

The Muslim Identity Politics amid India-Pakistan Face-Off

Although the wrestling is over with the referee, the US, calling upon the two contestants to stop and ceasefire, clashes between Pakistan and India is not something unprecedented. The recent reciprocal attacks exchanged between the two nuclear powers, following the terrorist attack in Pehelgam-Kashmir once again demonstrated what a fragile world we are living in. But like it or not, the contest over Kashmir is far from over and is part of a bigger issue of the Muslim world and once again unveils the dilemma of identity politics within.

Being a Muslim populated area of the Indian Subcontinent with over seven decades of struggle for survival and independence, Kashmir is one of the bleeding body parts of the Islamic world, occupied by the non-Muslims besides Palestine, Xinjiang (China), Rakhine (Myanmar) and elsewhere.

Despite the clarity about Kashmir being occupied by non-believers and its peoples' rightful struggle for freedom, the Muslim Ummah has been divided on the matter like every other issue. Many Muslims were puzzled as to what side they should support between India and Pakistan. In spite of the fact that the current BJP led government in India has a very strong Anti-Muslim rhetoric and that the Muslims in India are suffering under its rule disproportionately, the Airforce Commander of the Indian army leading the battle was a Muslim woman named Sofia Qureshi, the Grand Mufti of India Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad expressed his support of India's offensive, a renowned Muslim politician Asaduddin Owaisi supported the strikes on Pakistan and many other Muslim celebrities in India rushed to support their country India against Pakistan. On the other hand, some like the Khans of Bollywood chose not to take a stance, but were not safe from criticism for their silence.

Many Pakistani Pashtuns too, expressed their unwillingness to support the Pak army amid the Pak army's hostilities in the Pashtun populated areas and their alleged unfair share in power. Also, some people in Afghanistan cheered in favor of India due to their grudge against Pakistan. A renowned ex-Taliban official, Abdul Salam Zaeef who was Ambassador to Pakistan and was handed over by Pakistanis to Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, brought this war down to Punjabis vs. Hindus and went as far as to say: "[This] is a political war between the Hindus and Punjabis, has no religious aspects, Punjab will attempt to encourage the Pashtuns to fight India in the name of Jihad, the Pashtuns should save themselves and their children from this game" wrote Zaeef in a tweet on his X account.

While the expressions of support of one side and condemnation of the other may have been out of fear of the host government and people for labelling them a traitor or enemy supporter and or just questioning their patriotism, it is not very surprising given the depth of nationalist sentiments in the region often surpassing religious affiliations putting the Muslims in particular in a difficult situation.

Other Muslims around the world too had mixed reactions. Some thought supporting Pakistan was right because it was a Muslim country while others thought supporting Pakistan would mean supporting the allegedly corrupt and treacherous Pak Army. Some feared supporting Pakistani side in this war may be translated into supporting the designated terrorists that are being targeted by India. Very few had enough reasons to believe that it was a war between Islam and *Kufr*.

On the other hand, the Pak Army's strong nationalistic rhetoric over the years often prioritizing Pakistan over Islam, with its background of supporting the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, turning a blind eye over Kashmir's official annexation by India, its brutal suppression of the Pashtun tribes, and recently its inaction to support the Muslims of Gaza in an ongoing genocide as well as the occasional skirmishes into Afghan soil as well as expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, are only examples demonstrating Pakistani government's hostility towards Muslims and complicity with Infidels.

Despite the Pak army's slogan of *Jihad* and other Islamic symbolism in its outlook, it is still the remnant piece of the British Indian army that was sliced during the partition of the subcontinent. Although there are undoubtedly sincere Islamist officers in the Pak Army who are ready to fight in the path of Allah (swt), but they are far from making the decisions. In practice, the Pak Army acts as purely nationalistic and secular as any other on the planet. Hence it can hardly expect Muslims to support them when they are in a trouble.

Besides the ideological hurdle and identity issues, a practical obstacle that prevents Muslims to support the Pak Army for instance, is the issue of national borders and citizenship laws. I mean, even if someone from the Muslim world wanted to come to Pakistan to support or join the war, they would be considered an alien and required a passport with a valid Pakistani visa. The war took place simultaneously with the expulsion of Afghans who were born and had lived in Pakistan for decades. For the sake of argument, just imagine instead of being expelled, they were given Pakistani citizenship meaning that they were treated equally as other Pakistanis, the Pak army would be able to easily get a hundred thousand new recruits from among them ready to fight against India but the Pakistani state, which is overwhelmingly controlled by the army, chose not to do so and continued dealing with them as strangers.

So, if the Pakistani government considers Afghan refugees as aliens and expels them while requiring every other Muslim on the planet to have a passport with a valid visa and a purpose stated other than *Jihad* on it (as that's never an option in the list) while travelling to Pakistan, then you rationally can't expect them to support you in the war.

This whole hassle indicates how much the Islamic identity of the Ummah has been blurred over the years and is continue to being thrashed by nationalist policies of Muslim countries. It remains as one of the main obstacles towards unity of the Ummah which means that even if a Muslim country gets into a fight with unanimously accepted enemy of Islam and Muslims, be it Kashmir against Hindus, Gaza against the Zionist regime or Pakistan Vs. India, the rest of the Ummah is not ideologically and practically able to support that Muslim country.

This is a big lesson for the Muslim world that if a Muslim country wants to have the support of the Ummah during war or other situations, they should first make their state Islam centric and Ummah friendly and come out of their limited nationalist vision. This will allow the migration (Hijrah) of fellow Muslims to that country with along with their wealth, power and expertise. Once they are there, treated equally as everyone else, they will not have a valid reason to reside in and support a non-Muslim country.

In return, instead of considering the migrants (*Muhajireen*) as a liability and burden, the host country can then use their wealth, power and expertise to make the state stronger and stronger and be able to fight the non-Muslims with more ideological and material backing. But this can and will not happen by sticking to nationalist rhetoric as it alienates others and is antithesis to the very idea of Ummah. Such state would have to redefine the identity of its population as "the Ummah" as opposed to "the nation", its polity as *Dar-ul-Islam*, raising a flag that resonates with all Muslims, not only one nation. Once Muslims know that to be their state, one for all Muslims equally, then protecting such polity against foreign aggression and even expanding its borders in offensive endeavors, become a religious duty (*Fardh*). Once Muslims know that the fight their state carries is a *Jihad*, they will rush towards it in such a magnitude that the lists and registries of the volunteers would be overwhelmed and Muslims will have to wait their turn to participate in the *Jihad*, wishing to die in the path of Allah. Otherwise, within the current nation state system controlled, run and reinforced by the International organizations and their laws, no Muslim state can rightly claim to be an Islamic system inclusive for all Muslims, independent of the non-Muslim powers, leaving Muslims in a difficult and blurry position of taking sides in difficult times.

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