

ISLAMIC SCIENCE

Scientists gather in Riyadh

Some two hundred Muslim scientists met at the University of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia last month for the Islamic Solidarity Conference in Science and Technology. Michel Chodkiewicz of La Recherche reports

A SCIENTIFIC renaissance in Muslim countries is one thing. An Islamic scientific renaissance is another. The former has begun, more or less successfully, in several countries; the latter remains to be done . . . if it has any meaning at all. For many Westerners, and for some Muslims this last point is far from being proved.

This doubt was manifestly not shared either by those scientists present in Riyadh for the "Islamic solidarity conference in science and technology", or by the Saudi authorities who had bestowed munificent patronage on the meeting. Several Saudi ministers participated and King Khaled presided at the opening session. For all of these there was no conflict between Islam and science, either in the principles ("Seek out science, be it as far away as China", the Prophet had said) or in the facts (the brilliance of the abbasid era was witness to that).

But complacent contemplation of past glories must give way now to serious planning for the future; the majority of the presentations and discussion during the conference were very down to earth. From problems of nuclear energy, naval construction and scientific documentation to those of higher education, the subjects tackled seemed to have two priorities: that of a better balance within the Islamic world between financial resources and manpower; and that of a very powerful drive for research and development, without which the Muslim world will never reach the "critical mass" above which it will be taken seriously scienti-

fically, economically and politically.

The first of these problems—that of finance and manpower—is particularly evident in Saudi Arabia with its crying lack of manpower. (During our stay the government announced that civil servants were henceforth permitted—even encouraged—to work for private enterprise in their spare time.) One of the unofficial aims of the conference was to profit by this gathering of scientists and to organise a reverse brain-drain. Amongst the 185 Muslim scientists present, 27 worked in the USA, and it was particularly to them that a call was addressed to come and pursue their work in the Islam world. But researchers or technicians working in the resource-poor manpower-rich Islamic countries (such as Pakistan and Egypt) were also tempted by the salaries offered in the oil states.

In the long run this brain-drain, internal to the Islam world, may well be dangerous. The balance between the "umma" interest (the Islamic community as a whole) and those often divergent interests of constituent states will be difficult to get right. Moreover, the scientists working in the non-Islamic world will only return to a satisfactory environment, stimulating professional contacts and so on. The creation of centres of excellence could help resolve this problem: to this end, a first step will be taken quite quickly, thanks to the founding of an Islamic Foundation for Science and Technology, probably at Taif, the Arabian city with the most pleasant climate, which has the added advantage of being near both Jedda, where a huge university is being built, and Mecca, site of another planned university.

On most aspects of the arrangements between Islamic countries, visitors, not representing their countries officially, could only express wishes. However, the creation of a permanent Conference Secretariat, entrusted to the direction

of the Rector of Riyadh University, will doubtless lead to some concrete action in the fields of, for instance, of documentation and scientific information (unifying the technical vocabulary, publishing scientific periodicals, organising seminars and symposia) and in collation of statistical data needed for planning.

Amongst the Conference's recommendations was the establishment of a consultative body comprising scientists and engineers working in military research and armaments. This initiative gave further substance to the already announced decision that several Arab countries had begun to develop a military-industrial community in Egypt. But to move out in this field from the Arab to the Islamic world will not be without its problems. It is worth noting that in his shrewd and much applauded speech at the final assembly Professor Fazlollah Reza, who was at the conference as a physicist but who is also Iranian ambassador to Canada, made remarks on all the resolutions adopted . . . with the exception of that concerning military consultation, which he passed over in silence.

● **Salah Galal writes:** A total of nine "Scientific Sessions" discussed specific issues. These included natural resources; industrial planning and growth; light and heavy industries and, specifically, chemical industries and manufacturing processes; university education, including its responsibilities towards industry, and technical education and training; research in universities and research centres; and translation and documentation.

It was three special "Projects Committees" which proposed the establishment of the Islamic Foundation for Science and Technology and the establishment of an Islamic Institution for the development of manpower, and produced the recommendations concerning armaments and military research.

RECYCLING

Paper chase

A recent publication from Friends of the Earth, *Ecological Paper Buying*, featuring a variety of recycled paper, urges the extensive substitution of waste paper for pulp as the raw material for paper making, in order to reduce Britain's huge annual pulp import bill. More waste paper, it says, could be used in newspapers, writing and printing papers and tissues, which currently take up 45% of the market.

The FOE spotlight a vicious circle, in which there is little demand for recycled paper because it is not widely available or insufficiently publicised, but not more widely available because there is little demand. In fact the matter is more complicated than that. As the Waste Management Advisory Council in the UK said in its first report last January, there would have to be an increase of 50% in the usage of waste paper by the early 1980s (compared to 1973-74) to save £100

million a year on imports given existing technology. The value of those imports was £270 million in 1974.

That means an extra 1.1 million tons of waste paper a year, which has to be collected and stored. The problems this presents, coupled with the problems of cyclical demand, seem to make a buffer stock necessary. One estimate of the finance involved in an excess stocks scheme is £10 million—a sum that is apparently not around at the moment.