

**MUSLIMS IN THE CARIBBEAN
TOWARDS INCREASED
CO-OPERATION AND INTEGRATION**

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INTRODUCTION

While there has always been a need for closer relations among the Muslim communities in the Caribbean, the mechanism for achieving such has evaded the Muslims of the region. Over the years, the priorities of Muslims in the region have been survival, education and dawah. Regional co-operation and integration has been sidelined with major emphasis on the development of the individual organisations within the various national communities.

This paper seeks to briefly document efforts towards Caribbean Muslim co-operation and examine possibilities for enhancing and developing Muslim co-operation and integration in the Caribbean region. It is hoped that it will also serve as a catalyst for critical thinking and analysis on the subject and maybe as a platform for a new era of development.

CONTRIBUTORS TO CARIBBEAN MUSLIM DEVELOPMENT

Many international Islamic bodies with head offices outside of the Caribbean have contributed to the development of the Muslims in the Caribbean. Some of these are:

1. World Federation of Islamic Missions (WFIM), Karachi, Pakistan;
2. Tablighi Jamaat, Mewat, India;
3. International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations (IIFSO) Kuwait;
4. Muslim World League (MWL), Makkah, Saudi Arabia;
5. World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) Riyadh, Saudi Arabia;
6. Darul Ifta, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia;
7. Islamic Call Society/World Islamic Propagation Organisation (WIPO), Tripoli, Libya;
8. Islamic Academy, Islamabad, Pakistan and
9. Islamic Development Bank (IDB) an arm of the Jeddah-based Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).
10. Islamic Organisation of Latin America

Among indigenous formal and informal attempts at closer relations among Caribbean Muslims are:

1. Tablighi Jamaat
2. Islamic Missionaries Guild (IMG),
3. Darul Islam (Caribbean),
4. Association of Islamic Communities of Caribbean & Latin America (AICCLA) and
5. Caribbean Islamic Secretariat (CIS).

CARIBBEAN INDIGENEOUS EFFORTS

Tablighi Jamaat

The Tablighi Jamaat began in Mewat near Delhi, India in 1926 under the leadership of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944). Maulana Ilyas was succeeded by his son, Maulana Muhammad Yusuf (1917-1965), under whose leadership the Jamaat's activities extended beyond the confines of Mewat and covered a large part of India. Soon Tablighi missions began visiting Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, North America and the Caribbean.

The Tablighi Jamaat appeared on the Caribbean landscape in the 1960's through the efforts of Abdul Hafeez of India and Bhai Padia of South Africa. Known as an informal popular Islamic Dawah movement, the activities of the Jamaat spread initially from Trinidad to Guyana, Suriname and Barbados and then to the islands with mosques. Primarily concerned with the reformation of Muslims, the efforts of the Jamaat are centered around mosques. Structured events such as regional and international Jalsahs (gatherings) within and outside of the Caribbean attract large numbers of 'Tablighis'. The movement incorporates educational institutions such as Darul Uloom T&T which provide formal education and training.

In addition to contributing to the development of Muslim individuals and jamaats, the Tablighi Jamaat through its system of itinerant preaching created opportunities for increased dialogue and interaction among Caribbean Muslims.

Islamic Missionaries Guild

The IMG was launched in 1960 by Maulana Dr. Muhammad Fazal-ur-Rahman Ansari (b. 1914-d.1974), a Pakistani scholar and missionary and founder of the WFIM in 1958. It started as the missionary arm of the ASJA of which Dr. Ansari was the Sheikh-ul-Islam. It later evolved into a separate body – IMG of the Caribbean and South America with representatives in several of the Caribbean islands and South American continent.

Registered under the Company's Act in T&T, its activities included sourcing, publishing, distributing and selling Islamic literature, hosting lectures and radio and television programmes, arranging for Islamic scholars to visit the region on lecture tours, organising Hajj and Umrah trips, assisting Muslim youths in acquiring scholarships to study Islam abroad and fund-raising events. Approximately 25 regional conferences and camps were held by the IMG during 1965-1990.

During the sixties, seventies and eighties, the IMG contributed tremendously to the development of Muslim communities throughout the Caribbean. M.K. Hosein, Secretary General of the IMG for several years, played a significant part in the IMG's thrust in the Caribbean.

During the nineties, the defunct IMG gave way to the CIS as M.K. Hosein shifted from the IMG to the CIS.

