



# Counter-Violent Extremism

PIPS Policy Brief

Working Group 1

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## Religious Thought and Conflict

### Summary

- This brief summarizes the finding of the first working group on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE). The group deliberated the mechanism for shaping religion-based narratives against extremists' violent ideologies. The theme of the group was suggested in the PIPS-proposed CVE model presented in 2016.
- Acknowledging the presence of several social and economic factors behind extremism, the group was suggested to focus on the construct of religious thought alone. The group agreed that extremists invoke religious arguments behind their violent acts.
- The group called for shaping a narrative that caters to the needs of the society. Changes in the society should be the "basic starting point" of any new narrative, thereby lessening the chances of non-religious changes as causing faith-based conflict.
- While the means of the militants are questioned, their goals are not much debated. It was proposed the new narrative should also explore in revising the ultimate goal of the Islamists.
- Any response that counters extremism should not necessarily see itself as poles apart to the western one.
- The group called for prioritizing parliament in any engagement on new narrative.
- The basic contours of the narrative should be extracted from the Constitution, focusing on the rights of non-Muslims and on relations between Islam and state, and Muslim and non-Muslim countries.
- Once developed, a diverse segment of society should be sensitized and curriculum should be revised along those lines.

## Background

On 20 March 2017, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) convened a meeting of a first of the 10 working groups on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE), which deliberated about the mechanism for shaping narratives against those of extremists.

This meeting was convened in continuation of the CVE model PIPS proposed in 2016. A group of scholars, experts, and practitioners had, in a series of meetings, brainstormed over different components of a Pakistan-specific CVE model. The components themselves were derived from the work PIPS has been doing since its inception.

One of the key components of the CVE model revolved around religious and intellectual response towards extremism. Noticing the inability of religious scholars in responding to extremists' narrative, the component called for engaging scholars, especially religious ones, through a range of activities, which not only deny militants a space for ideological propagation but also reduce appeal of violent extremism.

In 2017, PIPS carried forward those recommendations, by further reviewing them and suggesting their implementation plan. The first working group deliberated about the need for shaping a counter-narrative to those of extremists; what can be done to shape the counter-narrative; and how to execute those responses.

## Key considerations

The group debated what could be done to reduce the appeal of militants who quote their interpretations of religious texts, traditions and precedents from Islamic history to propagate their violent ideologies and justify their actions.

*The first session debated the rationale of why religious thought as prevailing in the country, should be discussed, to counter the extremists narrative. Below were the key points:*

- Extremists invoke religious arguments behind their violent acts. They refute the modern-day concept of nation-based citizenship, calling for a pan-Islamic statehood. One participant summed it up, "as long as religious representatives reflect extremism, such discussion will be needed."
- There is a palpable rise of extremism even within Barelvis – mainly on the issue of blasphemy – otherwise considered as the followers of peace-loving Sufi Islam. The visit of the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to a Barelvi seminary in Lahore in February 2017 was not welcomed by many scholars and students in the same seminary, blaming the incumbent government for executing Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri, the assassin of former governor of Punjab, was awarded death sentence by the courts in 2016.
- Several participants questioned the rationale of focusing on religious factors of conflict alone, arguing militancy also emanates from non-religious factors, ranging

from ignorance to international politics. "Extremist organizations are not born out of any fatwa", one scholar noted.

Some called for looking at religious worldview of the extremists – or ideology – as emanating from social realities, rather than the other way around. Social inequality was cited as one such example. Similarly, it was suggested that in-country migration, especially from rural to urban areas, also produces circumstances that veer people towards extremists' narratives. Others hinted at how religious interpretations are subjected to external geopolitical circumstances too. Sectarian constructs of religious thought are in full play in the Middle Eastern conflict that could also impact Pakistan. Moreover, it was also reminded that a sense of victimhood of Muslims and Islam pervades the whole discourse of militants' strategy to win hearts and minds and get recruits.

