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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sun, 09/23/2012 - 12:31

Paper No. 630

12.03.2003

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During January and February, opposition from the Muslims of South Asia to the threatened military action by the US and the UK against Iraq was mainly vocal, but not demonstrative. Many statements were issued and speeches made by Muslim leaders condemning the US and the UK and expressing solidarity with the Iraqi people, but not necessarily with President Saddam Hussein. The threatened action was viewed as a war on Iraq and its people and not as a war on Islam. However, there were very few efforts to mobilise the people and hold mass demonstrations against the US and the UK.

2. This caution was due to their ambivalent attitude towards Saddam Hussein due to various reasons, some of which were common to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and some applied only to individual countries. Amongst the common reasons were the perception of Saddam Hussein as an apostate because of his secular and socialistic policies, his suppression of Islamic fundamentalist elements in his country and his past reluctance to condemn the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in India by a group of Hindus in December, 1992.

3. Amongst the reasons, which applied only to Pakistan, were his past support to India on the Kashmir issue and fears that any over-doing of the opposition to the US might add to US concerns about Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability. Osama bin Laden's past criticism of Saddam Hussein also had a restraining effect on the Islamic political parties and jihadi organisations in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

4. This vocal opposition has given place to a more active one in the streets of Pakistan and Bangladesh since the beginning of this month. While the unhappiness of the rank and file over the cautious approach of their leaders played a role in inducing this transformation, a more important factor was the statement attributed to bin Laden which was circulated in the Islamic world at the end of the fasting period of Ramadan. In this statement, he clarified that in the coming "crusade" against the US-led invaders the true Muslims could tactically co-operate even with Saddam Hussein's regime in order to achieve their ultimate objective of defeating the "crusaders." He said: "There will be no harm if the interests of Muslims converge with the interests of the

socialists in the fight against the crusaders, despite our belief in the infidelity of socialists. " He wanted the Muslims to forget their sectarian (Sunni vs Shia) and ethnic (Arabs vs Kurds) differences and join in this battle against the invaders.

5. His statement contributed to removing the ambivalence in the minds of the Muslims of Pakistan and Bangladesh about Saddam Hussein and they have started demonstrating in large numbers. A huge demonstration in Karachi on March 2 was followed by an even bigger one at Rawalpindi on March 9, 2003. Bangladesh has also been seeing similar demonstrations.

6. A careful analysis of the speeches made and slogans shouted on these occasions shows that the Muslims of these countries have started viewing the threatened war not just as a war on Iraq and its people, but as one on Islam. The US in general and President Bush in particular are seen as the leaders of an anti-Islam coalition and calls are being made to the Muslims of all countries to united against them. Even those sections of the Islamic organisations of Pakistan and Bangladesh, which in the past disliked identifying themselves with Al Qaeda and bin Laden, no longer have any such inhibitions. " It is Bush who's the terrorist; Osama is a hero" was amongst the slogans shouted during the Rawalpindi rally.

7. In contrast, in India, while the anti-US and pro-Saddam Hussein rhetoric has gone up in the sermons after the Friday prayers in the principal mosques, there has till now been a significant absence of mass demonstrations similar to the ones seen in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is because bin Laden does not command the same admiration and following amongst the Muslims of India, as he does in Pakistan and Bangladesh. There was hardly any anti-US demonstration by the Muslims of India, including Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), after the US military action started in Afghanistan on October, 7, 2001. Islamic political and jihadi organisations, including the indigenous groups of J&K, have maintained a careful distance from bin Laden. No indigenous organisation of India, including J&K, is a member of bin Laden's International Islamic Front (IIF). Only the Pakistani jihadi organisations, which have been operating in J&K, are members of the IIF, but they have not been able to mobilise the support of the people in India in the name of bin Laden.

8. The indigenous Kashmiris have always believed that they will not be able to achieve their objective without US support and, hence, have so far avoided any association with his Al Qaeda and IIF. Muslims in other parts of India are strongly critical of President Bush, but they do not view the entire American people as anti-Islam. While they were aggrieved by the reluctance of the Bush administration to be articulate in its criticism of the large-scale killing of Muslims in Gujarat last year and of the failure of the local Government to protect them, they have noted the role played by non-governmental human rights organisations of the US and the section of the State Department dealing with religious freedom worldwide in highlighting them. The decision of Bill Clinton, former US president, to cancel his visit to India ostensibly for physical security reasons and his reference to the sectarian tension (read Gujarat riots and after) as one of the factors inhibiting India's quick rise as a major regional power in his telecast message to a seminar in New Delhi were also widely noted. Consequently, there has been an anxiety amongst the Muslims in other parts of India too not to antagonise the US by over-playing their opposition to its threatened military action against Iraq.

9. The determined opposition of France and Germany to the US-UK machinations and the mass demonstrations in many West European countries against a war may not succeed in preventing the US from going ahead with its invasion of Iraq. Despite this, they have had the benefit of convincing many Muslims that they are not alone in this world and that many sections of the West do not approve of what the Muslims consider the anti-Islam policies of the Bush Administration. It remains to be seen whether this could have any moderating effect on the plans of Al Qaeda and the IIF to target Western nationals and interests in retaliation for the war. Any targeting of the innocent civilians of West European countries could cause a backlash and result in a dilution of the mass support to the people of Iraq.

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