Who speaks for the Islamic world? Religion, identity and the organisation of Islamic cooperation

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Who speaks for the Islamic world? Religion, identity and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, a book review

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Books under review:

Kayaoglu, Turan: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, problems, and potential (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015)


Religious solidarity - a shared identity - is one of the fundamental messages that Islamists, from varieties apolitical to democratic and peaceful to armed and violent, use to gather support and justify actions. One of the threats of the Islamic State, or Daesh, has been in their appeal to this shared Islamic identity to justify their resurrection of the Caliphate as a political institution, but crucially, to appeal to Muslims globally in bowing to the authority of this nascent ‘state’.

The fear of an Islamic ‘threat’ – an ideology that appeals to Muslims ‘here’ and ‘there’, educated and uneducated, male and female, young and old – is not new. A similar fear of so called ‘radicalisation’ of Muslims in Europe and the USA post 9/11 was and is central to counter-terrorism and espionage initiatives on Muslim communities who might be susceptible to al-Qaeda’s rhetoric of religious solidarity similar to Daesh’s contemporary one. Indeed, al-Qaeda once had their own call and vision for a restored Caliphate, rendered obsolete by Daesh. Kayaoglu reminds us that as far back as 1876 the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II attempted something similar, using his authority as Caliph to gain leadership over Muslims worldwide. Each of these attempts have been unsuccessful; the world’s 1.7 billion Muslims have not flocked to any of the above banners, despite their assumed shared identity.

What this brief overview reveals is that both those who would rely upon a shared Islamic identity and those who fear it, overestimate the power of that identity and its ability to help actors achieve their ends. That is not to say that the lack of effectiveness means that there is no such solidarity between (some) Muslims. As James Piscatori explains, this phenomenon I have referred to as religious solidarity or a shared identity is better labelled as pan-Islam, ‘an idea, a symbol, that is conditioned by modern contexts and is shamelessly used and manipulated, but nonetheless exercises a pull on the modern Muslim imagination’. So while 1.7 billion Muslims have not joined Daesh, for example, between 3922 and 4294 European Muslims have gone to fight for the organisation, according to an April 2016 report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. While such numbers are sensational and indeed a cause for concern regarding security, multicultural and socio-economic realities in European countries, there exists a far more tangible and wide reaching case for

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1 Kundani, Arun: The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror, (London: Verso, 2014), pg. 8
3 Kayaoglu, Turan: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, problems, and potential, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pg. 11
Islamic solidarity, which is the topic of the three books under review: The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an international organisation which claims to represent the entire Muslim World. The first article of its charter states that the organisation’s purpose is to ‘[t]o enhance and consolidate the bonds of fraternity and solidarity among the Member States’. As former Secretary General of the OIC, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, relates of the organisation, it is ‘the concrete manifestations of the concept of “Islamic solidarity” in the contemporary world’, deriving from shared Islamic experiences. While placing religious solidarity, and in this instance an articulation of a global Muslim community, or ummah, as central to the organisation, Naveed Sheikh argues that this is an ‘ontological achievement’, an ‘Islamization’ of the political paradigm that has augmented Islam’s ‘secularization-resistant profile not only in civil society but also in international society’. Indeed, as an inter-state organisation that explicitly places pan-Islam as a motivating force while also, in the words of the OIC’s charter, ‘adhere our commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter’, highlights the peculiar nature of this type of pan-Islam. Unlike the challenge of Daesh, al-Qaeda or a restored Caliphate as a challenge or alternative to the international system, the OIC’s vision of Islamic solidarity works within the system. The blend of religion and state politics perhaps goes someway to explaining the lack of scholarship on the OIC, given the secular foundations and assumptions of the discipline International Relations (IR). The three books under review do an excellent job of opening up the OIC to a wider audience, and showing the relevance of the organisation to contemporary political studies. Before continuing, I will briefly outline each of the three books.

