

# ORGANIZATION OF THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE (OIC)

AN UNITED NATIONS OF MUSLIM COUNTRIES?

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Describing the contemporary trend in Islam and in an apparent effort to reconcile between Islam and Turkish poet Ziya Gokalp's (1874-1924) idea of nationalism poet philosopher Muhammad Iqbal said at the beginning of the second quarter of this century that:

For the present every Muslim nation must sink into her deeper self, temporarily focus her vision on herself alone, until all are strong and powerful to form a living family of republics. A true and living unity, according to the nationalist thinkers, is not so easy as to be achieved by a merely symbolical over lordship. It is truly manifested in a multiplicity of free independent units whose racial rivalries are adjusted and harmonized by the unifying bond of a common spiritual aspiration. It seems to me that God is slowly bringing home to us the truth that Islam is neither Nationalism nor Imperialism but a League on Nations which recognizes artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility or reference only, and not for restricting the social horizon of its members.<sup>12</sup>

It is quite obvious that Iqbal wanted to see manifestation of Islamic brotherhood aim cooperative material progress of the Muslim ummah vis-a-vis Europe. This dream for a League of Nations<sup>13</sup> of Muslim countries seemed to have materialized when the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was founded in 1970 in response to a decision taken at the First

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<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Edited and Annotated by M. Saeed Shaikh. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989): 126.

<sup>13</sup> The term league of nations represent, for us, the idea of ummah or an United Nations of Muslim countries. Iqbal must have used the term league of nations because the League represented the family of nations because the League represented the family of nations when he delivered the above lecture.

Islamic Summit Conference held in 1969 in Rabat, Morocco. Echoing the dream of the poet-philosopher the Muslim leaders declared:

It is our conviction that the Ummah of 1000 million people, composed of various races, spread over vast areas of the globe and possessing enormous resources, fortified by its spiritual power and utilizing to the full its human and material potential, can achieve an outstanding position in the world and ensure for itself the means of prosperity in order to bring about a better equilibrium for the benefit of all mankind.<sup>14</sup>

Along the same line during the fifteenth hijra centenary celebration Muslim heads of state and governments further declared:

We consider that the innate qualities of the Muslim Ummah point to the way to unity and solidarity, to progress and achievement, to prosperity and power. It possesses the Book of God and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him). In them can be found a complete way of life leading us, [and] guiding us along the path of goodness, righteousness, and salvation.... It [the Qur'an and the Sunnah] enables us to break the shackles of subservience and mobilise in us the spiritual strength to utilise to the fullest extent our inherent capabilities.<sup>15</sup>

But has the OIC fulfilled the dream of the poet-philosopher or the desire of the Muslim ummah? Is the OIC serving the purpose for which it was created? What has it achieved in almost three decades of its existence? What did the ummah expect from the OIC? Was this expectation too unrealistic? How far away is the OIC from its declared goals? This paper proposes to discuss these questions in the following pages. Major OIC activities on political, economic, and cultural issues will be briefly discussed in examining its efforts to achieve its goals.

The conflict in Palestine has been generally considered by the OIC as one of occupation of Muslim lands by foreign forces and during the early years of its existence the OIC extensively discussed the Palestinian issue. In

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<sup>14</sup> OIC, The General Secretariat, "Declaration of the First Islamic Summit Conference," Organization of the Islamic Conference: Declarations and Resolutions of Heads of State and Ministers of Foreign Affairs Conferences 1389.1401H., 1969-1981, n.d.: 24

<sup>15</sup> OIC General . Secretariat, "Mecca Declaration," OIC Declarations and Resolutions.:718

fact, the OIC itself was established in the first ever held Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat, Morocco, in response to a Jewish arson attack on the Bait al-Aqsa . mosque in Jerusalem (1969) under Israeli occupation. It decided to station its head office in Jerusalem after it is free from Israeli occupation. Therefore, the OIC decided to fight Israeli aggression until the Palestinian “rights to freely exercise sovereignty over their land and national resources,” and to “establish their independent state in Palestine with Jerusalem its capital.” The OIC also resolved to achieve its goals by mobilizing all available resources of its member countries against Israel in the Political, diplomatic, military, economic, financial and cultural fields. It even declared jihad which it thought was a “duty of every Muslim, man or woman, ordained by the Pariah and glorious traditions of Islam”, and called upon Muslims “living inside ales outside Islamic countries, to discharge their duty by contributing each according to his capacity, in the cause of Allah the Almighty, the Islamic brotherhood and righteousness.”<sup>16</sup>

