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Sufism: A Peace-building and Resilient Strategy to Curb Violent Extremism in Pakistan

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Abstract

The wave of global terrorism and violent extremism emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US. Pakistan has also been grappled with the paramount challenges of violent extremism posing a threat to its security, stability and social harmony. Tackling the issue by using hard power and military strength led to the proliferation of terrorist outfits. The US after spending several billion dollars and tons of state-of-the-art military weapons had to withdraw its forces again by terminating the longest physical and military operation in Afghanistan after two decades without achieving any success. The current research tries to address the issue of violent extremism in Pakistan and explores the potential of Sufism as a counter-extremism approach that offers tolerance, compassion, social inclusiveness, non-violence, and interfaith harmony. This research has employed thematic analysis in qualitative research to identify themes and patterns by coding, categorizing and interpreting Sufi literature and policy documents to comprehensively investigate the potential of Sufism to curb violent extremism. The paper concludes by suggesting policy recommendations to incorporate and revive Sufism through its incorporation in curriculum, promotion of Sufi cultural festivals on media and interfaith dialogue so that the Sufi approach could contribute towards fostering a peaceful and tolerant society in Pakistan.

Keywords: Counter-Narrative, Al-Qaida, Pakistan, Zarb-e-Azb, Sufism, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism

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Introduction

Terrorism has now become a global issue. The originators of the Taliban were Mujahideen who gave birth to al-Qaida whose latest manifestation is ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq & Syria). With the rise of IS terrorists, a new brand of militancy has gained ground in Pakistan in which terrorists from existing terrorist organizations are joining IS.¹

In December 1979, Communist forces invaded Afghanistan. Taliban who started to fight against the Soviet expansionist designs were labeled as 'Mujahideen' and their war was considered the "Holy war". A strong narrative of waging *Jihad* against the Soviet expansionist forces was indoctrinated to win the supporters. The *jihad* took a new momentum when the USA, China and Saudi Arabia poured money and provided arms supplies to Mujahideen. Within a few months, Afghanistan became the center of an intensified cold war between two superpowers, the USSR and the USA.²

To subdue the Soviet forces, the Mujahideen fought vigorously. In the late 1980s, bin Laden fought with Mujahideen and then formed al-Qaeda which is a global militant faction backed by Arab Mujahideen. Later on, Afghanistan became the terrorists' sanctuary, where volunteers from all over the world poured into the al-Qaida faction to receive military training. The guerrillas fought a 'holy war' to withdraw the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Bin Laden himself collected the funding, found the recruits and purchased the weapons. The objective of al-Qaida is the restoration of the Caliphate that existed during the reign of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) which was abolished after World War I.³

Yousaf and Adkin (2003) asserted that Pakistan bore the overflow of foreign Jihadist outfits. The flow of tons of arms and ammunition was provided for this immense logistic exercise across Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁴ The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US spent 3 billion dollars to arm the Afghan resistance struggle against the USSR.

¹Ozer Khalid. The Global Terror Contagion Collision, Collusion and Convergence A Comparative Cross-Border Multi-Level Analysis of Extremism. Criterion Quarterly. Vol. 11.2. (2016). p. 99.

²Barak Mendelsohn. Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism. (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press 2009).

³Weinberg. Leonard "The First War of the Twenty-first Century". Global Terrorism: a beginner's guide. (England: One word Publications. 2005).

⁴Mohammad Yousaf; Mark Adkin. The Bear Trap Afghanistan's Untold Story. (Lahore; Jang Publishers, 2003).

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan in the 1980s. began to recruit and train radical Muslims from around the world to come to Pakistan and fight against the Red Army. Due to ideological synchronization, Pakistan's tribal people supported them and offered sanctuary. The government of Pakistan, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Jamat-e-Islami and other religio-political parties contributed to their ideological indoctrination.⁵ Emphasizing the notion of religious nationalism, the course of *jihad* and *qital* was compiled. Hundreds of madrassas of all sectarian persuasions have been set up along the Pashtun belt in the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Baluchistan that provided new generations of Pakistanis and Afghan refugees with accommodation, food, education and military training.⁶

Only 900 madrassas were there in Pakistan in 1971 but during the martial law period of Gen. Zia ul Haq in 1988, the number rose to 8,000 registered madrassas and 25,000 unregistered ones providing education to half a million students and attracting young boys from poor families.⁷ “The fighters in the name of 'Allah' conceived by ideologues, organized by politicians, financed by Saudis and equipped by the US contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Empire”.⁸ After the defeat, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved in December 1991. The National Security Advisor of the US, Brzezinski asserted, “They (the Afghanis) have a curious complex: they don't like foreigners with guns in their country.”⁹

