

Forbes

Encourage Responsible Islamic Voices: Give Diplomatic Status To Organization Of Islamic Cooperation

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June 13, 2016

America's relationship with Islam is fraught with tension. Donald Trump doesn't want to let any more Muslims into the U.S. He's not alone. But no one wins if Americans end up fighting an endless war with 1.6 billion people worldwide.

Rather, Washington should encourage responsible Islamic voices. One is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. According the group diplomatic status would give Americans greater opportunity to influence an important forum for Islamic activism.

The OIC was founded in 1969 and is made up of 57 states, most with majority Islamic populations. It calls itself "the collective voice of the Muslim world" working to "safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world" while promoting "international peace and harmony." The organization currently is headed by secretary general Iyad bin Amin Madani, a Saudi graduate of Arizona State University. The group is active in the United Nations and European Union. Only America has its own mission, but Washington does not officially recognize the OIC.

Past relations have been difficult. In 1990 the group adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam which emphasized the role of Sharia Law. At the UN the OIC routinely attacked Israel; in 1979 the organization temporarily suspended Egypt for making peace with Israel. The group also routinely defended its members from criticism over human rights abuses. For years the OIC sought UN support to target the so-called "defamation" of religion, which would have effectively given global application to domestic blasphemy laws, widely abused in such nations as Egypt and Pakistan.

The group also struggled with the issue of terrorism. Its definition could justify criminalizing peaceful dissent. Moreover, the OIC excluded as terrorism acts related "to the struggle of the Palestinian people" while denouncing Israel for committing "state terrorism." Further, the group called Islamophobia "the worst form of terrorism."

However, the OIC has filled a more responsible international role of late. Criticism of Israel continues, and, in fact, is inevitable as long as Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians remains an unfortunate reality. Nevertheless, the group has become more willing to challenge its own

members. The OIC suspended Syria over human rights abuses in the ongoing civil war and criticized Iran for the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran earlier this year.

Moreover, in 2008 the OIC amended its charter with an emphasis on human rights and liberty. It dropped the Cairo Declaration and endorsed the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Law. The organization also established the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission, an advisory body tasked with monitoring human rights within member states.

In addition, the OIC developed action plans for religious minorities within majority Muslim nations. Obviously, the group's reach is limited and the behavior of many member states remains awful. However, its work helps highlight the failings of the most repressive Islamic states.

Perhaps most dramatic, in 2011 the OIC abandoned its campaign on religious defamation and backed a resolution more friendly to religious liberty. The organization's previous secretary-general, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, admitted that opposition from America and Europe was too strong. The OIC shifted to Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which encourages "universal respect for" freedom of "religion or belief." Groups such as Human Rights First endorsed the measure as focusing "on the protection of individuals, rather than the protection of abstract ideas and religions."

Admittedly, not everyone is satisfied. George Washington Law School Professor Jonathan Turley pointed to the resolution's call for countries to approve "measures to criminalize incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief." While U.S. law does not protect an appeal to lawless violence, it does safeguard peaceful discourse even if others might be angered by it. Yet Ihsanoglu, among others, considered an anti-Islamic video to be "incitement to hatred, incitement to violence."

Despite this difference, the OIC appears to have moved significantly toward Western standards. For instance, the group promoted the 2012 Rabat Plan of Action to combat incitement. The document acknowledged disagreements over free speech and called for countering hate speech, while applying a "high threshold" before enacting limited speech restrictions. Last year the Fez declaration, adopted at a UN forum backed by the OIC, emphasized the role of religious leaders in countering religious hatred, not government in imposing legislative solutions.

Finally, while continuing to try to separate Islam from terrorism, the group acknowledged that some terrorists claim their faith as a justification for murder and mayhem. At its April summit in Istanbul, reported Diplomatic Opinion, the OIC condemned "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations regardless of motives." Moreover, the OIC-backed Marrakesh Declaration concluded that "It is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries."

Last year the group's executive committee developed a program to confront violent extremism and partner with organizations involved in counterterrorism. The group is in the process of setting up a Center on Violent Extremism in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Admittedly that's an ironic location, given Saudi Arabia's support for fundamentalist Wahhabism around the globe, but Joseph Grieboski, head of Grieboski Global Strategies, was hopeful about the OIC's plans to

review language and messaging, as well as develop programs to reach groups susceptible to radicalization.

The organization also is developing education projects. Grieboski explained that it was promoting school reform to reduce support for violent extremism and encourage interfaith dialogue, desperately needed steps in many Islamic countries. Moreover, the OIC is promoting the role of women, including their participation in STEM fields. The effectiveness of these initiatives remains to be seen.

The OIC is not the only international organization concerned with Islamic affairs. There are the Agadir Agreement, Arab League, Arab Maghreb Union, Council of Arab Economic Unity, Gulf Cooperation Council, Turkic Council, and more. However, most are geographically limited and confined to the Middle East. Yet the most populous Islamic nations are Indonesia and Pakistan.

In 2007 the Bush administration sent an envoy to the OIC. But the Obama administration effectively downgraded America's representation, withholding ambassador status from the U.S. delegate. Moreover, the group's U.S. office continues to lack diplomatic status, unlike that of the Organization of American States and even the Vatican. The diminished status hinders OIC operations.

The Senate Relations Committee currently is moving legislation to grant diplomatic status to the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council, but not the OIC or Arab League, as recommended by the administration. Chairman Bob Corker reportedly believes that the first has a greater military role and therefore can better help fight terrorism, which justifies the different treatment.

However, if the U.S. wants to talk to the Gulf nations, all it needs do is ring the Saudi embassy, which dominates what is a very small international club. Addressing the OIC allows Washington to reach 57 countries around the globe with substantial Muslim populations. Bush's OIC envoy Sada Cumber complained that "The United States has ignored one of its most capable and effective partners in countering the rise of violence extremism around the world."

Obviously, engaging the organization offers no panacea for the West's problems with Islam. The OIC's role is hampered both by a small budget and limited influence over member states. Nevertheless, the organization offers a useful venue for communicating with scores of Muslim nations. It certainly has more credibility than Washington in addressing members on issues with religious implications. And the OIC provides engagement opportunities for more than government officials. For instance, four years ago the PIHRC held meetings in America with journalists and NGOs as well as legislators on human rights.

No doubt, the OIC will continue to frustrate the U.S. on many issues. The organization must operate with an eye to its members. Which means different perspectives on terrorism, religious liberty, Israel, and more. However, the organization also appears open to debate. One American who worked with the OIC argued that in many areas the group disagrees with members.

Thus, ongoing engagement with OIC staff and representatives of member states—involving them in discussions with American advocates of human rights and religious liberty—could prove useful over time. Such activity might alert Washington to controversial initiatives before they are launched and moderate proposals before they are offered.

Cumber may have been overly optimistic when he wrote that the OIC “possesses the potential and capability necessary to delegitimize the narrative of extremist organizations, shift the balance of power, and safeguard international cooperation and security.” Nevertheless, the group could take on a larger and more positive role.

While all this is possible today, diplomatic status would ease OIC administration, encourage enhanced operations, and smooth U.S. relations. Moreover, argued Grieboski, “you get official oversight” with diplomatic status. Washington would lose little—other than a bit of tax revenue from tax exempt status—in granting recognition.

The latest terror attack in Orlando reminds us of America’s challenge in confronting Islam. One positive step would be to more effectively engage the OIC.