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IOC's Washington conference sparks major controversy

By Mark A Bruzonsky

"THE Arabs are often their own worst enemies." This often-mentioned aphorism about Arab political efforts in the U.S. seems about to be coming true once again as the Islamic Conference Organisation holds its first-ever major political conference in Washington.

The three-day conference scheduled for Oct 13-15 at central Washington's prestigious International Club is being co-sponsored by the American University after a number of foreign policy institutions turned it down.

But what some Washington observers and Arab personalities find inexcusable and even scandalous is that the IOC conference has invited as Jewish representatives Zionist hardliners supportive of Israel's invasion of Lebanon who are totally opposed to a Palestinian state.

Moreover, the conference is also being manipulated, albeit indirectly, by the Egyptian government which is using the gathering to show that Egyptian diplomats are fully accepted at such a meeting together with representatives from Arab governments who are scheduled, according to the organisers, to attend. Both Egypt's Ambassador to the U.S., Ashraf Ghorbal, and Egypt's Ambassador to Canada, Tahseen Basheer, have been aiding the conference organisers and will be personally attending.

It appears that the IOC has got itself into this political mess through a combination of what looks like incompetence, ignorance and deception.

"The Arabs aren't even able to organise one single affair like this in the right way. They are belittling the Arab world with this conference. They don't even know who their friends and who their enemies are," noted one former Arab diplomat in uncharacteristic exasperation.

Conferences, meetings and seminars are part of the daily diet in Washington. But sponsorship and financing from the IOC—with participation said to be coming from throughout the Arab world is not so usual.

The conference on the "Search for Peace in the Middle East" has become one of the more unusual and controversial Mid-east conferences that have taken place in Washington. It is being paid for by the IOC whose secretary-general will open the conference with a keynote address.

The conference is really the brain-child and creation of Hamdi Salah, an enterprising young Egyptian who has been in the U.S. for many years on leave from the Egyptian Foreign Service.

And the background of the conference goes back some years, involving a number of prominent Washington institutions and personalities.

The background is in fact an interesting case study in Arab undertakings in Washington—how very long the lead time, how haphazard the organisation, the use of money to facilitate sponsorship and bring in speakers, and the political compromises that all too often result in meetings which few remember, which make few lasting contributions, and for which there is no follow-up. There will be big names and considerable money connected with the conference, but there is little enthusiasm, much confusion, and little likelihood that anything will follow from it.

It all began some years ago when an official of the IOC who most people seem to remember only by his Pakistani nationality approached a number of Washington institutions to co-sponsor a conference focusing solely on Jerusalem. But it never worked out.

The IOC official was not willing to have the kind of broad participation usually required in Washington, and Washington institutions were not willing to co-sponsor an IOC conference that would be perceived as anti-Israeli or render them subject to the charge of having been bought with Arab money. In short, the IOC didn't know how to play the Washington game, how to overcome the still pervasive negative Arab image—and money proved not to be enough.

One rather ironic development is that back then there was IOC insistence not to have any Egyptian government participation in their conference—clearly a reflection of general Arab reaction to Egypt's separate Camp David peace—but now the conference is being organised by a person from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.

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On its own, the IOC probably would never have been able to arrange their desired Washington conference. It was about a year ago, though, that Hamdi Salah first began approaching people involved in Mid-east affairs in Washington for what he was then describing as a conference on Mid-east peace. The Foreign Policy Institute at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) showed some initial interest, largely due to the enthusiasm of Dr Dimitry Simes, a young scholar then involved with both the institute and the university. Salah began working closely with Dr Simes, an expert on Soviet affairs who had begun taking an interest in Mid-east affairs.

The director of the Foreign Policy Institute, Ambassador Lucius Battle, showed some interest pending Salah and Simes finding the money for such a conference—standard Washington procedure. Battle's interest continued for a short while.

But after further investigation, Battle, a savvy, careful Washington personality highly knowledgeable about Mid-east affairs—decided the conference was being improperly organised and would neither contribute to Mid-east peace nor bring together the right people for an Arab-American dialogue.

Consequently Battle took the highly unusual step of returning most of the 30,000 dollars he had received to the IOC and washing his hands entirely from the conference. In a town where money usually dominates such decisions, and in view of the Foreign Policy Institute's known hunger for just such supportive funding, Battle's decision was all the more unusual, though he remains unwilling to discuss the specific reasons for his decision.

Lacking a base for sponsorship, Hamdi Salah together with Dr Simes, attempted to find other sponsorship from other institutions involved in foreign policy. Failing to do so they arranged to have the conference co-sponsored by American University—and in fact the IOC sponsorship is being greatly downplayed even though the entire budget is subsidised by the IOC and the IOC Secretary-General, Habib Chatti, is scheduled to give the keynote address.

Unable to arrange himself for prominent American participation, Salah increasingly turned to Simes. Apparently being well-paid for his efforts with the IOC funds, Simes began arranging for high-level American participants with the guarantee from Salah that major Arabs would come. But possibly with reservations of his own, Simes refused to accept the co-directorship of the conference or any other official title, and continues to insist that the conference is all the responsibility of Salah.

Yet Simes has played a very major role in some of the key and most controversial decisions about whom to invite. The organisers decided only to invite academic or business-world Palestinians, specifically ruling out any participation from Palestinians representing the PLO. "They would be too controversial," the organisers are known to believe.

Even if this is so, it seems highly unlikely the IOC is fully aware of the Jewish participation chosen, largely at Simes's suggestion.

Joseph Joffe, a well-known European writer little known in Washington, is "one of the most arrogant and hard-line Zionists there is," according to one of the few Arab diplomats who knows him. And yet, he is on the small "sponsoring committee," organising the conference. Joffe is known to be totally opposed to Palestinian self-determination and is a strong supporter of the current government of Israel and its policies towards the Arabs. He is definitely not connected in any way with any of the progressive Jewish and Israeli groups whom the Arabs have come to invite to previous meetings.

Last week, apparently aware of growing criticism, the organisers sent a special delivery letter to Philip Klutznick, one of the few world Jewish personalities who has spoken up strongly for Palestinian rights and a comprehensive peace, attempting to enlist his participation. Klutznick was unable to attend and so the organisers, possibly at the suggestion of Egypt's Ambassador Ashraf Ghorbal, inexplicably turned to Rabbi Arthur Schneier in New York.

Schneier, chairman of the North American branch of the World Jewish Congress, is also known as a strong supporter of the government of Israel and its policies. He too is totally opposed to a Palestinian state and Palestinian self-determination. Some of those who know Schneier consider him an irrepressible "opportunist." There are also some who suspect Schneier has very close American government or CIA ties. Just as with Joffe, this will be the first time Schneier has ever been invited to such a gathering of Arab personalities.

A third Jewish person known to be advising the organisers is Dr Joyce Starr at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Starr has worked at SAIS for a number of years primarily attempting to support the separate Egyptian-Israeli peace and to build support and understanding for Israel's invasion of Lebanon. It was Starr who arranged another highly controversial conference two years ago in which the *Al Ahrum* Centre from Cairo co-sponsored a conference with SAIS at which the notoriously anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian commentator, George Will, was lunch speaker. At that affair Dr Saad El-Din Ibrahim, sociologist from American University in Cairo, had a heated and bitter exchange with Will. It was generally agreed by the Arab participants that "never again" would they allow themselves to be so manipulated.

And yet, it is happening again, and this time with IOC money and sponsorship and with even more controversial participants.