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Issue Brief

Understanding and Identifying Violent Extremism

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“... whosoever kills an innocent human being, it shall be as if he has killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind...” Quran 5:32

In recent years, understanding, identifying and countering violent extremism has gained prominence among policy makers and practitioners. Violent extremism prevalent in the Muslim world and the individuals and groups involved in or endorsing acts of extremism has been studied intensively. However, besides identifying some of the most common misconceptions in the discourse, while relating violent extremism with Islam, it is also crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach to explore the drivers of violent extremism in the Muslim world.

To begin with, understanding the phenomenon, i.e., what we know or how we understand violent extremism and what we do not know about it, is crucial to identifying and then tackling it. It is now generally accepted fact that terrorists in their desperation for legitimacy invoke religion – Islam – for justifying their act of violence. Frustration with the local and global political environment, and most of the times ideologically motivated thoughts are also behind violent actions.

There can be no general theory about why and how violent extremism occurs, because the answer to that question will differ from one setting to another. While realizing the role of religion in international affairs, it is true that religion makes it easier for extremists to demonize the enemy by portraying them as evil. Furthermore, in many cases, shared dedication to a particular vision about how a society ought to be organized and moral justification for it bring violent extremists together, for example Salafi jihadist,¹ with national and global agenda of riding the world of evil.

A good number of scholarly writings in the West as well as the Muslim world suggest that the driving forces behind violent extremism are economic disparity and illiteracy in the Muslim societies, which may be true in some cases. However, the events of 9/11 or Safoora Chorangi Tragedy in Karachi and the perpetrators of both incidents contradict the notion of socio-economic and educational setting as the factors contributing to violent extremism. 9/11 produced overwhelming sympathy and support for the US around the globe including the Muslim world, however, a considerable degree of *Schadenfreude*^{*} sympathy as well as support was also identified among some quarters of the Muslim population, particularly in parts of the Arab world. Moreover, the rise of homegrown terrorism by Wahabi and Salafi

* Pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune.

groups in Western countries was also felt who used Western mosques as platforms for da'wa and jihad. Therefore, many argue that Islamist extremism needs to be challenged and confronted rather than accommodated and tolerated by liberal democracies.²

Though the history and growth of violent extremism is very old, today we see radical narratives in the form of Salafi jihadi movements, ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Boko-Haram and Taliban's Islam with the aim to target youth for recruitment in Muslim societies. The violent extremism in the Muslim world, by the above mentioned networks and their ideological affiliates use Islam to justify their acts. The extremist do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they feed off ideas that have flourished in Muslim communities over decades. It is further argued that a combination of religious literalism and conspiracist politics is at the core of their anti-West ideology.³

A key point is the increasing interaction through social media by terror networks to advance their narrative of Islam, for example an ISIS Twitter account in a disturbing photo demonstrates the importance of jihad in Islam in an adverse way. The spreading of their messages through communication technologies increases their offensive potential. To counter this, many organizations in the Middle East, Pakistan and other places are leading the way in advocating counter narrative to extremist messaging, using Muslim history to argue against radicals who twist the meaning of the word Ummah into a nation united against infidels.⁴

In his speech, related to violent extremism at the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama called for eradicating violence extremism, as a common mission of all nations, irrespective of their religious, ethnic or sectarian identities. He asked for breaking the cycles of conflicts, grievances whether economic, political which are exploited by terrorists, making them magnets for violent extremism. Emphasizing on the terrorists' propaganda that the West is against Islam, he also highlighted the stereotypes about Muslims and Islam present in the West, saying that both types of hatred feed into extremists' narrative. In addition to that, he underlined that countering violent extremism begins with civic, religious and political leaders by rejecting violence, particularly sectarian strife, and called on major powers to counter the menace by isolating the terrorists groups, engaging faith communities in dialogue and not through proxy wars.⁵

A keystone of the Obama administration's counterterrorism and counter violent extremism is the Global Counterterrorism Forum, launched in 2011 with the aim to identify the need for governments and experts including grassroots civil society and religious leaders to coordinate and share effective counter

violence strategies. A Brookings Institution Paper prepared in January 2015, in its key findings, suggested that the United States should also convene counter violence practitioners and experts, diaspora leaders and academics to guide the development of the counter violent extremism agenda in Pakistan. The successful efforts and practices there can ultimately serve as a blue print for other regions facing similar challenges.⁶

Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, while addressing the UN General Assembly last September, said that the threat of terrorism should be defeated by addressing underlying causes, opposing extremist ideologies and countering the narratives of terrorists through the just resolution of “the several instances of oppression and injustices against Muslim in various part of the world.”

