

Economic Integration in the Islamic World: Environment and Process

**A Thesis from the Cultural Approach and
an Entry Theme for the Formulation and
Implementation of Strategies and Policies**

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Introduction:

The thesis presented in this study stems from two basic facts:

The first one is that the ***cultural factor*** is one of the most important elements of the environment surrounding the economic integration process in the countries of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation"; and the ***cultural factor*** is currently contributing to the disability and inefficiency at the moment; thus, this ***cultural factor*** has to be liberated from the current negative situation so as it would be the catalyst and enhancer for this Islamic economic integration in the future.

The second fact is that the nature of the processes for the building the in between integration strategies in the countries of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation", and the processes of general economic policy-making, and the consequent processes to turn them into plans and programs that can be implemented, as well as the nature of these processes constitute the most important determinants for this anticipated integration, whether by strengthening or weakening the possibilities for such integration.

Accordingly, properly introducing and formulating the ***methodology*** of these processes would be one of the most important challenges to be addressed.

The process of creating an environment for integration between the countries of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation" needs great attention, especially regarding the cultural approach for the integration; as well as examining the reality of this integration and spotting the causes of the disability of culture in this Muslim nation - in its peoples and governments - to work for enhancing the in between Islamic relations and actions as well as the collective ones.

Thus, the practical question arises; and it consists of two parts:

(1) How to activate the cultural approach and the cultural sphere in order to make it effective in implementing the existing policies of economic openness and enhancing communication between the countries of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation", within the current overall strategy, in parallel with the development of this strategy?

(2) How could the existing framework of the current strategies and the relevant policies be changed in order to allow achieving a greater degree of integration; taking into account the implications and connotations of the cultural factor on the political and economic aspects and the community?

This study discusses a range of ideas on two levels:

On the one hand, how could the cultural dimension and the strategy-making process and policies become considered as limiting and constraining factors – not motivating one - to the issue of Islamic economic cooperate?

On the other hand, what is the way to overcome this situation?

First - *The culture of integration*; the ever-absent and ever-present element in the contemporary culture of the peoples of the Muslim nation:

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation is based on the contractual link between its peoples and States. And Islam is the source of the cultural and civilizational traditions shared among these people and nations; while these people differ in other political and economic characteristics.

The organization's activities are organized all together in support of Islamic solidarity in the cultural, and other advocacy areas, as well as the social, educational, economic and other ones as well... Hence, the talk about "economic integration" and working at the level of this goal seems to be separated or isolated from other areas. Despite efforts in the areas of cultural, advocacy and educational spaces, the next question remains unanswered in between the Muslim countries and towards the outside world: Why the cultural factor does not represent - as such - a catalyst for economic integration? Is it a limiting factor? What is the meaning of that? And how could an organization that has been built upon common association and cultural characteristics remain incapable of employing this kind of resource to support the economy and politics; where the economic aspects of solidarity, as well as the political aspects are not held, so far, up to the required and anticipated level, or the level assumed to be available between the people who share collective cultural ties?

The fact is that the experiences of regional economic integration and other global ones have not been based directly on a "cultural factor" in its founding as much as they were based on primarily political, economic and other factors. Though these experiences, and especially the European one, have made a significant achievement at the economic and political levels, yet, the ultimate goals of these experiments have stipulated recalling the "cultural" element, whether directly or indirectly (e.g. the European identity in the European Constitution).

Also, stimulating the European economic integration was coupled, through successive decades, with internal dialogue in the homelands and across borders with debates that highlight how the interests of individuals, groups and peoples are achieved via integration; and the status of nations - individual ones or as a group - is achieved at the global level via integration as well. Hence, this dialogue and its products, be them civilian or popular movements, has become an

essential input in the development of the European integration process.

This is what could be described as a "**culture of integration**" among the people led by conscious elites, where the mechanisms and tools of culture and public opinion are utilized and employed, not in the service of the cultural dimensions only in a direct way, but for the sake of creating public awareness regarding the issue of the fate and the future of Europe as a united and effective continent through unity in the political and economic aspects.

Many theoretical studies in the areas of comparative systems, international relations, international organization and world order have already confirmed the importance of cultural dimensions and the value of these dimensions in the development experiences, whether national or collective.

