

Pakistan's Stance on the 'War on Terror': Challenging the Western Narrative

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Abstract:

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 allowed the United States to reframe its pursuit of global hegemony as 'War on Terror' which is styled on Islamophobic rhetoric and action. To counter this campaign of Islamophobia, Pakistan has adopted a consistent and well-planned stance. The essential contours of Pakistan's stance on the 'War on Terror' are the need to: condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations; defend Islam and Muslims; support the right of self-determination of oppressed people particularly, Palestinians and Kashmiris; respect international law; address the root causes of terrorism; and promote peace and harmony among cultures, civilizations and followers of diverse religions all over the world through promotion of a robust dialogue and criminalization of defamation of religions.

Introduction:

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 were a welcome pretext for the United States to reframe its pursuit of global hegemony as 'War on Terror.' The war sparked US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, ramped up drone strikes and other special operations in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, accelerated diplomatic, military and economic support for the US strategic partners, in particular, Israel and India, and fostered proxy wars for regime change in Libya and Syria. These military and political moves on the pretext of the 'War on Terror' have significantly increased American hegemonic control over the energy rich Central Asia and the Middle East.

US hegemonic designs also sought to style the political landscape of its allies around a system of American ideological and cultural values which speak of 'an ideological tension' and 'clash of civilizations,' portraying such notions as 'Islamic fundamentalism,' 'Islamic radicalism' and 'Islamic terrorism' or

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‘totalitarianism’ versus democracy, human rights, liberty and freedom of expression. This value system has been deeply entrenched within the Western political landscape through a constant reference to the ongoing ‘War on Terror’ that generated the culture of fear of Islam and Muslims (commonly referred as Islamophobia) all over America, Europe, Australia and Canada.¹ The prevailing culture of Islamophobia provides a framework for the US to mobilize Western public opinion against Muslim World to further its global hegemony. In effect, the US-led ‘War on Terror’ has put a strain on relations between the West and the Muslim World, which may presage a wider conflict with dire consequences for regional and international peace. It is against this background of discord and instability that Pakistan is keen to challenge the Western narrative of the ‘War on Terror’ to bridge the perception gap between the West and the Muslim World and to promote global peace and harmony.

This paper seeks to analyze the basic contours of Pakistan’s stance on the US-led ‘War on Terror.’ It mentions that Pakistan strongly rejects the way the US and allied countries define terrorism and narrow it down to Islam and its followers or Muslim resistance movements in occupied territories. From Pakistan’s perspective, the US-led coalition’s counter-terrorism narrative sows the seeds of endemic confrontation between cultures and civilizations, thereby posing threats to global peace and harmony. Pakistan’s stance centres around a comprehensive strategy and prescribes particular solutions: need to address the ‘root causes’ of terrorism, respecting the international law in letter and spirit in the ongoing ‘War on Terror,’ criminalization of religious defamation and hatred, and encouraging a robust dialogue between Muslim World and the West to advance the cause of peace and global harmony.

Pakistan’s Stance on Terrorism and the ‘War on Terror’:

Terrorism is Crime: Pakistan considers “all acts of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable regardless of their motivations.”² It asserts that terrorism has “no creed, culture or religion”³ and disapproves violence and terror in the name of religion, ethnicity, faith, value system, culture or society.⁴ From Pakistan’s perspective, terrorism is not an ideology but a method of warfare that may be used by individuals, groups or even states for personal, political, criminal and propaganda purposes in any culture or society. Examined closely, this stance refutes the extreme form of Western propaganda that describes Muslims as ‘fundamentalists,’ ‘radicals’ and ‘terrorists’ or ‘potential terrorists,’ falsely implying that Islamic teachings are violent too. Pakistan challenges the legitimacy of this claim by stating that there is no justification for the usage of terms such as ‘Islamist/Islamic terrorists’ and ‘Islamist radicals’ as these terms assign collective responsibility to Muslims and are absolutely unfair and unacceptable.⁵ In that sense, Pakistan draws attention to three points. First, killing of innocent civilians by some fringe militant groups or handful individuals to serve their personal, political or criminal ends does not represent the views of the overwhelming majority of peaceful Muslims who strongly

condemn terrorism. Many Muslims, who have taken the path of armed resistance against foreign occupation and political repression, reject the killing of innocent people. Their armed struggle is directed exclusively at legitimate foreign military targets. To reinforce its view, Islamabad points out to the terror acts undertaken by non-Muslim terrorist groups and individuals that have been equally callous in their disregard for the ultimate sanctity of innocent human life. A case in point is the terror attack on a youth camp outside Oslo in 2011 by an extremist Norwegian Christian, Anders Breivik, which killed nearly 80 people. Former Pakistan Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar described this terror incident “as clear manifestation that terrorists have no religion, no nationality and no values. They are bloodthirsty criminals and should be treated as such universally.”⁶

