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Report – Panel Discussion

“Islamophobia and How to Deal with It?”

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The Center for Strategic Perspectives (CSP) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a panel discussion on “*Islamophobia And How To Deal With It?*” on November 10, 2020. The panel of experts included: Dr. Todd Green, Associate Professor of Religion, Luther College, Iowa; Dr. Charles Powell, Director of the Elcano Royal Institute, Spain; Prof. Dr. Anis Ahmad, Vice Chancellor Riphah University, Islamabad; Prof. Dr. Samina Yasmin, Director, Centre for Muslim States and Societies, The University of Western Australia; and Mr. Ahmad Naeem Salik, Research Fellow, CSP-ISSI.

Introducing the panel and the topic of the discussion, Director CSP and Editor at ISSI, Mr. Najam Rafique said that phobia is a pathological anxiety disorder in which individuals experience extreme and irrational fear about certain situations. A new form of such phobia has now emerged based on fears about the religion of Islam and which has morphed into a phobia that we know as Islamophobia affecting the minds of many in western societies. The Director said that the way Muslims are being discriminated in the disguise of Islamophobia – a fear associated with both Islam and Muslims – is not just mere fear but a lethal form of racial discrimination. This type of racism which is being associated with religion is beyond comprehension. Everywhere, on media and other socio-political avenues, it is associated with everyday life of Muslims and does not bar the Islamophobes from retorting to violent actions like desecration and vandalizing mosques, burning the Holy Quran and profaning Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Describing the sorry state of affairs, he referred to the recent derogatory statements by no less a person than the French President, Emmanuel Macron, which has sparked a new wave of Islamophobia in his country and evoking a strong reaction from all sections of the Muslim world. The recurring theme of Islamophobia and Modi-led ideology of Hindutva, he opined, are two sides of the same coin. Such expressions are a form of superiority complex based on notions of ultra-nationalism that is finding new grounds in the derogation of Islam and the Muslims.

Describing Pakistan’s official response to Islamophobia, Mr. Najam said that the country stands for the honor of Islam and unity of the Muslim world, and its current Prime Minister Imran Khan has upheld this tradition by urging the Muslim leaders to unite against the demon of Islamophobia. He pointed out that the Prime Minister has even written to social media outlets

and owners asking them to take preventive measures against the spread of hate content against Islam, its messenger and the adherents of the Islamic faith.

Following the introduction, he invited the Director General ISSI and a seasoned diplomat, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, to share his views on Islamophobia and the perceptions he encountered during his diplomatic assignments in western countries.

Ambassador Chaudhry extended a warm welcome to all the panellists and participants. He went on to explain how Islamophobia is increasing beyond expectation and raised a question on where things turned wrong: whether this hate mongering is a result of certain religious extremist elements or is it that the level of tolerance in the European and American societies has dropped to an extremely dismal level?

Describing his experiences with the Western societies, he termed Islamophobia as a fear emanating mostly from lack of knowledge about the principles of Islamic religion. The problem, he said, is that the previously practiced notions of liberalism and tolerance have been set aside. Quoting Francis Fukuyama, Ambassador Chaudhry espoused that 'Identity' has overtaken the socio-political arenas in the West. Elaborating further, he said that distorted constructs of race, religion, identity and ultra-nationalism are creating fissures in inter-civilizational harmony.

Expressing his desire to listen to the views of the esteemed panellist, he posed a few questions: Why Islamophobia is surging? How do we reconcile the two sacrosanct expressions in the western and Muslim societies: freedom of expression and honoring the sacred religious personalities?

Engaging Dr. Todd Green, Mr. Najam asked for his views on the major causes of tensions between Muslims and the West? Is it the difference of religions or cultures, or is it a manifestation of some sort of conflicts of political interests?

