



Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism



Pakistan's National Action Plan to Counter Violent Extremism: Incorporating Community Resilience as a Core Component



SYED HUSSAIN
SHAHEED
SOHERWORDI

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Email: hq@WorldAntiExtremism.org

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About the Author

Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi is a Professor, Chairman of the department of Regional Studies and former Chairman department of International Relations for six years and Director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies with the University of Peshawar, following a career as researcher and professor of International Relations, Conflict Resolution, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), Community Resilience, Political Science and Creative Leadership. He is the director of the Center for FATA Studies, University of Peshawar. He remained convenor of a 'Working Group for Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan' at Pakistan's National Security Division, Islamabad, for four years. He completed his MS and PhD from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He concluded his National Security & Foreign Policy fellowship at the University of Delaware, US, in 2018.



**SYED HUSSAIN SHAHEED
SOHERWORDI**

He was a fellow of the Fulbright, Carnegie, Charles Wallace, and Higher Education Commission (HEC), as well as Edinburgh University. He taught at the Fulbright Commission, Bulgaria, for five years (2010-2014), where his teaching and training concerned peace & conflict resolution during the 21st century, especially extremism in the conflict zones like FATA (Pakistan), Afghanistan, the US foreign policy, South Asia, and the Middle East. He also taught at the University of Edinburgh from 2005-2010 on a part-time basis. Dr. Soherwordi has written more than fifty (50) research papers in National and International journals on the history & relations of India-Pakistan, China, the Tribal Areas of Pakistan, the War on Terror, Afghanistan, Pak-US relations, Conflict Resolution, and the application of strategies to the prevention of terrorism, extremism, and amelioration of counter-violent extremism. He edited two volumes titled "Socio-Economic and Political Currents in FATA: A Way Forward" in 2015 and "Religion, Economics and Politics of FATA" in 2021 by Peter Lang Publishers, US. His latest book, titled "A Divergent Foreign Policy Alliance: The Pak-US Relations," was published in the US in November 2024.

Prof Soherwordi has consulted for numerous foundations and government agencies on subjects like governance, local government, police reforms, education policy, federalism, and decentralization. He is a visiting professor at the Command and Staff College, Quetta, National Institute of Management (NIM), Peshawar, Pakistan Naval Academy, Karachi, Pakistan Navy War College, Lahore, and National School of Public Policy (NSPP), Lahore. He is also a member of the editorial boards of numerous national and international Journals. Dr Soherwordi regularly contributes his write-ups in national newspapers and appears on different national and international news channels to give his comments on issues of global concern.

In 2014, the government of Pakistan devised a National Action Plan (NAP) to mitigate the political, social, and economic damage encountered by the country due to the protracted tribulations of extremism. However, the Plan has yet to yield positive results. Extremists have shown defiance over the years, planting their roots in the tribal districts and across Pakistan. Considering the complexity of the situation and the limitations of the state when countering violent extremism, communities need to be strengthened. A quantifiable and time-bound agenda is required to develop resilient communities to end extremism once and for all. However, no such constituent is included in the NAP. Killing extremists via military means is only one way of dealing with the issue. Social cohesion, which is the backbone of a resilient community, is critically lacking in the extremism-affected areas of Pakistan. An insusceptible community could put an end to the recruitment and development of extremist organizations in the country. People who have migrated from tribal to settled areas have the potential to play a key role in empowering their respective communities. By incorporating community resilience as a core component in the NAP, Pakistan's policymakers may formulate an efficient national plan to counter violent extremism.

1. Introduction

This paper mainly focuses on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and the National Action Plan (NAP) to curtail terrorism in Pakistan. A lot has already been contributed on the phenomenon of CVE to substantiate the narrative (Gielen, 2017; Sumpter, 2017). CVE has supplemented counterterrorism by developing soft approaches and engaging individuals drawn by religion-driven violence (Kruglanski, Jasko, Webber, Chernikova, & Molinaro, 2018). Incessant violence diminishes the chances of compromise, resulting in the adoption of punitive measures to reduce fear. Pakistan's NAP is a crucial step towards CVE. However, it lacks an essential feature for countering violent extremism: transforming the community. Thus, the following research question has emerged: 'Why is there a need to incorporate community resilience into the National Action Plan (NAP) of Pakistan, and how can it serve the purpose of countering violent extremism?'

In Pakistan, the origins of extremism are linked to socio-economic misery, including poverty, an ideological motivation where extremists capitalize upon religious sensitivities, and the state's promotion of a militant culture. These factors have undoubtedly played a significant role in the germination of extremism across the country. However, another aspect that cannot be ignored is the lack of social cohesion in Pakistan. The country remains segregated based on ethnicities, sects, and linguistic differences. The divisions among Sindhis and Muhajirs in Sindh province, Saraikis and Punjabis in Punjab province, Balochis and Pashtuns in Balochistan province, and Pashtuns of settled and tribal areas, as well as non-Pashtuns of Hazara and D.I.Khan of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, have kept the country fractured and brittle since its independence in 1947. In order to bridge these linguistic and ethnic rifts, religion has been used as a uniting tool. But this strategy is constrained due to the religious and sectarian differences among various sects.

