

Assessing Pakistan's Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Programmes to Propose an Alternative Narrative for Countering Extremist Ideologies

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Abstract

Pakistan's Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts combine policy options and deradicalization programmes. However, these efforts have not efficiently utilized the potential of indigenously derived national narratives in combating terrorism and extremism. Pakistani officials introduced the Paigham-e-Pakistan (Message of Pakistan—a collective fatwā issued by more than 1800 religious scholars to provide a rebuttal to the extremist ideologies. However, the prime focus of this document remained limited to declaring any ruling on takfīr and jihād as prohibited while neglecting the pivotal concept of khurūj, which plays a central role in extremism and radicalization within Pakistan. Instead of simply endorsing or rejecting terrorists' interpretations of vital religious concepts, it is imperative for the state, along with other deradicalization efforts, to present an alternative narrative rooted in religion to tackle the threats of extremism and radicalization within Pakistani society. This analytical study attempts to evaluate the gaps in the CVE models of Pakistan and elucidates how the Islamic concept of wasaṭiyyah (moderation) can serve as the basis for an alternative narrative against extremism and radicalization in the country.

Keywords

CVE, deradicalization, alternative narratives, wasaṭiyyah, takfīr, khurūj.

Introduction

Despite significant counter-extremism efforts by Pakistani officials in both kinetic and non-kinetic domains, there has been a sharp rise in acts of terrorism and extremism. Reports indicate that militants perpetrated 789 attacks in 2023, resulting in 1524 fatalities and 1463 injuries.¹ This represents a dramatic sixty-nine per cent increase in militant attacks

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¹ Ikram Junaidi, "Violence-linked Fatalities Hit Six-year High," *Dawn News*, January 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1802262>.

compared to the previous year.² This sharp increase in terrorist activities may have a twofold reason: the August 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the rise in religious extremism in the country.³

Religious extremism has been a prevalent feature of Pakistani society for a long time. However, its scope broadened during the 1970s, along with the pan-Islamist policy of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. As per the 1973 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973), approximately ninety-six per cent population is Muslim, and Islam is the state religion. Being an ideological state, Pakistan has deep-rooted connections with Islamic teachings.⁴ Although Pakistan's founder, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, mentioned on August 11, 1947, "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste, or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State,"⁵ the radical groups undermined this message of tolerance, peace, and brotherhood. Instead, they misconstrued and employed religious concepts for subversive purposes.

The geopolitical location fueled the fire and made Pakistan vulnerable to extremist discourses from foreign sources. The Pan-Islamism of the 1970s, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization efforts in Pakistan, and most notably, the USA-sponsored Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan created a breeding ground that contributed to the increase of extremism across the society of Pakistan.

Later, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, global radical outfits such as Al-Qaeda provided religious justification for violence by disseminating religious *fatwās* to the indigenous militant groups, including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP is the most significant militant group that uses religion as a primary source to justify its violent actions within and beyond the state but never developed its indigenous ideological framework,⁶ as the TTP leadership and its followers have limited knowledge of Islamic teachings and a significant portion of its membership includes

² Ibid.

³ Muhammad Nawaz Khan, "Pakistan's Alarming Rise in Terrorism is Fueled by Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/pakistans-alarming-rise-in-terrorism-is-fueled-by-afghanistan/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, "The Speech of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah," to the 1st Constituent Assembly, National Assembly of Pakistan, August 11, 1947, <https://pdf.defence.pk/threads/full-text-of-quaid-e-azams-speech-on-11th-of-august-1947-to-the-constituent-assembly.630809/>.

⁶ Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 19.

aides from criminal networks, smugglers, and gangs.⁷ The group relies on borrowed ideological justification from external sources such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁸

The Pakistani authorities have taken up different approaches, including kinetic and non-kinetic measures, to deal with the TTP by launching various military operations and deradicalization and emancipation programmes (DREP) in Swat and newly merged districts (formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). These military operations aimed at wiping out the physical presence of the militants within the country, and the deradicalization programmes meant to deal with the aggravated level of extremism within Pakistani society. Though the military operations were able to successfully curtail the physical presence of militants from Swat and former FATA, the deradicalization efforts remained ineffective in dealing with the fear of extremism.

The success of any deradicalization programme in a country like Pakistan would require an efficacious ideological setting that may provide a rebuttal to extremists' justification of violence against the state and its people. Instead of working on the extremism's ideological manifestation, Pakistani deradicalization efforts are confined to vocational training, religious counselling, formal education, psychological rehabilitation, and social integration of the militants and their sympathizers.⁹ This has resulted in a neglect towards countering extremist ideologies.

The literature on counter-extremism revolves around various repetitive themes, including the scope of Pakistani CVE programmes, structural reasons for extremism, and the use of religious narratives by terrorist groups.¹⁰ The indigenous literature often glorifies the role of Pakistani military successes in the former FATA, which were crucial to hard counter-terrorism in the country.¹¹ Contrastingly, Western scholars have done most theoretical work on this issue, while a conceptual

⁷ Mona Kanwal Sheikh, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41-42.

⁸ Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, 19.

⁹ Abdul Basit, "Pakistan's Militant Rehabilitation Programs: An Overview," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 7, no. 9 (2015): 10-17.

¹⁰ Amil Khan, "Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism," United States Institute of Peace, March 2013, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR327-Pakistan-and-the-Narratives-of-Extremism.pdf>.

¹¹ Muhammad Makki and Natasha Khan, "Critical Appraisal of Pakistan's Efforts in (Re) Constructing a National Narrative to Violent Extremism and Terrorism: A Case of Paigham-e-Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 1, no. 2 (2019): 2-31.

engagement with this phenomenon is minimal in Pakistani discourse.¹² Several Western and local analysts believe that extremism in Pakistan is an indigenous issue that results from structural factors,¹³ including socio-economic deprivation,¹⁴ globalization,¹⁵ political marginalization, identity crisis,¹⁶ and social connections with radical, extremist, and terrorist friends and family members.¹⁷ These studies have completely ignored the role of subjective factors like religion, ideology, beliefs, and perceptions in manifesting extremist narratives in the country.

There is a considerable gap in the literature on extremist narratives in Pakistan, and very few scholars have done an in-depth study on the subject. One study discusses the narratives of various terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan and explains that most of the terrorist organizations in Pakistan use robust religious discourses to justify their violent activities.¹⁸ These narratives are based on the misinterpretation of religious concepts by Al-Qaeda, which is using these narratives instrumentally not only for exploitation but also for promoting sympathy for themselves among the masses.¹⁹

Another research mentioned that some religious seminaries in Pakistan had engendered religious and political discourses to facilitate religious extremism in Pakistan.²⁰ Theoretical work on radicalization and media defines the process of extremism in Pakistani society and

¹² Anum Babur and Saba Noor, "Paigham-e-Pakistan as a Counter Extremism Narrative," *Journal of Contemporary Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023): 69-87.

¹³ Abdul Basit, "Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and Deradicalization Initiatives," *IPRI Journal* 15, no. 2 (2015): 44-68. Minhas Majeed Khan, "Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: An Appraisal of Pakistan's CVE Initiatives," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2016), https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SS_No_4_2015_Dr_Minhas.pdf.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Vidino and James Brando, "Countering Radicalization in Europe," A policy report published by International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2012, <https://hope-radproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Vidino-Brandon-2012-Countering-radicalization-in-Europe.pdf>.