In reality, however, the OIC left the Palestinian people alone to fight Israel to achieve these goals. Because the fear of retaliation by Israel and its allies, no other Muslim or Arab country came to assist the armed struggle of the Palestinians against the Zionist state. Pointing out to the Israeli military action against Palestinians in Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said, “[The PLO forces] was besieged for 83 days in Beirut while no one extended any help or support. It was then besieged in Tripoli - a joint Arab-Israel blockade (pointing out to Syrian action against the PLO) while neither Arab not Muslim moved a finger”.<sup>17</sup>

The frustrated PLO leader gradually alienated himself from the original OIC decisions on the Palestinian issues and attempted to negotiate with Israel directly. In fact, the process of negotiations with Israel by OIC countries began in 1978 when Egypt, an important member-state of the OIC, signed an accord, known as the Camp David Accord, with Israel. Initially the OIC reacted angrily and suspended the membership of Egypt from the organization “up to the time when the reason that provoked this suspension

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<sup>16</sup> See Abdullah al-Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation? Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society*. (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1992): 114

<sup>17</sup> *Arabia* (August 1984): 7

are eliminated.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that within few years the OIC re-admitted Egypt without it abandoning its policy toward Israel. In reality, it seems that Egypt convinced other OIC member states to adopt its policy of “reconciliation” toward Israel.

Under the circumstances the PLO sacrificed the idea of the Palestinian “rights to freely exercise sovereignty over their land and natural resources.” It also struck a deal with Israel, an entity OIC does not yet recognize as a state, without even discussing the ideal of Jerusalem being the capital of the Palestinian state.

Was this the dream of Iqbal? Are the Palestinians happy about the deal? No. Press reports suggest that even the Palestinian negotiators are not satisfied with this deal with Israel. Palestinian negotiators themselves have categorically mentioned that they agreed to Israeli occupation of their land because they could no more fight Israeli aggression alone.

Afghanistan is another Muslim territory which was occupied by the former Soviet Union in 1979 and the OIC has dealt extensively. Immediately after the Soviet invasion of the OIC resolved to expel the puppet regime in Afghanistan from its membership in the organization. It also urged “all states and people throughout the world to support the Afghani people, and provide assistance and soccor to the refugees [a reference to displaced Afghani people due to the invasion.]”<sup>19</sup> However, it should be noted that the OIC resolution on this issue was not unanimous as was in the case of Palestine. Pro-Soviet OIC members including the PLO opposed the resolution arguing that the Afghani government was still led by puppet Afghan nationals. It is also noteworthy that although the OIC resolution on the subject expressed support for Afghan people and the refugees, it failed to categorically support the mujahidin forces actively involved in the struggle against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Individual member countries, however, offered assistance to the refugees as well as to the mujahidin which was effective in overthrowing the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan. Soviet occupation of

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<sup>18</sup> OIC Resolution 8/10-P (Political). For a detailed discussion see, Abdullah al-Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation?*:113-118

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Abdullah al-Ahsan, *OIC: Introduction to an Islamic Political Institution*, (Washington D.C.: I.I.I.T., 1988): 63-64

Afghanistan has now ended. But the point to note here is that OIC failed to fulfill the expectation of the Afghan people.