Second, Pakistan argues that an extremely small group of Muslims, who take the view that even killing of innocent civilians to fight the ‘adversaries of Islam’ is justified under the rules of Jihad, are not better acquainted with Islamic teachings which categorically forbid against the taking or harming of innocent human life including one’s own. Islam sanctions to take up arms in self-defence such as protecting the freedom to propagate the Islamic message, defending homes, land and people when the enemy attacks them, helping free the oppressed people from tyranny and aggression and establishing peace and justice. The person, who undertakes Jihad, is well aware that he is waging a war that is noble, “just, and honourable in its objectives, means” and ends. In essence, the doctrine of Jihad is defensive not offensive.⁷ Even in the defensive mode of armed struggle, Islam orders to protect noncombatants (especially, old men, women, and children) and captives at all costs. Moreover, Islamic teachings prohibit Muslims against harming the enemy by treachery; destroying cultivated fields, gardens and livestock; setting fire to inhabited areas; and demolishing buildings.⁸ Such clear rules of warfare aim at justice, compassion and forgiveness and go in line with the principles of contemporary international Humanitarian law. In this context, Pakistan considers it a grave injustice to equate Islam with violence. It upholds that Islam is a religion of peace, compassion and brotherhood and terrorism is a “complete antithesis to Islam’s humanistic outlook and noble values.”⁹

Third, Islamabad claims that some foreign powers support militant and terror groups to defame Muslims and advance their own geo-political agenda. Pakistani strategic community argues that the intelligence agencies of the foreign powers such as US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Black Water (now Xe Worldwide Services) and Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) have infiltrated and financed some militant groups to destabilize Pakistan.¹⁰ It is important to note that the “debriefing sessions” of Raymond Davis—the CIA agent in Pakistan, who killed two Pakistanis in Lahore—shocked the army about the devastating consequences of the CIA’s covert operations in the country, specially targeting Pakistan’s nuclear programme that remains a constant thorn in the side of America, India and Israel. A senior police official revealed that Davis had established “close links” with

twenty-seven extremists. He was involved in recruiting youth from Punjab for the militant organizations “to fuel the bloody insurgency” to give credibility to the American notion that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons could fall in to the hands of extremists or Al-Qaeda fighters.¹¹ Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) responded to such threats by restricting intelligence cooperation with Washington.¹²

The dominant narrative in Pakistan now is that Washington is playing a ‘double game’ with Islamabad by supporting some extremist and terrorist groups in collaboration with Indian and Afghan spy agencies under the garb of fighting terrorism. The underlying intent is to defocus Pakistan army by engaging it all over in the ‘War on Terror,’ thereby raising the costs of the war and forcing it to align its policies in Afghanistan, Kashmir and South Asian region with those of the US.¹³ Indeed, Pakistan’s successes against militancy and terrorism have come at a heavy cost. More than 9,000 personnel of the security forces have rendered the supreme sacrifice and more than 49,000 innocent civilians have fallen victim to terrorism.¹⁴ The economic costs of the ‘War on Terror’ for the period 2001-2014 are nearly US 102.51 billion dollars.¹⁵ Pakistan’s policy makers tend to believe that the US led ‘War on Terror’ will continue to exact a heavy toll both in economic and security terms as long as the US forces retain long term security presence in Afghanistan and provide support to militant groups engaged in war against Pakistani state and its institutions. Referring to such support as criminal, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations (UN), Ambassador Masood Khan stated that those responsible for such heinous crimes must be exposed to defeat terrorists: He went on to say:

