

## **THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**

The jitters caused by rising religious extremism are now being felt in different parts of the world. The death and devastation which the phenomenon has caused in West Asia is engulfing the other parts of the world as well. Moreover, the displacements and forced migration of lakhs of people from their lands and habitat to the foreign countries in alien and unfamiliar social landscapes is compounding the tragedy. The menace is gradually spreading in parts of South and South east Asia and parts of Europe. The US has had to face the problem in the shape of 9/11 tragedy.

The immediate consequences of this phenomenon are generally felt at two levels. One, the devastation which it causes in terms of human lives and destruction of cities and towns of the countries. The disappearances of historical sites and vandalizing the invaluable ancient cultural treasures is aimed at creating a disconnect with the past. This aspect is not accidental; rather it is one of the objectives of the extremist fundamentalist strategy. Second aspect, which again is intertwined with the strategy, is foisting the groups of people against each other. The influx of refugees and unwanted groups of people putting the resources of a particular state under strain is the painful result of the militant extremist operations. The other aspects aside, the host populace feel threatened with the arrival of groups of people with their specific traditions and customs. This situation sometimes results in unpleasant social reactions and responses.

History offers lessons which even most of the intelligent people refuse to learn. In the realm of international affairs, the short term strategic objectives have been guiding the states and nations.

They deem any strategy and whichever device, legitimate to defeat their opponent. The rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism owes much to this approach and strategy. The US effectively used this particular device in training and brainwashing the so called *Afghan Mujahideen* in Afghanistan in seventies which was aimed at driving out the then USSR from that country. The US, Saudi Arabia and many other countries provided the funding for the project and Pakistan was entrusted with the task of indoctrination of *Mujahideen* cadres. This indoctrination program provided the first formal and structured capsule, blending the religious doctrines with distortions, in preparation and usage of religious fundamentalism and extremism in pursuing the strategic objectives. Ironically, when media in the US enquired from the then US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski as to what would these *Mujahideen* do after the Russians had vacated the Afghan soil; his mechanical response was that ' *they would go to their home*'. The later events reveal that they did not go to their home; rather they sprouted as *Taliban* and *Al-Qaeda*.

The new formations which are currently playing havoc in West Asia and spreading their tentacles in other parts of the world have further articulated their ideological components with great finesse to impress their target groups. They are targeting the young and vulnerable minds and drawing them to their ranks. Their leadership appear to be concentrating on sectarian divisions in societies to build their cadres. However, they are keenly tracking down other divisive components in societies which exist due to varied factors. These divisions may be based on differential theological interpretations, social and political dissatisfactions, economic deprivations and malfunctioning of systems. The projection of dreams of a better life and a 'heaven hereafter' provide a great appeal for the vulnerable minds. The rising levels of violence in Iraq, Syria and Libya involving large number of young persons not only from these countries but from the other

countries as well provide an illustration to this gruesome paradox. In some cases the situations are acquiring further complexities. In Turkey, where a confrontation has already been going on between the Government and the Kurd separatists, the emergence (or arrival) of ISIS on the scene has created a new complex situation. In the complex web of global politics it is difficult to unravel this mystery.

It needs to be realized that it is a long struggle to deal with this growing menace. It is equally important to note that it can not be won by force alone. It is a battle for the hearts and minds which should require a lot of effort at various levels. The immediate task should be addressing the distortions which are introduced to distort the perceptions. The religious scholars and seminaries should accept this challenge on a priority basis.

It is noteworthy that *Rabita-Alam-e-Islami* held a four day (22 - 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2015) International Conference in Mecca on 'War against Terrorism and Islam' (*Islam-wa-Muharbatul-Arhab*). The conference addressed different issues including the definition of terrorism, the religious, economic and collective factors responsible for terrorism, the inadequacies in properly educating and guiding the youth, the contribution of media, the state and international vested interest and ramifications of terrorism on societies.

The deliberations of the Conference were quite meaningful. One of the participants from Qatar, while referring to religious texts of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity established that no religion of the world permitted terrorism. It was equally emphasized that certain domains belonged to the governments and certain matters fell in the sphere of public. However, never in the history of Islam were the people allowed to raise the weapons on their own.

The Conference paid specific attention to the situation in the Islamic countries and held that there was a lot of misunderstanding on the concepts of *Jihad*, *Sovereignty*, *Darul Islam* (Islamic World) and *Darul Harab* (Non Islamic World) which contributed to the promotion of terrorism apart from a growing negative ideology. The Conference pointed out that economic deprivation and absence of avenues of equity and justice were responsible for the disenchantment and extremism among the youth in some Muslim countries.

The Conference, by and large, came to a consensus on the reasons for the growth and prevalence of terrorism. Some solutions were also presented. However, the moot point is the practical enforcement of the solutions and proposals. The empirical evidence, in this regard, is not encouraging. The other view point against negative ideology, which was repeatedly highlighted during the Conference, forming the ideological backbone of extremism and terrorism, needs a forceful push and wider dissemination. The international media did not pay adequate attention to the deliberations of the Conference. The message has not gone effectively in the so called Muslim societies. At least a debate should have started on the issues which have a bearing on the religion and faith and which were deliberated upon during the Conference.

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