

## *“Whose War Is It?”*

### **Combatting Radicalization in Pakistan**

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South Asia has seen constant violent upheaval since that fateful year when Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul and changed the modern history of this region. The year 1979 marked a threshold that ushered in periods of instability and intolerance that continue to date, although violence in more recent years has reached extraordinary levels in Pakistan. 1979 was also a year that ruptured the settled ethos of communities living across the Pak-Afghan border by activating perennial faultlines that accommodated cultures, ethnicities, religious beliefs and nationalities.

More than three decades later, the faultlines that hemmed in the Pakistani nationstate now stand evident in sharp relief, as the country struggles to hold on to its ideological bearings and redefine its nationhood to give new meaning to its Constitution. Finding a new *raison d'être* has become necessary amid the uncertainty of prolonged international conflict that has undermined the social contract, left gaping democratic deficits and upset institutional equilibria that kept the national fabric intact. In particular, conflict has stretched the governance capacity of a state whose institutions could not fully aid, protect or provide for its citizens. As the country was overrun by conflict over three decades, multiple nationalisms asserted themselves accompanied by extreme forms of prejudice and bigotry in a country of 200 million people, whose political voices now demand the desirable and detestable in equal measure.

This paper describes Pakistan's prolonged brinkmanship with radicalization and the decades lost in fully addressing this challenge. A purposive history is provided to mark the ideological and political confusion surrounding efforts to curb radicalization. Despite the military operation launched in 2014 to quell the tide of terrorism, there are critical areas of engagement that need non-military solutions, including curricula reform, deradicalization programs, effective public messaging, reforming law civilian enforcement, legislative frameworks and mechanisms to uphold the rule of law. These sectors remain a work in progress in Pakistan, much like other countries where radicalization poses a growing challenge. The intention of this paper is to share a Pakistani perspective with an international readership seeking answers to radicalization. Instances of my personal experience have been mentioned to elucidate an understanding of multilayered conflict in Pakistan, in addition to a brief list of recommendations towards the end that is inexhaustive and based on my own desiderata.

#### **When is a state fully at war?**

Preparing for war would present an intellectual minefield for decision makers anywhere, not least where the *jus ad bellum* is contested, as it has been in Pakistan. There may be no standard baseline for creating a rationale to go to war, but for starters, it's worth identifying who the enemy is and considering what harm he is capable of. Is the enemy's ideology or rhetoric

markedly opposed to one's own? Is there a chance the enemy can reconcile to one's value system or will there be a duel to the death over clashing worldviews? Answering any of this can lead to a political impasse in a society where elements sympathize with the terrorist's perspective and make an argument that presents the terrorist as a noble warrior reclaiming the good he has been deprived of, or standing up to the tyranny of faraway empires that kill innocents with drones or even challenging the corrupt local satrap who exploits the toiling native. In a polity that is fractured along value systems, religious beliefs and modernities, the path to consensus building for war is fraught with impossibility. At what point does a state commit to war against radicalization – when public opinion sanctions? Can it be overstepped to suit the need of the hour? Who decides the need and what determines the hour?

In Pakistan, the decision to go to war has largely been brought about by external stimuli; it was a reactive outburst to violence, impelled by years of political muddle-through and never-ending political debate on what should be done about our brush in with terrorism. Eventually, our reaction to terrorist violence was even greater violence that shocked our own sense of capacity; we were reminded that we could be killers of such ferocity and scale. It produced moments of gloating and chest thumping; of showcasing the national silver and singing anthems composed for wars long ago. Our violence promised our greatness, once again, but for that unsettling afterthought: violence alone does not root out an ideology.

Why couldn't we get there without going to war?

