

Conference in Sudan debates future of Arab, Islamic world

by Our Special Correspondent

Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, played host in early December 1993 to a gathering of over 500 delegates to the second Popular Arab and Islamic Conference, an institution founded in the wake of the 1991 anti-Iraq war as an attempt to reconstitute the idea of unity which that war had shattered. Among the delegates were leading Islamists, like the host and co-founder of the conference, Sudan's Dr. Hassan Al Turabi, as well as Arab nationalists (many of them Christians), and representatives of Muslim communities outside the Arab world, from the United States, Europe, the Central Asian republics of the former U.S.S.R., Asia, and Africa.

The three-day conference witnessed hefty debate around every major political issue on the agenda, whether the recently signed PLO-Israel agreement on limited Palestinian autonomy, the war in Bosnia, the U.N. intervention in Somalia, the continuing embargoes against Libya and Sudan, or the international campaign against Sudan. The final day's panel was dedicated to the relationship between Islam in the modern world and Christianity.

Heated disputes over PLO-Israel agreement

Discussion around the Gaza-Jericho accord, referred to by many as "the Oslo-Washington agreement," was the most heated, reflecting the various bands in the political spectrum. By far the most vocal and most numerous were the speakers from the "rejectionist" front, comprising ten Palestinian organizations, the Islamist Hamas, as well as Iranian and Syrian spokesmen. They argued against the agreement as a "sell-out" and pledged continued resistance in the form of the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territories. Most prominent among these was Nawaf Hawatmeh, the leader of the Damascus-backed Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who profiled himself as an alternative to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. Unfortunately, Mr. Arafat, although a co-founder of the conference, was not able to attend; many, including Dr. Turabi, regretted his absence, as the policy pursued through the agreement was therefore not presented to the gathering and those among the attendees supportive of it, did not come to the fore.

Regardless of the fact that a numerical majority wanted to denounce the PLO-Israel agreement, the political majority, so to speak, succeeded in toning down the final resolution. The more moderate stance, adopted by Dr. Turabi, Gen.

Mirza Aslam Beg of Pakistan, and Sen. Kamil al Sharif from Jordan, among others, reflected their commitment to prevent civil war from breaking out among the Palestinians (between the PLO and Hamas), and to thwart attempts on the part of the rejectionists to escalate violence in the region. Senator al Sharif stated categorically, "We do not support terrorism." In the final resolution, the agreement was "rejected" but not "condemned," a distinction in formulation which reflected the conference leadership's intention to allow disagreement, but refuse violence.

This approach complemented that of the Sudanese government, which was illustrated just days earlier by Gen. Omar Hassan al Bashir in an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*. General al Bashir stated that "the government of Sudan has recognized and supported this [Gaza-Jericho] agreement which engages a peace process." Some conference delegates tried to infer that Dr. Turabi's criticism of the accord represented a long-term strategic option, whereas General al Bashir's support for it was merely tactical. The Sudanese have come to occupy a particular place in the political spectrum; their government was the first among the Arabs to be briefed personally by Arafat on the accords. Furthermore, the fact that they managed to bring representatives of fundamentally divergent political factions together under one roof at the conference points to the unusual status that the country has acquired in the eyes of Arabs and Muslims.

The war in Bosnia

The other hot subject was Bosnia. All were in agreement regarding the need to mobilize effective action against the genocide being perpetrated there, the contours of which were dramatically drawn by Azra Geric, the Bosnian representative in Malaysia and wife of the head of the Muslim community in Bosnia. Yet, the understanding of the geopolitical war aims of the British was limited to few delegates. Most speakers reiterated the notion that the war is a war against Islam per se. Particularly striking was the extent to which the speakers from Bosnia articulated their radicalization along religious lines. The head of the Bosnian delegation began his remarks by "confessing" that "we did not heed the Palestinians' complaints until we saw the destruction of our own mosques," and explained by saying, "we did not know because we had not read the Koran as we should have." Now,

he said, "we know we are being slaughtered *because* we are Muslims." This conviction was shared by the entire gathering. If Britain, in particular, hoped, by its orchestration of the war, to victimize Muslims worldwide and convince them that they are the new "enemy image" *qua* Muslims, the conference debate seemed to confirm that they have succeeded.

On the other hand, the conference as a whole did not fall into the trap laid by such British geopolitical schemes, known in think-tank scenarios as "religious warfare" or "clash of civilizations." In the case of Bosnia, the conference resolved to organize a boycott against the United States and Britain for one week in protest against their support of the war. In addition, the final document condemned the embargoes against Libya and Iraq. It announced the formation of an annually convened, institutionalized conference with a permanent secretariat and international board, which is to form ad hoc committees to function as a mediating force among parties in conflict; among the areas mentioned for possible mediation were Afghanistan, Algeria, and Yemen.

The Islamic-Christian dialogue

More broadly, in reference to relations with Christianity, the conference dedicated a significant portion of its final resolution to promotion of the Islamic-Christian dialogue. This panel raised discussion to a higher level. Several speakers stressed the need to define the common moral principles in Islam and Christianity as parameters for judgment, rather than believing simplistic characterizations of the "West." Senator al Sharif (who has often represented Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan in ecumenical conferences) pointed out that "we should not overlook the West; there is a third camp in the West with whom we can discuss seriously and rationally." In his opening remarks, Dr. Turabi had characterized the Bosnian genocide as "a result of religious intolerance, of which true Christianity is innocent." Therefore, he proposed, "it is better for this conference not to address Europeans in the name of Christianity . . . [but] to address the devout Christians, whether they are Europeans or Americans." The reason is, "What really counts is the real religious values of a true devout individual, whether a Muslim or a Christian."

Laith Shubeilat, an independent Islamist who was in the last Jordanian Parliament, spoke of the "strategic," not "tactical, importance of the ecumenical dialogue," which he said must be based on "the notion that man is created in the image of God, and thus is endowed with dignity, as the center of the earth. He is not an animal, but was created as *imago viva Dei*." Islam, which shares this view, he said, should seek dialogue with "real Christianity," not "paganism" in the West. In the economic realm, he said this entailed rejection of the "free market theory, the real anti-Christ."

The dialogue between Sudan and Rome began when Pope John Paul II visited Khartoum in February 1993 and addressed masses of Sudanese, Muslims and Christians, in the Green Park. During that visit, he met with General al Bashir.



Pope John Paul II at the Green Park in Khartoum in February 1993. The Vatican is actively working to defeat Britain's religious warfare scenario.

In April, the Peace and Development Foundation of Sudan hosted an international conference on religion, attended by 100 religious representatives from 30 countries, including the Vatican. At that conference, Helga Zepp-LaRouche spoke for the Schiller Institute in favor of a dialogue predicated on the notion that all men are created in the image of God. Following the conference, Dr. Turabi traveled to Rome to meet the pope.

In the final meeting with the press at the December conference, the Sudanese religious leader reported on the content of his talks with the pope. The purpose of the dialogue with the Vatican, he said, was the creation of "a joint front of religion against the irreligious spirit of decay." Saying that he and the pope "spoke almost the same language," Dr. Turabi discussed "the revival of Islam and the revival of Christianity as religions in one common front against materialism generally, against secularism generally, and corrupt social life all over the world." In followup discussions with cardinals involved in the Islamic-Christian dialogue, he discussed "measures and procedures of organizing not only the dialogue, but regular cooperation," scholarships, and "other measures." Commenting on Rome's view of Islam, Dr. Turabi said, "I found they are not interested in western propaganda."