



CENTRE for AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES

Advancing Resilience: Unleashing the Potential of Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan



ANALYSIS REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) involves a broad range of non-combative measures taken by governments and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) focused on curbing the multifaceted drivers and causes of violent extremism. Over the years, the concept of CVE has gained significant traction in the global realm. The United Nation Security Council in its resolution 2178 (2014) underscores CVE as an essential element to address the threats pertaining to global peace and security.

In recent years, the national security apparatus of Pakistan has also extended due credence to CVE measures. The underlying belief is that hard measures, when instituted in isolation, are inadequate to eliminate the religious extremism which is a key driver of terrorism in the country. Consequently, sustainability of any counterterrorism effort would remain questionable sans a viable CVE policy. The 2018 National Internal Security Policy of Pakistan (NISP 2018) aimed to counteract the conditions in the country that promoted violent extremism. It outlined a range of measures designed to tackle this issue. Another noteworthy initiative, reflecting a shift in focus from previous approaches centred on hard measures, included the National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG) introduced by the National Counter Terrorism Authority NACTA in 2018. This policy was widely praised as a means to foster inclusivity, connectivity, peace, and harmony within society. Furthermore, the Revised National Action Plan (RNAP) recognised CVE as a crucial component of its strategy in addressing the growing threat of violent extremism in Pakistan.

Despite having a necessary policy framework in place, Pakistan has struggled to fully implement comprehensive measures. While significant progress was made in curbing terrorism through kinetic measures employed during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, extremist tendencies within society persist and, in some cases, have even intensified due to various influencing factors. One major issue is the absence of a robust counter-narrative capable of dismantling the ideology propagated by extremists.

Currently, Pakistan is confronted with a renewed wave of religious militancy, posing a significant risk of further exacerbating extremism within society. In light of this pressing challenge, the government must prioritise institutionalisation of comprehensive CVE strategies. This entails establishing a framework that encourages collaborative and coordinated efforts between the government and civil society. The primary objective should be to safeguard vulnerable populations from the perils of radicalisation, while simultaneously fostering local resilience to disrupt any facilitation provided to extremists.

Against this backdrop, the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad organised a seminar to provide a platform for in-depth discussions and knowledge sharing on CVE in the context of Pakistan to generate actionable recommendations and strategies to effectively strengthen the government's efforts in this area. It brought together a diverse range of stakeholders, including policymakers, academics, practitioners, and representatives from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), to foster a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing CVE measures. Senior Director CASS, Islamabad, Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd) moderated the seminar, while President CASS, Islamabad, Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), delivered the concluding remarks. Eminent panellists included:

- ♣ Mr Mohammad Ali Babakhel, Additional Inspector General Police (Operations), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa;
- ♣ Ms Azeema Cheema, Founding Director, Verso Consulting; and,
- ♣ Dr Farhan Zahid, Senior Superintendent Police, Commandant Police Training College, Quetta.

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd) discussed the evolving concept of CVE. He shared that a major challenge was the lack of a universally agreed definition of 'violent extremism' leading to different interpretations by various states, groups, and individuals. He highlighted multiple drivers of violent extremism in Pakistan, including a feudal culture, politicisation of faith, and conflicts between tradition and modernity. He confessed that despite having a comprehensive policy framework, the implementation of CVE measures in Pakistan had been slow. It was emphasised that understanding the difference between public interest and national interest was crucial in CVE efforts. While Western Europe had implemented CVE programmes for left-wing and right-wing extremism, the rising right-wing extremism posed new challenges to the effectiveness of these programmes.

Mr Ali Babakhel highlighted that CVE was a complex and longstanding issue, not limited to post-9/11 events. Unlike counterterrorism efforts, the impact of CVE measures could not be instantly quantified, necessitating a comprehensive response plan. The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was not an operations organisation rather worked like a think tank on research for combatting terrorism and extremism. He stressed that identifying different categories of individuals involved in extremism and understanding its driving factors was crucial. According to him education was a pivotal factor, requiring increased investment. Technology and media engagement posed significant challenges in the fight against extremism. Building counter-narratives and engaging with victims was, hence, essential. He agreed that despite successes in countering extremism, implementation, monitoring, and communication remained areas of concern. Strengthening the rule of law, citizen engagement, media involvement, integrated education reforms, and adopting a whole-of-society approach were critical for CVE.

Ms. Azeema Cheema highlighted key challenges in the way of CVE in Pakistan. One major obstacle was the conflation of public interest with national interest, leading to a lack of focus on CVE as a function of public interest. Global populism had exacerbated violent extremism, driven by majoritarian groups convinced that their values were under threat. In this regard, conflict entrepreneurs were playing a significant role at local, national, and international levels in promoting extremism. According to her, the digital space in Pakistan lacked proper governance, relying heavily on censorship, which had limitations and consequences. She was of the view that the CSOs could contribute significantly for CVE through diagnostic roles, testing policy implementation, and consensus building. However, they faced regulatory challenges that hindered their capacities and support. She argued that the concept of addressing violent extremism should go beyond de-radicalisation and acknowledge identity-based grievances that contributed to polarisation and radical ideas across society.

Dr Farhan Zahid's talk focused on how CVE had evolved globally to address changing extremist ideologies, calling for enhanced international cooperation and evidence-based practices. To strengthen CVE efforts, a holistic approach encompassing social inclusion, education, economic opportunities, and community resilience was essential. He stressed that countering online radicalisation required collaborative measures, online monitoring, and partnerships with tech companies. Pakistan needed to strengthen CVE implementation,

involving civil society and collaborating with international organisations. Leveraging technology and regional cooperation could, he felt, enhance counterterrorism efforts, while social media campaigns promoting peace and discrediting extremist narratives were also crucial.