In the post-disintegration of the USSR and Cold War, US policy in the region, particularly regarding Afghanistan and the Taliban was changed. The Taliban were left unattended by the US leading to the civil war in Afghanistan. Moreover, during that period Afghanistan became a victim of the drugs industry, crimes and terrorism that had destabilized Pakistan and endangered other countries of the world too. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the second generation of Mujahideen emerged, who called themselves the Taliban. In 1992, different factions in Afghanistan started to fight. The Taliban faction

⁵Aarish Ullah Khan. The Terrorist Threat and the Policy Response in Pakistan. SIPRI Policy Paper. (2005). <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRIPP11.pdf>

⁶Ahmed Rashid. Taliban The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond. (New Delhi. Brijbasi Art Press Ltd, 2010).

⁷Ibid.

⁸Rohan Gunaratna & Khuram Iqbal. “Pakistan Terrorism Ground Zero”. (London: Britain. Reaktion Books Ltd. 2011).

⁹M. J. Cassini & M. J. Audou. Of the Use of Plausible Deniability by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. (2013). <https://dune.univ-angers.fr/fichiers/20031843/20132MALLC1111/fichier/1111F.pdf>

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produced in refugee camps, got an education in madrassas, trained in Mujahideen parties and was ideologically indoctrinated in madrassas of Pakistan's frontier region. The year 1994 observed the surfacing of the Taliban in Southern Afghanistan. They came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia instantly recognized and supported the Taliban's government in Afghanistan. In consequence, the "*Jihadi* culture flourished, informal violence galvanized along with huge developmental losses and severe damage to socio-economic infrastructure ensued."¹⁰

With the establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, the ferocious ethnic civil war turned into extremism. Ahmad Rashid observed, "The Taliban brand of Islamic fundamentalism was so extreme that it appeared to denigrate Islam's message of peace and tolerance and its capacity to live with other religious and ethnic groups" and rejected the accommodation of liberal Islamic ideals and West.¹¹ Taliban even refused to compromise with UN humanitarian agencies or foreign donor countries. They tried to enforce their interpretation of Islamic Shariah in Afghanistan. Their rejection of Muslim ruling elites as corrupt led to the increase of Islamic fundamentalism. This new age militancy gave a new face and a new identity that refused to compromise and accept any political system except their own. Moreover, they shut down all girls' schools and women's outdoor activities and all conceivable recreation including videos, TV, music, games, sports and kite-flying.¹²

1. Violent Religious Extremism in Pakistan

The United States introduced the idea of global terrorism. On the eve of September 11, 2001, the name al-Qaida and the term Jihad emerged, stereotyping the vast majority of peaceful Muslims as close to *Jihadi* terrorists.¹³ In a single day, the nature of international security has changed fundamentally. Thus, al-Qaida changed its policy and began its struggle against imperialist and Western states, especially the U.S. Afterwards, the Islamic Front was forged by bin Laden against Crusaders and Jews. A coalition of militant factions intends to fight the war against anti-Islamic

¹⁰Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "Security Threats Confronting Pakistan". Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector. NIDS Joint Research Series No. 9 (n.d.)

¹¹Ahmed Rashid. Taliban The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond. (New Delhi. Brijbasi Art Press Ltd, 2010).

¹²Ahmed Rashid. Taliban The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond. (New Delhi. Brijbasi Art Press Ltd, 2010).

¹³Sheikh Dr. Zaki Badawi. Jihad From Quran to bin Laden. (London, Palgrave Macmillan; 2004).

states including the US, its ally Israel, battle down their Middle Eastern military presence and abolish their local support and establish Islamic governments throughout the world.¹⁴

United States initiated Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) with extreme intensity. The apex leadership of the Taliban to find shelter crossed the un-administered border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaida made a strategic decision to live in Pakistan's tribal areas which is a natural fortress to fight a guerilla war and make defensive and offensive positions. The secret tunnels provide safe havens to launch deadly attacks against the enemy undetected.¹⁵ Taliban evolved a strong narrative for recruits, particularly the young, less educated and poverty-ridden people. Donald Rumsfeld, the former Defense Secretary, 2003 posed the question "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"¹⁶ The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington marked the beginning of another stage in the globalization of jihad.¹⁷

