**New narrative needed to counter Islamophobia**

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Four members of a family were killed in Ontario recently. Their attacker hit them with a pick-up truck. It has been declared a targeted killing. It is “[b]ased on information collected during the course of the investigation, we believe that this was an intentional act,” London Police Chief Steve Williams told the media. “We believe the victims were targeted because of their Islamic faith.”

Asena Karipek, in her article, ‘Portrayals of Jihad: A Cause of Islamophobia’, puts forward her theory that “a popular explanation that every American who watches the news probably knows is jihad. Jihad has come to be perceived as ‘holy war’ in American media”. Jihad is largely misunderstood and misrepresentation by certain groups of the very notion of Islam, coupled with taking certain verses from The Holy Quran and Hadiths out of context, has led to a complete misunderstanding of the religion by those who are not Muslims, generally speaking. Instead of targeting the miscreants, this has led to targeting those who follow this faith. Misconceptions about Islam are mainly rooted in skewed perceptions based on lack of study of the religion first-hand.

Looking at Indonesia, the first Bali bomb on October 12, 2002, leading to deaths of 202 citizens including foreigners, terrorism issues started rising. A number of incidents added fuel to fire, holding the religion culprit, not the miscreants twisting the religious beliefs. These included bombing of JW Marriot Hotel in 2003, JW Marriot II and Ritz Carlton (2009), Jimbaran/Bali II (2005) and Sarina (2016) among others. The stage was set for Islamophobia.

Since 9/11, many media houses and individuals went into overdrive to besmirch the religion itself. In an age where communication barriers are down, and technology allows news to travel around the world at the speed of lightning, media worldwide needs to question if it has played a part in spreading Islamophobia.

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Not only the mainstream media like newspapers and TV — in this age of social platforms being popular, accessible and cheap — the flow of information is fast. Spins are quick to gain roots. Fake news, deliberate twists serve vested interests. The Internet is a favoured platform of ‘research’ and ‘studying’. This allows those who so wish to plant stories, thoughts and incorrect narratives at times couched in half-truths and at others couched in shameless mistruths for mass consumption.

The ‘political representation’ within media has led to fanning hatred instead of intelligent and thorough analysis of events. Generally speaking, exceptions of course are very much there. The media does not only present reality; it has created perceptions by overriding reality to become reality. Choice of words, which are loaded, lapped up by the masses — become the ‘new reality’.

Even when miscreants indulge in acts of terrorism, these are framed as sanctioned by Islam instead of man-made calculations aimed at fulfilling their wrongful objectives. This is beautifully explained in this excerpt from Ratna Istriyani and Yuliatun:

“Islam is seen as a religion of violence and embraces the ideology of violence, so it is considered cruel, archaic and irrational. Thus, Islam is always connected with bombings, mass murders and terrorism. Though the terminology Islam refers to salvation or peace. Violence, radicalism and terrorism are only done by a handful of people who bring a bad name to Islam. For that reason, implications against Muslims. No wonder if then appears excessive anticipatory actions against the Muslims.”[Qijas, Volume 4, Issue 2, August 2016].

The political postures taken by the media and various interest groups, create over-the-top and exaggerated ‘realities’ diverting from the core issue aimed at giving all Muslims a bad name. It’s comparable to insisting that the Ku Klux Clan ideology is embedded in the DNA of all white Americans. Nothing can be further from truth.

The reality is that a majority of Muslims reject strongly any kind and form of terrorism. Research was conducted in 2016, the most extensive to date, on the views held by British Muslims. There was an outright rejection of terrorism by a whopping 90 percent; while 3 percent were neutral and 5 percent not knowing. Elsewhere, research in other countries like Kazakhstan, Iraq and Azerbaijan yielded similar and/close results.

Interestingly, women in Islam are projected as victims of the religion. New narratives need to be put in place. The logic by those supporting Islamophobia is flawed. To take the instance of women alone: why is an uncovered woman permissible but not a covered one? Each religion approaches these issues differently. This does not give the right to another to wrap a covered woman in the garb of a victim. In Christianity, for example, nuns of the Roman Catholic Church cover their heads and chests. As for the hijab, a feature published in The Conversation explained it thus: “Certainly, the headscarf is tied to religion. Many women who cover talk about it as a way demonstrating their submission to God and a constant reminder to hold fast to Islamic beliefs such as being honest and generous to those in need.”

A new narrative means redefining definitions, documenting facts on Islamophobia and then putting forward a new narrative.

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