

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Humanitarian Diplomacy in Assisting Refugees During Pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic that has occurred since the end of 2019 has become a scourge for the global people. The number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), which reached 82 million people, has caused them to become the most vulnerable group during the pandemic. According to the latest UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report, over 116,000 COVID cases have been reported among the refugees. Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as the world's second-largest inter-governmental organization, should tackle this vulnerability, considering that one of the OIC's Programme Actions programs is developing the Joint Islamic Humanitarian Action. This study used humanitarian diplomacy as the conceptual framework to explore the extent of diplomacy carried out by OIC in assisting IDPs and refugees during the pandemic. This research applied qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. This research found that, during the pandemic, OIC has carried out actions to address the issue of refugees, such as promoting international norms relating to refugees, initiating international discussions and forums related to the condition of refugees during the pandemic, and collaborating with other international organizations in monitoring refugee assistance during the pandemic. However, most OIC's roles are limited to organizing or facilitating international forums rather than engaging in the affected area.

Keywords: Humanitarian Diplomacy, Islam, OIC, Pandemic, Refugees

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a big problem for almost all countries in the world, both in terms of health, economy, and security, especially for refugees. The latest report from UNHCR shows that there are more than 82 million refugees who are forced to leave their home countries, and 116,000 refugees are reported to have been exposed to COVID-19 (UNHCR, 2022). Although the number of refugees exposed to COVID-19 is not that large,

the health conditions of refugees have been worse since the beginning, even without COVID-19.

Refugees have become the most vulnerable group during the pandemic. Based on the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) report, Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar Camp, Bangladesh, experienced difficulties in obtaining necessities and health due to limited mobility (IFRC, 2021). Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are also three

times more likely to be exposed to Covid than the general public (ACT, 2021). The IFRC report on refugees in Turkey also shows that many refugee families in Turkey cannot afford their essential needs, such as food and houses for rent (IFRC, 2021).

Refugees' issues cannot be separated from the Islamic world, considering that most of the refugees come from countries with a Muslim majority, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia, and Muslim communities, such as Rohingya. Syrian refugees are in a desperate situation. According to the UNHCR, many refugees have lost their previously meager income, forcing them to cut back on their basic needs, including food, medicine, and rent (UNHCR, 2020). Similar things are also experienced by Afghan refugees, who also have to face risks of child labor, violence, early marriage, and other forms of exploitation (UNHCR, 2021). Somalia has faced a refugee crisis for the past 30 years, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the country due to political instability. The pandemic has further worsened the situation, with more than 3.8 million people displaced in Somalia and around 6.7 million people struggling to meet their food needs (UNHCR, 2023a). Sudanese refugees who are people affected by the internal conflict have made up 3.7 million IDPs and more than 800,000 Sudanese refugees seeking safety abroad (UNHCR, 2023b). As a stateless community, Rohingya refugees also face a humanitarian crisis. Rohingya refugees, many of whom live in Bangladesh, are having difficulty accessing basic needs due to restricted movement, closed learning centers, and reduced on-site assistance provided by humanitarian organizations (HIR, 2020).

Several OIC member countries are also known to be the largest destination countries for

refugees, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Uganda (Marshall, 2020). Unfortunately, most of the Islamic countries that receive refugees are countries that are categorized as middle to low-income (UNHCR, 2020), have various domestic problems, and have heavily shared responsibility as the second-largest International Governmental Organization (IGO) in the world, the OIC which represents fifty-seven Muslim countries takes steps to deal with refugees, especially those who come from or reside in the Muslim country aligned with OIC's establishment in the Rabat Declaration on September 25, 1969. Since its establishment, the OIC has been concerned about humanitarian issues in the Islamic world, as written in the OIC Charter Preamble that the OIC pursues to consolidate solidarity among its member countries in securing the interests of the OIC together with various institutions in the international realm (History, n.d.) OIC's desire to eradicate refugee problems is also stated in OIC's 2025 Program Action, which was made in 2016, where one of its points is 'the implementation of Joint Islamic Humanitarian Actions to increase OIC cooperation and coordination with partners at regional and international levels, especially with the UN agencies in dealing with refugees and IDPs in OIC's Member States' (The OIC-2025: Programme of Action, 2016).

