

Gaining Arab Support against Terrorism: The Role of the Organization of the Islamic Conference

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Brief Analysis

As the United States pursues its military operations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference's (OIC) foreign ministers are scheduled to meet in the Qatari capital of Doha on Wednesday. Among the important issues that are likely to be mooted are the antiterrorism coalition and the scope of its activities; the future of Afghanistan; and a working definition of terrorism. The OIC has before it an important opportunity to ally the Muslim world with the prevailing international consensus against using religion as a rationale for mass violence.

Past Crisis and New Opportunities

The current U.S. military strikes are unlikely to be completely endorsed by the OIC. Traditionally, the OIC takes firm measures only when they enjoy a near-unanimous regional consensus. The OIC did condemn Iraq for its transgressions in August 1991, calling on Baghdad to adhere to the "UN security council resolutions issued in this regard." However, such an endorsement came only after protracted diplomacy by the Gulf states and the acquiescence of Egypt, Syria, and other important regional actors. At the moment, key regional states have expressed either reservation (Egypt) or outright opposition (Iran) to U.S. actions, and have stressed the importance of the United Nations and international conferences to resolve the issue. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that the OIC will be at the forefront of the debate, endorsing an American-led coalition that has generated opposition and ambivalence in the Middle East.

On the issue of Afghanistan and U.S. support for the opposition force -- the Northern Alliance -- the OIC may prove a receptive audience. The organization shares the international community's evolving position that a new government based on all ethnic groups is a desirable outcome for Afghanistan. In its December 1997 plenary meeting, the OIC expressed its "full support for inter-Afghan dialogue [and] formation of a broad-based government." As such, the notion of including a newly revived Northern Alliance in a prospective Afghan government will have standing in OIC deliberations.

One of the thorniest issues that the OIC is likely to confront is the question of what constitutes terrorism. The Bush administration has already taken a firm position in its opposition to terrorist organizations with "global reach" and has attempted to deprive them of financial resources. Yet, the OIC is likely to follow the position supported by both Iran and Egypt and craft a working definition of terrorism that explicitly excludes Hizballah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups. In its December 1997 meeting, the OIC condemned terrorism yet firmly recognized "the right of

people under colonial or alien domination or foreign occupation [to fight] for self-determination." In its most recent foreign ministers' meeting (in May 2001), the OIC strongly reiterated this position, declaring, "The Conference salutes with great pride the Intifada of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation and reaffirms its full political and material support and backing for the Palestinian resistance in the face of Israeli occupation as well as its support for their blessed Intifada and Palestinian right to resist occupation." Throughout its long deliberations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the OIC has not criticized the methods employed by Palestinian groups, including suicide bombings, and has held Israel responsible for the outbreak of acts of terror. Given the cataclysmic events of September 11, the OIC is likely to sidestep the issue of suicide bombings and continue to craft a definition of terrorism that differs from that of the United States. A more controversial item will be whether the OIC goes even further and specifically characterizes Israel as a terrorist state.

The OIC and Regional Diplomacy

Much of the impetus behind the upcoming meeting comes from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. While the latter two states have largely accepted the imminence of American military action, they do seek the approbation of the preeminent Islamic organization. Iran's situation is somewhat complicated, in that Tehran is uneasy with both the Taliban-led Afghanistan and the United States. Iran's preference is that the anti-Taliban coalition work under the auspices of the United Nations, as this would restrain the expansion of U.S. power while achieving Iran's strategic objective of displacing the Taliban. Moreover, Tehran is firmly committed to crafting a definition of terrorism that explicitly excludes Lebanon's Hizballah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups, which it has long supported. Clearly, Iran's diplomatic priorities are consistent with the predilections of the OIC, and thus are likely to be accepted and endorsed by the organization's foreign ministers.

Opportunities for the OIC

As an organization representing fifty-seven Islamic states, the OIC has an opportunity to move beyond its predictable parameters and the limits of Iran's diplomacy and to fully ally itself with an increasingly mobilized international community. The organization already took the important step of condemning the September 11 attacks, stating that the "hand of severe justice should apprehend the perpetrators as soon as they have been identified with certainty." This statement is consistent with the OIC's 1997 commitment "to take all necessary measures to prevent or to dismantle support networks helpful in any form of terrorism." The recent tragedy offers the organization an opportunity to fulfill its expressed pledges and commitments and to finally express unequivocal opposition to suicide bombings.

Among the important actions that the OIC can take in its forthcoming meeting is to buttress its initial condemnation of the September 11 attacks with a strong statement on the inappropriateness of using religion as a pretext for violence. Such a declared policy is certainly consistent with Islamic tenets that deprecate violence against defenseless targets. Ideally, a committee of prominent muftis would meet under the auspices of this foremost Islamic organization and issue an authoritative statement delegitimizing Osama bin Laden's claims that his actions are in line with normative Islam. Such a statement could go a long way toward dispelling the notion in some quarters that radical Islamists are an acceptable dimension -- albeit a radical one -- of a larger Islamic landscape.

The OIC can also establish a committee to coordinate action by the Islamic states against the Taliban. In addition, the organization can encourage all of its members to cooperate in furnishing information and intelligence on Afghanistan and on those terrorist groups deemed by Washington to have "global reach." Many of these groups have long menaced OIC states, and OIC support would grant the evolving international antiterrorism effort the religious approbation of the Islamic community.

As the international community rallies to the side of the United States and expresses its outrage at the attacks on

New York and Washington, the OIC stands at a critical juncture. The organization has already taken the important symbolic step of quickly and unequivocally condemning the attacks. Now it has before it an occasion to act on this condemnation and on its previously declared antipathy to terrorism and the Taliban.

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