

Critical Appraisal of Pakistan's Efforts in (Re) Constructing a National Narrative to Violent Extremism and Terrorism: A Case of Paigham-e-Pakistan

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Abstract

The inability of hard measures to effectively counter violent extremist ideologies and the resulting terrorism has generated a shift of focus towards soft measures. The area of soft countermeasures to violent extremism and terrorism, however, is a nascent field in comparison with its kinetic counterpart. In order to create a better understanding of the soft side of counter violent extremism, especially counter-narratives, a detailed inquiry into existing literature and practices is warranted. In doing so, this paper provides a brief understanding of the concepts of narrative and counter-narrative and further dwells into examining various efforts made at the international level. This is followed by a critical analysis of counter-narrative efforts initiated by Pakistan, in particular, the Paigham-e-Pakistan.

Keywords: narrative, counter-narrative, violent extremism, terrorism, Paigham-e-Pakistan, Pakistan

Introduction

Terrorism and related phenomena are an engaging subject matter, complicated to define and perhaps, even more, difficult to eradicate from societies. The recent wave of terrorism all over the globe and concomitant fight against it has resulted in the realization that hard measures alone are insufficient to defeat *ideas* that plague the minds of people. As a result, the focus of anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts has shifted towards producing narratives to counter the ideologies propagated by terrorists and

extremists. There has been a realization that challenging narratives of violent extremism and terrorism are vital as an ideological response¹, which must complement and supplement the fight against terrorism². Resultantly, considerable efforts have been poured into the generation, formulation, and subsequent dissemination of counter-narratives to violent extremism and terrorism at the global level.

However, concerning violent extremism and terrorism, the field of counter-narratives remains considerably new territory for researchers, and more so, for policymakers. In addition, inevitable shortfalls in counter-narrative building and dissemination have been observed. The very first challenge observed is the inability of scholars and policymakers alike to define what exactly a counter-narrative *is*. However, understood broadly as a strategy to counter and refute the narratives produced and propagated by extremists and terrorists, the exact contours of counter-narrative remain ill-defined and often confused across countering violent extremism³. A second potentially problematic area is the alarming absence of scholarly reflections. That is to say that the issues concerning counter-narrative to violent extremism have remained largely the possession of policymakers and governments, with an only recent realization for integrating local communities and civil society. In addition, due to the lack of scholarly research, there exists little to no

¹ See e.g., "Countering Violent Extremism". (n.d.). <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/countering-violent-extremism/>. See also, The Commonwealth, "Counter Narratives for Countering Violent Extremism," (n.d.). <http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/ComSec%20CVE%20Counter%20Narratives%20Presentation.pdf>

²For detailed information on Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, please visit: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/countering-violent-extremism/>

³ Kate Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies A Review of The Evidence*, (UK: University of East Anglia, 2016), 1-40.

evidence regarding the effectiveness counter-narratives to violent extremism i.e., an assessment of the impacts on radicalized individuals, or the ability of a counter-narrative to prevent further radicalization and its various manifestations⁴. Similarly, the counter-narrative to violent extremism (as a phenomenon) has also come under criticism for ignoring the structural factors — the *enablers* — such as unemployment, poverty, (ethno-spatial) inequalities, and governance-related predicaments, that contribute towards the development of violent extremism⁵.

Pakistan's protracted fight against terrorism has resulted in a shared comprehension that the nation must also focus on the softer side of counter violent extremism and terrorism, especially by employing an effective counter-narrative. The plague of extremism seems to have taken deep roots in minds of not just those ready to take extreme action in the form of terrorism, but also those who sympathize with the phenomenon of (violent) extremism⁶. Therefore, Pakistan has well recognized the need for a consolidated national/counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. In doing so, a comprehensive document — Paigham-e-Pakistan — was developed as *a national counter-terrorism narrative* by the collaborative efforts of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the Council of Islamic Ideology, Pakistan⁷. The document contains the unanimous

⁴Andrew Glazzard, "Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 2017.

⁵Eric Rosand and Emily Winterbotham, "Do Counter Narratives Actually Reduce Violent Extremism?" *Brookings*, March 20, 2019.

⁶Naveed Hussain, "Pakistan's Fight against Terrorism Far from Over," *Tribune*, (n.d.). <https://newslab.tribune.com.pk/pakistans-fight-against-terrorism-far-from-over/>

⁷"HEC collaborates with CII," *Pakistan Today*, September 9, 2018.

<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/09/09/hec-collaborates-with-cii-for-paigham-e-pakistan/>

agreements of *ulema* (representing various sects of Islam).

As mentioned above, Paigham-e-Pakistan has the unique feature of containing the unanimous approval of religious scholars from all sects of Pakistan. In addition, it uses evidence from the two most revered Islamic texts—the *Quran* and *Hadith* in order to refute the ideology of violent extremism and terrorism and its monolithically constructed *truth*. However, in the context of Pakistan, it is important to understand that the phenomenon of terrorism (in its various forms) is highly complex and multifaceted in nature (see for e.g. Khan, 2016; Hameed, 2018)⁸. Therefore, it is imperative to carefully analyze the composition and validity of the counter-narrative that Paigham-e-Pakistan aims to present. This article explores issues that surround the practice of counter-narrative to violent extremism to explicate its functional dynamics. The aim of this article is not to laud Paigham-e-Pakistan. Instead, the purpose is to illustrate the factors that ensure the effectiveness of counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. With regards, this article addresses specific themes (based on international practices) that provide a broad conceptual backdrop against which Paigham-e-Pakistan may be contextualized and analyzed. The presented analysis will be supplemented by interviews conducted with experts concerning the field of violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

Understanding Narratives in the Context of Terrorism

A narrative is a key building block of any discourse, used to create or elicit

⁸ M. Sheharyar Khan, “Narrative of Counter-Narrative in Pakistan,” *South Asian Voices*, July 13, 2016.