¹⁵ William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), <https://academic.oup.com/book/11176>.

¹⁶ Frazer Egerton, *Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10-54.

¹⁷ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy* (London: Penguin Group, 2010), 93-105.

¹⁸ Khan, "Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Fatima Sajjad, Daniel J. Christie, and Laura K. Taylor, "De-radicalizing Pakistani Society: The Receptivity of Youth to a Liberal Religious Worldview," *Journal of Peace Education* 14, no. 2 (2017): 195-214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2017.1304901>.

highlights the role of media in imparting dominance to radical narratives. Azam discusses the mainstream and radicalized media and their impact on each other. However, the argument needs to explain radicalization in the context of the use of religious narratives in Pakistan.²¹ Hashmi, Hamid, and Hashmi explained the way social media has worked as a double-edged sword in dealing with extremism. Inexpensive access to internet data, even in developing countries, has increased the number of social media users on mobile devices. The use of this facility has multiplied the receptiveness of extremist agendas and violent extremism. They further write,

The development has also exposed us to the changing nature and dynamics of extremist organizations, in terms of their operational and functional capabilities. Scholars have widely observed that the availability of the internet (and/or social media) has equally offered extremist organizations an opportunity to reach the wider public and vulnerable segments of society (such as youth). Therefore, the self-edited and controlled horizontal media has served the organizations very well regarding disseminating extremist narratives, hate speech, and disinformation. . . . The apparent challenge is that hate speech and extremist content identification is not easy to trace or decode, as it is written or recorded in local languages (such as Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, Pashto, Bangla or Tamil). Besides, there is less information about the planning and maneuvering tactics of extremists in carrying out violent activities because they have the essential expertise in using the safest and secret channels of social media platforms.²²

To counter the extremist social media presence, the necessary technology and expertise are required to decode the content from a local language. An App Surfsafe was launched by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), under its Tatheer drive to eliminate extremism and terrorism from Pakistan. It was named “Chaukas” (vigilant). It was designed for the public to report any hate content anonymously so that the content (and content producer) would be reported to the relevant law enforcement agencies. The demerit of Chaukas, however, was that it did not ensure the privacy of the reporter, and the sensitive nature of the content might lead the reporting person to unnecessary questioning by the authorities.²³

²¹ Muhammad Azam, “Radicalization and Media: Who Influences Whom and How in Pakistan?” *Conflict and Peace Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370904064_Radicalization_and_Media_Who_Influences_Whom_and_How_in_Pakistan.

²² Arshi Hashmi, Maria Hamid, and Moazzam Hashmi, “Youth, Counter Violent Extremism and (Social) Media: A Case of Pakistan,” *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* 5, no. 1 (2022): 61-72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 65.

Despite tremendous CVE efforts by the government, there is a visible gap in the literature in terms of evaluating extremism models and exploring alternative narratives in Pakistan. So, the present study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the role a religiously grounded counter-narrative would play in Pakistan's CVE efforts. The study also aims to suggest sources for alternative narratives for countering the terrorist narratives. Pakistani CVE programmes mainly focus on five modules, including psychological counselling and assessment, religious counselling, formal education, vocational training, and family counselling, but ignore the use of counter or alternative religious narratives. Along with the alternative narrative, this research provides a comprehensive model to have a more impactful alternative narrative. This study answers the following three questions: 1) Why have the CVE efforts of Pakistan not been successful in addressing the extremist narrative in the country? 2) What can be an alternative narrative for Pakistani society to deal with religious extremism? and 3) How can these alternative narratives be made impactful?

The research methodology employed in this study adheres to an interpretive framework, rooted in deductive reasoning. Utilizing both primary and secondary qualitative data sources, data was collected from diverse sources, including books, journal articles, lectures from practitioners at the National Counter Terrorism Training 2023, and extremists' publications such as *Majallah*—TTP's monthly magazine, specifically, issues 16 to 19. The semi-structured interviews with the experts were conducted to gain a comprehensive insight into the subject. These experts were selected through purposive sampling and were approached through WhatsApp and telephone calls, ensuring a nuanced exploration of the weaknesses within the Paigham-e-Pakistan narrative and potential alternative narratives.

The phenomenon of "narrative" originates from the term "narratology" and is used to refer to various theoretical concepts across disciplines, including political science, communication studies, sociology, organization studies, and anthropology. It is employed to explain the specific perspectives of certain groups and individuals as they try to elucidate past events, incidents, and interpretations.²⁴ Mainly, a narrative is a constructed story based on perceptions. The narratives depend on the interpretation of audiences, the sequence of events, and the characters of the group or personalities who plot it.²⁵

²⁴ Babur and Noor, "Paigham-e-Pakistan as a Counter Extremism Narrative."

²⁵ Michael Murray, "Narrative Psychology," in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, ed. J. A. Smith (London: Sage, 2003), 113.

Narratives can be communicated in several ways, but in the presence of appealing content or, in the case of extremism, “extremist ideology” is highly significant. Usually, a narrative works in four steps: orientation, complicating actions, evaluation cues, and resolutions.²⁶

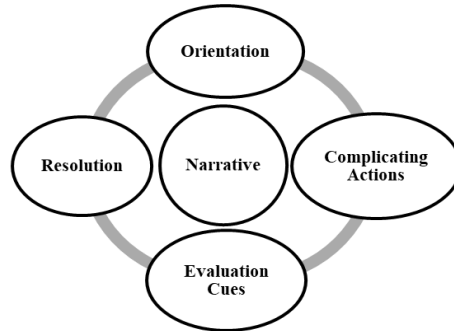


Figure 1: Theoretical Structure of a Narrative²⁷

The use of a comprehensive narrative assists extremist groups in contextualizing their ideology towards a specific cause (orientation) and outlining the significant events (complicating actions). Moreover, it assists them in subjective interpretation (evaluation cues). Eventually, this narrative transformation leads to the way forward (resolution), where the audience owns it.

The experimental studies on narratives have illustrated that the audience accepts the given narrative as a resolution and incorporates or juxtaposes their cognitive modes (intuitions and critical analysis) with the narratives.²⁸ To put it in another way, to process a narrative entirely, the audience includes rational and irrational beliefs to embed extremist messages in their social construct based on feelings and behaviours. Due to this, the extremist groups pick up their narrative from a specific domain of the already known congruence. As in the case of Pakistani militant groups such as TTP, the group has adopted narratives from religion. This narrative, based on Salafism, is further elaborated by Al-Qaeda’s explanations on the concept of *al-walā’ wa ’l-barā’* (allegiance and disavowal), *takfīr* (declaring other Muslims as infidels in certain conditions), and *khurūj* (armed rebellion against the state) to justify their violent activities within and beyond the territorial boundaries of the country. For the former chairperson of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Qibla Ayaz, the increasing religious intolerance in Pakistan is due to the