President of CASS, Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), stressed the significance of documenting and transparently publicising national interests to effectively counter violent extremism. In his view, inefficient policies spanning over 40 years, driven by foreign interests, had led to terrorism; and extremism had arisen from hate and intolerance within society, where religion was often misused. He emphasised that addressing issues like poverty, governance, education, and unemployment was crucial. He conveyed that for an inclusive society, active engagement in resolving issues was vital to combat extremism. The foundations of policies, in his opinion, should be centred on national interests, combining both kinetic and non-kinetic approaches, particularly emphasising the prevention of extremism turning into terrorism. He advocated for the utilisation of resources for societal development, highlighting the importance of justice, equality, and education in effectively combatting extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ♣ CVE lacks a universally agreed definition, leading to varied interpretations by different states, groups, and individuals based on their vested interests.
- ♣ Western Europe has implemented CVE programmes for left-wing and right-wing extremism, but the latter's rise is raising concerns about the effectiveness of these programmes.
- ♣ CVE involves soft, non-kinetic measures to address underlying issues related to extremism, promoting alternative narratives to deter and counter extremist ideologies.
- ♣ Global populism is fuelling violent extremism along gender, religious, and cultural lines, leading to majoritarianism.
- ♣ Conflict entrepreneurs promote violent extremism at local, national, and international levels.
- ♣ The global trajectory of CVE involves enhanced international cooperation and multidimensional approaches to combat evolving threats.
- ♣ The five underlying causes of extremism including poverty, poor governance, unstable political structure, poor education and unemployment co-exist in Pakistani society. More specifically, violent extremism is a result of multiple drivers, including a feudal culture, politicisation of faith, and social conflict arising from tradition vs. modernity or orthodoxy vs. progress.
- ♣ Conflation of public interest with national interest in Pakistan hinders progress in understanding and addressing violent extremism.
- ♣ Inconsistent policies over the past 40 years, including Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan, have largely contributed to the increasing levels of extremism and terrorism in the country.
- ♣ The Government of Pakistan recognises the importance of CVE in its counterterrorism efforts and has incorporated CVE strategies alongside kinetic measures.
- ♣ Pakistan has had successes in countering extremism, but implementation, monitoring, and communication remain areas of concern.
- ♣ While the state treats counterterrorism as a national security concern, limited progress in addressing violent extremism stems from not viewing it as a matter of public interest.
- ♣ Civil society in Pakistan seems less inclined to get involved and take proactive measures in CVE compared to other national crises. However, CSOs face challenges due to restrictive regulatory frameworks, affecting their funding streams and capacities.
- ♣ Pakistan lacks a comprehensive understanding of the digital space, and reliance on censorship as a solution has limitations and negative consequences.
- ♣ The difference between anti-terrorism and counterterrorism lies in their defensive and offensive nature, respectively.
- ♣ It is the responsibility of the state to develop a cooperative society, based on providing fair and equal opportunities, justice, and quality education for all.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

- ♣ Operational and tactical successes in fighting terrorism do not eradicate the menace in entirety, a well-defined policy framework based on national interests is a need of the hour.
- ♣ Policies against extremism and terrorism should be aimed at addressing the root causes of these problems by focusing on prevention of intolerance and hate that fester into extremism.
- ♣ For a more effective counterterrorism approach, it is essential to shift the perspective from viewing it solely as a national security concern. Addressing violent extremism should also be considered a function of public interest, thereby encompassing a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the issue.
- ♣ Strengthening rule of law, citizen engagement, media involvement, and integrated education reforms, along with a whole-of-society approach are critical for CVE.
- ♣ Federal and provincial linkages for integrated CVE response should be strengthened.
- ♣ There is a need for formation of a *Reconciliation Commission* based on best practices from other countries, as well as lessons learnt from Pakistan's own CVE and CT experience.
- ♣ Pakistan lacks a gender-responsive approach to security and countering violent extremism. Increasing women's role in CVE requires them to play a larger part in decision-making in the security sector, and to include them in peace processes.
- ♣ Education plays a crucial role, and greater investment is needed in this area. Teachers, parents, researchers, as well as those working in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), media, need to be play a more proactive and positive role in this regard.
- ♣ Technology and media engagement are significant challenges in the fight against extremism. Communication strategies should include building counter-narratives and involving victims.
- ♣ Countering online radicalisation necessitates collaborative efforts, online monitoring, reporting mechanisms, and partnerships with tech companies to remove extremist content.
- ♣ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can contribute to CVE through diagnostic roles, testing policy implementation, and consensus building.
- ♣ Specialised training for key community figures - such as police, educators, and civil society advocates – should be supported by the government to solidify Pakistan's counterterrorism posture.
- ♣ Pakistan can enhance counterterrorism efforts through collaboration with relevant United Nations bodies, and regional cooperation.

OPENING REMARKS

Air Marshal Farooq Habib, HI (M), SBt (Retd), Senior Director, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd) began the session with an introduction to the topic of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). He highlighted several challenges associated with the subject, such as lack of a universally accepted definition of 'Violent Extremism'. This ambiguity often allowed for subjective interpretations by states, groups, and individuals.

"CVE is an evolving concept both for policymakers and practitioners."

He elaborated that in the absence of sufficient experience, there was different understanding and analysis of the drivers and causes of violent extremism. Such variation was also visible in Pakistan where different segments of society perceived and interpreted this issue in their own manner. This ultimately affected the approaches adopted by states to counter violent extremism.

