIC states do not act to undermine OIC-wide interests and that collective responsibility is a meaningful commitment.

Finally, enhancing investments to increase people-to-people engagements through education, culture, sports, travel and other exchanges to “enhance and strengthen the bonds of fraternity and solidarity among Muslim peoples and Member States” (Preamble).

To progress on ‘Partnering for Unity, Justice and Development’ the OIC must come with a new vision that will restore its credibility, its relevance, and reform itself to forge a productive partnership capable of delivering unity, justice and development that is inclusive and equitable. So that all sections of the Ummah, including Palestinians, Kashmiris, Rohingyas and other persecuted Muslims may justly feel a partner with the OIC, which represents them and stands with them to address their needs, concerns and hopes.