Darul Islam/Islamic Party

Darul Islam (Caribbean) was formed in 1975 comprising primarily of converts of African descent from T&T, Grenada, Barbados and Dominica under the joint leadership of Bilaal Sayyid Abdullah and Muhammad Yusuf. Linkages between the Trinidad-based Darul Islam (Caribbean) and the rest of the Caribbean were established via the University of the West Indies St. Augustine Campus and visits by members from the islands to T&T.

Following the two-week visit of Muzaffahuruddin Hamid, Ameer of the Islamic Party of North America (IPNA / formed in 1972 in Washington D.C.), to Trinidad in 1977, Darul Islam (Caribbean) was dissolved with the majority of its members joining the Islamic Party. It should be noted that some “members” of the Islamic Trust (formed in 1975) also joined the Islamic Party. In 1978, the Caribbean Regional Headquarters (Community Mosque Complex) of the Islamic Party was opened at 123 Eastern Main Road, Laventille.

In 1981, the majority of the Trinidadian members of the Islamic Party formed Al-Muwahideen under the leadership of Bilaal S. Abdullah. In 1982, Al-Muwahideen together with two other small jamaats merged with the Jamaat Al-Muslimeen under the leadership of Yasin Abu Bakr in 1982. In 1993, Bilaal Abdullah together with other members left the JAM and soon afterwards formed the Islamic Resource Society with its headquarters in Port-of-Spain.

What started off as a Caribbean initiative emerged into fixed structures in T&T only with very little development in the other Caribbean islands.

Association of Islamic Communities of the Caribbean & South America

The efforts of Syed Hussain Pasha and Abdulwahid Hamid saw the birth of the Islamic Trust in T&T in 1975. The efforts of Ahmad Ehwas (arrived in Guyana in 1979) saw the establishment of the Guyana Islamic Trust. On his return in 1977 to Barbados from Saudi Arabia, Daud Abdul Haqq boosted the work of the Islamic Teaching Centre.

The Islamic Trust (T&T), Guyana Islamic Trust and the Islamic Teaching Centre were the backbone of AICLA. As a result, AICLA’s influence was felt more in the Caribbean than in Latin America. Its common training programmes were implemented in Guyana, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, Dominica, Jamaica, Bahamas and Belize especially during 1980-1985.

The AICCLA was formed in 1980 out of a need for a regional indigenous body that would function as an umbrella organisation for the Islamic Movement in the Caribbean and Latin America. It aimed at providing support and direction for the nascent Muslim institutions, associations and communities that evolved out of the Islamic Movement.

It did not survive the 1980s.

IIFSO & WAMY

Both IIFSO (established in 1969) and WAMY (established in 1972) have contributed to the creation and development of the CIS. IIFSO's and WAMY's organisational structure placed the Caribbean as a sub-region within a larger region including the US and Canada and South America. Having contributed to the formation of WAMY and having representation in WAMY, the IIFSO's efforts in the Caribbean were linked with WAMY's and co-ordinated from the USA. The resources of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) of the USA & Canada and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) were also mobilised to further the aims of WAMY and IIFSO in the Caribbean.

During the formative years of IIFSO and WAMY, Dr. Ahmad Totonji held key positions in both. He was the Assistant Secretary General of WAMY during its first ten years and Secretary General of IIFSO for the first four years and remained as an ex-officio member in IIFSO until now. Even after having left office in both IIFSO and WAMY, Dr. Totonji has continued to support the efforts of the IMG and subsequently the CIS. He visited the Caribbean three times. First in 1968 before IIFSO and WAMY were formed when he visited Trinidad, Barbados and Guyana. His two other visits were to Trinidad in 1994 and 1995. He has probably earned the title of "patron" of the Islamic work in the region.

In the late 70s and early 80s Dr. Yaqub Mirza held the roles of representative for the area of both the WAMY and IIFSO. Dr. Mirza introduced the system of Sub-Regional Representatives and appointed Imtiaz Ali (returned from Saudi Arabia in 1978) as the Sub-Regional Representative for the Caribbean.

In 1984 Dr. Omar Kasule succeeded Dr. Mirza and was re-appointed (i.e. Dr. Kasule) for another term in 1988. During the term of Dr. Kasule, the IIFSO's role in the region became more pronounced. Following the approval of a Five Year Development Plan (1986-1991), a Regional Co-ordinating Committee came into being in 1987 together with a Sub-Regional Office for the Caribbean- the CIS. The Committee included individuals who worked with both Drs. Mirza and Kasule as Representatives of the Americas & Caribbean Regional Office based in the US. By 1986, IIFSO's representatives in the Caribbean were: Daud Abdul Haqq- Eastern Caribbean, Imtiaz Ali-Trinidad & Tobago, Faisal Abdurrahman- Northern Caribbean and Fazeel Feroze- Guyana, Surinam and French Guiana.

