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FROM THE EAST

ICO conference ends without resolutions PLO exclusion embarrasses organizers

By Mark Bruzonsky

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WASHINGTON — The three day conference organized by the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO) in search for peace in the Middle East ended in Washington on 15 October without any concrete resolutions. The conference apparently proved to be an embarrassment for the organizers. There were however a few bitter exchanges between the Arab participants and the Zionist delegates.

One of the main speakers was the editor designate of the Foreign Affairs Magazine. Mr. William Hyland. In a speech Hyland repeatedly praised the moral and strategic American-Israeli connection and insisted that Palestinian suffering was insignificant in comparison to Jewish suffering during the second World War. On his part, Rabbi Arthur Schneider, an apologist for both US and Israeli governments said: "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".

Together with numerous Egyptian officials who had quietly helped organize the conference, Schneider attempted to convince the assembled Arab participants that the biggest mistake of the conference was their failure to invite representatives from the Israeli government.

Had this been one of the usual, dull, lifeless Washington undertakings ar-

ranged 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 \$ 25 million. As such, it totally reflected, in the words 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 the conference was a disaster and an embarrassment for the Arab world — this was the widespread conclusion by some of the most thoughtful observers.

The ICO had to end up with a number of hard-line Zionist spokesman 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.



Habib Chatti: PLO is legitimate representative of Palestinians

Opening the conference ICO secretary-general Mr. Habib Chatti declared that "through the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is the sole legitimate representative, the Palestinian people have given proof of their capacity for dialogue". PLO exclusion and subsequent embarrassment were brought about by the conference organizers, apparently unknown to the ICO, he added.

attract high-level American participants including persons connected with the Reagan Administration. It was decided that the PLO was involved such persons would not attend. Dimitry Simes, in fact, made this a condition of his own involvement. The decision to exclude the PLO only mattered to the new Zionist spokesman who the organizers had invited — foremost among them Dr. Joseph Joffe and Rabbi Arthur Schneider.

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 Khalidi, a very thoughtful young Palestinian academic when he found himself on a panel with Dr. Joe Joffe.

The bitter exchange that took place between Mr. Hassan Rahaman 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. A participant asked whether with that reasoning Rabbi Schneider would also favour participation of the PLO in the conference. To this he replied no.

"The charter of the PLO is the ideological and political response to the charter of the Zionist movement," Rahaman insisted. "Unless there is a radical change in thinking of the Zionist movement, there

barrassment were brought about by the conference organizers, apparently unknown to the IOO, he added.

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, Messrs Hatem Hussein from the PLO office at the UN in New York and Hasan Rahman, Director of the PLO Information Centre in Washington, attended the conference as observers. Expelled West Bank Mayors Mihem and Qawasmî also attended — the conference organizers allowing them, reluctantly, to play a somewhat greater role because they were not 'officially' part of the PLO.

The conference organizers

Mr. Hamdi Salah, an Egyptian foreign ministry official, and Dr. Dimitry Simes were the behind-the-scenes organizers of the conference. They are the two persons most responsible for all that went wrong before and during the gathering. Samieh Farsoun, a Palestinian professor of sociology at American University, was on the sponsoring committee, but he was negligently unaware of much that was being done and only stepped in in the final days. American University was the sponsoring body after other institutions more directly involved in foreign policy questions refused to lend their sponsorship.

The original decision to exclude official PLO representatives was taken in order to

cal 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, Schneier 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 questioners, Rahman persisted and began arguing with the chairman. It was a most undignified performance on the part of the PLO representative — though not worse than the previous day when Hatem Hussein also made embarrassing and totally insubstantial interjections from the audience. As it turned out, it might have been better for the Palestinian cause if the PLO representatives had totally stayed away.

Originally said to be a "conference on the search for peace in the Middle East" and an "Arab-American dialogue," the conference proved to be a "total fiasco" — a great embarrassment and 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 IOO has discredited itself by throwing time and money away and in the end putting on an outrageously embarrassing affair. Furthermore, the very concept of holding a serious, forward-looking, peace-oriented gathering of Americans, Jews, and Arabs has been dealt a great blow. The ultimate victims of course — Palestinian rights, Arab credibility and honour, and ultimately, peace itself.