

A Big Muslim Mess In Kuala Lumpur

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The well-known antisemite and Holocaust-denier Mahathir Mohamed, Prime Minister of Malaysia, along with the heads of Turkey, the inimitable Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, thought it might be a good idea if the 56 Muslim-majority states met to discuss problems within the Umma, the Community of Muslim Believers. From the get-go, things did not go as planned. The story is [here](#):

Leaders and senior representatives from some 20 Muslim nations gathered in the Malaysian capital on Wednesday to discuss issues agitating Muslims globally at a summit Saudi Arabia decided to snub, and which Pakistan ducked out of attending.

No agenda for the Kuala Lumpur Summit has been released, but it could address disputes in Kashmir and the Middle East, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority, mounting outrage over China's camps for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang and how to counter the spread of Islamophobia in the world.

About Kashmir, what is there to discuss? The vote will be unanimous, to condemn India for daring to make Kashmir again a place where Hindus – hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri pandits in recent years had fled the territory to avoid persecution, and even murder, by its Muslims – could, with the Indian army in place, live in relative safety.

About Syria, the lineup will be predictable: Iran will side with the Assad regime (did Assad bother to send a delegation, or is he too tied up with the war at home not yet fully won?), but none of the Sunni states – that means all the other Muslim countries – will do so. And nothing will have been accomplished in Kuala Lumpur to bring that war finally to its end, nor will anything be done about the return and resettlement of Syrian refugees.

As to Yemen, it will be not quite the same story, for it is not only Iran that support the Houthis, but also Sunni Qatar. That is for one reason only: Qatar supports those fighting its main enemy, Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis, though Shi'a, fit that bill.

The summit describes itself as “an international platform for Muslim leaders, intellectuals and scholars from around the world to discuss and exchange ideas about the issues revolving in the Muslim world”.

The four-day event, which is being hosted by Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's ninety-four-year old prime minister, wraps up on Saturday.

The event is already a bust. Fifty-six countries were invited; only twenty bothered to send a delegation, and many of them were headed not by heads of state, but by officials lower down on the political totem pole. Most embarrassing was the pullout of Pakistan, which had been one of three original promoters – along with Malaysia and Turkey – of the event. The Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, was “summoned” to Riyadh and read the riot act by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; Khan immediately pulled out of the Kuala Lumpur meeting himself – he may be sending his foreign minister – even though he had been one of its three promoters. He doesn’t dare cross the Saudis, whose financial support Pakistan desperately needs.

Mahathir, who is the world’s oldest premier and will be addressing the summit, is considered to have modernised Malaysia’s education system and made the country a model for economic development in Asia.

If Malaysia is a “model for economic development,” that is due to its non-Muslim Chinese and Hindu minorities, not the Muslim Malays. The Malays benefit from their industry and enterprise because of the “bumiputra” system, a kind of affirmative action that guarantees the Malays a certain number of university seats, sets aside scholarship money for Malays, requires that 30% equity in many enterprises be made available to Malays at preferential rates, and even provides them with lower cost loans for housing than are provided to non-Malays. It is the Chinese who above all are responsible for the economic advances in the country, but this, of course, cannot be openly discussed in Malaysia.

But the veteran politician has been accused of antisemitism after he described Jews as “hook-nosed,” claimed that they “rule the world by proxy” and questioned the number of people killed in the Holocaust.

At a welcome dinner for the guests, Mahathir said the summit

would aim to “do something” to improve the lives of Muslims and overcome Islamophobia.

“We need to find a way to address our shortcomings, our dependency on non-Muslims to protect ourselves against the enemies of Islam,” said Mahathir.

What if the “shortcomings” of Muslims are a result of Islam itself? What if the emphasis on authority in Islam, and the discouraging of free and skeptical inquiry, makes it harder for Muslims to acquire habits of thought that make achievements in science and technology possible? What if the fatalism of Islam – the belief that Allah decides everything according to his whim – dampens the desire to work hard, for in the end Allah will give, or take away, whatever he wishes.

Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan, who along with Mahathir and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had been a prime mover behind the summit, made a belated decision to skip the meeting.

In what will be seen as a deeply humiliating episode, Middle East Eye reported on Tuesday that Khan had taken the decision after being summoned to Riyadh for talks with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Imran Khan has two masters: the Saudis, and the Chinese. His country needs aid from the first, and investment from the second. He has pulled out of the Kuala Lumpur meeting, humiliatingly, in order not to the Saudi Crown Prince, and has refused to criticize the “re-education camps” for the Uighurs, so as not to cross the implacable Chinese.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamid Al Thani, whose countries have tense relations with Saudi Arabia, are also attending, Reuters news agency reported.

Explaining its decision to stay away, Saudi Arabia said the summit was the wrong forum for matters of importance to the world's 1.75bn Muslims, though some analysts suspected the kingdom feared being diplomatically isolated by regional rivals Iran, Qatar and Turkey.

Saudi state news agency SPA reported that on a call with Mahathir on Tuesday, Saudi King Salman reaffirmed that such issues should be discussed through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

A Saudi source told Reuters that Saudi Arabia was invited but would only attend if the meeting was held under the auspices of the OIC, which is headquartered in Jeddah.