Ihsanoglu’s study is a broad historical and issue based overview of the OIC. For the historical element, he begins with efforts to foster Muslim solidarity among states since before the OIC, to its founding in 1969 (then the Organisation of the Islamic Conference) all the way to 2009, outlining the key events of the time and decisions of the organisation. The issues that he touches on are the policy fields of major importance to the organisation during his tenure as OIC Secretary General (2005-2013), prominently the OIC’s ongoing reform process and combating Islamaphobia. The Islamic World in the New Century: The Organisation of the Islamic Conference, 1969-2009, is recommended.

10 Hurd, Elizabeth: The Politics of Secularism in International Relations, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pg. 10
reading for anyone wanting to know more about the OIC as given its easy style and issue (rather than theory) based content, it can be read by non-academic audiences.

Kayaoglu’s study also contains a historical dimension, but is primarily an examination of the organisation’s operating procedures (state-based rivalries) verses its overarching aims and objectives (pan-Islamic solidarity). Many of his insights derive from the activities associated with the OIC’s Ten Year Programme of Action (TYOPA), a reform initiative started in 2005 which included the organisation’s above mentioned name change. The reasons behind initiating the TYOPA, the policy changes and initiatives that came to be part of the TYOPA, and implementation of these reforms, are the laboratories in which Kayaoglu analyses the interaction between member states and the organisation, and between the member states themselves. *The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, problems, and potential* is an engaging book which will find a readership among academic audiences of all levels interested in the role of Islam in IR, and those interested in the politics of the Muslim world.

Sheikh’s study is far more critical than the preceding two. He explains how Islam, despite the name, is written out of the OIC’s DNA, and moves on to explore the ways in which an Islamic identity is brought back into the policies of the organisation. The subtitle of his book, *Pan-Islamic foreign policy in a world of states*, indicates the slight shift in focus compared to the other two books, onto the different states that make up the OIC, specifically the powerful states of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan, and their influence within the organisation. *The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic foreign policy in a world of states* is the most specialised book of the three in that it requires a working knowledge of IR theories, the history of the Middle East, is less issue based, and has more to say with regards to conceptual categories. The book will find readers among academics or those pursuing further degrees with an interest in post-secularism in IR, or how political Islam interacts with the state.

All three books seek to provide a historical overview of the OIC, its creation and its activities. This is perhaps to be expected as while taking these three books together might give the impression there is a lot of scholarly attention on the OIC, the reality is quite the opposite. No doubt general readers of IR, Islamic Studies or Arab Studies will benefit from the backgrounds provided by the three books. Some readers will be familiar with the workings of state based politics and international organisations, and will need the background in pan-Islam, *ummah* and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Others with a more Area Studies bent might be familiar with the latter concepts and events, but at a loss as to the relationship these issues have with an international organisation.

The three books do cover different themes, and complement each other with the narratives that they tell. Ihsanoglu’s book is fascinating as due to the privilege of his position as former
Secretary General, he is able to provide ‘blow-by-blow’ accounts of the meetings, communications and actions of various ministers, heads of states and international organisations, as they respond to a numerous political events. Ihsanoglu is far more generous to the OIC and trusts in the benevolence of the OIC’s mission. Despite this Ihsanoglu does not shy away from the failures of the OIC and is critical, for example, of the OIC’s failure in managing the situation of the Danish ‘cartoon crisis’, as he refers to it, in 2005-2006.  

Kayaoglu’s work, in contrast, is more critical and analytical, reading like a text-book, complete with two text-boxes which give background information on the Sunni-Shia split and proceedings of an influential Islamic Summit of the OIC. For Kayaoglu, it seems, the OIC is genuinely attempting to address concerns of Muslims globally, but cannot do so due to the unwillingness of member states to support the organisation. Despite this, Kayaoglu finds some successes for the OIC, particularly in the field of Human Rights and the organisation’s establishment of an Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) in 2011. Curiously, Kayaoglu maps the OIC’s position on Human Rights as having moved away from Shari’a and an Islamic legal framework, allowing the OIC ‘to discuss rights within the context of international human rights instruments rather than exclusively within that of Islamic law and tradition’.  

