

ENCOUNTERING EXTREMISM THROUGH A COUNTER NARRATIVE A STUDY OF THE PAKISTANI SOCIETY

Abdul Muhaimin

*Department of Islamic and Religious Studies, University of Haripur, KP, Pakistan,
muhaimin74@gmail.com, drmuhaiman@uoh.edu.pk*

ABSTRACT

This article highlights the significance of the concept of developing an effective counter narrative in response to the narrative of extremists. The study primarily focuses on the complexity of the issue of extremism in Pakistani society and an overview of the sectarian conflicts of the country. The study further indicates the inception of the culture of the Holy War in the country and the reasons for its present conditions. The research has highlighted the works done on counter narrative in the country and how the issue of extremism has been dealt so far and what needs to be done in future. The study includes a latest survey as well which reflect the mindset of the people of Pakistan with regard to extremism. The article highlights the narrative of the extremists and a counter narrative to their narrative and presents the real concept and the purpose of Jihād in Islam.

Keywords: *Extremism; Sunnis and Shias; Jihād; Madrassah; Tālib*

INTRODUCTION:

Modern day world is facing many challenges and one of the most important challenges is to establish peace in this world where everyone one can live at liberty. Extremism and terrorism has become a big threat to the peace, harmony and co-existence. The world is united on the issue of encountering terrorism and it has been realized that the military force alone cannot encounter the root causes of extremism and terrorism. There is a dire need to address the extremism and terrorism with the help of a strong counter narrative.

There is a growing consensus that now countering the ideology that drives the extremism has become critical in the effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it. The extremist groups must be challenged with a counter narrative of stronger appeal.¹

Terrorism has always been a battle of ideas, reflecting a desire for violent and immediate political transformation. The call of extremist groups to arms is a globally resonant expression of its outlook, grievances, agenda, and demands, and has a proven ability to turn passive observers into active participants in violent extremism.²

The evolving of terrorism and terrorist groups has promoted greater focus on prevention and the consideration of new and innovative tools to address them.³

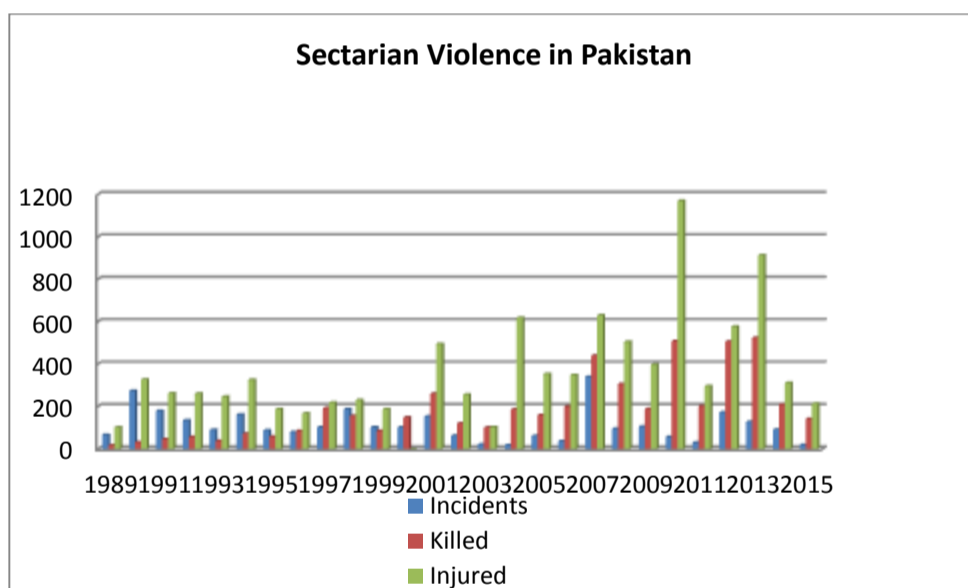
Grand counter terrorism strategy would benefit from a comprehensive consideration of the stories terrorism tell; understanding the narrative which influence the genesis, growth, maturation and transformation of terrorism organizations will enable us to better fashion a strategy of undermining the efficiency of those narrative.⁴

The Complexity of the Issue of Extremism in Pakistani Society:

Pakistan came into being on the basis of two nation theory in August 1947. There were long discussions even before the birth of Pakistan on the Islamic status of the new country. In an effort to establish a state replica of the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), without taking the global changes into consideration, the matter of a pure Islamic state got more complicated in the country. The very important issues such as the concept of Islamic state in modern days, the concept of *Jihād* etc. were not addressed and settled and this added to the worries of the country.