The Saudis want to hold such meetings on their home turf. That means the O.I.C., in which the Saudis have managed so far to control agendas, and to keep Iran isolated. The Kuala Lumpur meeting was arranged without their agreement, and the presence of Saudi Arabia's two main enemies, Iran and Qatar, which are both sending their heads of state, naturally alarms them.

"They are very concerned about it," the source said of the summit, declining to be named as he was not authorised to talk to media.

The Saudi government's centre for international communication did not respond to a request for comment.

The absence of Saudi Arabia, whose king holds the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, clearly demonstrates some of the current divisions in the Muslim world.

"The issue is that you've got blocs," said James Dorsey, a senior fellow at S Rajaratnam School of International Studies and Middle East Institute in Singapore.

“You’ve got a Saudi-UAE bloc, Turkey-Qatari bloc, and Pakistan in the middle trying to hedge their bets.”

The Muslims like to think of their Umma as one community, but in fact the Muslim world is more riven by conflict today than any other grouping of people. It’s a conflict between Sunnis and Shi’a, between Arab and non-Arab Muslims, between supporters and enemies of the Muslim Brotherhood, between despots and democrats, between promoters of the Arab Spring and its detractors.

Indonesia, the country with the world’s largest Muslim population, will be represented by Vice-President Ma’ruf Amin, a cleric overseeing the country’s fight against radicalisation and terrorism.

Even as delegations were arriving in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian officials were unable to provide a final list of who would be attending.

Mahathir’s office said that invitations had been sent to all 56 OIC member states, but officials said only about 20 were sending delegations, and fewer would be led by heads of state.

An embarrassing fiasco, even before it begins, with little more than a third of those countries invited actually sending delegations, and fewer still sending their heads of state.

Defending the summit, Mahathir’s office issued a statement saying there was no intention to create a “new bloc as alluded to by some of its critics”.

“In addition, the summit is not a platform to discuss about religion or religious affairs but specifically to address the state of affairs of the Muslim Ummah,” it said, using the Arabic term for community.

Speaking to Reuters last week, Mahathir expressed frustration with the OIC's inability to forge a united front and act decisively.

During that interview, the Malaysian leader also raised the possibility that the mistreatment of Muslim Uighurs in China's Xinjiang would be discussed.

Beijing describes the camps where Uighur Muslims are being held as "vocational training centres," while critics say they are mass internment camps.

There will be nothing to come out of this summit that will be any better than the O.I.C. at "forging a united front" to "act decisively." Iran will denounce, yet again, Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., Turkey will rage at the Kurds, Qatar will support Iran and vilify Saudi Arabia, and so on. As for problems facing Muslims, surely the worst is the persecution of the Uighurs by China, where up to three million Muslims are now in "re-education camps." Twenty-two Western states, all non-Muslim, have not hesitated to protest this state of affairs, while only Turkey, among Muslim states, has so far dared to criticize China. The other Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,, depend on China for investments and have publicly supported the treatment of the Uighurs as benign. The demands will come from Turkey for others to join in its criticism of China – to which the Chinese have angrily responded – but out of economic considerations, there will be few takers, and the impotence of the Umma to help its fellow Muslims in Xinjiang will be on embarrassing display.

As for the Muslim Rohingya, another issue sure to be brought up in Kuala Lumpur, all the protests and O.I.C. meetings have not caused the Buddhists in Burma to relent, and take back back those who fled, people whom they consider to have been uninvited migrants from what is now called Bangladesh. Previous expressions of Muslim support for the Rohingya have

accomplished nothing; nor with this meeting in Malaysia. Unless a military force of Muslims is prepared to escort them back to Myanmar, and remain to protect them – an impossible scenario – the Rohingya will remain in Bangladesh. This will be yet another display of impotence.

Then there is the issue of “islamophobia.” It becomes ever harder to make this charge plausible. As all sensible people know, that word was invented in order to undermine legitimate islamocritics; they are slandered as “islamophobes.” But the word will be everywhere in the meeting halls, as a constant complaint among the delegates in Kuala Lumpur. No one will point out that, after all, tens of millions of Muslims have been admitted into the midst of Europe. Nor will any one note that those Muslim migrants have had, in the generous welfare states of Western Europe, every conceivable benefit lavished upon them: free or highly subsidized housing, free medical care, free education, unemployment benefits, and family allowances. And it has been not Muslims, but two dozen non-Muslim countries that have protested China’s mistreatment of the Uighurs. The West has not hesitated, either, to criticize Myanmar for its treatment of the Rohyngya. What examples of “islamophobia” in the West can be adduced? Any reprisal killings after Muslim terror attacks? Mass roundups? Expulsions? Nothing of the sort. Didn’t NATO bomb the Serbs to rescue the Muslim Bosnians? Didn’t the United States spend several trillion dollars to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban, who have made life so miserable for ordinary Afghan Muslims? Didn’t the Americans spend another few trillion dollars in Iraq, to rid the country of a ruthless dictator, and to bring a semblance of democratic government to people who had never experienced it? How do those facts square with the charge of “Islamophobia”?

At the Kuala Lumpur meeting, the display by the representatives of the Umma – the one-third of it that bothers to send delegates at all – will be one of rancor, mutual

vilification, cries of victimization, and impotent rage. For that reason, a those of us who are Unbelievers should welcome this "international platform," and wish that the world's Muslims hold many, many more.

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