CVE's Crucial Role in Combatting Terrorism

Air Marshal Habib asserted that despite such shortcomings, significance of CVE was now acknowledged across the world, including Pakistan, as an important element in fighting terrorism.

"In Pakistan, emphasis on CVE started after the recognition that hard measures alone were not sufficient to counter terrorism."

However, he added, focus on CVE measures was currently restricted to the policy framework only, with little emphasis on its operationalisation.

Drivers of Violent Extremism in Pakistan and Imperative for Comprehensive CVE Strategies

The seminar moderator asserted that proliferation of violence in society and the propensity to condone it, remained a significant driver of violent extremism in Pakistan. Quoting Dr Eqbal Ahmed, he said that proliferation of violence in the country stemmed from peculiar conditions, including a feudal culture, deliberate politicisation of faith, and social conflict arising from a complex relationship between the past and future.

"CVE is a 'Whole-of-Nation' rather than a 'Security Only' approach."

TRAJECTORY OF CVE IN PAKISTAN: SUCCESSES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Mr Mohammad Ali Babakhel, Additional Inspector General Police (Operations), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Understanding CVE

At the outset, Mr Babakhel asserted that CVE was not merely a post-9/11 development; violent tendencies had long been a part of human nature.

“The flaw in our approach has been the primary dependence on kinetic options, without due regard given to weak links such as socioeconomic or ethnic factors.”

He said that Pakistan’s security-centric approach led to a mushroom growth of violent non-state actors. As a result, 78 (regional, international, local, ethnic, sectarian) organisations had formally been proscribed in the country. He elaborated that traditionally, counterterrorism efforts more commonly discussed a specific number of terrorists killed or a certain amount of weapons/gunpowder confiscated. However, CVE measures could not be instantly quantified in a similar manner. The National Internal Security Policy (NISP-I, 2014-18) was the first to incorporate the term ‘extremism’, citing it 37 times. It acknowledged that non-traditional threats from extremism had not only impacted the peace index, economic stability and social harmony, as well as instilled a sense of insecurity, they had also negatively impacted the state of fundamental human rights and the country’s image. He shared that NISP-I was based on the idea of a ‘Comprehensive Response Plan’ — a composite process based on dialogue with all sections of society, which also included infrastructure development, rehabilitation of victims of terrorism, creating a national narrative, reconciliation, reintegration, and legal reforms.

NACTA’s Role

The speaker referred to NACTA as a key federal organisation for intelligence sharing, analysis, research, cooperation, collaboration, planning, and policy review. He lamented that after every major incident of terrorism, the media questioned the effectiveness of NACTA, which negatively impacted its credibility. He clarified that NACTA was a think tank and a coordination-, information- and intelligence-sharing apparatus between the Centre and provinces. It was not envisioned as an investigative or operational CT body. Its mandate was primarily the development of action plans against terrorism and extremism, and to carry out research relating to the CT and CVE.

Identifying the Fault Lines

“Extremists ought not be confused with terrorists.”

Mr Babakhel emphasised the need for compartmentalisation to distinguish between extremists, sympathisers, facilitators, and terrorists. Additionally, identifying drivers of violent extremism was crucial to understanding why individuals succumbed to such ideologies. He

added that misinterpretation of religion was only one of the causes of growing extremism in Pakistan, but there were many other elements as well.

“We needed to identify ethnic, sectarian fault lines, while also assessing the impact of service delivery and political marginalisation. Following a whole-of-nation approach, socioeconomic and ethnic factors ought to be given more attention.”

The speaker identified the following seven drivers of extremism as listed in the National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG), 2018:

1. Service delivery,
2. Behaviour and structural issues of the Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs),
3. Weak accountability apparatus within institutions,
4. Economic constraints and limited economic opportunities,
5. Flawed and slow criminal justice system,
6. Erosion of social fabric and unplanned urbanisation, and
7. Out-of-school children.

Education

Mr Babakhel placed special emphasis on the role of education, insisting that there needed to be greater investment in this sector. He said that NISP-II (2018-23) rightly pointed out that minimum national standards must be set for *madrassahs*, as well as the public and private education sectors. At least four percent of GDP was recommended to be allocated to education. Curriculum reforms and training of teachers on how to prevent the growth of VE on educational campuses was highlighted.

“Teachers ought to be trained and parents taken on board as focal persons to prevent the spread of extremism.”

Technology and Media

Anonymity and encrypted communication had posed a challenge to LEAs, even in the first-world states. Quoting Ayman al Zawahiri who said that half of the battle was waged on the small screen, the speaker advised that Pakistan ought to learn that war had gone from the small screens to the palm of one’s hand. He called attention towards understanding how to fight such a war, how to deal with fake news, and how to identify narratives against national interests.

“The state has not benefitted from technology. However, it is used by violent Non-State Actors.”

He expressed that in terms of media engagement and media agenda setting, Pakistan needed to adopt an elastic approach. Given the amount of damage done through media and social media, media ought to be empowered to convey the national narrative better. As in Indonesia, instead of projecting blasts, commendable CT efforts of the state ought to be projected. A responsible media not only reports incidents of terrorism but also encourages

the debate regarding the push-and-pull factors and uses a diagnostic approach, he said. Steps should be taken for the implementation of PEMRA regulations pertaining to hate speech, fake news, racial prejudice and the glorification of terrorism and terrorist organisations. Ten per cent of the content should be earmarked for public service messages to share messages against extremism.

