

Islamic Conference

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Inaugural Statement by H.E. Prof. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary General of the OIC

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It is an immense honour for me to take the office as Secretary General of the OIC. I would like to begin by extending my heartfelt gratitude to all the Member States for the confidence they have placed in me by entrusting me with this important mission in the service of the Muslim world. I am all the more privileged having been proposed by the Republic of Turkey as its candidate and elected by way of vote, for the first time in the OIC's history, after having served for twenty-five years in the OIC as the Director General of IRCICA in Istanbul. I feel deeply grateful and at the same time filled with enthusiasm and emotion as I assume my duties. I shall work with full devotion and commitment towards realisation of the goals expressed in the Charter of the OIC, the objectives and policies of the Member States formulated in their conference resolutions, and the aspirations of Muslims all over the world. I shall make every effort to uphold and underscore these goals and objectives, which for the last thirty-five years brought together a growing number of Muslim nations and Muslim communities all over the world linking them with a spirit of solidarity and common consciousness that are in many ways unique as they are based on and inspired by the eternal principles of Islam.

An indispensable element of the existence and the achievements of the Organisation and its attaining its present status is certainly the support and assistance extended by the Member States. I would like to acknowledge with profound gratitude the close interest that the Member States have shown to the activities of the OIC, its subsidiaries, its specialised and affiliated institutions, in many ways including their involvement in the various OIC bodies, specialised committees, task forces, by hosting and supporting the various organs of the OIC, and by hosting its conferences and expert meetings. I do hope that the coming years will see the continuation and further strengthening of this support and interest through an even more active participation of all Member States in the OIC's activities.

On this occasion I would also like to pay a deferential tribute to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the host country of the OIC General Secretariat, under the leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd Ibn Abdulaziz, and His Royal Highness Prince Abdullah Ibn Abdulaziz, Crown Prince, First Deputy Premier and Commander of the National Guard, for the invaluable support it is extending to the Organisation. This is indeed one expression among many of the Kingdom's emphasis of the idea of Islamic solidarity which as early as the first half of twentieth century made the Kingdom one of the leaders of the effort towards

activating solidarity among Muslim countries which paved the way for the process that ultimately led to the establishment of the OIC in 1969.

The leaders of twenty-five Muslim countries which assembled in the Rabat Summit, prompted by the attack that was perpetrated on Al Aqsa Mosque in Al Quds, laid the foundations of the OIC on the basis of solidarity among the Member States. They set the broad objectives of consolidating cooperation in the political, economic, social, cultural, scientific and other vital fields of life, eliminating racial segregation, discrimination and eradicating colonialism in all its forms, supporting international peace and security founded on justice, coordinating efforts for the safeguarding of the Holy Places of Islam and supporting the struggle of the people of Palestine, helping them regain their rights and liberate their land, supporting struggle of Muslim people with a view to preserving their dignity, independence and national rights, and creating a suitable atmosphere for cooperation and understanding among Member States and other countries. Furthermore, the leaders present at the First Summit pledged to contribute to international peace and security in accordance with the aims and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. In this way they sought to contribute to peace and welfare not only in the Muslim world but on a world scale. Regarding matters of concern for the international community, they adopted stances parallel to those of the United Nations. This attitude has until today unfailingly marked the OIC's position over issues that are of concern to the Muslim world as well as those of the world community at large. Unquestionably, all these goals and principles laid down at the establishment of the OIC maintained their importance and remained as matters of current concern in our time.

Where does the OIC stand?

Notwithstanding the lasting validity and prevalence of the fundamental goals defining the OIC's Charter, the real world conditions they refer and apply to are certainly not the same as at the time of the OIC's establishment. The OIC was born in the Cold War period; its establishment and development were promoted by the idea of cooperation among developing countries that was then increasingly gaining currency. After the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the bi-polar world, the transition to a mono-polar world was accompanied by a spread of the market economy and the associated sets of values and rules of conduct. Simultaneously with this process, interdependences between countries increased. Diversities and complementarities of countries appeared more distinctly. Thus in contrast with the previous period, where the foreign relations of each country were defined in terms of alignment with one of the blocs, globalisation led each country to open its external relations towards a linkage with the world economy and adopt a multidimensional perspective. In consequence, international and regional groupings prompted by converging development concerns and political interests gained more importance than before. Certainly one of the factors contributing to this trend was countries' striving to get shares from the benefits of scientific, technological, informational and other advances by taking common stands in international negotiations. Thus not only international cooperation becomes more

