

Report from Islamabad

Jack Rosen

MORE than a year ago, I traveled to Islamabad, Pakistan—capital of the third most-populous Muslim state and the only Muslim state with a nuclear weapon—to begin what has become an important American Jewish Congress effort to build relationships with moderate forces within Islam.

The immediate outcome of that trip was the decision by Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf—widely covered in the news media in Pakistan and throughout the Muslim world—to accept our invitation to address the leadership of the entire American Jewish community and give voice to his program of “Enlightened Moderation” for Islam. The longer-term impact of my reaching out to President Musharraf has been a thawing of relations between Pakistan and Israel and an open line of communication between AJCongress and General Musharraf that can benefit Israel and the Jewish People.

Now, in the aftermath of the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, I returned to Pakistan—at President Musharraf's invitation—for a fifth meeting with General Musharraf to discuss the impact of the war on the future of Muslim-Israel relations, examine developments in Pakistani-U.S. relations, and further our talks.

In our discussions, I justifiably and firmly supported Israel's right—indeed its obligation—to self-defense and explained the gravity of the threat posed by Hezbollah and the Gaza terrorists with their rockets and missiles. Without diminishing that support in the slightest, I have learned firsthand that the conflicts had the unintended (though hardly surprising) effect of damaging Israel's image in the Muslim world, reducing the room to maneuver enjoyed by moderate Muslims committed to dialogue and moving towards reconciliation.

During separate talks with President Musharraf and Foreign Minister Kasuri in Islamabad I attempted over and over to mitigate that damaged image. I emphasized that it was Hezbollah that had dragged the countries into war: Hezbollah fired on Israel from among civilians, thus leaving Israel with a choice between failing to respond and risking the killing of civilians; international laws were neither violated nor ignored; and behind it all is the threatening posture of Iran.

PRESIDENT Musharraf listened closely but remained of the opinion that Israel should take into account the difficulties faced by moderate Muslim leaders. He also stated that Israel made a mistake by expanding the fighting beyond the Litani River in Lebanon.

I pointed out the gains Israel made in the war. I believe it is vitally important that Muslim leaders focus on Israel's gains and are not distracted by Hezbollah's propagandistic claims of symbolic victory.

President Musharraf said he would not be contributing troops to the expanded UN force now being deployed in Lebanon, although he held open the possibility of sending medical experts and engineers to assist in reconstruction. I proposed that he consider having Pakistan donate funds to the reconstruction efforts in order to help offset the Iranian influence.

My arguments were well received—there was even a balanced view of the gains recorded by Israel—but the fact remains that the Muslim “street” is seething and that Muslim leaders know it.

From what we are now witnessing, this may be less so in Lebanon itself, where Sheikh Nasrallah has virtually and in public apologized for setting off the conflict and where other confessional communities—

Sunni, Maronite, and even other voices among Hezbollah's fellow Shi'ites—are voicing critical judgments about what Hezbollah wrought. We are also hearing what must be seen as the beginning of a regional backlash, as Palestinians respond to the failed policies of continued terror, and the Crown Prince of Jordan publicly points to Iran—and specifically not to Israel—as the rising regional threat.

Nevertheless, Jewish-Muslim relations have been dealt an unavoidable, but not fatal, blow. I say “unavoidable” because Israel had to respond to rocket and missile fire and ambushes and kidnappings from both Gaza and Lebanon; I say “not fatal” because there remain many Muslim moderates committed to furthering dialogue and understanding.

IF anything, I am even more committed to the path that we have been on—standing up for Israel, for Jewish self-defense and honor, and against anti-Semitism wherever it may take its grotesque shape around the world.

And at the same time, and from the same platform, we have pioneered steps towards Muslims, including the heads of one of the most powerful Muslim nations on earth—Pakistan.

Does our access guarantee the specific results we all want? Of course not. But we have made it easier for President Musharraf to open dialogue with American Jewish leadership. By so doing, he legitimated this dialogue within Pakistan, and raised up the issue of Israel's fundamental legitimacy—an issue that lies at the heart of the current confrontation with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran.

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