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Countering the Ideology of Hate: The Tripartite Approach

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Synopsis

The world was rocked by two terrorist attacks over the past week: one in Kenya by Al-Shabaab which gunned down innocent civilians. The other was in Pakistan when the Tehrik-e-Taliban killed more than 91 Pakistani Christians. Both were inspired by a deviant understanding of Islam. Mainstream Muslims must challenge these misrepresentations of Islam by involving traditional Muslim scholars, Muslim activists and government authorities.

Commentary

TWO TERRORIST attacks within a week by militant groups, driven by a common hate ideology wrapped in the cloak of a peaceful religion, are a stark reminder that the war against extremist terrorism is far from over.

Terrorism wrongly using the name of Islam is not a new development. Prior to the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, numerous acts had been perpetrated in the name of Islam even though the religion clearly abhorred the killing of innocent people.

Transgressing core Islamic principles

Inspired by aberrant scholars whose warped interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith is used to justify such attacks, this thinking is rooted in an ideology of hate. Non-adherents are treated as the enemies who are legitimate targets, irrespective of creed, gender or age. The Prophet of Islam would never have condoned the actions of these terrorists. The Prophet Muhammad laid out strict codes of conduct even during wartime: Muslims are forbidden from killing women, children, the aged, those who seek refuge in places of worship. They are also clearly disallowed from desecrating any places of worship. All these conditions were blatantly transgressed in both the Kenyan and Pakistani attacks.

While the acts of terror in Kenya and Pakistan grabbed the global headlines, there has been little focus on the non-violent manifestation of this ideology of hate. Adherents of this ideology are quick to criticise any acts of violence against Muslims. However, there is deafening silence when terrorist acts are committed in the name of Islam. Many within this group are not overtly violent but condone the actions of their more extreme brethren. Within the Muslim community, those associated with this ideology would often target Muslim sects such as the Sufis and Shiites who are portrayed as deviants.

While some might resort to violent actions as could be seen from the destruction of Shiite mosques in Indonesia, others would post hate messages on their Facebook pages calling for religious authorities to act against these sects. In Malaysia where adherents of this ideology of hate are part of its religious bureaucracy, several states have issued a ban against Shiite Islam. This is despite the fact that more than 200 prominent scholars, calling for tolerance and unity in the Muslim world, signed the Amman Declaration in 2005 which reaffirmed the recognition of Shiite Islam as being part of the Islamic faith.

Reverting to Traditional Islam

While some in the West have supported liberal interpretations of Islam as a counter to these extremist ideas, such suggestions are merely lofty ideas of a select few who have no grassroots or large following amongst the Muslim masses. Rather than turning to these 'newer' interpretations of Islam, it is perhaps important for Muslims to revert to the original teachings of Islam.

Many traditional Muslim scholars such as Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the former Mufti of Egypt, have been in the forefront against terrorism. Ali Gomaa had argued that "Terrorism is the product of corrupt minds, hardened hearts, and arrogant egos, and corruption, destruction, and arrogance are unknown to the heart attached to the divine". Hence, he noted that these terrorists are criminals and not Muslim activists.

Unlike some Muslim scholars who argue that acts of terror are legitimate in places where Muslims are said to be repressed such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, Ali Gomaa has made no exception in his unequivocal rejection of all acts of terror. Another traditional scholar who has been in the forefront of rejecting terrorism is Turkish scholar and inter-faith advocate, Fethullah Gulen, who has stated clearly that terrorism has no place in Islam. He added that regardless of the circumstances, suicide bombings cannot be justified.

These scholars are not only playing a major role in countering extremism but have strong grassroots support. The Gulen movement is today the largest Muslim congregation in Turkey while Ali Gomaa has a huge following throughout the Middle East and Europe. It is thus pertinent for the ideas of these scholars to be promoted within the Muslim World.

The tripartite approach

The ideology of hate is not just a Muslim problem but should be confronted by the international community as a whole. For the struggle against pernicious thinking will determine the future direction of not just the Muslim community but the world.

Fuad Nahdi, founder of the Radical Middle Way (RWM), the leading counter-radicalisation grassroots initiative in the United Kingdom, has advocated the need to confront the problem of terrorism through a tripartite approach where traditional Muslim scholars partner Muslim activists and government authorities to counter the threat of terrorism.

Nahdi had argued that while Muslim scholars possess the knowledge to counter radical ideas, they might not be in tune with contemporary trends hence it is crucial that a group of Muslim activists assist them to disseminate these ideas through innovative means. The RMW has been organising the 'Dangerous Ideas' tours which saw scholars, musicians, artists and activists coming together to put up a series of events aimed at countering this ideology of hate. Such initiatives are especially pertinent in facing the threats that are currently faced by Muslim communities.

Authorities must assist traditional Muslim leaders in dealing with this threat and be discerning in ensuring that this ideology is not further disseminated. Preachers of this ideology must not be allowed to gain access to young Muslim audiences even if they profess a non-violent message. This ideology of hate creates a warped worldview that encourages Muslims to see others who do not subscribe to this ideology as despised beings.

This could be especially detrimental in multi-cultural societies. Failure to do so could lead to further radicalisation of the younger Muslims today which could prove damaging for Muslim societies and the larger world.

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