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**Tackling Islamophobia**

The recent provocative statements of French President Macron and other French officials have once again created an impression among many Muslims that the West is against the second largest religion on the earth, triggering demonstrations across the Muslim world and sporadic attacks in Austria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere.

The situation prompted Pakistan and some other Muslim countries to take up the case of Islamophobia before an international audience that does not seem to comprehend the roots of Muslim anger towards the West.

Ties between Muslims and Christians were cordial during the early centuries of Islam, turning sour with the eruption of crusades and worsening during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The colonization of Muslim states and the creation of Israel created hatred in the hearts of Muslims. The threat of communism forced Muslims and the West to fight this ‘red monster’ collectively, with Washington and London urging Muslims to wage a jihad against the ‘red infidels’.

The demise of the USSR emboldened the jihadis, who blamed the West for the genocide of Muslims in Bosnia, persecution of the faithful in Chechnya, the oppression of Kashmiris by India, and the subjugation of Palestinians by Israel. Islamists exploited the situation stoking anti-West feelings across the Muslim world but unfortunately, the Western media described these extreme Islamists as the representatives of all Muslims, unleashing lethal propaganda against the faith. The economic crisis in the West provided an opportunity for far-right forces to blame Muslims for the economic hardships, which resulted in violence against Muslims as well. Muslim extremists also targeted ordinary civilians in the UK, France, Germany, and several other countries. All this created the impression that Muslims are intolerant people. The images of Muslim radicals in Western media fanned anti-Islam feelings.

Various public opinion and surveys also reflect this anti-Islam bias. According to a Gallup survey of 2016, “Fifty-two percent of Americans and 48 percent of Canadians agree that the West does not respect Muslim societies. Among all the different religious population in the US, about one-half of them have some kind of prejudice towards Muslim Americans. The alarming section of the survey was that about 1/3 of those who have no prejudice towards Muslims had unfavorable opinions about Islam.”

Muslims living in Western societies view this with concern. During the same survey, eight in 10 Muslims had views that Western societies should abstain from discrediting the Quran and Islam overall and 6 in 10 believed that the West should not discriminate and portray them as hostiles because about 48 percent of the American Muslim population experienced racial or religious discrimination. Muslims assert that it is not only Muslim extremists who are using Islam to carry out attacks but white supremacists are also indulging in such activities using a different ideology – but they are never called Christian extremists. This assertion seems to carry some weight..

Unfortunately, these anti-Muslim feelings are not confined to a few semi-literate Trump’s supporters or far-right political workers. Some leaders in the Western world are also resorting to Islamophobia to boost their support. For instance, French President Macron recently stated that Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world. This statement could have been tolerated but the outrageous action of displaying the caricatures of the Prophet (pbuh) could not have been ignored. The action infuriated millions of Muslims, lending credence to the narrative of the extremists that the West is against Islam and has been waging a crusade against Muslims.

The West should realize that it is Muslims that are the biggest target of militants’ attacks. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a US think tank, among the total global terrorist attacks, about 85 percent of them occurred in Islamic countries, and 73 percent of them were carried out in the Middle East, North Africa, and other Muslim states. ISIS, which is believed to have the support of Western powers, is responsible for 37 percent of attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. According to the same report, the number of deaths in Muslim countries from terrorism was 43 percent higher than that of the US and Europe. Around 90 percent of the human cost in seven of the ten countries most affected by terrorism were Muslim states.

The West needs to realize that terrorism has no religion. Robert Pape, the author of ‘Dying to Win’, concluded that half of the suicide attacks between 1980 and 2003 were carried out by secularists in response to some kind of military occupation.

Most Muslims do not subscribe to the ideas of extremists. According to research from the University of Maryland, 77 percent of the Arab population believes in the democratic system of government, and only 34 percent in the Shariah system of government. So those Muslims who talk about a rigid interpretation of Shariah, vowing to impose it on the Western world constitute a tiny minority among the 1.8 billion Muslims.

The West should avoid fanning anti-Muslim feelings based on their ideology. This could be one of the best ways to battle not only Islamophobia but far-right extremism as well.

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