indispensable day by day in our time, it also appears clearly that international organisations will be expected to assume more prominent roles in future. It is observed in real life that together with “globalisation” a concomitant process is taking place whereby trends of “regionalisation” are increasing. To recapitulate, a major development of the twentieth century was the establishment of international and regional organisations as vehicles in international relations, and it was through them that each country participated in world politics. In the twenty-first century, however, participation in global affairs is likely to depend more on the balances of power and interdependencies between the regional and international organisations themselves. Therefore, the OIC will have to reconsider and strengthen the role it is expected to play in a capacity as the partner of other major organisations and the inter-governmental institution representing the Muslim world on matters commonly agreed by the Member States.

Parallel to these changing circumstances, the OIC's as a result of the steady increase the effect of external and internal factors and of its membership activities were constantly expanded and diversified over the decades under. With 57 Member States the OIC is today the second largest organisation after the UN. The OIC countries, dispersed over a large geographical region on four continents, extending from Albania in the north to Mozambique in the south, and from Guyana in the west to Indonesia in the east, account for more than one fifth of the world population. The OIC countries represent a substantial part of the developing countries, possess significant human and material resources, brain power and manpower, and have a considerable potential for production and trade. At the same time the Muslim world is the bearer and the holder of the Islamic civilisation which has been one of the main agents in the formation of universal civilisation and produced a multidimensional heritage that withstood the test of time and preserved its vitality although the Muslim world has lately failed to keep pace with modern advances in science and know-how. Today the Muslim countries lag much behind the industrialised countries and even the average of the developing countries in terms of all indicators of socio-economic development from literacy rates and income levels to technology and industry.

The establishment and the subsequent development of the OIC concretised the concept of Islamic solidarity in the contemporary world. The OIC emerged in response to the socio-political circumstances of recent history and evolved in a continuum. As any other organisation, it went through successive stages of development until it reached its present status. At times it was directly affected by the surrounding circumstances, sometimes transformations, which shaped world political and economic balances. Throughout those decades the OIC succeeded in maintaining its continuity as a forum where the member countries have voiced their concerns and found frameworks and channels of cooperation.

The OIC in the twenty-first century

Notwithstanding its multifarious areas of experience in international relations and the maturity it has acquired as an inter-governmental organisation, I must honestly

state that the OIC has not been able to fully achieve its potential and establish itself as a powerful entity capable of actively voicing the Muslim causes and making itself heard in the international arena. Given the large membership of the OIC and the diversities between its countries, it is certainly hard to reach cohesion of opinions on each and every matter but it must certainly be possible to achieve harmony and a collective spirit as it has been possible on many top political issues such as the problems of Al Quds and Palestine, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Turkish Cypriot State, the problem of Kashmir, the Muslim minorities and communities, among others, as well as over such problems of general common concern as educational development and eradication of poverty. These examples confirm that the capacity is there for the OIC to engage its Member States more actively in a concerted action whereby the Muslim world would assert itself in the international scene through the OIC. This certainly depends to a large extent on the political will of the Member States, on their firm determination to render the OIC an effective organisation which would have a weight in international affairs.

The OIC must acquire more weight and impact on the world scene. This is essential taking into consideration that its present position is not commensurate with and does not reflect the real strength of the Muslim world as regards its wide geographical coverage, its abundant manpower, rich and varied natural resources, untapped potentials and capacities. At present there are greater possibilities for enhancing the OIC's weight and impact in contrast with the situation thirty-five years ago, because the outside world is now much more aware of the Muslim world, its diversities and cultural riches, of the Muslim minorities and communities whose cultural and religious identities become increasingly more visible. Moreover, a growing number of countries are showing interest in the OIC and expressing a clear wish to become members or observers to the Organisation. The Russian Federation has manifested such an interest.

At this juncture, a renewed effort is necessary to draw the support and the interest of public opinion within and outside the Muslim world towards the OIC's present and future role by establishing linkages with non-governmental organisations, which represent the people, society itself, and I believe that in this relationship the Muslim world can best be inspired by its own history, having been the birthplace of the waqf institution, of which NGOs are a contemporary extension and a modern version.