²⁶ S. L. Carthy and K. M. Sarma, “Countering Terrorist Narratives: Assessing the Efficacy and Mechanisms of Change in Counter-narrative Strategies,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 3 (2023): 569-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1962308>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

ideological underpinning rooted in the concept of *al-walā' wa 'l-barā'*. It was during the 1980s that this ideology found its genesis and subsequently played a pivotal role in shaping Pakistani society. It was initially disseminated covertly but later became part of the curriculum of some religious seminaries to prepare fighters for the Afghan War.²⁹

The misinterpretation of such beliefs by the Salafist preachers enabled the radical and extremist groups in Pakistan to propagate hatred against those who opposed their beliefs and justify the killings of innocent people. Muhammad Saeed Al-Qahtani wrote the first book on these concepts, *al-Wala wa'l-Bara according to the Aqeedah of the Salaf*.³⁰ In this book, the author misinterpreted the Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic traditions to explain the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as one based on hostility.³¹ This book set the stage for Ayman al-Zawahiri's work *al-Ṣubḥ wa 'l-Qindīl* (Morning and the Lamp), translated in Urdu by 'Abd al-Ṣamad in 2009, as *Sapīdah-i Saḥar aur Timtimātā Chirāgh*. Its author declared Pakistan an un-Islamic country and the constitution of Pakistan a product of the Western mindset.³²

This narrative of Al-Qaeda provides a narrative resolution for the Pakistani militants to fight against the Pakistani authorities, including law enforcement agencies, government officials, and even innocent citizens. According to Saleem Shehzad, this justification of radicalism serves the purpose of Al-Qaeda's global militant ideology. The Pakistani militants had limited knowledge of Islamic philosophy; the Al-Qaeda ideologues used concepts of *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance),³³ *takfīr*, and *khurūj* as the baseline. They declared Pakistani society to be a *jāhīlī* society due to its involvement in various non-Islamic activities known as *bid'ah* (heresy).³⁴

To propagate this extremist ideology in Pakistan and justify war against the Pakistani state, al-Zawahiri set specific guidelines and tasked Shaykh Issa Al-Misri, also known as Shaykh Abdal-Hakim Hassan Abu

²⁹ Qibla Ayaz, "Religious Intolerance in Pakistan," a speech at National Peace Festival-2023 (National Counter Terrorism Authority, September 20, 2023).

³⁰ Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani, *al-Wala wa'l-Bara according to the 'Aqeedah of the Salaf*, trans. Omar Johnstone (London: Al-Firdous, 1993).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ayman al-Zawāhirī, *Sapīdah-i Saḥar aur Timtimātā Chirāgh: Islāmī Dastūr Samjḥ Janē Walē Dustūr-i Pākistān kā Sharī'at kī Rōshnī maiṇ Muḥākamah*, trans. 'Abd al-Ṣamad (n.p.: Idārah-i Ḥittīn, 2009), 20-29, https://archive.org/details/Sapeeda-e-Saḥar_Aur_Timtimata_Charagh_Dr_Aiman.

³³ Pre-Islamic time when Arabs were involved in various un-Islamic activities.

³⁴ This term refers to innovation and includes ideas that do not belong to the original faith and were not practised by the followers of the Prophet's time.

Amr,³⁵ to establish links with the local clerics. Shaykh Issa performed this task in two tiers. Initially, he approached local clerics (named Moulvi Sadiq Noor and Abdul Khaliq Haqqani) of North Waziristan and convinced both clerics to explain to people in their sermons that there is no difference between the USA and the Pakistani armed forces; and that Pakistani forces are even worse as being Muslim they are supporting the infidels of Israel and the USA. Both clerics started preaching the same concepts in the local mosques of Mir Ali and Darpa Khail in North Waziristan³⁶ and infiltrated the Al-Qaeda ideology in the ex-FATA. Gradually, this ideology was picked up by the local militants, including the Ghazi brothers of Red Mosque (Lal Masjid, Islamabad).³⁷

The above discussion reveals that any study on counter-narratives in Pakistan is incomplete without addressing the essence of radical ideology. Stephen Biddle, in a similar vein, posits that it was the radical ideology of Al-Qaeda that was the real enemy, rather than terrorism itself, in the war against terrorism. It is the ideology that needs to be defeated; otherwise, counter-terrorist efforts will inevitably fail.³⁸

The Strategic Importance of Ideology in Extremism: Options for Pakistan

Extremist and terrorist groups put tremendous effort into ideological work based on their particular beliefs to construct narratives that attract more people and justify their violent activities. In this age of cyber vulnerabilities and technological advancement, a well-constructed ideology can provide maximum gains to such organizations. An excellent example is the Umer Studio's official website, which publishes TTP's magazine *Majallah* regularly. This magazine not only provides the latest chronology of the group's achievements but also deals with justifying the fight against Pakistani officials by explaining their actions and *fatwās* through engaging in theological debate. Farooq Khan, a former professor at the University of Swat, produced several works and lectured against the TTP's ideology. Khan mentioned, in one of his pamphlets on *jihād* versus terrorism, the following: "If the religious scholars had issued decrees against the suicide bombing eight years ago, the menace would not have spread to such an extent. Extremism is averse to dialogue and

³⁵ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Al-Qaeda Goes Back to Base," *Asia Times Online*, November 4, 2005.

³⁶ Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, 19.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Stephen Biddle, "War Aims and War Termination," in *Defeating Terrorism: Strategic Issues Analyses*, ed. John R. Martin (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 7-8.

democracy and unrelated to any religion.”³⁹ The TTP killed Khan for being vocal against militancy and the Taliban.⁴⁰ The killing of Khan sensitized the Pakistani authorities to respond to the militant groups on an ideological plane.⁴¹ Several letters from Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were published to support the TTP militants’ operations inside Pakistan.⁴² The past experiences of such ideological backing indicate that TTP and Al-Qaeda militants believed that spreading religious extremism in Pakistan was a logical outcome, as guided by their beliefs. Had it not been intrinsically important to them, these groups would not have spent so many resources and energy on producing ideological materials for engaging local clerics to preach their *fatwās* in their sermons.

Hence, ideology and narratives are interlinked and cannot be dealt with separately. Therefore, ideology and narratives must be responded to all at once. To further understand the scope of ideology in narrative building and to evaluate the importance of alternative narratives, this study has developed a comprehensive model based on the findings of Mark Juergensmeyer’s book *Terror in the Mind of God*⁴³ and Muhammad Hanif Hassan and Tuty Raihanah Mostarom’s monograph *A Decade of Combating Radical Ideology*.⁴⁴ This model aims to develop an understanding of terrorists’ ideological trajectories and proposes an alternative narrative to deal with the existing extremist narratives.

It has been observed that terrorism occurs when opportunity, motivation, and capability intersect.⁴⁵ Ideology serves as a motivating force for terrorist groups, and when infused with religion, this motivation is transformed into a perceived cosmic war.⁴⁶ The cosmic war is a phenomenon of divine struggle between good and evil. Transcending human scale, these wars are unaffected by the loss of leadership. While profoundly personal, the

³⁹ Ayesha Umar, “Dr Farooq: The Loss of an Intellectual,” *The Express Tribune*, October 6, 2010, <https://tribune.com.pk/article/2025/dr-farooq-the-loss-of-an-intellectual>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michael W. S. Ryan, “Al-Qaeda on Pakistan: Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Morning and the Lamp,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 11 (2010): 6-8, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/TM_008_07.pdf.