Until now, inadequate attention has been paid to countering violent extremism by engaging communities that have been critically affected by the menace. These communities can aid in addressing the root causes of extremism in the country. The proposed research effectively fills this gap by documenting and understanding the perspectives of the people of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and FATA who left their hometowns and settled in Peshawar and Islamabad in the wake of Operation Zarb-e-Azb under the war on terror. Since these people have been directly affected by extremism, their input can prove indispensable in developing a community resilience strategy that can address and manage this threat.

This paper outlines the necessity for community resilience as a key component of the NAP. The discourse is debated with respect to the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and especially focuses on sensitizing the community to the recruitment of extremists. Despite an extensive discussion on the subject, it is pertinent to note that a theoretical uncertainty has prevailed in evaluating community resilience. The research that has emerged from the available data has recognized that the effort of countering violent extremism is more focused in government papers to fill the blank rather than on people. However, the community is the recruitment body for the extremists. It must therefore be sensitized to the enlistment process and thus rendered able to impede it, hindering and countering violent extremism in Pakistan. Though society has a 'soft corner' for the extremists, this is only due to the misguided policies of General Zia's era in the 1980s, when the Afghan Jihad was fought in the region. Therefore, reforms in both public and private approaches to counter-extremism are imperative. This paper traces the genesis of extremism, Pakistan's initial response to its growth, the advantages and disadvantages of extremism for the polity and society of Pakistan, including its losses, and finally, the drawing up of the NAP. Finally, it proposes community resilience as an essential component of the NAP, one that will enable effective counter-terror and counter-extremism measures and a long-lasting solution to the issue.

Violent extremism has been a continuous threat to the security situation in Pakistan for the last two decades. It is a pressing, multifaceted, and complex challenge for the state and the people of Pakistan. The term violent extremism has been defined as acts by individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further their political goals (Glazzard & Zeuthen, 2016). Violent Extremism may manifest in the name of various causes across the political spectrum, but in most of the reported cases, it has been practiced in the form of religious extremism (Sotlar, 2004). Yet, religious leaders of the tribal areas of Pakistan have mixed views about this narrative. As Muhammad Wali Afridi of Khyber Agency has stated,

Religion is not responsible for extremism. In fact, it's the approach of every individual towards religion. How you take it is more important than what it says. Religion has been constantly misinterpreted. He added, 'there are more people who find peace in religion than those who become extremists in the name of religion. Now, who is correct: the majority of peace or the minority of extremism?'

But in contrast to this, two Imams (religious leaders of a mosque), Khanzali Shinwari and Salim Khan Kokikhail addressed the topic differently. They said,

Jihad is an important part of Islam. It is a conspiracy that Jihad is equated with extremism or terrorism.' When I asked if the Taliban fighting in Afghanistan or in Pakistan are extremists or Jihadists, their reply was very simple: 'They are our Muslim brothers and we must help them. If we can't help them, at least we must support them verbally by not equating Jihad with extremism.'

The phenomenon of violent extremism is not only detrimental to the foreign relations of Pakistan but is proving equally damaging to the maintenance and preservation of the domestic harmony of the state. Among the masses, it has created a sense of unrest, political instability, and economic uncertainty. In Pakistan, its roots can be linked to both internal and external factors. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, controversial blasphemy laws, 9/11 attacks, post 9/11 war on terror, drone attacks in former tribal areas, and inadequate counter-violent extremism measures (such as the anti-terror courts in 1997, adopted by the government to maintain internal security) have further deteriorated the situation (Aziz, 2015). The sustainability and stability of the state and the well-being of its people are at stake because of the persistently growing extremist activities. The rise of the Tahreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan of tribal areas, Tahreek-e-Nifaz-e-Sheriat-eMuhammadi of Swat, and recently emerged Tahreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan provide but a few examples to quote here. Since the issue is deeply embedded in society, there is a dire need to formulate and implement an all-inclusive, comprehensive, and coordinated policy.