In Pakistan, just about anybody can provide a reasonable *jus ad bellum*, but the cast of villains to be fought on the battlefield will be extensive and often abstract, including entities who are allegedly the 'enemies of Islam'. Historians mark how ideological confusion has had a rich history in the territory now part of Pakistan, particularly in the most populous and prosperous province, Punjab, where multiple social and religious reform movements commenced and never really lost steam. Salafist beliefs too have made a home here and in other parts of the country that underwent the Islamist project under General Zia during the 1980s and 90s. Depending on your religious persuasion in Pakistan, your enemy could be fundamentally dissimilar. As a result, large cohorts of the population favoured the Taliban and their brutal regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s and continue to see Al-Qaeda as a global resistance movement against Western imperialism, just as there are those repulsed by the way of life Al-Qaeda represents.

When Islamist tendencies started becoming mainstream in the 1980s, Pakistan's religious minorities faced the brunt of popular radicalization. Non-Muslim minorities make up to 8 per cent of Pakistan's population of 200 million today, but all those who lived to tell the tale, will relate a story of structural violence that took place over decades. Systemic prejudice overtook the state and enabled communal harassment at an everyday level, particularly against the Ahmadiyya community, whose calls for help met with blanket institutional and public apathy. A jihadist empire came into place during this same period built by Saudi financiers, who

espoused categorical hatred for the Shias who make up a quarter of Pakistan's population. Militant groups led a campaign of terror against Shia communities across the country, provoking violence in return, which has incorrectly been conflated with sectarian violence inspired from the Saudi-Iran rivalry. In actual fact, it was a beleaguered minority confronting terrorism with little help from the state whose capacity to protect citizens was limited at best.

Ever since Pakistan joined the global War on Terror, our cities became the locus of violent aftershocks that came in waves of suicide bombings or IEDs detonated near soft targets. The death toll steadily mounted from 140 civilian deaths in 2003 to 2738 in 2011. As the war spilled in from Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda found a permanent home with militant groups that had long entrenched themselves in Pakistan's major cities and rural hinterlands. Pakistan became an 'incubator' for global jihadism after we joined the War on Terror, with fighters from Uzbekistan, Middle East, Chechnya, Afghanistan and other countries amassing in havens across the country and forming the rank and file of a jihadist juggernaut. In an interview I conducted in 2007 of an infamous cleric associated with the Red Mosque in Islamabad, later jailed and now under government surveillance, "an Army of self-sacrificers (Fedayeen) [was] waiting to attack," he said with the cold blooded grit of one who knew there was no dearth of able bodied villains for atleast a decade.

Unfortunately, with Afghanistan in freefall through the early 2000s and stories from Abu Ghraib feeding popular imagination alongwith militant propaganda, public opinion grew hostile towards the war we were fighting. From talk shows to tea stalls the refrain seemed to be "whose war is this?", especially as the number of fallen Pakistan soldiers became larger and more frequent. Our inclusion in the War on Terror had been second-guessed by many, none more so than the large conservative core of Pakistani society, which vocally stated that we were spilling Muslim blood. US dithering over Afghanistan for a decade did not help, neither did their drone program that killed civilians in our tribal belt and became the default face of American foreign policy. 'Whose war is this' spoke to the heart of ideological confusion and political angst in Pakistan, that partially believed the self actualizing rhetoric of militants, and partially recoiled from the horror of their atrocities. Political parties spanned this divided spectrum, some clearly supporting committing more troops and resources, and others stating that the Taliban were infact "our misguided brothers".

Militant groups proudly claimed responsibility for the attacks they staged but could never be openly blamed for them. Instead, the daily carnage on our streets was attributed to "unidentified miscreants" who mounted attacks with growing audacity just as we were firm in keeping their identities unknown ironically. The media reported atrocities in detail, but maintained the regime of silence because publically naming names meant paying in blood. Public denunciation in the press did not mean that perpetrators of violence would be brought to justice, rather that whistle blowers would face retribution and many did: media houses, parliamentarians, civil society groups who overstepped the line were attacked. This continues todate.

The ideological faultlines grew between those favouring an all out military operation against terrorism, and those seeking to appease them. To go through the motions, we reached out to the Taliban publically in a badly brokered political dialogue to give peace yet another chance in 2014, but the effort failed after a month long ceasefire and the military commenced its long anticipated, politically empowered, and superbly named Operation Zarb-e-Azb which is our most significant military engagement in recent history.