Shedding light on centuries-long historical perspective of European Christians and Muslims, Dr. Green said that the phenomenon of Islamophobia has its roots in theological works as well but its current form has much to do with political interests, particularly of the populist parties. With the rise of Islam, there started a rivalry between Europe and Muslim empires which lasted with the dissolution of the Ottoman empire. From this point of history onwards, the European empires

witnessed a mushroom growth all over the Muslim world. After the two World Wars in the 20th century, the fall of Europe and rise of the US in the global arena as a superpower introduced the Muslim states and societies with another form of rivalry: rivalry with the global hegemon.

Although America's role as a global hegemon prompted reactionary responses from all over the world, the Muslim bloc apparently came into a strong ideological conflict with the US. Some of this resistance, Dr. Green added, came from religious extremists who deemed it right to give a seething response to American hegemony. Just like the Soviet Union, the Muslims were perceived as the main stumbling block lying in the path to US global supremacy and its imperial ambitions. Hurling threats against Islam and Muslims as well as racializing Islam and its followers were all efforts directed towards advancing US imperialism in the world.

Another factor that accounted as a cause of surging Islamophobia is the agenda of far-right political parties of the Western societies. Populists in the European and American societies, such as Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron, instrumentalize Islamophobia to gain their political objectives. Dr. Green said that the current populism is originating from the sense of superiority of the western leaders who consider themselves at the top of the current global political order and their desire to uphold this superiority. He said that it is not prevalent in the West only but in the Muslim majority states as well, where some elements are invested in a certain political order. It is this form of politics, in his view, which is driving trends of Islamophobia to its extreme.

Picking up on the sense of superiority among western leaders, Mr. Najam asked Dr. Charles Powell whether it is appropriate for a political leader belonging to a multi-cultural society like France to endorse state-sponsored racialism in the name of freedom of expression and secularism and should not there be a redline to such expressions?

Dr. Powell said that in Spain particularly, Islamophobia is not on the rise. Xenophobia, he went on to explain, is being witnessed in all parts of the world and Islamophobia is one of its form. He refused to endorse the view that Islamophobia is rising again. He offered the Spanish perspective and informed the audience that in Spain, Muslim live in a vast majority and they have absolute freedom in observing their religious activities.

However, coming to the question of why Islamophobia is rising in secular Europe, he responded that there were two potential sources of this conflict. One is immigration, which led the locals to thinking that inflow of immigrants would lead to financial repercussions, especially after the 2008 economic crisis. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, these fears related to jobs and financial stability are on the rise again, which, in one way or another, lead to discrimination against Muslim immigrants.

Dr. Powell associated this fear with political machinations of far-right movements in Europe. Regarding Macron's statements, he said that it is unfortunate that a political leader would lose sight of the delicate balance which is required to be maintained between opposing sections of a multicultural society like France. He, however, was of the opinion that Europe's deep-rooted secularism must also be taken into account since it has been centuries that religion and politics have become two separate entities and do not interfere in each other's affairs. Emphasizing that the Europeans welcome all forms of religious expressions, he stated that interference of religion in politics usually becomes an irritant in the European polity. Given that, he explained, it is misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of religion, particularly Islam, which led to unfortunate developments bordering on xenophobia and violent actions.

Responding to the question about where lies the redline that marks the limits of freedom of expression, Dr. Powell said that these lines are very much drawn and written in our legal documents. Incitement of hatred based on religion is a legal crime. However, people in the government are extremely hesitant to intervene in affairs which fall under the ambit of freedom of expression. Dr. Powell stressed upon the fact that European societies are very liberal and anybody can criticize even the highest of religious personality such as the Pope. Yet, he was of the view, the leaders of all sections must bear in mind that some sort of balance must be maintained for inter-faith harmony in a complex multi-national and multi-cultural societies like Europe.

Mr. Najam posed two questions to Dr. Anis Ahmed: Is an inter-faith dialogue possible, particularly one based on patient negotiations? And, how effective these inter-faith dialogue would be in terms of promoting inter-faith harmony?