The concept of countering violent extremism (CVE) established itself officially for the first time during the Obama administration. In 2015, a summit was hosted by the White House with the intention of confronting and eliminating the threat of violent extremism (Frazer and Nunlist, 2015). Though CVE is not a new concept, the purpose of the summit was to add more urgency and impetus to the various ongoing non-kinetic efforts to counter extremism and its underlying causes. In Pakistan, the National Action Plan was created in January 2015 in an attempt to subdue terrorist activities and extremist ideology in reaction to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar (Salahudin, 2016). However, the implementation of this framework has been ineffective and disjointed. This is mainly because of the state's historic dependence on kinetic tactics to combat extremism. The establishment of military courts under the NAP also reflected this reliance on military power. The Inter-Services Public Relations informed the media in January 2019 that a total of 717 cases had been referred for trials by the military courts during the last four years, of which 646 were disposed of. It was stated that 345 terrorists had been sentenced to death, of which 56 had been executed. A total of 296 other convicts were sentenced to imprisonment of varying terms, whereas five of the accused were acquitted. According to the data, the conviction rate of military courts was 99.22 percent (Dawn, Dec 21, 2020). Since then, several steps have been taken to implement the NAP¹ to attain the desired goals of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism.

[1] The 20 agenda items of the National Action Plan 2014 are:

1) Implementation of death sentence for convicted terrorists; 2) Launching special trial courts under the supervision of the Army. The duration of these courts would be two years; 3) Militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country; 4) NACTA, the anti-terrorism institution will be reinforced; 5) Strict action against literature, newspapers, and magazines promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism, and intolerance will be taken; 6) Choking financing for terrorists and terrorist organizations; 7) Safeguarding against re-emergence of proscribed organizations; 8) Establishing and deploying a dedicated counter-terrorism force; 9) Taking effective steps against religious persecution; 10) Registration and regulation of religious seminaries; 11) Ban on the glorification of terrorists and terrorist organizations through print and electronic media; 12) Administrative and development reforms in FATA with an immediate focus on repatriation of IDPs; 13) The communication network of terrorists will be dismantled completely; 14) Measures against the use and abuse of the internet and social media for terrorism; 15) Zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab; 16) Ongoing operation in Karachi will be carried to its logical end; 17) Balochistan government will be fully empowered for political reconciliation with complete ownership by all stakeholders; 18) Dealing strictly with sectarian terrorists; 19) Formulation of a comprehensive policy to deal with the issue of Afghan refugees, beginning with registration of all refugees; 20) Revamping and reforming the criminal justice system.

These steps include the strengthening of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), the establishment of special military courts for the speedy execution of terrorism-related trials, countering terrorism financing, and reforming the Madrassa system in Pakistan. Along with the NAP, various military operations have also been conducted across the country to uproot sleeping terrorist cells. As a result, there was a 30 percent reduction in terrorist attacks in 2019 as compared to the previous year. However, concerns remain regarding a relapse in religious extremism due to the presence of sympathizers and the absence of a conducive socio-political and socio-economic environment (Junaid, 2020). Poverty is the mother of all socio-economic problems. In tribal areas, terrorist organizations pay huge amounts of money to the unemployed youth. Moreover, assigned jobs are also cast in religious terms, i.e., as Jihad.

“People from our village were employed to fight against Western forces in Afghanistan in the name of Islam. Yes, they were also paid, and this payment was enough for running the kitchen of their families”, said Aasal Alam of North Waziristan, now living in D.I. Khan.

He further elaborated,

“Upon their return to their home villages, they found Pakistani forces fighting shoulder to shoulder with the American Army. Hence, they thought that Pakistan was also allied with the US in their fight with the Afghan Muslim brethren. Hence, they took up arms against the Pakistani forces and got more recruitment from their villages.”

Aasal Alam's account is clear evidence for the recruitment of terrorists from their communities. So, to eliminate the cancer of extremism from society, it is necessary to empower the local communities against it. A person's capacity to withstand any adverse condition is called resilience. The concept has been derived from the perspective of engineering, relating to the durability of a material to bend and not break (Weine, Henderson, Shanfield, Legha, & Post, 2013). Similarly, the more resilient the communities are, the more they will be able to withstand acts of violence and extremism without breaking.

Therefore, to get optimum output from the National Action Plan, it is essential to incorporate community resilience as one of its core components.

Though the NAP is the only comprehensive plan that provides a mechanism to eradicate extremist ideology and activities, it still needs to incorporate community engagement strategies to develop resilience in society, which is essential for eliminating extremism (Gunaratna, 2017). Local communities can clearly play a pivotal part in countering violent extremism; therefore, it is imperative to increase awareness among them. There is a pressing need to encourage communities to tolerate sectarian differences, ethnic diversities, and varying political convictions and to provide education on recruitment tactics and counter-terrorism. A recognition of this need is present in the communities themselves; a schoolteacher of Vana, Saleem Mahsud of South Waziristan, now living in D.I. Khan, stated

‘We did not know what is the objective of the Pakistani government and its army. Very recently, they came up with bold pronouncements of what they wanted. However, this was too little too late. The community had become, by now, a hub of terrorist and extremist recruitment. Had they produced more awareness about their own objectives and exposed terrorists’ nefarious designs, life would have been different. There wouldn’t have been so much terrorism, and resultantly there wouldn’t have been such a vast scale of terrorist recruitment from our society.’