The U.S. accused al-Qaida of its hand in the New York attacks and demanded Pakistan's support in its crackdown. Pakistan was faced with a hard choice to either align with the US-backed global war on terror as a frontline ally or to be bombed into the 'Stone Age'.¹⁸ The reason is that Pakistan occupies a significant geopolitical position in South and South West Asia.¹⁹ President Musharraf thought it a wise decision to align with the U.S. and to become a frontline state in the global hunt against terrorism. Therefore, Pakistan responded proactively. This sudden changeover in Pakistan's policy from pro to anti-Taliban was with orientation to fight against terrorism. Pakistan provided the US with intelligence cooperation to control the hydra-headed terrorism. As a result,

¹⁴Benjamin Orbach. Usama Bin Ladin And Al-Qa'ida: Origins And Doctrines. Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 4. (2001). <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/orb0101.pdf>

¹⁵Syed Saleem Shahzad. Inside al-Qaida and the Taliban Beyond bin Laden and 9/11. (London, Pluto Press, 2011).

¹⁶Peter W. Singer. The War on Terrorism: The Big Picture. Brookings. (2004 June 1). <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-war-on-terrorism-the-big-picture/>

¹⁷Barak Mendelsohn. Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and Interstate Cooperation in the War on Terrorism. (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press 2009).

¹⁸Rohan Gunaratna & Khuram Iqbal. "Pakistan Terrorism Ground Zero". (London: Britain. Reaktion Books Ltd. 2011).

¹⁹Aarish Ullah Khan. The Terrorist Threat and the Policy Response in Pakistan. SIPRI Policy Paper. (2005). <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRI11.pdf>

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Pakistan became the epicenter of radical Islamic Ideology and its terrorist adherents. Therefore, the pivotal issue Pak-U.S. relations focus on to curtail religious fundamentalism in Pakistan.²⁰ The war on terror has cost Pakistan almost over a hefty amount of \$126 billion in economic loss and more than 83,000 civilians in two decades.²¹ The terrorists keep on gaining hold of a vast territory. In counter-terrorism operations, terrorism cannot be eliminated rather it can be curtailed to some extent. Hard force or military might are not enough to eliminate these terrorist outfits.²² The ground reasons for the rise of extremism and terrorism still needed to be understood as a threat to Pakistan's national security. US President Biden withdrew their forces for the second time and completed the physical military exit by the 20th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001. The U.S. again left the Taliban unattended after fighting its longest war against these terrorist outfits without accomplishing any success.

Pape claimed that terrorism is distinguished between two types: first is demonstrative terrorism to seek publicity and other is destructive terrorism to exert pressure through the threat of injury and death. Terrorists have chosen suicide terrorism in softening up the target (maybe the government) towards making political concessions. Governments can ill-afford cede to such tactics of intimidation any longer.²³ With the intent to render the powerful powerless, these self-styled martyrs used the concept of Jihad to wage war and hit the vulnerabilities of their foes. These suicide bombers value their enemies' lives more than their own lives. This strategy of annihilation will lead them to enter into highest paradise. This philosophy of waging war they named "jihad" aimed at defending the community against infidels (found in neighboring Muslim governments). Bin Laden employed this term as a persecuted defender of true Islam that

²⁰Dr. Eamon Murphy & Dr. Ahmad Rashid Malik. Pakistan Jihad: The Making of Religious Terrorism. IPRI, Journal IX, NO.2. (2009). <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/art2eams2009.pdf>

²¹Hashim Pasha. The US-Pakistan relationship in a new Afghanistan. Atlantic Council. (2021 Sep. 2). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/the-us-pakistan-relationship-in-a-new-afghanistan/>

²²Ryan, Missy, and Karen DeYoung. Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021. The Washington Post. (2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83->

²³Robert A. Pape Dying To Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. (Chicago; Random House Publishing Group, 2005).

has won the pool of recruits and met with considerable political success.²⁴ Over the last two decades, these terrorist outfits have been using suicide attacks as the most effective weapon in Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan. Recently, the first ethnic and separatist Baluch female insurgent to seek independence of its province carried out a suicide bombing attack and killed three Chinese citizens and their Pakistani driver in front of the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi on April 25. However, the incident raised a question about the motivation behind the attack. Also, it is a paradigm shift because earlier the Baluch were opposed to radicalization and violent acts.²⁵ The terrorists have changed their trends and tactics by recruiting a female bomber in a recent bombing attack. It reveals that the terrorists can go to any extent to destabilize the country and can even use women for their purposes.²⁶

2. Narrative-building of Terrorist Outfits: Understanding the Mindset

A narrative is a story that is constructed through words but propagated through constructed scenarios.²⁷ Joseph Nye termed rhetoric as a "soft power" instead of the use of "brute violence and forceful coercion." Soft power uses inducements and persuasion.