“The foreign hand that masterminds and guides [dastardly terrorist] attacks must also be exposed in order to disrupt, degrade and dismantle the terrorist networks targeting Pakistani civilians and installations....Killing innocent civilians is not a doctrine. It is a crime plain and simple. That is why; it should not be sublimated by associating it with religion, nationality, race or ethnicity.”¹⁶

Condemn Terrorism in All Its Forms and Manifestations: Pakistan condemns terrorism in “all its forms and manifestations.”¹⁷ A brutal form of terror is state terrorism which scars the lives of millions of people, in Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, the Philippines and elsewhere. In the post 9/11 environment, the international community increasingly views state terrorism as legitimate. In fact, the West has wilfully ignored the state terror, in particular, perpetuated by Israel and India against, respectively, Palestinians and the Kashmiris.¹⁸ While Pakistan condemns any violent acts by militant groups against non-combatant civilians in Indian-administered Kashmir and Israel as criminal, it also urges the international community to pay attention to the phenomenon of state terrorism which is far more destructive and far more brutal and repressive than non-state terror perpetuated by an individual or a group. Pakistan’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Shamshad Ahmad declared:

“Those who employ the state apparatus to trample upon the fundamental and inalienable rights of people are also perpetrators of terrorism.....While a just cause cannot be ennobled by the killing of innocent civilians; neither can the civilized community of nations condone the use of force for the repression of the legitimate cause of a people.”¹⁹

The West, especially United States has shown double standards in dealing with these disputes. Since 1948, Israel has sanctioned terror to confiscate and expand Palestinian territory. Israeli forces wilfully kill and injure Palestinian civilians including children, human rights activists, journalists and peaceful protesters by means of excessive and brutal force, demolish Palestinians’ homes and other property, impose severe restrictions on their movement and arbitrarily detain them.²⁰ Yet the US gives its military, diplomatic and financial support to Israel’s continued war crimes and genocide of Palestinians. This is because, in Middle East, the US regards Israel as its “offshore military base”,²¹ which can be used to exert its political hegemony and control of lucrative oil resources in the region.

Similarly, in South Asia, American policymakers recognize that pressuring New Delhi to end state terrorism and to come to negotiating table to resolve Kashmir dispute will be counterproductive for the US geo-political and economic interests in India. Furthermore, Washington seeks a strategic alliance with New Delhi to ‘contain’ China’s rising power in the world. Therefore, Washington never raises concerns or condemns the massive Indian military presence in Kashmir valley which is meant to terrorize freedom-loving Kashmiri people to submission and subjugation. How distressing it is then, that whilst Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine and some Kashmiri resistance groups such as Hizbul-Mujahedin (HM) active in Indian-administered Kashmir condemned for armed resistance against foreign occupation, the terror of the Indian army in Kashmir and the Israeli forces in Palestine goes unnoticed by the West. Pakistan, therefore, shows its disappointment on the silence of the West with regard to state terrorism and demands the international community to persuade Israel and India to end their repression and brutal occupation of Palestine and Kashmir respectively.²²

Most importantly, there is a growing frustration among Pakistani public as well as policymakers on the inaction and failure of Muslim rulers and Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)—which represents fifty-seven states—to play a major role in the resolution of these disputes. In this regard, condemning Israel’s military assault in July-August 2014, for unleashing colossal destruction upon civilian population of Gaza strip, which is already shattered by illegal Israeli blockade since 2007, Pakistan’s Senate passed a resolution calling it “disturbing that Muslim countries and the OIC are unmoved” by Israeli state terrorism.²³

Distinguish between Freedom Struggle and Terrorism: Capitalizing on the events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ Israel and India deliberately characterized all acts of resistance—including those directed exclusively at legitimate Israeli and Indian military targets—as terrorism with full backing of the West. Thus, Palestinian and Kashmiri people, determined to resist Israeli and Indian brutal occupation, are hunted down and killed, injured or detained as ‘terrorists.’ Pakistan regrets such attempts as “a method of demeaning all those legitimate struggles and wars for independence, which, throughout history, had been met with pride.”²⁴ It asserts that such resistance is just, legitimate and noble struggle endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolutions and a necessary response to Israel’s and Indian colonial terror. Equating a legitimate freedom struggle with terrorism, is therefore, unjust. Islamabad has steadfastly supported Palestinian and Kashmiri people’s legitimate quest for the realization of their right to self-determination.²⁵