Several challenges mar the government’s performance in tackling extremism. These include financial limitations, religious sensitivities of religiously conservative communities, and a lack of understanding regarding the root causes of extremism. One fundamental shortcoming in the NAP is the little to no attention directed to developing a community-centric approach for CVE. Unlike the US or the United Kingdom’s (UK) efforts to initiate and implement community-based CVE programs, Pakistan’s NAP has been silent on the subject of engaging communities that have remained victims of extremism.

It is evidently vital for Pakistan to understand the necessity for developing a community-centric CVE policy in Pakistan while keeping in view its unique and complex socio-political landscape and historical genesis, which played a significant role in generating this threat. This will be discussed further at the end of this paper under the heading of discussion and conclusion.

Tracing the Genesis of Violent Extremism in Pakistan

Extremism is a phenomenon with hidden complexities. However, generally speaking, activities, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, actions, and strategies of a character far beyond the norms defined by ordinary society are considered extremism (Coleman and Bartoli, 2003). The term is commonly used in connection with religious and political violence. The basic agenda of violent extremists is to place themselves outside the conventional framework of society and reject the existing political and social order. Extremists commonly reject notions of diversity and pluralism in favor of their preferred mono-cultural, ethnic, and sectarian views of humanity (Schmid, 2014). The widespread religious and nationalistic extremist activities in Pakistan follow this model.

A combination of internal and external factors has contributed to the rise of extremism in Pakistan. Since the inception of Pakistan, the contest between military and civilian rule has inhibited the establishment of a stable democratic institution. Resultantly, a mix of socioeconomic and political factors has created a sense of deprivation and marginalization among various segments of society, ultimately giving rise to violent extremism. These factors include ineffective rule of law, economic and educational disparities, uneven distribution of economic resources, and, most importantly, the misinterpretation of religion by non-state as well as state actors. As Syed Yasir Shah, a political activist of the ruling party of D.I. Khan, reiterated,

“Society emerged as disjointed, fractured and confused about the state’s political system, role of religion in governance and whole-hearted efforts to eradicate extremism’.

Most significant among the political developments in Pakistan was the Islamisation campaign of General Zia Ul Haq, a religious zealot and military dictator (Ghani, 2019), in the 1970s and the aftermath of the Afghan war of the 1980s. During Zia's era, the instrumentalization of Islam received state patronage, veering the society away from egalitarianism and towards fanatic radicalism. As Farmanullah Afridi of Karkhano Market, situated at the outskirts of Khyber Agency, explained to me,

'General Zia's Islamization plan proved counter-productive. He neither succeeded in bringing a complete Islamic system in the country nor left it as a secular entity of 1960s and 70s. He left it in limbo where the secular and, his own supported and encouraged, extremist forces collided time and again. Pakistan became a victim of Frankenstein's effect. A peaceful religious-minority-community started dictating its terms on majority pacific moderate Muslim-community'.

This shift proved epochal in the overall growth and development of extremist tendencies in Pakistan (Cordesman and Vira, 2011). Then, in the 1980s after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, mujahideen from Pakistan's tribal areas formed a frontline fighting guard as a counter move. These mujahedeen, who had been trained using funds from the US, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan, were left to their own devices after the two powers had left the region (Khan, 2019). This strengthened extremist groups in the region and introduced the concept of proxy governance, filling the void left by the State (Schetter, 2013; Aman, 2013). However, Zia's Islamisation and the Afghan war were not the sole factors that bred extremism in the state.

Externally, the Islamic Revolution of Shia Iran in 1979, and the growth and development of Sunni economies in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia have broadly contributed to the rise of Islamic militancy and violent extremism (Nasr, Feb 2000). These developments caused proxy sectarian wars in Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain, and deeply affected Pakistan. The post-1979 Iranian revolution held serious repercussions for politico-religious harmony in Pakistan, antagonizing Shia-Sunni hostilities and providing a cornerstone for violent sectarian conflicts and extremism (Khan, 2005)

Sunni organizations like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Muhammad, and Shia groups like Tahreeke-Nisaz-e-Fiqa-e-Jaffaria kept their daggers drawn. This melee of violent extremism was further accelerated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and by the reign of General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan in 1977.

Against the broad backdrop described above lie many multifaceted, localised conflicts that breed violent extremism at a grassroots level in Pakistan (Cordesman and Vira 2011). The interaction between these localized and regional dynamics means that a comprehensive strategy is needed to secure this threat. Although a reliance on hard measures to counter violent extremism has had some successes, it is far from adequate when it comes to addressing the root causes of extremism.