The former House of Representatives speaker Newt Gingrich observed during the Bush administration, in Iraq "[t]he real key is not how many enemy do I kill. The real key is how many allies do I grow. And that is a very important metric that they just don't get."²⁸ To win the allies, al-Qaida does not employ a hard power approach but its narrative that attracts young minds. Frank Ciluffo, a former White House Homeland Security official expressed "[w]e've been fighting the wrong battle. The real center of gravity of the enemy is their narrative."²⁹ The phenomenon of terrorism

²⁴Christoph Reuter. *My Life is a Weapon*. (New Delhi, Manas Publications & Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁵Abubakar Siddique. First Female Suicide Bomber Marks 'Paradigm Shift' In Pakistan's Baluch Insurgency. *Gandhara*. (2022 April 29). <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/first-female-suicide-bomber-baluch-insurgency-pakistan/31827362.html>

²⁶Saba Noor. Women Suicide Bombers: An Emerging Security Challenge for Pakistan. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 3, No. 11 (2011), pp. 1-3.

²⁷Sahar Pirzada. A Missing Counter Narrative for Terrorism. *Criterion Quarterly*. Vol. 12.1. (2017). p. 80.

²⁸Joseph Nye, Jr. *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs. (2004). p. ix.

²⁹Alex P. Schmid. Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge. ICCT Research Paper. (2014). <http://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda's-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf>

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has always been a “battle of ideas.”³⁰ Terrorist outfits achieved success in appealing the young brains. Rhetoric is the use of soft power that is developed against the adversary which may be a state, a government, or people. A narrative is designed and disseminated to target the desired audience, the youth, who is the potential carrier of the message. There are always two sides to the story and two opposing parties. They both try to inflict defeat on each other. The terrorists have been successful in fabricating a strong narrative. Pirzada delineates, "These ideas are in the air we breathe, in the thoughts we think and sometimes in the actions we take."³¹ The terrorists make people believe that they are the victims and they are fighting against unjust authorities. Violence is the only possible retribution against unjust authorities.³² In response, the youth is assigned the duty to correct these awful injustices. There is a sense of otherization and “us” vs. “them” dichotomy. The false notion prevails the premise of a terrorist is that their enemy is at the brink of collapse. To win the support and sympathy of young people, their sentiments have been manipulated by the potentially developed ideology. Currently, their narrative in the shape of photographs and videotapes has been disseminated via social media.

3. Al-Qaida’s single narrative is “the West is at war with Islam”³³

The single narrative of al-Qaeda is far away from the real interpretation of Islam. To fight the enemy, they legitimize the Suicide/martyrdom (shaheed) operations against enemies as an asymmetric tactic of warfare;

- do not distinguish between civilian and military targets;
 - justify the killings of other Muslims for their support to the West or with “apostate” Muslim governments which stand in the way of introducing strict Sharia law and an Islamic state;
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³⁰Antulio J. Echevarria. Wars of Ideas And The War Of Ideas. Strategic Studies Institute. (2008). https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/90824/Wars_Ideas.pdf

³¹Sahar Pirzada. A Missing Counter Narrative for Terrorism. Criterion Quarterly. Vol. 12.1. (2017). p. 80.

³²Christian, Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Clark McCauley. Narratives and Counter-Narratives for Global Jihad: Opinion versus Action. Countering Violent Extremist Narratives. The National Coordinator for Counterterrorism. (2010). <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Countering-violent-extremist-narratives.pdf>

³³Alex P. Schmid. (2014). Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge. ICCT Research Paper. <http://www.icct.nl/app/uploads/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda's-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf>

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- apply Takfir (ex-communication) of Muslims who failed to apply their interpretation of the Sharia system;
 - follow the path of jihad (in the sense of holy war) as an obligation for every true individual Muslim;
 - propagate the idea of the clash of civilizations between the Muslim world (Dar-al-Islam) and the non-Muslim world (Dar-al-Harb) until the Sharia system is applied in the entire world;
 - emphasize the necessity to establish a government ruled by Sharia as a stepping stone to a Sharia-based world government.³⁴

It is a reality that the only narrative plays a momentous role in the way for susceptible young Muslims toward violence. The notion of Jihad has been misused by the terrorist outfits and suicide attackers ‘fidayeen’. They do not interpret it as a spiritual struggle to lead a holy life but to strive hard to convert or subjugate the non-Muslims and make them submit to the Islamic religion that continues without the limitation of time and space and to achieve this ideal, they do not hesitate to use violence.³⁵

The idea of “glocal” jihad is to “think globally, act locally”. In the 1980s, Abdullah Azzam (Bin Laden’s mentor) opted for the internationalization of Jihad in Afghanistan against Soviet forces. Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri fortified this trend. Muslims are bound to a religious duty to protect the Muslim community (umma) and Islamic values.