Dr. Anis responded to the first question in an affirmative tone stating that inter-faith dialogue is the most appropriate way to resolve the current conflict between western and Muslim societies. He said that Islamophobia is not just a political but a social and psychological phenomenon as well. Also, he emphasized, this xenophobic problem must be considered as a human problem that prevails everywhere. He suggested bringing revival of ethics where all human beings can live in harmony. There must be a modicum of decency that must be followed whatever the society it may be. Hate speeches must be outlawed.

Regarding an effective inter-faith dialogue, he was of the view that such endeavor can be made successful only if it is carried out at all levels ranging from intellectuals, media personnel, political and religious leaders. He criticized the media vehemently as it is fixed on creating sensationalism and propagating distorted pieces of information. He said there must be a complete social effort, from both societies - western and Islamic, that can lead to prevalence of tolerance and inter-faith harmony. Though inter-faith dialogue had been commenced in the past as well, Dr. Anis said they were not as successful as expected, yet, this must not deter us from moving forward with a new dialogue.

Turning to Dr. Samina Yasmin, Mr. Najam inquired about her perceptions of Islamophobia in Australia, and what efforts should the Muslim world and Western societies make to mitigate this xenophobic crisis?

Responding to the first query, Dr. Samina Yasmin stated that seen from a comparative perspective, Islamophobia came late in Australia. It is in the new millennium when Islamophobia was seen on the rise in Australia, and this can be related to 9/11 and its aftermath, she reasoned. She was in conformity with Dr. Green's perspective that it is the desire of the West to stay superior which is driving the trends of Islamophobia. She also endorsed Dr. Anis' point of view that it is not just a political but a social and psychological problem as well and, therefore, should be dealt with as such. She said that the educational system in Australia does not provide much knowledge and understanding of Islam as a religion. She was of the view that Islamophobia is not a rampant phenomenon but is slowly creeping in.

She pointed to the markers that the western societies have set for identifying Islam as a progressive religion. For example, she described, the way women are treated in Islam is a marker

for the western states and societies to understand Islam as a religion. She cautioned against the pattern of thinking that the world is against Islam and Muslims. This she said, is another negative narrative. Pointing out to the far-right movements in American and European societies and quoting particularly Donald Trump and Macron's political statements on Islam and Muslims, she also factored in the role of media – electronic, print, and social media. For a cohesive international community, international media along with domestic media can play a positive role in overcoming hate speech and actions. Everybody, both from western and Islamic societies, must set some ethical standards drawing redlines between freedom of expression and encroaching on someone else's freedom.

Sharing his response to perceptions about the youth on Islamophobia, Mr. Ahmad Naeem Salik proposed to conduct meaningful and comprehensive discussions to reap the fruits of diversity in human societies all over the world.

Answering a question about populist movements in the US and their tactics of using Islamophobia as political sloganeering in electoral processes, Dr. Todd said that Trump is not alone in voicing highly anti-Muslim rhetoric. There are people in the US who share his views on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic narrative. This, according to him, is most alarming.

On the issue of Hindutva ideology, the panellists were of the opinion that it is an alarming trend. They agreed that this form of ideology is also a reflection of growing xenophobic tendencies. They deplored the fact that India being the second largest democracy, its claims of secularism stand negated with the rise of Hindutva thinking. They ascribed this unfortunate phenomenon to the rise of Modi and RSS ideologues.

Sharing his perspective on Islamophobia and the role of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in promoting peaceful narratives of Islam, Chairman BoG, ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that OIC has played its role in this regard but its efforts are far from satisfactory. He mentioned different organs of OIC, particularly its independent permanent human rights commission which is working at the forefront of the issue of Islamophobia.

The panellist agreed that it is not just Islamophobia but all forms of extremists ideologies and phobias that are a threat to democracies worldwide. They particularly referred to Modi's India

which is becoming a hotspot of Muslim prosecutions in particular. They were also in agreement that it is not Islam but Muslims that the xenophobes are most afraid of. They all pointed towards a solution based on education and dialogue for creating mutual understanding.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