Based on a review of the previous research on the OIC's roles in tackling refugee issues, there are not many publications on the role of the OIC in dealing with Muslim refugees. Most of these publications were written before the Covid pandemic (2019). Therefore, this article uses the concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy to elaborate on the extent of the OIC's role in dealing with international refugees in Islamic countries during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Based on the review of some metadata and keywords relevant to this research, most of the research related to OIC, Islam, OIC member states, and refugees was published between 2016-2017 (See Figure 1). Only a few relevant research studies were published in 2019 (Figure 1.1). More research should be conducted during that period, given that the end of 2019 began the COVID-19 pandemic when many refugees were affected by the pandemic and became vulnerable groups.



Figure 1.1 Wordcloud of Research Related to ‘OIC’ and ‘Refugees in 2010-2021 Based on Their Publication Year (the data were obtained from various sources)

The metadata also shows fewer articles related to the keywords ‘OIC’ and ‘Refugee’ in the last decade. Most of the publications on ‘refugees’ are more related to ‘Turkey,’ ‘Syria,’ ‘Bangladesh,’ and ‘Myanmar’ (See Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 Wordcloud of Research Related to 'OIC' and 'Refugees in 2010-2021 Based on Their Occurrence (the data were obtained from various sources)

An article written by Irawan Jati, 'Comparative Study of the Roles Of ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Responding to the Rohingya Crisis, ' tries to compare the roles of ASEAN and OIC in responding to the Rohingya crisis. According to Jati, ASEAN prioritizes a diplomatic approach, while OIC prioritizes humanitarian action together with UNHCR in helping Rohingya refugees. This article also presents the humanitarian assistance provided by several OIC members to Rohingya refugees in 2012 (Jati, 2017).

A publication titled 'Rethinking UNHCR and OIC's Response to Forced Migration' by Fethi B Jomaa Ahmed critically reviews how UNHCR and OIC manage the issue of Syrian refugees. According to Ahmed, the OIC is vital in helping and protecting refugees, considering several OIC member countries are home countries for international refugees. As an influential IGO, the OIC must defend human rights and strengthen brotherhood and solidarity in its member countries. However, OIC's charter does not specifically explain how to carry out the mandate (Ahmed, 2018).

Ahmed also wrote some recommendations for OIC. According to Ahmed, OIC can boost its role in solving the refugee crisis by including the point of "forced migration" in the OIC mandate, improving the efficiency of decision-making within the OIC, reviewing the concepts and principles of 'sovereignty,' 'noninterference' and 'justice,' striving to collectively address forced migration compared to unilateral actions taken by member states; changing the humanitarian assistance model to development assistance; empowering OIC member countries and consolidating protection against forced migrants with other international communities. (Ahmed, 2018).

Zahid Shahab Ahmed's article, 'The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC),' specifically explains the role of OIC in the refugee crisis in Syria. Among the host countries of Syrian refugees, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Greece,

Hungary, and Germany, only Turkey and Lebanon are member states of the OIC. According to Zahid Ahmed, OIC should also pay more attention to refugees, considering that the Syrian refugee crisis, which has become a transnational crisis, requires a multilateral solution. Zahid Ahmed also criticized the response made by the OIC, which was too diplomatic, but there was no real action.

Several articles above explain the OIC's role in handling Rohingya and Syrian refugee cases, evaluate them, and provide better recommendations for developing the OIC's capacity. However, previous research did not find humanitarian diplomacy as a conceptual framework. Humanitarian Diplomacy is "persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles" (Roeder & Simard, 2013). It also can be defined as "the use of international law and humanitarian imperatives to deliver humanitarian assistance or to promote the procession of civilians in a complex political emergency (Whittall, 2009).

Humanitarian diplomacy comprises the following actions: first, managing humanitarian organizations in the affected area; second, negotiating access to the people needing assistance and protection; third, monitoring humanitarian assistance; and fourth, promoting respect for international law and norms; fifth, supporting people and institutions and engaging in advocacy at any level (Regnier, 2013). Every humanitarian action must comply with humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Setyorini, 2021).