Pakistan's Initiatives to Counter Violent Extremism

Extremism can manifest in diverse forms: sectarianism, religious persecution, distortion of religious injunctions, hate speech and literature, belief in deprivation between provinces, left and right-wing political ideologies, smuggling, addictions, border controls, archaic traditions, including Swara, Wani, and many more. Issues caused by extremist mindsets include political uncertainty, mass unrest, governance problems, delayed justice, abuse of law and authority, and non-provision of basic amenities. In light of this range, the areas proposed for intervention in Pakistan are similarly manifold, and include counter-radicalization strategies, reforms in Madrassas, border control mechanisms, social inclusion and awareness, education and health reforms, and better governance (NCEPG, 2018). The intended outcome of these interventions is to prevent individuals from indulging in violent activities linked with political, ethnic, cultural, and religious ideologies, and is commonly referred to as 'countering violent extremism' (Wilson & Krentel, 2018).

No distinct laws to address terrorism existed in Pakistan prior to 1974, when the Suppression of Terrorist Activities (Special Courts) Act was passed. Next, in 1997, the Anti-Terrorist Act created more courts through special anti-terrorist legislation to deal with terrorism. Since then, the law has been amended fourteen times to tackle evolving terrorist activities. In 2013, a central institution, NACTA, was created to unify the State's administrative, punitive, and political responses to deal with the existential threat to the country. However, NACTA's scope was also restricted, and its success was limited.



Pakistan has been a victim of extremism for almost four decades. It has invested substantial finances and effort into countering this threat, which has not only impaired home security but has also damaged the socio-economic fabric of the country. The government of Pakistan has primarily remained inclined towards utilising periodic military operations and other kinetic responses to counter extremism. These include Operation Al-Mizan (2002-2006); Operation Sher Dil (2007-2009); Operation Rah-e-Haq (2007-2009); Operation Rah-e-Rast (2007-2009); Operation Zalzala (2008); Operation Rah-e-Nijat (2009-2010), Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2019), and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017-present). More than 375,000 anti-terrorist operations were carried out across the country under Operation Radd-ul-Fasad, including over 150,000 in Sindh, 34,000 in Punjab, more than 80,000 in Balochistan, and over 92,000 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (ARY, February 22, 2021). The only sporadic success of these kinetic efforts has created a space for the introduction of non-kinetic methods. A new blend of security-centric, development-centric, and community-centric approaches may prove invaluable to Pakistan's policy framework for countering extremism (Orakzai, 2017).

A growing awareness of the fact that hard measures alone cannot control the situation meant that past governments began to take concrete steps towards establishing soft power strategies to address extremism. Some of the non-military measures previously introduced by the government of Pakistan include the enlightened moderation policy of General Pervez Musharraf, the Madrasah reforms, the establishment of National Counter Terrorism Authority in 2009, the setting up of National Internal Security Policy in 2014, and finally the drafting of the National Action Plan in 2015 (Johnston, McDonnell, Burbridge and Patton, 2016). Due to the measures initiated by the government of Pakistan, deaths from violent extremism and terrorism have been reduced by roughly 77 percent since 2017 (Qadeem, 2019). By carrying out military operations and by the partial implementation of the National Action Plan, the government of Pakistan has been partially successful in countering violent extremism and deterring people from actively participating in heinous acts. However, even after four decades of battling widespread extremism, there still seems to be little improvement in the overall security dynamics of the country. Arguably, the government has failed to fully comprehend the intricate nexus between violent extremism and the role that a resilient community can play to tackle this challenge (Stevan Weine, 2013). Their efforts have been in good faith, yet they have underperformed in their implementation.



Simply running occasional deradicalization centres cannot eradicate extremism from society. This can only be achieved by creating resilient communities that reduce potential vulnerabilities and risk factors that draw people towards extremism, while simultaneously promoting protective conditions. The next section will discuss this further, considering how empowering civil society and encouraging behavioral changes can make citizens more resistant to intolerance, extremism, and hatred. In this regard, the media can play an active role in promoting positive changes amongst the masses.

Incorporating community resilience as a core component in NAP to counter violent extremism

Life doesn't get easier or more forgiving; we get stronger and more resilient.

(Maraboli, 1999)

The concept of resilience can be interpreted in two different contexts. The first defines resilience in terms of disaster preparedness; it means that resilience can be developed in individuals and communities to prepare them for a disastrous attack that may occur. In the second context, the term resilience is used to signify countering or resisting a concept. This study relies upon the second context. Here, resilience specifically concerns the ability among the members of the community to oppose radicalization and extremism (Stephens, 2019). Resilient societies are endowed with the power to challenge those who seek to radicalize them. Additionally, they can also provide support to those who have been affected by violent extremists (Radicalization Awareness Network, 2019). The inculcation of characteristics, skills, and capacities that can prevent individuals from being drawn into extremist ideologies or activities is essential. The fostering of flexible, tolerant, and strong individuals in educational institutions and communities will prove prolific in achieving the desired outcome in this regard. It is vital to create awareness about the dangers and threats that terrorism poses to make the community resistant to violent extremism. Therefore, Pakistan needs to incorporate attention to community resilience into its National Action Plan, thereby complementing the various ongoing counter-extremism policies in the country.