Sectarian Conflicts:

Pakistan has been under a serious threat of sectarian fierceness since the time of its inception. The main contenders are the Sunnis and Shias. The nature of the hostility is not after inter-sects but also intra sects. The most unfortunate facet of this encounter is that all the sects involved in violence do have the claim of serving the religion. A religion of peace and tolerance has been transformed into a religion of extremism and radicalism. The vested interest of political bosses and foreign aid has further intensified the situation. Each sect justifies itself on the true path and is sure to go to paradise. They construct religion according to their own concern and consider the others as non-believers even inferior to that.⁵ The following chart reflects the ratio of sectarian violence in Pakistan from January 1989 to March 2015.



Apart from nexuses among militant, it is also important to understand the political dynamics of sectarian violence in Pakistan. Many of the banned sectarian organizations wear political hats and take part in electoral politics, whether with different names and independent candidates or through making alliance with mainstream political parties. Religious education in Pakistan is also divided along sectarian lines. There are five religious education boards. Sectarian oriented curricula and the publications of *Madrassah* are considered a key factor in promotion of sectarianism in Pakistan.⁶ There are more than thirty religious groups in the country some of them are political and others are non-political.

The Inception of the Culture of Holy War in Pakistan and its Present Status:

The Holy War in Pakistan finds its roots in the Afghan War where *Mujāhidīn* fought against Russia and when that war ended and turned towards Kashmir and Pakistani government supported their struggle against India.

Pakistan has got two reasons to support the so called *Mujāhidīn*. First the Pakistani military is determined to pay India back for allegedly fomenting separatism in what was once East Pakistan and in 1971 became Bangladesh. Second, India dwarfs Pakistan in population, economic strength, and military might. This support includes, at a minimum, assisting the militants' passage into Indian-held Kashmir. Pakistan in turn, accuses India's intelligence service of committing terrorism and killing hundreds of civilians in Pakistan.⁷

PAKISTAN'S SUPPORT TO MUJĀHIDĪN IN KASHMIR:

This support has damaged Pakistan to great extent as these militants created sectarian violence even in Pakistan and carried out their *Jihād* in Pakistan as well in the name of establishing an Islamic state according to their own interpretations of Islam.

Pakistan now faces a typical principal-agent problem: the interests of Pakistan (the principal) and those of the militant groups (the agent) are not fully aligned. Although the irregulars may serve Pakistan interests in Kashmir when they target the Indian army, they always kill civilians and perform terrorism in violation of international norms and law. By facilitating the activities of the irregulars in Kashmir, the Pakistani government is inadvertently promoting internal sectarianism, supporting international terrorists, weakening the prospect for peace in Kashmir, damaging Pakistan's international image, spreading a narrow and violent version of Islam throughout the region, and increasing tensions with India- all against the interests of Pakistan as a whole. The Pakistani militant groups pose a long term danger to international security, regional stability and specially Pakistan itself and their ultimate goal is to turn Pakistan into an Islamic state.⁸

Lack of Education:

In Pakistan, as in many developing countries, education is not mandatory. The World Bank estimates that only forty percent of Pakistanis are literate, and many rural areas lack public schools. Islamic religious schools on the other hand, are located all over the country and provide not only free education, but also free food, housing and clothing. These religious schools are funded by individuals and by various states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. These schools are not administered by the government and can preach and promote the Islam of their own choice.