Respect International Law while Combating Terrorism: Pakistan declares that the ‘War on Terror’ must be waged within the framework of international law. It raises concerns over the methods and means of US-led counterterrorism operations which demonstrate the will to fight terror with most brutal and repressive forms of terror. Since 9/11, United States has launched 94,000 air strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya against “suspected terrorists”,²⁶ mostly killing civilians or using “indiscriminate weapons”, which is a grave violation of international law. In its zeal to revamp Greater Middle East, the US has trained and armed militias in the ongoing ‘War on Terror’ to trigger ‘regime change’ in Libya and Syria. Providing training, arms and financial support to these insurgents flies in the face of international law as well as counterterrorism mission. In this context, Pakistan considers that an open ended ‘War on Terror’ without the sanction of the UN and the use of armed drones violate human rights and is unlikely to secure lasting results for counterterrorism.²⁷

However, Pakistani government is perceived to be complicit in US drone campaign. Despite repeatedly denouncing the US drone campaign, several Pakistani officials have granted tacit approval to United States to carry out attacks on suspected ‘high-value targets’ in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as part of Pakistan’s counterinsurgency strategy.²⁸ The implicit understanding gave Pakistan’s government the right to protest against the drone attacks as “breach of Pakistani sovereignty and international law,” in order to keep Pakistani people satisfied.²⁹ Nevertheless, there is a growing understanding among Pakistani officials that the use of armed drones results in casualties of innocent men, women and children leading to alienation, resentment and psychosocial trauma among the residents of tribal areas. The militant groups have successfully exploited the tribes’ resentment and rage at drone attacks to increase recruitment of youth to sustain and spread insurgency against Pakistan.³⁰

Many Pakistani officials now hold that Americans who kill innocent tribal people during drone strikes are war criminals by all moral and legal standards. In May 2013, Peshawar High Court declared in a landmark decision that US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas are "naked aggression against the country" and constitute "war crimes."³¹ The court ordered the government to raise the drone issue at the UN Security Council and to take all possible measures to put a stop to attacks including severing ties with the US and, as a mark of protest, deny all logistic and other facilities provided to the US in the context of 'War on Terror.'³²

Because of legal orders and mounting political pressure, Pakistan has directed its representatives to raise the issue at international forums for the cessation of drone attacks in order to avert further civilian casualties. To that end, Pakistan succeeded to present and secure adoption of a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2014 that called on all countries to ensure that the use of armed drones complies with international law, "in particular the principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality."³³ Pakistan's diplomatic efforts, coupled with a sincere political will, can accelerate an end to the drone attacks in the country.

Address Root Causes of Terrorism: A recurring theme in Pakistan's stance on the 'War on Terror' is that combating extremism and terrorism warrants a comprehensive approach, i.e. to tackle the root causes of the problem. The West is relying instead exclusively on targeting militants and religious extremists as opposed to understanding the repressive environment and underlying conditions that feed these criminals. Islamabad, therefore, considers it futile to combat militancy, terrorism and extremism without addressing their root causes. It emphasizes that terrorism is essentially "a symptom of an underlying malaise, and that malaise is desperation, hopelessness and alienation."³⁴ In that sense, Pakistani leaders claim that the Afghan Jihad of 1980s, the Gulf War (1991), Serb atrocities and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia and the angry reaction of the US-led coalition against Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan following 11 September 2001, led to the total polarization of the Muslims against the US and its Western allies. Moreover, the US-led invasion and operations in Iraq without the sanction of UN Security Council; West indifference to the plight of Kashmiri and Palestinian people; the American hostile domestic responses against Muslims; inhuman treatment of Muslim detainees, mostly of them innocent, at the detention centers in Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), Bagram (Afghanistan) and Abu Ghraib (Iraq); angered and provoked the Muslims across the globe. These disputes and injustices are the root causes, which united Muslims to show solidarity with the notion of 'Muslim Ummah' and identify themselves with 'Islamic Movements'³⁵ against a perceived imperialist world order.

