

Restructuring Ties Between West, Islamic States

Arab News

JEDDAH — A move to restructure relations between Western and Islamic countries saw some innovative confidence-building proposals being floated in Brussels in order to deconstruct terror and build trust between the societies which are currently at odds over many issues. Forty leaders from Western and Islamic countries met at the European Parliament at the invitation of the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) for the Third International Roundtable on Constructing Peace, Deconstructing Terror. The initiative was endorsed by the Arab League and supported by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung.

The proposals at the two-day roundtable on Nov. 26-27, included a call for an inclusive semi-permanent conference on the Middle East, the creation of a contact group on building confidence between Western and Islamic countries and the promotion of Arabic culture and language in Europe.

Graham Watson, leader of the ALDE group, Dr. Wolfgang Gerhardt, president of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, Sundeep Waslekar, president of SFG, opened the inaugural session. Siim Kallas, first vice president of the European Commission, welcomed the participants on behalf of Europe and emphasized the importance of good governance. Ambassador Hesham Youssef, special envoy of the secretary-general of Arab League, and

Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, former Danish premier and president of the European Socialist Parties, delivered keynote addresses.

Youssef appealed for a partnership between Europe and the Arab world to address critical problems in the Middle East, especially given the repercussions they have for Europe. In response, Rasmussen argued that it was necessary for all parties to move away from the blame game and seek common approaches to global problems. He suggested that it was natural to have differences but it was important to recognize these differences and address them in order to find acceptable solutions.

Conference on Peace

The roundtable emphasized the need to find an urgent, fair and sustainable solution to the Palestinian problem. The problem stirs strong emotions around the world as an indication of injustice and the neglect of Arab concerns by Western powers. It is at times used by groups committing acts of terror who might otherwise be constructively engaged in ameliorating the situation of the Palestinian people. Whichever way it is looked at, there is an absolute urgency to find a sustainable solution to the problem.

The roundtable recommended an inclusive semi-permanent conference or uninterrupted long-term talks that take place despite disruptions and violence in the short run. Eventually they may move in the direction of creating a conference on security and cooperation in the Middle East to address not only the Palestinian

conflict, but also other aspects of security and cooperation in the region.

The semi-permanent conference may begin as a forum for dialogue between states that have a stake in the peace and security of the region. An important element must be to provide a place at the table, for representatives of the Palestinian Authority, as well as for small states in the region. This would be following the successful example of the rules used by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

Also, following the CSCE example, it would be useful to engage at multiple levels — at the level of senior officials appointed by the states and other interested institutions — on a semi-permanent basis for talks on certain days every week or every month. For instance, Cabinet ministers could meet from time to time and the heads of government initially once a year. In addition, expert committees may be convened as and when required.

WIDE Initiative

While the Inclusive Semi Permanent Conference on the Middle East Peace can address regional issues, it is necessary to have a mechanism — Western-Islamic Dialogue and Engagement (WIDE) — to address wider security and cooperation issues between the Western and Islamic countries. The roundtable proposed the establishment of a contact group of respected leaders from the Western and Islamic countries to deliberate over an

agreed period of time, ideas for institutional cooperation between Western and Islamic countries and to communicate a common understanding reached through such discussion to the international community for support and implementation. The contact group would explore common ground on critical conceptual issues. It is particularly necessary to develop a common global ethic. While the world economy is integrating, the fabric of core human values is eroding. Such a disjunction between economy and human values is not sustainable.

The roundtable also recommended large scale student exchanges between Western and Islamic countries. Even in the era of the Internet, it is necessary to encourage personal interface. It should also be possible to use technology in an imaginative way in order to promote cultural coexistence, engaging students and youth of various regions in the world. While educational exchanges have been proposed earlier, they have faced barriers such as visas for students from Islamic countries intending to study in Europe and North America. The contact group can use its political capital to lessen such entry barriers.

The roundtable also recommended very strongly, in order to promote understanding and coexistence, the establishment of centers of Arabic culture and language at universities in Europe, including media cooperation between Western and Islamic countries and other countries facing the threat of terrorism and extremism. The WIDE Initiative Contact

Group may seek input from experts as and when needed. It may also consult government leaders informally to examine the feasibility of specific ideas of institutional cooperation. In addition to the contact group, it would be necessary to have a group of stakeholder countries and institutions.

Study Group on Civilization

The roundtable welcomed the idea of a study group on the Islamic and European Renaissance to explore the mutual dependence and interface between Western and Islamic civilization. An independent study group will re-examine some of the critical historical issues from the perspective of examining inter-dependence and mutual cooperation in the development of humanity. The outcome of such an examination should be publicized.

AIR Initiative

The roundtable discussed the concept of an Arab Islamic Renaissance (AIR) Initiative to provide an alternative vision of society to the Arab world. Discussion on this subject was partially conducted in the full house and mostly in informal small break-out groups. The main conclusions were the following:

— The initiative should be essentially an internal Arab endeavor, with SFG playing a facilitating role. The initiative should primarily aim to build a scientific temperament, human resource capacity, employment for

youth, and a new and modern outlook in the Arab societies.