This reflects that the OIC has generally failed to identify problems of a particular member state as a common problem of the Muslim ummah. It, as an institution, failed to share the grief and pain of foreign occupation with Palestinian and Afghani peoples. In spite of its declared commitment to achieve strength, dignity and prosperity of the whole Muslim ummah, when attacked by anti-Muslim forces, it left the immediate victim to fight the enemy alone. Other Muslim nation-states have not wanted to jeopardize their national interests for the sake of fellow Muslims. It is interesting to note that this failure did not deter the OIC to adopt resolutions supporting security of Muslim nations. It resolved and reiterated time and again that the OIC wanted “to promote Islamic solidarity among member states and strengthen the struggle of all Muslim peoples to safeguard their dignity, independence and national rights.”<sup>20</sup> But no member country wanted to risk their interests by declaring jihad against the Soviet Union when it invaded Afghanistan.

The failure of OIC in siding with its members states or with Muslim minorities against external enemies was nakedly exposed in the Bosnian crisis in former Yugoslavia. In the beginning of the crisis most Muslim countries were not even ready to listen to the Muslims voice from Yugoslavia because of the latter's leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement. When it became clear through the Western media that Muslims were the piling victim in the conflict, the OIC issued an ultimatum to the aggressor and to the international community through the United Nations. The OIC demanded aggression against Muslims be stopped. It also demanded that the UN lift arms embargo over Muslims and allow them to defend themselves. But the deadline passed without notice and OIC remained silent and this proved to be very costly for Bosnian Muslims.

The OIC has not only failed to support its members countries against external aggression, it also suffered a severe set-back in resolving conflicts within its member states. In the recent Iran-Iraq conflict (1980-89) and Iraq-Kuwait conflict (1990) the OIC failed to play the role of a mediator. In reality, the OIC seemed to side with one or the other conflicting parties.

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<sup>20</sup> Foreign Minister's Conference resolutions, 13/13-P, 16/11-P, 17/14.

The OIC has had major problems in dealing with matters involving Muslims in non-member countries. Although Muslims in non-member countries have no status in the OIC charter and are not officially represented in the OIC structure, the organization has frequently shown its concern for them. The OIC noted that, “Muslim minorities in some countries of non-Muslim majorities do not enjoy the political and religious rights guaranteed by international law and norms” and appealed to “countries with Muslim minorities to respect those minorities and their culture and belief and grant them their rights in accordance with the UN charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.”<sup>21</sup> It also called upon its member states to “manifest support and assistance to the people under the yoke of colonialism and racism.” It never raised the question of Muslim suffering in the former Soviet Union, or China, or India. When in 1983 in Assam state of India many Muslim women and children villagers were massacred by Hindu fanatics the OIC did not even protest to India.

The OIC has generally failed to resolve any political crisis of Muslim nations. Occasionally member states have voiced concern about Muslim problems such as in Afghanistan and in Palestine, but the OIC has hardly taken a collective stand on any political issue. In this sense the OIC has been a failure. If one compares the role of the OIC with that of the United Nations, one clearly notes that the latter also generally failed to resolve many political crises such as the conflict between India and Pakistan on Kashmir. But one must also admit that the UN has been more successful in resolving conflicts even between two Muslim countries than the OIC. For example, the UN has been more successful in getting the conflicting parties, Iraq and Iran, into negotiations. Also in Bosnia, whatever has been achieved to restore peace in the area, has been achieved through actions of the United Nations with the support of other international organizations such as the EC and NATO.

The United Nations addresses not only political problems of member-states, it also attempts to coordinate economic and cultural activities of member countries. Similarly the OIC also has established a number of subsidiary and supporting organs to improve economic relations and foster closer cultural ties among its member states. The OIC accused the developed

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<sup>21</sup> See Abdullah al-Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation?*.. 118.

countries for not having political will to transfer technology to Muslim countries and decided that, “it was necessary for Islamic countries to resort and foremost to the mobilization and to the re valorization of their national resources, to ensure the economic and social welfare of their people.”<sup>22</sup> It is generally agreed that the OIC countries jointly have a tremendous potential for economic growth because they constitute capital-surplus countries on the one hand and capital scarce labor surplus countries on the other. Natural resources are in abundance in OIC countries; so is tile trained manpower. But it seems more likely that OIC countries themselves lack the political will to initiate effective cooperation for economic development within the OIC community. For example, the OIC formulated a “General Agreement for Economic, Technical and Commercial Cooperation Among the Member States of the Islamic Conference.” This was aimed at providing “necessary arrangements, guarantees and incentives to encourage the transfer of capital and investments among themselves.” This was designed also to promote the socioeconomic development of all Islamic countries and to open up new avenues for the optimum utilization of the economic resources available within the Islamic World. The Agreement urged member states to explore and identify the possibilities of investing in joint projects and encourage maximum food production to satisfy the food requirements of the Islamic World.<sup>23</sup> But in reality the OIC failed to achieve any substantial progress on the basis of this Agreement.

