

Summary Report of the First OIC Member States Conference on Mediation

21 November 2017, İstanbul

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, in cooperation with the OIC General Secretariat, organized the First OIC Member States Conference on Mediation on 21 November 2017 under the theme “Surge in Mediation: The role of the OIC”.

The conference was organized at a time when the United Nations was working to put prevention and mediation at the focus of its future work. In his report entitled “United Nations activities in support of mediation”, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) H.E. Guterres stressed the need for enhanced capacity on mediation as a tool to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts both at the UN, as well as at other international, regional and local organizations.

Turkey, in its capacity as the Chair of the Summit and the Executive Committee of the OIC, decided to convene this conference to contribute to the capacity building efforts within the OIC on mediation. As the largest international organization after the UN in geographical outreach and population, the OIC has a huge potential and a genuine comparative advantage in that field. However, it is necessary to further enhance its capacity on mediation.

With a view to contributing to the capacity-building work of the OIC, the Conference aimed at strengthening awareness in the OIC area of the benefits of mediation by facilitating intellectual exchanges on various normative aspects and practical issues on mediation. The Conference brought together around 100 participants, including senior officials from OIC Member States, the OIC General Secretariat and other international organizations as well as academics, to discuss for the first time the ways to enhance interaction, understanding and cooperation with a view to improving the effectiveness of mediation efforts in the OIC area.

H.E. Ambassador Abdallah Alim, Assistant Secretary General of the OIC for Political Affairs and H.E. Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey inaugurated the Conference.

H.E. Ambassador Yıldız referred to the SESRIC Report of February 2017, entitled “Humanitarian Crises in OIC Countries” to set the scene. He underlined the importance of mediation as a cost-effective instrument with extensive benefits and expressed the strong support of Turkey, as the Chair of the Summit, to the significant steps taken by the OIC for more effective and wider use of mediation. Giving information on Turkey’s efforts regarding mediation, he called on OIC Member States, who have not done so, to join the UN Group of Friends of Mediation. Since peaceful prevention and resolution of conflicts require political will, but also a capacity and a method, he proposed to build political will by building capacity. Consequently, he called upon the OIC and all its Member States to play a more visible and active role in mediation efforts and help build awareness and capacity.

H.E. Ambassador Alim drew attention to the fact that the long-standing unresolved conflicts within the Member States and in countries where Muslims minorities reside are among the gravest threats to international and regional peace, security and stability. He pointed at the major role the OIC has to play in facilitating peaceful and just resolution of all such disputes. He explained the OIC peace architecture including the mechanisms for effectively addressing important matters concerning peace and security, conflict prevention, mediation, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. He also warned about the conflicts that are feeding on sectarianism and flawed interpretations of ideology and creed. Referring to several ongoing complicated

conflicts in the OIC geography, he underlined the need to take a pause and take stock of the aggravating situations.

After the inaugural speeches, the Conference addressed the above-mentioned issues in three senior expert level sessions. The first expert session set the scene by discussing the role of regional/sub-regional organizations in mediation and took stock of the developments in the area of mediation and field experiences of the OIC, as well as the OIC Peace Architecture. The second expert session explored possibilities to enhance the contributions and role of OIC in mediation. In this context, it elaborated on new initiatives within the OIC Peace Architecture, namely the Islamic Rapprochement Initiative and the OIC Contact Group on Peace and Conflict Resolution, as well as further institutional and practical measures to build on them. The third session addressed the possible steps that the OIC can consider in strengthening its current mediation and mediation-support capacities and identified possible future OIC activities in mediation as both a conflict prevention and conflict settlement method. In this context, it discussed probable concrete steps the OIC might consider in employing mediation in prevention and resolution of actual or developing tensions, including animosity against Islam in various geographies. It also dwelt upon the need to enhance the role of women in the field of conflict prevention and resolution.

Summary of the panel discussions are provided below.

