

Report

Visit of Delegates from the OIC

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Delegates from the OIC's Special Contact Group on Jammu and Kashmir, headed by Special Envoy Abdullah Abdulrehman Alim, visited the Institute of Strategic Studies on April 21, 2011. The guests participated in a roundtable that included researchers from the ISSI and other noted analysts and journalists, including Lt. Gen. (Retd) Talat Masood, Ambassador (Retd) Asif Ezdi, Nasim Zehra, Director Current Affairs, Dunya TV, Munawwar Saeed Bharri, Jan Muhammad Khalid Jamali, Director (SA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad and Zehra Abbasi, DG (SA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad. The Director General of the ISSI, Ambassador Ashraf Jahangir Qazi introduced the participants and welcomed the delegates, introducing the views on the situation in Kashmir and noting that a solution needs to be advanced with the UN Security Council Resolution in mind, as well as the human rights discourse. He hoped that the current phase of positive relations between India and Pakistan would lead to a better understanding of the issue and noted that any solution requires the involvement of Pakistan since India has shown that it does not have a political solution at the moment.

The OIC Special Contact Group's Envoy then discussed his agenda, the importance of Kashmir for the OIC and the role that it could play in a successful resolution to the issue. He noted that it was using its privileges and

opportunities to express the OIC position to the global community and this included the highlighting of human rights violations in the region. At various platforms, the OIC believes, it can play a role in explaining the Kashmir situation; a week after visiting the ISSI, the Contact Group was to visit Brussels and discuss the very issue with the European Parliament, in what is one such high-level meeting that the OIC is likely to have.

The Envoy also discussed his agenda for that meeting, noting that it was an invitation and it provides a good opportunity for the OIC to express its views on Kashmir. This involves the need for a peaceful solution through negotiations and dialogue since without this India alone cannot reach an end to the crisis. Indeed, the OIC believes that it is the Kashmiri people who have to frame the agenda themselves.

General Talat Masood then raised the important issue of expectations from the OIC that were never met. However, there are obvious limitations that are realized by the Muslim world – for instance, there is a substantial Muslim population in India as well that the OIC is sensitive to. He noted that while human rights is a relevant issue to raise, India has reason to counter this by pointing out human rights violations in the Muslim world as well. He also raised important questions of what exactly Indian objections to third party role such as the one being played by the OIC

are and what is the consideration of giving India observer status in the organization.

This was followed by Nasim Zehra's concern that while international organizations have a facilitating role to play, it depends on the issue of power within the OIC member states. With respect to the Contact Group on Kashmir, she wondered whether there would be official, formal positions taken since the OIC appears to be a very bureaucratic organization and moving away from traditional and safe meetings seems unlikely. Regardless, she stressed that the human rights issues in Kashmir still need to be highlighted given a recent Amnesty International report that raised concerns; the question to be asked is whether the OIC can come up with a coherent and courageous stance in these circumstances and move beyond rhetoric?

The envoy responded to these questions and worries by pointing out an important fact of the current global system of relationships; India refuses to meet with representatives of the OIC, he noted, but the concern of Kashmir remains high on the agenda and internal meetings continue to discuss the issue. He said that India as an observer state was a possibility but India has to officially declare its intention and wish of such a position. He said that India had not responded to OIC letters and intimations in any official way. Moreover, in response to Ms. Zehra's question, one member of the OIC group said that a number of Kashmir-related

statements have been made and it is not really a matter of courage.

A point was raised that more official steps from the OIC are needed, to which the contingent replied that while this was true, the group on Kashmir is a work in process. Moreover, official stances taken by the OIC Secretary General and requests that official reports are published, are all critical matters and the OIC has certain limitations that need to be understood since it is not limited to the General Secretary or to Jeddah; indeed it is a matter of having 57 member states on board whenever a concrete stance is taken. A new strand in the OIC of a Human Rights Commission however, is a good step that shows a new character of the organization.

