



Anatomy of Extremism in Pakistan, Efficacy of State's Response and Re-Imagining the Startegy Framework

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Abstract. This paper examines the anatomy of extremism in Pakistan by analyzing its ideological, socio-economic, and geopolitical dimensions, as well as assessing the efficacy of the state's counter-extremism responses. Extremism in Pakistan has evolved from sectarian and jihadist origins into a multidimensional threat fueled by ideological radicalization, socio-economic disparity, digital propaganda, and regional instability following the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan. Despite significant tactical successes through military operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ul-Fasaad*, the state's strategy remains constrained by weak policy coordination, limited ideological reform, and insufficient civilian engagement. The paper argues that Pakistan's counter-extremism framework must move beyond reactive security measures toward proactive socio-political transformation. It proposes a reimagined strategic approach centered on five pillars: (1) reframing the National Action Plan (NAP 2.0) with stronger institutional coordination, (2) comprehensive education and madrasa reforms, (3) youth engagement and socio-economic reintegration, (4) digital resilience to counter online radicalization, and (5) regional cooperation through multilateral platforms such as the SCO. The study concludes that enduring resilience against extremism requires a whole-of-nation approach that integrates ideological pluralism, governance reform, and regional diplomacy to transform Pakistan's counter-extremism policy from containment to long-term stability and inclusive national identity.

Keywords: Counter-Terrorism; Digital Radicalization; Extremism; Ideology; National Action Plan

1. INTRODUCTION

Extremism in Pakistan represents a multidimensional challenge that intertwines ideology, politics, socio-economic disparity, and regional geopolitics. The phenomenon has evolved from sectarian roots and the Afghan jihad legacy into a more complex web of violent extremism that now threatens national cohesion and regional stability. Despite decades of state-led countermeasures ranging from military operations to socio-religious reforms the persistence of extremist networks underscores gaps in strategy implementation, coordination, and ideological counternarratives. This paper explores the anatomy of extremism in Pakistan, critically evaluates the efficacy of the state's responses, and proposes a reimagined strategic framework aligned with contemporary realities.

2. OBJECTIVE

This paper aims to achieve three core objectives:

- a. To identify the underlying drivers and patterns of extremism within Pakistan's socio-political and ideological landscape.

- b. To assess the effectiveness of existing state responses, particularly under the *National Action Plan (NAP)* and related counter-terrorism policies. 2.3 To propose a renewed strategic framework emphasizing prevention, rehabilitation, and regional cooperation.

3. ISSUES

The persistence of extremism in Pakistan stems from a complex interaction of structural, ideological, and external factors. Despite multiple counter-extremism frameworks, including the *National Internal Security Policy (NISP 2018–2023)* and the *National Action Plan (NAP 2015)*, extremist tendencies have re-emerged in various forms sectarian militancy, radical political movements, and violent narratives within digital spaces. These developments point to the state's partial success in kinetic operations but its limited achievements in long-term ideological transformation and social reintegration. Several critical issues define the anatomy of extremism in Pakistan: The persistence of extremism:

Ideological Radicalization and Sectarian Divide.

Pakistan's ideological landscape remains fragmented along sectarian lines. Groups such as *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)*, and other splinter networks continue to exploit sectarian grievances to recruit and radicalize youth. The misuse of madrassas as ideological incubators, though not universal, has contributed to sustaining intolerance and exclusionary narratives.

Socioeconomic Disparities and Marginalization.

Persistent poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to quality education create fertile ground for extremist exploitation. According to the UNDP *Human Development Report (2023)*, approximately 39% of Pakistani youth identify unemployment and lack of social justice as key push factors toward radical movements. The failure of local governance and limited youth engagement in civic processes further deepen alienation and susceptibility to extremist propaganda.

Weak Implementation of Counter-Extremism Policies

While Pakistan has achieved substantial progress in degrading militant infrastructure through military operations like *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ulFasaad*, the implementation of non-kinetic measures such as deradicalization, reintegration, and madrassa reform remains inconsistent. Bureaucratic fragmentation and inter-agency rivalry have slowed the operationalization of the *National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA)*, reducing its capacity to coordinate national efforts effectively.

