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June 9, 2007

S'pore can play unique role in the Muslim world

By Sofiah Jamil

SINCE the inaugural Asia-Middle East Dialogue, also called Amed, held here in 2005, Singapore's growing engagement with the Middle East has been impressive.

A significant aspect of Singapore-Middle East relations has been the former's blossoming camaraderie with Gulf Arab states - namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are collectively known as the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC. The latest statistics indicate that the GCC was Singapore's sixth-largest trading partner last year, with bilateral trade totalling S\$40.3 billion, a 7.4 per cent increase from 2005.

The visit by the current secretary-general of the GCC, Mr Abdulrahman Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah of Qatar, therefore only serves to further galvanise the commitment and efforts demonstrated by both sides.

It should be noted, however, that while such initiatives are important for sustained economic growth and linkages between Singapore and the Arab world, they will also assist in positioning Singapore as a significant player in contemporary Muslim politics and issues. Two critical roles could be as a mediator in Middle East conflicts and as a facilitator in shifting coordinates within the Muslim world.

In one recent interview, Kuwait's ambassador to Singapore, Mr Mohammad Fadel Khalaf, noted that Kuwait would seek Singapore's opinions regarding Iraq and Palestine as Singapore supports the Arab peace initiative, which addresses the problems plaguing Palestine.

The initiative was first proposed to Israel in 2002 at the Beirut meeting of the Arab League by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, at that time the crown prince. The initiative has been the best offer made by the Arab world to Israel since the latter's creation in 1948.

The Arab peace initiative offers Israel instant recognition by all 22 Arab states in exchange for recognised borders that will give the Palestinians a viable contiguous state. It promises Israel normal relations in a multitude of fields, including diplomatic, cultural and commercial exchanges.

For that to happen, however, Israel must return to its pre-June 5, 1967, borders. Despite former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's refusal to abide by the plan, the current Israeli government is, in fact, considering it.

In addition, Singapore could play a significant mediating role between the West and the Muslim world.

Singapore possesses a unique position with its close and cordial ties with the United States and Israel. At the same time, Singapore is sensitive to Muslim concerns.

Moreover, with Singapore and Israel's socio-economic and geographical similarities - small prospering states surrounded by Muslim-dominated countries - it is hoped that Singapore will be able to increase its leverage in influencing conflict parties to come to an agreement.

Singapore's credibility as a potential mediator has been taking form, as seen during Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's visit to Iran in March. While in Teheran, Mr Goh was very frank in his opinions, expressing that while Iran had the liberty to develop its nuclear programme, it had to abide by international standards.

While the US would often disapprove of a visit by a friend or ally to a country it has labelled part of the 'axis of evil', Mr Goh's visit indicated to the wider public that Singapore is not tied down by the demands of the US and therefore is able to exercise its own sovereignty freely. With this increased credibility among Muslim countries and communities, Singapore will hence be able to play an effective mediating role not only between the GCC and Israel, but also between the GCC and its regional neighbours such as Iran.

Singapore can also play a significant role in further diluting the notion of centre versus periphery forms of Islam, which refer to the Arab and non-Arab regions in the world.

An active dialogue should be initiated between Muslim scholars and intellectuals from the GCC and Singapore. The GCC stands to gain from the experiences of Singapore's diverse Muslim minority, comprising not only Muslims of South and South Asian descent but also Gulf Arabs (primarily from the Hadramut region).

Not only has the Muslim minority played a significant role in the nation-building of Singapore, they have adapted and assimilated as a unique Singapore culture without losing the essence of their faith. By engaging in discussions over issues such as the differences between normative Islam and customs, the GCC would be able to further understand the diverse cultures and viewpoints within the Muslim world.

Fulfilling this role, however, requires substantive and dynamic input from the Muslim community in Singapore. Singapore's Muslims must be proactive in strengthening ties with their Middle East counterparts not merely as recipients and observers of an Arabised faith, but also as contributors to a global faith that is inclusive of various cultures.

The Singapore Muslim Identity Project is one particular example that would highlight local perceptions of Islam as opposed to the more legalistic and puritan forms of Islam found in the Middle East.

By doing so, greater commonalities can be forged between Arab and non-Arab Muslims and therefore provide a dynamic cycle of exchange of knowledge from the perceived 'centre' and 'periphery' of Islam.

Singapore and Gulf Arab ties have taken off on a positive note and are likely to develop further. The outcomes of these relations have the potential to extend far beyond economics and are able to place Singapore in a more eminent position in the international Muslim community.

Muslims in Singapore, therefore, play a vital role in not only further bridging the gaps between the Middle East and Asia, but also shedding light on

accommodating to life in non-Muslim majority communities without losing one's religious identity.

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