We took the long road to war instead, and were transformed in the process, for good or bad.

The Operation has revamped the security architecture in Pakistan and successfully beat back terrorists on multiple fronts. Last year there were 940 civilian deaths in terrorist attacks, which is a major climb down from 2012 levels. The operation has also changed the nature of political debate: the military is immensely popular; civil military relations are tipping in favour of the military with the latter's control over defence and foreign policy; landmark legislation has been carried out that cuts back some civil liberties; military courts have come to replace civil courts on terrorism related cases and the death penalty was reinstated in 2014.

It has cost us many precious lives to get here, and sacrificing a generation's aspirations and growth. The conflict has transformed mindsets and militarized Pakistanis to a point where the continuum of violence may not cease, but morph into other patterns of social interaction that belie a violent past. Political angst, domestic abuse, psychological trauma and everyday crime all separately indicate the violence we have experienced and continue to process at individual, community and state levels.

The products of violence helped secure communities by beating back the militants, but beyond subduing some 'hard' and 'soft' elements, the ideology behind radicalization remains unbroken.

### **Grappling with Radicalization**

The fundamental characteristic of the radicalized is the use of violence to pursue ideological ends, or to glorify, justify or condone its use towards the attainment of their goals. There is no radicalization scale that helps determine where individuals or communities stand in relation to moderate thinking or behavior, unless plebiscites are undertaken on particular themes. Radical thinking occurs unnoticed till a violent act ruptures the humdrum of daily life and shocks us into realizing how close the terror has come. From Paris to Peshawar, the trend speaks to daunting evidence that radicalization has taken root in unexpected locations.

However, violence undertaken by radicals is still easier to respond to if combative superiority allows defeating or containing the attackers; such events can be anticipated and quelled. But non-violent extremism is the real Leviathan, whose tread we cannot sense and whose magnitude dwarfs our attempts at fighting back. Much of this plays out at psychosocial levels, where states can seldom intervene or garner influence. In 2015, Pakistan had over 1000 cases of

violent extremism which included targeted attacks against Shias and Ahmadis, mosques and schools bombed, in addition to multiple cases of non-violent extremism that saw harassment or protests against religious minorities, expressions of support for violence in the name of religion, blocks against pro-women legislation, etc. Non-violent extremism goes unreported in the press, but every once in a while the streets fill with enough people protesting for a radical cause and the magnitude is clear.

As we have seen in Pakistan and elsewhere, radicalization does not burn out with retributive violence but thrives on narratives of oppression and self-righteous victimhood. Legal and ethical arguments abound in this domain, especially as the boundaries between terrorism, radicalism, violent extremism and self determination conflate and violence becomes the expression of choice for each of these enterprises. Just as going to war is challenging, knowing the moralistic power of a radical's rhetoric is equally critical in estimating how it resounds with the polity; a radical can be beaten back on the battlefield, but live on in popular imagination as a hero whose legend becomes larger with the passage of time.

The instruments available to the state in dealing with terrorism, radicalization or insurgency are not very many or different. Fighting on the battlefield has had a very definite imprint on national life over the last several years in Pakistan. Military operations came with lessons in governance; overhauling administration; the need for reforming police, provision of justice and upholding rule of law; curricula reform; establishing deradicalization programs; and strategic communication. These are briefly touched upon in sections that follow. The cost of this learning is dire, but there are no other choices to make.

### 1. Military operations

Although Pakistan engaged its forces in the War on Terror in 2002, in addition to providing overall support to the US led coalition that included sharing military bases, intelligence and apprehending targets, the War started in a major way within Pakistan's territory in 2004 when the military commenced operations in our Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that border Afghanistan. Since then, the Pakistan Armed forces have been extensively engaged in defeating terrorist outfits and infrastructure from FATA and major cities. Since 2008 particularly, this war theatre has become a critical nerve centre of the global war against terror, where international jihadist groups otherwise known in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Central Asia have been fought back with success. Independent sources suggest that about 7000 security personnel have laid down their lives in this conflict, and about 50,000 Pakistanis have lost their lives in attacks (higher estimates suggest up to 80,000 as well). There has been a massive internal population displacement of upto 5 million people from the areas that underwent military operations, although many have subsequently returned to their homes where peace has been restored. Large populations still live in refugee settlements managed by the government of Pakistan and international aid agencies. In 2012, Pakistan surpassed Iraq and Afghanistan in terms of terrorist attacks with 1404 incidents recorded. In 2014, the military launched the