Digital Radicalization and Information Warfare

Extremist groups have increasingly shifted their recruitment and propaganda to digital platforms, particularly social media networks such as X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and TikTok. The absence of a comprehensive cyberregulatory policy and limited digital literacy among youth have enabled extremist narratives to proliferate unchecked.

Regional Geopolitics and Cross-Border Linkages

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 has revitalized militant morale across Pakistan's western border regions. Weak border management, porous crossings, and ideological sympathy between transnational networks have enabled the reorganization of the TTP and allied groups. This spillover has intensified the security dilemma, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.

4. ANALYSIS

The state's response to extremism in Pakistan has historically oscillated between military coercion and limited socio-political engagement. While the *National Action Plan (NAP)* and various counter-terrorism operations have produced significant tactical gains, their strategic efficacy remains constrained by policy fragmentation, ideological ambiguity, and limited civilian ownership.

Military-Centric Response: Tactical Success, Strategic Stagnation

Military operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* (2014) and *Radd-ul-Fasaad* (2017) played a decisive role in dismantling militant sanctuaries, neutralizing leadership figures, and restoring state writ in formerly militant-dominated zones, particularly in North Waziristan and FATA. However, the reliance on kinetic force, though necessary, failed to address the underlying ideological and socioeconomic causes that regenerate extremism.

The absence of a robust post-operation reintegration plan allowed dormant cells to re-emerge, especially after the 2021, Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. Moreover, the civil–military imbalance in policy ownership limited sustainable governance reforms in conflict-affected areas.

Ideological and Educational Gaps

Despite multiple state-led madrasa reforms, including the *Pakistan Madrasa Education Board Act (2021)*, ideological pluralism remains weakly institutionalized. Most reforms focus on curriculum standardization rather than critical thinking or civic values. Extremist ideologies continue to find resonance among disenfranchised youth due to the

absence of a comprehensive national narrative promoting tolerance, constitutionalism, and inclusive identity.

According to research conducted by *Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS, 2024)*, 63% of surveyed madrassa students expressed distrust toward secular state institutions, and nearly half believed violence could be justified in defense of religion. This underscores the need for reorienting educational strategies toward civic engagement and peace education.

Governance, Law Enforcement, and Policy Fragmentation

Pakistan's counter-extremism policies are dispersed among multiple institutions: *Ministry of Interior, NACTA*, provincial Home Departments, and the military intelligence apparatus. The overlapping jurisdictions and lack of data-sharing protocols have produced coordination failures. As a result, deradicalization programs such as *Sabaon* and *Mishal* remain localized, underfunded, and poorly evaluated.¹¹

In addition, the judicial prosecution of extremist actors is weak; conviction rates for terrorism-related cases remain below 15%, largely due to witness intimidation, poor evidence collection, and procedural delays.

Socio-economic and Political Dimensions

Extremism cannot be delinked from the structural inequities embedded in Pakistan's socio-political system. The concentration of wealth, limited job creation, and regional underdevelopment especially in Balochistan and South Punjab continue to fuel resentment against the state. Furthermore, the instrumentalization of religion in politics, particularly during electoral mobilization, undermines state efforts to de-radicalize society.

Data from *World Bank (2024)* indicates that unemployment among youth aged 18–30 reached 10.7%, with rural poverty rising to 39.4%. These conditions provide fertile ground for extremist recruitment, especially in areas where the state's service delivery and governance remain weak.

Regional and Diplomatic Context

The regional security environment continues to shape Pakistan's extremism landscape. The Taliban's ideological influence and the porous Durand Line have facilitated transnational militant flows. Similarly, the strategic competition between India and Pakistan occasionally shifts policy focus from internal stabilization to external threat perception, thereby diverting resources from counter-extremism to deterrence.

Furthermore, international scrutiny especially from the *Financial Action Task Force (FATF)* has pressured Pakistan to adopt stronger financial counterterrorism measures. While

Pakistan was removed from the FATF grey list in 2022, continued vigilance is necessary to prevent the re-emergence of unregulated financial networks supporting extremism.