Al-Qaida’s prime focus is on the "far enemy" (the West) and then near enemy “apostate regimes in Muslim countries”. Currently, their focus is more on an immediate enemy. Conversely, the IS attacks both near and far targets simultaneously³⁶ “Glocal jihad and interpretation of different spatial realities consist of five key elements: first, strategic actions (local, national, regional or global fights) targets (far enemy or near enemy), second, exchange of experience and learning process (local or shared international vision on the way to act against the apostate regimes and with the populations, and how to manage a conquered territory); third, organizational command (orders coming from al-Qaida or autonomy of the local emirs); fourth, exchange of services (examples of logistics, training, funds between *jihadi* groups); and fifth, the modus operandi (local,

³⁴Alex P. Schmid. (2014). Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge. ICCT Research Paper.

³⁵Sheikh Dr. Zaki Badawi. Jihad From Quran to bin Laden. (London, Palgrave Macmillan; 2004).

³⁶Adib Bencherif. Unpacking “glocal” jihad: from the birth to the “sahelisation’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Critical Studies on Terrorism, 14:3. (2021). 335-353.

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circumstantial and historical tactics vs. homogenization of the type of attack, such as suicide-bombing).”³⁷

Al-Qaeda’s use of aggressive strategies is supported by a strong narrative that allows its approach, supports its actions, propagates its narrative and gathers recruits.

1. “Muslims are under attack everyone (set-up);
2. Only al-Qaeda and its followers are fighting the oppressors of Islam (climax);
3. If you are not supporting al-Qaeda, then you are supporting the oppressors (resolution/challenge)”.³⁸

Al-Qaida rationalizes the use of violent strategies against the enemy. They sacrifice their lives to kill others objectifying their lives’ worth only as weapons. Their cause is more important than their lives seems their doctrine of Jihad is bent on complete annihilation. “They kindle fear in people and there is no way to retaliate against attackers who hit, not just to kill others, but to die at the same stroke.” They felt their cause was more important than their lives.³⁹

The state needs to formulate an effective counter-narrative to win the battle of ideas and reach the ‘hearts and minds.’⁴⁰ of those susceptible to terrorists’ account of the story. Islam instills in the believers a message of peace and tolerance and respects the differences in faith, ideas and traditions with those who do not observe identical faith.

4. Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Measures

4.1 Zarb-e-Azb: An Offensive Strike

“A human dies when you attack a person. Humanity dies when you attack a child.”⁴¹ The apex political leadership of Pakistan was pursuing negotiations with the Taliban. The Taliban attacked Army Public School

³⁷Adib Bencherif. Unpacking “glocal” jihad: from the birth to the “sahelisation’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:3. (2021). 335-353.

³⁸Tom Quiggin. Understanding al-Qaeda’s Ideology for CounterNarrative Work. *Perspectives On Terrorism*. Volume 3, Issue 2. (2009). <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2009/issue-2/understanding-al-qaeda%E2%80%99s-ideology-for-counter-narrative-work---tom-quiggin.pdf>

³⁹Christoph Reuter. *My Life is a Weapon*. (New Delhi, Manas Publications & Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ozer Khalid. The Global Terror Contagion Collision, Collusion and Convergence A Comparative Cross-Border Multi-Level Analysis of Extremism. *Criterion Quarterly*. Vol. 11.2. (2016). p. 99.

