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**Clarifying perspectives, defeating terrorism**

With the situation in Afghanistan now reaching a climatic point as the US finalizes its troop withdrawal, Pakistan will inevitably have to deal with a possible influx of militants and an increase in terrorism in the region.

The question to be asked is precisely what Pakistan’s stance on terrorism and groups such as Al-Qaeda is. Do we really believe that Osama bin Laden, who created Al-Qaeda as an organization which killed thousands of people in nations around the world, was a martyr or a hero of some kind? While the US action in lifting him off Pakistani soil is of course controversial, this does not change the fact that Pakistan must decide clearly, once and for all, if Bin Laden and others like him are heroes or villains.

The matter is also important to the country’s social fabric. Over the years, thousands of people have named their sons Osama, recognizing Bin Laden as a hero. The trend seems to have partially faded away. We hope this also suggests some change in thinking – though this is far from clear. We also know that in the past Pakistan has played a role in defending at least some terrorist networks, partially out of loyalty to them given their role in the battle against the Soviets during the war which began in 1979.

But today, Pakistan is a state which must redefine itself. This is important both so that it can escape international isolation as well as to alter its image before the mirror of the globe. The paid influencers who appear on YouTube to highlight Pakistan as the ideal tourist location are not enough for this purpose. We need a clear political vision and the capacity to make these feelings known so that people too can understand the dangers terrorism still presents the country.

It should not go unnoticed that in its most recent statement, the FATF once again asked Pakistan to act against key militants who had conducted terrorist offences in other countries. The reference was to men like Hafiz Saeed, the man India believes is responsible for the 2008 siege of Mumbai. Saeed remains at Kot Lakhpat Jail, but in the past he has received bail time and again as have other individuals. A fair trial could help make things more open for the world and for Pakistanis. The Laskhar-e-Taiba has long been an organization known for its philanthropic work at home, but suspected of terrorism overseas, notably in India.

The prime minister must also realise that all world leaders, no matter what their personal opinions, need to think carefully before they speak in public. Pakistan already has a situation where views on terrorists are extremely mixed. There are many people who see the US as an enemy. This is totally logical given the role it has played in the region. But this does not mean that foes of the US, such as the Afghan Taliban, are friends. It is perfectly possible that they can both be enemies of the people of Pakistan and others who live in the region. This reality needs to be built into a definite structure of thought and put before people.

The US drone attacks on targets in Pakistan and Afghanistan may have caused more harm than good. Certainly, they laid the seed for yet more terrorists to rise up and take up arms. But one set of wrongs does not make other sets right. The Pakistani Taliban inflicted terrible horrors in Swat and in other parts of the country. The massacre at the APS in Peshawar in 2014 can never be forgotten by any of us. Neither can the 2016 bomb attack during Easter at a park in Lahore which caused mass death, many of the victims a part of the Christian minority in the country who had stepped out to celebrate the day.

Ehsanullah Ehsan, the man who claimed responsibility for the APS attack as well as the shooting of then teenager Malala Yousafzai in 2012, mysteriously escaped from custody in 2020 and has never been recaptured. The parents of the APS victims continue to demand he be brought to justice. It appears no one is willing to hear their voices or comprehend their pain.

We need to turn things around. Malala, and other individuals who speak out for the rights of vulnerable groups, have been repeatedly vilified by elements within the country. The insistence that Malala is a Western agent and has been one since she was around 11 years old and bravely wrote a blog under a pseudonym describing the Taliban horrors against girls of her native Swat is widespread. Perhaps officially, with our leaders and other people of influence speaking out, we need to determine who the true heroes and defenders of our country are. Malala is not alone. Other people including scientists, human rights activists, Aitzaz Hasan, the young boy who died while preventing a suicide bomber from entering school as well as others who have been involved in offering education to deprived children, giving the destitute shelter and food such as Abdul Sattar Edhi and now his son Faisal and wife Bilquis must be elevated to the role of persons that the country looks up to.

If we look towards Osama as a hero, we will never escape the mindset of extremism that has gradually crawled into nooks and crannies across our country, leaving minority groups and sects in constant danger and from time to time attempting to force women into hijab. The prime minister’s recent misogynistic suggestion that women are raped because of what they wear certainly did not help. Did he think of the five-year-old girls who suffer rape? Of seven-year-old Zainab, after whom a bill has been named, and of other young victims as well as those who suffer rape quite regardless of what the wear? The truth should be that women must have a right to choose what they wear without the peril of rape hanging over them. Adapting to social norms is a choice, but failing to do so should not lead to a heinous crime being committed against them. The same is true of rapes within homes.

All these considerations need to be put on the table. We must know what Pakistan is as a country. Can we recover from the horror of the Zia years, the horrors that came before and after that under different dictatorships – and convert ourselves into a democratic country which truly accepts diversity, human rights and its own constitution? This is the challenge for our future and will have a huge role in determining how Pakistan is seen both by the world and its own people.

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