Moreover, for nearly three-quarters of a century, Western governments and their corporations have plundered and exploited natural resources in Muslim

countries to maintain liberal international order by supporting repressive client regimes. However, the last couple of decades have witnessed an unprecedented political awakening among Muslims to challenge their own oppressive Muslim rulers to demand political and economic reforms.³⁶ Nevertheless, the West has manipulated recent Islamic political movements such as Arab uprisings to shatter Arab unity and to dismantle the Middle East region for their own ends. For instance, the US and its allies have provided training, arming and funding to insurgents to overthrow Libyan and Syrian governments to promote democracy in the region. These insurgents now operate under the banner of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Ironically, the Western officials, who previously lauded these insurgents for overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya, now consider them a destabilizing factor in the Middle East. However, the West shares most of the responsibility for the destabilization of the region by creating and nurturing insurgent groups to serve its interests. In essence, it is the misguided and aggressive American policy towards Muslim World that has spawned more terrorism and militancy than it has eliminated— from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, to Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria.

It is in this context that Pakistan stresses the need to address root causes — unresolved disputes, political exclusion, economic and social injustice, poverty, illiteracy and foreign occupation. It maintains that the fight against terrorism must be multifaceted. The battleground must be political, economic and social as well as military to deprive the militants and extremists of any legitimacy. To that end, Pakistani policy makers emphasize that ‘winning hearts and minds,’ is key to deter militancy and terrorism.³⁷ Surely, this would require the West to limit its social and politico-military engineering efforts within Muslim countries under the banner of the ‘War on Terror.’ Rather, the West needs to engage with the Muslim World in a constructive political dialogue for the resolution of the conflicts.

Besides, Islamabad calls Muslim governments to take necessary measures to expand the educational and employment opportunities for youth so that they could play a vital role in the promotion of *peace* within their *society*. It asserts that focusing on education to promote tolerance and communal harmony and encouraging participation of Muslim youth in socio-economic development helps meet basic human needs, builds community resilience and prevents terrorism.³⁸

Most importantly, the focus point of the ‘root causes’ debate centres around continued strife and instability in Afghanistan. From Pakistan’s perspective, the peaceful solution to this conflict is regarded as a way of defeating the militancy and bringing peace and stability both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, fourteen years of US-led military operations, war crimes and political manipulation in Afghanistan have failed to subdue the Afghan Taliban insurgency which is now transformed into a national liberation war against the US occupation. Despite Taliban’s status as an indigenous Afghan resistance

movement, Washington still sees Afghan Taliban through the same lens as Al-Qaeda, to justify a long-term US security presence in Afghanistan.³⁹ Islamabad, on the other hand, sees political marginalization of Afghan Taliban as a root cause to continued instability in Afghanistan and the region. It insists that improving security in the region is directly linked to the political participation of “moderate” faction of Afghan Taliban. Islamabad is in favour of an Afghan led reconciliation process comprising all Afghan factions including Afghan Taliban. Pakistan policy makers assert that peace and stability in Afghanistan will have a direct salutary effect on the security of Pakistan.⁴⁰

Avoid Confrontation between Cultures and Civilizations: Pakistan repeatedly draws attention of the international community to promote harmony between communities, cultures, civilizations and faiths. Pakistani leaders tend to believe that the growing Islamophobia across the United States and Europe is rooted in developments that arise from the ‘War on Terror,’ indicating a growing confrontation between cultures and civilizations. No doubt, following the 11 September 2001 tragic attacks on the World Trade Center (New York) and the Pentagon (Washington), and 7 July 2007 bombings in London, Muslims are increasingly seen as “an enemy within” in Western societies.⁴¹ For instance, the New York City Police routinely coerce Muslim immigrants, arrested for minor infractions, to become informants to spy on their community.⁴² This discriminatory practice reflects that the Muslim community has remained inherently suspect ever since 9/11.

Moreover, Muslims face direct and indirect forms of discrimination in access to housing, employment, education, goods and services across the West. Attacks against Muslim individuals including women and children, their homes, shops, mosques and Islamic centers are also on the rise. Furthermore, extremist politicians in the West stimulate Islamophobia and present themselves as guardians of a crumbling Western society and a faltering Western economy against the perceived threat posed by Muslims. By doing so, politicians may aggravate religious and cultural tensions as part of their strategy for gaining political power. For instance, in 2010, a number of American politicians began calling for a ban of Sharia Law in US courts. Afterwards, several Federal States proposed legislation that would ban the application of Sharia Law in US state courts. Similarly, the leader of Dutch Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders campaigns to tax Hijab, ban the reading of the noble Qur’an and deport back all Moroccan citizens of Muslim immigrant background in the Netherlands.⁴³