Let us examine one of the most important areas of economic development in the light of this Agreement. In a resolution in 1978 the OIC noted that most member countries depended on external sources to meet part of their food requirements even though many of them possessed vast areas of arable and grazing land. In fact, according to one study, the OIC countries have the potential to produce annually 75 million tons of grain by the year. 2000, and this can be done by cultivating only 50 million hectares out of 2200 million hectares available to these countries.<sup>24</sup> This study was supplemented by another study called “the Food Problem in Islamic

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.;:129.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.;:129-130.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmad S. Heiba, “Agricultural Resources in the Muslim World: Capital and Future Growth,” in *The Muslim World and the Future Economic Order*. (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1977), pp. 296-315.

Countries and Proposals for Future Action” by the Ankara based OIC affiliated institution the Statistical,

Economic and Social Research and Training Center. But in practice the OIC has not been able even to hold a meeting of the Agriculture ministers of OIC countries for many years. The meeting was first scheduled to be held in Egypt then to Mali but could not be held because of lack of response from member countries. The Agreement prepared by OIC experts on mutual coordination was not ratified by adequate member states for many years and, therefore, the Agreement could not be put into operation.

This pattern of behavior among OIC countries reflect a lack of commitment in implementing OIC decisions on the part of national elites. But is the lack of commitment common to all international organizations? Such does not seem to be the case with the European Community. The economics of EC countries are more uniform than those of OIC countries; all are developed industrialized economics, with highly trained manpower. Although all the OIC countries have developing economics, there are capital-rich as well as capital-poor countries among them. More important, capital-poor countries possess enormous manpower, and some also have huge cultivable land areas and other resources which could be exploited for economic growth.. It is the EC however, that has developed more - effective means of cooperation for development than OIC countries.

The OIC has suffered similar failure in coordinating cultural activities among OIC countries. It pledged to coordinate member countries' efforts in the field of education and culture, and consolidate Muslim culture and strengthen Islamic solidarity. On the pattern of the United Nations it established many affiliated and supporting organs including the Rabat based Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (ISESCO) to achieve its cultural goals. It blamed European countries for colonizing Muslim countries and for deliberately alienating young Muslims from their tradition. The Director General of ISESCO in its journal Islam Today declared that:

ISESCO was established on firm cultural premises, and not on the flimsy ground of politics. Had this been the case, it would have become entangled in inter-state differences and conflicts of interest... Instead it



emerged as the true expression of Islamic revival and as tool for promoting and expanding Islamic Knowledge while enhancing its adaptability and its responsiveness to the challenges of progress and evolution.<sup>25</sup>

In reality, however, the ISESCO did nothing to achieve its goals. On the contrary despite the organization's non-political character, the Moroccan King used the platform at a 1983 ISESCO conference to attack another OIC member country<sup>26</sup> Still leaders of OIC countries continued to emphasize the need for Muslim solidarity in the modern world. Turkey, which resolved in the beginning of the present century to break- away from the Muslim ummah by abolishing the Khilafah, again decided to work for an united platform of all Muslim countries. One of its former presidents said:

The Islamic world is in dire need of solidarity and this can be achieved by culture which is the basic element in the formation of a society. To realise the idea of the solidarity of the Muslim ummah, we have to obtain the goal of cultural solidarity ... We must also remember that we are confronted with many complex problems each claiming a priority but the culture should merit our utmost attention.<sup>27</sup>

These claims of the OIC leaders and officials do not seem to have been realized in practice. Muslims do not seem to have overcome the problem of national interests over the interest of the ummah. What is the solution then?