Communication Strategies: Building Counter Narratives

The speaker added that caution must be exercised while dealing with clergy on account of the several sensitivities involved. The military, LEAs or intelligence personnel ought to be trained and must not be rank-conscious in order to secure the national interest. Thus, a communication strategy must be carefully devised. He warned that terrorists indoctrinated child soldiers and suicide bombers by perpetuating a narrative of victimhood, therefore, the state also ought to opt a victim-centric approach. Engagement with victims was indispensable and their stories ought to be a part of the counternarrative. Citing examples of UK, Sweden, Norway, Indonesia, Mr Babakhel stressed that former combatants must have a role in building a narrative. In Pakistan, there is no role for former combatants and victims in the narrative-building process, which could facilitate in understanding the factors that led them towards extremism.

Successes

Pakistan had the world's best practices for countering violent extremism, and these successes ought to be highlighted on the international level, to impart knowledge on how to avert, prevent and counter extremist values and practices. The main successes highlighted by the speaker included: FATA reforms, successful military operations, disruption of militant networks, elimination of key militant leaders, restoration of government control, incorporation of Article 25A (regarding free compulsory education for 5-16-year-olds) into the Constitution, rehabilitation programmes, policy initiatives and the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Disappointments

A number of policy initiatives, most of which were developed in the post-APS-incident era, included NACTA Act, NCEPG 2018, NISP-II (2018-23), National Action Plan etc. However, the problem was with implementation, monitoring and revision.

“An effective communication strategy to address the relevant audience
has also been a missing link.”

In general, the disappointments highlighted by the speaker included: the prolonged spell of extremism; lack of understanding about CVE policies and programmes; lack of support from clergy, community and human rights organisations for CVE policies and programmes; weak legal and institutional framework; weak monitoring and evaluation of CVE programmes; slow pace of *madrasah* reforms; growing extremism on educational campuses; low convictions; sectarian violence; ethnic violence; and online radicalisation.

Recommendations

Priority areas for policy intervention, as pointed out by Mr Babakhel, were: rule of law and service delivery; reformation, rehabilitation, reintegration and renunciation; media

engagement; citizen engagement; promotion of culture; and integrated education reforms. As a way forward, he advised that:

1. Pakistan needs to assert that it is a democratic nation and reconsolidate its institutional framework accordingly.
2. To effectively combat extremism, it is imperative to reconsolidate the security apparatus, including the role and functioning of NACTA, as well as CVE measures into short-, medium- and long-term plans.
3. While dealing with extremism, developing states usually focus more on external factors; consequently, internal push and pull factors leading to radicalisation are often overlooked. The effectiveness of a narrative depends on the redressal of the target audience's needs; ideally, it should be a combination of both generic and targeted interventions. Formulating a counter-narrative should not be considered a separate component and should be part of the CT strategy and adopt a whole-of-nation approach.
4. Federal and provincial linkages, for an integrated and well-coordinated CVE response, ought to be strengthened.
5. Referring to the Peace and Stabilisation Fund under NACTA, the formation of a *Reconciliation Commission*, based on lessons learnt, may be considered.
6. Terrorism is not only an act of violence but also communication. In covering terrorism, the media can play a positive or negative role. The way terrorism is reported has a negative impact on public safety and LEAs' efforts. Exaggerated and biased coverage may polarise communities, fan hatred and encourage terrorist groups. Responsible reporting fulfils professional as well as social duties.
7. Pakistan lacks a gender-responsive approach to security and countering violent extremism. Traditionally, women have been presented as victims, but it has been shown that women are increasingly supporting or being an active partner in VE, e.g, gathering intelligence, recruiting and mobilising resources. Increasing women's role in CVE requires them to play a larger part in decision-making in the security sector, and to include them in peace processes.
8. Without building the capacity of preachers, teachers, parents, social workers, women and police to sniff out the virus of extremism, defeating miscreants may remain an elusive dream. The antidote to extremism is, hence, education.

Kinetic responses don't address socioeconomic causes, and may exacerbate radicalisation and limit rights. Preventing radicalisation requires resolving the grievances and motivation that lead people to join ext-remist groups. A security-based approach alone is insufficient to root out terrorism. Fighting extremism demands that youth, families, women, victims of terrorism, religious, cultural and educational leaders, civil society and media play their role.

CVE and the Role of Civil Society

Ms Azeema Cheema, Founding Director, Verso Consulting

The speaker outlined that a range of issues that often shaped and heightened vulnerability to violent extremism and other negative outcomes at the individual, community, and structural levels. These included, but were not limited to, the normalisation of violence; worsening economic crisis; disrupted education; lack of trust in governance; frayed social cohesion; trauma; and a sense of uncertainty and diminished hope for the future.

“One of the challenges, when approaching a subject like CVE in Pakistan, is that public interest and national interest are in conflict with each other.”

Ms Cheema stated that the country viewed counterterrorism primarily as a matter of national security. The lack of progress in understanding and addressing violent extremism arose from not perceiving it as a public interest issue or as ‘a function of public interest.’

Function of Majoritarianism

Ms Cheema explained that global populism was evoking violent extremism in a considerable manner along gender, religious and cultural identities. Majoritarian groups had been convinced by conflict entrepreneurs in any context that their values and interests were under threat. Hence, there was a systemic set of beliefs that were fundamental to building violent extremism. The speaker cautioned that there was now an audience primed to violent extremism.

“In Pakistan, we have developed a linearity of conflict where the space around pluralism is closing, and this is happening through alliances of religious extremist groups.”

The speaker commented that violent extremism was essentially a function of majoritarianism and a nuanced conversation around the topic was not being done.