Pakistan strongly opposes the anti-Islam and anti-Muslim agenda of Western extremist politicians and demands that politicians should exercise tolerance and restraint when discussing issues relating to Muslims and Islam to avoid friction between Muslim and non-Muslim societies. In September 2011, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister attempted to alert the policy makers in the West by

equating these politicians as “hate mongers” who should be prohibited “to pursue their evil agendas under the garb of freedom of expression.”⁴⁴

Indeed, the increasing anti-Muslim discourse is becoming more mainstream, systemic and institutionalized across the West. Many European governments have also adopted “special, harsh measures” to deal with Islam, as these governments perceive the centrality of Islam in the lives of Muslims as a threat to European secular values.⁴⁵ For instance, in Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands, Muslim girls have been banned from wearing headscarves in schools. Poland and Denmark have brought in laws that ban the Halal slaughter. In France, Marine Le Pen, leader of far-right National Front Party, aims to prevent schools from offering special Halal lunches to Muslim students in the 11 towns where her party won in local elections, saying such arrangements were contrary to France’s secular values.⁴⁶ Such discriminatory policies indicate restrictions on civil liberties and legitimize acts of religious hatred. As a result, Muslim communities in the West feel increasingly alienated and excluded from mainstream politics and many Muslims develop extremist tendencies towards the West.

There is also a venomous campaign going on against Islamic beliefs, its scriptures and holy personalities, much of it manifested from Western mass media and internet. The printing of the blasphemous Danish drawings about Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) in 2006, the burning of the noble Quran under the supervision of American pastor, Terry Jones, on 20 March 2011, and [provocative video uploaded on YouTube in 2012](#) that disrespected Islam, [escalated the tensions between the Muslim world and the West](#). Pakistan described these incidents as “deliberate attempts to discriminate, defame, denigrate and vilify Muslims and their beliefs” and a serious “set-back” to efforts at promoting global harmony.⁴⁷ In that sense, Pakistan cautions Western policy makers to avoid a confrontation with the Muslim world and presses for a genuine and honest dialogue between different civilizations to comprehend each other grievances and promote peace and global harmony.⁴⁸

Islamabad has also relentlessly advocated effective cooperation with the UN to stand up against negative stereotyping and discrimination of Muslims. Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2013, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sent a strong signal to international community that Islamophobia is unacceptable and may presage ‘clash of civilization’:

“Islam is a religion of peace, compassion and brotherhood. And yet most insidious form of contemporary racism in the name of religion is on the rise. Peaceful Muslim communities are profiled and subjected to discriminatory practices. Their faith, culture, holy personalities and scriptures are under attack. Stereotyping of Muslims as extremists and terrorists must stop. We must all use the influence and reach of the United Nations to

avert a clash of civilizations and promote harmony among followers of diverse religions, all around the world.”⁴⁹

Criminalize Religious Defamation and Hatred: Since 1999, Pakistan has made consistent calls for global legislation to criminalize defamation of religions and religious hatred as a means to promote human rights and social, cultural and religious harmony. Pakistan feared that defamation of religions could result in violence against Muslims to a level similar to the Second World War anti-Semitic violence led by the Nazis in Europe.⁵⁰ So, a legal protection against defamation was considered essential to defend Islam, and other religions. In this regard, Pakistan has played a major role on behalf of the OIC in pushing the ‘Combating Defamation of Religions’ Resolutions forward at the UN Human Rights Council and securing adoption of these resolutions on annual basis. It also seeks to draft an international protocol against “defamation of religions.” However, the US, European countries, Canada, Australia and some Latin American countries fiercely oppose a legal framework that would criminalize religious hatred, on the pretext of protecting human rights and freedom of expression. Under US pressure, support for the OIC resolution began to dwindle over the past few years — even within the OIC. In 2010, Pakistan had to work overtime in Geneva to ensure a simple majority.⁵¹ In March 2011, Pakistan introduced a compromise resolution on behalf of the OIC, which Omits any reference to ‘defamation’ but encourages countries to address and combat “advocacy of religious hatred against individuals” that amounts to incitement to hostility or violence.⁵²

