

WASHINGTON ISLAMIC CONFERENCE:

Why is PLO excluded?

WASHINGTON - Conferences, meetings and seminars are part of the daily diet in this world capital but sponsorship and financing from the Islamic Conference Organization - ICO - with participation said to be coming from throughout the Arab world is not so usual.

Exclusion of representatives from the PLO is also part of everyday happenstance in Washington. Earlier this month, for example, reporting on the going-away party for Saudi Ambassador Al-Hegelan, the Washington Post joked of the "alleged" but unverified presence of a PLO representative at the same reception together with ranking Reagan Administration officials. Yet, exclusion of the PLO from a function sponsored by the ICO is hardly unusual.

The "Conference on the Search For Peace in the Middle East" to be held at the prestigious International Club October 13 through 15 is fast becoming one of the more unusual and controversial Middle East conferences that have taken place in Washington. It is being paid for by the ICO whose Secretary-General will open the conference with a keynote address. And it is being sponsored by American University after numerous failed attempts to enlist other more foreign-policy oriented institutions as sponsors.

A BRAIN-CHILD

But 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 organization, 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 this upcoming ICO con-

ference, 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 ICO whom 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 ICO 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 ICO 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 ICO 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.

IRONIC DEVELOPMENT

One rather ironic development is that back then there was ICO 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 organized by a person from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry and acceptance of Egyptian Government officials at such a conference appears to be one of the major goals of the organizers. The largest attendance will be from Egypt, including a number of Foreign Ministry and ambassadorial personalities, but without any of those who have outspokenly opposed the Camp David Agreement.

SAIS

On its own, the ICO probably never would 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 Middle East affairs in Washington for what he was then describing as a conference on Middle East

peace. The Foreign Policy Institute at the Johns 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. Mr. Salah began working closely with Dr. Simes, an expert on Soviet affairs who had begun taking an interest in Middle East affairs.

By MARK A. BRUZONSKY

The Director of the Foreign Policy Institute, ambassador Lucius Battle, showed some interest pending Salah and Simes finding the money for such a conference - a standard Washington procedure. Battle's interest continued for a short while, he lunched with the Pakistani ICO official and others interested in creating such a conference, and he accepted, briefly, an initial check for \$30,000 as seed money for the still undefined affair.

LACK OF DEFINITION

It was this lack of definition, more than anything else, that killed it at that point. Battle, a very experienced old Middle East hand, became concerned about the nature of the conference and its organization. And though his institute is known to be very much in need of funds, he took a very unusual step a few months ago by returning most of the money the ICO had sent - a little was deducted for the lunch and other initial arrangements. Battle further told the organizers of the conference that he no longer felt it appropriate for the conference to be sponsored at the institute and SAIS. Shortly thereafter both Simes and Salah were no longer associated with SAIS or the institute. Simes went to the Carnegie Endowment for international peace, a block away, and Salah continued looking for a home for his conference.

There clearly is more to the story of how after 3 years of trying the ICO failed in the effort to enlist the well-known Foreign Policy Institute and SAIS in its effort, and precisely why the project collapsed. But persons involved, including Battle, are reluctant to give any details or point any specific fingers. One thing that is known is that Mr.

Salah carries a diplomatic passport which confuses his status in terms of working for American institutions. But this was probably more a reason after the decision had been taken, since with a little bit of yankee ingenuity something could have been worked out as has apparently been done at American University.

There followed a period of confusion in which Hamdi Salah contacted a number of Washington-based organizations, including the Middle East Institute, looking for one that would be willing to co-sponsor the conference he and the ICO had now agreed upon. The ICO was becoming desperate to hold a Washington conference they had spent many years trying to arrange and in fact the leadership of the ICO had decided that the conference must be in October which put nearly impossible pressures on the organizers to arrange a thoughtful and well-arranged conference.

With both money and an approaching time limit, something had to be done quickly. Whatever, not until Salah gave up on the major foreign policy institutions and approached American University did he find a place willing to accept the funds, provide him with the job of conference coordinator, and act as sponsoring institution.

The reasons for the difficulties were probably many and varied. For one thing, Salah himself is a young new-comer to the field of Washington-Middle East conferences and some questions have been raised about his organizational skills, follow-through and general approach. For another, over the years the ICO had done little to promote its image as the kind of organization that can be worked with and counted on. The ICO is little known here (which probably accounts for their original desire to hold a Washington conference) and has no real understanding of the way this town works. And finally, as both Hamdi Salah and his colleague Dimitry Simes acknowledge, it was very difficult for people to understand just what the purpose and goals of this conference were to be.

CONFUSION

Much of this confusion has in fact continued to this day. Originally conceived as a conference that would make a contribution to thinking about peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, planners of the meeting have been very vague about the structure and participation. Further more they have often invoked names of participants or sponsors which have proved

PLO excluded?

