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## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# Use of Internet and Banned Outfits in Pakistan

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Technology, particularly the growing use of internet is one of the important strategic factor which is now being utilized by terrorists organizations for many purposes. A wide range of purposes served through internet



by terrorists organizations includes recruitment, propaganda, training, financing and acts of terrorism. Beside the many benefits of internet, it is also used to facilitate communication within terrorists organizations. For communication, either between terrorists groups or their contact with the society at large, social media is used as a tool by proscribed organizations in Pakistan.

Proscribed organizations in Pakistan are promoting tactics of propaganda which is tailored to appeal to vulnerable and marginalized groups in the society. The process of recruitment through Facebook or social media becomes very easy when they target the individual's sentiments of injustice, lawlessness, corruption and humiliation. Other than this, demographic compulsions such as age and gender are also exploited in this regard.

Social media differs from traditional and conventional media in many aspects, such as interactivity, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence. Terrorists most important purposes online are radicalization and recruitment of vulnerable target audience. They develop a list of potential recruits and sympathizers by going through the profiles of individuals on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. In Pakistan, there are over 44 million users of social media. Out of this amount, 30 million users are active on Facebook only.<sup>1</sup> All these users are only one click away from anyone who wants to search them.

According to a recent report by *Dawn News*, the proscribed organizations in Pakistan are active on Facebook and well-connected with its followers. According to the Ministry of Interior, there are total 64

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1335561>

banned outfits in Pakistan. Out of these 64, 41 proscribed organizations are active on Facebook. These organization are a mix of sectarian organizations, global terrorists organizations and separatists groups working in Baluchistan.<sup>2</sup>

The active 41 banned outfits on Facebook have over 700 Facebook pages and groups. Around 160,000 users have liked the pages of these banned outfits which draws attention towards the weak de-radicalization strategy in the country. A study conducted by *Dawn* reveals that during examination of the accounts, some user profiles linked to banned outfits on Facebook indicates open support of sectarian and extremist ideology. Some of these Facebook pages and groups claim that they are "official" representatives of these outfits, while it seems that some of them are run by members and supporters of these groups.

Proscribed organizations in Pakistan are targeting youth in educational institutions through Facebook. The radical segments of these religious organizations and self-radicalized individuals are a source of recruitment for international terrorists organizations as well. Shahbaz Taseer, the son of former governor of Punjab who was released from Taliban's custody in 2016 was abducted by young engineering students on behalf of a terrorists group.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in an operation carried out by counter-terrorism department in Lahore, a female terror suspect was arrested who was later identified as MBBS student recruited and radicalized by ISIS operatives in Punjab. The whole group was arrested as they were planning to carry out an attack on Easter.<sup>4</sup>

It is shocking to explore that the biggest outfit on the Facebook in terms of size is Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASJW) with around 200 pages, Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz (JSMM) with 160 pages, Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) with 148 and Sipah-E-Muhammad with 45 pages respectively. Most of these groups glorify their existing leaders or those killed in the past and some of them also campaign for the release of their arrested leaders and activists. Many of these groups have pages with the names of their respective districts, which means that these organizations are active in our rural areas which is a soft breeding ground of terrorism and extremism because of marginalization.

The phenomenon of spreading the radicalized ideologies through social media is at a very minuscule level in Pakistan, but needs to be nipped with iron hands before it can further damage the society. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/104191-UET-graduate-led-group-kidnapped-Shahbaz-Taseer>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.geo.tv/latest/138261-Girl-arrested-in-Lahore-encounter-an-MBBS-student-went-missing-from-Hyderabad>

Interior Minister has directed concerned officials to evolve such a system in consultation with Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), so that there should not be a curb on freedom of expression and at the same time no one could misuse this right.<sup>5</sup> The total blackout of terrorists on media, destroying of communication system of terrorist organizations and banning of hate material and propaganda to promote sectarianism, extremism and intolerance were among the main points of the National Action Plan launched in January 2015, and which directly or indirectly involve social media. The steps taken by the government in handling these particular issues seems to be in the shades of grey. It is imperative that the government set its targets focusing on the centre of the problem rather than making cosmetic changes, which will end up in achieving nothing.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.samaa.tv/pakistan/2017/03/nisar-annoyed-by-facebooks-refusal-to-share-information/>