Finally Sheikh’s study is the most critical of the three, and reading it next to the rather optimistic overview of Ihsanoglu can at times leave one thinking that the two narratives presented can hardly be describing the same phenomena. Sheikh convincingly argues that the OIC is less of an actor but more of an arena, an arena in which the aggregate interests of the member states are given an Islamic legitimacy, rather than the members being ‘conditioned by any “Islamic rationale”’. Sheikh’s damning appraisal of the OIC’s appeal to a pan-Islamic identity, and the differences between the three studies which I have outlined here, can be illustrated with an example. I mentioned the Arab-Israeli conflict earlier as this is an issue which was central to the founding of the OIC, a response in part to the arson attack on 21st August 1969 on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam. As such, it is a telling illustration of the differences between the three studies when dealing with the genesis of the OIC.

The first summit of the OIC took place almost exactly one month after the above mentioned arson attack, on 22nd September 1969. Ihsanoglu lauds the success of the first OIC summit as it established ‘a collective Muslim position on the issue of Al-Quds and the Arab-Israeli conflict’. The conflict, specifically the attack on Al-Aqsa mosque, was the spark that brought the Muslim world

12 Kayaoglu, Turan: *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pg. 107
together to form the OIC. Written while Ihsanoglu was Secretary General of the OIC, this narrative of collective admonishment of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, and support for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in their struggle, seems to be the ‘official’ history of the OIC’s founding. What Sheikh brings to the story is a subversive addendum which catalogues the first use of Islam as a strategic tool by its member states, in this case Saudi Arabia in its battle against the Nasserite revolutionism of Egypt. As Sheikh explains: ‘In resorting to the pan-Islamic invocation as a legitimizing counter-strategy against activist pan-Arab radicalism, by design a delegitimizing discourse, he [King Faisal of Saudi Arabia] attempted to shroud his commitment to policy-prescriptions based on vulgar political realism: divide and (maintain) rule’.  

The plight of the Palestinians, then, was simply a convenient cause upon which more specific and decidedly uncooperative policies could be implemented. Kayaoglu also notes that King Faisal was ‘not wholly altruistic in founding the OIC’, but maintains that the founding’s most important success was that ‘Muslim states had united despite their vast political, ideological, national, sectarian, and economic differences’.

What this brief example of the OIC’s beginnings reveals, is that the OIC is more than an ineffective international organisation, but less than a mechanism to enact collective ‘Islamic’ policies on international affairs. The OIC is an intriguing case of religious identity in international relations and while a much grander exercise of pan-Islamic solidarity, receives far less attention than organisations like al-Qaeda or Daesh. In all these examples however, the utility - or fear - of Islam as an identity that ‘overwrites’ the behaviour of actors, compelling them to act in certain ways under an Islamic rubric, seems unfounded. To this end, Sheikh leaves us with the sobering conclusion that the OIC member states ‘can hardly be conceived as sub-entities of a cosmopolitan Islamic supra-nation, nor does their behaviour suggest that they identify themselves as such’. While the Islamic solidarity of the OIC might be found wanting, especially given the lofty ambitions of the organisation, Ihsanoglu goes to great lengths to point out the concrete instances of cooperation and convergence of interests of the member states, especially with regards to the OIC’s recent reform process. Kayaoglu’s provides a perspective where by ‘the OIC’s loose structure, flexibility and low expectations have allowed sceptical countries to attend and, in the process, socialize and increase their engagement with the organisation’.

Taken together, we might see the OIC as an organisation with a flawed past, and perhaps a disingenuous one with regards to a ‘genuine’ ummah – whatever that might look like – but it is by far the most constructive example of Islamic solidarity on offer. By

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16 Kayaoglu, Turan: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pg. 13  
17 Kayaoglu, Turan: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pg. 15  
19 Kayaoglu, Turan: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pg. 57
engaging with the realities of contemporary international relations (the nation-state), rather than pander to pre-colonial memories of Caliphate, the OIC, with all its idiosyncrasies, is a fascinating example of Islamic politics which warrants more attention by students of IR and political Islam. The three books under review are an excellent way to become familiar and explore the intricacies and theoretical difficulties (and successes) that the OIC presents.
Bibliography