Humanitarian Diplomacy seems broad and vague. There is no limitation on whether Humanitarian Diplomacy can only be conducted by humanitarian organizations since the elements of the humanitarian system are IGO, INGO, states, and national and local governments. Any of these actors can engage in negotiations and interventions during humanitarian crises. Moreover, humanitarian diplomacy is about gaining access to people

suffering from crises and maintaining and ensuring the effectiveness of that access (Regnier, 2013).

The authors, therefore, applied 'Humanitarian Diplomacy' to elaborate on the role of the OIC in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019-2021. This study elaborates on the actions of OIC towards refugees, especially in the context of the pandemic, as the realization of its responsibility to protect.

Methods

This research applied the study case method, which most scholars in International Relations often use. According to Bakry, there is no common understanding of what "study case research" means in International Relations, especially its methodological aspects. According to Harrison and Callan, a study case is research that tries to analyze a unit or model in detail. The study case's analysis unit encompasses actors, systems, and structure. In this case, OIC is seen as the actor to be studied by making the international phenomenon of refugees during the pandemic the case (Bakry, 2016). This research began by collecting a set of data obtained from secondary sources, which then served as considerations in formulating research questions. A literature review has been conducted to seek novelty in the research and determine a relevant conceptual framework or concept to address the research question. The analysis heavily relies on secondary data from OIC's reports, publications, and relevant sources. In-depth analysis and interpretation were conducted after case selection and data collection.

Results and Discussion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, OIC has made some efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to help refugees, especially in countries with conflict and persecuted groups such as Turkey, Syria, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sudan, Pakistan, and Myanmar, where there are Rohingya groups. These efforts were carried out multilaterally, where OIC collaborates with member countries and countries where refugees live and unilaterally helps refugees directly in

countries in conflict or countries where refugees have fled.

By applying Humanitarian Diplomacy according to Régnier, the authors found that of the four actions in Humanitarian Diplomacy, three of them have been carried out by the OIC collectively; they are managing and monitoring humanitarian assistance, supporting people and institutions, and engaging in advocacy at any level; besides those actions, access of the humanitarian organizations to the people in need was managed by OIC's member states (notably the refugees' host country) unilaterally.

Managing and Monitoring Humanitarian Assistance

Any international organizations would certainly help the affected communities. Even before the pandemic, OIC has worked with its subsidiaries and agencies: ISF (Islamic Solidarity Fund), SESRIC (Statistical Economic and Social Research and Training Center for Islamic Countries), ISESCO (Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), IDBG (Islamic Development Bank Group), IOFS (Islamic Organization for Food Security), and the IIFA (International Islamic Fiqh Academy) in helping countries suffering from humanitarian crises, especially countries that are members of the OIC. During the pandemic, OIC has also enhanced its cooperation with various international organizations, including OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, ICRC, IFRC, EU, and USAID (Resolutions on Humanitarian Affairs Adopted by the 48th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (Partnering for Unity, Justice, and Development, 2022).

During the pandemic, OIC's Secretary-General paid more attention to the Palestinian refugees and IDPs. In 2020, with one of its subsidiaries, ISF, OIC donated 35,7 USD to the Palestinian Ministry of Health to help Palestinian people suffering from COVID-19. In the same year, OIC's representative in Palestine also consulted and coordinated assistance with the local government and assessed and reported the current pandemic situation in Palestine. OIC sent letters to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

OIC's member countries and some international organizations, such as the UN and World Bank, requesting them to donate or directly assist Palestine via UNRWA (OIC, 2022).

Besides Palestine, the OIC Secretary-General and ISF assisted refugees and IDPs living in LDCs (least developed countries). OIC has helped Afghanistan, which has 2,6 million IDPs, and Yemen, with 137.000 IDPs. OIC has also helped Bangladesh, the home of 1,4 million Rohingya refugees. Humanitarian assistance was also sent to other LDCs that have less number of refugees, such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. Even though the countries above have less number of refugees, the intense social conflict has increased the chance of their people becoming IDPs. The assistance includes medical instruments, medicines, and capacity-building training for personnel, volunteers, and health authorities in the affected countries (OIC, 2022). OIC also monitors assistance provided by partner organizations so that it is right on target by conducting consultations.