The question we need to ask in the present context is whether the Muslim society will be able to develop such a system that will enable its members to choose between the ummah and the nation. But again the question is how will the Muslims develop this mechanism?

In Islam, theoretically speaking, one definitely finds an all-encompassing ideology. It accommodates other identities within its fold (49:13) and it has the potential to inspire and guide its adherents. Most importantly, a community established in the light of Qur'anic teachings existed in history and the Muslim community today views it as an ideal community. But it is

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<sup>25</sup> Abdelhai Boutalib, "Editorial", Islam Today, 1:9.

<sup>26</sup> The king attacked Iran on this occasion. For detail, see Abdullah al-Ahsan, Ummah or Nation?:125-120.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Ibid.,:127.

also a fact of history that this ideal community existed only for a short period of time. And with the development of nationalism the Islamic ummah identity has lost the status of the supreme identity of Muslims. Many contemporary Muslim thinkers and scholars have noted this dilemma of the Muslim community and have put forward ideas for its solution. A Pakistani intellectual, Altaf Gauhar, has said:

Western cultural imperialism has been able to influence and undermine our beliefs, values, attitudes and manners and the task before us is to reassert our identity and to reach for our destiny. I am not advocating revivalism. Societies move forward not backward. They move forward through a sustained process of cultural assimilation, cohesion and continuity. The past cannot be revived but it can be restructured and this we cannot do unless we rediscover and reinterpret the beliefs and the values enshrined in the Holy Qur'an and made available to us as a living and everlasting model in the life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him).<sup>28</sup>

It is perhaps fairer to say that Muslims themselves have not been able to adjust to the developments and discoveries in Europe rather than saying that Western cultural imperialism has been able to undermine Muslim beliefs and values. It is easier to find a solution to the problem if the root cause is identified within the community instead of blaming others.

Gauhar's idea of the progress of societies reminds us of the Comte view of societal development. This French philosopher, frequently referred to as the Father of Sociology, believed that theology had been superseded by a positive stage of development. He also believed that "the highest progress of man and society consists in a gradual increase of our mastery over all our defects of our moral nature." Based on theories in Physics and Biology, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) laid the foundation of the modern study of human behavior and became the Father of Social Sciences.

Gauhar holds the view that Qur'anic beliefs and values should be reinterpreted but he does not explain how he would like to interpret the Qur'an. In interpreting the basic beliefs and values of any belief or ideology one must

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<sup>28</sup> Altaf Gauhar, "Islam and the Secular Thrust of Western Imperialism," in *Islam and Contemporary Society*. ed. S. Azzam. (London: Longman, 1982),:228.

bear in mind that there are foundational features in every ideology and that no ideology can afford to lose such characteristics. As for the Qur'anic ideology, there are some basic beliefs enshrined in the Qur'an; for example to believe in the Unseen is a pre-condition to receive guidance (2:3) from the Qur'an. Therefore, Gauhar's position on the issue demands more clarification.

In our view, a reinterpretation of certain practices of the early Muslim community in the light of Qur'anic values will be acceptable to a modern Muslim society. Here one has to understand properly the difference between Qur'anic values and their interpretation by the early Muslim community. For example, on the question of representative government the Qur'anic value is "to run their affairs in consultation among themselves (42:38)". The early Muslim community practiced this instruction in various ways. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, assumed the responsibility after a general consultation among leading Muslims of Madinah and later the rest of the community gave consent to his appointment. The second caliph, 'Umar was nominated by the first caliph before his death and the community accepted the nomination. Umar nominated a committee of seven leading members of the community and the committee then voted the third caliph to power. Based on the verdict of the same committee, the fourth caliph assumed the responsibility of the caliphate and the community accepted it.

This question of representative government is one of fundamental importance for the Muslim community today. Muslims are divided on this question. If a solution to this problem is found it will be easier for the Islamic ideology to claim the supreme loyalty of modern Muslims. In interpreting this issue, however, one has to bear in mind the Islamic practices of choosing a leader.