Pakistani militant groups are now exporting their version of *Jihād* all over the world. According to the chancellor of a *Madrasah* his school is training students from Burma, Nepal, Chechnya, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Yemen, Magnolia and Kuwait.

Social Behavior:

When a boy becomes a martyr, thousands of people attend his funeral. Poor families become celebrities. Everyone treats them with more respect after they lose a son, a martyr's father said, "And when there is a martyr in the village, it encourages more children to join the *Jihād*. It raises the spirit of the entire village". In poor families with large number of children, a mother can assume that some of her children will die of disease if not in war. This apparently makes it easier to donate a son to what she feels is a just and holy cause.⁹

THE CONCEPT OF COUNTER NARRATIVE IN PAKISTAN

The misconceptions and wrong interpretations about *Jihād* never gave room to a counter narrative of extremism throughout the history of Pakistan. The significance and the need for a counter narrative were realized in recent past but unfortunately it did not work. Like many other issue we could not determine the real concept of *Jihād* in Islam and ultimately two extremes have developed; either you are a supporter of Taliban or a devotee to the west in the war against terrorism.

The very first to write on the subject of counter narrative was *Jāved Ahmed Ghāmidī*¹⁰ and his point of view was that *Madrassah* has played a vital role in promoting extremism. Moreover, a religious issue can only be addresses by a stronger counter narrative and religion addresses only individuals and the state has no religion as there live people from various religions.¹¹

Instead of supporting *Jāved Ghāmidī* by forgetting their internal disagreements in order to encounter extremism, all the columns written after this were addresses to negate the thoughts of *Ghāmidī* and the real issue of counter narrative went in the background. Many leading scholars such as *Mufti Taqī Usmānī*¹², *Qārī Hanīf Jalandarī*¹³ and many more wrote against the opinions of *Ghāmidī*. For instance, 'recently some voices are being heard that in order to rid the country of terrorism it should be secularized. In other words the call is being made to discard all the ideological, political and practical efforts to set the direction of the state and to make altogether a new state'¹⁴. 'religion and state are two sides of one coin and separating them means to open the door of ignorance and conceitedness'¹⁵ *Ghāmidī* wrote again and again in reply of these leading scholars and counter narrative disappeared in the course.

Survey:

A survey was conducted specifically for this research in the University of Haripur and its surroundings in *Khyber Pakhtunkhah* province of Pakistan. The participants of this survey were asked a few questions in connection with religion, extremism, Taliban, war against terrorism etc. About 437 people were questioned in regard with these issues which included 21 people having doctorate, 53 were M.Phil, 61 had master's degree, 77 had bachelor's degree, 93 were intermediate while 67 people were under matriculation and the rest were illiterates. 253 of these were male and 184 were female. The questions asked were;

1. What is the role of religion in your life?

94% people answered that religion plays a very strong and important role in their lives.

2. Are Madrasahs involved in promoting extremism?
57% said Yes, while 43% answered it with, No.
3. Is there any concept of good and bad Taliban?
61% favored it while 39% were of the opinion that there are no good Taliban.
4. Are Taliban fighting for the cause of Islam?
87% said No while 13% said Yes.
5. Are you happy and satisfied with the role of religious scholars in there formation of society?
82% were not satisfied with the role of religious scholars.
6. Should we support west in war against terrorism?
78% said No while 22% said Yes.

An analysis of the data collected through the survey reflects the real mindset of the people living in Pakistani society. It also replicates that the statements given by the participants of this survey are very contradictory. For instance, 94% of the people said that religion has got to play a very vital and strong role in their lives, which means that encountering terrorism in Pakistani society is purely a religious issue. The people of Pakistan are not clear on the role of *Madrasahs* in promoting or discouraging extremism. 61% of the people believe that Taliban are excellent people, but when it comes to what they do, 87% goes against them. 82% people are not happy with the role of the religious scholars which also reflects that people are expecting them to do better in terms of their religious development. While 78% of the people say that we should not support west in the war against terrorism, means that the majority of the people in Pakistani society do not have any understanding of the intensity of the issue.

