

Time to bridge the gulf

Islam

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

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AS the US gets more deeply mired in Afghanistan and Iraq, with little sign of improvement in the security situation, there has been increasing talk of efforts to bridge the gulf between the sole superpower and the world of Islam. In the US, many moderates ascribe the problem to the excessive reliance on force by the US, on the basis of doctrines founded on its undoubted military superiority.

Within the Islamic world also, there is rising concern over the tendency in the West to equate Islam with terrorism. The OIC summit last year adopted a resolution, presented by Pakistan, calling for efforts to promote and project "enlightened moderation" as the guiding principle of Islam.

The starting point of the debate is the terrorist attack of 9/11, which is compared to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 that brought the US into the Second World War. Having been attacked on its mainland, the event shattered the complacency the American people and government had developed about the security of the country. With terrorists, who are seen mostly as Islamic fundamentalists committed to jihad against the West, the war against terror is elevated beyond the destruction of terrorist groups to the elimination of Islamic extremism.

The neocons around President Bush believe that America has a right to eliminate Islamic extremism of the type that can threaten the security of the US and its close allies, notably Israel. The concept of Greater Middle East put forward by Bush envisages transforming the region from Morocco to Pakistan by securing client regimes committed to adopting western concepts of democracy and human rights.

The difficulties encountered after the occupation of Iraq in 2003 raised some doubts about the efficacy of pre-emption, but the surrender of weapons of mass destruction by Colonel Qadhafi in December 2003 was seen as evidence of success of the pre-emptive policy.

The persistence of insecurity and chaos in Palestine still raises questions about whether the US can win the hearts and minds of the Islamic world, if it persists in backing a hard-liner like Ariel Sharon in Israel. The notion is gaining growing acceptance that one can overcome terrorism on an enduring basis only by addressing the roots of terrorism, that lie in political and economic injustice.

The awareness that the West, headed by the US, and the Islamic world appear

launch the doctrine of pre-emption, to the detriment of the principles contained in the UN charter and international law.

US exponents of the tough approach to "militant Islam" see it as a serious threat to western interests. Speaking at the seminar organized in Beijing to mark the 50th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, in June, former secretary of state, George Schultz, justified resort to war against Islamic extremism by accusing it of having launched a worldwide movement against the West.

He alleged that the Muslim extremists wanted to expel the West from the Middle East, and establish a unified Islamic theocratic rule. In his view, the very existence of the international state system was under attack and the US had no choice but to engage in a bitter war

extremism. In the 1940s, the Jews in Palestine had formed the most aggressive terrorist groups. Some of the leaders of these groups became state leaders, such as Menachem Begin.

Terrorism and extremism have risen in several parts of the Islamic world because the Muslims happen to have been the main sufferers in the denial of fundamental rights, whether in Palestine or Kashmir. The Palestinian Arabs have experienced injustice and deprivation, and even the UN has not succeeded in enforcing implementation of its resolutions, because of the strong support of the US to the Zionist cause.

Similarly, UN resolutions on Kashmir have been violated, driving the Kashmiris to militancy. The solution lies not in perpetuating injustice through

force, but in addressing the political and economic injustices, and implementing the principles of democracy the West advocates.

If the menace of terrorism is to be addressed effectively, its underlying causes need to be removed. There is a tendency in the US to treat the Islamic world as a monolithic entity, whereas it is perhaps the most diverse religious community, with enormous differences between distant parts. The one feature shared by the 1.3 billion followers of the faith is poverty and backwardness, and here they form an integral

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There is increasing opposition to this approach not only in Europe but in the US itself, where the need to pursue a dialogue with the Islamic world is being recognized. The Muslim world itself has recognized the need for concerted efforts to reassure the dominant West that Islam stands for peace and justice. Even within the US, Muslims have taken many initiatives, to present the real message of Islam, whose very name means "religion of peace."

Though President Bush also acknowledged Islam as one of the great world religions that had brought many benefits to humanity, his main stress, in this election year, is on his vigorous pursuit of the "war on terror." He claims that the war on Iraq was not only justified, but had also achieved a breakthrough in persuading Col. Qadhafi to renounce his militancy.

The beginnings of interaction between the West and the Islamic world have started, through seminars and symposia, some of them organized by the US state agencies. There have been interesting exchanges between the two sides in Pakistan as well. In addition, the Pakistan government has followed up the president's initiative to project Islam as a force for "enlightened moderation", and to revitalize the OIC so that it can be more effective in projecting Islam properly, and in promoting unity and cooper-

part of the developing world. A majority of political regimes in the Islamic world are not democratic in the western sense, but progress in the political field is linked to economic progress, and specially to education.

The process of building bridges of understanding is certainly the need of the times, but such a process must not be based on the assumptions that Islam preaches extremism, or that western concepts of democracy need to be enforced in order to eliminate the threat from terrorism. The US has enjoyed worldwide esteem for the role it played after the Second World War in creating the UN, and in facilitating the rise of colonized peoples in Asia and Africa to independence.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union as a restraining force in 1989 has left it in the position of absolute military superiority. Since then, a small number of neo-conservatives have advocated US hegemony of a type that constitutes a negation of principles of international law. Even the economic system in the age of globalization is marginalizing the developing countries.

President Bush has unfortunately identified himself with the doctrine of pre-emption which caters to the interests and perceptions of a minority in the US. While pursuing the path of building bridges between civilizations we must respect the right of each civilization to

reliance on force by the US, on the basis of doctrines founded on its undoubted military superiority.

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The awareness that the West, headed by the US, and the Islamic world appear to be again involved in a clash of cultures gives rise to the view that somehow both are at fault. Certainly, the terrorist attack on the US on September 11, 2001, did take place. But the US response has been not only to intensify the use of force against Islamic countries, but also to legitimize resort to state terrorism by Israel in dealing with the Palestinians, by characterizing their movement for rights guaranteed in UN resolutions as "terrorist."

President Bush, who had started his term by adopting a unilateralist approach to international affairs, has taken advantage of the terrorist attack to

worldwide movement against the West. He alleged that the Muslim extremists wanted to expel the West from the Middle East, and establish a unified Islamic theocratic rule. In his view, the very existence of the international state system was under attack and the US had no choice but to engage in a bitter war

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part of the developing world. A majority of political regimes in the Islamic world are not democratic in the western sense, but progress in the political field is linked to economic progress, and specially to education.

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President Bush has unfortunately identified himself with the doctrine of pre-emption which caters to the interests and perceptions of a minority in the US. While pursuing the path of building bridges between civilizations we must respect the right of each civilization to follow its value systems, consistent with the five principles, that include those of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful coexistence.

The US has to return to its moral leadership by abandoning excessive use of force in a world whose resources should be used to improve the life of all its citizens. The dialogue with the Muslim world should be based on concern for each other's sensitivities and legitimate rights, rather than on imposing western value systems as a panacea for the whole world.

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A recent seminar on the subject of building bridges between the US and Islam heard some very candid views from Pakistani intellectuals on the way the dialogue has to proceed. If the neocon assumption is followed, that Islam is militant and needs to be reformed, and that ruling regimes have to conform to western concepts of democracy and human rights, we are going to get a strong backlash. The problem of terrorism is not a manifestation of Islamic