<https://southasianvoices.org/narrative-of-counter-narrative-in-pakistan/>

Masood Hameed, “The Need for a Counter Narrative,” *Daily Times*, February 13, 2018.

<https://dailytimes.com.pk/200673/need-counter-narrative/>

emotions and opinions. Klein (1999) defines narrative as being dependent on an audience and requiring an appropriate response: “a variety of techniques that at times indicate implicit or explicit evidence of the narrator’s preconceptions and aims” (p. 167)⁹. Looking at the aspects of narrative building, Rudrum (2005) brings to attention the way most definitions describe narrative as “the representation of a series or sequence of events” (p. 196)¹⁰. Braddock and Horgan (2016) further elaborated the term narrative as a cohesive account of events, with a discernible beginning, middle and an end¹¹. This posits that a narrative is an exchange or flow of *words* and *meanings* between the *narrator* and the targeted audience, and comprises of a clear sequence from *beginning* to an *end*. In addition, it has been well recognized that narratives have the capability to influence human thoughts. That is to say, narratives can influence the process of thinking: the way a person thinks about himself, his environment, and even the world at large. This (re)configuration of the thinking process at a micro-level further contributes towards the formation of a particular worldview, which has been referred to as a ‘grand’ or ‘master’ narrative¹².

Such worldviews or ‘grand’ narratives are all different forms of representations enabling the self to make sense of the world organized around its existence. Crew (1999) argues that such worldviews and

⁹ Harnet Klein, “Narrative”, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, No.1/2 (1999),167-169. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43102456>

¹⁰ David Rudrum, "From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use: Towards the Limits of Definition," *Narrative* 13, No. 2 (2005), 195-204. www.jstor.org/stable/20107373.

¹¹ Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counter Narratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, No.5(2016), 381-404. doi: [10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277).

¹² Michael Mateas and Phoebe Sengers, “Narrative Intelligence,” *American Association for Artificial Intelligence Technical Report*, 1999. <https://www.aaai.org/Papers/Symposia/Fall/1999/FS-99-01/FS99-01-001.pdf>

narratives may present different facets of *reality*, for those who believe in them¹³. Consequently, such narratives do not accommodate authoritative or totalizing discourses¹⁴. Such *rejectionist* tendencies are often exhibited in the violent extremist narratives; they often attribute veracity to their narratives as the only *truth* or *reality* while discarding any competing or existing narratives¹⁵.

Deconstructing the Narratives of Terrorism

The narratives propagated by terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaida and ISIS, explicate the way the organizations view themselves with respect to the rest of the world. In addition, their narratives have significantly shaped the way their followers think and act. For instance, the narratives of Al-Qaeda and ISIS launched their mobilization around a constructed reality that was fundamentally against the West. These terrorist organizations have over time employed various themes emanating from the Islamic tradition to necessitate both the establishment and exercise of a unified Muslim community — i.e., the *Ummah*. This conceived unification fundamentally against the constructed and presented ‘others’ was being guided by the principles of Salafi-jihad, which both the Al-Qaida and ISIS consider the

¹³ Brian Crews, “Postmodernist Narrative: In Search of an Alternative,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* No. 12, (1999), 19-36. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/16359515.pdf>

¹⁴ Brenda S.A Yeoh and Tou Chuang Chang, "The Challenge of Post-Modern Scholarship Within Geography," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, No. 1 (1995), 116-30. www.jstor.org/stable/41056905.

¹⁵ Along similar post-modernist lines, the work of Baudrillard provides the concept of *hyper-reality*, which when applied to the conceptual understanding of violent extremist narratives, uncovers a pattern whereby extremist narrators transpose and reduplicate the historical Islamic context onto the contemporary world, thereby creating a new form of contemporary reality in line with their narratives (for a detailed explanation see Ryszard W. 2017 on Hyper-reality and Simulacrum).

purest face of Islam¹⁶. For instance, the ideologies of the organizations have been heavily influenced by ideologues such as Ibn Taymiyya and Sayid Qutb, both of whom held revisionist and reformist views (Sayid Qutab has been dubbed as the ‘Philosopher of Islamic Terror’). Claiming to be the vanguard of *true* Islam, the Al-Qaeda also called for such revisions and reform. The famous *fatwa* by Osama bin Laden encapsulates the narrative of Al-Qaida in the following words:

“The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies — civilians and military — is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty Allah: *and fights the pagans all together as they fight you all together, and fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah*”¹⁷

By tactfully combining propagandist material with religious interpretations, Al-Qaida was able to provide a single unifying narrative for its audiences¹⁸.

¹⁶Katherine Zimmerman, “Al Qaeda’s Strengthening in the Shadows,” *The American Enterprise Institute*, July 13, 2017.

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20170713/106235/HHRG-115-HM05-Wstate-ZimmermanK-20170713.pdf>

¹⁷ “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders,” February 23, 1998.

<https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>

¹⁸ Alex Schmid, “Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge,” *ICCT Research Paper*, January 2014.

Similarly, ISIS has been successful in employing related rhetoric(s) in order to secure wider religious-driven support in the broader public realm. As an illustration, ISIS narrative communication specially designed *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines¹⁹ (in the English language) in order to reach-out the (vulnerable) individuals living in the western countries. The magazines presented those (self-interpreted) *realities*, clustered around various themes of Islamic theology, which provided both the justification and motivation to consider the exercise of violence against the 'other'. More importantly, such kind of diversified narrative communication has an ability to tactfully manipulate the targeted audience in a selective manner²⁰.