Addressing the issue of Muslim minorities, raised by the Director General ISSI, a Contact Group member replied that while the OIC is concerned with Muslim minorities, if Kashmir becomes part of a Muslim minority, the OIC is in a weaker position. This was followed up by Mr. Asif Ezdi who reasoned that the OIC has limitations since it can only do what it is mandated to do and member states play a dominant role. He discussed Pakistan's stance on the Kashmir issue and noted that while the political issues and situation are important, the human rights concerns should always be highlighted.

Mr. Munawwar Bhatti also commented that the OIC presents a good platform

to discuss the Kashmir issue, which is one of the oldest issues in the US agenda with Pakistan. He said that this pressurizes India; however, while human rights are a valid concern, it is really a political issue and should be treated as such. He then posed as question as to whether the OIC can deliver now that the Kashmiri people would expect it to play a more active role in reaching a suitable solution. He expressed hope that the OIC group can meet Kashmiris and get a better idea of the prevailing situation and ultimately play a big role.

The Envoy also gave his insights, noting that some Muslim countries enjoy good relations with India and that prevents a more forceful approach. His colleague Mr. Al-Hussain pointed out the difficulties in such a case by citing an example from 2009 when the OIC wanted to come up with a declaration but could not do so before changing just one word in the document that was unacceptable to some parties; essentially, these reservations have to be considered when justifying any role that the OIC has to play in situations such as the one in Kashmir.

Simbal Khan of the ISSI asked whether any broad guidelines or benchmarks existed within the OIC Contact Group so that it could see whether it was achieving any success in its own goals. General Talat Masood also interjected that while Indian hesitance in accepting third party role in Kashmir is understood, the OIC can have a possible role to play in bringing together India

and Pakistan to the negotiating table like any other concerned party in South Asian affairs; this would be a way for the OIC to expand its role and also prevent a total dependence on western countries. However, the Envoy of the Contact Group replied that any expansion of the OIC was not in his mandate.

Ambassador Qazi also contended that the Contact Group finds itself in a uniquely difficult situation since while it desires to bring changes and have more responsibilities, political realities and institutional hindrances prevent it from achieving its potential. But, he asserted, for that to happen the OIC needs to be more vocal and eventually bring a thaw in the Indian approach. Even when meeting Kashmiris, it has to be made clear that the willingness to help is not just in rhetorical terms.

At this point, Mr. Ghani Jafar from the ISSI also wondered whether given the Ummah's realities, there is any consideration of changing the name of the OIC itself. He also asked whether despite the limitations already mentioned, and despite the good relations that some OIC members share with India, is it not a reason to believe that some leverage over India can be gained? He also asserted that it might be better and more effective if any resolution that is put forward for approval with the Council of Ministers could beforehand be made public for a more open dialogue process.

Mr. Al-Hussaini answered that while the suggestions were interesting; there is again the logistical and difficult issue of General Secretary and the member countries' separate views that needs to be kept in mind. To this, Mr. Fazalur Rahman of the ISSI also asked whether, since there is a need for deeper bonds between Muslim countries and the OIC has a strong role to play here, is there any talk of a major reform process within the OIC to make it more relevant and effective? Mr. Hussaini again responded by pointing out that since 2005 an active process of change had occurred as issues of human rights, democracy and governance, among others, had now changed the character of the OIC, but that this is a work in progress.

The discussion then veered to the current situation in Libya and the OIC position in this regard, while other immediate concerns in African Muslim countries were also touched upon. In the end the Envoy suggested that since his was a new position, he needed time and hoped to bring substantial achievements and successes to the OIC. He said that he wanted to open more channels with India in his role and alternatives perhaps needed to be sought as well. He reiterated that he would be highlighting the important issue of Kashmir at all major platforms internationally. The discussion ended with the Director General of the ISSI thanking the guests, expressing his own optimism and belief that the human rights of the Kashmiri people should be always on the agenda.

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