comprehensive Zarb-e-Azb operation that has significantly degraded terrorist wherewithal in FATA and flushed out militancy from major cities with a resolve to pursue terrorist and extremist syndicates alike. Last year, 625 terrorist attacks took place which means a 48% decrease in attacks compared to 2014. 1069 persons lost their lives and 1443 suffered injuries in 2015, representing a fall by 38% and 54% compared to 2014.

## 2. Reforming the police

With violence flaring in parts of the country through more than a decade, and as urban populations became increasingly vulnerable to terrorist attacks, it was seen that the military's role needs to be supplemented through civilian counter terror and counter insurgency operations. The civilian law enforcement agencies including the police force were already taking a severe hit as the first line of defence, with far fewer resources and training in comparison. A massive overhaul was undertaken to realign policing to counter terrorism, upgradation of facilities, improvement of reporting procedures and investigation, and most importantly, a drive to depoliticize the police forces which had long operated on a colonial template for governance that lent itself to high handedness, repression, corruption and incompetence. Crime was also surging through this period, and radical outfits would preach their sectarian agenda with impunity, which necessitated a new approach to criminal justice, as well as new technologies that would help surveillance and prosecution. The effort to equip and retrain the police is still underway, with more success in some provinces than others, as political and bureaucratic will make space for the police force to emerge from decades of neglect.

## 3. Legislating for Conflict

Among the most critical challenges of responding to terrorism and radicalization is establishing the legislative framework that criminalizes offences against the state. Pakistan's legislation on terrorism goes back several decades, but the more recent laws significantly undercut human rights capital. Legislating for conflict begs the fundamental question – should legislation or policy be made to address peacetime excesses or conflict itself? Invariably, the scales tip in favour of the latter, as we have seen in Pakistan. The Protection of Pakistan Act (2014), the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment (2015) and the Pakistan Army Act Amendment (2015) were promulgated with the knowledge that these constitutional changes gave overriding powers to military courts to prosecute hardcore terrorists. They eroded basic procedural safeguards, but were brought about in view of the exceptional circumstances of war and applied selectively. The death penalty was reinstated in 2015 after a seven year moratorium that drew sharp criticism from international rights organizations and foreign governments. More than 330 prisoners have been executed by January 2016, all found guilty of terrorism. Capital punishment splits public opinion in Pakistan, but there is ample recognition of the challenge that hardened terrorists need to be prosecuted as they radicalize inmates and wield enormous influence inside the prison walls, even as they sit on deathrow.

## 4. Deradicalization

No country has been able to prove scalable success when it comes to deradicalization, although models from multiple countries do demonstrate that we can engage with radicalized mindsets and rehabilitate lives. This has definitely been the experience in Pakistan, where a number of deradicalization programs are being administered through public-private partnerships that rehabilitate a few thousand pupils every year. It is painstaking work founded on the belief that mindsets and personalities can be overturned partially or even fully after being immersed in dehumanizing violence. In 2009, the defeat of the Taliban from the Swat region of Pakistan revealed how child soldiers had been recruited for combat from seminaries, and necessitated a process that could bring them back in the fold.

Unfortunately, the pace of radicalization itself supercedes the modest success of these programs. Pakistan's myriad developmental challenges, coupled with ideological strains and regional security threats make a potent combination that feeds radical thinking. While the state has engaged militarily against this, civil society groups have attempted to create broad based public debate to address intolerance and extremism, as well as documenting social, religious and cultural excesses. But there is even lesser success to report on this front; so far there is no plausible intersection of the extremist and moderate projects in Pakistan. Moderates and extremists operate in separate, self sustaining silos that reinforce their worldviews and prevent socio-political interaction.