Several militant organizations have been proscribed by the government of Pakistan with the intent of safeguarding and ensuring the socio-economic development and well-being of its people. They include *Jaish-i-Mohammad*, *Sipha-i-Sahaba*, *Lashkar-i-Jhangvi*, *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, *Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat Mohammadi*, *Tehrik-i-Fiqh Jafriya*, *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), *Sipha Mohammad*, and *Harkat-ul-Mujahedin*.

However, little can be gained by the proscription of these organizations alone. The laws enacted and the initiatives taken to counter violent extremism cannot currently be implemented in their true spirit (Ghani, 2019), as they have failed to include the support of the community that is the ultimate victim of extremist activities.

The efforts towards peace and reconciliation with the insurgents-turned-terrorists were already greatly distressing for the state and society of Pakistan when events reached a climax on 16 December 2014. The attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar that took place on this date killed 132 children and 17 staff members. The disaster shocked the whole nation. In Peshawar, numerous stories circulated concerning the origin of the extremism behind the attack. Some narratives suggested that the backlash to foreign-backed military operations by the Pakistani state has fueled local resistance against the government. Others claimed that personal revenge lay behind the brutality, as a response to the state's collateral damage, which includes the killing of innocent civilians, especially in tribal areas. As a result of these motivations, every symbol of the state, be it a police station or a public sector University/school, is seen as an open target for the extremists. Overlaying these narratives is a belief that terrorists are said to be supported and funded by foreign secret agencies, particularly those in India and Afghanistan. The long-delayed National Action Plan (NAP) was finally launched on 24th December 2014- a week after the APS attack.



Army Public School Auditorium, Peshawar, Pakistan

To gain supremacy, extremist groups manipulate marginalized classes by using localized conflicts as a tool to spread violent extremism. They harness local grievances such as lack of access to justice, socio-economic marginalization, weak governance, and suppression of human rights that prevail in society for their own advantage (Fink and Barakat, 2013). To effectively mitigate extremism, new approaches should include the implementation of collective actions, resilient practices, and an emphasis on the community's ability to adapt (Metre, 2016; Edwards, 2009). Success, however, as existing CVE measures suggest, is contingent upon engaging all the community stakeholders in Pakistan, including the government, religious leaders, media, and the private sector. The threat of violent extremism in Pakistan is so unpredictable that to counter it solely by relying on the traditional security-centric CVE measures, such as law enforcement and military responses, is not sufficient. The only rational option left is to initiate a grassroots-level course of action. Emphasizing an approach that is centered on the involvement of local communities and the direct victims and targets of extremism (Fink & Barkat, 2013) has so far not been explored by the relevant practitioners and policymakers in Pakistan.

In contrast, the international community has recognized the importance of adopting a more holistic approach towards extremism. Many of their efforts are concentrated on soft interventions with a stress on the engagement of communities rather than exclusively relying on security-centric approaches (Stewart, N.D.). In 2016, the United Nations' (UN) plan of action to prevent violent extremism focused on addressing the underlying grievances and building trust between the government and the victims of extremism (UN, 2016). The drivers of violent extremism aim to gain the support of aggrieved persons to further their cause. In an attempt to combat this, the British Council has a multi-fold strategy. It suggests that communities should be made resilient by providing young people with ample opportunities to access education, thereby increasing their ability to resist violent extremism. It further aims to improve the capacity of community organizations and the government to work collaboratively to overcome local grievances (Stewart, N.D.). Pakistan could benefit by adopting sustainable approaches akin to these in order to address popular discontent. The degree of collaboration between the community and the government directly correlates to the chances of success in rooting out extremism.

The policy reforms in education, media, economic development, and the security sector already initiated by the government are proving unproductive due to the lack of support from the local communities (Farsight, 2016). Despite dedicating efforts towards countering violent extremism, neither intelligence agencies nor law enforcement agencies can be present everywhere and at all times. Consequently, after the law enforcement agencies carry out their respective roles by employing hard counter-measures against extremists, the responsible policymakers and institutions need to support their efforts by identifying gatekeepers in the community. These gatekeepers are those best positioned to discern individuals on the verge of engaging in extremist behaviour, being their peers. They must also be capable enough to identify the resources that attract these individuals towards extremist ideologies (Zeiger & Allay, 2015). Ideal candidates for this role include community figures such as religious scholars, school and university teachers, media men, and those well-versed in print and electronic media in general. Forming local links is evidently vital, not just in terms of fostering grassroots contacts but also by propagating stronger social connections within and between local communities.