The Summary and Findings of the Conference Sessions

First Session: “Perspectives on the Role of Regional Organizations in Mediation”

This session started with underlining the surge in conflicts in the OIC region and the significance of the peace and development nexus in terms of prevention. As the common voice of the Moslem world and being the second largest international organization after the UN, the role of the OIC must be next to the UN in global peacebuilding efforts. Islam is a religion of peace, compassion, tolerance and gratitude, which emphasizes the peaceful settlement of disputes and thus mediation is not an unfamiliar concept for Islam.

With these thoughts, the session dealt with the current state of affairs regarding the OIC’s mediation activities and its legal and institutional background. In doing so, it brought forward vast experience, derived from a number of cases around the OIC geography. The discussions demonstrated that while there are several success stories of mediation in the OIC area, there is still need to reinforce existing OIC mechanisms and build further capacity with a view to streamlining the institutional framework of mediation activities. This includes more structured mediation support within the OIC.

The session included the analysis of the current OIC peace architecture, with reference to i. the Chapter 15 of the OIC Charter devoted to the peaceful settlement of disputes, ii. the role of the decision-making institutions such as the Executive Committee, Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) and the Islamic Summit, iii. the decisions taken at the 13th Islamic Summit Conference held in Istanbul on 14-15 April 2016, including the adoption of the OIC-2025 Programme of Action, which mentioned the development of mechanisms for effectively addressing important matters concerning peace and security, conflict prevention, mediation, and peaceful resolution of conflicts, iv. the decisions taken at the 44th Session of the CFM in Abidjan on 10-11 July 2017. The three-tiered peace and security architecture of the OIC composed of the Wise Persons Council, Special Envoys and the Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit at the General Secretariat was mentioned as well as the role of the Islamic Fiqh Academy and Islamic Development Bank.

One of the most significant problems is the recurrence of conflicts, which underlines the importance of addressing the root causes. Most of the ongoing conflicts around the world are in the OIC geography, which shows that more needs to be done in that field. Hence, there is a need for soul searching as regards where we stand when it comes to the use of mediation. On the other hand, one should not forget several success stories of the OIC in the field of mediation in Africa and Asia.

It was observed that most of the conflicts are of internal nature, which makes it more difficult in view of the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. The OIC has to be invited by the concerned countries and act with the consent of the relevant governments. This constitutes the ground on which the OIC builds its mediation efforts. Past experiences show that non-OIC countries such as the Philippines, Thailand or China have resorted to and accepted the OIC's mediation efforts since the Moslem minorities in their countries listen to the OIC and their governments do not want their economic and other relations with the Islamic world to be affected. A lesson learnt from the Philippines case was that the mistake of closing the file upon the signing of the final peace agreement; since the conflict continued afterwards. It was expressed that some internal conflicts in Asia are of ethnic nature rather than a religious one.

The discussions in the session also highlighted the added value regional organizations can bring to the area of mediation and the calls for their effective involvement in mediation efforts. Many regional organizations had no capacity or willingness to engage in mediation until the 1990s; whereas today, among more than 500 regional organizations, around 20 of them are genuinely interested and have the capacity to mediate. It was reminded that most mediation efforts of these organizations do not succeed. Regional organizations do not have a choice as regards which mediation process they can embark upon. It is the states to decide at the end whether to have mediation or not, although studies show that third party interest in reaching a solution increases by six times the chances of a solution to the conflict. Regional organizations have the advantage of familiarity with the conflict conditions and are better placed to find its root causes. They have more legitimacy than a regional country embarking on a mediation attempt. Such legitimacy also gives credibility to the mediation efforts of regional organizations. Another advantage of having a regional organization in the mediation process is the role it can play in the post-conflict stage. It was also reminded that regional organization's mediation role could sometimes be hijacked by the interest of regional powers. In civil wars, governments and rebels may have reasons for not entrusting a regional organization with the role of mediator. On the other hand, regional organizations can bring economic leverage to reach and to implement a deal.

