

Europe's Islamic Dilemma

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Immigration and the settlement of new arrivals in any society or country always throws up umpteen difficulties which sometimes turn into substantial problems. Europe has been facing such problems for quite some time now. Some of them have their roots in the old race or colour-related issues while others are of more recent origin. The emergence of difficulties related to Islamic faith appears to be among the latter category and, unfortunately, it seems to be getting worse rather than better. New York twin tower 9/11 attack whose sixth anniversary has just been marked with promises of more determined battles, Afghanistan and Iraq wars, al-Qaeda's unremitting profile and the cartoons controversy have most certainly contributed to the current disequilibrium of emotions between the native and immigrant communities.

In Britain, for instance, a recent Gallup opinion poll revealed that 15 per cent of British people do not want to live next door to a Muslim family. The poll conducted in conjunction with Coexistence Trust whose members include Sir Gulam (correct—not Ghulam) Noon, Lord Hameed, Lord Janner, Lord Mitchell and others, also finds that 62 per cent of Britons believe minorities must be more flexible to blend in with the majority, while 54 per cent of Muslim Londoners think the majority should do more to accommodate minorities' religious customs.

As a sign of skewed conditions, *Pakis* (the term includes Indians and all other South Asians) have often been the butt of jokes, invectives and occasional physical attacks but now the target seems to be acquiring a specific religious twist. Only the other day football fans at a match between Newcastle and Middles borough teams chanted anti-Islamic taunts against Mido, an Egyptian player. His success at scoring a goal was greeted with the taunt "Mido, he has got a bomb." Labelling Muslim players as bombers is a new phenomenon. The incident has been condemned by the sporting authorities and an inquiry is in progress. The recent Glasgow airport suicide bombing attempt and the memory of July bombings of bus and underground trains that left over 50 people dead and scores injured two years ago could be a strong reason behind such outbursts.

One of the main explanations behind the alienation of Muslim youth from the mainstream British society is the comparative lack of opportunities and jobs, which must be tackled with greater attention by the government. Acknowledging this as a part of the problem, Noon said in an exclusive interview at his London office: "A frustrated Muslim youngster is prone to fall into the trap of extremist mullahs or wrong imams." The so-called imams (Noon refuses to call them true imams) "must be confronted – unka samna karna pade ga –" if the Muslims have to find their rightful place and regain the trust of the mainstream society.

Noon, who was appointed to the British government's Muslim Task Force after the July bombings of two years ago in London, has been very outspoken over the role of mullahs in poisoning the minds of young Muslims. He blames the British authorities for going soft on the extremists. Pointing to the case of the Egyptian Islamist mullah Abu Hamza, he attacked the failure of British courts to deal adequately with the likes of Hamza. "If some one is convicted for a terror or hate-related crime, the full force of law should apply, he told the London Times recently. Hamza had been jailed for seven years but he won't serve it under lax regulations. He would come out soon and "be up to the same mischief" yet again.

When I suggested to him that people like him, who have no elections to face, were better placed than prospective or sitting Muslim MPs and municipal councillors to speak out against the fundamentalists, he agreed wholeheartedly and said more community leaders must come out and speak openly against the extremists. Asked about his views on the British government's policy of encouragement and funding help to new faith or religious schools, Noon shook his head, saying: "Falling (the government) into the same trap. You (minorities) can't cocoon yourself." Religious training must be given at home at the weekends and parents must watch and supervise what the imams teach the young children, Noon strongly believes.

Talking about the headscarf and burqa or veil tradition among Muslim women, Noon said the headscarf was understandable but not the eye-slits full burqa. Those who want such a lifestyle "should go and live somewhere else."

Incidentally, Noon, who hails from Bombay and heads a food empire, was questioned in the cash-for-peerage scandal that rocked Tony Blair's government, has been completely cleared of any wrong doing. He stood his ground during the investigations and his stand vindicated. He remains a supporter of Labour Party under Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Reflecting the native British perception of Islamist fundamentalism, or at least part of it, Boris Johnson, Tory MP and candidate for the position of London Mayor at the next London Assembly elections, is known to have strong opinions. He is a strong advocate of inculcating "Britishness, especially into young Muslims." He fervently believes: "We should teach English and we should teach in English. We should teach British history. We should think again about the jilab (hijab), with the signals of apartness that it sends out, and we should probably scrap faith schools.

"We should forbid the imams from preaching sermons in anything but English ...we cannot continue with the multicultural apartheid." Localism, he once said could lead to sharia law because "large chunks of Muslim population did not feel British. "Supposing Tower Hamlets or parts of Bradford were to become governed by religious zealots believing in that system?" he asked.

Such rhetoric may not be totally representative but it does strike chords in many hearts and there in lies a disruptive danger to wider community life. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, on the other hand, was extraordinarily careful in the aftermath of Glasgow suicide bombing and

London car bomb attempts by never referring to the bombers as Islamists or Muslims. He simply called them terrorists and steadfastly refused to give them the Muslim label. Instead he has been talking about winning the battle of hearts and minds. He also has a different attitude to the Iraq war, more pragmatic than his predecessor Tony Blair's line.

