



The Middle East – Good News for a Change, out of Asia by
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Americans, accustomed to being at the center of diplomacy on the Middle East, might not pay a lot of attention to news out of Jakarta, Indonesia following a Jan. 31 meeting between Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and visiting Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. They should. In the face of the multiple crises in this region, the world desperately needs all the honest brokers it can get.

At a joint news conference, the two presidents announced a new initiative on the seething conflicts in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. The leaders said they hoped to call together a group of “like-minded” Islamic countries – by which they were clearly referring primarily to moderate Muslims – to develop new approaches to these parallel crises, crises that have reached directly into their two countries in the form of terrorism.

There are many reasons why this initiative should be welcomed, including by the United States. Indonesia and Pakistan have unimpeachable credentials in the Islamic world, and both suffer from domestic threats from small but active groups of violent Islamist extremists. The two are, respectively, the first and second most populous Muslim-majority countries in the world. Pakistan is a front-line state in the struggle with the residual Taliban forces and their supporters along and on both sides of the long Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Indonesia currently holds a seat on the United Nations Security Council and is a troop contributor to the UN “UNIFIL” peacekeeping mission in Lebanon. It was one of the few Islamic countries acceptable to Israel following the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. As part of Indonesia’s renewed international activism, Yudhoyono’s government recently offered its services in a number of conflict situations, including the North Korean nuclear issue and the Hamas-Fatah conflict in Palestine; this latest initiative fits that pattern. But it is the first to be taken jointly with another major Islamic country.

Interestingly, although both leaders are Muslims, neither comes directly out of Islamic political circles – both are former generals – but both are clearly aligned with moderate Islamic forces in their countries. Moreover, both are known to have positive relationships with the United States, but also to have differences with Washington over policy, including in the Middle East, and to speak independently on these subjects. So their voices carry weight in other Muslim capitals.

The voice of the moderate majority of Islamic countries has not been conspicuous in recent efforts to resolve the various conflicts in this region. The U.S. has urged friendly

governments to play more active roles in peacemaking, but without conspicuous recent success – perhaps because the U.S. is now so widely viewed as part of the problem. But there can be no question that Islamic countries, both in the immediate Middle East region and more broadly, have a major stake in the future of the Islamic world and its relations with other countries.

Of course, the initiative has no specific substance. The leaders offered no details at their press conference, and consultations will be required with other key governments, including Malaysia (currently chair of the “Organization of the Islamic Conference,” the international grouping of Islamic nations) and Saudi Arabia. Musharraf met with Malaysian Prime Minister Abdallah Badawi following his Jakarta visit, and Musharraf specifically referred to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia as another Islamic leader who was being consulted on the proposal. There are numerous obstacles and pitfalls in the road. But the fact that two prominent leaders of major Islamic nations have stepped forward to call for an independent (i.e., not U.S.-inspired) initiative to deal with the wide and still-spreading turbulence in their region has to be considered a promising development. And it should be welcomed as such by the United States and other interested Western governments.

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