Counter-Narratives to Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Understood simply, a counter-narrative is a narrative that has the potential to challenge, submerge, or neutralize an existing narrative. In the case of countering violent extremism, a narrative can offset the existing themes within the extremist narratives and thus reduce their ability to influence people, as argued by Braddock and Horgan²¹. Similarly, the United Nations (UN) Resolution 2354 states that "Counter-narratives should aim not only to rebut terrorists' messages but also to amplify positive narratives, to provide credible alternatives and address issues of concern to vulnerable audiences who are subject to terrorist narratives" (p. 3)²². The European

<https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda's-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf>

¹⁹ "Islamic State's (ISIS, ISIL) Horrific Magazine" (n.d.).

<https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>;

²⁰ Samantha Mahmood and Halim Rane, "Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, No.1(2016),15-35. doi:10.1080/13216597.2016.1263231.

²¹ Braddock and Horgan, "Towards a Guide," 385.

²² Security Council, *United Nations*. Resolution 2354 (2017).

Union (EU) has also pushed for the building and dissemination of an effective counter-narrative to terrorism. It urged the formation of alternative narratives that not only challenge the themes around which the *truth* has been constructed but also expose contradictions with the underlying themes (through fact and logic)²³. Such an emphasis on generating effective counter-narratives suggests that the concerned counter-terrorism authorities have recognized the need for building effective barriers against terrorism, which must also be erected on ideological foundations²⁴.

International Approaches

Within the Muslim World, Saudi Arabia has taken important steps towards formulating a counter-narrative to violent extremism. In addition to establishing a 'Joint Task Force' and strengthening multilateral cooperation for combating terrorism, Saudi Arabia has actively pursued a policy of inter-faith dialogue. With regards, various conferences have been organized (in Mecca, Madrid, and New York) to highlight the importance of dialogue in promoting inter-faith harmony and inter-religious coexistence. Similar efforts were undertaken through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in order to present a united Muslim front to the problem of terrorism²⁵.

Other Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and Bangladesh, have also

https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2354%282017%29

²³ "Counter-Narratives to Terrorism", *Parliamentary Assembly*. Resolution 2221 (2018).

<http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML->

[en.asp?fileid=24810&lang=en](http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=24810&lang=en)

²⁴ "Challenging Extremist Ideology, Propaganda and Messaging: Building the Counter-narrative," *East West Institute*, April 2015.

<https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/ideas-files/Challenging-Extremism.pdf>

²⁵ Ali Asseri, *Combating Terrorism: Saudi Arabia's Role in The War On Terror* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

undertaken efforts to counter the outreach and influence of extremist narratives. For instance, Bangladesh has recognized the need to combat the growing number of Taliban sympathizers, both at the societal and political level. In response, preventive measures have been taken to reduce both the socio-political influence of various religious-based organizations and their ability to disseminate the violent extremist narrative, echoing the idea of Talibanization²⁶. Similarly, Malaysia has actively engaged itself to defeat the menace of terrorism. In addition to hard measures, Malaysia has adopted a three-pronged policy of 'Legislation', 'Rehabilitation', and 'Education' in order to counter violent extremism and its various manifestations²⁷. Indonesia is another important country that has boldly and strategically encountered the *idea* of violent extremism and terrorism. By doing so, the country has widely promoted the voices of those who have been victims of terrorism, or those who have been influenced by extremist narratives. The Indonesian authorities have employed such a form of personal storytelling as a counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. In addition, dialogues with Islamic clerics and scholars have also been initiated as part of dispelling falsely constructed notions or interpretations of religion propagated by extremists²⁸.

Considerable counter-terrorism discourse has been generated in other parts of the world, including the US, EU, and Australia. The European

²⁶ Sreeradha Datta, "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 30, No.1(2007), 145-170. doi: 10.1080/00856400701264084.

²⁷ Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, "Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia: Past Experience and Future Prospects," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, No. 6(2017): 6-10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351526>.

²⁸ Elis Anis, "Countering Terrorist Narratives: Winning the Hearts and Minds of Indonesian Millennials", (2016).

<https://knepublishing.com/index.php/Kne-Social/article/view/2333/5159#info>

Parliament's Committee (2017) provides an in-depth overview of counter-terrorism efforts undertaken by various countries around the world. The year 2011 has been decisive as it brought together the international community (China, the Netherlands, the EU, United Arab Emirates [UAE], the UK, and the US) to establish a forum which can serve "[...] as a mechanism for furthering the implementation of the universally-agreed UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy" (p. 15)²⁹. Similarly, a 'Global Coalition Communications Cell' was formed in the UK (in September 2015). Bringing together all the coalition partners to form a single communications initiative to counter the narrative of violent extremism and terrorism. According to the British government, this effort has succeeded in countering the narrative of Daesh³⁰ while exposing the embedded contradictions and *falseness* within the Daesh narrative.

In 2010, the US also expounded efforts to establish the 'Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). The center aimed to assemble a unified US narrative to counter the burgeoning influence of violent extremist ideologies. The objective was also to systematically deal with the online presence of such narratives and their proponents. Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) is another important initiative where more than 3,000 practitioners are involved in analyzing and reviewing the practices for counter-narrative generation, while also extending services to those who engage in counter-narrative construction. Other global efforts in this regard

²⁹ Alastair Reed, Haroro J. Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering Terrorist Narratives," *Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs*, 2017. <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Countering-Terrorist-Narratives-Reed-Whittaker-Haroro-European-Parliament.pdf>

³⁰ For further details, see 'UK Action to Combat Daesh': <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/daesh/about>

include the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) Network (a London-based initiative), which is committed to performing as a global force against violent extremism. It is indeed very interesting to observe that the AVE Network relies on the help of both former (violent) extremists and survivors of terrorism-related incidents. More importantly, the AVE Network has initiated several projects to exclusively deal with the issues of vulnerable youth, often described as 'at risk'. These projects include *Harakat-ut-Taleem* and *Average Mohamed*³¹.