⁴² Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, 19.

⁴³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 145-63.

⁴⁴ Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Tuty Raihanah Mostarom, *A Decade of Combating Radical Ideology* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 2011).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 145-63.

notion of cosmic warfare can be extrapolated to the societal realm. Acts of religious terrorism operate not only as tactical tools within political strategies but also as manifestations of a wider spiritual conflict.⁴⁷

According to Juergensmeyer, once the terrorist ideology enters a cosmic war, this ideological transformation justifies the terrorist activities in three ways. First, it is perceived as a defence of basic identity and dignity; second, losing the struggle will be unthinkable; and third, the struggle is blocked and cannot be won in real time or real terms.⁴⁸ When all options are exhausted and a simple war is transformed into a cosmic war, it becomes a sacred battle. So, a struggle that starts for political gains gradually transforms into a sacred war, and simple opponents become cosmic foes. Cosmic wars are very difficult to fight and win as they never end until the ideology is redirected or until one of the sides has been destroyed. If the ideologies reach this point, the deprogramming becomes very hard. Usually, to respond to this situation, states have two options. Either they go for kinetic means (military operations) or non-kinetic (counter-narratives) measures while ignoring the possibility of an alternative narrative that can end this war by redirecting the extremist ideology of terrorist groups.

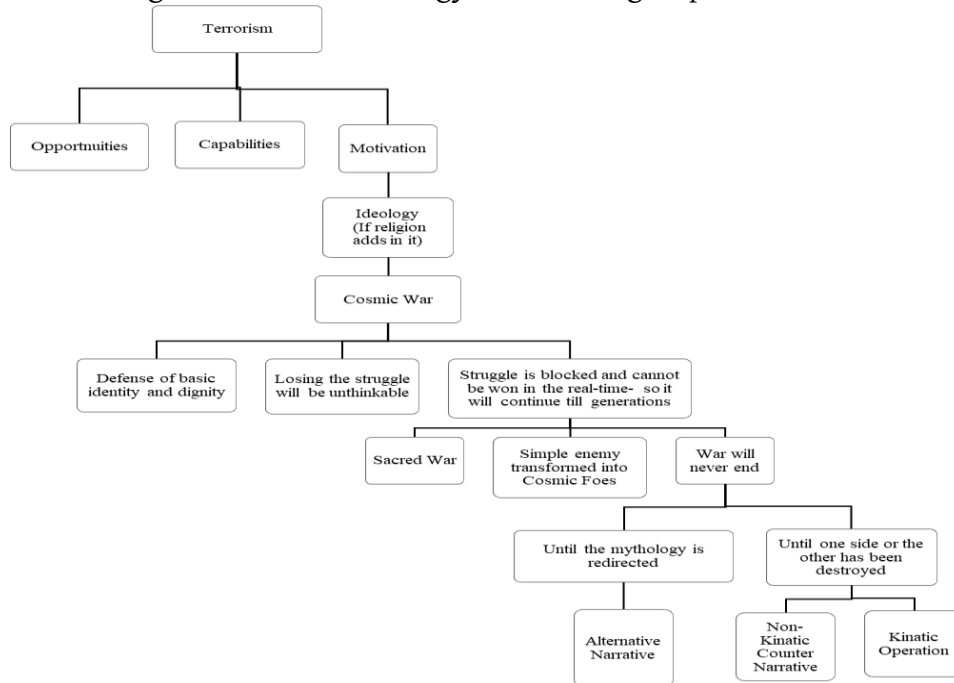


Figure 2: Strategic Analysis: Flow Chart for Analysing Terrorists' Ideology and Proposing Responses for Pakistan

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Rather than spending all energies on responding to the terrorists with kinetic operations and non-kinetic ways of writing rebuttals, states should find a proactive strategy of an alternative narrative along with other deradicalization efforts and redirect the ideology.

Assessing the Extremist Narrative and Identifying Gaps in CVE Efforts of Pakistan

The Pakistani government adopted an integrated approach to address the challenges related to extremism and radicalization. This approach involved a two-pronged strategy incorporating both kinetic and non-kinetic responses.⁴⁹ On the kinetic front, the government initiated extensive security operations in volatile areas, effectively dismantling on-ground militant networks. Conversely, the state formulated key policy documents at the non-kinetic level, including the National Action Plan (NAP) and the National Internal Security Policy (NISP). Furthermore, it established deradicalization and emancipation programmes (DREP) in regions like Swat and the ex-FATA.

Deradicalization and Emancipation Programmes (DREP)

In 2009, various deradicalization programmes were initiated in Swat. One in Punjab was jointly initiated by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) Punjab and the Technical Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) in 2011. Unfortunately, with scarce financial resources, the programme was shelved after a year of its initiation.⁵⁰ Upon its discontinuation, three batches of 311 individuals had completed their training.⁵¹ The programme was based on a three-pronged strategy of prevention, rehabilitation, and after-care, along with modules of psychological evaluation, religious rehabilitation, and vocational training.⁵² The individuals selected for the programme were ex-members of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Tayba (LeT), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), etc.⁵³

⁴⁹ Muhammad Makki and Syed Ali Akash, "From Counter-Terrorism to Counter Violent Extremism: An Analysis of Pakistan's Internal Security Policies," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1-26, <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/From-Counter-Terrorism-to-Counter-Violent-Extremism-1.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Faisal Ali Ghuman, "Deradicalization in Disarray," *Dawn*, October 24, 2014.

⁵¹ Saba Noor, "From Radicalization to Deradicalization: The Case of Pakistan," *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analysis* 5, no. 8 (2013): 16-19.

⁵² Lateef Hakim Zai Khyber, Shahida Aman, and Syed Rashid Ali, "De-Radicalization, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Juvenile Militants in Pakistan: A Case Study of Sabaoon," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* 5, no. 2 (2022): 1-16, <http://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v5i2.124>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Initially, the programme was under the military administration, but local agencies and non-governmental organizations soon joined to assist. The role of Hum Pakistani Foundation (HPF), a local NGO led by Feriha Peracha with Sabaoon, was paramount.⁵⁴ The programme was later handed over to them. The Rastoon aimed to rehabilitate the youth and young adults aged 19-25. The Sparlay, based in Tank, KP and operating in Swat, aimed at educating the families of the militants. The Mishal programme dealt with adult militants.

In the first phase of the process of deradicalization, a psychological assessment of a detained individual is carried out by an expert. The psychological rehabilitation module helps identify the causes that led to an individual's radicalization and involvement in terrorism. Psychologists assess and identify through investigation a militant's mode of recruitment, their position in the outfit, and the basis of their association with the militant leadership to decipher if the recruitment was based on any personal ties or not. The militant's possible continued inclination towards the outfit is also carried out.⁵⁵ The indicators might vary from individual to individual, and based on the evaluated set of motives, they are categorized into "very high risk, high risk, medium risk and low risk."⁵⁶ After the psychological assessment of militants comes religious rehabilitation, where the main purpose is to deconstruct the extremist religious views that militants hold. Since the radical views are guided by a misinterpretation of holy texts and scriptures, it is through dialogue and religious counselling that the mindset of the militants is challenged.⁵⁷

Formal education and family counselling are two other modules of Pakistani CVE models. The education module prepares the detainees for post-rehabilitation higher education. It also provides vocational training to the detainees in areas like carpentry, tailoring, and computer skills to equip them with technical expertise for self-sustainability. Family counselling involves sensitization of the families of detainees regarding the issues of extremism, along with training them on how to engage with the detainees during and after the deradicalization process. After completing these stages, the detainees are reintegrated into society. Law enforcement agencies monitor their activities for certain periods to note if any inclination towards militancy reemerges.