People having such level of understating of a very important global issue, are easily entangled by the narrative of extremism. Such a mindset cannot be ignored while developing a counter narrative for the narrative of extremism.

Narrative of Extremists:

The narrative of extremists is based on their own concept of *Jihād* which to them is to fight against the people of other religions and even the followers of their own religion who are the friends of the people other religions. Such a fight is aimed to establish the sovereignty of Allah in their state and ultimately in the whole world. It is obvious that the religion, Islam plays a very vital role in Pakistani society and the Quran, the holy scripture and the practice of the Prophet of Islam possess a very high spiritual status. Consequently, the major arguments come from these two sources. And one of the major arguments is that Allah wills that Islam and Muslims dominate all other religions of the world. The Quranic verse which is quoted says;

He it is Who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to make it victorious over all (other) religions.¹⁶

The narrative of extremists mainly stands on their interpretation of *Jihād* which they think is a holy war. The Quranic verses which they bring in the favor of their argument are;

Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.¹⁷

And kill them whenever you take them and expel them from whenever they have expelled you, and *fitnah* is worse than killing. And do not fight them at *AlMasjid Al Haram* until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.¹⁸

Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you. But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not.¹⁹

Verily, those who have believed, and those who have migrated and have fought in the way of Allah, all these hope for Allah's mercy.²⁰

O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as friends, they are but friends of each other. And if any amongst you take them (as friends), the surely he is one of them.²¹

March forth, whether you are light or heavy, and strive hard with your wealth and your lives, in the cause of Allah.²²

Verily, Allah has purchased of the believers their lives and their properties for that their shall be paradise. They fight in Allah's cause, so they kill others and are killed.²³

And if you punish (your enemy) then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted.²⁴

Allah has promised those among you who believe and do righteous good deed, that He will certainly grant them succession in the land.²⁵

Counter Narrative:

All these verses are either used in wrong context or the first or the last part of these verses is skipped. For instance in the case of the second verse the last part i.e. Allah loves not the transgressors²⁶, is skipped. And again the verse in regard with punishing your enemy is quoted half. The last part says; but if you endure patiently, verily it is better for the patient.²⁷ The word *Jihād* has nowhere been used in the Quran to mean war in the sense of launching an offensive. It is used rather to mean 'struggle'. The action most consistently called for in the Quran is the exercise of patience. Yet today, 'Muslim *Mujāhidīn*' under unfavorable conditions have equated "God is Great" with "War is Great." In the light of on-going conflict, we must ask why so great a contradiction has arisen between the principles of Islam and the practices of Muslims. As a matter of fact military commanders have been accorded positions of great eminence in the annals of history. It is a universal phenomenon that the hero is idolized even in peace time and becomes a model for the people. It is this placing of heroism in the militaristic context which has been the greatest underlying factor in the undue stress laid on war in the latter phase of Islam's history.²⁸ Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was born at a time when an atmosphere of militancy prevailed in Arab society, there being, in their view, no other path to justice. But the Prophet always opted for avoidance of conflict, for instance, at the time of the battle of Allies and at the truce of *Hudybiyah*.²⁹

THE CONCEPT OF *JIHād* IN ISLAM:

Peace and freedom are two essential requirements of a society. Just as various penal measures help in protecting a society from the evils and excesses committed by an individual, restoring to armed offensives sometimes become essential to curb the evils perpetrated by countries and nations. As long as diplomatic relations and negotiations can be used to resolve matters, no one would endorse the use of force for setting affairs. However, if a nation threatens to disrupt peace and freedom of the world and its arrogance haughtiness exceeds all bounds, a stage may come when the use of source and power becomes essential to keep it in check. In such

cases it is inalienable right of humankind to forcibly stop its subversive activities until peace and freedom of the world are restored. The Quran asserts that if the use of force had not been allowed in such cases, the disruption and disorder caused by insurgent nations would have been reached the extent that the places of worship would have become deserted and forsaken, not to mention the disruption of the society itself.³⁰ Allah says;

And had it not been that Allah set aside one people with another, the monasteries, and churches, the synagogues and the mosque in which His praise is abundantly celebrated would be utterly destroyed.³¹