Promoting International Norms and Advocacy at Any Level

OIC has taken several actions to promote compliance with the international refugee norm. In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of 'the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees', OIC celebrated World Refugee Day. At the celebration, Dr. Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen, the Secretary-General of OIC, expressed OIC's support for refugees and invited the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to host countries among OIC's member states. The event also discusses the need for collective efforts to resolve the refugee crisis in the Muslim world in its political, social, and humanitarian dimensions. OIC announced its commitment to cooperate with the relevant organizations, such as the UNHCR (UNA OIC, 2021).

A resolution was made in March 2022 to prove OIC's commitment to Refugee Norms. Since maintaining compliance with international norms is difficult, the resolution

urges humanitarian organizations to develop comprehensive policies for responding to the refugee crisis. The policies should benefit refugees and people in the host countries; in short, the policies should bridge the gap between humanitarian emergencies and the state's development. Further, OIC has signed some international frameworks to enhance international cooperation in tackling the refugee crisis, including the New Action Plan 2020-2022 between OIC and UNHCR and the 'New Action Plan' 2021-2024 between OIC, ICRC, and GCC.

Besides promoting compliance with refugee norms, OIC has implemented several programs to promote humanitarianism in OIC member countries. At the global level, OIC intensified communication with the UN, WHO, EU, China, USA, and other international institutions. The OIC also uses the media for press conferences to invite OIC countries to fight and prevent the spread of COVID collectively. OIC also utilized its website and social media campaigns to promote its action. The website shows COVID statistics, which are updated every 30 minutes. Hashtag #OICCountriesCombatCOVID19 or #دول_التعاون_الإسلامي_تواجه_كورونا (in Arabic) was used to show its solemnity in combating COVID-19. Videos, graphics, images, and other content were used to attract engagement and response from the international community. Those contents were posted in Arabic, English, and French (UNA OIC, 2021).

Managing the Presence of Humanitarian Organizations in the Affected Area

The OIC manages the presence of humanitarian organizations in affected areas by providing open access to OIC member countries, often before refugee camps. These countries can collaborate with international organizations such as Turkey, Bangladesh, and Pakistan under OIC partners. Turkey has become the country with the highest number of Syrian refugees since 2011 (Putri et al., 2023). Turkey is home to 3.6 million refugees from Syria and 320,000 asylum seekers under the protection of international organizations.

Turkey's role in opening access to international organizations is significant (UNHCR, 2022).

Under the 3RP (Regional Refugees Resilience Plan) made by Turkey, UNICEF helps Turkey serve children's education and protection as long as it provides the basic needs for the refugee children in the camp. UNICEF also assists Turkish children who are affected by focusing on assisting the handling of education, protection of children, youth, and youth, as well as the basic needs of children in refugee camps. Not only that, UNICEF assists Turkish children who are affected by the presence of refugees (UNICEF, 2022). Turkish children whose families live close to refugee camps. Turkey also cooperates with UNDP for recovering refugees' MSMEs and their surrounding communities (UNDP, 2022). Besides, Turkey and UNDP also seek to establish good governance, overcome the impact of human rights and socio-economic protection from COVID-19, green economy, and digital disruption, and strengthen health services and management (UNDP, 2022). Besides cooperation with UNICEF and UNDP, Turkey managed the 6 Billion Euro fund from the World Bank to improve the infrastructure, health, education, and economy in the affected areas (UNDP, 2022). The ILO has also assisted the Turkish government in increasing the refugees' capacity and life standards. According to ILO, it is only 3% of refugees residing in Turkey can have access to decent jobs (ILO, 2022). Thus, Turkey 3RP is aimed at ensuring the refugees improve their welfare.

Turkey also accelerates access to the affected area for domestic and international NGOs that purposely seek to help refugees and asylum seekers. One local NGO that assists refugees and asylum seekers is the Darussafaka Society. It assists by providing academic scholarships and online classes to the children of refugees and poor Turkish children for a better future (European Union, 2019). The TEF (Turkish Educational Foundation) has also provided an accessible education to anyone in need since 51 years ago. Dealing with the refugee crisis, TEF has collaborated with volunteer groups worldwide to fundraise and teach the refugees. The Immense Initiative,

which is one of the leading NGOs in Turkey that was founded in 2014, is also engaged in helping the refugees (Fofuca, 2021).