In that session, information was shared as regards the Mediation Support Unit (MSU) of the UN Department of Political Affairs, the Standby Team of Mediation Experts, and the work carried out by the Group of Friends of Mediation co-chaired by Turkey and Finland. It was explained that the UNSG attaches importance to conflict prevention and mediation. Gender parity and strong partnerships and structural cooperation with regional and sub-regional organizations, including the OIC, also constitute a high priority for the UNSG in these efforts. The importance of supporting partnerships with local and national mediators was also expressed. Some trends were identified as i. the transformation of the nature of conflicts into more protracted and regionalized ones, ii. the multiplication and the fragmentation of actors, iii. the divisions in the international community as seen in the UN Security Council, hampering the role of the UN, iv. the growth in mediation actors including NGOs and regional organizations that are better suited to tackle many conflicts. There needs to be a coherent cooperation and a division of labour among different mediation actors. The lack of such coordination runs the risk of "forum shopping" where the parties will search for the best

mediators to fit their own interests. The UN MSU contributes to increasing the capacity of different regional organizations through sharing best practices and lessons learnt as well as establishing mediation support structures and rosters of mediators.

Some participants emphasised the importance of political will and consensus among OIC Member States to mandate the Organization in any specific conflict. The need for necessary resources and tools for mediation was also mentioned. In this respect, it was stated that a specific resolution to be adopted by the Member States to give support and mandate may enable the OIC General Secretariat to play a more active and visible role in this field. The OIC may take inspiration from other regional organizations in designing an effective mediation mechanism. Some participants called for more OIC involvement in resolving the Rohingya crisis.

Second Session: “Enhancing the Role of the OIC in Mediation”

The discussions in this session focused on the recent innovative frameworks of “Islamic Rapprochement Initiative” and “OIC Contact Group on Peace and Conflict Resolution” added to the OIC Peace Architecture and the ways to render them more effective in the field of mediation. This session also addressed some lessons learnt from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

It was argued that both initiatives were introduced at a time when the OIC region has been facing grave tensions and conflicts undermining the Moslem world and that the main premise of the Islamic Rapprochement Initiative, started by Turkey and Kazakhstan, was the Shia-Sunni division. In that vein, the same division was identified as the main challenge to this initiative complicating and hampering its initiation. The need for political will of the Member States and operational procedures was emphasized accordingly. It was suggested that such procedures may be informal or in many different shapes and the political will has to come from the Member States through the Islamic Summit Chairmanship, CFM Chairmanship or the Executive Committee, the bodies that give guidance to the OIC. Another argument was that this Turkish-Kazakh initiative was caused by the urgent need to address unresolved issues among Moslem countries and the growing tensions between Moslem countries threatening Islamic unity and solidarity. Thus, it did not only focus on Shia-Sunni tensions, but it is a very wide and flexible concept to revise all complex problems of the Islamic world and to define a common ground for the conflicting parties.

The Indonesian initiative of the OIC Contact Group on Peace and Conflict Resolution was also welcomed as a timely step to address the challenges of the Islamic world in matters of peace and security. The Contact Group was established to focus on emerging issues such as radicalism, extremism, sectarianism, terrorism and challenges for peace with the consent of the concerned Member States and in tandem with and to complement the existing OIC mechanisms.

The Contact Groups are not operational by themselves and have to be tasked by institutional bodies. Thus, the Terms of Reference (ToR) of this Group needs to be devised in a way to carry the weight of the institutional bodies of the OIC and it was with this understanding that Turkey proposed the group to be co-chaired by Indonesia and the Islamic Summit Chair. The Chair of the CFM has to play a role too and the Group must have a link with the Executive Committee. It was highlighted that the Executive Committee established to address urgent issues has proved its relevance, yet its role still needs to be complemented. The restructuring of the work of the Executive Committee and the Contact Groups was also underlined.

A suggestion was the establishment of a Group of Friends of Mediation at the OIC and a MSU within the Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit at the General Secretariat to support the Contact Group. It was argued that the Contact Group has a great potential, yet progress was stalled due to technical issues in the first expert meeting on the ToR of the said Group in April in Jeddah. Another point of view was that it was not stalled and this is a process that requires time. Member States were invited to provide input to reinforce the ToR. The participants were informed that the Contact Group is open to the membership of all OIC Member States. On the other hand, Indonesia believes that the membership of a limited number of countries, with a rotational system based on certain period of membership with representation of different geographic regions, with maximum number of 5 countries per region would be a more efficient option. The Contact Group, inter alia, may take role as a mediator based upon the consent of the concerned parties.

