

**Meet Sada Cumber**

Bush's appointment to the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

by Stephen Schwartz

03/06/2008 12:00:00 AM

ON MONDAY, MARCH 3, the first U.S. special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which brings together 57 Muslim countries, took up his duties. Named by President George W. Bush, America's new diplomat to Muslims is Pakistan-born Sada Cumber of Austin, Texas. Cumber is the co-founder of an investment and wealth consultancy, CACH Capital Management, and some 10 other enterprises. Cumber's official job at the OIC is "to promote mutual understanding and dialogue between the United States and Muslim communities around the world."

Born in Karachi in 1951, he was educated in Pakistan, came to America in 1978, became a U.S. citizen in 1986, and has been prominent in Texas politics. But these details of his life—even his identification with the president's home state—are of little interest compared with a remarkable fact that does not appear in his U.S. government [biography](#). Sada Cumber is an Ismaili Muslim—a member of a small and historically suppressed branch of Shia Islam.

When President Bush announced last June that he would send a U.S. representative to the OIC, some observers wondered how an American Muslim would function in a body that has long been dominated by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Having selected an Ismaili for the post, President Bush proved to be astute and adroit. Because Ismailis have suffered discrimination at the hands of Sunnis, and especially Islamist bigots, to draw America's observer at the OIC from their ranks represents a substantial challenge to the radicalism and conformism imposed on global Islam. It affirms the rights of Muslim minorities including Sufis, or spiritual Muslims, as well as Shias, just as America has advocated for the freedom of non-Muslims in Islamic lands. Ismailis have been brutally mistreated in the Saudi kingdom, where they are few but, as elsewhere, well-educated and vocal in demanding respect.

Once the rulers of Cairo, Ismailis are distributed today in small communities across the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. They total about 25 million people, out of 1.2 billion Muslims. Their religious leader is Aga Khan IV, their Imam, a billionaire born in 1936, known for his family's worldly ways as well as his own generosity in public good works. Aga Khan's father Aly Khan was wed in 1949 to the actress Rita Hayworth, who had previously been romantically involved with another larger-than-life figure, Orson Welles. Aly Khan's marriage to the movie star lasted only four years. But Aly Khan also became Pakistani ambassador to the United Nations, in 1958, when the Muslim world was less afflicted by fundamentalist extremism.

Ismaili theology is esoteric and almost as difficult to explain to ordinary Muslims as to non-Muslims. In the recent past, Ismailis were often seen as drifting away from Islam altogether, but Shia leaders now perceive a movement in the Ismaili sect back toward an established Shia tradition. Further, Aga Khan IV, as leader of the worldwide Ismaili community, has also demonstrated great intelligence in the use of his fortune. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) operates a system of agencies that finance improvement of education, health, microcredit availability, agricultural technology, historic preservation, and cultural endeavors across Africa and Asia. But AKDN help is not limited to Muslims; rather, it benefits members of all religions who are found to be in need.

In addition to his work within the American Ismaili religious community, Sada Cumber, Bush's OIC appointee, has represented the Aga Khan's humanitarian programs in the southwestern United States. In sending an American Muslim to the OIC who stands for independence in Muslim theology, entrepreneurship as well as social responsibility in the use of Muslim wealth, and a strong pro-Western attitude, Bush has brought another small but positive change to relations between the West and the Islamic world. Throughout history, and especially in crisis zones, minor developments have had great consequences. Perhaps the appointment of a U.S. representative to the OIC in the person of Sada Cumber will prove to be another such decisive and meaningful action.

Stephen Schwartz is a frequent contributor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD.