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The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Strengthening of Pakistani Islamists

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The current conflict between Israel and Lebanon has angered many Muslims around the world including a large number of Pakistani Muslims. Previous developments in the Muslim world such as the war in Iraq and Afghanistan have fuelled the feeling of anti-Americanism amongst many ordinary Pakistanis which often translate into increased support for Islamist groups and parties. In light of the upcoming elections in Pakistan scheduled for next year, it is likely that the conflict and the anger it has generated will have a significant impact in shaping both the domestic politics of the country as well as the politics of the region.

Reaction from Different Segments of Pakistani Society

Following the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, the Pakistani government condemned the attacks and appealed to the world community to come forward to help find "an immediate and peaceful settlement" of the conflict. Despite the actions of the Pakistani government, it has been the Islamist groups who have been at the forefront condemning the Israeli attacks.

The *Muttahida Majlisi Amal* (MMA) an alliance of six religious parties has held nation-wide protests against Israel and the US governments. In addition, the MMA has been the most efficient group in organizing relief funds for victims of the conflict. The alliance, as they did in Afghanistan, is also geared towards sending its youth to fight the Israelis. In addition, other groups such as the *Jamaat-ud-Daawah*, the social welfare branch of the *Lashkar-E-Taiba* (LET) and the *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafariya* (TNFJ) have been especially vocal on this issue. The LET has even gone as far as issuing calls for Pakistani Muslims to sign-up for *jihad* in Lebanon and Palestine. While these actions were aimed at heightening the emotions of Pakistani Muslims, it is unlikely that action by these groups will be in line with their rhetoric. The LET have not been known to send *jihadis* to other parts of the Muslim World beyond the South and Central Asian region.

These Islamist groups have not only sought to use the conflict to discredit the Pakistani government for its failure to assist the Lebanese and Palestinians but they have also employed the conflict as a means to attack General Pervez Musharraf's recent move to repeal the *Hudud* Ordinance (Islamic criminal laws introduced during the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq). The Islamists deemed the move part of a larger conspiracy of the United States to destroy Islam and have argued that Musharraf's decision to repeal the laws was a result of pressure from the US government.

Implications for Pakistani Politics

In the last Pakistani General Elections of 2002, analysts argued that anti-Americanism was one of the major factors for the rise of Islamist parties such as the MMA. The MMA made significant gains in Pakistan's parliament and won control of the provincial governments in two of Pakistan's four provinces by riding on the wave of anti-Americanism triggered by issues such as the US war in Afghanistan, America's increasing interference in Pakistan's domestic affairs and what is deemed as America's 'anti-Islam' posture.

In more recent times, American action and policies in Iraq and Iran have given rise to even stronger anti-American feelings in the country. Many Pakistanis are irked by what they perceive to be the double standard employed by the American government in its relationship with Israel in contrast to the Muslim World. Similar to the electoral outcome of 2002, it is conceivable that General Musharraf's close association with the Americans may translate to reduced support for parties supporting his regime such as the Pakistan Muslim League (Q). Following from this, the biggest gainers are likely to be the Islamists parties.

Another important development likely to spell trouble for the parties allied to Musharraf is the declining support of the Shiite populace in Pakistan for the government. Shiites form about 20 percent of Pakistan's 150 million population and are closely linked to the larger Shiite world. In northern Pakistan where the Shiites are the majority, pictures of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the late Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and even Lebanese cleric, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah are ubiquitous in the bazaars. In addition, groups such as the TNFJ are known to have close links with other Shiite groups such as Hizbollah and many prominent Pakistani Shiite clerics underwent their religious training in Shiite seminaries in Iraq and Iran.

In the 2002 elections, the Shiite threw their lot with secular parties such as the PML (Q) and the Pakistan's Peoples Parties (PPP) mainly due to their disagreement with the anti-Shiite position of many religious parties. However, the developments in Lebanon have united Sunni and Shiite groups in Pakistan against their principal enemy Israel. The recent killing of a popular Shiite leader and a member of the MMA, Allama Hassan Turabi have also been successfully portrayed by the MMA as an American conspiracy to destabilize the coalition. These factors could ultimately shift the Shiite support from secular parties to religious parties such as the MMA or the smaller Shiite Political Party.

Wider Implications for the Region

At the regional level, a win or increased support for MMA may impede the growing relations between Pakistan and India. The MMA has been unwilling to resolve the Kashmir issue through peaceful dialogue. MMA has taken a non-compromising stance on the Kashmir issue and will not accept anything less than a plebiscite for the Kashmiri to decide their future, a solution that India will not accept. Strains are likely to develop in the relations between the two neighbors.

Anti-Americanism may also result in the growing popularity of radical groups such as the LET and *Jaish-E-Muhammad* which may lead to an intensification of acts of terror committed against US interests in the region.

The LET has an understanding of the world where there is an axis of evil comprising of the

US, Israel and India which must be destroyed to secure the well-being of Muslims all around the world. The appeal of this understanding of international affairs can be found in the fact that many youths who joined the LET cite that a motivation for joining is unhappiness with US policies towards the Muslim World. Credence for the correlation between anti-Americanism and support for the LET may also be seen in the organization's significant rise in membership after the American invasion of Afghanistan.

The LET has exhibited its political dexterity by successfully shifting the attention of the Pakistani populace from their own involvement to the Mumbai bombings to the current conflict in the Middle East. At the same time, their donation drive and attempts to recruit *jihadis* may garner more credibility for their cause. Hence, it is likely that the LET will see a further increase of support.

With this increase, the strength and influence of moderate and radical Islamist influence in Pakistan is likely to continue to grow.

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