**The heavy cost of faith-based conflicts**

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Faith-based conflicts have largely shifted from Europe to the [Middle East](https://dailytimes.com.pk/533241/middle-east-fault-lines-triggered/) and South Asia. These regions can learn from the European experience. We know that religion and politics are a deadly mix and that religious nationalism can complicate matters. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the Iran-Iraq war, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and India and Pakistan are examples.

We know that faith-based conflicts, once started, are very difficult to stop because of the strong feelings they awaken. Today’s opportunistic leaders cynically use the slogan of God and the country. It is a divisive tool to stay in power. Religious nationalist groups globally share a common attribute. They actively encourage discrimination against religious minorities, even if it leads to chaos and disorder. Even when appealing to a sense of national community, they have the opposite effect of dividing societies.

The deadly nexus of religion and nationalism has left a trail of violence and bloodshed in history. In the 16th and the early 17th centuries, religious nationalism pitted Catholics against Protestants. In recent times it has Jews and Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites, Hindus and Muslims, battling on opposite sides. The conflicts have worsened with struggles for power and claims on natural resources.

One would have expected that the Europeans would learn from the devastation wreaked by the Thirty Years’ War. The War had dreadful costs for central Europe, with around 20% of the German population being killed. Leaders intended the treaty of Westphalia that ended the war to be a comprehensive resolution for religion-inspired conflicts. But the support of German Protestants in the rise of Hitler wrought more devastation on Europe.

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Still, Europe has enjoyed relative peace from religious wars since the end of the Second World War. The exception is the savage religious conflict in the former Yugoslavia. There is hope that Europe has put its bloody history of religious conflicts behind it. Arguably, an important reason for the reduction in religious conflicts is the diminishing influence of the Church on the affairs of state and the strengthening of secular democratic institutions.

Some additional factors have undeniably given impetus to the religious-nationalist forces in the region. One, secular nationalism espoused by early leaders in Israel, India, and Pakistan has given way to religious-nationalist policies. Second, religious nationalists have won over territorial nationalism propagated by past regimes in Iraq and Syria. Third, a clerical Shiite dictatorship replaced the despotic government of the Shah of Iran. Sometimes, even supposedly good intentions can have negative consequences.

Take, for example, the British government’s Balfour Declaration supporting the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. The Balfour Declaration stated that a Jewish Homeland would not prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.Later, the suffering endured by European Jews during the Holocaust swayed world opinion, which eventually led to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.Or, drawing lines on an empty map, leading to the creation of artificial states such as Iraq and Syria with simmering religious and ethnic tensions without getting the consent of the people. Or, the religious-nationalist passions unleashed in South Asia in the bid to settle the conflict between Hindus and Muslims.We know how badly those arrangements worked out.

But the current struggle against religious nationalism in India offers a forward. India’s secular nationalism, eclipsed by Hindu majoritarian nationalism, is fighting back. Indians across class, ethnic, gender, caste, and religious lines have taken to the streets in a struggle against imposing a Hindu nation. The land of Gandhi and Nehru may yet uphold its democratic, secular principles under grave threat from regressive forces.

Regrettably, it is too late for Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, who have long succumbed to the downside of religious nationalism. The dire warnings on the outcome of India abandoning its minorities, coming from Pakistan’s leaders and commentators, appear insincere and self-serving. Pakistan’s poor record in the treatment of its minorities or those accused under its unjust blasphemy laws hardly qualifies it to offer advice or criticism.

Ultimately, common sense has to prevail even if genuine tolerance may prove elusive for centuries. Against all the odds, sometimes half-measures are better than none. The way forward is a global secular community with religion removed from politics. The state can serve as a neutral guardian of religious and human rights. Muslim societies, in particular, should accept the principles of separation of church and state, democracy, human rights, religious pluralism, and civil society. A tall order, but the alternative is to live with the perils of religious nationalism.

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