It was suggested that any alternative or counter response should take into consideration those non-religious factors too. That way, the external circumstances will not easily be swayed towards militancy in the name of religion.

*The second session discussed the key contours of the new narrative that counters those held and promoted by the extremists. Following key points were discussed:*

- To some, the rationale of the new narrative as being "counter" to the existing one, be extremists', was unproductive. This relation implied as if the counter narrative is "responsive" and dependent on the existing one.
- Several participants called for shaping a narrative that caters to the needs of the society. Unless we talk from the standards of society, we cannot succeed, it was said. A more productive one is to reflect the "people's will."
- Narratives grounded in society resonate with a wide range of social segments. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was popular in both religious and secular circles, for some time, partly because his religious credentials aligned with the needs of the people, it was said.
- One participant argued that changes in the society should be the "basic starting point" of any new narrative. This way, there will be little room for non-religious factors as spilling into faith-based conflict. As was pointed earlier, many saw extremism as an outcome of social realities.
- When it comes to state-society relations, the narrative should cater more to society's need. Such a narrative should be bottom-up. In the past, attempts to merely cater to state's need resulted into the rise of a religious view that ended up justifying violence against its own fellow citizens.

- This approach will also tap into Pakistan's diversity, which suffers at the hands of extremist violence. The country's multiple ethnic, religious, and sectarian communities will benefit from a worldview that takes stock of the society.
- One of the fundamental issues the new narrative should deal with is the extent to which the ultimate goal of the Islamists can be revised. When it comes to revisiting the extremists' narratives, it merits mentioning that many religious scholars have openly denounced violence for attaining that goal. The goal, however, is hardly questioned. A participant shared it was often said Taliban are right in their end, not their mean.
- Some members of the group wondered if the problem is rooted in the goal, which revolves around dominance of one or another faith, and what can be done to revisit that in line with the religion. One participant argued unless the "entire purpose of religion in our lives" is re-thought about, progress is not possible. The debate over this or that Islamist government is secondary to that rethinking.
- The purpose of religion as many understand now, is closely tied to politics, growing out of the way the history of the Muslim world has been narrated. Many conflicts in the early era of Muslim history were political in nature, revolving around the right to rule, embodied in the persona of caliph. But these disputes have been couched in religious language, especially by latter-day Islamists. Thus the desire of caliphate is seen as much in the writings of political Islamists such as Maududi as in those of militant groups like Daesh.
- Members debated if the goal can be revised. One called for revising this approach towards religion, focusing more on education and preaching (*dawat*). Another pointed out that one of the dominant features of the Prophet's (PBUH) ways was accords; the Prophet (PBUH) never started war. These features can guide in revisiting the existing constructs.
- Participants called for a response, which, while countering extremism, doesn't see itself as poles apart to the western one. Much of the intellectual worldview in the Muslim world sees itself in relation to the west. While acknowledging the missteps of the western countries, several participants warned of putting the entire blame on the west. They pointed that the involvement of western countries in Muslim world should be seen through political lens only. Instead of viewing the west as a monolithic entity, the group called for acknowledging contribution of the west in diverse spheres of knowledge.