In order to enhance its status, increase its efficiency and intensify its activities, the OIC has to be fully aware of its own potentials and capacities and take the necessary steps to mobilise them. A positive development in this regard has been the will and intention that the Member States have formulated more clearly and more firmly than before during the last few years, towards reforming the OIC and its mechanisms. In this light, studies were launched recently and are ongoing, to restructure the General Secretariat, and separately, to review and rationalise the resolutions of the OIC meetings at various levels. No doubt, adoption of clearer resolutions formulated in an optimal and result-oriented manner would contribute in enhancing the impact and the credibility of the OIC within and outside the Muslim world. Other methodological and procedural aspects of the work can also be

improved, and this would surely have a positive effect on the OIC's image. A recent example is the election of the new Secretary General by the system of voting which was highly commended by the representatives of the Member States participating in the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers and in the world at large.

The Muslim world, and in fact the entire world, stand at a crucial moment with regard to a number of vital questions that bear implications for future peace, security and welfare of humanity, on top of which is the Palestinian cause to which the OIC has been attaching special attention, as well as the situation in Iraq. The Muslim world also faces the many new threats of various kinds, including civil wars and regional conflicts, that the whole world is concerned with. Mounting problems are faced in other areas as well: we need to intensify the existing efforts towards eradicating poverty. More cooperation is needed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in our countries. No doubt, preventive measures are the immediate action we need to take, while durable solutions to these and many other problems depend on economic and social development. Still another problem that calls for more care and attention in the present period is the protection of the environment. This by itself has to constitute one sector of OIC activities. All these problems not only require concerted cooperation among the Member States but also working relations with the concerned, especially the neighbouring countries outside the Member States. Regarding the growing threat of regional conflicts, the OIC has on its record successful interventions in cases that had bearings on the Muslim countries, communities and minorities. The existing mechanisms, in particular goodwill committees, must be reinforced to be used even more extensively in dealing with such problems.

To be able to follow the global developments, voice opinions on them and take action, the OIC needs to broaden and diversify its perspectives. This constitutes an urgency because some of the conflicts that hold the attention of the international opinion are related to the Muslim world although they are not caused or provoked by the Muslim countries. Another similarly sad situation facing the Muslim world is the problem of international terrorism. In part of world opinion, terrorism is associated with ideological and religious extremism in the Muslim countries and thereby implicitly attributed to the Muslim world. We have to work persistently to make the world understand that terrorism has no religious or cultural origin. It is a threat to all countries including the Muslim countries. It must be counteracted by short and long-term measures that would duly respect the rule of law. It would be beneficial that the OIC defines its own strategy and at the same time participates in a global strategy of cooperation against terrorism together with the UN and other concerned institutions. Within this framework, an objective and correct definition of terrorism has yet to be made. Terrorism in all of its forms, including state terrorism, must be condemned.

The subject of human rights is of topical importance for the world opinion and the OIC. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam adopted in 1995 should be underscored on all relevant occasions. Efforts should be multiplied to reaffirm the position of the Muslim world in various areas such as human rights, international law, settlement of disputes, and to reject unilateral governance in any matter of

international relations. The OIC should convey the Muslim world's stances over such issues to the world opinion. This would contribute at the same time to our efforts to project a correct image of the Muslim world, make its views and values known, and eliminate "Islamophobia". To this end, better and wider use should be made of the mass media and information technologies. The subsidiary organs and institutions of the OIC can fruitfully contribute to this effort within the framework of their respective mandates.

Taking into consideration the new needs, it is evidently high time that the OIC engages in serious self-criticism, evaluates its strengths and weaknesses, availabilities and potentials, and introduces reforms wherever necessary. Reform is the key word for the new period. The OIC needs to adapt itself to the new conditions and new expectations, a need that some other international and regional organisations, such as UN, OUA and ASEAN are already addressing. For this purpose it needs to optimise and accelerate its activities which can be done by a review, and subsequently a restructuring, of the General Secretariat and the OIC system as a whole, and by introducing administrative reforms. This necessitates a re-examination, and if necessary a revision, of the distribution of activities within the General Secretariat, to be followed by an assessment of the needs and availabilities of manpower as compared to the tasks and duties. Accordingly, the General Secretariat would be endowed with the necessary highly qualified staff.