⁵⁴ "The Youngest Casualties," *Dawn*, October 10, 2011.

⁵⁵ Abdul Basit, "Countering Violent Extremism," 44-68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Psychological Counselling	Included in the programme
Religious Counselling	Included in the programme
Vocational Training	Included in the programme
Education/Vocational Training	Included in the programme
Partial Finance Assistance	Included in the programme
Family Counselling	Included in the programme
Counter Ideology	Not included in the programme
Societal Reintegration	Not included in the programme

Table: Deradicalization Programmes in Pakistan

The above table illustrates the components of the deradicalization programmes in Swat. While some of the programme's components may not be completely effective, they are still functional. For instance, financial assistance is only provided to some beneficiaries, and after their reintegration into society, individuals do not have any means of financial assistance. In most cases, the families of the reintegrated individuals assist them financially and bear the expense of their living. The Pakistani CVE programmes focus on five modules that appear quite comprehensive and all-encompassing, but these lack in terms of challenging the ideological settings of the militants and extremists. Pakistan's DREPs lag, unlike effective international models, in engaging religious scholars to play their responsible role in writing rebuttals and alternative narratives for ideologically countering extremist ideologies in the counselling sessions.

Further, for the successful dissemination of an alternative narrative, active deradicalization centres are crucial. However, most Pakistani deradicalization efforts are inconsistent, as most of the deradicalization centres are not active. This is due to a lack of financial resources. Such programmes require sustainable resources for long-term success. Without regular funding, these programmes may not be able to adapt to changing circumstances and techniques of countering narratives.

The National Internal Security Policy and the National Action Plan

At the policy level, the National Internal Security Policy (NISP-2014) was developed in February 2014, followed by the introduction of the National Action Plan (NAP-2015) in December 2015. NISP-2014 emphasised engaging various decision-makers in the country in counter-terrorism efforts through dialogue. Additionally, both NISP-2014-18 and NISP-2018-2023 focused on isolating terrorists from sympathizers for precise counter-terrorism operations and deterring extremist and radical

groups within the country.⁵⁸ Similarly, the NAP-2015 was the government's 20-point policy for deradicalization, emphasizing the significance of disrupting the financial activities of these extremist groups and dismantling their radical discourse. This was to be achieved by disrupting their communication networks, both on social media and those used for on-ground operations.⁵⁹

A major criticism of NAP-2015 was that the government over-concentrated the military component of the plan, neglecting the civilian aspect aimed at winning hearts and minds.⁶⁰ In 2021, the respective document was updated, dividing the plan into five kinetic and nine non-kinetic points to address extremism and terrorism in the country.⁶¹

Similarly, NISP 2018-2023 has recently been updated. It covers a broader spectrum of actions for combating the twin evils. This new policy revolves around three primary domains: administrative, ideational, and socio-economic. In the administrative domain, the policy suggests more comprehensive coordination and strategic planning from relevant government departments to respond to nontraditional security threats. The policy proposes to challenge extremist narratives with comprehensive counter-narratives in the ideological domain.⁶² The socio-economic spectrum focuses on the mitigation of terrorist financing and deals with the social aspects that may foster security challenges.⁶³

The most significant aspect of this policy is dealing with terrorist narratives. However, dealing with narratives without rightly calibrating the ideological challenge posed by terrorists is a naïve approach. As Stephen Biddle suggested, defeating the ideology is the only way to defeat terrorism. An ideology takes shape within the confines of an individual's cognitive sphere, rendering the "capture or kill" strategy

⁵⁸ "Text of National Security Policy 2014-2018," *The Nation*, February 27, 2014, <http://nation.com.pk/islamabad/27-Feb-2014/text-of-national-security-policy-2014-18>.

⁵⁹ "National Action Plan," National Counter Terrorism Authority, September 24, 2017, <https://nacta.gov.pk/nap-2014/>.

⁶⁰ Sajjad Ahmed, "A Twenty-Point Recipe of Peace—The National Action Plan for Pakistan: Context, Analysis and Evaluation of Successes and Pitfalls," A paper presented at APSec, December 8-9, 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311964734_A_Twenty-Point_Recipe_of_Peace_The_National_Action_Plan_for_Pakistan_Context_Analysis_and_Evaluation_of_Successes_and_Pitfalls.

⁶¹ "Revised National Action Plan—2021," National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), September 25, 2023, <https://nacta.gov.pk/revised-national-action-plan-2021-2/>.

⁶² Fahad Nabeel, "National Internal Security Policy 2018-2023: A Critical Assessment," Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, August 2, 2018, <https://cscr.pk/explore/publications/assorted-readings/national-internal-security-policy-2018-2023-a-critical-assessment/>.

⁶³ Ibid.

insufficient for mitigating the threat it poses. The rationale behind this is that while it is possible to incarcerate an individual's physical being in a secure prison or detention facility, the realm of thought or the mind remains beyond such confinement's reach. Annihilating a physical body fails to deter others imbued with the same ideology from continuing the struggle. Thus, the best form of cure is that which targets the diseased organ, in this case, the mind. This requires a process of deprogramming and re-education. So, counter-terrorism work must begin with a full understanding of extremist ideology.

Paigham-e-Pakistan and Pakistan's National Narrative against Terrorism and Extremism

Pakistan has developed two important documents to respond to extremist ideology. One is the Paigham-e-Pakistan (Message of Pakistan), which contains a *fatwā* (religious decree) and Pakistan's National Narrative against Terrorism and Extremism (PNNATE). Paigham-e-Pakistan was issued in 2018, signed by 1800 religious scholars from all Muslim sects, and endorsed by the Imām-i Ka'bah and al-Azhar University, Egypt. PNNATE consists of fourteen points extracted from the major document of the Paigham-e-Pakistan *Fatwā*. Usman Asghar mentioned Paigham-e-Pakistan as an important step towards countering violent extremism (despite its practical weaknesses) because this is the first time in Pakistan's history that the state has responded to terrorists and extremists in a religious language.⁶⁴ Earlier, the state always countered the religious narrative of terrorists via state laws or policies. This is the first time that religion has been used to counter an extremist narrative. However, the desired results of this *fatwā* have not been seen yet.⁶⁵ There is no evidence that the Paigham-e-Pakistan decree has been incorporated into the curriculum of religious seminaries (*dars-i naẓāmī*).⁶⁶

Asghar and Zafar both said that Paigham-e-Pakistan is a well-written religious decree, but it does not have much significance beyond that. Asghar pointed out that religious seminaries do not teach this topic in their classrooms and avoid discussing the essence of Paigham-e-Pakistan in Friday sermons.⁶⁷ So, the scope of this decree is limited to government files only. However, Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani's recent

⁶⁴ Muhammad Usman Asghar (Assistant Professor, Government College Lahore), interview by the authors, September 16, 2023.