## Key recommendations

- i. Parliament should be the foremost body in any engagement on the narratives countering extremists.
- ii. Parliamentary bodies shall negotiate with diverse government departments on how their actions may impact explanations on religious grounds.
- iii. Scholars should annul the extremists' arguments and their sources that legitimize violence. The fatwas and arguments of the scholars, against extremism, should be brought to forth. The narrative of extremism and their concepts like *takfeer* (the practice of excommunicating someone), should be answered in detail.
- iv. Regular interactions should be held between scholars of social sciences and religious scholars, to come up with a response in light of modern needs.
- v. Religious scholars and clerics in mosque should be sensitized on new narrative.
- vi. Mainstream political parties may be convinced about the need for a new narrative, and its contours be shared with them, especially while disseminating it.
- vii. Any narrative aimed at countering extremists should be extracted from the constitution of the country.
- viii. No religious interpretation be accepted which contradicts the constitution-bound sanctity afforded to different citizens.
- ix. The existing Islamic clauses in the constitution should be elaborated for simple understanding.
- x. The clauses related to the following themes should be explained in simple language and elaborated widely. These clauses are (a) relation between Islam and state, (b) rights of the non-Muslims, and (c) relations with Muslim and non-Muslim countries.
- xi. Dialogue forums, at national and provincial levels, shall be convened on enhancing inter-sectarian and inter-religious understanding.
- xii. There is a need to build awareness about the history of the west and evolution of its institutions. In the universities, centres aimed at understanding relation between Muslim and the west, be created, and making functional the existing ones.
- xiii. Study centers aimed at understanding each other be created in universities and madrassas, and courses also introduced to this end.
- xiv. Participants called for shaping curriculum in light of new narrative, especially about commonalities between different faiths and about modern concept of citizenship.
- xv. Individuals and organizations that denounced faith-based violence should be identified and prospects explored for their further engagement; lessons learned from these instances should also be used for de-radicalization and reintegrating of others.
- xvi. Festivals of all linguist, religious, and cultural communities should be celebrated at government level, and their festivals should be encouraged.

## Participants (arranged alphabetically by last name)

### Group members

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2. Saqib Akbar, Al-Baseera Trust, Islamabad
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7. Qazi Javed, Director, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore
8. Dr. Khalid Masood, former chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology, Islamabad
9. Khursheed Nadeem, columnist/anchor, Rawalpindi
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### Observers

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6. Zooshen Riaz, Pakistan Peace Collective
7. Hassan Sardar, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
8. Sabookh Syed, senior journalist
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### Rapporteurs

1. Atif Hashmi, Contributor/columnist, *Tajziat*
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## List of original and updated recommendations, along with their implementation mechanisms

Problems	Recommendations	New recommendations	Implementation mechanisms
<b>Intellectual challenge</b>			
<p>Extremist narrative</p> <p>Non-acceptance of cultural and social diversity</p> <p>Confusion in education system</p> <p>Ideological tensions</p>	<p>There is a need to review afresh the political construct of religion as well as religious thought on the concepts like <i>ummat</i> (pan-Muslim statehood), collective order, and state and society.</p> <p>The strength of the militants' narrative is hidden in their religious arguments. Therefore it is greatly needed to first understand the intellectual/jurisprudential context of militants' narrative and then counter it in the same perspective.</p> <p>The hate-filled attitude in the Muslim world and the west, towards each other, such as anti-westernism and Islamophobia, is an intellectual challenge, which can be addressed through</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious extremism is basically a result of not giving proper attention and interpretation to certain Islamic injunctions in the Constitution. It is recommended that a narrative be evolved out of the Islamic clauses of the Constitution.</li> <li>The fatwas and arguments of the scholars, against extremism, should be brought to forth.</li> <li>The narrative of extremism and the concepts like <i>takfeer etc.</i> should be answered in detail.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The clauses related to the following themes should be explained in simple language and elaborated widely. These clauses are (a) relation between Islam and state, (b) rights of the non-Muslims, and (c) relations with Muslim and non-Muslim countries.</li> <li>People have the right to interpret religion, but no such interpretation</li> </ul>



Problems	Recommendations	New recommendations	Implementation mechanisms
	<p>intellectual endeavour and strength.</p> <p>Understanding intellectual challenge requires continuous research and intellectual exercise.</p>		<p>shall be accepted which endangers and violates the sanctity of the citizens of Pakistan.</p>
<b>Religious context</b>			
<p>Traditionalist religious thought appears unable to respond to the modern challenges</p> <p>There is lack of adequate responses to growing faith-based discord and sectarianism</p>	<p>There is a need of concerted dialogue between religious scholars and experts in social studies, so as to understand the modern needs and counter the negative narratives.</p> <p>To promote social and religious harmony, scholars should highlight commonalities among different faiths, as well as develop an understanding of modern citizenship, which is compatible with the concepts of tolerance, fairness and harmony.</p> <p>Efforts are required for restructuring a non-discriminatory religious thought. Proper public</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a need to build awareness about the history of the west and evolution of its institutions. In the universities, centres aimed at understanding relation between Muslim and the west, be created, and making functional the existing ones.</li> <li>There is a need for constant dialogue between religious scholars and social scientists.</li> <li>Religious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of the reasons of extremism is misunderstanding between east and west. To erase those misunderstandings, madrassas and universities should create study centres and introduce courses.</li> <li>National and provincial dialogue forums are created, for playing roles in inter-religious</li> </ul>