Role of Conflict Entrepreneurs¹

Ms Cheema pointed out the role of ‘conflict entrepreneurs’ in Pakistan. She elaborated that at the local level, they were trying to control space. She referred to examples which included, one community pushing out a minority community in order to control their space, activities around forced conversions, and the marginalisation of Hindu communities in Sindh. At the national level, conflict entrepreneurs were trying to shape the state as per their ideology using religious extremism and targeting policymakers and state actors. Finally, she argued that in the international domain, there was a network that was meaningfully trying to wage war. She inferred that the regional message was targeting the Pakistani state via narratives of de-legitimisation.

¹ “Conflict entrepreneur refers to a group or individual who promote conflict for profit. They exist inside or outside government. Usually, a conflict entrepreneur engages in or directly benefit from illegal economic activity that promotes violence or undermines efforts for good governance and economic development.” <<https://definitions.uslegal.com/c/conflict-entrepreneur/>>.

Digital Space

Ms. Cheema argued that Pakistan's grasp of the digital realm was limited. The digital space, by its nature, eluded traditional governance structures. While social media companies wielded significant influence, states housing the headquarters of these platforms exercised more control over them. She lamented that social media companies were less likely to set up their offices in Pakistan given that it had already demonstrated itself to be an excessively regulatory actor by frequent requests to take down content from platforms like Meta.

"Our solutions' toolbox so far is largely relying on censorship."

She further emphasised that Pakistan lacked the technical and legal capacity for selective censorship. This deficiency often pushed the state to consider eliminating/banning entire social media platforms, thereby jeopardising the livelihoods of the very youth groups the it sought to engage and support.

Role of Civil Society

Civil society, particularly Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), could be effective as a means to solve some of the issues linked to CVE.

1. Diagnostic Role

Discussing the role of CSOs, the speaker pointed out a potential diagnostic role since they had the ability to redefine and reframe the problem, address gap areas, the ability to tell where the researcher was going wrong, and also the ability to give confidence if a certain area was beyond the reach of the researcher.

"We need to ditch the narrative of 'Pakistan exceptionalism.'"

Ms. Cheema pointed out that the challenges faced by Pakistan mirrored those encountered globally. She emphasised that Pakistan was not an isolated case but was navigating within an international framework that had occasionally been unjust to the country. She stressed the importance of projecting confidence when addressing these specific issues.

2. Testing

Ms Cheema highlighted the vital role of CSOs in evaluating policy implementation. She asserted that every policy intervention required rigorous testing. Instead of the state merely conveying its stance, it was paramount to ensure that the intended messages resonated accurately with the target audience. According to the speaker, while these were foundational strategic communication principles, the state had not fully leveraged them, primarily due to their experimental nature, emphasising the indispensable role of CSOs in this phase. She also detailed how regulatory frameworks had adversely affected CSOs' functions and capabilities. For instance, a CSO needed to secure an NOC and subsequent approval from local police to conduct specific activities in an area. Such administrative constraints not only diminished funding avenues for civil societies but also hampered their capacity to train staff for policy evaluations.

"The state can greatly benefit from civil society support."

She referred to the experience of the 2022 floods as opposed to the 2010 floods that made it evident that there was a gaping hole in terms of the kind of support that the civil society was able to provide.

3. Consensus Building

Ms Cheema underlined the pivotal role of civil society in building consensus. She observed that large public groups were often mobilised using online hate speech and disinformation. However, state institutions lacked clear definitions for hate speech and online disinformation. Despite the prevalent discussions about these issues in Pakistan, there was an absence of a concrete policy framework to tackle them.

“All we are doing is censorship which is not actually addressing violent extremism at all.”

She referenced the international arena, noting the presence of well-defined and actionable terms for violent speech. She suggested that by adopting these definitions, especially those used by social media companies, Pakistan could enhance its communication with these platforms, enabling more effective identification and management of content deemed as violent speech.

Ms Cheema concluded that while civil society had played various roles, it was essential to move beyond solely viewing violent extremism through the lens of deradicalisation. While deradicalisation was important, its scope lay primarily within the domains of law, justice, and state security. She contended that broader narratives around identity-based grievances, which led to societal polarisation, primed audiences towards violent extremism. This propensity for isolated incidents or ‘flash events’ to evolve into broader populist movements bolstered consensus around more radical ideologies in society, which remained unaddressed.

CVE in the Global Context

Dr Farhan Zahid, Senior Superintendent Police, Commandant Police Training College, Quetta

Background on Global CVE Evolution

Dr Zahid commenced his talk by tracing the evolution of the debate on extremism and terrorism, spotlighting its amplification post the 9/11 attacks and subsequent US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“Not every extremist is a terrorist, but every terrorist follows a path of extremism and become a violent person.”

He pinpointed ideological underpinnings - ranging from religious and politico-ethnic to irredentist beliefs - as primary catalysts for terrorism. In the context of Pakistan, Dr Zahid observed that the dominant response leaned heavily towards kinetic actions, like anti-terrorism and counterterrorism operations. However, he underscored the importance of exploring solutions beyond these direct interventions.

Dr Zahid drew a distinction between anti-terrorism and counterterrorism, noting that while the former was defensive, the latter adopted an offensive stance. He observed a prevailing ambiguity at the policy level concerning these two strategies. He referenced a shift in discourse, noting that the emphasis on CVE surfaced in 2015, when President Obama introduced the term during a White House summit. Prior to that, discussions predominantly centred around radicalisation, deradicalisation, and counter-radicalisation. Following this, the academic realm began embracing the term CVE, indicating a global pivot towards addressing the issue through softer, non-kinetic approaches.

