

Semantics of terrorism

By Khalid Aziz | From the Dawn Newspaper 29th July 2011

WHEN we discuss issues that have to do with terrorism we often tend to avoid using the correct word or description. Therefore, the first casualty is truth.

In order to remain in the safe world of non-controversial matters, we avoid discussing the real drivers of terrorism. Instead, we identify hunger, poverty and unemployment as the causes of terrorism. An analysis under this framework does not pay dividends; one must identify the real motivating force that drives terrorism if we are to create the right policies.

We fall into this trap because our minds are hardwired by culture, religion, history and our specific national narrative that forces us to view objects from a preconceived angle. For example, as soon as the recent tragic killings began in Norway, yellow journalism ran amok initially. The western media as well as Al Jazeera called it a jihadist attack; some even accused the Ansar al-Jihad al-Alami organisation as the instigator.

Police finally charged Breivik, an 'ethnic Norwegian', with a history of far-right and anti-Islamic views as the accused. This underscores the point that the media is not neutral. All the current self-praise about being rational and enlightened is imaginary. The East and West have both created the 'other' as our Neanderthal forefathers did before us. Similarly, we write evasively when we discuss the causes of terrorism.

The war on terrorism is a phenomenon that prevents clear thinking. The Norwegian tragedy showed that when a society is threatened by any danger the impulsive reaction is to accuse the cultural 'enemy'. In Western Europe, until the Second World War, the Jew was the accepted scapegoat. The new 'enemy' is now the Muslim in Europe and the US.

If western societies come under further economic or security stress then Muslims will be the scapegoats. The recent rubbishing of the Kashmir Action Committee in Washington is another example of a similar turf and cultural war between the ISI and the CIA and FBI. All major intelligence agencies fund lobbies to enlarge their influence within an important country; KAC was apparently doing that for Pakistan. The FBI wants to reduce Pakistan's footprint in Washington.

In a similar manner, in our attempt to avoid taking controversial positions, some analysts claim that hunger and food shortage leads to terrorism. Clearly, the shortage of food in households is due to the lack of income. Another faulty conclusion is that poverty leads to terrorism. Such statements conceal the real forces driving terrorism. If the causes are denied then solutions cannot be found.

Research conducted in Swat last year provides some important indicators. For instance, it was noted that neither poverty nor the deteriorating provision of social services, nor the

concentration of land in the hands of a small elite were sufficient causes by themselves of the rise of terrorism in Swat. What then is the cause?

It was found that the increase in the idea of the threat to Islam from the invasion of Afghanistan by the US in 2001, coupled with the use of Pakistan's military against tribes in Fata in 2004, convinced the religiously inclined population in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal areas that the invasion of Afghanistan was a prelude to an attack on Pakistan's identity of which religion is an important component.

The melding of a separate regional Islamic identity anchored in jihad began with the arrival of the formidable Islamic warrior Syed Ahmed Shaheed from Patna in 1826 to what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The call for jihad was made after the East India Company won the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the conservative Muslims concluded (correctly as it turned out) that Britain was planning to displace Muslim rule in India.

The Islamic ramparts in India were strengthened by Shah Waliullah's family. One of their important contributions in association with other ulema was to dispatch 800 warriors from eastern India to the Pakhtun belt to organise the jihad; first against the Sikhs and later the British who replaced the former as rulers in 1849. In an interesting interregnum in this episode, Peshawar was declared an Islamic emirate in 1829 under Syed Ahmed before the Sikhs wrested it back.

Malakand and the surrounding areas formed the core region of maneuvers of Syed Ahmed's jihad that was etched in the collective memory and is revived whenever the people are convinced that their Islamic identity is under threat. In the survey mentioned earlier, 87 per cent of the respondents said that they began to support jihad due to the persuasion of local religious personalities.

Later, the militants solidified their hold over society in Swat by the use of terror as a control mechanism. The local religious leaders were assisted by the TTP and jihadi outfits from Punjab. Radicalism was fanned and acts of terrorism were committed to prevent the government from falling completely under the sway of US policies.

Secondly, the people in Swat could not be won over by religious rhetoric alone. The militants obtained support for their cause by linking the current events with the past historic, religious and cultural experiences of the region.

Religiously inclined militants explain that the approach followed in Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the best method of containing the enthusiasm for the West shown by the government and Pakistan's westernised elite. This then appears to be the foremost driver of terrorism in Swat. It could also be the explanation for the wider terrorism in Pakistan and the unending war in Afghanistan.

The policy recommendation emerging from this discussion clearly is that either the government should align its policies with national aspirations or expect to face violence.