— The initiative should explore specific ideas such as modern Houses of Wisdom, large-scale translation of scientific books and literature into Arabic, establishment of institutes of technology and social development, and others.

— The initiative should primarily use the current capacity and existing institutions in the region and examine how they could be expanded to cover the entire Middle East. In this context, various programs of the Islamic Development Bank and Qatar Foundation were mentioned as examples.

The roundtable also emphasized the need to have internal dialogue and education within societies to understand their respective cultures. The Third International Roundtable is part of a process initiated by SFG, which began in 2004 with the convening of the First International Roundtable on Constructing Peace, Deconstructing Terror in New Delhi. This resulted in a declaration that proposed a distinction between terrorism and acts of terror, and dissociation of religion from terror.

The Second International Roundtable, held at the European Parliament in collaboration with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in the European Parliament in June 2005, recommended a policy of Zero Tolerance of Terror and transformation strategies in order to dissuade young people from supporting terror and extremism.

Terror Fears Boost Demand for Security Equipment

Katherine Haddon

Agence France Presse

LONDON — As the home of Britain's three tallest buildings and international banks such as HSBC, the Canary Wharf commercial district in London is likely to feature high on any would-be terrorists' list of targets.

But like businesses, stadiums and railway stations worldwide, it has enlisted the latest technology to protect itself, creating a boom among manufacturers more accustomed to supplying airports.

This month, Canary Wharf started using a system which can detect objects concealed under clothing, including materials used by suicide bombers, British manufacturers ThruVision told AFP.

It is designed to protect 80,000 people who work at the 14 million square foot (four million square meter) complex, as well as the thousands more who flock to its shopping malls, bars and restaurants each week.

The move underlines the extent to which the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center towers in New York and

other terrorist plots have broadened the range of contexts in which security is seen as a top priority.

On Dec. 5 and 6, London hosted the International Security National Resilience conference, attended by 6,000 people including representatives from the Austrian-Swiss hosted Euro 2008 football tournament and Swedish carmakers Volvo.

Exhibitors showing off their wares at the event underlined the extent of the shift in the industry. "The change mainly came about because of 9/11, then 7/7 and then recently the baggage scare at Heathrow airport," Jan Brown, the Europe, Middle East and Africa marketing manager for Rapiscan Systems, which makes baggage and people screening machinery, told AFP.

On July 7, 2005, 52 people were killed by four suicide bombers on London's transport system, while in August, British police uncovered an alleged plot to bomb trans-Atlantic jets, which led to tougher baggage restrictions on planes. Traditionally, US-owned Rapiscan has worked with airport authorities worldwide. But Brown added they had increasingly

supplied clients including ports and stadiums in the last couple of years and were hoping to compete for work at the 2012 London Olympics. The firm's year-on-year sales in the area Brown covers increased by 14 percent in 2001 and by 56 percent in 2006.

Rapiscan is also trying to address one of the main challenges facing the industry - how to screen people on public transport.

Like some other firms, it has developed technology, which can identify people carrying items including explosives and metals under their clothing.

This has been tried at Paddington railway station in London, from where thousands of commuters stream into the capital every working day.

Brown said this equipment could only pick out hidden items, not identify what they were, meaning it needed to be used alongside other equipment.

"There's a whole lot of stuff out there but there's no one thing that will get everything. You have to do it in phases," she added. John Marsala, vice president of international sales at US-based L3 Communications, which has

developed software to detect suicide bombers, also identified public transport as a tough field. "We can take care of the airplanes; mass transit is extremely difficult," he told AFP.

The main problem is the volumes of people using such modes of transport, estimated at seven million a day in London alone, he added. "Everybody's trying to figure out that solution...there's lots of thinking being done on it at the moment, but there's really no terrific solution. "There are some thoughts on how you would do it but it's probably going to be the last thing" accomplished, Marsala said.

Will Geddes, of International Corporate Protection, a firm which reviews security for corporate firms, cautions that security equipment can only be as good as the person operating it, though.

"There are some companies who have got the most amazing technology in the world that they've spent millions on, yet it's ineffective because ultimately, a lot of this equipment is human controlled," he told AFP.

Many security flaws detected by his firm are down to a lack of vigilance by often poorly-paid security guards, he added.



A yacht sails up the River Thames and past Canary Wharf, second right, in London, in this Sept. 7, 2005 file photo. As the home of Britain's three tallest buildings and international banks such as HSBC, the Canary Wharf commercial district in London is likely to feature high on any would-be terrorists' list of targets. (AFP)

IPWF — Dedicated to the Service of Pilgrims

Siraj Wahab

Arab News

JEDDAH — For millions of Muslims around the world, coming to Saudi Arabia to perform Haj is the dream of a lifetime. That dream almost became a nightmare for Indian pilgrim Rasheeda Begum and her ailing husband during their 2004 pilgrimage to Makkah.