Increasing the efficiency and accuracy of both the policies and the activities is indispensable so that the Organisation rises to the challenges of the twenty-first century. In this regard we presently stand at a cross-roads, where we have to deploy a firm will towards reforming and strengthening the OIC so that from now on it can have a say in world politics on behalf of the Muslim world and affirm its position among major international organisations. In this process of globalisation where international organisations have already gained more relevance than before if not more effectiveness, the Secretary General can assume a more effective mission in the service of the Member States. Therefore, reactivating and supporting the coordination role of the Secretary General can be instrumental in enlarging the sphere of influence of the Organisation.

Globalisation requires that we devote special care to the reinforcement and activation of dialogue between the Muslim world on one hand and other groups of countries on the other, particularly the Western world, and other major powers. A number of dialogue processes are already established between the Muslim world and Europe, such as the OIC-EU Joint Forum which was initiated by the Turkish Government four years ago and supported by dialogue sessions involving policy-makers and opinion leaders of each side. I believe there is a need to consider establishing contacts conducive to dialogue with major regions beside Europe as well. The OIC can assume a greater role in this regard on behalf of the Islamic world. In this context we shall also seek the possibility of developing more intense working relations with regional organisations to which the Member States are parties. These activities can be given more concrete and practical content than that provided by mere intellectual exercises and statements of intent. This can be done by identifying specific topics and problem areas that can be addressed jointly by

the pertinent institutions of each side starting from areas of immediate concern such as improving the public image of each culture, disseminating correct information on the cultures of the Muslim world and other cultures to each other, monitoring and correcting the coverage of news and events of each side by each other's mass media and eliminating stereotypes and negative biases of peoples one about another.

Culture provides the ground for encounters between peoples, strengthens bonds and affinities and helps to build bridges of common consciousness and cooperation towards protection and advancement of human spiritual, intellectual and material achievements. Economy, on the other hand, provides the arena, the institutions and the vectors of activity for collective cooperation towards development and welfare. I believe that one of the most important tasks in the present period is to give a new impetus to economic cooperation in many ways, among others by encouraging the Member States to ratify and participate in the execution of the instruments that have been created within the framework of the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation - COMCEC. This year is the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of COMCEC. This has been an occasion to appraise the progress achieved in rendering operational some of these instruments, such as the Framework Agreement for the Establishment of a Trade Preferential System and the Export Financing Scheme, but also to underline the need to activate the other mechanisms which have not received the interest they deserve, such as the Plan of Action to Strengthen Economic Cooperation Among the Member States.

At this point I would like to underscore the important supervisory role being played by the specialised high-level committees of the OIC in charge of the various sectors of activities, namely the Al-Quds Committee chaired by H.M. the King of Morocco, the three Standing Committees, namely the Standing Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH) chaired by the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Standing Committee on Information and Cultural Affairs (COMIAC) chaired by the President of the Republic of Senegal, and the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation (COMCEC) chaired by the President of the Republic of Turkey. The distribution of supervisory tasks among the standing committees has proven to be an ingenious system which was instituted by the Third Islamic Summit Conference held in Taif and Mecca in 1981.

A need for re-examination, revision, reform and improvement is felt in these and other areas some of which were already identified by the OIC conferences at various levels. Undoubtedly, the period ahead may bring unforeseen, unpredictable but hopefully positive and beneficial developments for the Muslim world and the OIC. Certainly, we shall derive strength from the collective will of the Member States which shall emanate from their common aspiration to find solutions to the just Muslim causes, achieve socio-economic development, encourage a fruitful dialogue between civilisations, and contribute to a peaceful coexistence of peoples around the world.

The twenty-first century global environment is bringing new, different and perhaps unprecedented challenges for the Muslim world and for the OIC. In this environment, international solidarity and cooperation will be needed more than ever. The OIC as a forum of solidarity and cooperation will have to consider accommodating new subjects in its agenda, increasing its dynamism and flexibility, accelerating its procedures, and addressing many new areas that are likely to call for joint action in future. With the support, interest and active engagement of its Member States, the OIC will certainly be capable of implementing the desired reforms and becoming a stronger institution that makes itself heard and contributes in elevating the standing of Muslim countries in the community of nations.

Before concluding, I would like to express my profound gratitude to H.E. Dr. Abdelouahed Belkéziz, my distinguished predecessor, and all the ex-Secretaries General for their invaluable devoted services which contributed in bringing this Organisation successfully to its present status. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Belkéziz for the sincere support and encouragement he has continuously extended to IRCICA and its activities.

For my part, with your support and your confidence, I shall make every effort in this direction. May God guide us to the right path.