(APS) Peshawar on December 16, 2014, under a different guise killing 140 people including 130 children.⁴² ‘The attack was termed Pakistan’s 9/11’.⁴³ Afterward, the civil and military leadership of Pakistan were on the same page and advocated the fight to eradicate hydra-headed terrorism. This military offensive Zarb-e-Azb was planned “against all hue and colour”,⁴⁴ and it is without any exception, whether it is Haqqani network or Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan”. The military strike was aimed at annihilating all the terrorist factions without any discrimination of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Taliban.⁴⁵ Before Zarb e Azb, 11 major military offensives were launched by the armed forces of Pakistan in tribal areas against local and foreign militants.⁴⁶

As Pakistan’s armed forces initiated Operation Zarb-e-Azb with more intensity, TTP leadership became split, moved towards eastern Afghanistan, regained control of certain regions and re-established terror sanctuaries and safe havens and started operating from there. The intensity of terror attacks in Afghanistan has increased to a high level. Afghanistan lashed out and accused Pakistan of its involvement in terrorist activities. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani quoted a statement made by the Taliban recently that “if they had no sanctuary in Pakistan, they wouldn’t last a month.”⁴⁷

Shortly after this offensive strike, the Pakistan Rangers started an offensive strike in Karachi. Around 533 criminals have been detained. The decrease in terrorist incidents has been made visible by up to 60 percent. 3,000 hard-core criminals have been arrested. Additionally, 15,400 illegal

⁴²Ulrich Karock The Peshawar Army Public School attack: From nightmare to greater darkness? Directorate-General For External Policies. (2014). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2014/536429/EXPOATA\(2014\)536429EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2014/536429/EXPOATA(2014)536429EN.pdf)

⁴³Zahid, Farhan. “The successes and Failures of Pakistan’s Operation Zarb-e-Azb.” Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor, vol. 13 (July 10, 2015). <https://jamestown.org/program/the-successes-and-failures-of-pakistans-operation-zarb-e-azb/>.

⁴⁴Andrew North, All hues or some shades in North Waziristan? BBC News. (2014 July 2). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28122590>

⁴⁵Daud Khattak. Pakistan Makes No Distinction Between 'Good,' 'Bad' Taliban. Gandhara. (November 19, 2014). <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/sartaj-aziz-interview/26699985.html>

⁴⁶Pakistan Army launches 'Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad' across the country. DAWN. February 22, 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1316332>

⁴⁷Sanjeev Miglani. Afghan president says Taliban wouldn't last a month without Pakistan support. REUTERS. (December 4, 2016). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-afghanistan-idUSKBN13T0CM>

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weapons have been recovered from the custody of criminals operating within Karachi. Rangers and police have somehow tackled the situation.⁴⁸

Since Pakistan intensified the Zarb-e-Azb offensive, peace has been achieved. The number of terrorist incidents has decreased to a large extent but Pakistan will have to establish a systematic and sustainable counter-terrorism approach. The Taliban have been fragmented into varied factions and gained strength due to their insurgency strategies. The military has done its job by physically cleansing the area from the militants' stronghold now it is the government's responsibility to build civil structures and establish an alternate story, a counter-narrative.

Terrorism is a non-conventional enemy. Its tactics are not visible, tangible and organized. Therefore it cannot be defeated by war.⁴⁹ According to Pirzada (2017), nothing is meted out in more aggression towards *jihadists'* terror activities, hate versus hate and two versions of hate do not make a right. He asserts that "war does not determine who is right, only who is left." All this must stop for it is making their job easier.⁵⁰

Basit (2015) presented a few suggestions concerning the countering of violent extremism.

1. The government should deny physical access to terrorists. There should be no chance of interaction between these terrorists and the population so that they may not inculcate ideas in the minds of innocent people.

2. Poor and uneducated people should be recruited for different jobs. The government must use its resources to provide them with alternative sources of income.

3. Rehabilitation programmes must be initiated on a regular basis to educate and aware people.

4. dialogues between all stakeholders such as the civilian leadership, armed force personnel, religious scholars and militant factions should be initiated to find out the root causes of violent activities carried out by terrorist factions and build a counter-narrative approach.⁵¹

⁴⁸Pildat. Monitor Implementation and Monitoring of the National Action Plan. (2017). <https://www.pildat.org/events/17-05-24/pdf/ImplementationandMonitoringoftheNationalActionPlanBackgroundPaper.pdf>

⁴⁹Jennifer Jane Hocking, & Colleen Helen Lewis. Counter-Terrorism and the Post-Democratic State. (1st ed.) (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007)

⁵⁰Sahar Pirzada. A Missing Counter Narrative for Terrorism. Criterion Quarterly. Vol. 12.1. (2017). p. 80.