The session was instrumental in reminding the need to further reflect upon the operationalization of these two crucial initiatives. Another essential point highlighted once more in that session was the need to develop more thoroughly OIC's efforts and to improve the role of the Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution Unit. 6 out of 18 members of the "High Level Advisory Board on Mediation" appointed by the UNSG are from the OIC Member States. This shows that there is capacity within the OIC geography.

The session also addressed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the failed mediation efforts for a peaceful resolution of this conflict so far. The position of the OIC and its Member States in international fora regarding this conflict was thoroughly analyzed. The OIC has played an instrumental role in raising awareness of the world community on the aggression of Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan. The 13th Islamic Summit in Istanbul established a Contact Group on the Aggression of the Republic of Armenia against the Republic of Azerbaijan on 14-15 April 2016. Nevertheless, there is still need today to develop new tools and to strengthen current mechanisms to boost the OIC conflict resolution and mediation efforts, as well as to enhance further intra-OIC solidarity and cooperation among Member States within other multilateral organizations, concerning the mediation and conflict resolution matters.

Third Session: "Elements of a Road Map for the OIC's Role in Mediation"

The third session was instrumental in discussing possible elements of a roadmap, including practical steps to strengthen OIC's mediation capacity, in emphasizing the crucial role of women in mediation and in elaborating on the role of mediation in conflicts and tensions based on various forms of political, social and religious animosities, such as xenophobia and animosity against Islam. Given the rise in animosity against Islam around the world, this session tried to assess whether there is a role for mediation there and what the OIC can do in this respect.

It was restated that ethnic and religious conflicts are on the rise today and this puts more responsibility on us, as members of Islam, the religion of peace. It was expressed that Moslem societies' trust in mediation processes led by Western institutions is low due to the belief that the West has a role in the root causes of many conflicts. It was highlighted that mediation must be humanitarian and ethical. It should not be confined to the technical process, but has to become sustainable. For this, ownership of the process by the masses is of equal importance.

The role of women in mediation is an issue of representation. With their forgiveness, diplomatic skills and creative solutions, women can contribute not only to peacemaking but also to peacebuilding. A study by “UN Women” on peace processes demonstrated that women made up only 2% of Chief Mediators, 4% of Witnesses and Signatories and 9% of Negotiators. Normative UN resolutions have not changed this picture, although women have a multiplier effect in social peace. On the other hand, it was reaffirmed that the OIC Women’s Advisory Council will continue to contribute to the role of women in OIC.

A suggestion was to establish academic centers in OIC Member States about mediation, conflict prevention and negotiation to counter the successful “Islamophobia Industry”. A more humanitarian, conscientious and ethical mediation will also contribute to peace in the OIC geography.

While the OIC has done a lot to contribute to peace in its geography and has many success stories in this respect, there is room for further development. The OIC needs to do more in terms of dialogue facilitation and mediation. In this context, it was recommended to;

- i. Strengthen the partnerships between the OIC and other international and regional organizations
- ii. Ensure political will (Member States must decide to give due attention and priority to mediation.)
- iii. Invest more on early warning by adopting a new paradigm of dialogue and culture-based idea of security
- iv. Enhance good governance to preempt conflicts and to eliminate root causes, encourage Member States to increase capacity and capability in mediation processes
- v. Establish a network of OIC mediators, including experts, think tanks and civil society
- vi. Establish a “Group of Friends of Mediation” in OIC, similar to the one at the UN
- vii. Prepare a Code of Conduct like a guideline for mediators
- viii. Invest more in mediation by mobilizing more resources
- ix. Build a culturally sensitive mediation approach
- x. Deal with tensions like Islamophobia and strengthen the Alliance of Civilizations mechanism and the Istanbul Process to this end
- xi. Enhance the good offices of the Secretary General
- xii. Expand and fully activate the Wise Persons Council
- xiii. Encourage cooperation and exchange of expertise among OIC Member States and continue with this conference on an annual basis
- xiv. Strengthen the mandate of Contact Groups
- xv. Strengthen the Islamic Rapprochement Initiative.