Problems	Recommendations	New recommendations	Implementation mechanisms
	<p>education and guidance are required on sensitive religious issues, so that terrorists justifying their activities by invoking wrong interpretations lose appeal among people.</p> <p>The authority of issuing <i>fatwa</i> (religious edicts) should be handed over only to a credible institution that represents all Islamic schools of thoughts.</p> <p>Respecting all religions and accepting their presence is highly important for religious harmony.</p> <p>The acceptance of religious diversity as a fundamental value should be at the heart of all efforts meant to improve social harmony among different religious communities and sects</p> <p>Religious scholars will have to take up this responsibility of responding to militants' use of some of the concepts and legal rulings, tradition and history of Islam to</p>	<p>intellectuals and social experts should shape a positive narrative which is in line with contemporary needs and requirements.</p>	<p>and inter-sectarian dialogues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Those points which are agreed upon should be disseminated.</li> <li>Essays and books should be published on topics promoting sectarian harmony, and should be enforced in formal and informal education systems.</li> <li>The curriculum on modern citizenship should stress on tolerance and justice.</li> <li>Discrimination on the basis of religion shall</li> </ul>

Problems	Recommendations	New recommendations	Implementation mechanisms
	justify their use of violence including the concepts of <i>takfeer</i> (the act of declaring a Muslim to be outside the creed of Islam), and <i>khurooj</i> (going out/ armed rebellion against the state).		be discouraged. New books may be compiled to raise awareness among students, on sensitive religious topics.
<b>Socio-cultural context</b>			
1. Extremist narratives are against cultural diversity	The foundation of Pakistani culture should be built on positive cultural expression that accepts and tolerates diverse cultural identities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pakistan is a diverse country, where different cultures thrive. Cultural sensitivity should be created. Practices in the name of culture, violating human rights, should be discouraged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Festivals of all linguist, religious, and cultural communities should be celebrated at government level, and their festivals should be encouraged.</li> <li>Scholars should create awareness in society and shape public opinion.</li> </ul>
2. Social and economic inequalities also feed into extremist narratives and violent extremism	There is a need to discourage sick customs and traditions playing out in the garb of culture. There is also need to legislate to this end.  Cultural diversity should be made the foundation of formal and non-formal education. Local cultures should be accepted as part of the national heritage.		

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<p>3. The lack of moderation and tolerance in social attitudes and narratives is a major problem</p> <p>4. Sectarian undertones in day-to-day conversation and discourse</p>	<p>The provincial and federal governments should pay special attention at eliminating class divide, reforming justice system, governing better, distributing national resources justly, producing new resources, planning about population pressure. Although manifestoes of all political parties speak clearly about these issues, it is important that the parties ruling in provinces and at centre take necessary steps regarding that.</p> <p>Restructuring of social attitude is required, wherein progressive change is taken as positive value. Static, regressive social attitudes do not accept any type of social, cultural, and political change, thereby endangering the social development.</p> <p>There is a need of promoting peaceful expression as a principle social value.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender equality be ensured within the sphere of social, political, and legal rights.</li> </ul>

Problems	Recommendations	New recommendations	Implementation mechanisms
	<p>The growing expression of sectarian divide in daily attitudes indicates a move towards social discord and turmoil, which needs to be stopped immediately.</p> <p>Gender equality, be ensured.</p>		