As the country that resides most Rohingya refugees, the Bangladesh government has cooperated with international organizations and the community to deal with the refugee crisis. The overpopulated Cox Bazar has caused a more serious health crisis and has worsened since the pandemic. Women and children, who are the most vulnerable group among the refugees, are often kidnapped and raped. Bangladesh's government has cooperated with IOM and got 128 million USD from IOM in 2022 to provide better assistance for the refugees (IOM UN Migration, 2022). Bangladesh has also cooperated with NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council) and some local and international NGOs to create a response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. Bangladesh government and these NGOs aimed at strengthening the standard and capacity of local government and ensuring sustainable advocacy for the rights of the most vulnerable refugees by providing assistance and skill training ("NGOs Urge Global Community to Support Rohingya Refugees - Bangladesh," 2021).

According to data from UNHCR, in October 2020, there were 800,000 refugees, of which 780,000 were from Afghanistan and 20,000 from Iraq. There were also 2 million Afghans living in Iran without documents. The pandemic made their condition worse. In facing the refugee crisis, Iran has cooperated with some international organizations. An Iranian NGO, the Society to Protect Children Suffering from Cancer (MAHAK), helped the government by providing medical facilities for refugee children affected by cancer, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. MAHAK has been the official partner of UNHCR since 2001, working with UNHCR for refugees prone to cancer. WFP (World Food Programme), a transnational NGO, has also helped the government manage refugee malnutrition. WFP distributed 50 MT of essential foods, such as dates, biscuits, and milk, to refugees in Iran (Mobarra & Khan, 2022). At the governmental level, Iranian governmental agencies such as

HAMI (Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children, PDA (Pars Development Activist Institute), and ODVV (Organization for Defending Victims of Violence) have also helped refugees improve their quality of life (Mahak, n.d.).

Pakistan, home to 1.4 million refugees (Pakistan | Global Focus, n.d.), has partnered with international organizations to ensure refugees' safety in Pakistan. 5,9 million child refugees suffered from malnutrition and lack of education. Thus, 61,4 million USD in 2022 was sent by UNICEF for solving nutritional emergencies in Pakistan. UNFP (United Nations Population Fund) also provided services and supplies and treated the refugees in the affected areas. Thus, the medical personnel and volunteers could hear refugees' grievances and expectations. UNFP has also facilitated and helped midwives with newborn care and psychological support (UNFP, 2022). Besides UNICEF and UNFP, Pakistan has collaborated with WFP to assist refugees. WFP assisted 33,733 pregnant and lactating mothers and 38,545 children who have experienced malnutrition since the pandemic (WFP, 2021).

Conclusion

The Covid pandemic has significantly impacted all aspects of a country's survival, especially in the economic and humanitarian sectors. Refugees are the most marginalized group due to the pandemic and the mobility of refugees to countries experiencing paralysis in these sectors. OIC member countries that host refugees are overwhelmed by the economic crisis and refugees. However, based on humanitarian principles, the OIC does not ignore the existence of refugees. Through representatives assigned to affected member countries, the OIC monitors and reports on the condition of refugees during the pandemic before determining a solution. By applying the concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy in its analysis, we can see that the OIC has attempted to overcome the refugee problem by instructing its subsidiaries to send humanitarian aid and funding. Donations are sent to countries receiving refugees and countries prone to internal conflict. The OIC has also encouraged

compliance and commitment to refugee norms and humanitarian principles by advocating for the refugee crisis through international events and online campaigns. Lastly, the OIC has attempted to collaborate with relevant international organizations, including several UN agencies and non-governmental organizations. Collaborate to provide adequate access for refugees.

However, the efforts made by the OIC are still limited to humanitarian action, and collaboration with humanitarian non-governmental organizations is mostly carried out by OIC member countries, which are host countries for refugees, such as Turkey, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Iran. It is time for the OIC to intensify joint Islamic humanitarian action and demonstrate its capacity as an international organization that oversees the interests of Muslim countries and communities.

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