INSTITUTE'S ACTIVITIES

Seminar On "Western Perceptions About Islam & Muslims: A Case Of Hungary"

MUSLIM Institute organized a seminar on "Western Perceptions About Islam & Muslims: A Case of Hungary" on May 18, 2016 in a local hotel. Head of department, center of policy studies COMSATS institute of Information Technology, former ambassador Ms. Fauzia Nasreen presided the session, and other worthy speakers were Ambassador of Hungary H.E Istvan Szabo, President international Center for Democratic Transition Hungary Dr. Istvan Gyarmati, Director General ISSI, former Ambassador Masood Khan, and Chairman MUSLIM Institute Sahibzada Sultan Ahmad Ali, who shared their views on the subject, and Research Associate MUSLIM Institute Usman Hasan gave the presentation. Foreign delegates, professors and students of universities, scholars and researchers from different institutions, analysts and media persons actively participated in the seminar.

Speakers expressing their views observed as under:

Historically, Islam and the West are not alien to one another. Three major religions of the world Judaism, Christianity and Islam have same roots as all are descendant of Abraham. Muslims regard all Prophets including Holy Isa Ibn Maryam (A.S) (Holy Jesus) as great Messengers of God and believe in the virtue of Holy Maryam (R.A) (Saint Mary). They share many common principles and for centuries their followers have peacefully coexisted around the world. Whether it is subcontinent, Hungary or any other region, their history of peaceful coexistence with each other dates back to medieval times. According to the historians like Dr. Norbert Pap (University of Pecs), in 9th and 10th centuries there were few Muslims in Hungary, in the 13th century thousands of Muslims lived in the Hungarian Kingdom. From beginning of 16th Century, Hungarian territory became part of Ottoman Empire for 150 years but Ottoman Empire never converted the Hungarians to Islam by force that is why still there are good relations between Hungary and Turkey. Tomb of renowned 16th century Bektashi Sufi mystic Gul Baba is situated at Rózsadomb (Budapest) which symbolizes the shared history of Muslims

on Hungarian lands. More over the tribute given by Allama Iqbal to the Hungarian poet Petőfi in his book Payam-e-Mashriq (Message from the East) depicts the relations of Muslims and Pakistan with Hungarian literature. It was Hungary which legally acknowledged Islam in 1916 as a "recognized religion". The celebrations in Hungary for century of Islam's legally recognized existence in Hungary would play an effective role in bridging the communities.

After the spread of Islam in eastern Europe, Muslims studied the Greek philosophy and laid down the foundation of modern science by effecting advancements in knowledge. This knowledge reached to the west through Spain and eastern Europe which later on played a major role in Renaissance of Europe. In the modern time Muslims are taking benefits from western inventions and modern scientific knowledge. In the field of research and knowledge Muslims and west shared with each their research, knowledge, experimental observations and technology, which shows the relationship of knowledge between west and Muslims.

The respect for humanity and for each other's faith, culture and belief is a major factor which has brought us to the current age. Unfortunately nowadays media do not highlight the commonalities of Islam with Western Christian beliefs. Contemporary portrayal of Islam, which usually depicts Muslims as dangerous or hostile, has been called a refraction of the history, rather than a reflection. Perhaps one of main reasons of the misconception that Islam and West are incompatible, are certain incidences and unfortunate events of terrorism and violence. Unfortunately such incidents became the basis for the anti-Islamic sentiments. Similarly due to Islamophobia and theory of clash of civilizations Muslims have to face the challenges and often they have to bear discrimination, legislation against the veil and construction of minarets are few examples. This idea has been deliberately promoted that "not all Muslims are terrorists, but (nearly) all terrorists are Muslims." Dr. Ronald Inglehart and Dr. Pippa Norris described in their 2009 research published by Harvard Kennedy School that "These events raise fears that second generation Muslims living in isolated urban communities are becoming alienated from democratic societies…" We need to have a look on Europol report which says that "In 2014, seven

EU Member States reported total 201 terrorist attacks and only two were classified as religiously inspired".

Similarly the debate on multiculturalism in West with specific focus on Muslim immigrants and refugees has given rise to misconception such as: 'Muslims cannot integrate in Western society'. Such theories are based on anti-Islamic sentiments. Dr. Inglehart and Dr. Norris conclude in their research that: "…Muslim migrants do not move to Western countries with rigidly fixed attitudes; instead, they gradually absorb much of the host culture." Muslims in the west want to follow western rules and regulation keeping their Islamic Identity alive and also to have social political and all other freedoms like others. Muslims living in the West also have a responsibility upon themselves to raise such awareness and work with their domestic societies. Professor Ramadan from University of Oxford described three main principles to be fulfilled in order to become integrated in Europe: Law, Language, and Loyalty. He argues that majority of Muslims fulfil all three as they abide by the Law, know the language, and are loyal to their host state.

Particular actions of few individuals should not be related to whole community whether it is West or Muslims. We should understand that the slogans raised for the sake of some political and vested interest should be kept separate from reality and be countered with factual narratives. Moreover, Muslim countries should not be defensive all the time for giving justification for such misperceptions rather they should prove by their actions that Islam is the religion of peace and any act of terrorism has no connection with Islam. Economic and technological development of Muslims will automatically change the narrative about the Muslims as some decades ago there were limited visitors to China but due to its economic development everyone wants to visit there now.

We should promote inter-faith harmony and environment of mutual trust. Efforts of some intuitions and political leaders to this effect are commendable and they played their role in bridging the differences between Islam and west. It is pertinent to mention that prejudice against any civilization or beliefs on the basis of particular political motives must be avoided. We should introduce masses about other cultures so that they are flexible enough to accept others. However it is also true that

western democratic system is on stake by the extremist political parties and therefore prejudice against Muslims is also increasing.

Instead of the blame game we should promote mutual co-operation and work on commonalities. France and Germany fought great wars but at last after World War II they realized that they will have to exist in peace and accept each other. To save the humanity from wars and massacre, we have to respect the norms and values of all other cultures and beliefs.

Interactive Session

After speakers expressed their views, interactive session was held in which the panel replied to the questions of participants. Panelists informed the audience that a great majority of migrants entered Hungary, which was not having effective border control system at that time. However, a large number of migrants did not get themselves registered in Hungary but they were more interested to go to other neighboring countries. European countries are divided on the issue of migrants, and therefore they could not reach any consensus as how to tackle this issue and how these migrants should be divided among different countries. Media can play its influential role to create harmony between West and Muslims and a continuous effort is required in this regard to bring gradual improvement to resolve the migration issue.

Mutual dialogue can enhance understanding and reduce misperceptions about each other; today's seminar is a positive move in this regard. People in subcontinent have been living together in peace for centuries and can co-exist even today if we try to understand and respect each other's viewpoints with patience.

At the end of seminar, Chairman MUSLIM Institute, Sahibzada Sultan Ahmed Ali presented shields to honourable speakers.