The Pre-Islamic Arabs were known for their egalitarian character and their bloodties. Generally after the death of a tribal leader, leading members nominated an elderly wise person among themselves as the leader of the tribe and the rest of the tribal community would give their allegiance to the newly-elected leader. The tribal leader in return used to decide on affairs of the community after consultation with experienced and wise members, usually clan chiefs, within the community. Islam broke this structure. It considered tribal and blood-ties to be of secondary importance, and established itself as

the supreme identity, but it nevertheless retained the principle of consultation in running the affairs of the community. Now the Muslim will adopt a parliamentary or a presidential form a government or they will develop a new institution capable of running the affairs by consultation of community members is an issue to be decided by the Muslims themselves.

With the introduction of Western parliamentary systems in some Muslim 'countries, however, as Fazlur Rahman has pointed out, the lawmaking has become the business of lay parliamentarians. But there are large-scale protests from the Ulema and their supporters that law making must be vested in the Ulema institutions.<sup>29</sup> This is because Muslims have not yet decided whether their supreme loyalty lies with Islam or to their nation-state identity. In our opinion, there is no easy solution to this problem. Failure Ragman has rightly suggested that:

The only way to produce genuine Islamic law is to enlighten public conscience, particularly that of the educated classes, with Islamic values. This, in fact, underlines the necessity of working out Islamic ethics systematically from the Qur'an and making such works accessible to the general reader. There is no short cut to this process for the production of Islamic law.<sup>30</sup>

Muslim established the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to reassert their identity in recent history. But, as we have noted earlier, this political institution has had little effect in achieving collaboration among Muslim nation-state. The collaborative achievement of any group needs a stopping social band; in modern times, for example, nationalism created this bond among Europeans. In Muslim countries, too, a strong bond was created against European colonialism; but in formulating this bond, secular nationalism and the Islamic ummah both played equally important roles. After the creation of independent nation-states, Muslims were confused.

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<sup>29</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity.. Transforming an Intellectual Tradition*. (Chicago Press, 1982): 256.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*:156-7.- cohesion and continuity. The past cannot be revived but it can be restructured and this we cannot do unless we rediscover and reinterpret the beliefs and the values enshrined in the Holy Qur'an and made available to us as a living and everlasting model in the life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). It is perhaps fairer to say that Muslims themselves have not been able to adjust to the developments and discoveries in Europe.

Neither secular nationalism nor the ummah could form the basis of any group feeling; therefore, a strong feeling of individualism dominates Muslim society today.

Once the hierarchy of identities is clearly defined, the OIC will need to restructure its form if it wants to play the role of United Nations of the Muslim ummah. The failure of its resolutions suggests that the OIC cannot be effective as a structure where the components are more powerful than the mother organization. Fruitful cooperation on the platform of the OIC can take place only if the ummah is given priority by Muslims. Muslim society needs to change as it did under its Prophet; in his time the ummah replaced tribes; today, it needs to replace the nation-states. Nation-states do not need to be abolished; rather, like the early Muslim community, modern Muslims need to change the hierarchy of their identities.

This change, however, will not be easy to achieve. For any fruitful cooperation it is necessary to understand the dilemma of the existing situation. Once this is properly understood, it will be easier to determine a realistic goal. Muslim intellectuals need to re-evaluate lessons from the full range of their history. When the ummah was first established under the leadership of the Prophet, it replaced the tribal customary law. Muslim intellectuals need to study the character of law in pre-Islamic Arabian society in order to understand how Islam modified that law to conform with the Islamic concept of tawhid (Oneness of God). It is also necessary to understand the local Arabian customs which were accommodated within Islam, and similarly it is necessary to understand how incorporated other cultures, specifically the dominant Byzantine and Persian Muslim intellectuals must understand the nature of these cultural interactions in history in order to accept or reject the teachings of European civilization. However, this will be possible only after a clear of their loyalties. Muslim intellectuals must decide about supreme loyalty - whether it lies with the Islamic ummah identity or the ideas of European civilization.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES