

Strategic Counter-Terrorism: A Game Changer in Fighting Terrorism?

Rohan Gunaratna

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Countering Violent Extremism

In 2013, the US announced the end of its Global War on Terror (GWOt) after defeating Al-Qaeda. Two years later, in 2015, at a White House-hosted summit, the Obama administration propounded the concept of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) to confront, contain and eventually eliminate the latent threat of radicalism and extremism. Though CVE is not an entirely new concept, the purpose of the summit was to add more urgency and impetus to the various on-going non-kinetic efforts to counter extremism and its underlying causes.

Recently, some media reports have indicated that the Trump administration is toying with the idea of scrapping the CVE project. Others maintain that the US is considering renaming CVE as countering radical Islamic extremism and shifting the focus back to kinetic-efforts. Regardless of the decision, it is clear that components of CVE will have to be retained if the present threat of religious extremism and terrorism is to be checked. These involve community engagement to build social resilience and counter extremism, and rehabilitation and re-integration of radical elements.

Keeping this in view, the latest issue of CTTA features the CVE programmes of three Muslim-majority countries, Malaysia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, focusing on the rationale and main components of their initiatives along with highlighting the achievements and challenges.

Overall, the threat landscapes in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Pakistan have some common characteristics that make the comparison worthwhile. First, all three are Muslim-majority countries with religious diversity and heterogeneity. Second, the jihadist landscape in these countries is presently split between Al-Qaeda loyalists and the so-called Islamic State

(IS)-affiliates, with the latter having an ideological advantage. Third, in the recent past, these countries have witnessed an unprecedented rise of IS-inspired recruitment from the middle and upper-middle classes in urban areas. Internet and various social media platforms have played an important role in their radicalisation and recruitment. In a way, the battlefield has expanded from real space to cyber space. Or, as Thomas L. Friedman noted in his recent *New York Times* article, there are two kinds of caliphates – ‘real’ and ‘cyber’. Fourth, all three are grappling with the problem of growing religious conservatism and politicisation of Islam. Compounding the existing problem is the ambivalence of the authorities towards the jihadist threat in Bangladesh and Pakistan, as they have been in denial of the IS threat to their internal stability.

CVE in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Pakistan is a work in progress. Short of any major achievements, these programmes, notwithstanding enormous challenges, have shown promise. They have created awareness among these traditional Muslim societies about the threat of religiously-inspired extremist ideologies. Similarly, the indigenous natures of these programmes have bridged the trust gap between the state and society, which is the sine qua non of a successful CVE policy.

When a comparison is carried out, some common traits of the CVE programmes in these countries become visible. For instance, all are aimed at balancing the kinetic and non-kinetic aspects of counter-terrorism and extremism or as Rohan Gunaratna puts it, evolving ‘smart’ responses by combining the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ responses. Likewise, in all three countries, CVE efforts are trying to neutralise the social avenues which extremists exploit to recruit people. They are sensitising

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masses through awareness campaigns against extremist ideologies as well as providing counter-narratives to strengthen the state-society bond.

The CVE programmes in these countries however face several challenges. Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, need to build up political consensus among the diverse political parties and interest groups on countering religious extremism and terrorism. All three countries need to institutionalise various CVE components with clearly-defined mandates, roadmaps and a dedicated professional manpower to manage these programmes. Additionally, a plethora of initiatives undertaken by civil society organisations exists alongside the government measures. There is a need to bring synergy and harmony between them for better results. Another challenge is the dependence of these programmes on donor funding which raises concern about their sustainability and longevity.

The four articles in this issue deal with various aspects of the CVE programmes. **Rohan Gunaratna** sets the tone by discussing the shifting focus of the Trump administration from strategic to tactical and operational counter-terrorism. He argues that preventing radicalisation through community engagement efforts, and rehabilitating and reintegrating those who have been radicalised are critical to counter-terrorism efforts.

Muhammad Haziq bin Jani looks at Malaysia's CVE programmes which pre-dates the U.S. conception of CVE. He highlights Malaysia's reliance on internal institutions and indigenous CVE policies, and stresses the need to manage trends that undercut its CVE efforts; he argues that counter-narratives and introducing upstream education measures are critical to countering the threat of violent extremism.

Farhan Zahid looks at the inadequacies of the CVE programme in Pakistan, arguing that even though the country has been faced with Islamist terrorist groups since 2001, militancy and terrorism continues to pose a dominant threat. The author asserts that functional strategies, which focus on implementation of the existing CVE programme and its continued evolution in light of the changing dynamics is key to Pakistan's progress against radicalism and extremism.

Lastly, **Iftekharul Bashar** focuses on CVE in Bangladesh, discussing the shortcomings of the programme while the country is confronted with the growing threat of IS. The author advocates the need for a comprehensive national action plan for CVE programme that looks beyond ad-hoc responses, and a dedicated body to coordinate inter-agency response to the problem of violent extremism.

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Strategic Counter-Terrorism: A Game Changer in Fighting Terrorism?

Rohan Gunaratna

Introduction

Terrorism and religious extremism are interlinked and they present a growing threat to social stability around the globe. The security challenges presented by the pre-eminence of Al Qaeda (AQ), the so-called Islamic State (IS), and other country-focused groups such as the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban and the Philippines Abu Sayyaf Group among others, threaten social harmony and stability. As such, if governments fail to manage or curb the threat of these and other similar groups, the grievances which the abovementioned terrorist groups adroitly exploit can escalate into conflicts and widespread insurgencies within the immediate geographical region and beyond.

Over the years, governments and their partners have built a counter-terrorism toolkit. The three principal approaches that define this toolkit include, (i) tactical counter-terrorism (ii) operational counter-terrorism and (iii) strategic counter-terrorism. Tactical and operational counter-terrorism focus on kinetic and reactive means to kill and apprehend terrorists and disrupt their operations. Conversely, strategic counter-terrorism, alternately referred to as countering violent extremism (CVE), is both preventive and corrective. Overall, strategic counter-terrorism aims to counter the threat of terrorism emanating from group members and supporters through (a) community engagement to build social resilience and counter extremism and (b) rehabilitation and reintegration to de-radicalise terrorists and extremists.

Community engagement is the component to prevent and curb religious extremism, whereas

rehabilitation and reintegration are the tools to de-radicalise terrorists and insurgents. A strategic counter-terrorism approach is essential to support and sustain tactical and operational counter-terrorism measures.

Background of Counter-Terrorism Responses in the US

In the 21st Century, responding to violence with violence has been the norm with regards to managing conflicts and insurgencies. In comparison, peace-building measures have been neglected as managing security and countering threats is considered the domain of the military forces, law enforcement authorities, and national security agencies. After the September 2001 attacks (9/11), governments had failed to contain, isolate and eliminate terrorism, and continued to fluctuate between hard and soft approaches to counter-terrorism.

Shortly after 9/11, President Bush authorised the military intervention in Afghanistan, a country controlled by the Taliban, coupled with a strong AQ presence. In March 2003, the Bush Administration (2001-2009) invaded Iraq, a move that is now widely regarded as a mistake. The Iraq War was based on flawed intelligence regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction that was never verified.¹ The invasion dismantled the Iraqi military forces, security, and intelligence apparatus and the Baathist administrative structures that held the country together. It became a catalyst for recruitment by extremist and terrorist groups to fight against the US and

¹ Hans Blix, [Iraq War was a terrible mistake and violation of U.N. charter](#). CNN News, 19 March 2013.

its allies.² Foreign and Iraqi insurgent groups were created on the grounds of resentment and anger towards the perceived 'occupiers'.³

In response to the growing threat, the US adopted CVE during the Obama Administration (2009-2017) as a strategy to engage Muslim communities and curb their radicalisation into violence. Contrary to the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration realised the need for a softer approach, and focused on the active participation of Muslim leaders and communities.⁴ To take the fight to the terrorists and manage extremism in their communities, President Obama actively engaged Muslim leaders and empowered Muslim communities. Even though the US supported strategic counter-terrorism, in the form of rehabilitation and community engagement efforts overseas, the successes of such efforts within the US were limited. In addition, there were no attempts to build a rehabilitation programme targeted towards detainees of Guantanamo Bay. Thus, it is evident that the US had still emphasised the application of military force, which was paired with capabilities in strategic counter-terrorism.

The US Administration had miscalculated possible developments in Afghanistan and Iraq while fighting on both fronts. In Afghanistan, the decrease in US's focus and military presence resulted in the return of the Taliban. In Iraq, the US had advocated a total withdrawal believing that the Iraqi security forces could contain the threat.⁵ In both countries, the insurgencies grew stronger, threatening the fragile governments put in place by the US.

Shift from Strategic to Tactical and Operational Counter-terrorism?

The recently elected Trump Administration has shifted its focus towards tactical and operational counter-terrorism, as adopted by the Bush Administration. In President Trump's new counter-terrorism policy, the White House intends to replace the term CVE with radical Islamic extremism or scrap the CVE programme altogether.⁶ One reason for such a move could be linked to the idea that ideology is not a driver of terrorism and that the gains from US' CVE initiatives in the past were limited at best.⁷ This explains the counter-terrorism team at the White House giving preference to kinetic approaches. In comparison, the use of the term 'Islamic' indicates that US is at war with militant Islam.⁸

Even though this stance faces opposition, President Trump and his team seem determined to do-away with CVE in one way or another. In this regard, the predominant focus on the enemy-centric approach, divorced from the population-centric approach, is likely to fuel extremism and terrorism in the future. In addition, the term 'Islamic' singles out one particular religion as the source of radicalisation and extremism. This leads to the problematic issue of excluding and ignoring the presence of white supremacist and other right-wing groups operating within the US and abroad. However, it is possible that the recent Middle East visit could have changed Trump's perspectives in line with his well-informed advisors such as General H. R. McMaster.

In this sense, although a target-centric strategy is essential to prevent and pre-empt attacks, winning the hearts and minds of the people is critical in mitigating the threat and defeating terrorism. Tactical and operational counter-terrorism provide critical yet limited benefits of

² Paul Harris and Peter Beaumont. [Iraq war created a terrorist flood, American spymasters warn Bush](#). *The Guardian*, 24 September 2006.

³ Robert Pape. [It's the Occupation, Stupid](#). *Foreign Policy*, 18 October 2010.

⁴ [Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism](#). *The White House (Press Release)*, 18 February 2015.

⁵ Lionel Beehner. [Iraq's Post-Saddam Insurgency](#). *Council on Foreign Relations (Background)*. 14 November 2006.

⁶ Jim Acosta and Eli Watkins. [Trump admin eyes scrapping anti-extremism program](#). *CNN*, 3 February 2017.

⁷ Emma Green. [What Lies Ahead for Obama's Countering Violent Extremism Program?](#) *The Atlantic*. 17 March 2017.

⁸ Emma Green. [What Lies Ahead for Obama's Countering Violent Extremism Program?](#) *The Atlantic*. 17 March 2017.

detecting, disrupting, and degrading the operations of groups. In comparison, strategic counter-terrorism is key because it fosters an environment that prevents support for extremism and terrorism. Hence, in order to stabilise and resolve relevant local, regional and global conflicts, initiatives both to counter extremism and *wasatiyyah* or promote moderation are essential.

Threat of the Global Jihadist Movement from AQ to IS

The world has witnessed the rise of three successive generations of global terrorist movements in the last 15 years. The first generation or 'global jihad 1.0' emerged after AQ targeted the US in the 9/11 attacks. AQ provided an overarching ideology proclaiming that the West is against Muslims and Islam, leading to the development and spread of its global jihadist narratives in Asia, Africa, Middle East, and the Caucasus. The second generation or 'global jihad 2.0' came after Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the formation of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in June 2014. Lastly, the third generation or 'global jihad 3.0' represents the current global expansion of IS and its continued threat. In light of territorial losses and operational defeats within Iraq and Syria, IS is putting faith in its *wilayats* (provinces) as the bastions of power in the Middle East, Africa, Caucasus, and Asia. Even though IS is facing serious setbacks, the group continues to hold some territory and garners a social media presence with networks of individuals willing to fight for the IS' caliphate and ideology in their own countries.

AQ, also referred to as the 'pioneering vanguard', wanted other Islamist terrorist groups to believe that it will pave the way for the global jihadist movement.⁹ After conducting the 9/11 attacks, AQ had inspired and instigated other groups to fight against the US and the West. The war in Iraq was a critical impetus in the recruitment conducted by global jihadist groups, such as AQ, and contributed to

⁹ Rohan Gunaratna. "Defeating Al Qaeda – The Pioneering Vanguard of the Islamic Movements." In *Defeating Terrorism: Shaping the New Security Environment*, edited by Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer, 1-28. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

the creation of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which eventually became IS.¹⁰ Without eliminating the threat and stabilising Iraq, President Obama withdrew US forces, creating the conditions for the rise of IS. The US and UK failed to provide proof of WMD presence, which made them lose their credibility within the international community. Also, the images of Muslims suffering in Iraq, with over half a million civilians killed,¹¹ managed to galvanise support for extremist and terrorist groups that used the rhetoric of widespread persecution of Muslims and Islam being under attack as recruitment strategies.

Both IS and AQ are groups with a vision of global jihad, but the scale, magnitude, and intensity of IS threat are stronger in comparison. IS, which emerged partially as a consequence of the Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian conflicts, represents a predominant global threat. On the other hand, while the strength of AQ and its affiliates might have declined, they continue to be active in the form of Hayat Tahir Al-Sham (HTA),¹² Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Conversely, in the likelihood that IS and AQ join forces, the threat emanating from this union would be unprecedented. The key strength of both groups lies in their ability to reach out to and offer a platform for addressing the grievances of Muslim communities in Asia, Africa, the Caucasus, Middle East, and migrant and diaspora communities in the West. In such a scenario, both groups will continue to utilise social media to politicise, radicalise, and militarise their followers and potential recruits.

¹⁰ Doug Bandow. [The Collapse of Iraq and the Rise of ISIS: Made in America?](#) *The National Interest*, 23 September 2015.

¹¹ Dan Vergano. [Half-Million Iraqis Died in the War, New Study Says.](#) *National Geographic*, 16 October 2013.

¹² It is believed that the rebranding of Al-Nusra Front as Hayat Tahir Al-Sham (HTS) is a strategic move by the group to distance itself from Al Qaeda. However, other sources say that the link between AQ core and HTS exists. Refer to: [Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahir al Sham.](#)

Managing the Ideological Front of the Global Jihadist Threat

Western nations led by the US have advocated the use of military-centric strategy to defeat insurgency and terrorism. The overwhelming use of kinetic means has reduced the threat in the immediate-term (1-2 years), but the long-term inadequacy of these measures meant that the threat grew in the mid-term (2-5 years). In addition, the presence of lone wolf attacks demonstrates that the threat is going to spread worldwide in the long-term (5-10 years). The Global War on Terror (GWOT) failed to contain the threat from spreading beyond conflict zones, although it was initially effective in Afghanistan in operationally weakening AQ and the Taliban. When turning attention towards Afghanistan and Iraq simultaneously, US strategists have argued that as a hyperpower or a global leader, the forces could fight in two theatres. However, even though operationally there might have been victories, on the ideological front the US lost. The AQ ideology still permeates, while the IS ideology has emerged and remains a potent source of recruitment.

The threat is operational and ideological in nature and extends to on-line (social media) and off-line (battlefield) domains. However, the ideological and social media threat is more potent. IS' social media expertise has enabled the group to spread its ideology worldwide, drawing fighters from more than 86 countries.¹³ The return of IS fighters to their home countries, from Iraq and Syria, also poses an ideological threat as these individuals continue to radicalise members of their communities.

The US government and its global partners need a comprehensive strategy to control and manage the threat. Even though security forces are capable of fighting insurgency and terrorism, states should increasingly build partnerships with community organisations to manage extremism. Presently, governments coupled with educational institutions and religious authorities are unprepared to meet the ideological threat of IS. For instance, after

¹³ Ashley Kirk. [Iraq and Syria: How many foreign fighters are fighting for Isis?](#) *The Telegraph*, 24 March 2016.

declaring a caliphate, IS argued that syncretic Islam was not pure and its propaganda countered mainstream Islam practised in different parts of the world. Even though mainstream scholars argue that IS' version of Islam is a misinterpretation, it is not enough to convince possible recruits to reject IS and its rhetoric.

Strategic Counter-terrorism to Fight the Threat

In the fight against IS, the world is confronted with three challenges. First, multiple coalitions divided by geopolitics face the difficult task of working together to contain, isolate, and eliminate IS in its heartland of Iraq and Syria. Second, IS is creating and consolidating its wilayats in the global south that will act as ring bearers of IS ideology and continue to carry out attacks. Third, extremism, terrorism, and insurgency from IS and AQ ideology present a long-term security threat to communities, nations, and the international system.

In order to fight against the threat of IS and even other groups, such as AQ, strategic counter-terrorism should lie at the core of the efforts. The capabilities of states towards fighting terrorism need to be widespread and can be divided into three categories; upstream, midstream, and downstream. The capabilities needed upstream include prevention of community radicalisation through community engagement. For the midstream efforts, rehabilitation and reintegration of terrorists and extremists are critical. Lastly, for downstream capabilities, states should continue to pursue kinetic means to catch and kill terrorists or disrupt terrorist operations.

Overall, past IS members, supporters, and sympathisers should be rehabilitated and reintegrated to society. Lack of rehabilitation programmes for those radicalised means that these individuals will continue to pose a threat to the society. It is possible that they could indoctrinate others and be hailed as heroes by likeminded individuals. In addition, strategic counter-terrorism could also assist in preventing the radicalisation of those who are vulnerable.

The community is the primary resource base of the terrorists. Terrorists and extremists penetrate communities and recruit vulnerable persons to join either their threat group or their support base by remaining in the community. Even though those joining groups such as IS represent a minor proportion of the total populations of countries, a strategy is needed to deter or dissuade their participation. Outside conflict zones, the government should dedicate some of their efforts towards building operational and tactical counter-terrorism capabilities, while placing more emphasis on building strategic counter-terrorism capabilities. In the conflict zones where the threat groups are actively fighting, greater resources should be dedicated towards building operational and tactical capabilities to dismantle the groups and decapitate their leaders and other individuals directing and facilitating the attacks. As the threat of terrorism and extremism continues to evolve, it is essential to build new tools to operate both in the physical and virtual spaces. As such, the newest frontiers in strategic counter-terrorism lie within digital rehabilitation and online counter-extremism.

The Need of the Hour: A Focus on Smart Power

With the global spread of IS, multipronged, multi-dimensional, multi-jurisdictional, and multinational approaches are central. In this regard, at the heart of winning the fight against terrorism and extremism is the integration of hard power with soft power, which collectively represent smart power.¹⁴ The strategy for global leaders, such as the US, and other countries is to conduct focused operations employing hard power to fight and applying soft power to engage the extremists and terrorists. While hard power is representative of kinetic means, soft power reflects strategic counter-terrorism and its key element which is CVE. Even if a government has strong tactical and operational counter-terrorism capabilities, both cannot be an absolute substitute for strategic counter-terrorism. Moreover, as governments are confronted with threat

networks, instead of threat groups, they need to shift their focus from counter-terrorism cooperation to collaboration. There is a dire need to work together to build common databases, conduct joint training and operations, and share experiences and resources.

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¹⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr. [Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power](#). *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

Countering Violent Extremism in Malaysia: Past Experience and Future Prospects

Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

This article examines Malaysia's CVE strategy and programmes which involve three main components—legislation, rehabilitation and education. As in other countries, CVE programmes will continue to be a case of work in progress that requires constant reviews, adaptation and adjustment.

Introduction

On 8 June 2005, at the Special Operations Command headquarters in Florida, General Bryan D. Brown and other senior security and military figures declared the end of the 'global war on terror' and the advent of a new counter-terrorism strategy: the Struggle against Violent Extremism (SAVE).¹ This eventually led to the conception of the CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) strategy against terrorism that involved not only military, but also diplomatic, economic, political, and "all instruments of national power." In 2015, the then US President Barack Obama reaffirmed the new-ness of the strategy in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly underscoring the need for "a comprehensive strategy" that uses all available resources as mentioned above.²

In Malaysia, a successful model of "CVE" approach existed long before its present US conception. CVE was carried out in Malaya (now Malaysia) from 1948 to 1960 during what

was known as the Malayan Emergency.³ The successful counter-insurgency against communist terrorists during the Malayan Emergency informed Malaysia's strategy towards a host of religiously-inspired extremist and terrorist groups that have threatened its security to date. Notable among them include Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI), Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia, and various groups linked to the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group.

This study departs from the conventional and US-centric understanding of CVE, which tends to focus on "community programmes" and "surveillance."⁴ Such an approach strays from the philosophy of CVE and ignores a wide range of state policies undertaken by Malaysia. This paper explores various components of CVE in the Malaysian context and what more could be done to address violent extremism in the future.

CVE in the Malaysian Context

Essentially, CVE is a holistic approach to address violence emanating from various forms of extremism. In Malaysia, CVE includes the three following modules: legislation, rehabilitation, and education.⁵

³ Komer, Robert W. *The Malayan Emergency In Retrospect: Organization Of A Successful Counterinsurgency Effort*. No. 957, Arpa. Rand Corp Santa Monica Ca, 1972.

⁴ Green, E. [What Lies Ahead for Obama's Countering Violent Extremism Program?](#) *The Atlantic*, 17 March 2017.; Fernandez, B. [The Pseudoscience of Countering Violent Extremism](#). *Al Jazeera America*, 17 April 2017.

⁵ El-Muhammady, A. "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia." *Countering Daesh Extremism: European and Asian Responses*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2016: pp.105-122.

¹ Fox, R. [Gwot is history. Now for Save: After the Global War on Terror comes the Struggle Against Violent Extremism](#). *New Statesman*, 8 August 2005.

² Office of the Press Secretary. [Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism](#). *The White House: Speeches & Remarks*, 29 September 2015.

Security/Legislative Measures

Malaysia relies on its anti-terrorism legislation to address violent extremism. They include the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 or SOSMA, the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA), the Special Measures Against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act 2015 (SMATA), and the National Security Council Act 2016 (NSCA). These laws were introduced to empower the Malaysian authorities to deal with terrorist threats following the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA, 1960) in 2012.⁶

Together with the Penal Code, the police can detain terrorist suspects and their supporters without warrant, including those in possession of terrorist materials (flags, banners, or publications).⁷ In addition to managing the terrorist threat, these security laws are also used against other forms of violent extremism.⁸ Under this legal framework of counter-terrorism and extremism, over 250 IS fighters, supporters, and sympathisers have been arrested and prosecuted in Malaysia.⁹ For example, in March this year, two IS supporters were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment each for the hand grenade attack that injured eight people at the Movida nightclub in Puchong last year. They were also given an additional ten-year sentence each for supporting IS. In another case, a former post-graduate student was sentenced to five years' in jail for possession of books related to terrorism.

Militant Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of detained militants involves the 'deradicalisation' and rehabilitation of ISA or SOSMA detainees. The conceptual tool kit of this programme is grounded in the country's past efforts to reintegrate communist

supporters during the Malaysian Emergency.¹⁰ The programme was developed and remodelled to suit the qualitatively different security threats since the 1960s and especially since 9/11.¹¹ Due to its roots in the Emergency era, the programme included re-education of "mainstream values", financial assistance, and "continuous monitoring" as follow-up security measures. Following the rise of IS and the evolving threat environment, the programme was overhauled and updated to deal with religious extremism. For instance, beginning 2016, the Ministry of Home Affairs made public the contents of its *Integrated Rehabilitation Module for Detainees* during various 'deradicalisation' conferences, revealing an emphasis on religious rehabilitation.

Educational Initiatives

Since the popularisation of the US-led CVE approach, the educational module was added to Malaysia's CVE framework. This involves public awareness campaigns by various institutions including the Malaysian Special Branch, the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM) and civil society organisations. Providing "counter-narratives" against religiously-inspired extremist ideologies would be part of the CVE campaigns.

In April 2015, after the Special Branch had initiated the approach, JAKIM set up the Jihad Concept Explanation Action Committee to address misconceptions about jihad at different social groups and institutions; they include schools, universities, mosques, suraus (community prayer areas), and the Internet.¹² The Action Committee comprised the Civil Defence Department, the National Security Council, the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM), Al-Hijrah Media Corporation,

⁶ El-Muhammady, A. "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia," p 117.

⁷ Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani. "Annual Threat Assessment: Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, January 2017: 16-20

⁸ The Straits Times. [Malaysia extends anti-terrorism security law Sosma for 5 years](#). *The Straits Times*, 5 April 2017.

⁹ J. Chine. [Malaysia: Clear and present danger from Islamic State](#). *Brookings Institute*, 16 December 2015.

¹⁰ KJ. Henderson. Extracts from the Experiment at the Taiping Rehabilitation Camp. *Papers of the EU and EEMO*, box 42, File 2, (Rhodes House, Oxford, 20 July 1953), p. 8-9

¹¹ El-Muhammady, A. Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia, p.118.

¹² The Star. [Malaysia targets spread of terrorist ideology in main battlefronts including schools, internet](#). *The Straits Times*, 19 April 2015.

and the Institute of Islamic Strategic Research Malaysia (IKSIM).

Various civil society organisations that recognised the significance of the public communications approach also organised public talks and produced print, visual, and new¹³ media to counter extremist narratives. These groups include the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) and the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM); both groups combined to form a task force to counter IS ideology from as early as September 2014.¹⁴ Since the establishment of the task force, ABIM and GMM have produced posters and short videos that aim to create public awareness on extremist narratives and prevent youths from joining terrorist groups.¹⁵

Malaysia's CVE and the *longue durée*

Since 2014, Malaysia has been arresting local pro-IS cells that had been communicating with Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, Malaysia's top IS operative in Syria.¹⁶ Now that Wanndy has been killed, four more Malaysians may take his place.¹⁷ Malaysia's Counter-Terrorism Division had warned in December last year that there were scores of Malaysians trying to evade the police to go Syria and Iraq to fight for IS. The number of people arrested for wanting to go to Syria has increased from 82 in 2015 to 112 in 2016; nine however managed to slip out. IS ideology continues to spread through social media despite battlefield losses in Iraq, Syria and Libya. And, terrorist plots continue to be hatched. The most recent was the arrest of four Yemeni terrorists in February for plotting attacks during the Saudi King Salman's visit to Malaysia. Separately, two Indonesians, one Malaysian, and an East

Asian national, were also arrested in anti-terrorist operations.¹⁸ All these indicate that Malaysia's CVE programme is very much a work in progress. This is especially so since 2016 accounted for about 40% of IS-related arrests since 2014.¹⁹

Malaysia has declared that its IS-era rehabilitation programme has had an impressive success rate of 97.5%.²⁰ In 2012, a study of de-radicalisation programmes in Muslim-majority states produced similar numbers for Malaysia: 98.3% success rate – of the 154 jihadists detained, all except six successfully completed the programme.²¹ The lack of recidivism was taken as an indicator of the programme's success. However, when IS emerged, six of the ex-ISA detainees eventually joined IS in Syria.²² Critics may question the long-term effectiveness of the rehabilitation programme although in the age of the Internet and aggressive IS online propaganda, it might be difficult to avoid some level of re-radicalisation and recidivism of released detainees and prisoners.

Malaysia may continue to face the threat of violent extremism so long as IS, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates persist with their vigorous online radicalisation efforts. Coupled with the politicisation of Islam and growing exclusivist rhetoric that promote narrow world-views, Malaysia faces challenging times ahead.²³

Another concern is Malaysia's educational approach to CVE. In order to counter IS

¹³ Mass communication and digital technologies such as the Internet.

¹⁴ Loh, FF. [GMM, Abim condemn IS, forming task force to curb spread of extremism](#). *The Star Online*, 10 September 2014.

¹⁵ El-Muhammady, A. "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia", pp.120-121.

¹⁶ Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani. [Annual Threat Assessment: Malaysia](#). *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Volume 7, Issue 11, December 2015-January 2016, pp. 17-21. Accessed May 2017,

¹⁷ Reduan, H. [Four Msians replace dead Msian IS leader Wanndy](#). *New Straits Times*, 15 May 2017.

¹⁸ The Star. [Malaysia's police chief says four Yemeni terror suspects arrested were targeting Saudi royalty](#). *The Straits Times*, 7 March 2017.

¹⁹ Ng, E. [Malaysia's softer approach to radicals reaping rewards](#). *TODAY Online*, 8 December 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Harrigan, Jane, and Hamed El-Said. "Deradicalizing Violent Extremists: Counter-Radicalization and Deradicalization Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States." *Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012).

²² El-Muhammady, A. "Countering the Threats of Daesh in Malaysia," p.119.

²³ See some arguments about the drivers of extremism within Malaysia in Hudson, J. [Why Does Malaysia Have an Islamic State Problem?](#) *Foreign Policy*, 9 September 2015.

narratives, Malaysia announced the establishment of a regional, digital counter-messaging centre for Southeast Asia, the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging Communication Centre (RDC3) in October 2015.²⁴ Malaysia secured US funding for the project and set out to establish the centre in May 2016.²⁵ It is still work in progress.²⁶ Besides the RDC3, Malaysia has a number of similar initiatives under various ministries with foreign assistance or in the pipeline. For instance, the Counter-Messaging Centre (CMC) under the Home Ministry was established in May 2016. Similarly, a Digital Strategic Communications Division (DSCD) under the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counterterrorism (SEARCCT) was established in April 2016. Currently, a proposed centre for a similar purpose is to be established under the King Salman Centre for International Peace with Saudi Arabia.²⁷ The existence of several such counter-messaging centres runs the risk of overlapping roles and straining limited resources.

Malaysia will have to do more in counter-ideology efforts. There is a need to formulate a strong counter-narrative across the multitude of government bodies and organisations it now has. Policy initiatives are also required in the cyber domain to counter jihadist narratives. These narratives on social media and chat groups are instrumental in radicalising the vulnerable segments of Malaysian population, particularly youth. When stern action was taken against various IS cells which operated in the open, IS fighters and supporters grew in numbers in the online sphere, corresponding with the increase in numbers of new pro-IS cells in Malaysia.²⁸

Malaysian authorities might also need to reconsider the present educational approach

²⁴ P. Parameswaran. [Malaysia Eyes New Regional Facility to Counter Islamic State](#). *The Diplomat*, 8 October 2015.

²⁵ P. Parameswaran. [Malaysia to Launch New Center to Counter Islamic State Messaging in May](#). *The Diplomat*, 27 January 2016.

²⁶ P. Parameswaran. [Malaysia's New Terror Centers in Its Islamic State War](#). *The Diplomat*, 7 March 2017.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani. Annual Threat Assessment: Malaysia.

towards CVE in the *longue durée*, learning from its achievements of public education in schools. UNESCO praised Malaysia for taking “a firm stance against violent extremism through inclusion and education.” UNESCO considers it “the most effective long-term prevention to forces threatening to divide societies”.²⁹ UNESCO was not referring to the CVE initiatives, but Malaysia’s relatively successful and indigenous efforts at managing ethnic relations in Malaysia’s context.³⁰ Malaysia can effectively counter the menace of violent extremism through education and developing counter-narratives as nation-building narratives further upstream.

Conclusion

Malaysia’s CVE experience in the context of the IS threat demonstrates the need for all facets of “countering violence” to be implemented. Malaysia’s authorities have done well in the realm of counter-terrorism legislation and rehabilitation. A long-term critical look at Malaysia’s CVE experience as it evolves from the Malayan Emergency era until the present reveals the following.

Firstly, CVE requires constant adaptation to address the changing security landscape. Secondly, the adaptations must emanate from and improve upon existing institutions, whether it is the legislative or security infrastructure or the education system. Thirdly, Malaysia would do well to rely more on its indigenous CVE policies which pre-dates the US-launched CVE initiatives. Fourth, the politicisation of Islam and growing exclusivist rhetoric in the country may render vulnerable groups susceptible to online jihadist narratives, thereby undercutting its own CVE initiatives.

Managing these trends through counter-narratives that promote pluralism and religious and political moderation, and introducing upstream education measures to build

²⁹ I. Bokova. [The Malaysian Example – Partnering with Asia to Prevent Violent Extremism](#). *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation* website, 22 September 2016.

³⁰ R. Ibrahim. “Multiculturalism and education in Malaysia.” *Culture and Religion* 8, no. 2 (2007): 155-167.

sustainably resilient multicultural societies, are critical in countering the threat of violent extremism.

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Pakistan's CVE Programme: An Overview of Achievements and Challenges

Farhan Zahid

Unless the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) measures are not instituted and implemented judiciously, Pakistan's fight against home-grown extremism and terrorism will remain partially successful. So far, Pakistan has made modest progress against violent radicalisation but much remains to be done. As the CVE initiatives—launched by the military and the civil society—are maturing from the embryonic phase to adolescence, a critical overview of their challenges and achievements will help Pakistan to consolidate the gains as well as plug the existing gaps.

Introduction

The term CVE refers to measures taken by governments and civil society organizations to contain, deter, and eventually address the underlying causes of violent extremism. As a concept, CVE gained currency in academic circles in 2015 when the Obama Administration hosted a summit at the White House following the meteoric rise of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group.

The CVE measures are considered essential for sustainable counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies. They provide the balance between the kinetic (hard) and non-kinetic (soft) aspects of counter-terrorism. The major objective of any CVE policy is to create a counter-narrative against extremist ideologies through policy and academic research. To be effective, every CVE strategy must be contextual and cognisant of the extremist milieu of a particular place.

In Pakistan's context, CVE can be defined as countering radical narratives disseminated by jihadist organisations to promote intolerance

and values that may directly or indirectly contribute to the growing cycle of violence and extremism in the country. To achieve optimal results from a CVE policy, strengthening the ties between the states and societies and removing the trust deficit are essential.

Defeating extremist ideologies requires joint state-and-society approach. Primarily, a CVE policy provides masses with a narrative against extremist ideologies and resuscitates the trust of the community in the state, a sine qua non to fight violent extremism. It also assists government agencies in containing terrorist groups' recruitment drive by neutralising the social and political avenues they exploit to gain support and sympathy.

Pakistan's CVE Initiatives

Notable Pakistani counter-terrorism analyst, Muhammad Amir Rana, defines Pakistani CVE measures as preventive and as disengagement steps implemented to dissuade individuals from extremism and confront the radical narratives.¹

In Pakistan, jihadist literature available in the vernacular press, social media platforms, and the traditional religious curricula taught at the madrassas are major dissemination sources of jihadist narratives. These narratives emanate from a variety of extremist groups and individuals, such as Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS) and domestic groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and others.

¹ Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies in April 2017, Islamabad.

Why Pakistan needs CVE Initiatives

Pakistan's foremost challenge, as far as terrorism is concerned, is to deal with the jihadist groups and their ideological narratives that resonate with at-risk individuals and vulnerable social groups. In Pakistan, the Interior Ministry has banned sixty-four jihadist organisations.² Most of these banned organisations are involved in terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.

Pakistani security forces have been fighting against homegrown terrorist groups for the last fifteen years. At least, ten major and scores of minor military operations have been carried out against these militant outfits in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Currently, a nationwide military operation Rad-ul-Fasad (Elimination of Discord) is underway to neutralise terrorists' sleeper cells and nullify the threat of latent radicalism.

Despite all of these efforts, Pakistan has suffered more than 61,000 casualties³ and economic losses amounting to a whopping \$118 billion USD.⁴ Primarily, the *raison d'être* of CVE programmes in Pakistan is to address the issue concerning the growth of homegrown terrorism. Pakistani society is however also plagued by a high level of religious extremism with regular incidents of persecution of religious minorities and display of religious intolerance. The latest case in point is the lynching of a university student Mashall Khan by a violent mob of university students on false charges of blasphemy and the killing of a 10-year-old Hindu boy in Balochistan by a vigilante mob. Both incidents and several other similar instances point to the deep permeation of extremism into Pakistan's social fabric.

² [Official website of National Counter Terrorism Authority.](#)

³ [Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan 2003-2017.](#) *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*, Accessed 15 May 2017.

⁴ [Pakistan suffered a loss of \\$118bn during war on terror.](#) *Dawn*, 4 June 2016.

CVE achievements and challenges in Pakistan

The unprecedented growth of Islamist radicalisation is definitely an enormous challenge for Pakistan's strategic community and lawmakers. Although policymakers have not been able to devise a concrete counter-terrorism policy framework, a number of disjointed CVE initiatives have been undertaken by civil society and the military.

Various CVE initiatives implemented in Pakistan are evolving from their embryonic phase to adolescence. While there are some achievements in countering violent extremism, no substantial gains have yet been made so far. In fact, putting a CVE structure—despite its disjointedness—in a religiously divisive and politically polarised country like Pakistan is no less than an achievement.

Since 2014, the Pakistani government has been working on a national narrative spearheaded by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). A separate directorate has been established since then and a number of initiatives have been taken in this regard, such as engaging moderate religious clerics like Dr Javed Ahmad Ghamdi. Various seminars and workshops have also been conducted on the issue. NACTA officials have been sent abroad to study the CVE programmes of other countries such as Malaysia and Turkey.⁵

The government has launched several military operations to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy the terrorist networks. The military operations in KP province and tribal areas have hitherto not been able to tackle the Taliban militancy despite driving various Taliban groups out of the area. The regrouping and reorganisation of these militant outfits in Afghanistan's border areas seem to be neutralising the gains of Operation Zarb-e-Azb. Moreover, to some extent, the writ of the government has been restored in some districts of Pakistan tribal areas and KPK province. Similarly, the operation in Karachi has also yielded some positive results. However, no concrete action

⁵ Telephonic discussions with a NACTA official in Islamabad, May 2017.

has been taken against the Islamist terrorist outfits in Karachi, such as the Rah-e-Haq Party, a new political face of sectarian militant organisation Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (and its mother organisation Sipah-e-Sahaba). Rah-e-Haq has managed to win nine constituencies in Karachi's municipal elections held in December 2015.⁶

CVE Measures in Pakistan

The civil and military establishments in Pakistan have initiated a number of CVE measures during the last eight years. These measures include de-radicalisation and rehabilitation programmes of detained militants, madrassa reforms, and policy measures like National Internal Security Policy (NISP), National Action Plan (NAP), and legal measures such as amendments to the Anti-Terrorist Act and Protection of Pakistan Ordinance.⁷ These measures could be divided into:

- i. Militant De-radicalisation and rehabilitation programmes
- ii. Reforms and laws
- iii. Policy measures

Militant De-Radicalisation and Rehabilitation Programmes

Although a comprehensive and national-level policy of militant de-radicalisation and rehabilitation policy do not exist in Pakistan, a few initiatives warrant mentioning. After the conclusion of the military operation Rah-e-Rast (Path of Righteousness) in Malakand Division in 2009 against the TTP Swat chapter, the Pakistani army initiated de-radicalisation programmes for detained Islamist militants ranging from teenagers (the would-be suicide bombers) to adults involved in militancy in Swat and adjoining areas of northwest Pakistan. The initiative was called De-Radicalisation and Emancipation Programs (DERP).

⁶ Zia ur Rehman, [ASWJ affiliate quietly swipes nine seats in Karachi](#), *The News*, 7 December 2015.

⁷ Abdul Basit, "[Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and De-radicalization Initiatives](#)", *Journal of Institute of Policy Research Islamabad (IPRI)*, XV, No. 2 (Summer 2015): 44-68.

DERP programmes were held at Swat district, which was the region most affected by Taliban militancy at that time. These centers were established to de-radicalise, rehabilitate, and reintegrate militants arrested during the military operation. So far, a total 2,500 militants have been de-radicalised under this initiative. Of these, 200 have been reintegrated from Saboon rehabilitation center and 1,169 from Rastoon center; the remaining figure (1,131) comprises other militants who have interned at these centers.⁸

The Saboon Centre focused on de-radicalising the teenagers who were trained to become suicide bombers, while the Rastoon Center worked on Islamist militants aged between 19-25 years. Meanwhile, the Mashal Centre works with the families of Islamist militants undergoing deradicalisation to sensitise them to post-rehabilitation requirements. The military sought professional assistance from an umbrella body of non-governmental organizations, Hum Pakistan Foundation (HPF), led by Dr Fariha Paracha.⁹

Another initiative was taken in 2011 by the Punjab government's Counter Terrorism Department in partnership with Technical and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) to de-radicalise and rehabilitate militants of banned Kashmiri jihadist and anti-Shia militant groups. The ex-members of these militant groups were given technical and vocational training to pursue alternative livelihoods. The Punjab government also provided modest soft-loans to start small businesses or to set up their own workshops.

Three batches of more than 300 militants were rehabilitated and trained through this programme.¹⁰ Two other programmes were launched in the aftermaths of military

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Discussion with Muhammad Amir Rana, Director Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies in Islamabad. For details, see: Muhammad Amir Rana, "Swat De-radicalization Model: Prospects for Rehabilitating," *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April-June 2011, pp. 5- 13.

¹⁰ Saba Noor, [From Radicalization to De-Radicalization: The Case of Pakistan](#), *Counter Terrorists Trends and Analysis (CTTA)*, Vol. 5, Issue 8, August 2013, pp.16-19,

operations Rah-e-Rast and Rah-e-Nijat in Bajaur tribal region and KPK's Tank districts. Although no latest information is available, the government plans to establish two de-radicalisation centers for Islamist militants who renounced militancy.¹¹ The center established at Khar, capital of Bajaur, rehabilitated 47 Taliban militants under the Navi Sahar programme. The militants were released after completing the vocational training course in October 2013.¹²

Reforms and Legislation

Another set of measures taken by the government under NAP was madrasa reforms, which have been a contentious issue in Pakistan's struggle against home-grown extremism and terrorism. It is slow moving and progress, so far, has been one-step forward, two steps backwards. After the 18th constitutional amendment, it has become a provincial matter. To date, the madrasa reform measures have not achieved the intended goal of registering all the madrassas in Pakistan.

The Madrasa Regulation Ordinance had been passed in 2002 (amended in 2008) by the then military regime of General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008). The main aim was to register and revise the curricula of madrassas promoting narrow sectarian worldviews and promoting jihadi ideologies. Following the restoration of democracy in Pakistan in February 2008, the Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government reached an accord with the Ittehad-e-Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Pakistan (ITMP),¹³ a coalition of five madrasa boards in Pakistan. The consensus reached between the Federal Ministry of Education and ITMP was that the government would recognise the madrasa boards and in return, the madrasa boards would revise their curricula. Despite initial success, the talks did not last long and the agreement failed to become an act of the

parliament.¹⁴ The apparent reason for the failed negotiations was ITMP's demand for a degree-awarding status on par with other government and private universities.¹⁵

On the legal front, the government amended old laws and introduced new ones to empower the law enforcement agencies to combat terrorism. For instance, the Anti-Terrorist Act (ATA) 1997 was amended twice in 2014 and 2015 to give them more powers. Similarly, the Protection of Pakistan Act was passed in 2014 with a two-year sunset clause. The Act provided sweeping powers such as 'shoot suspects on sight', 'enter and search, without warrant any premises to make any arrest', remand for an extended period, and prosecute suspects on the basis of digital evidence.¹⁶

In 2014, the 21st Constitutional Amendment was passed to establish the Military Courts for two years to expedite the judicial trials of hardcore terrorists and execute them swiftly. This was done due to the inherent weaknesses and failures of the slow-moving criminal justice system which failed to try and convict the terrorists. This stop-gap measure was heavily criticised by human rights watchdogs and civil society organisations. Although the establishment of military courts was never viewed as a judicious step and did not yield the desired results, the government extended their duration for another two years after parliament passed the 28th Amendment Bill 2017 and gave a fresh lease to the courts starting from January 7, 2017.¹⁷

Policy Measures

The incumbent government of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is not the first one to initiate policy measures specifically related to CVE in Pakistan, despite the fact that their policy frameworks are important sub-components of various ongoing CVE initiatives.

¹¹ Zulfiqar Ali, [De-radicalization centers being set up in Bajaur and Tank](#). *Dawn*, 21 January 2012.

¹² "Rehabilitation & integration: 47 ex-militants freed after receiving vocational training", *Express Tribune*, 13 October 2013.

¹³ Alliance of the Boards of Religious Seminaries.

¹⁴ [Govt and Ittehad-e-Tanzeemate-Madaris \(ITMD\) talks fail](#). *Pakistan Today*, 9 October 2010.

¹⁵ Abidoon Nadeem. [Govt and Ittehad-e-Tanzeemate-Madaris \(ITMD\) talks fail](#). *Nation*, 9 October 2010.

¹⁶ Irfan Haider. [Protection of Pakistan Bill 2014 approved in NA](#). *Dawn*, 2 July 2014.

¹⁷ [President Mamnoon signs bill extending military courts for two years](#). *Geo News*, 31 March 2017.

However, the PML-N government has built on the work of their predecessors. The previous government established the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) in 2009 to take the lead role of coordinating agency modelled on the US Directorate of National Intelligence (DNI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). NACTA also has a specialised directorate for CVE. Since NACTA's creation, it took the government another four years to pass the bill in parliament in 2013 to make it operational.

Another similar step was the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2014-2018 which was announced in 2014. The policy provided a clear roadmap for achieving targets concerning Pakistan's internal security challenges. The policy document calls for the establishment of the Directorate of Internal Security (DIS) and federal Rapid Response Force (RRF), an arms control regime, preventing the misuse of cyberspace, a border control regime, and capacity building and modernization of overall criminal justice system.¹⁸ The highly ambitious policy, even after three years, has hitherto not been implemented.

The twenty-point National Action Plan (NAP) turned out to be a corollary to NISP in December 2014, following the tragic terrorist attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, by TTP militants; the militants killed 132 APS students. The NAP was the result of an All Parties Conference (APC) convened after the APS attack. Besides policy measures, a consensus was developed to adopt both soft and hard measures to deal with the terrorists. There are a number of initiatives adopted in the 20-point NAP agenda such as the strengthening of NACTA, action against hate literature, protection of the minorities, registration of madrassas, and measures to safeguard cyber space from radical ideologies. The implementation of NAP has been only partially successful as apparently, the major stakeholders are not on board.

¹⁸ Raza Rumi. [Charting Pakistan's Internal Security Policy](#). *United States Institute of Peace Studies (USIP)*, Special Report 369, May 2015.

Civil Society's CVE Initiatives in Pakistan

In addition to government-led CVE measures, the civil society in Pakistan has taken a number of measures as well. For instance, the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based private think tank, has launched a project *Reconstruction of the National Narratives and Counter Violent Extremism Model for Pakistan*. Under this project, a series of consultative discussions with religious clerics, scholars, policymakers, law enforcers, parliamentarians, social activists, and retired civil servants were held in Islamabad in 2016-17. The overarching objective of these meetings was to devise guiding principles for shaping the national narrative.

Other CVE initiatives by the civil society include public awareness campaigns and peace rallies. For instance, the Jinnah Institute, a private think-tank based in Islamabad, organised a peace march to promote peaceful coexistence, religious harmony and tolerant values. Similarly, CSO CIRCLE organised a National Flag day in 2014 to bring together cross sections of society.¹⁹

Need for consolidation

As discussed earlier, a number of CVE measures have been initiated by the government but there is a need to consolidate the gains along with improving the implementation mechanism through regular assessment. Arguably, terrorism is low cost whereas counter-terrorism is very high cost and CVE is one major pillar of the overall counter-terrorism strategy of any country. Pakistani policymakers need to analyse the challenges in the implementation of CVE measures. Most importantly, there is a need to expedite the strengthening of NACTA because it is the primary agency leading the efforts in the execution of CVE initiatives.

The CVE wing of NACTA has not been able to implement the policy initiatives as elaborated in NISP and NAP. There may be other

¹⁹ Hediah Mirahmadi, Waleed Zaid et al, [Empowering Pakistan's Civil Society to Counter Global Violent Extremism](#). *Brookings Institute*, January 2015.

challenges such as funding, a dearth of skilled professionals, and a challenging environment not conducive for implementing the CVE policy initiatives. The lack of consensus among the provincial governments on revising the curricula of public schools and implementing madrassa reforms have undermined CVE initiatives.

Conclusion

Despite the abovementioned efforts, the apparent results are insignificant as far as CVE measures are concerned. There is a realisation in Pakistan that without implementing CVE measures, the current issues related to religiously-inspired militancy would remain unresolved. The country has been fighting a variety of Islamist terrorist groups since 2001 (in some cases such as LeJ even earlier than 2001) but hitherto does not have a comprehensive counter-terrorism policy. With no proper framework organising counter-terrorism policy, it appears that Pakistan's success against terrorist groups will remain limited. There is a need to formulate a concrete counter-terrorism policy encompassing all the essential tools, a roadmap, and an implementation mechanism. Policymakers need to evaluate and assess the successes and failures of CVE measures taken during the last one decade and devise a functional strategy with the consensus of all the stakeholders.

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Countering Violent Extremism in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

Despite counter-terrorist operations, radicalisation and extremism remains a serious issue in Bangladesh. The present administration has instituted a number of programmes to counter violent extremism (CVE). However, there are still severe challenges in implementing an effective CVE programme.

Introduction

The growing traction of violent extremist ideology in the Muslim majority state of Bangladesh poses a serious security challenge. Successive kinetic counter-terrorism operations have done little to inhibit recruitment by the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group and Al Qaeda.¹ As such, Bangladeshi authorities have taken soft countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives, with a particular focus on building social awareness.² However, Bangladesh requires a long-term strategy, commitment, adequate investment and, above all, competent leadership in CVE programmes for optimal results. This paper will provide a brief overview of Bangladesh's CVE initiatives to highlight areas that require more attention.

Background

On 1 July 2016, five pro-IS militants, aged between 17 to 26, stormed Dhaka's Holy Artisan Café and killed twenty people.³ Two of the attackers were undergraduates while one

was a college student. The aforementioned three attackers were also from Dhaka metropolitan city, while the other two came from rural areas and had madrasa education. The youngest amongst the five was 17 years old.

The attack underlined the growing traction of violent extremism among Bangladeshi youth, despite their social, family, and educational background. The Holy Artisan Café attack and the subsequent attacks in Kishorganj and Sholakia triggered a series of counterterrorism operations in various parts of Bangladesh and at least 70 terrorists were killed in these operations. However, kinetic operations have not had a significant impact on discouraging the radicalisation of youths and deterring violent extremism.

It should be noted that violent extremism is not new in Bangladesh. Thousands of Bangladeshis fought in the Soviet-Afghan War during the 1980s. The returnees from this war formed the first Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh, including Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). These groups carried out a number of attacks in the country from 1999 to 2005. After a brief interlude from 2006 to 2012, Bangladesh witnessed sporadic attacks inspired by Al Qaeda. At least 12 secular bloggers and activists were killed from 2013 to 2016. Additionally, Bangladesh remains in constant threat due to the radicalisation of Rohingya refugees coming from western Myanmar. Since 1978, Bangladesh has hosted Rohingya Muslims, and presently, half a million Rohingya refugees and illegal immigrants are residing in Bangladesh. Both IS and Al Qaeda have

¹ Iftekharul Bashar, "[The Evolving threat in Bangladesh](#)," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Vol 9, Issue 3.

² Interview with a Bangladeshi Counterterrorism professional in Dhaka

³ [Gunmen take hostages in Bangladeshi capital Dhaka](#). BBC, 2 July 2016.

consistently used the Rohingya issue to advance their propaganda.

Factors that have contributed to the CVE programme

The on-going CVE initiatives are being undertaken by the 17-member National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention formed in 2009. The committee comprises relevant ministries (Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Youth and Sports, and Ministry of Culture) and security agencies (Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, National Security Intelligence, Police Headquarters, Rapid Action Battalion, Special Branch, Border Guards Bangladesh etc.), and is headed by the Minister for Home Affairs.⁴ A number of factors have contributed to the establishment of the country's CVE programme.

First, according to Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies, recruitment by terrorist entities, such as the pro-IS Neo-JMB, remains persistent despite the numerous counter-terrorist operations.⁵ The demography of terrorist recruits has also changed significantly due to IS and its recruitment strategy. While in the past recruitment took place mostly in rural and sub-urban areas, the present-day recruits are predominantly urban youth with secular education.⁶ Also, in the past, terrorist recruitment took place mostly in madrassas (Islamic religious schools). However, the status quo has seen mainstream educational institutions being used as recruiting grounds. The profile of the attackers of the Holy Artisan Café and the subsequent attacks attest to this.

According to an intelligence report, Bangladeshi authorities have brought 21 educational institutions under surveillance due to extremist activities. The list includes 18

educational institutions in the capital Dhaka alone.⁷ While the existence of extremist organisations in educational institutions is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, the lack of attention from families, society, and state has provided space for these entities to operate freely. Additionally, in the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of female recruits as male terrorists are actively engaging the female members of their family.

Second, the penetration of internet has made online radicalisation more prevalent. As such, since the establishment of the so-called 'caliphate' of IS in June 2014, Bangladesh has seen a steady increase in internet-based radicalisation. IS and Al Qaeda propaganda materials are readily available on the internet, where write-ups on IS and Al Qaeda leaders, operations methodology, and success stories of their attacks are regularly posted in Facebook groups. Bangladesh has a sizeable number of active Facebook users. Dhaka city alone has 22 million users, which represents the region with the second highest active Facebook users globally.⁸

This is worrying because the majority of current recruitment takes place online, which has minimal measures in place to counter the impact of extremist propaganda. In fact, there are over one hundred secret Facebook accounts that terrorists are using for recruitment.⁹ Despite limited capacity for vigilance, law enforcement agencies have arrested some extremists operating in the cyber domain and managed to shut down their forums. However, a dozen more forums would usually replace the ones that have been brought down.¹⁰

Third, terrorist groups are also changing their tactics. They are constantly changing their locations and operating in small cells, instead of maintaining organised and large networks,

⁴ Shahab Enam Khan, "Bangladesh: Changing Dynamics of Violent Extremism and Response of the State," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol 28, No. 1 (2017): 210.

⁵ Interview with a Bangladeshi Counterterrorism professional in Dhaka.

⁶ Interview with Bangladeshi counter-terrorism officer in Dhaka

⁷ This report is based on an investigative report dated 27 September 2016 by a prominent Bengali Daily Newspaper named the Kaler Kontho. [Link](#).

⁸ [Dhaka ranked second in number of active Facebook users](#). *bdnews24*, 14 April 2017,

⁹ M Abul Kalam Azad. [No thanks to technology](#). *The Daily Star*, 23 April 2017.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

enabling them to deceive the authorities and make detection difficult.

Given the above, CVE initiatives, such as community engagement, can help in detecting extremist behaviour more effectively.

Major components of the CVE initiatives

The fundamental features of CVE initiatives in Bangladesh focus on building greater awareness of religious teachings in society and engaging communities in building social resilience. These include:

Religious Education

Extremists often exploit religious spaces to recruit and spread their radical ideas. As such, a key component of Bangladesh's CVE programme is to partner with religious leaders who play an important role as community leaders. Religious leaders are co-opted to alert and sensitise the Muslim community about violent extremism. Bangladesh Islamic Foundation (BIF), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is working with Imams from a network of 70,000 mosques to ensure that a pre-sermon speech is delivered by them during weekly Friday congregational prayers. The text of the speech is prepared by BIF experts and sent to Imams all over the country.

CVE Messaging through print and electronic-media

Bangladesh's Ministry of Information and Ministry of Culture are using newspapers, radio, and television for CVE messaging. Presently, the government is producing documentaries, short-films, and advertisements with a focused CVE message targeted at confronting extremist narratives. Additionally, television channels, including those of private media houses, have been instructed to broadcast programmes against terrorism and extremism.

Engaging Educational Institutions

The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Home Affairs are engaging educational

institutions in building awareness about extremism and terrorism among teachers, students, and parents. The educational institutions have also instructed teachers, parents, and students to remain vigilant and report to the police if any student is involved in extremist activity or goes missing for ten days. Currently, there are 37 public and 95 private universities in the country with a total student population of 600,000 students.¹¹

Engaging Youth through Sports and Extra-Curricular Activities

The Ministry of Youth is developing a Youth Database to develop new youth-based programmes. Through its countrywide network, it is organising various sporting events across the country to channel the energy of Bangladeshi youth into creative and constructive activities.

Revising Madrassa syllabus

Some madrassas have been known to preach religious intolerance and extremism. Consequently, madrassa textbooks have been revised and the government has directed the Ministry of Education to continue its scrutiny of madrassa curriculum. Additionally, the government has co-opted the Qawmi Madrassa in the country, which is one of the two major madrassas in Bangladesh. The government has recognised the Dawra-e-Hadith degrees issued by Qawmi Madrassa Education Boards as equivalent to a Master's Degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic. This implies that Qawmi Madrassa graduates will now compete in the job markets with others who studied under the National Curriculum. However, it remains to be seen how differences in the syllabus of Qawmi Madrassas and the general education system are reconciled.

Controlling extremist messaging on the internet

Bangladesh has taken steps to monitor social media platforms, such as Facebook and

¹¹ [Nahid to talk militancy with university VCs](#). *The Daily Star*, 13 July 2016.

Twitter. Efforts are underway to develop the technological capacity of the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) to enhance the detection of extremist websites. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) is also working in this regard.

Community initiatives

Muslim clerics in Bangladesh have contributed significantly to Bangladesh government's CVE efforts. For instance, in 2016, a leading Islamic group in Bangladesh issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) condemning terrorism and militancy, including violent attacks on non-Muslims and secular writers and activists. Such acts were declared as "Haraam," or forbidden in Islam. The *fatwa* was signed by more than 100,000 Islamic scholars, legal experts, and clerics, and presented by Maulana Fariduddin Masoud, chairman of Bangladesh Jamiatul Ulema (BJU), a national body of Islamic scholars.¹²

The *fatwa* by esteemed scholars and its endorsement by the apex Islamic religious body of Bangladesh provides an effective counter-weight to extremist propaganda. It helps in delegitimising the dangerous narratives forwarded by the likes of IS, hence dissuading those attracted by extremist advocacy of violence.

Gaps in Bangladesh's Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Despite the CVE initiatives taken by Bangladesh, the overall programme remains weak because of a number of reasons. First, the existing CVE initiatives are being carried out on an ad hoc basis. As a result, the sustainability and continuity of such initiatives will remain a concern.

Second, the CT agencies remain focused on the capital Dhaka. There is inadequate coverage of the more vulnerable northern and south-eastern regions of Bangladesh. These areas, especially those with a concentrated Rohingya population, are at greater security

risk due to a pronounced presence of extremist outreach efforts mainly through radical preachers or so-called social organisations.

Third, there is a need for more coordination and information sharing among the various security agencies in the country. The coordination is limited despite the government's stress on better coordination and the formation of several committees to this end.

Fourth, there is no framework to assess the implementation and effectiveness of the CVE programmes so as to make necessary adjustments.

Fifth, the detection and countering of extremist trends on social media platforms is not effective since there is a lack of dedicated and technologically-skilled professionals in this domain. Sixth, Bangladesh lacks a holistic plan to rehabilitate violent extremist offenders. Presently, there are more than 3,000 detainees in prison and some inmates will be released in the next few years. Unless they go through a comprehensive rehabilitation programme, they will fail to reintegrate back into society and will continue to pose a security threat.

On the strategic front, Bangladesh's response remains weak. There are some initiatives to utilise media to create social awareness and resistance to extremism and terrorism. However, the progress is slow and the outcome remains to be seen. In recent months, there have been some concerns about the government's appeasement of an Islamist vigilante group known as Hefajat-el-Islam, which is a pressure group of madrasah (religious schools) teachers and students. The government has changed the content of some school textbooks by 'Islamising' them. Many observers in Bangladesh are worried that this move will be counterproductive, especially at a time when Bangladesh is attempting to eradicate extremism.

Conclusion

Bangladesh must formulate a comprehensive National Action Plan for CVE and ensure that the CVE work of various agencies and

¹² [Anti-Terror Fatwa Endorsed by 100,000 Bangladeshi Islamic Scholars](#). *Voice of America*, 21 June 2016.

ministries are coordinated to maximise the desired outcomes. Bangladesh must increase its engagement of Muslim religious scholars and co-opt them into its CVE programme because the contemporary wave of violent extremism thrives on the misinterpretation of Islamic texts. The terrorist and extremist threat can be contained, isolated, and eliminated if the security apparatus, including the national security agencies, law enforcement authorities, and military forces, is enhanced. Political will, legal and governance framework, and operational capabilities of the government should be robust so that threats can be detected, disrupted, and dismantled. The present administration has the political will to tackle radicalisation but lacks a well-articulated strategy and a dedicated body to coordinate inter-agency responses to the problem of violent extremism.

Most importantly, Bangladesh should acknowledge that IS is operating on its soil. Only by acknowledging this can the government sustain and create a tactical and strategic CVE campaign to neutralise its threat.¹³

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¹³ Interview of Rohan Gunaratna, Singapore, 12 May 2017.

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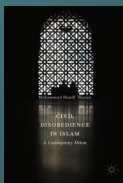
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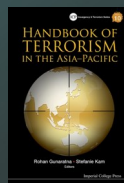
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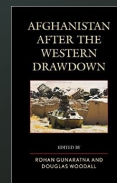


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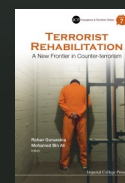
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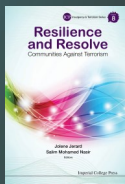
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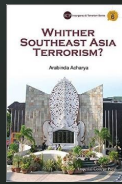
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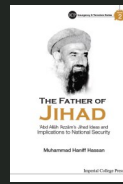
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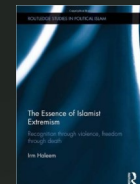
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