

Canadian antiwar activists sat down with terror groups

Canadian activists were out in force at a recent conference in Cairo that sought to forge closer links between the international antiwar movement and Islamic resistance groups, including several on Canada's terrorism list.

BY THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 8, 2007

MAY 08/07

Canadian activists were out in force at a recent conference in Cairo that sought to forge closer links between the international antiwar movement and Islamic resistance groups, including several on Canada's terrorism list.

About 20 Canadians attended the March 29 to April 1 Cairo Conference, the largest delegation from Canada in the event's five-year history. According to one report, Canada also had one of the largest delegations from outside the Middle East. In total, as many as 1,500 delegates from the Middle East, Europe, South Korea and the Americas attended.

Many of the Canadian delegates were from the Canadian Peace Alliance, the country's largest umbrella peace organization, and some of its 150 affiliated groups, said peace alliance co-ordinator Sid Lacombe, who attended the conference.

Groups that sent delegates include the Toronto Coalition to Stop the War, the Canadian Arab Federation, the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, Artists Against War, the Venezuela We Are With You Coalition, the Toronto-Haiti Action Committee, the Toronto-Egypt Solidarity Campaign and Not In Our Name -- Jews Against Israel's Wars.

The conference attracted representatives of at least four organizations that appear on Canada's list of terrorist organizations -- Hamas, Hezbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Jamaat al-Islamiya, best known for killing 71 tourists in Luxor, Egypt in 1997.

Among the attendees were Moussa Abu Marzouk, deputy leader of Hamas, and Ali Fayad, a member of Hezbollah's politburo.

According to conference literature, the main purpose of the gathering, sponsored by the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian opposition parties, was to forge "an international alliance against imperialism and Zionism."

If coverage of the conference is any guide, delegates appear to have made progress toward that goal.

One report in Cairo's Al Ahram Weekly said the growing co-operation between "the anti-global left and Muslims" was striking. The left, the article said, "is finally overcoming its traditional resistance to the cultural conservatism of Islam, and likewise Muslims are reaching out to the left."

A story in the Socialist Worker said the meeting was "a demonstration of the growing resistance in the Middle East and its links to the worldwide antiwar movement."

And a lengthy account in the New York-based leftist magazine Monthly Review said the conference "revealed increased cohesion" between Islamic, nationalist and socialist forces in the Middle East and antiwar groups in Canada, Europe, Korea and Venezuela.

However, Mr. Lacombe dismissed the likelihood of heightened co-operation between Islamist groups and the Canadian Peace Alliance.

"There's very little practical application for that right now," he said. "Our focus is Afghanistan. And Afghanistan wasn't really at the top of the agenda there."

"We're not actually co-ordinating our activity with any of these organizations. There's very little logistical crossover that would make any kind of sense under the circumstances."

That said, the Canadian delegation in Cairo was diverse, he acknowledged, and some of the groups might be interested in working more closely with groups in the Middle East.

"They have very different sets of politics. So individual groups can sign on to whatever it is they feel they want to sign on to."

The willingness of Canadian antiwar activists to meet with representatives of groups that are on Canada's list of terrorist organizations has drawn fire from some critics.

For instance, a column by Terry Glavin in the Georgia Straight last month accused the Canadian Peace Alliance of holding "a strategy session with some of the world's most foul jihadists."

And a website called Judeoscope, whose avowed mission is "to cast light on anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, xenophobia and militant Islam in Canada and the world," also weighed in with a stinging attack.

The presence of antiwar groups at the conference "should make it clear to anyone still in

doubt that, far from promoting peace, these coalitions serve as western cheerleaders of radical Islam's brutal disregard for human life," the website declared.

However, Mr. Lacombe said those who accuse Canadian antiwar activists of aiding and abetting terrorists misunderstand why they were in Cairo.

"For us it's just a question of dialogue and clarity, of being able to meet with people who have experienced war over the course of the last few years," he said.

"It does help us figure out what's going on in the world around us, and it is helpful in that sense. But the possibilities for any sort of collaboration, we don't really look at it as that sort of activity."

Though a statement issued at the end of the conference endorsed a revival of the Palestinian intifada and "the weapon of resistance" -- an apparent reference to suicide bombing -- Mr. Lacombe said the Canadian Peace Alliance was there strictly as an observer and did not sign on to any conference declarations.

The fact that some groups at the conference are on Canada's terrorism list does not concern Mr. Lacombe: "We want to be able to have the opportunity to talk with anyone, from any number of different groups."

Nor is he worried that meeting with groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah will attract scrutiny from RCMP or CSIS. "If we're in trouble for talking to people, whereas you can be considered a hero for bombing them, that's not the kind of world we want to live in."

A spokesman for the federal Department of Justice agreed that merely attending a public conference with representatives of designated terrorist groups would likely not constitute a breach of Canadian law.

Mr. Lacombe said dialogue with all parties, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, is the only way to resolve conflicts in the world.

"At some point, this is going to have to happen," he said. "Otherwise, we just kill everyone."

Mr. Lacombe said the Cairo conferences are an important forum for groups in the Middle East, particularly for Egyptian opposition groups who would normally be jailed by the regime if they tried to meet.

"Part of the point of the conference is it provides a little bit of international cover for the Egyptian groups," he said.

The conference is also increasingly important for Canadian groups that want to acquire first-hand knowledge of what's happening in the Middle East, Mr. Lacombe said.

It also provides an opportunity for Canadian antiwar groups to connect with like-minded groups from other G8 and NATO nations, he said.

"We've now got more groups internationally that are working on the Afghanistan campaign talking to each other.

"I think that was the key for us."

The only other Canadian delegate who could be reached was Ali Mallah, a vice-president of the Canadian Arab Federation and a member of the international solidarity committee of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

In a brief interview, Mr. Mallah said the Canadian Peace Alliance and the Toronto Coalition to Stop the War were thinking of issuing a press release about the Cairo Conference later this week "just to put things into perspective."

Mr. Mallah, who has attended four of the five Cairo conferences, brushed aside Mr. Glavin's critique in the Georgia Straight.

"I'm not interested in wasting my time with stuff like that," he said. "I would prefer if we could have a civilized discussion but unfortunately he went on his way and came to the wrong conclusion."

© (c) CanWest MediaWorks Publications Inc.