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Israel, Lebanon and the Rise of the Islamists

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ON 12 August, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) organized an unprecedented conference of Islamist movements in Kuala Lumpur. Entitled 'South-East Asia Organizations Roundtable Conference on Palestine and Lebanon in facing Zionist and Anglo-American Imperialism', the gathering discussed ways to assist Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims in the current Arab-Israeli conflict. Those who came were almost the "Who's Who" of the world Islamist movement, including the Jamaat-E-Islami Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well as other Islamist parties and groups from Cambodia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia. More importantly, the Iranian government sent a senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Tashkiri while Hamas leaders, Khaled Meshal and Dr Khaleel Al Hayea, sent their representatives. The fact that both these figures decided to send their personal representatives and messages to the conference alludes to the importance of the event to the Hamas leadership.

Formation of an Islamist Secretariat

In their respective speeches, delegates to the conference condemned Israel for its attacks on the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples and severely criticized the American and British governments for their lopsided support of the Israelis. Hizbullah and Hamas were hailed for their bravery in defending the Muslims from what is perceived as attempts by the Americans and Israelis to destroy Islam. The Iranian government was also praised for being the only Muslim country to come to the defence of the Palestinians and Lebanese. The harshest criticisms were reserved for Muslim governments and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) for its failure to act against Israel and the US. (The OIC is currently chaired by Malaysia.)

Perhaps the most important outcome of the conference was the decision to form a permanent secretariat, with its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur to assist the Palestinians and Lebanese. The terms of reference for the Secretariat will encompass political initiatives and lobbying efforts, humanitarian and relief work, fund-raising and economic action as well as media and research and development. It was also agreed that the Secretariat will continue to function beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict and will take up the cause of any persecuted Muslim.

The proposed resolutions significantly reflect the Islamists' preferred approach of working within the framework of international law and democracy. For instance, a proposal to boycott specific goods and services from corporations known to be funding the Israeli regime -- such as Coca-Cola, Colgate and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) -- could easily find support within

Muslim societies, although this strategy could be double-edged. Another resolution to assemble legal experts to initiate a war crimes tribunal against Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US President George Bush, as far-fetched as it may sound, is plausible within the framework of international law. Such ideas could resonate well with the Muslim masses and are likely to be an effective tool for the Islamists to galvanize support for their respective causes.

Likely impact of Secretariat

The formation of the Secretariat is arguably the most significant development due to the fact that it is the first time Islamist groups have come together publicly to tackle an issue related to the Muslim world. While Islamist groups were known to have mediated during the Gulf War in 1991 and assisted Bosnian Muslims during the Balkan crisis, these actions were never done publicly and with such broad-based support. Many of the delegates expressed their solidarity with the larger Muslim community regardless of sectarian differences. For example, many of the Sunni Islamist leaders condemned Muslim clerics and leaders who tried to portray the Hizbullah or Shiism as a deviationist group. Interestingly, it was a Sunni Islamist from Pakistan, a country known for its sectarian differences, who proposed a resolution to educate the Muslim masses about the dangers of the intra-religious chasm.

While many of the Asian Islamists expressed genuine concern for the Palestinians and the Lebanese Muslims, they also considered the Israeli actions and American policy in the Middle East as a blessing in disguise. These Islamists have successfully utilized the conference and the formation of the Secretariat to portray themselves as the true voice of the Muslim masses. At the same time, they have sought to use the conflict to discredit their respective governments for their failure to assist the Lebanese and Palestinians. Judging from the demonstrations against the Americans in many Asian cities, it is likely that the Islamists will be able to rally Muslims, most of whom are already predisposed against America. The biggest losers in such a scenario will be the secular Muslim governments in the region.

The impact of the conference, and more importantly the Secretariat, on the Malaysia-led OIC cannot be underestimated. PAS initiated the Secretariat with the support of Iran and Hamas, in part to reflect their disillusionment with the OIC and as a means of exercising political pressure on the Malaysian government. Several PAS leaders tried to underscore what they said was the failure of Malaysia in its current leadership role of the Muslim world. Should the Secretariat succeed in implementing the resolutions on Lebanon, it may gain more credibility at the expense of the OIC.-

The recent gathering in Kuala Lumpur also reflects larger concerns of the Islamists, as well as many Muslims, that America and Israel may be out to destroy Islam. As such, they feel a need to form a united front against this threat. Ironically, Israel's latest campaign against Hizbullah and Hamas has not only strengthened these two groups but also other Islamist groups in the Muslim world.

The unity between Shiite and Sunnis, which was at its lowest ebb, has been forged once again in the face of a perceived common enemy, Israel and America. It is unfortunate that in its war against terrorism and its pursuit to democratize Muslim societies, the US has alienated many moderate Muslims who could otherwise be crucial partners in America's foreign policy. The moderate voices in the Muslim world have been further eclipsed by the thundering voices of the Islamists. This will have a significant impact in shaping the Muslim world of the future,

with major repercussions on international relations.

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