⁵¹Abdul Basit. "Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and De-Radicalization Initiatives." IPRI Journal 15, no. 2 (2015): 44-68

4.2 National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA)

NACTA is Pakistan's internal counter-terrorism authority that aims to implement short, medium and long-term plans to eradicate terrorism. Under the Act of Parliament, NACTA was established in 2009 but its powers and mandate have been spelled since 2013. The Twenty-first Amendment of the Constitution was passed to provide an institutional mechanism for the establishment of NACTA.⁵²

The policy decision came about when on 16th December 2014, six terrorist outfits from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conducted a deadly terror strike on Army Public School (APS) Peshawar.⁵³ A national consensus was built that came hard on the terrorist outfits.⁵⁴ National Action Plan (NAP) a 20-point agenda is an action plan by the Government of Pakistan to eradicate terrorism and a supplementary anti-terror offensive in the North West region of Pakistan. It is considered a major coordinated state retaliation that received support from all political parties in Pakistan as well as the federal and provincial governments.

A comprehensive plan was chalked out by the Ministry of Interior, the federal and provincial governments and other stakeholders and got its approval on 24th December 2014. The counter-terrorism drive after National Internal Security Policy (NISP), is the second consensual policy document and action plan by the government.⁵⁵

This action plan established special trial military courts for cases about offenses related to terrorism. NACTA remained largely effective in 1. biometric verification of SIMs 2. trial of offenses related to terrorism and, 3. shut down of many madaris. NACTA remains largely ineffective because 1. social media has been largely ignored for propagating the militants' side of the story including videotapes and images 2. banned organizations have been operating with different names and 3. there is a lack of coordination between different security and intelligence agencies at both federal and provincial levels.⁵⁶

⁵²Jennifer Jane Hocking, & Colleen Helen Lewis. Counter-Terrorism and the Post-Democratic State. (1st ed.) (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007).

⁵³Umbreen Javaid. Operation Zarb-e-Azb: A Successful Initiative to Curtail Terrorism. South Asian Studies. Vol. 30, No.2. (2015). 43 – 58.

⁵⁴Jennifer Jane Hocking, & Colleen Helen Lewis. Counter-Terrorism and the Post-Democratic State. (1st ed.) (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007).

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Strengthening Governance in Pakistan: Assessing the National Action Plan to counter Terrorism and Extremism. (2020).

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To curtail the extremist activities, the government remained heavily reliant on the armed forces of Pakistan. The political leadership should take the fight to its logical end and curtail the militant outfits with all their manifestations without any discrimination as well as allocate sufficient resources to strengthen NAP and reactivate NACTA.

Sufism: A Way to Curb Violent Extremism

During the medieval period, immense Sufis made inroads in sub-continent India, propagated the message of Islam and emphasized the brotherhood of man. At that time, Hindu rituals, practices, culture and customs created social disharmony, class exploitation and the disparity between diverse segments of people. Sufi movements that were religious and social endorsed harmony and peace and held together the people of all segments.⁵⁷ Thomas Arnold observes that “during Muslim rule in Sub-continent India, the level of tolerance demonstrated towards non-Muslims was missing in Europe till modern times”.⁵⁸

All qualities of humanism, liberal in forgivingness, broadmindedness and tolerance are profusely found in a mystic way of life. Emphasis was placed on compassion, companionship, kindness, generosity, self-sacrifice (*ithas*), forgivingness, forbearance (*infaq*), giving away in charity and many similar qualities found in Sufi metaphysics.⁵⁹

Currently, the world is faced with violent religious extremism and Pakistan is the worst instance of its vulnerability to fundamentalism and extremism leading toward terrorism. Multiple ethnic, religious and sectarian differences are present in contemporary society. Sufi philosophies and ideologies can bridge the gap in society. Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is founded by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) which refers to the spiritual dimension and inner core religion of Islam. Sufism is an ideal of ethical and spiritual perfection that sets the tradition of tolerance, non-interference and the acceptance of differences, plurality and diversity. Sufis are considered

[https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final from Hamayun.pdf](https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final%20from%20Hamayun.pdf)

⁵⁷Munazza Batool. (2013). Sufis of the Indian Subcontinent and their views of Hinduism. National Conference on ‘Religious Harmony and Interfaith Dialogue in KPK. Hazara University Mansehra. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334465043_Sufis_of_the_Indian_subcontinent_and_their_views_of_Hinduism

⁵⁸Khan, M.A. 2008. Islamic Jihad: A legacy of Forced Conversation Imperialism and Slavery. Falibri.com. USA Print

⁵⁹Ashaq Hussain. Pluralism And Communal Harmony: Studying The Contribution Of Sufis. International Journal of Multiculturalism. Vol. 1.2. (2020). DOI: 10.30546/2708-3136.2020.1.2.65