In this session it was recalled that the UN Group of Friends of Mediation helped to promote a culture of mediation by raising awareness of the need for and utility of mediation at all stages of the conflict continuum and created, fostered and expanded the network of mediators by encouraging the relevant actors, including regional and sub-regional organizations, to undertake mediation activities as well as to engage more women in mediation.

Attention was drawn to the significance of mediation at the domestic level to prevent civil strife by engaging in a culture of mediation that will address domestic hotspots to prevent them from igniting civil wars. In this context, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was referred to as a prime example of mediation at the domestic level. It was expressed that an effective mediation process at the domestic level responds to the specificity of the conflict. It

takes into account the causes and dynamics of the conflict, cultural sensitivity, the positions, interests and coherence of the parties, as well as the needs of the broader society.

The importance of inclusivity in mediation was also underlined. It was reminded that the inclusion of women in peace processes increases the chances of a lasting peace agreement. In line with this, calls for stronger support for different networks of women mediators led to the establishment of Nordic Women Mediators Network, the African Union-led FemWise- Africa and the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network. A suggestion was to develop a curriculum to teach relevant mediative skills to the community at the primary and secondary school levels and at the university level.

Similarly, the importance of youth in terms of preventive measures was underlined. The need to increase awareness through media and education was highlighted, while referring to the role of grassroots, youth and women in terms of inclusivity. Attention was drawn to the fact that trends like radicalism and xenophobia are not only observed in the West. We also see the increasing radicalism and sectarianism in the Moslem world. In order to overcome these challenges, there is need for better communication skills, resources and creation of dialogical spaces as well as refraining from using media to escalate tensions. The problem of radicalism/ extremism and continuous civil wars is like “chicken-and-egg” and the OIC needs to deal with this issue. Islamophobia and larger anti-Moslem rhetoric also have to do with the developments within the Moslem world. Increasing radicalism in the Moslem world also feeds into the radicalism and extreme right in the West. It was reminded that radicalism, violence and xenophobia are not inherent but socially learnt behaviors, which gradually develop in connection with the problems of the social, economic and political system. Grassroots level, religious leaders, media and education can play important roles and the approaches and techniques of peace and conflict studies can provide a useful source in overcoming these challenges. These approaches need to be human-centric and bottom-up. Educators, mediators and political discourses are very important in this context. The usual practice of elite-level mediation mostly addresses already emerged conflicts, whereas social grassroots mediation can be a more preventive way. In this context, reference was made to the Alliance of Civilizations as a very successful initiative dealing with issues like immigration, youth and culture and trying to reach out to youth and to include women. Peace education is also important in some post conflict societies. The OIC may consider strengthening peace education. Educating youth to develop empathy at early ages and supporting peer mediation, bringing together local religious people and training women for mediation will also contribute to these efforts.

Concluding remarks

In his concluding remarks, H.E. Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız stated that it is no time to be cautious, but to be active. He suggested the Secretary General to follow closely the evolving conflicts and offer his good offices when necessary or to approach a Member State to do so. H.E. Yıldız also underlined the importance of the clerics to come to the forefront to advise Moslems and non-Moslems about the true nature of Islam and to correct misunderstandings.

H.E. Ambassador Burak Akçapar, Director-General of Policy Planning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, summed up the Conference by reemphasizing the need for action, since conflicts do not end by themselves. Reminding the SESRIC statistics,

he mentioned two keywords for the way forward: “immediately” and “proactively”. Referring to the significant steps that the OIC has already taken, he stated that time has come to utilize these OIC experiences and to build more capacity. In this context, he proposed the formula of generating wider political will by building further capacity and concluded that this Conference is only the beginning of such a process.