Prime Minister Brown in well-timed announcements on Iraq over the fortnight around the end of September and beginning of October has announced a graduated withdrawal of British troops from the war theatre. On a sudden visit to the troops in Basra at the start of October he declared that one thousand out of five and thousand British troops in Iraq will be home by the end of the year, with the prospect of almost half out of Iraq by next spring.

The timing of the announcement, while the Opposition Conservative Party annual conference was in progress, has been seized upon by the Tories as a point-scoring gimmick before a likely snap general election. They are not opposed to the withdrawal of troops, only to the timing and place of the announcement. Whatever the internal differences, the British are steadily but surely pulling out of Iraq, which all parties seem to say is costing them the good will of millions of people in the Islamic world.

Yet at the same time, they are tightening the dragnet on terrorist outfits. Tory leader David Cameron in his speech to the Tory party faithful said that, if elected, his government would ban Hizb-ut-Tehrir, a theoretically peaceful group but widely suspected as a terrorist outfit by security agencies. Cameron also said his party would review the human rights legislation which is hindering the fight against terrorism.

Notwithstanding official or diplomatic words of restraint, the courts, police and administrations across Europe are hardening their stance on terrorism, al-Qaeda or Islamic fundamentalism. Police and intelligence agencies are more watchful and courts are passing harder sentences. Gone are the days when the fundamentalists could claim the benefit of the doubt or get instant cover of civil liberties and human rights. Hideouts are becoming fewer by the day. And the authorities also insist that their fight is not against normal Muslims, only against the fundamentalists among them.

The militants who claim to represent the Ummah or international Islam are being singled out, not just by the West but also by moderate regimes in Muslim countries from Pakistan to Algeria. In fact, Pakistan President Musharraf has been targeted as an enemy in al-Qaeda's latest video release. The new video from Osama bin-Laden's hideout declares war on General Pervez Musharraf and his apostate army as revenge for the attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July,

"We in al-Qaeda organisation call on God to witness that we will retaliate for the blood of Abdul Rashid Ghazi (the chief imam of Red Mosque)... against Musharraf and those who help him," bin-laden is quoted as saying in the video. "Pervez, his ministers, soldiers and those who help him are all accomplices in spilling the blood...He who helps him knowingly and willingly is an infidel like him," warns al-Qaeda.

The warning also promises more fighting in Afghanistan, North Africa and Sudan's Darfur region. It is clear that al-Qaeda is not just fighting the West, it is challenging Islamic regimes all over. It is holding a veiled threat to the governments represented in the OIC as well. It is fighting to become the sole spokesman of the Ummah.

Europe, in turn, is facing another dilemma, a long-standing one. The issue of allowing Turkey to join the European Union or keeping her out. Turkey has been a member of Euro-American NATO alliance since 1952 and has been an associate member of the European club since 1963. How long is Europe to keep her standing outside the door? Turkey's credentials as a long standing ally of NATO and as a staunchly secular applicant are impeccable. The human rights objections are widely seen as an excuse which cannot wash any longer. What is holding her membership? Is it because Turkey is a Muslim country and the European Union is a Christian club that is posing the real dilemma? That certainly is the widely perceived feeling in Turkey and large parts of Europe, though never officially admitted and always diplomatically obfuscated.

Europe's Turkish or Islamic dilemma has acquired a fresh and immediate urgency with the election of foreign minister Abdullah Gul as the country's president. A devout Muslim and an acknowledged former Islamist, he was Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP or Justice and Development Party's nominee for the nation's top post. And Gul poses dilemma not just for Europe but for Turkey's own military who are the traditional guardians of the staunchly secular republic founded by Kemal Ataturk in 1923. The army has intervened four times over the years and is unlikely to lower its guard in the coming times if the situation so demands. The generals boycotted the new president's first official reception, though a later meeting has taken place several days after the investiture.

The AKP, in its former avatar as Welfare Party, was banned and its leader Erdogan jailed in 1998. The turbulence between the army and Erdogan-Gul combine continues, despite the party leadership having done its utmost over the past five years to actively pursue a moderate, secular, liberal and pro-European agenda. Fears of creeping, neo-Islamism still remain very much on the surface, having prompted the head of the armed forces, General Yasar Buyukanit, to issue a warning of threat to secularism by the "centres of evil" only a day before the presidential election.

Gul has been opposed by the secularists not just because of his own persona but also because of his wife Hayrunnisa's image. She wears a head-covering scarf, strictly forbidden in official Turkey. Her headscarf is not a face-covering or a top-to-toe hijab or burqa but it is still unacceptable in the Kemalist republic of Turkey, especially when she is the First Lady of the Republic.

And the Turkish First Lady's scarf, however colourful and splendid, is a symbol of separation and cause for objection in large and powerful of parts of Europe too—from President Sarkozy's France to Austria and others, though Britain and some others, in the words

of the new British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, should "reach out to Turkey." It is not just Turkey's dilemma; it is Europe's dilemma, too.