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Youth Radicalization in Pakistan

Summary

- Pakistani leaders face serious domestic extremism challenges; more than 47,000 thousand lives have been lost in terrorism-related violence in Pakistan over the past decade.
- Effective counter-radicalization processes must take into account Pakistan's large young adult population (ages 15-29), which collectively accounts for at least 30 percent of the overall population.
- Youth radicalization in Pakistan can be understood as the product of an exclusively Islamic identity—meaning a majority of youth identify primarily through their religion over nationality—combined with a broader reactive movement comprised of militant, political and missionary organizations.
- A variety of religious, political and militant organizations operating within Pakistan, some with the tacit or active support of the state, have fostered an enabling environment for radicalization and at times violent action. Some groups provide forums for interaction and connections with more militant actors, while others carry out the whole range of social, political and violent activity.
- When radical groups can popularize an exclusive Islamic or sectarian identity, even nonviolent organizations can become connected or aligned with more radical organizations and concepts.
- Confronting youth radicalization in Pakistan requires a holistic approach that supports political, social and educational alternatives to exclusionary Islamic identities, reducing the space for groups that espouse violence in the name of an exclusive Islamic identity.

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Introduction

Within the past decade, more than 47,000 people have been killed in terrorism-related violence in Pakistan.¹ Attacks by domestic terrorist organizations have implications for physical security, but they also impact the domestic social and political fabric. The surge in attacks in Pakistan has often been attributed to external factors, particularly the conflict in neighboring Afghanistan or the covert U.S. Predator drone campaign in Pakistan’s Federally Administrated Tribal Areas, but most violence is carried out by Pakistani militant actors targeting their fellow citizens.

Despite the costs borne by Pakistani victims of terror, some segments of Pakistani society continue to sympathize, justify or at times even directly support violence, providing an “enabling

environment” within which militant groups and their affiliates are able to operate. This support, whether tacit or active, is particularly concerning when it is expressed by members of Pakistan’s large young adult (ages 15-29) population, which collectively accounts for 30 percent of the overall population.² Pakistan’s youth bulge is projected to persist for at least another three decades³ and can either be an asset or a liability for the country depending on how effectively this segment of the population is integrated into society. In either case, the youth population is bound to define the future course of the country, which is currently mired in multiple crises.

Based in part on surveys and focus group interviews conducted in Lahore from late 2011 to spring 2013 with a range of youth, this brief posits that youth radicalization in Pakistan can be understood as the product of a closed Islamic identity combined with a broader reactive movement comprised of militant, political and missionary organizations.⁴ As the new national government led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif grapples with how to formulate a response to terrorism conducted by extremist groups, it must contend with the domestic roots of the threat, a key component of which will be to counter radicalization of the youth population at large.

Exclusive Islamic Identity and Youth Radicalization

Pakistan’s formation as a state specifically intended to represent the former British India’s Muslim population and conscious state-led ‘Islamization’ efforts under the dictatorship of former General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, have encouraged the spread of individual exclusivist identities among Pakistani youth and adults. These are furthered by political and religious groups that seek to define themselves in alignment with Islam and in opposition to all else, including indigenous culture.

In surveys of Lahori youth conducted for this piece and in other previous studies, young Pakistani respondents expressed high levels of identification with religious-based values systems.⁵ For example, in one survey 88 percent of educated youth in elite school institutions stated that religion was their primary identity and 50 percent considered their national identity to be dependent on their Islamic identity.⁶ In another countrywide survey, 75 percent identified themselves as Muslims, as compared to just 14 percent as Pakistani, suggesting that their religious identity was far more important than their nationality.⁷ At the extremes, this form of closed, homogenized self-identity can increase youth propensity to radicalization, leading them to accept or at times even justify violence conducted against other groups in the name of Islam.

The “Enabling Environment” for Radicalization

Violent terrorist attacks are not the product of a single actor operating in isolation, but are instead embedded in a larger social and political milieu. Indeed, violent radicalization can be represented as a pyramid, with the active terrorist at the top, the religious-political organizations in the middle and the missionary Islamic organizations at the bottom. Linkages between these three levels create an “enabling environment” that enhance the means and opportunities to advance an Islamic identity-based social movement and, in effect, the radicalization of youth to potentially militant causes.

These linkages can be categorized into three basic models:

- the loosely-coupled model, where a shared space facilitates interaction between nominal sympathizers, supporters and militant actors. For example, a mosque or large congregations of missionary organizations, such as the Tableeghi Jamaat, allows for literatures of all levels to be distributed, and political and militant activists have the opportunity to interact with lower level sympathizers.

- the bridge model, where one organization bridges the initial pool of sympathizers with more militant organizations. As an example, the Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) is a religious-political party which acts as the political representative of the large Deobandi mosque-madrassa network, composed of various missionary organizations. It also acts both as an ideological guide as well as a channel for youth volunteers to join Taliban militant actors. During the 1990s, for example, the JUI-S faction led by Maulana Sami-ul Haq closed its madrasa schools to allow students to participate in the Afghan civil war alongside the Afghan Taliban. Similarly, the Jamaat-e-Islami both has a strong national student organization, the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, and is connected with militant organizations such as Hizbul-Mujahideen.⁸
- the encapsulating model, whereby an entire social network has been mobilized to form a large organizational form, encapsulating all three levels of the pyramid. For example, the Jamaat-ud-Dawa acts as a proselytizing actor with a network of mosques and educational institutions, as well as a service oriented NGO; it has increasingly taken on a political role through its messaging on culture and politics, while its militant role as the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba has been well documented.

Though the methodology of missionary organizations may be peaceful, the acceptance of their message increases the likelihood that youth will also accept the message of religious-political or militant groups as being absolute.

For example, missionary organizations such as the male-focused Tableeghi Jamaat and the female-oriented Al-Huda, which have the largest public reach, have the potential to increase youth receptiveness to more radical groups by reinforcing messages of a primarily Islamic identity, through the rejection of indigenous ethnic, national or tribal identities as well as foreign cultural and political signifiers. By popularizing an exclusive Islamic or sectarian identity, they may contribute to alignment with more radical organizations, and the rejection of pluralistic politics.

Religious political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and the JUI have generally maintained a cordial relationship with the state and participated in the electoral political process, endorsing violent jihad only in select situations, such as Pakistan's policy in Kashmir or Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Most militant organizations such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi instead pick up this thread at the extremes, calling for youth to join in violent jihad. Militant jihad presents a call for revolutionary action to achieve the same goals, a just Islamic order against an unjust and un-Islamic system of governance at the domestic as well as at the global scale against infidels and persecutors of Muslims. While general goals are common, differences in the understanding of a just Islamic order and competition for power also leads to sectarian violence against fellow Muslims and intra-Islamist violence. The Pakistani state has historically allowed ample space for many Islamist organizations to operate, recruit and mobilize support, including in some cases active militant and sectarian organizations. The Pakistani military's historical practice of selective support for certain militant actors in order to support regional policy objectives in neighboring Afghanistan or India has helped build a resource base for not just militant but also nonmilitant organizations serving bridging or encapsulating roles.

Today, a vibrant free market of 232 religious organizations and militant groups exists within the country; 100 of them have their headquarters in Punjab and 71 in Lahore alone.⁹ Some militant groups operate openly in the country — establishing parallel educational or training institutions, collecting or extorting financial donations, and distributing published materials and media. The state's education system also facilitates these groups, who are often able to fill a vacuum left open by low levels of public education provision. The strength of these organizations leads to better marketing and recruitment, enabling them to draw youth from lower ends of the radicalization "pyramid" upward toward active militancy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this assessment, youth radicalization in Pakistan emerges from the interlinking of an exclusively Islamic identity, and a strong and unchecked Islamic identity-based social movement, which has greater opportunities to promote its message and mobilize resources within the Pakistani political and security framework.

Confronting youth radicalization in Pakistan requires a holistic approach that, in addition to police actions against militant organizations, also supports political, social and educational alternatives to this narrow Islamic identity. Only a comprehensive approach can disempower the groups espousing violence in the name of a reactive Islamic identity.

Steps in this regard should include:

- Publicize and support alternative discourse and world view linked to an inclusive religious meaning in all public domains, including physical and virtual spaces. Strengthen civil society initiatives to reform the education curriculum, and engage large media house executives to support programming that covers inter-faith and inter-sectarian harmony, tolerance, and diversity within the religious framework. Additionally, support similar initiatives in social media, which is the single most important source of information for the youth.
- Encourage the celebration of local cultural diversity and establish centers to ensure youth participation in cultural activities, social clubs and professional and sports organizations. Currently most public schools, colleges and universities are bereft of student unions, student clubs and extra-curricular activities. Lower cost private institutions experience similar shortages, as do low-income communities where most youth do not attend school. Art councils supporting literature, arts and music currently exist only in large cities, and should be strengthened and expanded. Youth centers for low-income communities and extracurricular activities for public educational institutions can be supported by nongovernmental organizations, private institutions and education leaders, combining cultural activities and vocational skills.
- Promote greater inter-provincial, inter-national and inter-religious interaction among the youth. Support civil society and inter-college youth-led initiatives through student clubs that use inexpensive technology for regular interactive discussion among the youth of different provinces, sects, religions and nationalities. Additionally, engage universities and colleges to initiate courses on peace and conflict resolution while also bringing together youth for interactive workshops.

Because radicalization of Pakistani youth stems from cultural socialization in a strictly religion-bound identity, a deradicalization strategy needs to focus on opening up the social identity by strengthening other identity constituents.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Based in part on USIP-supported surveys and focus group interviews conducted in Lahore, Pakistan from late 2011 to spring 2013 with a range of youth, author Raheem ul Haque provides a theoretical framework for understanding the process of youth radicalization in Pakistan. The author is a research fellow at the Forman Christian College Centre for Public Policy and Governance in Lahore, Pakistan; the views expressed here are his own.

Notes

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