**[Worsening trend](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768826/worsening-trend)**

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A US Congressman last week introduced a resolution calling for the House to recognise Islam as a major religion in an effort to foster more respect for Muslims within America. That this was needed is a tragic reminder of the global increase in Islamophobia. As a Muslim-majority state, we may consider these external issues that are emotive, but with little direct local relevance. But the domestic ramifications of global Islamophobia deserve attention.

There is no doubt that Islamophobia is a shocking and worsening global trend. The recent events in Sweden and Denmark recall the UN special rapporteur on religious freedom’s 2021 finding that Islamophobia had risen to epidemic proportions; for example, anti-Muslim incidents in the UK doubled between 2012 and 2021, and 30 per cent of Americans surveyed in 2017 viewed Muslims negatively. In 2021, the UN was moved to observe the first International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

The notion of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim sentiment in the West is also being broadened to include shifting attitudes in the Global South, with the term equally evoking incidents such as Israeli forces’ raids on the Al Aqsa or the shuttered doors of mosques on the outskirts of Delhi following communal violence.

Pakistan’s response is often multifaceted, balancing its position as the second-largest Muslim majority country in the world and the need to manage hurt religious sentiment at home. This usually takes the form of diplomatic ire and the organisation of local protests. We saw this last month in response to anti-Muslim incidents in Sweden, with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

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There is, however, one element missing from this approach — a revision of Pakistan’s counterterrorism strategy. This is important because there are inevitable links between global Islamophobia and domestic militancy. Islamophobic incidents, and the emotion and outrage they provoke create a fertile recruitment ground for militant groups, and validate violent extremist responses, which are framed as proportionate in the face of growing onslaughts against Muslims.

Sadly, this is a vicious cycle that is all too familiar to Pakistanis. More than 680 people have been killed in 232 militant attacks this year already. The attacks recall the dark almost-decade from the mid-2000s onward in which over 66,000 Pakistanis are said to have lost their lives, with targets ranging from security forces to police, tribal leaders to politicians.

The uptick in militancy in Pakistan is largely driven by developments in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, and the more conducive atmosphere for the outlawed TTP and IS-K. But militant narratives continue to rely on a demonisation of the West and other governments that fail to stem anti-Muslim sentiment and attacks. In these narratives, the democratically elected governments of Muslim countries are often portrayed as complicit, failing to do enough, or kowtowing to the West by continuing to work within secular frameworks (the OIC, for instance, is calling for the UN to condemn Quran desecrations in Sweden and Denmark in the context of UN Human Rights Council resolutions regarding religious freedom and the hate speech limitation to freedom of expression). Not without precedent, this very logic was evoked by the IS-K to justify its recent attack in Bajaur against the JUI-F, with the former accusing the latter of hypocrisy for donning a religious identity yet cooperating with the government and military.

Pakistan’s approach to the militant threat continues to be largely securitised, with Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari recently threatening military action in Afghanistan if the Afghan Tali­ban failed to clamp down on cross-border terrorism. More holistic counterterrorism approaches that include the creation of educational and employment opportunities, inclusive local government and compelling counter-narratives — including those that acknowledge the hurt caused by global Islamophobia to stem radicalised and violent responses — remain in draft form.

Incidentally, a broader counterterrorism approach focused on inclusion and prosperity would also stem the tide of asylum seekers on Western shores where immigration is a highly politicised and toxic issue. This would be the start of a virtuous cycle that would benefit everyone.

Acknowledging the interconnectedness of global and regional trends will help develop more holistic approaches that tackle both global Islamophobia and domestic militancy. And there is cause for hope: the US this year reported the first decline in anti-Muslim incidents since it started tracking the data in 1995, likely due to the Biden administration’s more inclusive messaging. There’s still a long way to go but a concerted effort has to be the first step.

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