

THE PRESS AND THE NATION RISE AND FALL TOGETHER

# THE MUSLIM

Regd. No. R-12

EVERY MORNING FROM ISLAMABAD

VOL. V NO. 147

MUHARRAM-UL-HARAM 12, 1404 A.H.—WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1983

PRICE: Rs. 1.25

## Washington Islamic Conference: Setback for Arab World

WASHINGTON, Oct. 18: "Hyland had nothing to say about the Middle East that was worthwhile. His speech was full of shameful and insultingly hackneyed clichés that could have been given by any Joe Blow... his speech was demeaning to the Arabs."

This was a comment publicly expressed last Friday by Fouad Moughabi, editor of the Arab Studies Quarterly and one of the more provocative of the Arab participants. He was referring to the main dinner speech the evening before by William Hyland, Editor designate of Foreign Affairs magazine.

In his speech Mr. Hyland had repeatedly praised the moral and strategic American-Israeli connection and insisted that Palestinian suffering was insignificant in comparison to Jewish suffering during World War II.

"Camp David should be a foundation for further movement... King

Hussein should be given the support by many of the Arab states so that he, in concert with the Palestinians from the West Bank, should enter into talks with Israel."

This was the central thrust of Rabbi Arthur Schneider's comments as he, together with numerous Egyptian officials who had quietly helped organize the conference, attempted to convince the assembled Arab participants that the biggest mistake of their 3-day conference was their failure to invite representatives from the Israeli government.

Had this been one of the usual, dull, lifeless Washington undertakings arranged by one of the many foreign policy institutes in Washington, there would be little reason to take notice. American personalities often embarrass themselves with their ignorance about Middle East realities. And American Jewish figures are constantly harping on Camp David and recognition of Israel while avoiding Palestinian rights.

But this was very much not the usual gathering. It was the result of three years of effort by the Islamic Conference Organization and an expenditure approaching a quarter million dollars. As such, it totally reflected, in the word of one thoughtful Arab diplomat with decades of experience in Washington, "the Arab's total inability to even arrange right one single conference. It's shameful."

Of course there were other speakers, and some interesting and thoughtful moments. Yet on the whole Washington's first Islamic Conference Organization-sponsored meeting was a disaster and an embarrassment for the Arab world — at least this was the

widespread conclusion by some of the most thoughtful observers whom this journalist has come to know and trust in his nearly 10 years covering the Washington scene.

Not only did the ICO end up with a number of hard-line Zionist spokesmen who rambled on about direct negotiations with Israel, the terrible PLO charter, and the virtues of Camp David the conference was also manipulated by outsiders so that all persons directly associated with the PLO were purposefully excluded from official involvement.

Though ICO Secretary-General Habib Chatti opened the conference declaring that "through the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is its sole legitimate representative, the Palestinian people has given proof of its capacity for

dialogue" PLO exclusion and subsequent embarrassment were brought about by the conference organizers, apparently unknown to the ICO.

In the final days preceding the conference, the exclusion of the PLO became a matter of great concern to a few of the Arabs involved in the meeting. Anxious phone calls went out in an attempt to round up a few Palestinians other than the American-academic ones who had been invited all along.

Though not officially involved in the programme or as speakers, at the last minute both Hatem Hussein from the PLO office at the U.N. in New York and Haman Rahman, Director of the PLO Information Centre in Washington, attended the conference as observers. Expelled West Bank mayors Milhem and Kawasme also attended, the conference organizers allowing them, reluctantly, to play a

somewhat greater role because they were not "officially" part of PLO.

Hamdi Salah, a young Egyptian foreign ministry official and Dr. Dimitry Simes — influenced on Middle East matters brought in for a substantial attempt to round up high American participants — were behind-the-scenes organizers of the conference. They are the persons most responsible for that went wrong before and at the gathering. Samieh Fares, a Palestinian professor of sociology at American University, was a sponsoring committee member, but negligently unaware of much was being done and only at the final days. American University was the sponsoring body, other institutions more involved in foreign policy negotiations refused to lend their

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ship - and one, the Foreign Policy Institute at the Johns Hopkins School for advanced International Studies, returned to the ICO a cheque for \$30,000 after deciding to end its tentative involvement.

The original decision to exclude official PLO representatives was taken in order to attempt to attract high-level American participants, including persons connected with the Reagan administration. It was decided that if the PLO was involved such persons would not attend. Dimitry Simes, in fact, made this a condition of his own involvement.

But the conference was so hastily and so badly prepared that no senior American person came after all to what had been billed as a very important Arab-American "dialogue". Consequently the decision to exclude the PLO only mattered to the few Zionist spokesmen whom the organizers had invited - foremost among them Dr. Joseph Joffe, a supporter of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and annexation of Arab territories, and Rabbi Arthur Schneider, an apologist for whatever governments reign in both Washington and Israel. Both choices were of course, outrageous, but the Arab organizers were so confused and so desperate for participants that they accepted whatever they could get. "I was amazed whom I was sitting next to," said Rashid Khabidi, a very thoughtful young Palestinian academic, when he found himself on a panel with Joe Joffe. In the end many observers as well as invited participants were encouraged to stay for the various meals and panels in order to build up the very weak atten-

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dance.

Furthermore, many speakers indicated that they did not come with the usual prepared remarks because they only learned of the conference within the last few days.

The bitter exchange that took place between Haman Rahman and Rabbi Schneider was a telling commentary on the entire conference.

Rabbi Schneider had made a plea for inclusion of representatives of Israel in such a conference so that "all" parties to the conflict could sit together and better understand each other. Asked from a conference participant whether with that reasoning Rabbi Schneider would also favour participation of the PLO in this conference, Schneider gave one of his typically convoluted answers that amounted to "No."

A short time later, Haman Rahman rose from the audience with a question for Rabbi Schneider. Almost fittingly, the first microphone he was handed didn't work. Another was brought to him, that didn't work either. It seemed that even the technology of the conference was conspiring to safeguard the gathering from participation by the PLO.

Finally it was suggested that Rahman come to the participants table to use one of the table microphones. Rather than addressing himself to the former question and indicating that at least in this way the PLO was indeed finally participating in the conference, Rahman began to cross-examine Schneider asking him what he

could point to in the "various charters of the Zionist Movement which recognizes the basic rights of the Palestinians to self-determination."

"The charter of the PLO is the ideological and political response to the charter of the Zionist Movement," Rahman insisted. "Unless there is a radical change in thinking of the Zionist Movement there will be no change in Palestinian thinking," he stated.

Evasive as always Schneider responded that at Camp David the Israeli government had agreed to accept the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."

But Rahman was unsatisfied, and as the session chairman, Abdul Aziz Said from American University, tried to move on to other questions, Rahman persisted and began arguing with the chairman.

Originally said to be a "conference on the search for peace in the Middle East" and an "Arab-American dialogue," this 3-day affair proved to be a "total fiasco," "a great embarrassment," "a disaster," to quote from the observations of some of the more critical observers.

Once again the Arab world has proved it is way out of its political league in Washington. The ICO has discredited itself by throwing time and money away and in the end putting on an outrageously embarrassing affair.

Furthermore, perhaps more tragically, the very concept of holding a serious, forward-looking, peace-oriented gathering of Americans, Jews, and Arabs has been dealt a grave blow. The ultimate victims of course - Palestinian rights, Arab credibility and honour, and ultimately, peace itself.