While most of the above-mentioned counter-narrative related initiatives generated in Middle Eastern and Muslim countries focus on providing an alternate and *true* interpretation of Islam, the western discourse (both the EU and the US) primarily focuses on factors; such as extreme religious views, anti-modernism, socio-psychological and identity-based processes, and structural determinants of violent extremism (e.g., poverty, unemployment, [ethno-religious] horizontal inequalities, poor governance etc³²). Despite such commendable efforts, some areas still require significant attention. For instance, one of the most disregarded aspects is the *micro* or sub-divisions within and between key terrorist organizations: several internal divisions can now categorize the Taliban, where each *Shura* or division possesses its own objectives, often at a clash with others³³. This

³¹ Tanya Silverman et al., "The Impact of Counter Narratives," *Institute of Strategic Dialogue*, 2016.

https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf

³² Richard Jackson, "An analysis of EU Counterterrorism Discourse post-September 11," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20, No.2 (2007), 233-247. doi: 10.1080/09557570701414617

³³ "For Afghanistan, a Divided Taliban Poses an Obstacle to Peace," *Stratfor*, May 23, 2018.

<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/afghanistan-divided-taliban-poses-obstacle-peace>

undoubtedly translates into different ideologies, and thus, requires very precise and focused efforts for counter-narrative work. Alongside fragmentation amongst the terrorist organizations, the counter-narratives to violent extremism and terrorism also fails to consider the cultural, ethnic, and social fault lines that are often exploited by various groups, thus reducing the efficacy of the counter violent extremism related efforts.

Making Counter-Narratives Work

Literature highlights the elements that should be considered to ensure the effectivity of counter-narrative(s) to violent extremism and terrorism. Here, in this section, we identify six main elements. First, literature widely argues that a counter-narrative must be both context-sensitive and specific. Although there have been commendable attempts to counter the underlying themes of terrorist narratives (both at the global and national level), most of the counter efforts overlook the root causes — the *enablers* — that are responsible for both the conditioning of violent extremism and creating its support-base. It has been further argued that counter-narratives to violent extremism have mainly been macro-focused, hence conveniently confined themselves to address only the religious and historical dimensions of Islam³⁴. Consequently, the Council of Europe (2018), in a draft resolution, recognized the significance of context-specific counter-narratives:

“The Assembly recognizes that a single, overarching counter-narrative cannot be developed. The complex construction of a multitude of different types of messaging

³⁴ see for e.g. Michele Grossman, “Disenchantments: Counterterror Narratives and Conviviality,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, No.3 (2014), 319-335.

and media, articulated around local issues and narratives is required in the creation of effective counter-narratives³⁵”.

In view of the above discussion, it is therefore pivotal to formulate a counter-narrative to violent extremism that is contextually defined or driven. Such a counter-narrative will have an ability to establish and position itself around the unique contextual ‘conditions’ or ‘enablers’, which contributed towards the manifestation of violent extremism or terrorism³⁶. An effective counter-narrative, therefore, must address such underlying contextual factors that lead to the manifestation of violent extremism.

Second, certain contradicting themes embedded within the terrorist or extremist narrative must be deconstructed. The ISIS or TTP narratives, for instance, propagate (re)modeling the targeted society on the rules of an Islamic *Sharia* or Caliphate. Exposing the discrepancies in their ideology and practices may then provide a relevant foundation for counter-narrative agenda and drive. To this end, Rundle and Anibaldi (2016) offer an interesting approach to countering the ISIS ideology by employing marketing tactics³⁷. They model the ISIS recruitment mechanisms on that of a successful advertising agency and suggest using counter-narratives of the same nature³⁸. Similarly, the Al-Qaida and TTP claim to be the only

³⁵ “Counter-Narratives to Terrorism,” *Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights*, United Kingdom: Council of Europe, (2018), 2.

<http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?FileID=24554>

³⁶ Christian Leuprecht et al., "Winning the Battle but Losing the War? Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, No. 2 (2009), 25-35. www.jstor.org/stable/26298404.

³⁷ Sharyn Rundle-Thiele and Renata Anibaldi. "Countering Violent Extremism: From Defence to Attack," *Security Challenges* 12, No. 2 (2016), 53-64. www.jstor.org/stable/26465607.

³⁸ see for e.g. Braddock and Horgan, “Towards a Guide”

legitimate authorities of the socio-political and religious conduct. However, evidence from various terrorist-related activities revealed the contradiction or hypocrisy *within* their conduct by exposing their involvement in the drug trade and other illegal activities³⁹. Presenting similar evidence-based rebuttals can help to identify grey areas that will discredit the presented *reality* by introducing multiple micro-narratives instead of creating a generalized counter-narrative that may not resonate with its audience.

Third, hateful content must be controlled in its every form that may entice violence in multi-ethnic or religious societies (including online or other literature). This aspect has been well incorporated in the international counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism approaches. With regards, it is equally essential to recognize the emerging role of social media that has completely altered the operational and communication dynamics of terrorist organizations. For instance, the creation and presence of 'online spaces' or networks have offered the terrorist organizations a promising virtual space not only to recruit people but also to escape any scrutiny of the disseminated propaganda and hateful content (e.g., Malik, 2018)⁴⁰. Therefore, an effective counter-narrative must address such modern mechanisms containing

³⁹ Michael Jacobson, "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives," *National Coordinator for Counterterrorism*, 2010.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/4b7aaf56ca52e.pdf>

Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Drug-Conflict Nexus in South Asia: Beyond Taliban Profits And Afghanistan," *Brookings*, May 20, 2010.

Muhammad Makki and Saleem Ali, "Gemstone Supply Chains and Development in Pakistan: Analyzing The Post-Taliban Emerald Economy in The Swat Valley," *Geoforum*, 100(2019), 166-175.

⁴⁰ Nikita Malik, "Hate Speech Still Spreads Too Easily Online: Here's How to Stop It," *Forbes*, October 12, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nikitamalik/2018/10/12/hate-speech-still-spreads-too-easily-online-heres-how-to-stop-it/#c34969653821>

propagandist and hateful themes⁴¹.

