**Israel-Palestine conflict: Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia**

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As the dust from the recent Israel-Palestine skirmish settles, the new government of Israel led by Naftali Bennet seems even more hawkish in approach than its predecessor. Naftali is committed to annexing more land to make it an official part of Israel. Interestingly, this year in May, he mistook Al Shifa hospital of Gaza with Shifa Hospital Islamabad, Pakistan and called it a hub of Hamas. Such recklessness from leaders makes it evident that common people are certainly not immune to believing in and propagating fake news and conspiracies. For instance, the air of Pakistan remains filled with conspiracies regarding Jews. Israel – the only parliamentary democracy in the Middle East – is not recognised by Pakistan and has no official relations with it. As some Middle Eastern countries normalised the relations with Israel, Pakistan too tried to create an environment for the recognition of Israel in the population by having some journalists try to develop a soft corner for the Jewish state. However, the attempt failed because the general population sees Israel not through a political lens but a religious one.

The Middle East is a volatile region where conflicts frequently erupt but are seldom resolved. At the heart of its sensitivity is the Israel-Palestine issue. It is a fact of history that in no conflict one side is completely right and the other completely wrong. Every stakeholder has some legitimate interests. In this conflict, both parties to the conflict believe in different ideas for statehood. For instance, the historian Yuval Noah Harari writes in 21 Lessons for 21st Century, “In the early 20th century, a favourite Zionist slogan spoke of the return of a people without a land (the Jews) to a land without a people (Palestine). The existence of the local Arab population was conveniently ignored.”

Attack on journalists and media houses is a violation of international humanitarian law

The armed conflict between Arab nations and Israel ended in the annexation of more and more land by the latter. And even now Arab nations are not actively involved. Some have normalised relations with Israel. Palestinians are on their own or at the helm of organisations such as Hamas, which the US and most of its allies consider a terrorist organisation.

The Israel-Palestine conflict divided the world into two poles: pro-Palestine and pro-Israel. Those who support one side refuse to accept any wrong by the other. And why would it not happen? People, especially from regions far from the battlefield, have every reason to become hardcore deniers of what their opponents firmly believe in. The modes of information are hijacked. As Israel attacked the 11-storey Al-Jalaa building having international media offices including Al Jazeera and Associated Press in the Gaza Strip, the building collapsed and turned into dust and debris. Attack on journalists and media houses is a violation of international humanitarian law.

On the other hand, in the Islamic world, people have started to blame Jews for controlling most of the international media. Some even started to glorify Hitler. This is absolutely cruel. But in Third World, where literacy rates are quite low and many are unaware of history, most do not even know what the holocaust actually was. The public discourse does not involve much talks on the history of world wars, especially relating to Jews. After all, Muslims had little to do in the persecution of Jews in Europe. Pakistan’s foreign minister blamed Jews for controlling the media and having “deep pockets” in an interview with Bianna Golodryga at CNN. The anchor intervened and called this “an anti-Semitic remark” while such words are not interpreted as anti-Semitism in many parts of the world.

Before the rise of Hitler in the Weimar Republic, conspiracies started to erupt that Jews controlled the continent’s finances. Such conspiracies let to anti-Semitism in Europe and ultimately to their persecution. With the historical background, it does sound like an anti-Semitic slur considering the context. But, in the regions that were largely uninvolved in the persecution of Jews, the connotations of the terminologies are different. The west must realise that the values at one place can be different from those at another.

For example, the memories of the holocaust reduce people in the west into tears because it is remembered in the public discourse. For Palestinians, it is the Nakba. As the right-wing ultra-nationalist Israeli protestors marched in the streets of Jerusalem some time ago, they chanted inflammatory slogans such as “Death to the Arabs” and “I hope your villages burn”. One man even shouted “A second Nakba is coming” referring to the 1948 ethnic cleansing of more than 700,000 Palestinians. Such sentiments from the people whose ancestors faced severe persecution in the holocaust is startling. What is a normal comment for some people can be hugely offensive for others.

For instance, in Pakistan – a country where there are no Jews – most of the clerics in Friday sermons call for the destruction of Jews, and the term “Jewish conspiracy” is associated with everything that sounds new to the prevailing social order. It is offensive for westerners but has sadly become a norm in Pakistan. Anyone who tries to question this perspective in the country is labelled a Jewish agent pronto. Some matters that are considered relatively normal in the west are treated with capital punishment in Pakistan. Blasphemy of the Prophet (PBUH) is intolerable for Muslims and many cases have been reported where the so-called lovers of the Prophet went as far as murdering the accused in cold blood. The whole country gets jammed with protests over incidents such as Charlie Hebdo publishing cartoons. The protestors would chant slogans that translate to “there is only one punishment of the blasphemer: beheading”. Interestingly, they would call the Prophet (PBUH) an epitome of mercy while they themselves would even resort to murder and utter violence in his name – a thing Prophet (PBUH) himself did not endorse. Non-Muslims in the west would find it hard to understand why Muslims become so emotional at such things. Sometimes the connotations associated with a phenomenon matter more than the thing itself.

Just like blasphemy causes a swift backlash in Muslim societies, invoking statements relating to the holocaust hurts the Jews. To strive for a world that is open for all, people need to understand the cultural contexts of other people. For that, everyone should learn to respect others’ values and not resort to things that are offensive for others.

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