⁶⁵ Zafar Iqbal (Dean of Social Sciences, International Islamic University, Islamabad), interview by the authors, October 1, 2023.

⁶⁶ Asghar, interview.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

address at the Paigham-e-Pakistan National Conference⁶⁸ has prompted the TTP to defend its narrative once again. This reflects how important this counter-narrative shall be. The TTP has published nearly three periodic articles to indirectly respond to Usmani's address and declare the Constitution of Pakistan un-Islamic.⁶⁹

TTP's Response to Paigham-e-Pakistan and Efforts for Using an Alternative Narrative

To construct their counter-narrative against the Paigham-e-Pakistan and the national narratives against terrorism and extremism, the TTP has published a series of articles titled: "Ā'in-i Pākistān Islāmī yā ghair Islāmī?" (Is the Constitution of Pakistan Islamic or un-Islamic?), "Idhn-i Imām, Ullū 'l-Amr, Baghāvat aur Shahīd" (The Imām's Permission, Authorities, Rebellion, and Martyr),⁷⁰ "Shahādat kē Fazā'il, Aqsām aur Şifāt" (Merits, Types, and Characteristics of Martyrdom),⁷¹ and "Bōltī Taşvīrain" (Talking Pictures).⁷²

These specific articles lay the groundwork for extremist narratives at all four levels of the narrative building. They provide an opportunity for the TTP militants to frame their ideology, justifying their fight against Pakistani authorities by labelling the constitution as un-Islamic and the armed forces as non-Muslim or infidel forces.

Furthermore, in each article, TTP ideologues attempt to complicate the counter-narrative debate by referencing statements from Usmani, as presented at the Paigham-e-Pakistan National Conference. This approach aims to add complexity and depth to their argument.

Additionally, by referencing past examples and incorporating them into the ongoing debate, TTP ideologues create room for subjective interpretation. This strategy serves to justify their ongoing fight against the Pakistani forces, providing a continued rationale for their actions.

In one of these articles, the author narrated how Haji Tarangzai, a tribal elder from ex-FATA, fought against English soldiers for the protection of the Ottoman caliphate. This reflects that the TTP is crafting

⁶⁸ "TTP Men Fighting against Pak Army are Rebels: Taqi Usmani," *The Nation*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/24-Jan-2023/ttp-men-fighting-against-pak-army-are-rebels-taqi-usmani>.

⁶⁹ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥammād, "Ā'in-i Pākistān, Islāmī kih ghair Islāmī?" *Majallah* 15 (2023): 14-16; Ḥammād, "Ā'in-i Pākistān, Islāmī kih ghair Islāmī?" *Majallah* 16 (2023): 4-7; Ḥammād, "Ā'in-i Pākistān, Islāmī yā ghair Islāmī?" *Majallah* 18 (2023): 17-19. In this article, all references to *Majallah* are taken from classified documents in the NACTA archives.

⁷⁰ 'Abd al-Ḥakīm, "Idhn-i Imām, Ullū 'l-Amar, Baghāvat aur Shahīd," *Majallah* 16 (2023): 14-15.

⁷¹ Şibghat Allāh, "Shahādat kē Fazā'il, Aqsām aur Şifāt," *Majallah* 15 (2023): 29-32.

⁷² "Bōltī Taşvīrain," *Majallah* 15 (2023): 39-45.

an alternative narrative by suggesting that the Pakistani government has employed tactics similar to those used by the English forces in past to dismantle the caliphate.⁷³ ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm has articulated seven strategic points to draw parallels between TTP’s struggle and the resistance of the Haji Tarangzai (for the protection of the Ottomans against the English). He also emphasizes that, similar to the Pakistani government, the English forces in the past constructed a narrative centred around the following seven points⁷⁴:

1. It propagates that this is not a *jihād* (Taliban’s definition of *jihād* is to fight), as *jihād* cannot be waged without the approval of the head of the state. Undertaking *jihād* without the consent of the state representative is deemed *ḥarām* (forbidden).
2. Efforts should be made to incentivize people to refrain from assisting Haji Tarangzai in his struggle against the English forces.
3. It is important to preach that Ameer Habib Ullah is the rightful leader of Afghanistan. Muslims should refrain from engaging in combat unless Ameer Habib Ullah issues a call for *jihād*.
4. Every Muslim must draft a written oath (*bay’ah*) on paper and dispatch it to the office of Sardar Nasrullah Khan, the second in command in Kabul.
5. Provide incentives to Sardar Nasrullah Khan and encourage him to abstain from participating in *jihād*.
6. It should be conveyed that the conflict between the English forces and the Turks was political rather than religious (TTP considers its fight against Pakistani forces as a cosmic war).
7. The English forces received a forged directive from Sultan Abdul Majeed Khan, the Caliph of Turkey, and disseminated it throughout the Indian subcontinent (Hindustan). This directive stated that everyone must obey the English forces and refrain from combat.

Precisely, without directly engaging in debate on whether the Paigham-e-Pakistan *fatwā* and national narratives against terrorism and extremism are correct or not, the TTP has started working on an alternative narrative. TTP’s alternative draws relevance and analogies with historical events when English forces used forged *fatwās* and religious personalities to prevent Muslims from participating in any militant movements.

The TTP has used this particular analogy as this historical event is very close to the Pakistani population. Pakistan’s National Television (PTV) recently broadcast a series of Dramas on Ottoman history (Ertugrul Ghazi and Osman I). Such selective historical evidence (Haji

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Tarangzai's movement for the protection of the Ottomans) may encourage the TTP adherents in Pakistan and Afghanistan to equate TTP with the Tarangzai's movement and Pakistan's polity and armed forces with English forces. As the theoretical debate suggested, to process the narrative entirely, the audience includes rational and irrational beliefs and embeds extremist messages in its social construct based on feelings and behaviours. This already-known congruence allows extremist groups to pick up their narrative.

Unfortunately, this essential element of emotional congruence is missing in Pakistan's attempts at bringing a counter-narrative. A critical discourse analysis of the Paigham-e-Pakistan reveals the repetitive use of words such as infidels, *jihād*, and *takfīr*. While these terms are clarified, their repetition also amplifies the risk of radicalizing the uninformed youth. On the one hand, this repetition strengthens the state's stance in the Us-vs-Them narrative (between the state and extremists). On the other hand, it blurs the boundaries, allowing extremist groups to exploit governance issues, lack of justice, inflation, and missing persons.⁷⁵

It is essential to note that when ideological differences attain the profound nature of cosmic wars intertwined with religion, they persist until the underlying method is reshaped or one side prevails over the other. Creating a counter-narrative is an attempt to ideologically dismantle extremism. However, relying solely on this approach leads to an ongoing cycle of responding to extremist narratives. This cycle involves addressing their orientation, complicating their actions, evaluating their cues, and suggesting a way forward.

Any weakness at any stage of this process could have adverse consequences for the country. Therefore, instead of expending all efforts on crafting rebuttals of extremist narratives, the state should develop an alternative narrative and redirect the national discourse. This strategic shift is crucial to disrupt extremism's vicious cycle and foster a more stable ideological setting for national harmony, acceptance, and peace. The following section attempts to suggest an alternative narrative to deal with the threats of violent extremism in Pakistani society.