Fourth, it is important to re-apply and enhance the role of 'dropouts' (i.e., former terrorists) in developing a counter-narrative. To this end, an increasing number of studies highlight the importance of incorporating former terrorists into the process of counter-narrative generation. For instance, a London-based outreach program, 'Against Violent Extremism', employs the help of former extremists who became disenchanted with the ideology of their former groups/associations⁴². Indeed, such an approach has helped enlighten the youth (in particular) about the realities and consequences of participation in any kind of violence and extremism. It has been further noted that the shared experiences of former extremists can be incredibly helpful towards exposing another concealed reality behind the phenomenon of terrorism; including the moral uncertainties and dilemmas associated with religiously motivated violence⁴³.

Fifth, there is a greater need to exercise consolidated efforts, arising from the government itself. Several of the above-mentioned counter-narrative work has to emerge out of consolidated governmental approaches and efforts. However, certain scholars warn against the potential downfalls of this approach. Van-Eerten and colleagues (2017) state that governments suffer from a 'say-do gap', and it may be difficult for the public to re-orient

⁴¹ Agata de Latour et al., "WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives," *Council of Europe*, 2017. https://www.nohatespeech.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/WeCANmanual_FINAL_MAJ17032017.pdf

⁴² The detailed contents can be accessed online: <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/>

⁴³ Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, No. 2 (2009), 12-17. www.jstor.org/stable/26298402.

the established 'ideas'⁴⁴. They instead suggest a strengthened role of civil society, which should take the lead in not only developing but also exercising the counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. Similarly, Subedi and Jenkins (2016) shed light on the role of a wide range of societal actors (women, civil society, local human rights organizations, local government authorities, and faith-based organizations) and suggest that these actors can greatly influence discourse at the local level due to their presence *within*⁴⁵. Russell and Rafiq (2016) also suggest the delineation of carrying out counter-narrative work, where governments can engage the civil society to increase outreach and lend credibility to counter-narrative programs at local levels⁴⁶. In addition to engaging local actors, the effectiveness of a counter-narrative can also be increased by targeting specific vulnerable segment(s) 'at risk' of a particular society. For instance, comprehensive guidelines provided by the Hedayah Institute (2014) recommend tailoring the message of counter-narrative in accordance with the specific audience and insists on engaging local communities in the

⁴⁴Janjaap van Eerten et al., "Developing social media response to radicalization: The role of counter- narratives in prevention of radicalization and de-radicalization," September, 2017.

https://www.wodc.nl/binaries/2607_Summary_tcm28-286137.pdf

Rachel Brigs and Sebastian Feve, "Countering The Appeal of Extremists Online," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2014.

<https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Countering%20the%20Appeal%20of%20Extremism%20Online-ISD%20Report.pdf>

⁴⁵ DB Subedi and Bert Jenkins. "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Engaging Peacebuilding and Development Actors," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8, No. 10 (2016), 13-19. www.jstor.org/stable/26351459.

Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen and Karin Ingrid Castro, "The Trouble with Counter-Narratives," *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 2017.

<https://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/almindel/reu/bilag/189/1729101.pdf>

⁴⁶ Jonathan Russell and Haras Rafiq, "Countering Islamist Extremist Narratives: A Strategic Briefing," *Quilliam*, 2016.

https://www.academia.edu/30556016/Countering_Islamist_Extremist_Narratives_A_Strategic_Briefing

development of an effective counter-narrative. In the light of these arguments, counter-narrative related attempts that target a generalized or broad audience can prove to be counterproductive⁴⁷.

Paigham-e-Pakistan: The National Counter-Narrative to Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Pakistan's protracted fight against terrorism has resulted in a shared comprehension that the nation must also focus on countering and preventing aspects of violent extremism and in the ideological realm. Various scholars have identified that the plague of (violent) extremism has taken deep roots in the society, as a mean of offering a receptive space where certain vulnerable individuals and identities became sympathetic to extremists' agendas⁴⁸. Over time, this has led to the formation of a widespread albeit unofficial expression of delegitimizing extremist groups and their ideologies. However, the complex nature of extremism and resultant terrorism in Pakistan complicates this task by many-folds. Consequently, experts lay overbearing emphasis on the need for a national counter-narrative for Pakistan⁴⁹.

During the fieldwork, various respondents while discussing the need for, and the composition of the counter-narrative for Pakistan shared certain interesting views. For instance, one of our respondents contextualized the need for a counter-narrative to violent extremism as:

“[In countering terrorism] you first control all the mediums in

⁴⁷ Janjaap van Eerten et al., “The role of counter”

⁴⁸ Naveed Hussain, “Pakistan's Fight Against”

⁴⁹ Muhammad Feyyaz, "Why Pakistan Does Not Have a Counterterrorism Narrative," *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, No. 1-2 (2015), 63-78. www.jstor.org/stable/26465205.

order to formulate your own 'counter-narrative'. Therefore, this is what fighting an ideology means. We are not fighting in physical space only. This [terrorism] is a 'perception'. In ideological conflicts, it is not the reality; it is the perception, which matters. Perception is all in the abstract and the psychological domain [and] perceptions are built through narratives⁵⁰."

The first attempts at counter-narrative formation at the national level culminated in the form of 'Enlightened Moderation' during 2002. Presented by the then-president Musharraf, the *idea* of Enlightened Moderation was first unveiled at the OIC Summit Conference in Malaysia. However, it failed to gain much momentum beyond the sphere of discussion.⁵¹ This is particularly so as the reason the subsequent years witnessed no efforts towards the building or re-construction of another counter-narrative to violent extremism or terrorism. Efforts were renewed much later following the terrorist attack on Army Public School, Peshawar in 2014, which led to the creation of the National Action Plan (NAP)⁵². Though, not a counter-narrative in itself, NAP (with its 20 provisions) laid down the road for further policy measures that became responsible for the birth of Pakistan's first official national counter-narrative to terrorism, the Paigham-e-Pakistan. It was however, revealed during the fieldwork that though Paigham-e-Pakistan was formulated through intense stakeholder engagements and collaborations, it was the missing element of political ownership that kept

⁵⁰ Personal interview, January 10, 2019.