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inaccurate. For instance Phillip Stoddard, Director of the Middle East Institute, is listed on the "sponsoring committee." But when asked, Mr. Stoddard indicated he is not on the committee though he has agreed, for \$500, to moderate a panel during the conference - though he was not aware who would be on the panel or its precise theme. And among the "academics" that have definitely accepted to attend the conference is Dr. Fouad Ajami. But here too, when queried, Dr. Ajami indicated he will definitely not be attending the conference.

The conference is now being termed "The Search For Peace in the Middle East" but it is clear from the prospective list of invitees - exclusively Arabs and Americans - that the normal broad categories of participation are not going to be found at this conference. Indeed, when questioned about this very matter the organisers are quick to point out that this particular gathering is an "Arab-American dialogue" and that this explains the selection of participants.

But in reality the selection process has far more behind it than this. Both Israelis and PLO members are excluded - ironically putting them in the same category as outsiders. Israelis are not participating because the conference is being held strictly with ICO funds - at least \$150,000 - and the ICO continues its policy of excluding Israelis of all stripes. When asked if any thought has been given to the PLO's new policy of welcoming certain Israelis - those who have specifically called for Palestinian self-determination and a Palestinian

state - the response from the conference organisers is rather vague. Some Israelis they say noncommittally, might be invited for the audience, but none can participate. When offered a list of key Israelis acceptable to most Arabs for the thoughtful and at times courageous stands they have taken - Lova Eliav, General Matti Peled, Uri Avenri, Amnon Kapeliouk - the conference organisers profess lack of both time and funds to contact them.

As for exclusion of the PLO, this seems to be one of Dimitry Simes' contributions to the conference. Simes is a highly intelligent young Soviet emigrant who came to the U.S. about a decade ago and has been involved with a number of prominent Washington institutions in a variety of capacities. At the time Hamdi Salah was looking for a home for his proposed conference, Simes was at SAIS and showed considerable interest and support for Salah's efforts.

Though refusing to take on the role and responsibility of conference co-director, Simes is in fact functioning in that capacity. He is being well-paid for his efforts from the ICO funds, and indeed it seems unlikely the conference would take place at all without his efforts to enlist a variety of well-known Americans. Nevertheless, he is a relative newcomer to Middle East affairs, someone very careful to accommodate the needs of the Washington establishment, and in the opinion of some knowledgeable persons here some of his decisions have been very questionable.

Foremost among the question-

able decisions is the exclusion of all PLO personalities from the conference. Certainly persons such as Shafik Al-Hut or Khalid Al-Hassan would make very important contributions to a discussion of such issues as "the Palestinian question", "settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict", and "the Palestinian perspective" - all themes listed on the conference programme.

No, PLO

Yet the organisers have decided, largely based on Simes' view, that only Palestinians who hold academic or business positions are to be invited - on PLO figures since this could embarrass some of the American invitees or even cause them not to attend.

Some Palestinian personalities have been invited - and one, Dr. Samieh Farsoun who teaches at American University is on the Sponsoring Committee (though playing a very restrained role and it seems without enthusiasm). But the organisers have made it very clear - no PLO.

When asked about the one PLO-linked personality who is on their tentative list, Dr. Nabli Shaath in Cairo, the organisers insist he is invited as President of Team International and they do not know of his PLO connection. It is well-known, however, that ever since Dr. Shaath took on an active role with the PLO during the past year his visa to come to the USA has been invalid.

Another decision which can be traced to Simes involves the choice of Jewish personalities to be involved with the conference. Rather

than prominent Israelis in the forefront of calls for Palestinian rights, or prominent American Jews such as Arthur Hertzberg or Seymour Martin Lipset who have become outspoken critics of the Israeli government, Simes chose a colleague now at the Carnegie Institute, Dr. Joseph Joffe, to play a prominent role in the conference.

Dr. Joffe, a well-known writer for Die Zeit in Germany, is also well-known as a very tough Zionist totally opposed to a Palestinian homeland. One moderate Egyptian diplomat, upon hearing that Joffe was involved with the conference, exploded in rage saying "but he is one of the worst Zionists." Philip Klutznick is going to be invited to attend, according to the conference organisers, but his participation at this late date is uncertain.

So the ICO will finally have its Washington conference, a considerable amount of money will be expended, large travel grants and honorariums will bring assorted names and personalities together for another sterile discussion of the ongoing Middle East dilemma. But there will be little enthusiasm, little impact, and in the end one more Arab event in Washington will come and go without impacting in a significant way on the policies and the consciousness of people in Washington, D.C. It is but one more contemporary example of how the Arabs - with more than twenty ambassadors, considerable resources, lots of sympathy - are still no match for the famous Washington Jewish lobby.

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