"I think the major achievements of IIFSO and WAMY in the Caribbean," wrote Dr. Totonji, "were the following:

- 1) increased awareness of the Muslim Ummah among Muslims in the Caribbean.
- 2) upgrading of the Islamic activities among the youth and students in the Caribbean to the level of Muslim youth organizations elsewhere.

- 3) distribution of Islamic literature in English language and to some extent in French and Dutch for Muslims to get the knowledge of Islam from reliable sources.
- 4) created opportunities for the exchange of experience of the Muslim youth and student organizations in different parts of the world with that of the Caribbean.
- 5) inculcated the spirit of Dawah in the Muslim students and youth in the Caribbean to work with the indigenous people and get the message of Islam to non-Muslims, and
- 6) created opportunities for Muslim students and youth from the Caribbean to study in Muslim countries.”

(Letter to Imtiaz Ali dated February 23rd, 2000)

Caribbean Islamic Secretariat

Established in 1987, the CIS served as a secretariat for both the IMG and IIFSO Caribbean operations. It was administered by a Management Committee appointed by Dr. Kasule with MK Hosein, a director of the IMG, as Director of the CIS. In 1992 when relationships between MK Hosein and the IMG deteriorated, the CIS began functioning as an autonomous body. In 1993, the IIFSO’s representative for the area changed with Dr. Kasule being replaced by Mahmoud Harmoush.

In 1995, all funding from IIFSO was terminated and the operations of the CIS came to a standstill. Despite the financial constraints, the Management Committee decided to continue the operations of the CIS on a reduced scale.

During 1996, M.K. Hosein reconstituted the Board of Directors of the CIS and by 1998, the CIS once again began receiving funds from abroad for specific projects and as a result of such it became revitalised.

While the CIS is at present the only body servicing the region, it has undergone several reshuffles, all of which has seen Mohammed Kamarudin Hosein (MK), as the key player. The approach of the CIS has been “to facilitate Islamic work” in the region. As a result, the composition of the CIS has always been by selection – again with MK being the selector.

The operations of the CIS have been influenced mostly by the funding that it receives. It has been distributing Islamic literature because it has been receiving such for distribution. It conducts camps, conferences, assists in the building and maintenance of masjids, funds “breaking of the fast” projects when funds are provided for those specific ventures.

In recent times, the CIS was renamed Caribbean Islamic Council (CIC). Soon afterwards, MK Hosein departed from the CIC. From then until now, the CIC has not been operating at its optimum.

ORGANISATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE CARIBBEAN

While “Islamic work” is an essential aspect of any Islamic body, Caribbean Muslim co-operation and integration has to be pursued from a different perspective. While any individual Muslim could embark on any project for the benefit of Muslims in the Caribbean region the tasks of co-operation and dialogue among Muslims, nurturing brotherhood beyond national boundaries, identifying and pursuing common interests and representing communities must involve the communities themselves.

Since Muslims throughout the Caribbean are organised mainly via the formation of Islamic associations, attempts at regional co-operation and integration would have to be pursued through these bodies. This new approach of participation by the national Islamic associations must be adopted in order to bring people, organisations and communities closer together.

In Trinidad and Tobago, two umbrella bodies have evolved, namely the Muslim Coordinating Council and the United Islamic Organisations of T&T. The UIO functions on the basis of a Memorandum of Understanding approved by all its members. Its membership which at its peak comprised thirteen Islamic bodies, now comprise ten organizations with almost half of them dormant. The MCC is an informal group comprising the three major groups in the country. In recent times only two of the groups have been participating in discussions. The MCC’s method of operations reflect the view that the unit groups are not seriously interested in genuine co-operation and continuous dialogue and that each group prefers to be dealt with individually. Any grouping, therefore, that requires the involvement of the major Islamic associations in T&T, would have to consider the UIO together with the individual members of the MCC.

In Guyana, while the Central Islamic Organisation of Guyana (CIOG) is the largest Muslim association, the much smaller Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT) has gained recognition in the Guyana landscape. In Suriname an umbrella body has evolved and so also in Barbados. Grenada and Jamaica each has only one Islamic association as do many Caribbean islands with very small Muslim populations.

The Muslim diaspora in the Caribbean comprises Muslim individuals and families, mosque-based associations called jamaats, Islamic associations registered as incorporated bodies, companies, charities, co-operatives and friendly societies together with unregistered ones, national umbrella groups and representatives of international Islamic institutions. This setting, therefore, allows for a variety of options at nurturing Caribbean Muslim co-operation and integration.