⁵¹ For details see "A Plea for Enlightened Moderation," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5081-2004May31.html>

Stephen P Cohen, "Musharraf's Great Failure," *Brookings*, July 27, 2005. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/musharrafs-great-failure/>

⁵² "National Action Plan, 2014," *National Counter Terrorism Authority*, Pakistan. (2014). <https://nacta.gov.pk/nap-2014/>

the document 'on hold' for a substantial period⁵³.

Launched on 16 January 2018, Paigham-e-Pakistan was the first of its kind; a unanimous agreement amongst religious scholars from the various sects of Islam. Bearing the signatures of over 1600 religious scholars, this 22-point religious decree (*fatwa*) was a collaborative effort between the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the Council for Islamic Ideology (CII). While admonishing acts of terrorism as having no place in Islam⁵⁴, this 121-pager document states its goals in the following words:

“This unanimously agreed document titled, ‘Paigham-e- Pakistan’ prepared in accordance with the injunctions of the Holy Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Constitution of Pakistan, reflects the collective thinking of the State of Pakistan. The Message identifies the problems faced by the State of Pakistan and provides a basis to devise a strategy to achieve the goals of Objectives Resolution. Moreover, through this Message, Pakistan is being projected as a strong, united, developed, cultured and modern nation in the international community. This consensus-based document shall be helpful to reconstruct Pakistani society whose core values are tolerance, spirituality, justice, equality, and balance in fulfilling rights and obligations”⁵⁵.

Paigham-e-Pakistan aims to address the phenomenon of terrorism and its various manifestations in Pakistan. The National Internal Security Policy, released during 2014, also necessitated the construction of a national

⁵³ Dr. Adnan Rafiq, personal interview, December 20, 2019.

⁵⁴ Mati, “Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Narrative,” *Dispatch News Desk*, January 19, 2018. <https://dnd.com.pk/download-paigham-e-pakistan-pakistans-counter-terrorism-narrative/138145>

⁵⁵ Paigham-e-Pakistan. *Islamic Research Institute Press*. (2018), IX.

narrative on extremism (NISP, 2014): “Constructing a robust national narrative on extremism, sectarianism, terrorism, and militancy is the cornerstone of an ideological response to non-traditional threats”⁵⁶. Likewise, the second updated version of the policy (NISP, 2018) predicates, “reimagining of the society as a tolerant, inclusive and democratic polity will be pursued in order to strengthen a shared vision for the nation” and further emphasized on the “shared values of acceptance of diversity, debate, and tolerance” in the very fabric of the society⁵⁷.

The realization of these policies in the form of Paigham-e-Pakistan has evoked many positive responses. It has been praised as an umbrella and shield, which can protect Pakistan from all forms of (violent) extremism. It has been pronounced a step in the right direction that can help to encounter all challenges posed by terrorism and extremism, including the role of sectarian-based conflicts⁵⁸. It has been further recognized as providing a basis for the promotion of a soft and positive image of Pakistan, and as possessing the ability to bring together the diverse segment of the society under the shared values of tolerance and peace⁵⁹. To promote the message of the Paigham-e-Pakistan, the National Counter Terrorism Authority

⁵⁶ National Internal Security Policy I. *Ministry of Interior. Government of Pakistan. Pakistan. (2014),7.*

⁵⁷ National Internal Security Policy II. *Ministry of Interior. Government of Pakistan. Pakistan. (2018),45.*

⁵⁸ “Govt unveils Paigham-i-Pakistan; fatwa against terrorism,” *Dawn*, January 16,2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1383306>

Rasheed Khalid, “Paigham-e-Pakistan a shield against extremism: MNA,” *The News*. January 26,2019. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/423787-paigham-e-pakistan-a-shield-against-extremism-mna>

⁵⁹ Fawad Maqsood, “National narrative ‘Paigham-e-Pakistan’ a right step to end terrorism: President,” *Business Recorder*, January 16, 2018.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2018/01/16/393336/national-narrative-paigham-e-pakistan-a-right-step-to-end-terrorism-president/>

(NACTA) has played an instrumental role in organizing several workshops, seminars, and conferences across the country. These platforms have focused on addressing educational institutions and stressing upon the need to build a tolerant and peaceful society, and securing the ideological borders of the country from the threats of extremism⁶⁰. The focus has also been on the role of the youth and educational institutions in countering and preventing violent extremism.

However, certain respondents who were interviewed for this research raised some concerns over the process of stakeholder engagement towards formulating Paigham-e-Pakistan. The following debate analyzes Paigham-e-Pakistan in order to identify some of its other strengths and weaknesses.

Engaging Local Bodies and Civil Society

Indeed, Paigham-e-Pakistan has successfully incorporated the religious element into its substance. In particular, the faith-based organizations are well noticeable in the extensive list of names of religious *ulema* and *muftis* (representing various schools of thought) involved in the making of the national counter-narrative. In addition, it is important to notice that the Paigham-e-Pakistan incorporates the opinions and agreement of over 1600 officials, nation-wide, belonging to various political, religious, and academic groups. This has helped to lend the text legitimacy by ensuring diverse religious and social representation(s).

