[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

May 25, 2021

**Leading the Ummah**

Pakistan is the most important Muslim majority nation on the planet. This is distinctive in some ways, and a default and rather trite pole position in others.

The grave responsibility that both Pakistanis and Pakistani leaders must shoulder due to Pakistan’s centrality in the Ummah, however, is not a banal matter. It is central to the ethos of the Pakistani identity, critical to the values that need to shape public policy at home and instrumental for foreign policy and national security.

The self-image of the Muslim elite of South Asia, and especially those that backed and won the bid for a separate homeland, was one that located pre-independence India as an epicentre for global Muslim thought, leadership and politics. The creation of Pakistan was, for many of them, an affirmation of this stature. It would be Pakistan that would solve the three major crises that faced the Muslim world in 1947: the lack of Western education among Muslims, the occupation of Palestine and, most of all, the vacuum of Muslim leadership on the global stage that emerged in the first half of the 20th century. Seventy-five years since independence, and almost one hundred years since the fall of the Ottomans is a good time horizon to assess how Pakistan has performed as a leader of Muslim majority nations.

The short report card isn’t hard to guess. Pakistan was partitioned in 1971, fatally wounding the South Asian Muslim ethos that helped inform its founding. Pakistan’s treatment of minority religious and ethnic groups reeks of majoritarian inferiority complexes, rather than being fragrant with the self-assuredness of being a global middle power. Worst of all, Pakistan’s perennial economic challenges have convinced the intellectual, political and military elite of the country that its moral and economic deficits are adequate justifications for clumsy and obdurate public policy bereft of creativity and vision.

But school isn’t out yet. Palestine is not yet free. Social indicators for Muslims in education and gender massively trail most other major world religious denominations. And most Muslim majority nations, like Pakistan, are demographically peaking – our young outnumber our elderly. The future may not be bright, but it isn’t dark either. In fact, it is yet to be written.

Can a country that has devastating limitations at home somehow create a narrative of the potential of the Muslim world beyond its borders? Not easily. Public policy at home that doesn’t work will likely fail, even if it travels abroad in first class. But should Pakistan simply abandon its role abroad for the sake of assuaging the feeling of moral burden or compromise felt by its stinking elite? That one is pretty easy to answer. In many ways, the recent foreign affairs energy displayed by Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi signals both the incredible stock of political capital that Pakistan enjoys, and the degree to which this capital can be deployed in service of the people of Pakistan.

A note of caution. There is a difference between the sentiment of the people, and the sentiment of leaders. The people’s ‘feelings’ matter. They are central to politics and policy – whether nerds with laptops like it or not. Leaders’ feelings don’t matter much. If a leader acts rashly in a rush of adrenalin, it is most likely to do great damage to the cause of her or his people. In a 21st century political mode of production in which what we ‘Like’ has become so central to who our leaders are and what they say, understanding this distinction is crucial to the difference between failure and success for the people.

One of my favourite bits of survey data is from October 2019. In October 2019, you may remember, India’s illegal annexation of Occupied Kashmir was only a few weeks old and PM Khan’s first speech at the UN General Assembly was merely a few days old. Gallup Pakistan reported that, “nearly 3 in 4 Pakistanis (76%) are optimistic that Prime Minister Imran Khan’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly will play a pivotal role in resolving the Kashmir issue”.

The average Pakistani intellectual elite will scoff at this, “What do these simpletons know? Silly!”. But one’s depth of understanding of international affairs is hardly the issue here. The issue is that a vast majority of people believe that an UNGA speech that focused as much on climate change, as it did on Occupied Kashmir, could help resolve the Kashmir dispute. Perhaps the work of the woke 21st century intellectual is mostly to mock people and their feelings, but the work of leaders is to step above and beyond the temptation for mockery. The first step is to understand what signal such data points send, and the second is to frame public policy that draws its strength from its people.

Around roughly the same time as that Gallup survey, the Indian media was quick to pounce on another data point. “Pakistanis feel inflation, not Kashmir, is biggest problem facing them: Survey” boasted the India Today headline. The jab was obvious: Pakistani leaders should focus on lowering inflation instead of talking about Kashmir. Fifth generation warfare may have lost its appeal as a concept (thanks to the questionable conduct of this country’s fifth generation warriors), but this is a good example of what to look out for, when trying to understand the concept.

Of course, Pakistanis feel inflation is the biggest problem facing them. In the same survey, unemployment was the second biggest problem they claimed to face. Guess what was third? It was Kashmir. Above corruption, above loadshedding, above political instability and even above water! So, what policy lesson can we draw from these two data points? Tentatively, that Kashmir matters to Pakistanis and more importantly, that national leaders are seen to have the power to change the status of a dispute like Kashmir with a speech.

Now fast forward to Pakistan’s role in raising the issue of Palestine globally. Foreign Minister Qureshi’s whirlwind diplomacy over the last two weeks was dizzying. On a plane. In Istanbul. With other leaders. At the UNGA. On CNN. Back home. Should he have known better than to trip up on an avoidable anti-Semitic trope? Of course – but his trip does not get cancelled, and Pakistan’s role in Muslim-relevant issues does not get diminished. Not due to a gaffe. Not due to Pakistan’s limited economic autonomy. Not due to seventy-five years of failure. Why?

The short answer is gravity. Pakistan is a marketplace of 220 million young people located at the crossroads of the five civilizational junctions: Central Asian, Chinese, Hindu, Persian and Arab. Its military’s capacity to engage and win in 21st century battlefields is second to none. Its nuclear arsenal is among the safest and most well-researched on the planet. But, most of all, its people are invested in better outcomes for the people of Palestine and the people of Kashmir.

Now the bad news: PM Khan and FM Qureshi, or those before them, or those after them – none can escape the reality of domestic disarray. If domestic policy is not anchored in the pluralism of the Quaid, asking Europeans or Americans to be more pluralistic will fall flat. If Pakistan’s fiscal culture keeps offering a free pass to the elite, asking Chinese or Saudi benefactors will ring hollow. If broken and dysfunctional government departments, systems, processes, and officers are not fixed, through systemic reform, the list of issues that Pakistanis cite as problematic will grow larger and deeper.

The past two weeks of FM Qureshi’s time as foreign minister may be more of a learning experience than even the weeks of upheaval after the Raymond Davis scandal. Now, more than ever, he should take a greater leadership role in helping PM Khan identify and fix the weaknesses at home that hamper Pakistan abroad.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.