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Report – Public Talk

“Understanding Extremist Narratives and their Impact on the Society”

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Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a Public Talk on "*Understanding Extremist Narratives and their Impact on the Society*" on February 18, 2020 under its Distinguished Lecture Series. Professor Dr. Samina Yasmeen (AM), Director, Centre for Muslim States & Societies, University of Western Australia, was the guest speaker at the event.

Welcoming Professor Dr. Samina Yasmeen, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that the subject is complex and highly relevant. He was of the opinion that we need to understand the extremist narrative, especially in Pakistan where exposure to such narratives is high. The entire South Asia is a good case study. For centuries, the people of South Asia did not know the real meaning of extremism as these societies were very tolerant. Muslim and Sufi saints were very peaceful. The issue of extremism started in the 20th century among Hindus when the RSS develop their extremist thoughts, and among Muslims when the Deobandi school of thought adopted certain fundamentalists view points. Fast forward to 80's when the seeds of Afghan jihad were sowed in the region and which created problems of extremism in Pakistan. But with heroic efforts, Pakistan managed to overcome the situation. Much of terrorism and part of extremism was dealt with an iron hand and the situation is now much better than it was a decade ago. Next door in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to create Hindu 'rashtra', and now, extremism is taking roots in India and narrow nationalism is on the rise?

Ambassador Aizaz also pointed out that other societies like Europe are also facing the issues of narrow nationalism. Recently, there was a group of extremists captured in Germany where they were planning to target various mosques to create mass casualties. He said that extremist narratives are not unique to Pakistan, nor even to Muslim societies. This is a phenomenon that every society has faced at various points in time. Therefore, we need to address the causes why extremists narratives are getting so popular with such speed and how to deal with them. It is very much clear that extremists exploit the grievances of the people and then they present them as victims and instigate them for revenge, promising them with rewards in the hereafter. These days, internet and social media is increasingly being used by extremists to spread their messages. Pakistan has been struggling to create counter-narratives through public diplomacy, strategic narratives, targeted campaigns and digital literacy.

Dr. Samina Yasmeen thanked ISSI and the Australian High Commission for arranging the talk. Focussing her talk on the subject, she said that her research with extremist narratives started in 1998. She said that the question of a narrative includes obstacles that stop us from achieving the ideal state. After 9/11, the question of Muslims getting radicalized became important as to why some Muslims became radicalized and some not. She said that we need to understand the actual meaning of narratives, and appreciate what is right and what is wrong and how do we change that. Narratives by themselves are not negative nor are they violent. As far as extremist narratives are concerned, they only need trigger words to become violent. In the case of Pakistan, extremist narratives were promoted at the time of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Eventually, the country came face to face with a diversity of violent extremist narratives.

This raises an important question that how do these narratives effect the society in Pakistan? In the beginning, it was visualized that Russia and India were becoming an obstacle in establishing the Islamic norms in the society. But with the passage of time, the list of these obstacles started increasing. So therefore, the proscribed organizations in Pakistan tried to shape the society by shaping the individuals. They started with the notion that you need to become a better Muslim, and change your sense of what you are and your relation with the environment. They also put out arguments that a good Muslim who is committed to change himself is also committed to jihad. Hence, this increased the tendency among young Muslims to get inclined toward their narratives and start opposing TV, music etc.

So one may argue that the first impact of the extremist narrative is on the personality of an individual. The second impact of extremist narratives is the fact that these narratives start raising questions on what kind of a society we want in Pakistan. The multiple meanings of Islamic society in Pakistan ends up in creating problems in the society. The third impact of the extremist narratives is a tendency to include and exclude people from Islam. So it appeals to the people who have similar ideas, but it excludes others who do not have hard core Salafi school of thought. Therefore, this inclusion and exclusion thing becomes the significant part of extremist narratives.

The situation becomes even more complex when this inclusion and exclusion thing includes non-Muslims. The extremist narrative combined with activism actually works to bring change in the

society. We need to consider what footprints violent narrative had left on their brains. So we need to account for this side of the damage in the society in order to calculate the overall damage. Another important aspect is the role of women in all this phenomenon. We need to realize that the extremist narrative is not only promoted by men in any society. Jihadi and extremist narratives are increasingly used by women. At one level, women are told to change themselves to become a better woman by supporting their husbands who go on jihad and also willing to remarry in case they are killed. This whole change of self is closely tied to the idea that good Muslim women know their space and limits. Another aspect is the production of extremist literature which is then passed on to the women and they pass it on to their children. The worrisome situation is that this literature leaves its prints on young minds for a long time.

Therefore, in order to deal with extremist narratives, we will have to come up with the idea of counter-narratives and promote notions of inter-faith and inter-communal harmony. We need to secure our young generations because some of them who are exposed to extremist narratives will become jihadis or white supremacists.

Concluding the event, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BoG, ISSI, stated that the topic of the talk is a live issue which is effecting Pakistan on daily basis. Narratives are evolved in given set of values , belief and thinking, so they may vary from place to place, but it induces change in peoples thinking. It may induce some good thinking, but when it becomes violent it becomes dangerous. It is pointed out that extremist narrative is only related to Islam, this is not true. We need to draw solutions, and tolerance is a good solution. Dialogue among civilizations is the way to form a global narrative. We must be cautious about the spread of negative narratives as this is also a form of hybrid warfare.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