However, in view of broadening further engagement in formulating a national/counter-narrative for Pakistan, Mossarat Qadeem (counter violent

⁶⁰ “Workshop under Paigham e Pakistan initiative highlights role of faculty members, Ulema in peace-building”. October 2, 2018, <https://uos.edu.pk/news/post/Two-days-workshop-under-Paigham-e-Pakistan-initiative->

extremism expert), mentioned that the relevant institutions (such as NACTA) needed to engage with broad civil society in order to develop a comprehensive narrative against terrorism⁶¹. Whereas further commenting on the need for greater engagement between the society and state, another respondent stressed the need for joint collaborations and actions, at both societal and state levels. He suggested that such collaborations must be made imperative if counter-narrative is to be brought to effective implementation⁶². This suggests that Paigham-e-Pakistan and related initiatives must continue engaging the broader civil society actors to ensure the effectiveness of counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism.

Targeting Themes and Delegitimizing Personalities

Paigham-e-Pakistan has adequately targeted one major theme of violent extremism in Pakistan, i.e., 'Jihad against the state'. Quotations from both the *Quran* and *Hadith* are used to draw a critical commentary on the various facets of the extremist actors and involved processes. For instance, the document highlights the various verses from religious sources condemning violent acts, and declares them anti-state and subject to the harshest punishment, both in the eyes of state and religion. With regards, Section 3.2 of the Paigham-e-Pakistan details the illegitimacy of war waged against the state institutions, and innocents from the public. Following this, Section 3.4 deals with misinterpretations of jihad and the conditions surrounding it. It urges the iniquitousness of jihad against the state and its residents without due cause, legitimacy, and authority. In a similar argument, it also elaborates on the various historical contexts (from which many extremist narratives

⁶¹ Personal interview, December 20, 2019.

⁶² Personal interview, January 17, 2019.

draw their inspiration) and contends that these should not be used as a foundation or historical 'point of reference' for contemporary violent action.

Countering Hate Speech

In addition to demystifying actors and processes, policy documents further suggest addressing the root causes of the spread of extremist narratives, which can be traced back to hate speech very often. In this view, the fifth point within the National Action Plan (NAP) stresses the need to address hate speech and make it clear that the state will not tolerate any kind of hate speech, and serious actions will be taken against those involved in such activities (NAP, 2014). This reaffirms the realization that the need for action against hate speech is necessary as it propels extreme *ideas* into extreme *actions*. Nevertheless, one of our research respondents drew attention towards the complexity of the issue:

“[...] by only ‘banning’ the hate speech, the government cannot end the phenomenon [of violent extremism], what they end up doing is, they banned hate speech, not the hate. You have to remove hate by intervening in the social domain, intervening in society, by changing people’s behaviors”⁶³.

Furthermore, different sectarian-based outfits use hate speech against other sects and religious groups as a way to dehumanize others⁶⁴ and subsequently legitimize their violent actions in Pakistan. Building on this debate, Rumi

⁶³ Personal interview, December 20, 2019.

⁶⁴ Christine Fair et al, “Democratic Values and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from a National Survey of Pakistan,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, No.5 (2013),743-770.

outlines the nature of such sectarian outfits as incongruent and antagonistic, legitimizing their actions and existence as an antithesis of one another⁶⁵. To counter this, Paigham-e-Pakistan declares the propagation of hate speech and dehumanization of *others* as strictly forbidden by the religion of Islam. Section 3.3 of the document deals with this subject in detail while borrowing supporting pieces of evidence from the Quranic text. It strictly urges against the sanctimonious declarations and propagation of sectarian-based rulings (the *fatwas*). Hate crime against other sects is also strongly reproached. Paigham-e-Pakistan also addresses the usage of loudspeakers and other forms of public pronouncements of demeaning and hateful speeches, and strictly condemns all such acts. It calls for building a society based on the tolerance (of others) while prohibiting individuals, (religious) identities or groups from enforcing their beliefs or *will* upon others. Similarly, the document details the role of schools and educational institutions (including religious institutions), as places of learning *only*. It condemns involving them in the spread of hateful material and learning.

These insights into the Paigham-e-Pakistan reveal a truly unprecedented achievement on the part of Pakistan. The sheer numbers of religious scholars, who have been included in the list of signatories and formulators, seem an achievement indeed in drawing broader consensus (Salman, 2019)⁶⁶. However, it remains to be seen if the success on paper can be

⁶⁵ Raza Rumi, "Peace Must Win," in *Rethinking Pakistan: A 21st Century Perspective*, ed. Bilal Zahoor and Raza Rumi. (Lahore, Pakistan: Folio Books, 2019), 287-298.

⁶⁶ Visal Saleem, "Paigham-e-Pakistan: The Strong Peace Narrative that Attracts the Support of Extremist Ulema," *Modern Diplomacy*, May 7, 2018. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/05/07/paigham-e-pakistan-the-strong-peace-narrative-that-attracts-the-support-of-extremist-ulema/>

translated to success in reality. In this regard, certain discrepancies can be observed in the case of Paigham-e-Pakistan — as a national counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. Such discrepancies might not seem very problematic at first glance, but the present research indicates that they can severely impact the ability and effectiveness of Paigham-e-Pakistan.

Assessing the Contextuality of Paigham-e-Pakistan

The existing literature points towards addressing root causes — the conditions — as a vital success factor for any counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. With regards, Paigham-e-Pakistan can be characterized as indeed context-specific. It explicates upon sectarianism, which has been a growing cause of violent extremism in Pakistan; however, it falls short of addressing the root causes of terrorism in Pakistan (as indicated in 2.3 & 2.4). Research on the growing religious militancy in Pakistan identifies increased horizontal inequalities and the related phenomenon of failure of the social contract between the state and its citizens as one of the key motivations behind violent (identity or group) mobilization⁶⁷.