Despite that the belief bond makes the Muslim peoples "one nation" (*Ummah Wahidah*), it is astonishing to find that this bond became was no longer a basis for political and economic unity in the same way where it was already achieved in previous centuries, when the cultural dimensions were strongly emerged with other dimensions in the construction of the Islamic civilization.

Whatever the reasons may have been numerous and varied, be them interior or exterior ones, the history of the Islamic world - and especially over the last three centuries - has been filled with huge problems; the most important of which was the duality (and dichotomy) between what is "Islamic" and what is "civil" in educational institutions, as well as the social and judicial ones.

Hence, one can monitor a set of **characteristics with cultural dimensions**, which may explain how the cultural factor has become constrained and not a catalyst for effective economic cooperation among Islamic countries.

Among the most important of these characteristics, there are the following ones:

- 1) Loss of faith among the westernized elites (as well as the western-dependent and the or corrupt ones) in the notion that the economic integration between Islamic countries is a necessity to achieve the economic and political interests of these people in a way that is

beyond the interests gained from cooperation in other non-Islamic frameworks and structures. These westernized, western-dependent and corrupt elites have also lost their faith that this Islamic unity is possible, economically and politically, even in any non-traditional ways.

The ambiguity and pallor that have hit the concept of "nation" (*Ummah*) amongst the Muslim people, and the lack of hard conscious and continued debate about the need and prospects for Arab or Islamic possible economic unity, or debating and discussing the potentials of such unity and the constraints it may face, were all factors that help entrenching and cementing this odd situation of fragmentation of Muslims and the Islamic States; and even extending the presence of such division and fragmentation.

This situation also supports the effects of the loss of willingness among the elite and the lack of awareness among the people, in addition to the absence of organized pressure groups - in general - and in this economic sphere in particular, where **the making of the strategy and policy in the organs and bodies of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation" remains a process of instant high official levels only, detached from the core of the society and the grass-roots, and such process regarding the making of the strategy and policy remain only known to few limited circles.**

Similarly, the output of the process of "public policy" is not highly made public, and the concerned citizen does not know about it, as well as the ordinary citizens of course. For example, the Muslim people whom the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation" represents know nothing about the following:

- a- The amount of increase of intra-regional trade in between the Islamic countries... How could I touch it as an Egyptian citizen? What are the products of the Islamic countries that enter our markets, and thus, we need to support them in the face of its competitors?
- b- What do we know about the development of Islamic banks and how to use their roles?

- c- What do we know about the aid policies and their relationship to the policies of relief?
- d- What do the citizens, groups, and civic and popular devices in the Islamic countries know about the financial and economic cooperation devices and organs affiliated to the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation"? Is not there a payoff for these devices activities and works, even if that was only at the official level? Is there by any chance any effort to get the public to know about the financial and economic cooperation devices of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation" as a necessary tool to mobilize support and mobilize cooperation throughout the Muslim World?

In summary of all this, one could conclude that **"the loss of democracy in the process of strategy and policy making deeply interferes with uninterrupted link between this process and its outputs on one side and the people of the whole nation on the other, in addition to the loss of the supreme sovereign political will to induce change"**.

2) Lack of clarity regarding the philosophy of "economic cooperation" at the official supra-structures

Philosophy here means the nature of the cooperation model and the values that guide and shape such cooperation. For example, we ask: Do the economic cooperation projects support the necessities of life among the people, or is it tending towards *Tahsinaat* (the higher luxurious economic needs) on the expense of the true elementary economic daily life necessities (*Darurat*) and the other mid way needs (*Hajjiyyat*)?

Are not the values of the consumer society - emanating from the values of capitalist globalization - pressing the orientations of the cooperation strategies and policies, to the extent that the structural characteristics of the economies of Islamic countries are put under pressure by these trends (as some of these consumerist capitalist characteristics represent a motivation and incentive for cooperation

between Islamic countries and others outside the framework of the "Organization of Islamic Cooperation" rather than fellow Muslim ones?