Heidi Ellis and Sadia Abdi have suggested strengthening social connections to make communities stronger in the face of violent extremism and alleviate the risk factors associated with recruitment. The term social bonding is used to denote the connections within a community whose members share the same social identities. The term social bridging is adopted to explain the connection between groups whose individuals respectively have divergent social identities but share a common sense of community (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Developing a strong social connection between groups and communities in Pakistan can strengthen feelings of oneness and tolerance. In this way, a strong bond can be created and developed among the individuals of a community that will lead to a greater spirit of inclusion and empower them to withstand violent extremism. Isolated communities are always more vulnerable.

Besides the community divisions mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the subsequent displacement of the FATA tribesmen, either due to militant violence or military operations, has further added to issues of social cohesion. This is especially the case in the settled districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (especially D.I. Khan and Bannu) and Islamabad, where these people have faced difficulties in adjusting to the new environment owing to the disparity between rural and urban life. This feeling of “not belonging” has shaped an enabling environment for extremism. The tribal communities who have now settled in urban regions across the country need to be integrated into their new geographical communities in order to reduce their vulnerability to extremist ideology. Their integration will also strengthen the communities that they join overall. An extended and elaborated NAP needs to take into consideration the grievances of these communities and prepare them so they do not fall prey to the menace of extremism in the future.

To defend the population from extremist ideologies and practices, it is therefore a prerequisite for policymakers to first acknowledge the role of communities, and then enhance the state’s connection with them, their trust in the government, and their bonds with each other. This will improve the efficacy of the various awareness programs that can be introduced to counteract the extremist philosophies used to recruit vulnerable individuals. Necessary elements in these educational programs include the deglamorization of extremist ideologies, the deconstruction of extremist narratives, and the provision of counter-narratives (Council of Europe, N.D.). Only locally-driven efforts can eradicate the roots of extremism in a sustainable and long-term manner.

Discussion and Conclusion

The NAP, as it stands, is comprised of twenty points, but the most important one is missing - community resilience. Extremist and terrorist organizations rely upon recruitment from the community. If a community is strong and fully apprised of the situation and its consequences, it will be resistant to manipulation. Therefore, until community resilience is incorporated into the NAP, Pakistan will remain consumed by firefighting rather than removing fuel from the blaze.

It is possible that the media could play a role in mitigating the situation. However, Dr Inayat Kaleem, Chairman of the Department of International Relations at the COMSATS University, Islamabad has a contrary view. He argues that the

‘[The] mainstream media has its own limitations. This is the era of social media. [The] state may regulate social media for making the community resilient.’

Utilising social media does appear to be a more democratic option; however, it must be remembered that extremists can also use social media. The party that uses these instruments of influence with the most efficiency will win.

When I spoke with Dr Mufti Almas Gul, a research fellow in the Department of International Relations at the University of Peshawar, concerning the NAP, she responded,

‘The 20-point National Action Plan has missed out on working on some fundamental issues. For example, working against the recruitment of terrorists. Undoubtedly, most of these terrorists are young Pakistani nationals, and they are recruited by the terrorist organisations for different reasons, including ideology, monetary gains, and belonging to the neglected segments of society. Revised curriculum in universities and colleges against extremism and tolerance for other faiths, sects, and ethnic minorities, consulting university students while devising policies of national security and working towards the betterment of the neglected segments of society, as well as engaging youth in positive activities, can work against this menace, we are engulfed in.’

Dr Gul's comments are very important and pragmatic in dealing with the menace of community resilience as well as making the National Action Plan more robust. In fact, she chalks out parts of a strategy for handling extremism.

Unlike Dr Gul, Dr Shakeel Ahmed, Chairman, Department of Social Work, University of Peshawar, is hawkish concerning the lethargic operation of the NAP and NACTA:

‘There is a dire need to change the governmental modus operandi from killing (firefighting) to working on the community. As mentioned above, gatekeepers are numerous and have the propensity to act vehemently and enthusiastically. But the passive role of NACTA for community resilience is discouraging.’ He further elaborated, ‘Teachers, journalists, policemen, civil society, and religious scholars are ready to play their active role in softening attitudes of the community. They are the trusted and respected lot. Hence, they can play a very constructive and positive role. However, managing and streamlining their roles under NACTA is a requirement for now.’

Dr Syed Irfan Ashraf of the Department of Journalism adds that,

‘Once Community Resilience is included in the NAP, every aspect of society will start playing its constructive and contributive role in eradicating extremism and preaching tolerance and peace in society. Any community service of an Imam of Masjid, a teacher, a journalist, a policeman, or any government servant without government patronage is counterproductive. People want recognition of their services as per the law. This is possible only once the Community Resilience is included in the NAP.’