Alternative Narratives for Pakistan

Following 9/11, many Islamic and Muslim-majority countries initiated efforts to formulate an alternative narrative against the prevailing threats of extremism from Al-Qaeda and its linked organizations. They established various centres for advising on a comprehensive strategy for alternative narratives. For instance, the Qaradhawi Centre for Islamic

⁷⁵ Hammād, "A'īn-i Pākistān, Islāmī kih ghair Islāmī?" 14-16.

Moderation and Renewal was founded in Qatar in 2008, the Moderation Assembly for Thoughts and Culture received support from the King of Jordan in 2006, and the Wasatiyyah Institute Malaysia was established in 2005. These institutions were entrusted with researching Islamic concepts and creating a conceptual framework that could assist these countries in promoting moderation and countering extremism.

All over the world, Muslim scholars have engaged in discussions regarding *wasatiyyah*, reaching a consensus that Muslim societies should be built upon moral values and spirituality. They should also adhere to the principles of civilized values, respecting rights and responsibilities, all while refraining from causing harm to innocent lives or fomenting conflicts between religious and other societal groups.

Alternative narratives are those that provide a different fact that is not explained or discussed by the dominant power elites. In this context of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan, the power elites are the ideologues of Al-Qaeda and TTP that have provided an ideological baseline to TTP leadership by using the concepts of *khurūj* and *takfīr*.⁷⁶ The recently released magazine of TTP, named *Majallah* (issues 16-19), reveals the TTP's perspective of Pakistani society. According to these publications, the TTP ideologues considered Pakistan to be in a state of *jāhiliyyah*, following an un-Islamic constitution, with the government being viewed as a puppet of the West. Furthermore, the articles of these magazines suggest that despite the TTP leaders being killed or captured, the struggle for the establishment of a self-proclaimed *sharī'ah* state in Pakistan will persist. This persistence is not contingent upon specific individuals but is rooted in the ideas that its followers believe in. Therefore, there are numerous individuals prepared to continue this cause and compensate for any losses incurred.

In short, this conflict between Pakistani authorities and the TTP is not just a war between two groups but a clash of ideologies, followed by narratives. The essence of the Pakistani constitution is rooted in the balance between modernity and Islamic laws.⁷⁷ Any counter-narrative initiative that merely provides a rebuttal without addressing the persuasive logic of the TTP's ideology falls short. This ideological battle will persist until the underlying ideology is redirected or until one side overpowers the other. In this regard, while a counter-narrative aims to dismantle narratives, *wasatiyyah* has the potential to redirect the whole

⁷⁶ Al-Ṣawāhirī, *Ṣapīdah-i Ṣaḥar*.

⁷⁷ Zafar Iqbal, "Narratives and Counter Narratives," a lecture at the National Police Academy, Islamabad, September 26, 2023.

debate. As suggested by Sallahudin Mehsud, if religion is the issue, the solution must also come from within religion.⁷⁸

The terminology of *wasatiyyah* is derived from the Arabic word “*wasat*” mentioned in the Qur’ān. This carries the deep meaning of justice, moderation, and balance. The philosophy of *wasatiyyah* is divided into two streams of meanings: one is moderation, and the second is the middle ground between excessiveness (*ifrāt*) and laxity (*tafrīt*). Muslim scholars, including Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), have done extensive work on *wasatiyyah* and used various alternative words such as *i’tidāl* (fairness), *tawāzun* (balance), and *inṣāf* (justice) to describe it further.⁷⁹

Kamal Hassan has explained this concept of moderation with the help of a comprehensive model. Primarily, the essence of the *wasatiyyah* is grounded in two sources: the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad. Further, from these grounds, the model of *wasatiyyah* is divided into three pillars, including ‘*ilm* (knowledge), *īmān* (belief), and *taqwā* (compliance with divine guidance). *Īmān* refers to the strong belief in Allah as the only God and Muḥammad as the final Messenger of Allah. ‘*Ilm* defines the importance of knowledge in Islam as one can never believe in the true God without knowing the religion. *Taqwā* is the most significant element that has centrality in Islam.⁸⁰

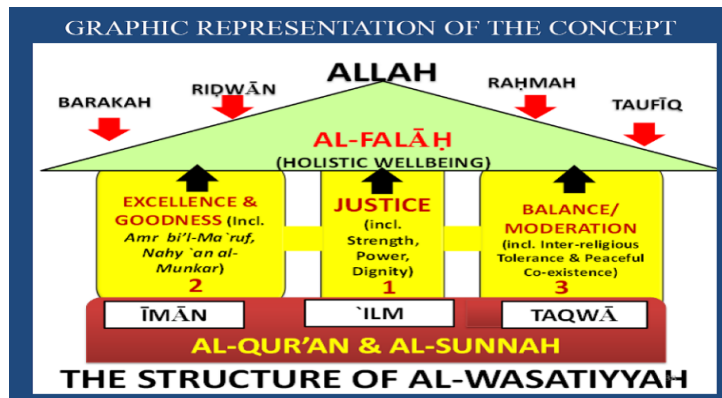


Figure 3: The Graphical Representation of the Concept of *Wasatiyyah*⁸¹

⁷⁸ Sallahudin Mehsud (Commandant, National Police Academy, Islamabad), interview by the authors, September 27, 2023.

⁷⁹ Shahzadi Pakeeza, Mariam Bushra, and Ghousia Mobeen, “Concept of Moderation (*Wasatiyyah*) and Laxity,” *Al-Eeqaz* 3, no 2 (2023): 13-22.

⁸⁰ Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “*Wasatiyyah* as Explained by Prof. Muhammad Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 2 (2014): 24-30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351233>.

⁸¹ Hassan, “*Wasatiyyah*,” 26.

Hassan mentioned that justice, excellence, and balance are three attributes of the concept of *wasatiyyah* that establishes “*ummatan wasatan*” (community of the middle way). For this, the key reference is the following Qur’ānic verse: “And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way (*ummatan uasatan*), so that (with your lives) you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you.”⁸²

The concept of *wasatiyyah* is the twining of the *khayr ummah* (best community) concept. As the Qur’ān mentions, “You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in God. Now if the followers of earlier revelation had attained to [this kind of] faith, it would have been for their own good; [but only a few] among them are believers, while most of them are iniquitous.”⁸³

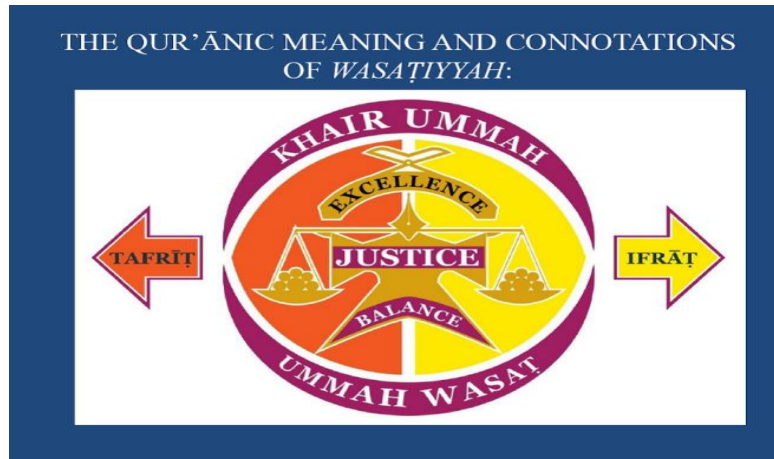


Figure 4: The Qur’ānic Meaning and the Connotations of *Wasatiyyah*⁸⁴

In combination, both concepts emphasize that Muslims enjoin all that is good and prohibit all that is bad. Moreover, Hassan has explained that, based on this, the societal model of *wasatiyyah* divided the pillars of justice, excellence, and balance into tangible strategies. He explained that *al-amr bi ’l-ma’rūf* and *al-nhy ’an al-munkar* (enjoining what is good and prohibiting what is bad) and possession of power and strength as justice cannot be achieved without tolerance and peaceful co-existence with other religions and cultures (*taqwā*). By achieving that, all Muslims

⁸² Qur’ān 2:143; Hassan, “*Wasatiyyah*.”

