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US losing 'war for hearts and minds' of Muslims

By Anwar Iqbal



MADRID: Thousands of people take part in a rally held on Sunday to denounce the Israeli atrocities in Gaza.—AP

WASHINGTON, Jan 11: The Gaza conflict appears to have widened the traditional divide in the United States between the left-leaning liberals and the mainstream politicians and has also dealt a severe blow to US efforts for winning the hearts and minds of Muslim masses.

For the past two weeks, anti-war groups have been holding protest rallies against the Israeli aggression almost daily. The biggest rally was held outside the White House on Saturday, which brought tens of thousands of people from across the United States.

Most of the participants were the same who come to all anti-war rallies. And the main organisers — Brian Becker, Cindy Sheehan, Ramsey Clark, Cynthia McKinney — are known anti-war activists.

What is new is the participation of a large number of Muslims and Arabs. Even a cursory look at the names of the organisations associated with these rallies show how the Gaza conflict has mobilised the Arabs and Muslims against the Israeli aggression.

The organisers of these rallies included the Muslim American Society Freedom, Free Palestine Alliance, American Muslim Task Force, National Council of Arab Americans, Al-Awda — International Palestine Right to Return Coalition, Council on American Islamic Relations, American Muslims for Palestine, American Muslim Alliance, US Palestinian Community Network, Iranian-American Friendship Committee and the Middle East Children's Alliance.



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And they were able to bring thousands of their supporters to the rally. Protesters waved Palestinian flags, wore keffiyeh — a traditional Palestinian headdress — and some even came in shalwar qamiz.

This marked a change in the attitude of the US Muslims and Arabs who traditionally stay away from political activities, preferring instead to focus on their businesses and professions.

“There goes Bush’s campaign to win Muslim hearts and minds,” said a protester who identified herself as a member of the group called Act Now to Stop War and End Racism.

“If you also look at the huge anti-war rallies in the Arab world, you can see that the US has lost the war for hearts and minds,” she said.

“I came because there are innocent children dying daily in Palestine. The American people need to know the truth,” said 13-year-old Razan Ali, a Palestinian-American from New York.

The protesters also marched to the headquarters of The Washington Post to protest “its hard pro-Israeli line”, before heading to the offices of construction equipment giant Caterpillar and military contractor Lockheed Martin.

The organisers pointed out that each Israeli tank in the Gaza invasion was followed by a Caterpillar bulldozer to flatten thousands of homes. Lockheed Martin manufactures the F-16 fighter jets that Israel uses to bomb targets inside Gaza.

But such protests have had little impact on the mainstream politicians in the United States who remain solidly behind Israel.

While the Bush administration last week abstained voting for a UN Security Council resolution which called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the US Congress overwhelmingly endorsed the Israeli plan for a military victory against Hamas.

The two moves gave Israel the support it needed to ignore the United Nations and continue its military strikes in Gaza.

Earlier this week, the US House of Representatives adopted a resolution, titled “Supporting Israel in Its Battle with Terrorist Hamas”, by 390 votes. Only five congressmen voted against it.

A similar resolution in the Senate, co-sponsored by Majority Leader Harry Reid and Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, was passed unanimously.



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