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Middle East Politics Add Heat To Campaigns for Governor

By ROBERT HANLEY

TRENTON, July 19— New Jersey's gubernatorial campaign veered into the thicket of Middle East politics today as the two major candidates started feuding over the same Muslim group that was at the center of a quarrel between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Rick A. Lazio in the New York Senate race last fall.

The New Jersey dispute started quietly about a week ago when the Democratic candidate, Jim McGreevey, met with some rabbis and gave them two newspaper articles about a campaign speech his Republican rival, Bret D. Schundler, made in April to the New Jersey chapter of the American Muslim Alliance.

Mr. McGreevey's spokesman, Richard McGrath, said today that Mr. McGreevey had offered the clippings to show that Mr. Schundler was "outside the mainstream." But he said Mr. McGreevey did not ask the rabbis to use the clippings as grounds for anti-Schundler preaching in their synagogues.

News of the meeting made the front page of The Star-Ledger in Newark today, setting off a tit for tat rivaling those that are often a hallmark of New York campaigns. By day's end, both candidates had churned out statements expressing both their allegiance to Israel and their attention to Muslim concerns.

Mr. McGreevey trumpeted his past work with the Muslims and noted that for years he had attended Muslim religious services and civic affairs and spoken out against "anti-Muslim stereotypes." But Mr. McGreevey said he opposed a statement on the Web site of the American Muslim Alliance that called "for the withdrawal of all United States support for Israel." His statement did not mention Mr. Schundler by name.

Mr. Schundler, in turn, accused Mr. McGreevey of dividing voters and said one of his own goals was to meet with all religious and ethnic groups. "As a strong supporter of Israel, Bret clearly does not share every one of the American Muslim Alliance's beliefs," the Republican candidate's statement said, "but he will not apologize for holding a dialogue with its members to discuss his vision for New Jersey's future."

Mr. Schundler also accused Mr. McGreevey of being hypocritical.

In 1996, it turns out, Mr. McGreevey spoke at a leadership conference of the alliance's New Jersey

chapter in Woodbridge, where Mr. McGreevey is mayor. The chapter's former president, Ali Chaudry, said today that Mr. McGreevey also sponsored a resolution in the State Legislature that year praising the New Jersey chapter of the alliance for its efforts to educate Muslim Americans about the American political process.

"He may have forgotten us," Mr. Chaudry said, referring to Mr. McGreevey's resolution.

In response to the accusation of hypocrisy, Mr. McGrath said Mr. McGreevey was comfortable with the 1996 resolution because the alliance focused at the time on teaching Muslims about the American political process. It was not until 1997, Mr. McGrath said, that the national group became more outspoken about Middle East affairs.

In the midst of the argument, the Anti-Defamation League urged the candidates to calm down. "There are many other issues that are more urgent," said Shai Goldstein, the league's New Jersey director. "We do not believe it needs to be or should be a central issue of the campaign."

Mr. Goldstein called on each candidate to meet with Muslim leaders and voters, calling them "a crucial and constructive part of the American mosaic."

At the same time, Mr. Goldstein criticized the American Muslim Alliance because it had not denounced militant Islamic groups in the Middle East, like Hezbollah and Hamas.

The coordinator of the New Jersey chapter of the alliance, M. A. Siddiqui, said the group was "very disappointed" with Mr. McGreevey because the chapter was not involved in any anti-Israel activity.

In the Clinton-Lazio dispute last fall, Mrs. Clinton returned \$50,000 collected at a fund-raiser organized by the alliance because of what she called "offensive and outrageous" statements by its leaders, including an expression of support by the national president, Agha Saeed, for the right of Palestinians to use "armed resistance" against Israelis. Afterward, Mr. Saeed said he was not advocating violence or terrorism, but expressing a common view of Muslims in the Middle East.

Officials in both New Jersey campaigns said today that they did not believe they had received campaign donations from the alliance. Mr. Schundler would accept such donations, said a spokesman, Bill Guhl. Mr. McGreevey would return them, said Mr. McGrath, his aide.