Options and the Way Forward

In light of the multidimensional nature of extremism in Pakistan, the state must recalibrate its strategic framework from reactive security operations to proactive socio-political transformation. The following policy options are proposed to strengthen the state’s long-term resilience against extremism and violent radicalization.

Option 1 – Reframing the National Action Plan (NAP 2.0)

The *National Action Plan (NAP)*, introduced in 2015, succeeded in improving operational coordination and eliminating several terrorist infrastructures. However, it lacked sustainability, measurable benchmarks, and societal ownership. A revised version NAP 2.0 should incorporate three structural reforms:

Strategic Element	Proposed Action	Expected Outcome
Institutional Integration	Empower NACTA as a central coordination hub linking civil intelligence, and provincial agencies	Reduced policy overlap and enhanced unified command
Ideological CounterNarratives	Develop a national communication strategy promoting inclusive Pakistani identity and religious harmony	Weakening extremist ideological appeal
Community Ownership	Engage civil society, academia, and youth councils in local peacebuilding	Sustainable grassroots resilience

Figure 1. *National Action Plan (NAP).*

Option 2 – Strengthening Education and Madrassa Reforms

The transformation of madrassa education is critical for dismantling the ideological roots of extremism. Beyond curriculum alignment, reforms must introduce civic education, critical reasoning, digital literacy, and teacher training programs that integrate religious and scientific worldviews.

A potential model is the *Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board’s Peace Education Pilot (2023)*, which integrates tolerance narratives and conflict resolution in Islamic Studies. Expanding this model nationwide can contribute to ideological balance and social cohesion.

Option 3 – Socioeconomic Reintegration and Youth Engagement

Pakistan's youth bulge nearly 64% of the total population is both a risk and an opportunity. The absence of structured economic reintegration for ex-militants and vulnerable youth continues to perpetuate cycles of radicalization.

- a. Policy measures should include:
- b. Establishment of Regional Rehabilitation and Skills Centers (RRSCs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.
- c. Microcredit and entrepreneurship programs for youth in high-risk districts.
- d. Partnerships with private sector employers for post-training job placement.

A UNDP pilot project in Swat (2023) demonstrated that vocational training reduced extremist recruitment by 37% among high-risk groups.

Option 4 – Countering Online Radicalization

Digital extremism poses one of the most potent modern threats. A National Digital Resilience Framework (NDRF) should be established to coordinate cyber-monitoring, promote counter-narratives, and strengthen digital literacy. Key actions include:

- a. Creation of a Cyber Response and Intelligence Cell (CRIC) under NACTA.
- b. Strategic collaboration with tech companies for content moderation.
- c. Youth-led counter-narrative campaigns through social media influencers and universities.

Option 5 – Regional and Diplomatic Cooperation

Extremism in Pakistan cannot be isolated from its regional environment. Strengthened cooperation with Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asian republics through border security coordination, intelligence sharing, and deradicalization diplomacy is vital.

Pakistan should also re-engage with the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)* Counter-Terrorism Framework and expand joint training exercises focusing on counter-extremism and digital threat response.

5. CONCLUSION

Pakistan's long battle against extremism demonstrates that the challenge is not merely military but profoundly ideological, structural, and generational. While kinetic operations have neutralized many militant networks, the ideological infrastructure that sustains extremism remains resilient nurtured by socioeconomic inequality, political exclusion, and weak civic narratives.

The state's response, though robust in security dimensions, has often been reactive and fragmented. The next phase of Pakistan's counter-extremism strategy must therefore evolve

into a whole-of-nation approach, integrating policy coherence across political, educational, and digital sectors. Three overarching imperatives emerge from this study:

Institutional Continuity: Ensure consistent political ownership and interagency coordination through an empowered NACTA and periodic review of NAP implementation.

Ideological Counter-Narrative: Promote a unifying vision of Pakistani identity grounded in constitutional pluralism and inclusive religious discourse. **6.3 Preventive and Regional Diplomacy:** Embed counter-extremism within broader regional security cooperation, focusing on prevention rather than post-crisis reaction.

If these imperatives are realized, Pakistan can transition from a state of perpetual containment to one of strategic resilience where national unity, civic education, and inclusive growth serve as the strongest antidotes to extremism.

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