## 5. Curricula Reform

A major bone of contention between conservatives and moderates in each province is revamping the content of syllabi for primary, secondary and higher education. There have been multiple exercises over the last decade, most notably an effort under the Musharraf government to overhaul content in schoolbooks deemed to inculcate prejudice and immoderate thinking among schoolchildren. In addition, the revisions sought to introduce global perspectives, impart better analytical skills and allow critical thinking. The content baselines come from General Zia's regime in the 1980s that actively promoted violence in the name of jihad and gave a definite notion of Pakistani identity that saw neighbouring India as the aggressor. This applied particularly to subjects of history, Islamic studies, social sciences, as well as language and literature that saw content reinforcing a sense of hypernationalism and a misinformed, non-pluralist political identity. Under General Zia, the state itself acquired an illiberal creed that reflected itself in centrally controlled syllabi taught to school children. Today the creed of the state may have changed, but reforming curricula has become a battleground where conservatives disallow overturning content from the Zia era; in some cases content removed during Musharraf's rule has been added back. Madrassa curriculum forms a critical node in this framework that has been reviewed repeatedly, but with little success.

## 6. Public Messaging

Public opinion in Pakistan presents a postmodern dilemma triggered by multiple schools of thought hankering for alternative versions of the state that find no common ground. The state

has receded from the daily contests of citizen inquiry, letting television channels moderate public opinion on all things from foreign policy to personal faith. Agendas abound in the industry of public discourse, and the search for popular television ratings makes private media houses kowtow to base public impulses, even as they help spread extremism or condition violent behavior. Governmental regulatory authorities have long attempted to bring ethical standards to television content, but lack the political wherewithal to implement decisions. Another arena for public opinion is the print media that has conservative and progressive strains alike, where the vernacular or Urdu press has a far larger influence over national psyche. Ironically, terror outfits are known to issue press releases to larger media houses claiming responsibility for attacks or clarifying their positions. Print and electronic media still fall within the purview of the state that used to fully control dissemination of information, especially during the erstwhile military dictatorships. But social media presents a dystopia of unchained disinformation where radicals find ample space for expression, support and coordination. Like other countries, Pakistan is grappling with ways to monitor hate speech on the internet and cut back web content that compromises its counter-radicalization drive. In much of this the state's role as the arbiter of public opinion is virtually over and just as state ideology becomes diluted, competing ideologies have tried to fill the vacuum with degrees of success.

### **Takeaways for Less Radicalized Societies**

Other than militarily fighting terrorist outfits that support and spread radical ideologies, Pakistan's response to radicalization has been tentative at best. It will take a generation to roll back the tide of extremism from the country, given how deep rooted the issue is, as well as the confluence of faultlines cutting across Pakistan that make social cohesion impossible.

Social contexts differ though, and any society's attempts at deradicalization will hinge on its ability to move beyond 'toolkit' approaches. There are important lessons learnt in countries that have developed deradicalization programs, with common threads running through their approach and prescription. While some literature has been devoted to evaluating the success of deradicalization models, I offer my own set of policy 'desiderata' that may be relevant to any society where radicalization trends are evident. This is not a complete set of policy prescriptions, rather I earmark some policy sectors that merit cautious monitoring as contributors to radical thinking. This brief list is based on my research on youth in communities that have experienced conflict, economic disadvantage and political marginalization.

#### **1. Arrest Social Exclusion**

There are vast population enclaves suffering from political neglect and disenfranchisement across the world, where citizenship sometimes means little more than a ration card or access to a metalled road. Weak state penetration opens up a multitude of possibilities for individuals or groups trying to thwart the state's monopoly of violence, and establishing control over host communities. Sovereignty is perennially under threat in fragile states whose democratic franchise boils down to displaying state symbols for an election every few years, but at local



levels the politics of patronage and suppression hold sway. Anthropological work on ungoverned or less governed spaces shines a light on how such terrain transforms into 'global borderlands' that develop an insurrectionary character riding on poor socio-economic development and stunted institutional growth. This is true of regions across the global South where violence has found expression in response to economic deprivation or political marginalization, albeit it may not be always be a causal factor.