It is known that the Islamic model of development is of certain Islamic cultural specificity that is stemming from the value dimensions that are based upon the notions of *Al-Istikhlaf*, *Al-Oumran* and *Al-Tazkiyah* (i.e. the notions that perceive the human being performing a mission instructed by Allah to build and develop his life upon this earth and to upgrade this life within the belief of Tawhid and the subsequent value system). From such core model, the values are all associated with the concept of "justice" (*al-Adalah*) and how to achieve it internally in the Muslim world and on the global level. The mechanisms to enable these values and achieve their teleological objectives had already manifested itself in the glorious flourishing periods of Islamic civilization's history.

Unfortunately, the study of the political economy of Islamic civilization (the Islamic economic history internally in each country, in between the Islamic States, and then, globally) and the study of the political sociology of the Islamic civilization, are branches of social sciences that are not given our full attention and due care, while these branches of knowledge enjoyed great care by ancient and modern Orientalism.

3) The limited and shallow perception of the concept of "the scope of economic cooperation" is an issue in itself, where it is limited to direct economic sectors, and mainly at the official level, surpassing the people all the time. The question is: Where are the dimensions of the cross-national collaboration? And where are the economic returns of the direct and indirect collaboration and cooperation in the human-based economic spheres; such as tourism, education, media, arts and literature and youth exchanges? Is not there any development of cooperation in these sectors that would push towards a Pan-Islamic economic cooperation?

In fact, it takes a civilized integrated vision to be established to operate and to create interaction between different sectors that would - in turn - feed into each other. It is, for example: joint education programs and joint degrees and all such similar intellectual unification methods that would actually interact and breed fruits when considered as ways to configure new elites that have the awareness about "the reality of the nation" and working towards making it unity a live de-facto.

4) The institutions operating in different areas; media, cultural, advocacy and economy and so forth, they act as isolated islands... As if the Da'wa issues (religious call and advocacy) as well as the educational elements, the cultural ones and so forth are by default separated from the other dimensions (i.e. the societal, the economic and the political). For example, we ask: Where are the goals and objectives of the ISESCO and what are the moves of this organization to reach them (including the objectives of promoting cooperation between Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in the fields of education, thought and technology, as well as working to make the curriculum based on Islamic culture and values, supporting the Islamic culture and protecting the independence of Islamic thought from all forms of cultural invasion)? And how are these objectives enacted to support cooperation in other areas?

And again, where is the work for informing the people in the Islamic countries about the conditions and situation in the different parts of the Muslim world? And where is the effort to bring those people together and introduce them to one another as well as making them aware of their integrated capabilities? And where is the effort to tell the Muslim peoples about the need to work together for the unity of the nation? Where is the culture of renewal and revival of the concept of "nation" (Ummah) to be incorporated and internalized practically and not just through speeches?

The issue of "Saving the Nation" does not only mean saving and

preserving its heritage, but it also means to renew its moral and soft capabilities as much as its physical capabilities. This needs making a strong emphasis on culture, education, knowledge as well as capable media that is dealing with the reality in all its dimensions and in an integrated manner between the moral and the physical, as well as the cultural dimensions and those of material interest, within a form of successive integration between the internal in each country, the in between among these countries and the global as well.

Second – Towards an Interaction between the Cultural and the Moral Aspects in Relation to the Material Interests on the National and Collective Levels in the Muslim Nation

In light of the previous set of properties and characteristics tackled, it can be said that:

The cooperation model (that is restricted with all negativities of the concepts of sovereignty of nation-states, precedence of national interests over anything else, the domination and hegemony of the ruling regimes over the peoples and the laws of globalization in the current savage capitalism, while excluding and marginalizing all elements pertaining to the people and transnational nations) is no longer the model viable or liable to continue, as the culture of unity and integration must come from the culture of the people and their belief in the need for their unity.

If the previously mentioned characteristics assume a different model of cooperation that is contrary to the existing one (i.e. the one which is currently structured and determined through the Charter of the Organization), the previously proposed ideas at the beginning of this paper are the ideas for a "**comprehensive change**" and not just fixing or reforming (in a partial sense) the status quo.

However, the "reform" - as an essential stage for change that should eventually take place gradually - is supposed to keep in mind the following pivotal elements:

- A quick look at the developmental experiences and the integrative successful across the world reveal a large role for **cultural integration** that would be applied and consistently flowing between government sectors and non-governmental organizations, and between producers and consumers, not just within a single country, but also among integrated states and entities, where such countries reflect the **synergy** between the "moral" and the "interest-based" elements within the circle and cycle of integration; so that the entrenched beliefs become consolidated and stating that the element

of "belonging and affiliation" to these cultural norms and ethical values can truly achieve the awaited "development", "economic growth" and "economic integration", so as - in the end - achieve the mutual interests that are worthy of consideration.