Nevertheless, Islamabad has continued its campaign for an international law against religious defamation and hatred against the Western criticism that such law would restrict freedom of expression. Pakistan challenges this Western notion on the following grounds. First, Pakistan claims that exercising the individual’s right to freedom of expression carries with it special responsibilities: to promote tolerance, peace, cultural and inter-faith harmony in a democratic society. From Pakistan’s view, if freedom of expression is so recklessly exercised that it sows the seeds of discord among adherents of different religions through falsehood and ignorance, and foster an environment conducive to religious hatred and violence then it is “not a service to humanity but an enmity towards it.”⁵³ Islamabad, therefore, demands that the UN and other international organizations must seek a law that bans hate speech which intends to stir up hatred and violence.

Second, from Pakistan’s perspective, hate speech against Muslims and Islam amounts to “the worst kind of anti-Semitism and bigotry.”⁵⁴ It is a remarkable irony that the West does not extend the notion of the freedom of expression to anti-Semitism and denial of Nazi Holocaust. But the West ardently invokes freedom of expression when satirizing the tenets of Islam or defending those who are targeting religious symbols and Prophet of Islam (Peace Be Upon Him). In fact, anti-Semitism is considered as racism, discrimination, incitement

to violence and, therefore, is punishable by laws in many European countries. In this context, Pakistan has accused Western countries of blatant double standards following their discriminatory responses to the blasphemous YouTube video and Danish cartoons, which were in contradiction with the way many European countries criminalize anti-Semitism and denial of Holocaust.⁵⁵ Pakistan demands that the Western countries should enact effective laws to protect religious sentiments of the Muslims on the lines of laws against anti-Semitism.

Finally, Pakistan demands that Islamophobia must be acknowledged as a contemporary form of racism and be dealt with as such.⁵⁶ The West does not consider religious hatred and discrimination as racism. However, Pakistani policymakers state that Islamophobia falls clearly within the ambit of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

Contemporary racism against Muslims in the context of ‘War on Terror’ is based on religion, culture, economic and nationality and other kinds of social mold of ‘inferiorization’ which facilitate the exploitation, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination against Muslims. It seeks legitimacy and protection under various pretexts such as combating terrorism and freedom of expression. In fact, one of the most vivid signs of racism is exercising the right to express oneself freely to stigmatize a religion and its adherents. Incitement to racial or religious hatred and attacks on belief systems expressed in vicious language and practices can seriously damage the self-esteem of two billion Muslims and ranking them as ‘inferior’ to those of the racists. This fact brings the anti-Muslim rhetoric and acts within the purview of ICERD, which centres on protection of the individual and collective ability of human beings to sustain the codes and beliefs they regard as integral to their identity and dignity.⁵⁷

ICERD prohibits incitement to racial discrimination and acts of racially motivated violence as well as dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred. It also calls for prohibitions on public authorities or institutions to promote or incite racial discrimination.⁵⁸ In this context, Pakistan calls for laws to strike a balance between freedom of expression and freedom from racial discrimination. This narrative underscores that there will have to be, in a civilized and democratic society, some restraints on freedom of expression and defamation of religions must be one legitimate restraint to prevent racial discrimination against Muslims. Failing which, the continuation of frictions, discord and conflict over these issues will undermine civil society in Muslim as well as Western countries.

Conclusion

Pakistan views an expanded US-led ‘War on Terror’ modeled on a sophisticated propaganda campaign of Islamophobia as a serious concern for discord between Muslims and the West and a grave threat to international security, peace and prosperity. To foster harmony among cultures and civilizations and to bring

peace and security to South Asian region and beyond, Pakistan has adopted a consistent stance which challenges the Western narrative and calls for the implementation of a comprehensive and coherent strategy. This strategy looks inwards to Muslim governments to bolster economic and social development in their countries. It looks outward to the West, specially United States to review and resolve its anti-Muslim and anti-Islam policies and to play an effective role in the resolution of political disputes and conflicts confronting the Muslim World.⁵⁹ In particular, the peaceful resolution of Kashmir and Palestine disputes and Afghanistan conflict and combating religious hatred and violence will be vital to defeat the scourge of militancy and terrorism and to bring global peace and harmony.

End Notes

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