CVE as a Counterterrorism Strategy

Dr Zahid posited that the United Kingdom's well-recognised counterterrorism strategy prominently featured the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) approach. Drawing upon the premise that 'by striking a balance between kinetic and non-kinetic measures, the CVE aims to curb violent extremism,' he noted how CVE was rooted in soft, non-kinetic initiatives undertaken by governments, CSOs, and other institutions. These initiatives, he emphasised, sought to address the deep-seated factors that fuel violent extremism. In particular, CVE strategies has been instrumental in providing direction and resources to galvanise and empower civil society, with a keen focus on the youth, who were often susceptible to extremist ideologies.

At its core, CVE aims to challenge and undermine extremist ideologies by amplifying alternative narratives.

CVE: The Global Trajectory

Dr Zahid delved into the global evolution of CVE measures, observing how states and organisations had refined their strategies in response to the shifting landscape of extremism and terrorism. While Islamist terrorism had been once at the forefront, there had been a burgeoning emphasis on countering white supremacist nationalism, introducing a new set of challenges. Addressing these emerging threats had necessitated heightened international cooperation, which had included sharing both information and intelligence, as well as adopting best practices from entities like the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum. The evolving trajectory of CVE had underscored the need for unified efforts to confront the ever-changing face of extremist ideologies globally.

Holistic Approaches to Enhance CVE Efforts

The speaker underscored the necessity of a holistic and multidimensional approach to CVE, advocating for the promotion of social inclusion, education, economic opportunities, community resilience, and religious and cultural dialogue. He suggested that to achieve best practices in CVE, there was a pressing need to pay close attention to the formulation of policies and the development of inclusive programmes both in Pakistan and beyond. Globally, he observed that research and evidence-based practices had taken a front seat in shaping effective CVE strategies. Rehabilitation and reintegration programmes were recognised as critical components. According to him, this perspective had kindled debates in Pakistan, particularly when military-led efforts had been the primary approach, lacking a comprehensive policy framework and broader stakeholder involvement.

Recommendations

1. Countering Online Radicalisation

The increasing concern over online radicalisation underscores the need for a multifaceted response. Collaborative measures are essential, encompassing vigilant online monitoring, creating responsive reporting avenues, and forging strong alliances with technology firms.

Dr Zahid underscored the pivotal role of suppressing extremist content and obstructing recruitment drives online to stifle the proliferation of radical ideologies in digital spheres. He urged the importance of forging partnerships with social media corporations, CSOs, and international allies to adeptly tackle online radicalisation and adopt a multifaceted strategy tailored to the nuances of online extremism and its recruitment channels. Furthermore, he recognised the pivotal role of enhancing digital proficiency and fostering platforms for media literacy in the fight against online extremism.

2. Bolstering CVE Efforts in Pakistan

Dr Zahid accentuated the urgency of reinforcing CVE endeavours in Pakistan. Central to this goal was the rigorous enforcement of extant policies and frameworks, such as the National Action Plan (NAP), National Internal Security Policy (NISP), and National Counter Extremism Guidelines (NCEG). Furthermore, the establishment of diplomatic synergies with neighbouring nations, regional entities, and global institutions was paramount. He also highlighted the indispensable role of civil society in fine-tuning and executing these regulatory paradigms.

He contended that Pakistan's strategy against extremism should pivot on engaging CSOs as paramount contributors. This approach should be complemented by aligning with international entities, including the United Nations' Global Counterterrorism Forum and the European Union. He championed the ethos of collaborative initiatives and the facilitation of information dissemination as avenues to pool global experiences and best practices against extremism. Additionally, he stressed the importance of fortifying digital platforms against radical infiltration and championed the establishment of stringent monitoring systems to pinpoint and neutralise extremist content and recruitment drives. In tandem with these strategies, regional cooperation and specialised training for key community figures - such as police, educators, and civil society advocates - could solidify Pakistan's counterterrorism posture.

3. Harnessing Social Media for Peace Promotion & Countering Radicalisation

To counteract the tentacles of extremism, Dr Zahid proposed an aggressive utilisation of social media platforms to champion narratives of peace, tolerance, and religious concord.

Strategically designed campaigns that debunk extremist dogmas and elucidate the adverse repercussions of radicalisation can act as powerful antidotes against extremist ideologies.

He also advocated for the formulation of proactive digital reporting structures and helplines. Such platforms would empower users to flag extremist content and facilitate early

interventions for individuals exhibiting radical tendencies, thereby augmenting the deradicalisation trajectory.

“It is of great necessity to break away from past policies and adopt innovative measures for a more impactful and successful counterterrorism strategy.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan, HI(M), SBt (Retd), President, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies

In his concluding remarks, President CASS, Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), highlighted the significance of national interests.

“Without clearly defining the national interests, it becomes challenging to define national objectives and formulate as well as implement effective policies and strategies to fight violent extremism.”

He highlighted that while Pakistan excelled at operational or tactical levels in combatting terrorism, guidance should come from an overarching national policy framework. He highlighted the state’s responsibility to clearly define, document and publicise national interests; otherwise, strategic shortcomings would persist.

Adverse Consequences of Inefficient Policies

Air Marshal Khan (Retd) asserted that the problem of terrorism was not a recent one but had been brewing for 40 years owing to flawed policies. In his view, Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan was not driven by its own national interests but was influenced by the agendas of other countries.

“Though diplomatic means are suggested policymakers, the focus remains merely on kinetic means, resulting in colossal economic damage and loss of lives.”

President of CASS underscored that in just the last six months, Pakistan mourned the loss of approximately 386 trained soldiers. This figure was alarmingly high in comparison to other nations.

Understanding Extremism and Terrorism

Air Marshal Khan observed that extremism was rooted in a particular mindset or ideology. When this mindset manifested in violent actions, it became terrorism.

“People do not resort to violent extremism suddenly. Rather, there are two prior stages of extremism, including intolerance and hate.”

