

'Peace in Palestine' Conference in Malaysia

by Mike Billington

Malaysia, currently the chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), hosted a "Peace in Palestine" conference in Putrajaya from March 28-30, with representatives from 34 nations. Organized by Peace Malaysia, a coalition of 1,100 organizations and parties, the 400 participants included five Israelis, despite the fact that there are no diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Israel. The presence of the Israelis led to the boycott of the event by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS).

Nonetheless, the Malaysian government not only supported the event, but Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi issued a published address, and met privately with the Israeli guests. He called for an "international campaign for a sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side-by-side in peace and harmony with Israel." He said that if a "global campaign could be launched, not unlike the one against apartheid in South Africa, it might indeed succeed in influencing the concerned parties to achieve a peaceful resolution."

Peace of Westphalia

The Israeli participants came from two organizations: Gush Shalom, a leading force in the Israeli peace movement, founded by Uri Avnery; and Neturei Karta, an international association of Orthodox Jews who oppose Zionism. After their private meeting with Prime Minister Abdullah, Adam Keller, representing Gush Shalom, said that the Prime Minister had told them that Malaysia was ready to open diplomatic relations with Israel, provided the peace process continues.

Keller, in his speech to the conference, affirmed that a "reasonable peace can be achieved." He condemned the daily Israeli bombardment of Palestinians for the past four years, but also pleaded that the suicide bombings in Israel have "obscured the justice of Palestinian demands." Former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, in a 2003 speech to the OIC, had expressed this same point, calling for Muslims to define terrorism as any attack on innocent civilians, including the suicide bombings. His proposal was rejected at that time, while Israeli dismissed Dr. Mahathir as an anti-Semite!

This issue provoked some dissent at the conference as well, as at least one participant argued that suicide bombings must be accepted as part of the necessary "armed resistance"

of the Palestinians against the occupation, due to the "state terrorism" of the Israelis. Such finger-pointing demonstrates the urgency of adopting the concept of a new "Treaty of Westphalia," as proposed by Lyndon LaRouche—for each side to recognize the "benefit of the other" as in one's own true best interest for long-term peace and development.

'Focus on the Economy'

The keynote address by Malaysian Education Minister Hishammudin Hussein, who is also the patron of Peace Malaysia, put the focus on the economic disaster in Palestine. "Palestine's perilous economic condition must also be addressed," said Hishammudin. "I am a firm believer that economic issues must be tackled if peace is to be achieved. A lack of jobs and opportunities fosters despair and hopelessness, which in turn is easily exploited by the unscrupulous and evil-minded."

The statistics on the plight of the Palestinians reported by Hishammudin made the point: unemployment of 25%, with 37% of young people without work, and nearly half the population living below the poverty line. He warned that this was an international crisis: "Our peace is threatened by the bloodshed in Palestine and Israel. If we are not careful, the conflict in the Holy Land will begin to define all relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews."

Saeb Erakat, the chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority, wrote in a prepared speech that the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and from a few West Bank settlements represented a "glimmer of hope," but he insisted that "unilateralism only invites extremism and signals a rejection of a negotiated solution to the conflict." He called for an "immediate resumption of political negotiations," and expressed hope that the Gaza withdrawal would lead to a return to the Road Map, and thus to "the creation of a self-sufficient, independent Palestinian economy that is not dependent solely on aid." He warned that the recent announcement of new Israeli settlements to be built on the West Bank marked a "continued Israeli theft of Palestinian land," which indicates that Israel has "no intention to fulfill the vision of two states or to live within recognized and secured borders."

Possible Boycott

The participating organizations issued an "action plan" at the end of the conference, calling for the establishment of a center in Malaysia to "organize a selective boycott of Israeli goods, and divestment from that country, in order to pressure Tel Aviv to withdraw completely from the West Bank and Gaza." Chandra Muzafar, the founder and director of the Malaysian-based Just World Movement, told the press that there would be no "rush into such an action," but that they would carefully study the issues involved, noting that the European Union and the Non-Aligned Movement had already discussed boycotts of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements.