

29/06/2003

Bulwarks against extremism

WITHIN days of the Sept 11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, concentrated efforts were made by the United States to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world in its global war against terrorism. Yet, study after study has shown that anti-American sentiment among Muslims has intensified, plummeting to new depths after the war in Iraq.

As President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan pointed out in Washington last week, this hostility is "due to the perception that symptoms rather than root causes of terror and extremism are being addressed, and that unjust situations in which Muslim peoples are victims of state terror are being ignored".

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met President George W. Bush in Washington a month after Sept 11, he had already stressed the need to eliminate the root causes of terrorism rather than invading Afghanistan to wipe out al-Qaeda. His advice was obviously not heeded because the US proceeded to attack Afghanistan and then Iraq, which served only to increase Muslim animosity towards America.

As Dr Mahathir pointed out before the Iraq war began, "Not only are we not trying to remove the causes, we are actually creating new ones." Far from reining in Muslim anger and frustration, the manner in which the US is waging its war on terrorism threatens to create more hostility and more Osamas.

Musharraf believes that "if a Middle East and a South Asia peace process can develop credibility, the very negative Muslim perceptions arising from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will become much less so". Dr Mahathir has pointed out on many occasions that the problem of global terrorism has a direct connection with the fate of the Palestinians. In his meeting with Bush in October 2001, he had urged the US to restart the stalled peace process so that a Palestinian state could be established as soon as possible.

Since the illegal military occupation of Palestine by Israel is a focal point of Muslim grievance, a Middle East settlement holds the key to warmer relations between America and the Muslim world and thus to winning the war against terrorism. While the roadmap outlined by Bush has raised hopes of peace, his words must be matched by his deeds. Because of its overwhelming power and therefore its vulnerability as a terrorist target, the onus is on the US - which has been dispensing financial and military aid to Israel and giving blanket support for it to do as it pleases - to make sure that the roadmap leads to peace via the formation of a Palestinian nation alongside a secure Israel.

The US has to address the huge gap between its rhetoric and its actions because its deeds in the Muslim world often belie its avowed good intentions to defend freedom and promote democracy. The multi-million dollar advertising campaign by the US State Department promoting the lives of Muslims in America, for instance, is at odds with the discrimination of Muslims in the country after Sept 11. As Musharraf said, they have been subjected to "arbitrary arrests, detentions, crude interrogations, mistreatment and deportation".

The US must not demonise Islam by tarring Muslims, whether or not by design, with the brush of terrorism. Many Muslims do not condone acts of terror, whether directed against Israeli civilians in Jerusalem or Australian tourists in Bali. Neither are they attracted to the extremism

of political Islam. The war on terrorism will not be won unless Washington is able to distinguish clearly between the independent moderates and their extremist foes, instead of confusing them in its quest for allies and enemies of convenience.