OPTIONS FOR CARIBBEAN MUSLIMS

Caribbean Council of Muslim Parliaments (CCMP/CARICOMP)

Establish Muslim Parliaments among all national Muslim communities in the region. Representatives of each Muslim Parliament could comprise the CCMP.

Certainly this is not an immediate option since this kind of structure does not exist anywhere in the Caribbean.

Caribbean Council of Jamaats (CCJ/CARICOJ)

Allow every mosque-based jamaat to become a member of the CCJ. There could be between four to five hundred mosques in the Caribbean. Establish a system of regions or zones whereby jamaats could form regional councils. Representatives of these regional councils could then form the Executive body of the CCJ.

While this system could work, there is a major obstacle with many Jamaats already being associated with or committed to certain Islamic associations.

Caribbean Council of Islamic Associations (CCIA/CARICIA)

Allow every Islamic association to become a member of the CCIA. Establish a system of regions or zones whereby Islamic associations could form regional councils. Representatives of these regional councils could then form the Executive body of the CCIA.

This system may be perceived as a threat to the achievement of the establishment of umbrella bodies wherever they exist.

Caribbean Council of Umbrella Muslim Bodies (CCUMB/CARICUMB)

Allow a coming together of only genuine/formal umbrella bodies. One may conclude, that only associations that are willing to work with others in a structured manner at a national level can be expected to do likewise at a regional level.

This system would compliment the efforts towards Muslim unity and encourage other communities to do the same.

Caribbean Muslim Union (CMU/CARIMU)

Allow a combination of Umbrella Muslim Organisations wherever they exist and principal national bodies to chart the course of furthering Caribbean Muslim co-operation and integration. This approach could allow for (1) a recognition of efforts towards country-based Muslim Unity, (2) the inclusion especially of the principal bodies in some countries where many Islamic groups exist without any umbrella body and (3) an immediate shift from “selection of individuals” to “representatives of Islamic associations”.

Observer status should be granted to the Caribbean representatives of international Islamic bodies in whatever structure/s that are adopted.

Caribbean “Authentic Jamaat”

This option is an extrapolation of Maulana Imran Nazar Hosein's "One Authentic Jamaat" for T&T as propounded in his book "One Jama'at One Ameer".

The book presupposes that all the existing Jamaats and Islamic organisations in the Caribbean are not authentic Jamaats and as such incapable of "sustaining Islam". Maulana Hosein proposes the training of an "army of volunteers" called Rufaqa who will form the General Assembly which will then appoint an Ameer and a Majlis ash-Shura (Consultative Assembly). All those Muslims, who refuse to join the "Authentic Jamaat", would be considered as living in a state of Jahiliyyah (ignorance).

Although there are several references to the "Authentic Jamaat" in the Caribbean, the book, however, is silent on the organisational structure of the "Authentic Jamaat" on a Caribbean level.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Role of T&T

It is to be noted that all the initiatives towards closer ties and co-operation among Muslims in the Caribbean were launched from Trinidad and Tobago.

Inter-Caribbean Funding

It is to be noted that funding for projects within the Caribbean has found very little support from within the Caribbean. Therefore projects which depended solely on Caribbean help were not sustainable.

Extra-Caribbean Funding

Among the sustainable efforts are those that received financial assistance from outside of the Caribbean.

Ethnicity

In countries where the Muslim populations are multi-ethnic, there have emerged Islamic groups that are predominantly of one ethnic background.

Muslim Population

There is a general feeling that the Muslim population in the Caribbean is growing.

Communications

The facilities for communications and transport are continuing to improve within the Caribbean thereby facilitating Muslim travel and communications.

International Aid

International, regional and national Muslim institutions, Muslim Governments and Caribbean Muslims living outside of the Caribbean are all willing to and capable of supporting the development of Muslims in the region.

CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The way forward would have to be decided by the individuals or associations who desire to further the cause of Caribbean Muslim co-operation and integration.

The establishment of this new body could very easily follow through with the groundwork laid by the CIS/CIC, thereby either incorporating the CIS as an arm of the Caribbean body or fazing it out. However, if the administrators of the CIS feel that it is necessary or expedient to continue operating the CIS, then they could do so, at the same time, maintaining very strong links with the new body thereby providing support and funding.

While there is an increasing presence of Islam in the Caribbean, co-operation and integration among Muslims in the region would go a long way in enhancing the processes of Dawah and development.

Once again, it is hoped that this humble effort will also serve as a catalyst for critical thinking and analysis on the subject and maybe as a platform for a new era of development in the Caribbean region.

And Allah knows best.