He underlined that intolerance and prejudice had played critical roles in fostering extremism within Pakistani society. Reflecting on incidents of hatred since the 1970s, he contended that

decades of mounting animosity and intolerance had led to the current levels of extremism and terrorism. He pointed out that various individuals and political factions had manipulated Islam for their own objectives in the country, leading to widespread misconceptions about a faith that is inherently peaceful. The distortion and exploitation of Islam in the country had been profound. He emphasised the pressing need to present an authentic portrayal of an Islamic State, embodying the principles of peace, tolerance, and unity.

Importance of an Inclusive Society in Eradicating Extremism

President of CASS agreed with the speakers that several factors had contributed to extremism, notably poverty, ineffective governance, unstable political frameworks, inadequate education, and unemployment. Given that all these elements were prevalent in our society, he underscored the challenge: how could a society beset by such issues effectively combat extremism? He championed the creation of a society deeply invested in addressing these challenges. Furthermore, he believed it was the state's duty to foster a society that resonated with the concerns of those on the frontlines of the fight against terrorism. He conveyed the sentiment that it was essential to nurture a society that was not only a stakeholder but also aligned with national interests, asserting its crucial role in countering extremism.

Policy Foundations to deal with Extremism and Terrorism

Air Marshal Khan passionately conveyed that the cornerstone of any policy against extremism and terrorism must be rooted in national interests, employing a blend of both kinetic and non-kinetic tactics. He emphasised the urgency of proactively tackling extremism before it escalates to full-blown terrorism. Addressing the deep-seated issues of hate and intolerance in society was paramount.

He urged policymakers to first set their internal affairs straight, emphasizing that to eradicate hate, intolerance, extremism, and terrorism, the focus should be on the well-being of the populace. He championed the ideals of justice, equality, and education. By investing resources into societal development, he believed, Pakistan could decisively conquer the threats of extremism and terrorism.

ANNEXURES

Annexure I: Profile of Speakers



Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan, HI (M), SBt (Retd), President, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad, Pakistan

Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan has rich experience in aviation and industrial management, diplomacy, and negotiations. During his service, he remained on various important command and staff appointments, including Vice Chief of the Air Staff and Chairman Pakistan Aeronautical Complex Board. He has also served as Pakistan's Air Attaché in New Delhi, India. He is the co-author of 'The Aviation City' and 'Milestones' about the growth of military

aviation industry in Pakistan and its way forward.

Mr Mohammad Ali Babakhel, Additional Inspector General Police (Operations), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

M. Ali Babakhel Sb is the Additional IGP Operations, KP Police. Over the last 26 years, he has served in different international, federal, and provincial law enforcement organizations. He has held the positions of Additional IGP Operations, Additional IGP Headquarters, Additional IGP Investigation, RPO DI Khan, Mardan, Hazara, CCPO Peshawar, Additional Chief Security Officer to PM & Director General NACTA. He has vast expertise in counter-extremism, counter-terrorism, and criminal justice system reforms. He is also the author of three books, including "Pakistan in-between Extremism and Peace". As an Op-ed writer, he regularly contributes to the Daily "Dawn".



Ms Azeema Cheema, Founding Director, Verso Consulting



Ms Azeema Cheema is a Founding Director at Verso Consulting, a Pakistan-based collective of practitioners, where she leads the portfolio on Conflict, Fragility, and Violence. Ms. Azeema has over seventeen years of experience as a researcher with civil society organizations, governments, and international organizations focusing on political economy, social cohesion, and conflict in Pakistan. With degrees in Public Administration from Syracuse University and in Political Economics from Bloomsburg University, Pennsylvania, her current research considers the discourse of social movements

and political actors in Pakistan and developing communications frameworks to strengthen community resilience.



**Dr Farhan Zahid, Senior Superintendent Police,
Commandant Police Training College, Quetta**

Farhan Zahid is specialized in the field of Counter Terrorism and holds Doctorate in the subject from Vrije University Brussels, Belgium. He is an academic and also serves in Police Force of Pakistan. He is the author of three books including the one which he has co-authored with two writers. The title of his latest book is 'Al Qaeda Networks in Pakistan'. In addition, he has contributed various chapters on related topics in four edited books. Dr Zahid has also been published widely in various reputed international and national, journals.

He has 19 years of experience in field policing and is currently posted as Commandant Police Training College, Quetta holding the rank of Senior Superintendent Police.

**Air Marshal Farooq Habib, HI (M) (Retd), Senior Director,
Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS),
Islamabad, Pakistan**

Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd) joined the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies, Islamabad as Senior Director in February 2022. A graduate of National Defence University and Air War College, he has 36 years' experience of military aviation as fighter pilot in the Pakistan Air Force. He holds Master's Degrees in Strategic Studies and Defence & Strategic Studies. During his service with the PAF, he has held various Command and Staff appointments including



Commandant of Air War College, Deputy Chief of Air Staff Training, Deputy Chief of Air Staff Personnel and Vice Chief of Air Staff. He lectures regularly at National Defence University and Air War College on related subjects. He is a recipient of Hilal-i-Imtiaz (Military) for his services to the PAF.

Annexure II: Press Release

Addressing Underlying Issues: CASS Seminar Calls for Whole-of-Nation Approach in Countering Extremism



The Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad, successfully concluded a seminar on 'Advancing Resilience: Unleashing the Potential of Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan.' The event featured insightful presentations from Mohammad Ali Babakhel, Additional Inspector General (Operations), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police; MS Azeema Cheema, Director of Research and Strategy at Verso Consulting; and SSP Dr Farhan Zahid, an international counterterrorism expert.



