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## The OIC's Journey to Enlightenment

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7 June 2007

*Reflecting on the speeches made at the 34<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) held in Islamabad recently, one could suggest that nothing new was mentioned. Though the expected calls for eradicating poverty and the need for more progressive ideas amongst Muslim communities were conducted in accordance with the OIC's enlightened moderation agenda, many critics suggest that not much has been done since the agenda's establishment in 2005. Much of the Muslim world still remains trapped in poverty and illiteracy while armed conflict and extremism remains prevalent in various parts of the Muslim world.*

However, while it is tempting to suggest that the OIC is simply a talking shop, such a charge may be unfair as regional or international organisations are designed by and large to be platforms for forums. More importantly, this function should not be underestimated in the OIC as it has been critical in providing a platform to unite diverse Muslim states worldwide. Moreover, despite ongoing efforts and an increase in funds channelled to address poverty, illiteracy and regressive mindsets, these issues will only be effectively overcome in the long-term. Hence, rather than merely branding the OIC as *doing nothing* about these issues, it would be more useful to analyse what OIC members *are doing*.

### Education

Efforts by Muslim governments to promote education have reached an all-time high with the generous donation made by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rachid Al Maktoum, prime minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Jordan, he announced the establishment of the Mohammed Bin Rachid Al Maktoum Foundation with a start-up of US\$10 billion that aims to promote human development in the Middle East via education. The foundation's initiatives include establishing high quality programmes and research centres, scholarship grants and support for research in Middle East universities. Such a move is seen as a milestone in achieving meaningful human development and the OIC has been quick to provide collaborative offers to the Foundation for the betterment of Muslims worldwide. The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) – an OIC affiliated body – will offer the Foundation resources, data and free consultations. By doing so, the OIC will be able to overcome its lack of finances and fund the various education initiatives it has set out for its member states.

The UAE has also tapped on the strengths of countries beyond the OIC realm to improve their education system. In early May, Singapore and the UAE signed a Memorandum of

Understanding to support education collaboration, thus providing support to the UAE's vision of reforming and strengthening its public school system. Initiatives include incorporating the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education, study visits to Singapore's schools and Ministry of Education, as well as close engagement between Singapore's National Institute of Education and the Emirates College for Advanced Education.

Other Muslim states have also engaged in similar initiatives. Bahrain's education ministry recently announced scholarship grants for 3000 Bahraini students, while Saudi Arabia has held discussions with fellow OIC member state Brunei regarding education, culture and youth and sports cooperation.

### **Poverty Alleviation Funds**

With nearly half its members located in poverty-stricken areas of Africa, much effort has been put into alleviating poverty in the Muslim world. The Islamic Development Bank - the OIC's most effective organ – is set to launch its US\$10 billion Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF) and will allocate \$350 million annually for poverty reduction projects. It was agreed that OIC member countries would donate 0.02% of their GDP to the fund. However, to date, only 21 of the 57 OIC member states have done so, resulting in a total of US \$1.35 billion. This is understandable given that many of the poorer OIC members still fail to even pay their annual dues. Fortunately, several wealthier member states have contributed more to the PRF. Saudi Arabia has offered to contribute US \$1 billion while Kuwait announced a contribution of US \$300 million.

In addition, 21 OIC members have agreed to create an International Zakah Fund that is expected to bring a complete change to the collection and distribution of Zakah (obligatory annual due and one of the five pillars of Islam), while also supporting efforts to combat poverty and unemployment in the Islamic world. The move has also been supported by Islamic clerics such as Shaikh Yousuf Al Qardawi, chairman of the World Forum of Muslim Scholars, who noted that the obligatory dues given during Eid al Fitr alone would amount to \$2 billion if collected at the global level.

### **Economy Boosting Initiatives**

Aside from providing funds, the OIC has also engaged in income-generating initiatives to boost state economies. The OIC Cotton Producing Countries' Cooperation Development Strategy (2007-2011), for instance, is aimed at enhancing the production efficiency and international competitiveness in the twenty OIC cotton producing countries – a total production which account for 28 percent of the world's total cotton production and 36 percent of world cotton exports. This strategy is significant as it will address problems including the lack of technology and water for cotton field irrigation (especially in West Africa) that is necessary for lowering production costs and increasing cotton yields. A workshop on Micro-Credit Financing and Poverty Alleviation in OIC Member States is also in the OIC pipeline.

In light of increasing global concerns to adapt to climate change, ongoing projects in selected OIC member countries – capacity building in Sierra Leone's palm oil industry and fisheries in Bangladesh, development of small enterprises and micro credit in Tsunami-affected Banda Aceh, Indonesia and exploration of oil and mineral resources in Mauritania – are commendable in fostering sustainable development and boosting OIC states' potential as producers of natural resources and clean technology.

Tourism has also been identified as a major source of revenue in many OIC member states.

Their beautiful natural habitats are highly attractive places of interest – from the Kashmir Valley to the Koura Region of Lebanon to the Pink Lake of Senegal. In light of this, nine member states have thus embarked on a project on Sustainable Development of Tourism within a Cross-border Network of Parks, Reserves and Sanctuaries across West Africa.

### **Long Way to Enlightenment**

International attention on the OIC is focused on its role in Gaza, Iraq and conflict zones involving Muslim minorities such as southern Thailand. However, the OIC's poverty alleviation and education initiatives may be more significant than its role in conflict resolution. For example, in southern Thailand, the OIC would do well by providing socio-economic assistance schemes critically needed by Thailand's Muslim minority.

While the idea of establishing an OIC peacekeeping force has been deliberated, such an OIC force may be a financial burden. International peacekeeping operations should remain under the auspices of the United Nations. By focusing on human development and security, the OIC can, in the long term, fulfil its goal of ensuring a more progressive and prosperous global Muslim society.

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