In the Holy Quran, *Jihād* can be classified in two distinct categories; firstly against injustice and oppression and secondly, against those who reject the truth after it has been conclusively communicated to them. The first type *Jihād* is an eternal directive of Islamic law and it is launched to curb oppression and injustice. The second type, however, relates to the divine law of the conclusive communication of the truth. This law is always implemented in the world directly by the Almighty through His messengers. In the history of the mankind, for the very last time this status was conferred on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

And for each community, there is a messenger. When their messenger comes, their fate is decided with justice and they are not wronged.³²

According to this law, once the truth is communicated to a people through their respective messengers in a conclusive manner and they still deny it in spite of being convinced about it, they are punished in this very world. At times this punishment is through earthquakes, cyclones and other calamities and disasters, while at others, it emanates from the sword of the believers. As a result, those who have denied the truth are totally vanquished in their land and truth reigns supreme in it. In the case of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the divine scourge took this very form. Consequently, just as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions were asked to wage war against oppression and injustice, they were also asked to wage war to punish the rejecters of his truth once it had become totally manifest to his addressees. This was actually a divine plan executed through human beings. It should be viewed as a divine practice and cannot be initiated by human beings in any manner. The following verse of the Quran alludes to this very reality.

Fight them and Allah will punish them by your hands.³³

THE PURPOSE OF *JIHĀD*

The purpose of *Jihād* with arms is the elimination of *fitnah*. The Arabic word *fitnah* has been used in the Quran in the context of *Jihād* so full of meaning that there can be no single-word equivalent to it in English. This word *fitnah* has been used in the context of *Jihād* in the Quran carries the meaning of mischief, chaos and tumult in the land and oppression and persecution. Islam does provide for wars as inevitable evil while strongly disliking bloodshed. In this connection the first directive to an Islamic state is to be perpetually in a state of preparedness and to keep the potential enemies in awe about the strength and might of Islamic state. According to Islam

bloodshed is permissible only in the actual theatre of war and aerial bombardment and missile attack on cities and townships is not allowed in Islam and an Islamic state at war cannot resort to these barbaric methods of modern warfare. It has to keep the war confined to actual theatres of war. However, the other side does not observe these limits, the Muslim army may retaliate but keeping in limited to the barest minimum and with advance warning to the civilian population.³⁴

There is no concept of *Jihād* in Islam without any limitations or restrictions. The right time has to be considered. Those who ask for reconciliation or treaties should be awarded that. Quran and *Hadith* has laid down very strict limitations for the start of *Jihād* at any level.

The ultimate goal of *Jihād* is to establish peace in the world and to bring an end to all sorts of oppression and cruelty. It is to ensure justice to everyone on equal grounds. It has to achieve certain goals and once they are achieved, there should not be any *Qitāl* i.e. fight. It is meant to help the needy and the poor and to help the helpless. The ultimate of *Jihād* is reconciliation and peace.

GOOD AND BAD TALIBAN:

All Taliban were good when they were fighting against Russia and all of them became bad when they declared *Jihād* against the West. And when needed they were divided into good and bad Taliban. Questions were raised on Pakistan army regarding their stance on Taliban. Those who attack in Afghanistan and Kashmir were considered good Taliban and those who targeted Pakistani citizens were called bad Taliban. Pakistan army treated them differently. For instance the policy of Pakistan army about the negotiations with Taliban the ex-army chief once said, 'The army has always supported peace talks with the Taliban, however the army opposed negotiations with the top two leaders *Mūlāna Faḥrullāh* and *Khālīd Khurāsānī* who are based in Afghanistan.'³⁵ This is one interpretation of the term, 'good and bad Taliban'.