⁸³ Qur’ān 3:110; Hassan, “*Wasatiyyah*.”

⁸⁴ Hassan, “*Wasatiyyah*,” 30.

may attain well-being (*al-falāḥ*) that blesses them with *barakah* (blessing), *riḍwān* (pleasure), *rahmah* (mercy), and *tawfiq* (success).

Making This Alternative Narrative More Impactful for Pakistan

It is crucial to understand that Pakistan's countering violent extremism (CVE) models do not effectively address extremist ideology and require intellectual rigour for efforts at alternative ideological narratives. Evidence suggests that ideologues from TTP and Al-Qaeda strategically employ religion. They are not simplistic or uninformed, so a mere *fatwā* of Paigham-e-Pakistan will not suffice in dismissing their narratives from society. In this regard, Pakistani authorities need to focus on the following objectives of counter-ideology:

1. The state must develop a precise national alternative narrative based on *wasatiyyah* to safeguard Pakistani society from extremist ideology. Since the emergence of TTP and Al-Qaeda, the ideologues of both groups targeted the constitution of Pakistan and made every attempt to declare it un-Islamic. However, the alternative narrative of *wasatiyyah* should answer the objections of the extremist groups and explain the importance of moderation in Islam. This alternative narrative, based on *wasatiyyah*, may help clarify Pakistan's status as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, not just as an Islamic state.
2. This narrative must provide a shield to mainstream Pakistanis from being influenced by the TTP narratives on issues like inflation, injustice, and governance. Counter-narratives are always reactive, which means that they are generated when one has already lost a broader war of ideas; these are reactions to the damage that has already occurred.⁸⁵ So, the preaching of *wasatiyyah* will be a proactive position that will bring Pakistani authorities to the leading position for framing the alternative and novel national narratives rather than responding in a tit-for-tat manner to extremist narratives.
3. The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) needs to work on two critical points to make this alternative narrative impactful:
 - 3.1 It should develop a desk under the Counter Terrorism (CT) and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) wings and bring religious scholars on board from within and outside the country (including Qatar, Malaysia, and Egypt) to explain the concept of *wasatiyyah* in the local context. With the help of mainstream religious scholars and international input, NACTA may lead the development of an indigenous model of alternative narrative based on *wasatiyyah* and further break down its scope as per the needs of respective regions.
 - 3.2 Further, NACTA may assist in building state-community cooperation. In this regard, a healthy relationship between

⁸⁵ Abdul Basit (Associate Research Fellow, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Singapore), interview by the authors, October 1, 2023.

madrasahs (religious seminaries) and NACTA can be developed to discuss the points for an indigenized model of *wasatiyyah*. The mainstream religious scholars in all seminaries shall be identified and later engaged to discuss the concept of *ummatah wasatan* to redefine the characteristics of the *shari'ah* and the Islamic characteristics of the Pakistani constitution.

4. Lastly, an alternative narrative plan, based on *wasatiyyah*, can be developed more strategically:

4.1 A strategic communication knowledge base can be developed. For this purpose, the concept of *wasatiyyah* can be systematically incorporated into communication efforts aimed at countering religious extremism, sectarianism, and sub-nationalist terrorism. This approach may utilize a three-level strategic communication model, with specific strategies designed to address distinct explanations to address different audience groups, including anti-state sympathizers, neutral individuals, and those supportive of the state. Each of these categorized audiences may be engaged through diverse platforms, including social media, electronic and print media, mainstream educational institutions, and religious seminaries, ensuring a broad, inclusive, and culturally relevant outreach.

4.2 Along with the dissemination efforts, it is pertinent to develop a robust research base through both empirical and subjective studies to trace patterns and trends in extremist narratives. This process will help build indigenous understanding of critical, social, and culturally responsive pedagogies. This process will help to identify the contributing factors of extremist ideologies and help the religious scholars and relevant researchers to address such critical factors with the help of the concept of *wasatiyyah* through focused group discussions or pursuing policy advocacy.

4.3 The established content must be published in multiple languages through books, journals, newspapers, blogs and social media platforms. This will not only help to counter extremist ideologies at their roots but also to foster sustainable resilience by embedding the principles of moderation within the educational and social structures of Pakistan.

4.4 However, these actions can be further extended, based on what we may learn from the initial stages. It is pertinent to note that this plan is a starting point, a foundation that can be customized for each region or group. For instance, when it comes to communication strategies, one approach would not fit every situation. We need to tailor strategies for different groups—be it militant factions, ethnic communities, various age groups, professions, or educational institutions. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work at all. By tailoring efforts, based on specific needs, the state can make a real impact and

may revive the social fabric of Pakistani society based on acceptance, peace and harmony.

Conclusion

Despite substantial efforts by Pakistani authorities in both kinetic and non-kinetic realms to combat violent extremism, there has been a noticeable escalation in extremist activities. The military operations succeeded in diminishing the physical presence of militants, but deradicalization programmes have fallen short, particularly in countering the underlying fear of extremism in the country. The effectiveness of deradicalization initiatives hinges on an ideological framework that challenges extremists' justifications for violence against the state and its people.

The current deradicalization efforts in Pakistan primarily focus on psychological rehabilitation, religious counselling, education, and social integration, neglecting the pivotal importance of tackling extremist ideology. This research identifies the weaknesses in Pakistani CVE programmes and offers a comprehensive model to enhance the impact of alternative narratives, aiming to empower NACTA in this endeavour. The research has identified that narratives play a crucial role and operate through stages of orientation, complicating actions, evaluation cues, and resolutions. Militant groups, like TTP, have adeptly utilized narratives rooted in Salafism, misinterpreting core beliefs to propagate hatred and justify violence. In the digital age, well-constructed ideologies, exemplified by platforms like Umer Studio's official website and TTP's magazine *Majallah*, amplify the reach and impact of extremist organizations.

Further, rather than solely responding with kinetic operations and reactive rebuttals, the state must proactively develop alternative narratives. Redirecting prevailing myths and ideological underpinnings is crucial. By challenging extremist ideologies head-on and promoting alternative narratives such as *wasatiyyah*, rooted in moderation and understanding, societies can effectively defeat the allure of extremist groups, fostering a more resilient and peaceful future.

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