Meanwhile, urban centres across the world are accommodating larger and larger cohorts of global population everyday, revamping their demographic profiles and necessitating new civic engagement. Too many megacities have dark underbellies where municipal governments prey on inhabitants alongside criminals, and where survival is more valuable over citizenship. The urban metropolis is equally harsh a landscape for the vulnerable, or perhaps more, than the hinterland they left behind as migrants. Even as city inhabitants move beyond the squalor of ghettos, past poverty lines and into the relative calm of a middle class ethos, this transition comes with psycho-social stress and the loss of support networks. Social exclusion is rampant in cities where structural binds, cultural displacement and prejudice prevent individuals and communities from getting ahead or assimilating.

As lessons from Pakistan show, radicalization thrives in urban densities and rural cold spots. It is imperative to check-in with communities through new models of citizen engagement that do as much as to deepen democratic franchise as creating platforms for communication between citizenry that identifies the locus of radical thinking. Surveillance regimes might be the method of choice for many governments instead, but cannot become an alternative to engaging citizens through 'dialogue safety nets' resourced by governments, community institutions and local leaders. This may require overhauling the size and approach of local government, but it must be undertaken if social exclusion and its concomitant issues have to be reversed.

## **2. Inhibit the police state**

With the advent of international terror networks that increasingly rely on soft technologies to execute terror, our collective focus on security architectures has undergone a profound change. Physical borders have 'hardened' across continents for multiple reasons: delimiting refugee influx; monitoring movement of citizens; securing borderlands that experience outbreaks of violence; and preventing infiltration, trafficking and health risks. Cyber security is another arena where states are shoring up technical wherewithal to safeguard information systems as well as detect, monitor and contain terrorist networks. Both sectors – border security and cyber security – supplement each other and have become more critically linked following the Paris attacks to provide digital clues about terrorist movement across Europe and the world.

Closely related to this is monitoring the internet where terrorist networks as well as radical outfits publish, campaign, organize and recruit. Shutting down websites has been a standard response of government departments tasked with removing terrorist or extremist content from the web. But this has also created vociferous new debates regarding freedom of expression and

other human rights, in multiple events across the world where citizens feel the state is overreaching, overreacting or simply taking preventive action where it is not needed.

Indeed, the postmodern state is now confronted with stark choices that pull at the very core of its liberal constitution: to strike a new balance between guaranteeing basic human rights and punishing terror. In doing so, how far is a state willing to police its citizens through surveillance, arbitrary arrests, detention and interrogation, and in the process severely compromise human rights and basic freedoms? Nations at war suspend constitutions or parts of it. But countering terrorism never fully allows an enunciation of whether a state is at war. In such a time, which laws stand to be abrogated? No country offers a suitable template in answering that question; for the largest part, states have gone ahead and curtailed human rights in their national interest.

International terror has made borders hard and states even harder. It is imperative that the police state's worst tendencies are inhibited as they undercut the rationale for constitutional entitlements for citizens.

### **3. Present a Counter narrative**

Whatever the state ideology, it is now critical that powerful counter narratives are created and presented through mainstream media to win back ideological ground. Radicalization wins where moderate narratives are missing or fail to shine a light on emotive global issues. Public messaging to present counter narratives is fraught with its own challenges, especially, the moral argument about whether a state should determine public debate. While national legislatures and public forums are tasked with exactly this purpose – to debate public issues – it may be critical for the state itself to take a stance on issues of national interest, especially if it seeks going to war at home or abroad.

Removing web content that feeds radical thinking may be a step in the right direction, but there must be something to replace the vacuum of a relentless 24 hour news feed. Should the state find a voice? Whom does it speak to and what instruments can it justifiably apply to augment its message? The answers to any of this may well determine a change in the nature of the state. The end goal is for politics to effectively moderate opinion when it comes to radicalization and present informed and robust counter narratives that speak to ideological confusion, especially as religion and ethnicity dominate street discussions across a globalized world.