As a matter of fact the word *Tālib* means a person who asks for something and it is used for students in Arabic and Urdu, because they ask for knowledge. The term Taliban, the plural of *Tālib* was used for those who wanted to establish an Islamic state in Afghanistan and later in Pakistan. In the above mentioned survey 61% people said that there are good and bad Taliban and this cannot be ignored as Pakistani society is purely a religious society. A counter narrative negating the concept of good and bad Taliban may not work in Pakistani society. Rather, this may be emphasized that good and bad Taliban have become one and now it is not possible to differentiate between the two. Hence there is no option but to stop promoting talibanization. There may be good or in other words real Taliban somewhere, who would understand the core of Islamic teachings and would understand the basic principles of Islam in true spirit such as peace, mercy and love for all mankind.

CONCLUSION:

The problems of Pakistan have made it very easy for the extremists to propagate their brand of Islam. The militant interpretation of Islam has dented the image of Islam in the west and

it is considered that Islam cannot keep pace with rapidly developing world. There is a need to reinterpret the true concept of *Jihād* in Islam which in reality aims to establish peace and harmony.

The use of force to encounter extremism will not be fully successful until and unless it is addressed with the help of a comprehensive counter narrative. Pakistani society is a religious society and the feelings of the people may not be ignored at any forum which intends to address extremism. There is a dire need to promote the real image of *Jihād* in Islam which will ultimately put an end to extremism.

ENDNOTE

¹ Jacobson, Michael, (2010). *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives*, Hague: National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, 73.

² Nūrīn, Chowdhury, (2013). *Mastering The Narrative*, Netherland, Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 3.

³ Peter Neumann, (2009). *Old and New Terrorism*, Malden: Mass Polity Press, 23.

⁴ William D. Casebeer, (2005). Towards a Comprehensive Counter Narrative Strategy: *Strategic Insights* 4(3): 3.

⁵ Nadeem Shah, Muhammad, (2014). Evaluation of Sectarianism in Pakistan: A Threat to the State and Society” *Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 29 (4): 441.

⁶ “Sectarian Violence, “Pak Institute for Peace Studies, accessed April 12, 2015, file:///C:/Users/ib/Downloads/194.pdf

⁷ Stern Jessica, (2000). Pakistan’s Jihad Culture, *Foreign Affairs* 79 (2): 116.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117

⁹ Stern Jessica, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁰ Jāved Ahmed Ghāmidī (b. 1952) is a well-known Pakistani Muslim scholar who is a founder of *Al Mawrid* Institute of Islamic Sciences who has written several books.

¹¹ Ghāmidī, Jāved Ahmed. (2015, January 23). Islam and the State: A counter narrative. *The Jang*, p. 8.

¹² Muḥammad Ṭāqī ‘Usmānī (b. 1943) is a Pakistani religious scholar who is a Judge and expert in Islamic Jurisprudence and an author of more than seventy books.

¹³ A renowned Islamic scholar who is the general secretary of one of Madrasah boards in Pakistan.

¹⁴ Usmānī, Muḥammad Ṭāqī. (2015, January 27). Islam and the State. *The Jang*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Jalandrī, Muḥammad Ḥanīf. (2015, February 18). Islam and the State. *The Jang*, p. 9.

¹⁶ The Quran (61:9)

¹⁷ The Quran (2:190)

¹⁸ The Quran (2:191)

¹⁹ The Quran (2:216)

²⁰ The Quran (2:218)

²¹ The Quran (5:51)

²² The Quran (9:41)

²³ The Quran (9:111)

²⁴ The Quran (16:126)

²⁵ The Quran (24:55)

²⁶ ,The Quran (2:190)

²⁷ The Quran (16:126)

²⁸ Khan, Waheed-ud-Din, (2002). *The True Jihad*, New Delhi: Islamic Centre, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰ Ghāmdī, Jāved Aḥmad, “The Islamic Sharī‘ah of Jihād,” *Al Mīzān* 4(2009): p.579.

³¹ The Quran(22:40)

³² The Quran(10:47)

³³ The Quran(9:14)

³⁴ S.A.H. Rizvi, (1999). *Battles of The Prophet*, Lahore: Genuine Publication Ltd., 140.

³⁵ Beig, Aslam. (2014, June 8). Changing Key Players. *The Express Tribune*, p. 11.