"I discovered that the money we had brought with us was gone," she recalled in an article which appeared in India in an Urdu daily. "I don't know if it was stolen, or we just dropped it somewhere accidentally. We had no money on us. The amount was nearly SR3,000 which is almost 40,000 Indian rupees. That is quite a sum for travelers."

The couple had prepared for their trip by attending a Haj training camp in India where they learned about the physical challenges of the pilgrimage and also about coexisting in peace and harmony with millions of other pilgrims in the holy cities. "Nobody really told us or prepared us as to what or who we should go to in the event of losing our valuables and money," she said. "Not knowing what to do only added to our woes. We could barely speak Arabic, but we did ask somebody for directions to the nearest police station in order to lodge a complaint. Recovering the money was definitely not an easy task."

Their luck changed for the better when the volunteers of the Indian Pilgrim Welfare Fund (IPWF) heard of their plight. "Somebody directed us to the Indian mission volunteers in Makkah who took us to their offices in Makkah's Misfalah district. There we were given SR2,000 on the spot — just a few questions asked. They took down our Haj cover numbers and made us sign a paper that essentially said in the event that we recovered our money, we would pay their money back. That was it. I was literally in tears. I never expected such a thing in a foreign land."

Rasheeda Begum and her husband are among the hundreds who have been aided by the IPWF since its founding in 1997. Former Indian Consul General Afzal Amanullah came up with the idea for the not-for-profit organization after a massive fire in the tent city of Mina that year left scores of pilgrims, especially Indians, penniless. It was the IPWF that saved the day for many that year by lending money to the distressed pilgrims. The fund is linked to the Indian Consulate General in Jeddah and is overseen by a group of Indian expatriates who want to give something back to the community. The fund never has actively sought donations from the general public, opting instead to raise the needed funds either

from themselves or through cultural events, such as last year's India Festival which was organized by the Indian Consulate in Jeddah.

One of the key sources of funding for the organization is the annual mushaira (poetry-reading session). "By being so popular among the expat community, the mushaira attracts a lot of attention from Jeddah's corporate world," said Dr. Ausaf Sayeed, the Indian consul general. "The marketing people in various firms which cater to Indian expatriates see the mushaira as the event to make their service or product visible by putting up banners in the auditorium where the mushaira takes place. All the resulting proceeds from such sponsorships are given to the IPWF."

India's diplomatic mission to Saudi Arabia also acknowledges the organization's contributions. "Haj is a tough job and a massive affair. To take care of the nearly 157,000 pilgrims is not easy," said Indian Ambassador M.O.H. Farouk. "We need the help of everybody — both here in Saudi Arabia and in India. The IPWF is performing a good service for pilgrims, especially pilgrims who find themselves in distress. The fund has an excellent network of people who are responsive and have helped by dispensing

much-needed cash in only a matter of hours." The ambassador and the consul general were particularly touched by the organization's donation of a pick-up truck to the Indian Haj mission this year. "We appreciate their efforts," said Haj Consul Dr. Suhel Ejaz Khan.

This year, the IPWF has launched a women's division of volunteers who distribute ihrams (the special clothing one wears when performing Haj) among women pilgrims from India. "Our women volunteers, who are actively encouraged by Farha Sayeed, wife of the Indian consul general, go to most of the buildings in Makkah and Madinah where the pilgrims are staying and try to raise their morale, to keep them in good spirits, and let them know where the nearest health care facilities are," said Saleem Quadri, IPWF general secretary.

"What the IPWF is doing is only a drop in the ocean," Farha Sayeed said. She recalled a situation she encountered last year. "I saw an elderly couple sitting on the pavement for quite some time," she said. "We passed them by after every prayer we said at the Grand Mosque. They were always there so we casually inquired why they were sitting there and not going to their accommodations. Their

reply stunned us. They said they had been evicted from their room by other pilgrims. 'Why didn't you complain?' we asked them. 'We have no idea who to complain to.' So they simply came down out of the building and sat there, contemplating what they should do next."

If we had not spoken to them, God knows how long they would have stayed there. It is in such situations that IPWF volunteers are helping people. It is not just about dispensing cash to those who have lost their money."

Another new service the IPWF is offering is training classes for pilgrims already in the Kingdom. "Our aim is simple: Help the pilgrims in whatever way we can," said Shabbir Patel, current president of the IPWF. "This year we are distributing a practical guide for Indian Haj pilgrims. The consulate has made it available in a number of languages and the guide is helping pilgrims quite a bit."

You probably won't hear much more about the IPWF in the press. It operates quietly — out of the limelight — ensuring that the Haj remains a dream come true for Indian pilgrims. "We always wanted and still want to do our work quietly," Patel said. "We are trying to do our bit to help the guests of Allah."



Farha Sayeed, wife of the Indian consul general, distributes ihrams among Indian pilgrims in Makkah last week. This was one of the many philanthropic activities organized by the Indian Pilgrim Welfare Fund. (AN photo)

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