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IFTIKHAR AHMAD analyses the reasons behind the intolerance in our societ
meet the challenge of containing it

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The increased religious extremism in our country during the last several years has brought unrest and discredit to the nation rather than bringing any good. While drifting the country to be declared a terrorist state, it has plunged it into further chaos and problems that would take perhaps several years to come out from. Mushrooming of Jehadi outfits in several colors, with fervent zeal for Jehad, has destabilised the entire structure of our society. These outfits have misguided the youth towards destruction and devastation, the result of which we have seen in Afghanistan where even the dead bodies of Jehadis (not necessarily terrorists) were maimed, hacked, kicked, spit upon, torn to remove gold teeth by their own Muslim compatriots right under the eyes of civilised nations. Is it all normal? Do we have any direction in this religious extremism, which is just, viable, beneficial and attractive to some? Should we continue with it or contain it. These are some of the irritating questions that continue bothering us today. The confusion is getting even thicker as the variety of interpretations and jumbled ideas continue pouring out.

No one can dare denying the spirit of Jehad. But, what is Jehad? Is it to abhor other creeds and kill the people of all alien faiths? Is it to take the danda (long stick), or Kaleshnikove and start challenging the superpowers that have all kinds of power; military, economic, diplomatic?

The jehadis have made it even more complicated. Why do they have to fight those who don't want to come into their fold or want to do differently? Why do they think that they only have got the right to live and practice their faith while others don't? The paradox is even more visible in our own ranks. One jihadi group or religious sect hardly tolerates the other and is out there to destroy it. When we don't have tolerance among ourselves then how could we expect tolerance from others? And therefore we can't blame them for their right to defend themselves.

Islam is a religion of peace, moderation and tolerance, which embodies nothing but noble teachings and precepts. It emphasizes on building a viable and prosperous society. It encourages propagation of its ideas through peaceful means and enviable deeds. It focuses on impressing non-believers by action and practice, not by terrorizing them through violence and killing. But our clergy has forced upon the youth self-carved religious interpretations to misguide the immature young minds.

Instead of channeling energies of our jihadis into constructive activities to strengthen our nation with knowledge and technology like the other strong nations who browbeat us with their invincible power, our clergy lured the uneducated and unemployed youth to the misguided paths. Lacking knowledge, reasoning and logic, they became easy prey to their hands. These shortsighted jihadi groups saw only what they wanted to see, ignoring all the ground realities surrounding them. Several thousands young men obsessed with the passion of Jihad joined the ranks of Taliban and got perished. Intolerance, parochial thinking and intransigence to adapt to the changing world

The rational thinking demands that our clergy infuse a spirit in the young minds to develop their national resources, learn modern knowledge, become equal or at least come closer to the advanced nations of the world in knowledge and technology to see them eye-to-eye, while maintaining our true religious beliefs and strictly following them

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eventually brought their downfall in a very unceremonious way. Had they been a little pliant they could have saved not only their regime but also the lives of several thousands to serve Islam for a prolonged time and in a better way.

If Jihad is the name of fighting those with alien faiths then how about poverty, hunger, ignorance, corruption, injustice and misery surrounding us? Is it not Jihad to fight against these monsters, under which we are suffering for so long? Not a single jihadi outfit, despite having substantial funds, cared to open a university or hospital or an orphanage or a shelter for those young men or children whom they wooed to become jehadi and gave klashinkove in their hands to fight? Not a single chief cleric (except the ones who are returned soon) in our country went for Jihad, for which they clamor so much, to get the honor of martyrdom. They know only how to exploit the poor, unemployed and the immature minds for their own vested interests.

In today's world, economy has gained pivotal importance. Only good economy and sustainable pace with the changing world can give us the due share in the world, if we want to survive with it. Resisting it because of our bigoted dogmas and creed we are bound to live or die in caves. The rational thinking demands that our clergy infuse a spirit in the young minds to develop their national resources, learn modern knowledge, become equal or at least come closer to the advanced nations of the world in knowledge and technology to see them eye-to-eye, while maintaining our true religious beliefs and strictly following them.

It is a big challenge, but not impossible. Several examples can be quoted of those who not only excelled in their professional fields but kept strict tenacity to their Islamic beliefs, in spirit and practice. The example of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan maybe apt to cite here who not only made our country a nuclear state, by virtue of which we are able to stand today to our arch enemy, but is contributing appreciably to education while adhering to Islamic teachings. Isn't it therefore desirable that our clergy also channel the energies of our young minds into activities that could build a stronger nation to face the modern challenges and not to be browbeaten by the US or any other power? Our clergy would do a great service to Islam and the nation by promoting education, both modern and religious, through pooling their resources and skills. ■