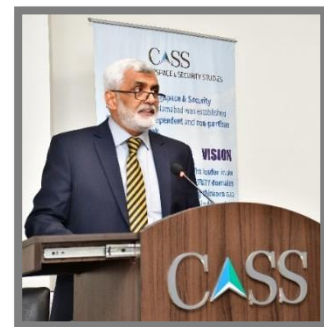
AIG Mohammad Ali Babakhel's presentation focused on Pakistan's evolving efforts in countering extremism, highlighting both successes and challenges. He emphasised the complexity of measuring success in countering extremism, as it cannot be instantly quantified due to its nuanced nature. He also addressed the disparity in technology usage between the state and violent non-state actors, stressing the need for effective policy implementation, monitoring, and communication strategies. He underscored the importance of highlighting Pakistan's best practices in countering violent extremism and the need for greater investment in education. The speaker also stressed the significance of assessing factors such as ethnic and sectarian fault lines, service delivery impact, and political marginalisation in addressing extremism.

Ms. Azeema Cheema discussed the crucial role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in countering violent extremism. She emphasised the need to dispel the narrative of 'Pakistan exceptionalism' and urged a comprehensive approach to policy implementation. Ms Cheema highlighted the challenges faced by CSOs due to regulatory frameworks and pointed to the need for a comprehensive policy framework to address hate speech and disinformation online.



SSP Dr Farhan Zahid underscored the importance of partnerships with international entities engaged in CVE initiatives, such as the United Nations and the Global Counterterrorism Forum. He highlighted the role of technology in countering extremism, including robust monitoring mechanisms for online platforms and the integration of counter-narratives into educational curricula.

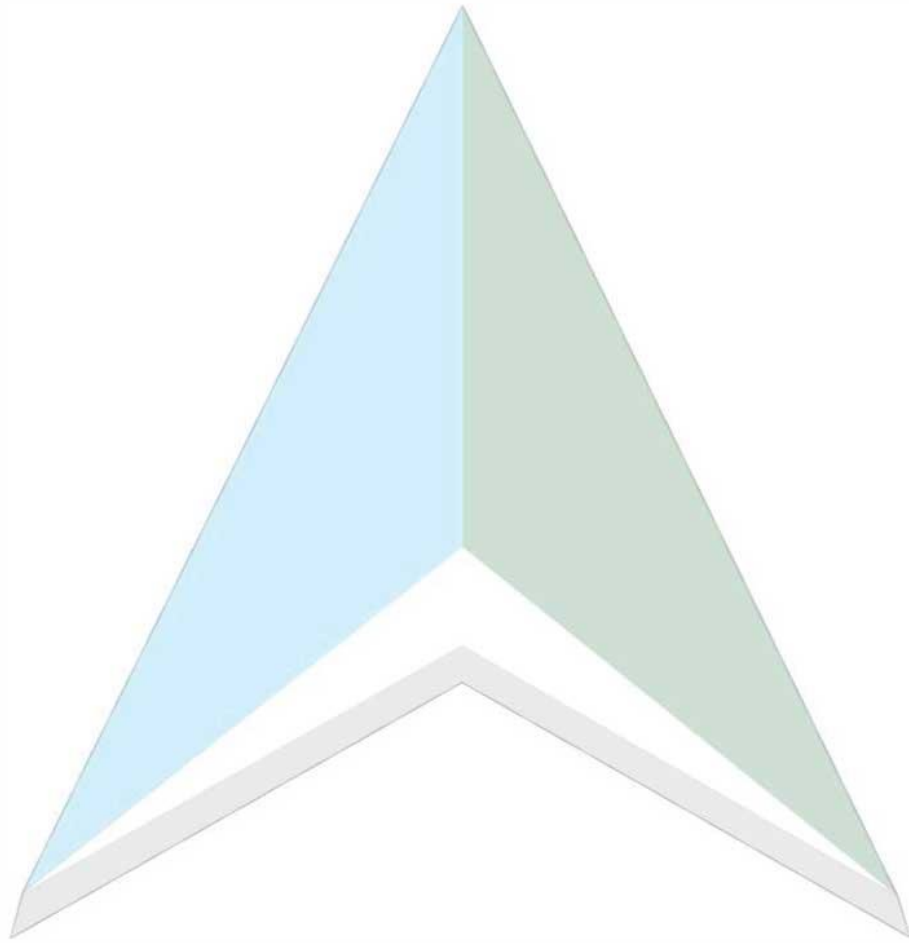
Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd), Senior Director at CASS and the seminar's moderator, acknowledged the lack of consensus on the definition of violent extremism. He stressed the importance of addressing underlying issues contributing to extremism, such as the acceptance of violence and the politicisation of Islam. 'CVE in its essence is a 'whole of nation' rather than a 'security-only' approach. This attribute makes it mandatory that the subject is debated openly, understood collectively and employed wholeheartedly, he urged.



President of CASS, Air Marshal Farhat Hussain Khan (Retd), highlighted the crucial role of national interests in shaping objectives and formulating effective strategies. He put emphasis on the need to define and document national interests transparently. Air Marshal Khan also pointed to the significance of both kinetic and non-kinetic approaches in countering extremism and called for concentrated efforts to address hate and intolerance in society.



The seminar provided a valuable platform for experts and policymakers to share insights and strategies to counter violent extremism in Pakistan. The discussions underscored the importance of comprehensive approaches, investment in education, international partnerships, and pragmatic and holistic policy frameworks to achieve long-term resilience and stability under a whole-of-nation approach. It was attended by retired military officers, scholars from various think tanks, journalists, and students, who actively participated in the interactive question and answer session.



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