Pakistan is a strategically an important country for the United States and the rest of the world with regard to countering violent extremism. At present, Pakistanis faced with challenges from all kinds of extremist ideologies. The phenomenon of violent extremism, in the form of religious, sectarian and ethnic strife including violence against religious minorities, is one of the major challenges that Pakistan faces today. In recent years, the resurgence of sectarian violence by terrorist organizations and their linkages to hostile foreign agencies are not only disrupting the social fabric but also adversely affecting national economy and development. Moreover, Pakistan is also facing the effects of crises in Syria, Yemen and other sectarian conflict-prone sub-regions in Middle East as Iran and Arab states back their sectarian proxies.

Pakistan has taken many initiatives to address the issue. Of capital importance was the decision to launch Operation Zarb-e-Azb in the tribal areas when the peace talks with the Taliban ended without achieving its objectives. The operation has inflicted heavy damages to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and some other networks. Though it helped in improving the security situation inside the country and provided space for better regional coordination to counter terrorism and promote stability in the region,⁷ the fresh attacks by TTP have shown that they are down but definitely not out.⁸

Another step to counter the violent extremism was initiation of National Action Plan (NAP) after the brutal attack on Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014. The 20-point NAP very clearly defines the government’s counter-radicalism and counter-terrorism strategy. However, a faithful implementation of the NAP, in letter and spirit is the best means to effectively choke terrorism financing, prevent abuse of social media and sustaining meaningful *madaris* reform.

The government's decision of zero tolerance with regard to hate speech and fanning of sectarianism is a step in the right direction but is to be implemented fully and comprehensively. Moreover, auditing of *madaris* accounts and transfer of their fund through banks will go a long way in monitoring of *madaris*. In addition, the efforts of the government to block terrorists funding through *Hawala* and *Hundi* have proved successful. Statistically speaking, 2014 was a good year from a security perspective as a downward trend was noted in the number of overall incidents of violence. The number of terrorist attacks came down by 30 percent as compared to 2013.⁹ Moreover, kidnapping for ransom and collection of funds, most commonly used by terror organizations, particularly in Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have shown downward trend.

To tackle the menace, it is the responsibility of civil, political and religious leadership to refute the notion that terrorist groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda or Taliban represent Islam, because it is a misrepresentation that holds the terrorist narrative. If such ideas are not contested and condemned, extremist groups will continue to regroup no matter how many terrorists are eliminated. Educating the masses is as important as educating 'Muslim thought leaders' in mosques and educational institutions to disseminate knowledge that how the radicals among the Muslim are threatening Muslim communities.¹⁰ We, as Muslims, have to put our own house in order. Unless we devalue the notion that the West is at war with Islam, we will become fodder for extremists' propaganda and will never be able to address our own problems. In a nutshell, there is no magic bullet to cure the problem, but we must continue our quest for a peaceful harmonious society by investing in education and socio-economic development.

Notes and References:

- ¹ Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism", (USAID, February 2009), x and 11-3.
- ² Dr. Alex P. Schmidt, "Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" *The Hague Research Paper* (May 2014), 1-3.
- ³ Ed Husain, "A Global Venture to Counter Violent Extremism", *Council of Foreign Relation*, (September 9, 2013), 1-2, accessed October 26, 2015 CFR.org.
- ⁴ Ibid., 2.
- ⁵ Remarks by the President at the Summit on "Countering Violent Extremism", (State Department: February 19, 2015), accessed 23 October 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>
- ⁶ Hedieh Mirahmadi and et.al, "Empowering Pakistan's Civil Society to Counter Global Violent Extremism", *Brookings Paper*, (January 2015), accessed October 26, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/01/countering-extremism-pakistan-civil-society>
- ⁷ "Pakistan's Security Landscape in 2014", Policy Brief, accessed October 25, 2015, <http://san-pips.com/index.php>
- ⁸ Afrasiab Khattak, "Taking the Stock of NAP", *The Nation*, (September 05, 2015), accessed September 5, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/columns/05-Sep-2015/taking-stock-of-nap>

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- ⁹ "Pakistan Time Line", 2015, accessed, October 25, 2015,
<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/timeline/index.html>
- ¹⁰ Ed Husain, "A Global Venture to Counter Violent Extremism", 2.