However, Aamir Ayub, who works for an NGO, has a different opinion, arguing that,

‘[t]hough [the] NAP is a complete failure due to its extra-kinetic and extremely bureaucratic approach, adding resilience will make it a plan of the community as a whole. Every Pakistani will be responsible for accepting tolerance, preaching peace, and acting upon its silent contours. Thus, [the] NAP will become a public-private partnership. In this way, extremists will not be able to find the gap between the government and the governed.’

Dr Inayat Kaleem disagrees with Dr Ashraf. He disappointedly says,

‘Our society is full of ignorance and hate. After class 5, [the] dropout rate is 50%. The ones who go further are taught Math, Chemistry, Physics, and other subjects, which are devoid of any education related to civic responsibilities, endurance, community service, ethics, morality, and/or tolerance. Thus, our society remains ignorant of basic ethics, which in turn multiplies into extremism.’

He also couches the role of the religious leader (Molvi) in very negative terms:

‘[the] Molvi is bribed, by different means, for delivering a sermon based on extremism. Thus, [the] Molvi plays an active role in fanning sectarian divide and garnering support for extremists on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is alarming. [The] need of the time is to get the Molvi on the governmental payroll. He must be paid a modest honorarium so that he is bound by the government policies. In this way, the government would be in a position to hand over an official sermon to the clergy for Jumma prayers, which would be apolitical and based on ethics and inclusiveness with a pluralistic approach.’

Taking a tangent, Mr Omer Hayat, an official working at the State Bank of Pakistan, Peshawar, says that the role of banks in discouraging extremists is valuable. He recounts how money laundering and informal modes of money transactions, like Hundi (informal means of transferring money from one country to another without involving banks - money laundering), are detrimental to a society. ‘Stop money laundering and the extremist elements will wither away, ’ Mr Hayat urges, adding that ‘the community must be imparted education about illegal transactions. They may be given an awareness about legal ways of money transference, i.e., inter-bank transactions, and not otherwise.

Violent extremism poses an existential threat to the stability of Pakistan and the socio-economic well-being of the people. An effective, inclusive, and foolproof action plan is required to eliminate extremist ideologies and activities from society. Engaging all stakeholders into a cohesive single fold will prove invaluable, as they stand, ethnic and sectarian divisions limit Pakistan's ability to resist extremism. However, this harmony cannot be achieved without empowering local communities. It is imperative to increase community awareness of the adverse effects of extremism. Providing education on their crucial role in countering violent extremist ideologies is essential.

There is no dearth of activism among the local communities of Pakistan. Whether it concerns disaster management, the mitigation of conflicts, or peacebuilding, local communities at a grassroots level have always played an active role. However, it is critical that the state engage with and strengthen these efforts and the communities that house them. These efforts may not carry the label of countering violent extremism, but they aid in the creation of resilience. The government will always remain ill-equipped to eradicate violent extremism without community engagement.

The inclusion of community resilience in the NAP is an integral step in this direction.

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INTERVIEWS

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- Aasal Alam, a clerk in a government department of North Waziristan, now living in D.I. Khan, interviewed in D. I. Khan on 23rd October 2020.
- Dr Shakeel Ahmed, Chairman, Department of Social Work, University of Peshawar, interviewed in Peshawar on December 15, 2020.
- Dr Syed Irfan Ashraf, Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, interviewed in Peshawar on 16th December 2020.
- Farmanullah Afridi, a businessman of Karkhano Market (tax-free market), situated at the outskirts of Khyber Agency, was interviewed in Karkhano, Peshawar, on November 12, 2020.
- Khanzali Shinwari, Imam of a mosque in Landi Kotal, Khyber Agency, interviewed on 27th February 2021 in Landi Kotal.
- Muhammad Wali Afridi, a local religious scholar of Khyber Agency, interviewed in Jamrud, Khyber Agency, on 27 February 2021
- Saleem Mahsud, a school teacher of Wanna, South Waziristan, now living in D.I. Khan, interviewed in D.I. Khan on 24th October, 2020.
- Salim Khan Kukikhail, Imam of a Mosque in Jamrud, Khyber Agency, interviewed on 28th February 2021.
- Syed Yasir Shah, a political activist of D.I. Khan, interviewed in D.I. Khan on October 25, 2020.
- Dr Inayat Kaleem, Chairman, Department of International Relations at the COMSATS University, Islamabad, Interviewed on March 22, 2021.
- Dr Mufti Almas Gul, a research fellow at the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, interviewed on 20th April 2021.
- Omer Hayat, an official at the State Bank of Pakistan, Peshawar, interviewed on November 29, 2020.



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