- On the other hand, these experiments reveal that the cultural - with all its importance - is not enough by itself to build or manage real integration between the countries and communities; as it is obliged to resort to a well-methodologized mentality that would be capable of making strategies of complementarities that are based on a deep study of the reality of the units on one hand, and good planning for the future and a vision for the integration on the other.

The bottom line here is that afro-mentioned **vision** raised in this paper exceeds the prevailing theses about the limitations imposed on the functionality of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and how to get the entity vitalized to perform its function and fulfill its mandate; since the predominant classical thesis for vitalizing this organization has always focused on the structural traditional aspects, such as: characteristics of the systems in the Islamic States, the voting system and decision-making mechanism in the organization, the political dimensions and the security ones, the pressures and constraints from the outside world and the globalized international environment... Yet, despite the importance of all these aspects that relate to the capabilities and potentials of this organization, the factors that relate to the will of the Muslim nation and its people, at the heart of which the **values, beliefs and culture** in the broader sense (which may coincide with *identity* as such), must witness a massive move to rehabilitate them, especially at the level of an organization that has essentially been created to reflect the faith, beliefs and the value system of this Muslim Ummah. Yet, the reality tells us that the experience of this organization has not yet been able to show how it should be embodying and incorporating the values and cultural traditions, as well as the civilizational commonalities in the form that shows the organization's ability and its willingness to achieve the national and collective interests of the peoples and countries of the Islamic world.

The challenge is all about responding to the crises of culture, development and integration in the Muslim nation, and such challenge would remain on the table in the upcoming period.

Based on all of the above:

There are a number of practical solutions and alternatives in this regard combining the approach of cultural change and that of strategy and policy-making restructuring, including:

- 1) The formulation of a clear vision for the values and culture of the Islamic economic integration

- 2) Drawing and constructing a network of relations at the civil level (society-based and popular movement-based) on the grounds, assuming that the popular and community-based support to all kinds of formations and bodies of international organizations is an inevitable indispensable elements for the success of such organization, and because such support constitutes the most important determinants of credibility and effectiveness. Such popular and community-based support is - by far - one of the most important pillars for economic integration in between Islamic countries.

- 3) The distribution of roles in the strategy and policy-making, between national agencies and mass organizations, between the formal and informal spheres, between the internal and in between circles would all together enhance communication with the world and the overall global environment

- 4) The development of the role of "Islamic Committee for Economic Cultural and Social Affairs"; which is the committee that has its main objectives revolving around fulfilling the mission for providing a platform that resembles a General Assembly that consolidates all subsidiary organs in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation ... And this is the committee that is examining the work programs in the fields of economic, cultural and social development for the Secretariat of the organization and the ancillary devices ... It is also the one that provides guidance and suggestions to the Islamic Council of Foreign Ministers. This committee meets once a year at

the invitation of the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation.

It is possible that this committee becomes mandated to manage the "**culture of solidarity for integration**," according to a holistic vision that calls for the interaction between all organs of the Organization to support this culture; for example, establishing communication and connection between the activities of ISESCO and the activities of the Islamic Development Bank and other economic bodies.

5) The establishment of a "Department for Public Diplomacy" in the Organization, which would not be directed to speak only to the outside world and the countries outside the Organization's Member States, but it should also - and foremost - be concerned with being a department that is heading for and outreaching to the peoples of these countries to support the bonds of relationship between these peoples at all levels; i.e. in education, knowledge, tourism, communication, etc... These bonds would regenerate the concept of the Muslim Ummah in reality and in an actual lively manner - which represents the base for building the "culture of integration" that is most required at the moment.

6) The establishment of regional offices for the Organization; to facilitate communication between management bodies and civil societies as well as popular societal structures on the one hand, and between the organs of the Organization and on the other hand to publicize the activities and the support cooperation amongst all these actors.

7) Activating what we call "**Economic Integration Media**" (through both the conventional traditional media or the modern electronic one); this should be the media model that shall inform the citizens of the Islamic Member States of the Organization about the integration issues and their importance.

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