Muslim humanists.⁶⁰ Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240) developed the Sufi tradition saw it as comprehensive ‘hub al-hub’, as ‘Love of love’ as it is stated in the Qur’an “There is no compulsion in faith” means that other religions of faith should be tolerated and venerated. Ibn ‘Arabi was in favour of inter-religious dialogue. In Pakpattan, Baba Farid’s convent became a place where Muslims and Hindus met and exchanged their views peacefully. The shrines of the Sufis are open to all devotees. People of all faiths including Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs venerate these saints and make pilgrimages to their graves.⁶¹

A Sufi poet, Rumi began his poetry with tolerance and moved on to compassion, respect and love, only then peace and harmony can be established between conflicting beliefs and ideologies. He said, “Listen with ears of tolerance, See through the eyes of compassion! Speak with the language of love.” “I am not from the East or the West. I am not Christian or Jew or Muslim. I am not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen. I do not belong to any established religion or any cultural system.”⁶²

Sultan Bahu (1631-1691), a Sufi poet offers a vision of a universe based on the principle of love and forgiveness. His concept of inclusivity and all-embracing love is a strong deterrent to the discourse of the clash of civilizations, and othering that stems from ignorance of the intrinsic beauty of Islam which means peace that is embedded in Sufi literature. Interfaith dialogue can bridge the gap between polarized views and serve to connect different and warring creeds. Sultan Bahu’s unifying vision of “Oneness” in which different and divergent points of view co-exist peacefully and harmoniously.⁶³ One more Sufi poet, Bulleh Shah gave a humanist approach. He disseminates the message of peace, love and religious tolerance for all human beings irrespective of their colour and creed. He discouraged hatred and cruelty.

Other Sufis such as Hazrat Sheikh Khwaja Syed, Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya, Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh Ali Hajveri and Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, to name just a few, gave the concept of Sufi tolerance of religious differences and their “live-and-let-live” cultural diversity comes from the philosophical concept of “tawhid — the Oneness of the Divine” indicates a holistic worldview. This view prevents people from

⁶⁰Jürgen Wasim Frembgen. Tolerance in the Sufi Tradition. Sahapedia. (2016). <https://www.sahapedia.org/tolerance-the-sufi-tradition>

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Jalal al-Din Rumi. (2004). The Essential Rumi. Barks, C. (trans.). Harper One.

⁶³Retrieved from: (<https://www.sultanbahoo.net/>)

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interfering in the religious views of those of other faiths and accepts harmony and togetherness of all in sacred places.⁶⁴ Another Sufi Mian Mir laid the foundation stone of Sri Harmandir Sahib Ji. Moreover, people of all religions and races, irrespective of caste and creed from and from distant places used to assemble at various Khanqahs to seek spiritual guidance.⁶⁵

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, militants have made borders irrelevant. They find ungoverned space to recruit and train people, build a narrative and collect funding. The militant factions are selling their narrative better than the state. The extremist narrative dominates the ideological space inexorably and unrelentingly. The government's objective is to crack down on terrorist factions using hard power or forceful means. Even though, the Pakistan military, in its offensive strikes, has been able to regain the physical territory from the militant factions' stronghold. The counter-narrative of the government is weak and vague. The youth falls victim to the terrorists' grand narrative. Little attention has been paid by the government for the youth who are falling victim at the hands of the terrorists' hardcore ideology. Therefore, a counter-narrative should be designed, developed and disseminated with a special focus on the youth. However, this narrative based on Sufi qualities has not been established to present it to society. The Sufi approach can bring peace, and stability and counter violent religious extremism. Sufism should be incorporated and revived in educational curriculum. Sufi cultural festivals should be promoted on media so that the Sufi approach could contribute towards fostering an interfaith dialogue for peaceful and tolerant society in Pakistan.



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⁶⁴Jürgen Wasim Frembgen. Tolerance in the Sufi Tradition. Sahapedia. (2016). <https://www.sahapedia.org/tolerance-the-sufi-tradition>

⁶⁵Makhmatkulov Ilhom Turdimurodovich, Giyasov Bobosher Djurakulovich, Eshatov Ikrom Quziyevich. The Role And Place Of The Khanqahs In Spreading The Mysticism And Spiritual Purification To The Peoples Of Central Asia. International Journal Of Scientific & Technology Research Volume 9, Issue 03. (2020). <http://www.ijstr.org/final-print/mar2020/The-Role-And-Place-Of-The-Khanqahs-In-Spreading-The-Mysticism-And-Spiritual-Purification-To-The-Peoples-Of-Central-Asia.pdf>