Recent talks on ‘Actualization of National Narrative’⁶⁸ stressed upon the need to create synergy between the national counter-narrative and the

Uzair Salman, “Paigham-e-Pakistan in need for a Novel Reappraisal,” *The Nation*, January 9, 2019. <https://nation.com.pk/09-Jan-2019/paigham-e-pakistan-in-need-of-a-novel-reappraisal>

⁶⁷Sadia Malik, “Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Conflict in Pakistan: Is There a Link?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, No.34(2009), 21-24.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260467704_Horizontal_Inequalities_and_Violent_Conflict_in_Pakistan_Is_There_a_Link

⁶⁸ *Actualization of National Narrative*. One Day National Conference (March 28, 2019), Pakistan House – Think Tank of International Affairs, Islamabad, Pakistan.

realities of Pakistan; if we expect to achieve any success in the present context of the country and to avoid ‘clash of narratives in the country’⁶⁹. While emphasizing on the need to eradicate certain divisions and for unified identity, one of our key respondent who served as a senior military official and was actively involved in the counter-terrorism operations stated that:

“[...] before efforts are poured into the creation of a counter-narrative, the state must agree on a singular, unified and unchallenged narrative of ‘Pakistaniyat’ which can provide a strong ideological foundation for the country to counter the pervasive threats of extremism and terrorism”⁷⁰.

The Role of Government

Related to the above-mentioned factor is the role of the government. It has been widely suggested that the government should not act as the primary *source* or *generator* of a counter-narrative, as it may suffer from a ‘say-do gap’, which can provide the basis for challenging the legitimacy of any counter-narrative work carried out by the government.

The Role of Former Extremists or Terrorists (the Dropouts)

A considerable amount of literature also points to the role of dropouts or formers in the building and the dissemination of a counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. The underlying rationale for this stems from the ability of previously disenchanted *ihadists* to be a legitimately convincing source of deterrence, and their ability to provide a realistic view of contemporary Jihad. Paigham-e-Pakistan does not indicate having

⁶⁹ Akbar Nasir, personal Interview, January 30, 2019.

⁷⁰ Personal interview, February 04, 2019.

incorporated any opinions of this sort. The reason for this could perhaps be attributed to the sensitive nature of operations, and the reticent status of actors related to violent extremism and terrorism. Perhaps, the only area where one can find traces of these formers is in the list of the religious signatories of the document, Paigham-e-Pakistan. Hence, this paper argues that Paigham-e-Pakistan — as a national counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism — must address this dimension in order to lend additional strength to its message.

Target Audience

In addition to the above-highlighted elements, the existing discussion on the effectiveness of counter-narratives to violent extremism and terrorism underlines the need for focusing on a specific target audience for increased effectiveness in battling (violent) extremist ideologies. Several international approaches mentioned earlier (see Section 2.3), warns against the overly generalized audience. Again, understandably, a national counter-narrative is meant for the entire nation, which may cause it to exhibit certain generalizations; nevertheless, Paigham-e-Pakistan seems to be a rejoinder against the anti-Islamic or anti-state rhetoric employed by critics of the Pakistani state and its institutions. This reminder is provided to the readers at large and does not target any demographic(s), explicitly.

A related factor that has not been considered in the development of the national counter-narrative is *language*. The narrative has been primarily presented in English and Urdu. However, considering that large numbers of mainly rural populations of Pakistan may be unable to comprehend the literary composition of the document, this seems to be a serious flaw. It may be prudent to translate the document into the various local languages such

as Sindhi, Balochi, Pashto, Saraiki, while also considering alternative ways of broader dissemination. Indeed, Paigham-e-Pakistan is currently being disseminated in several universities via conferences and workshops; however alternative ways must be discovered to improving its content(s) to reach wider audiences at the national level. The very fundamental reason for this stems from providing an understanding of the national (counter) narrative to violent extremism and terrorism at the local level throughout the country.

Conclusion

This paper provided certain understandings of the concepts of narrative and counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. The focus here is explicitly drawn to extremist narratives and possible methods to counter their ideologies. While the deconstruction of extremist narratives has been in practice for a while, this paper attempts to take apart and analyze the counter-narrative of Pakistan against (violent) extremists' narratives. The case of Pakistan offers a veritable specimen of counter-narrative work. A look at Paigham-e-Pakistan reveals that although it has made a commendable attempt at addressing some of the factors leading to violent extremism in the country, it remains largely very one-dimensional. Herein, rests the issue of 'efficacy' versus 'effectiveness'.

At first glance, the Paigham-e-Pakistan seems to be a very inclusive and wholesome narrative, as a counter-narrative against the one propagated by violent extremists. However, diminutive scrutiny reveals some glaring discrepancies. The phenomenon of violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan is complicated and intricate in the way that it transcends the conventional and contemporary understandings of religiously motivated

violence and related extremist ideologies or (extreme) actions. It spans over various actors, events, and causes. It is imperative therefore, that any attempts made to counter such extremist narratives and to shake the foundations of their ideology and pervasive travesties, be made with extreme caution and the utmost attention to detail.

The arguments presented in this paper indicate that there is a further need for a critical assessment of Pakistan's national counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. Exercises broadly addressing only a few basal and recurring themes cannot hope to trump extremist narratives. The findings that emerge suggest revisiting the attempts made by the state at generating a counter-narrative. As identified by literature and expert opinions, a counter-narrative cannot hope to gain any success if it fails to acknowledge the contextual realities of the audience and environment, which it aims to influence. The case of Pakistan especially embodies a host of complications, whereby the apparently religious extremism is fueled by various sectarian, political, economic and ideological grievances and aspirations. Exhaustive and extensive research is required to identify and explore the existing gaps, which permit manipulation(s) by extremist actors and their ideologies. As identified in the paper, the concepts of narrative and counter-narrative, do present some very perplexingly interrelated ideas. A more detailed look into the narratives propagated by terrorist and extremist outfits reveals the artistry behind the formulations of such narratives. This demands that counter-narratives also display a certain level of convolution to rival the narratives that they set out to debunk. Nevertheless, this may be an arduous task, considering the need to account for diverse audiences and heterogeneous contexts.

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