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SPECIAL REPORT

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Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism

Summary

- People process events around narratives that resonate on an emotional level. Effective strategic communications efforts understand this and ground messages within existing, accepted narratives.

- Violent extremist Islamist organizations in Pakistan have effectively drawn on powerful existing narratives in presenting and promoting their particular worldview.

- Specifically, the circumstances and arguments surrounding Pakistan's birth gave rise to narratives that violent extremist organizations, including al-Qaeda, have exploited to promote themselves and to gain sympathy.

- For example, extremist strategic communications efforts build on Pakistan's existing narratives to portray events related to Pakistan as proof that there is an ongoing war against Islam.

- As a result, narratives promoted by extremists are making strong headway among the Pakistani people, who are increasingly seeing extremist narratives as an attractive way of explaining the world around them.

- Unlike extremist communications efforts, strategic communications efforts to counter extremism in Pakistan typically do not deploy messages built on Pakistan's narratives.

- An effective counterextremism communications strategy needs to engage Pakistan's narratives and work with those elements of society who are—through their cultural output—challenging extremist visualizations of the world.

- Any strategy toward counterextremism communications in Pakistan should draw on Pakistan's existing narratives and its sense of itself. Indeed, these narratives provide significant opportunities for counterextremists to attack the vision and worldview of groups like al-Qaeda.

- Strategic communications efforts against extremism need to move away from crafting the "right" message from the practitioners' point of view and move toward focusing on emotionally engaging the audience.

• All such efforts should be long-term and Pakistani-led, with the capacity to involve state and private entities.

Introduction

According to scholar Steven Corman, narratives help provide "an alternative way of thinking about the world."[1] Whereas rationality is seen as dependent on facts and logic, narrative rationality depends on an audiences' desire to align their own values to a depiction of an event. In essence, Corman is saying people often believe a version of events because they want to. Counterextremists often overlook this reality and operate on the hope that they will be able to present audiences with the "right" information capable of convincing them that extremist arguments are false. Meanwhile, extremists skillfully exploit existing narratives to provide messages that the intended audiences will want to believe. This is especially true in Pakistan, where extremists have been able to exploit, to great effect, narratives related to the political, social, and historical conditions of Pakistan's birth. As a result, extremist arguments in Pakistan are increasingly seen as aligned with its people's fears, desires, and hopes. At the same time, extremists point to the country in their global messaging as an affirmation of their worldview. In short, Pakistan's narratives have become for extremists an asset as valuable as bombs, bullets, and recruits.

According to Corman's framework, audiences relate to stories, which form narratives and then master narratives, which in turn feed into a rhetorical vision. People buy into this vision because they have an emotional interest in doing so. An approach to counterextremism in Pakistan built on this understanding provides an opportunity for a much more fundamental way of tackling extremism there.

The emotional resonance that extremists manage to generate in their Pakistani audiences has roots in the narratives that were developed and deployed in the establishment of Pakistan and in subsequent historical events. In Pakistan, globally oriented Islamist extremists have a population of 180 million that has been exposed to the main elements of extremist narratives for over six decades. Various extremist actors have exploited this situation to present an extremist rhetorical vision that is perceived as being analogous to the country's self-image. Al-Qaeda, as the world's most ambitious and arguably most successful Islamist extremist organization, has subsumed Pakistan's narratives into its own. In doing so, it is has succeeded in making the country seem like an international poster child for the extremist cause. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's narratives have begun to form Pakistanis' views of the wider world.

An exploration of al-Qaeda's narratives around Pakistan shows that the organization— and its ideological allies—have succeeded in popularizing their rhetorical vision because they understand Pakistani narratives and have developed stories that their intended audience will want to believe. Meanwhile, counterextremism efforts by Pakistan and its external patrons focus on generating messages they believe to be "right" from their own viewpoints. A successful counterextremism strategic communications policy for Pakistan needs to better understand Pakistani narratives and generate stories that people will want to believe and that will feed into a more attractive rhetorical vision for the country. The government in Islamabad and its supporters should trust that the lives and views of ordinary Pakistanis can be called upon to provide the building blocks for an alternative vision for the country.

This report looks at why extremist strategic communications in Pakistan have been so successful and what it would take for the government and its allies to reverse the gains of what is sometimes called "the al-Qaeda worldview." Like all good communications campaigns, extremist messaging is grounded in a reality. In this case, that reality is the views and emotions—and the narratives that articulate them—that were born out of the

establishment and subsequent conduct of the state of Pakistan. This report first examines how transnational Islamist extremists exploited and appropriated Pakistan's narratives and pressed them into the service of their own cause—effectively ideologically outflanking the Pakistani state. It then aims to learn from the extremists' strategy to help nuclear-armed Pakistan extricate itself from what looks like a spiral into ever-worsening violence and political instability that threatens both the state and the wider world.

Al-Qaeda's Master Narratives

Al-Qaeda is the best-known and most ambitious violent Islamist group on the world stage. It does not hold a monopoly on Islamist ideology that promotes violence for religio-political aims. However, it has developed a compelling set of narratives that chime with individuals across the world on a number of levels. The Open Source Center's Master Narrative series has identified al-Qaeda's master narratives to be the following:

- There is a war going on against Islam, and the West is a major enemy.
- Muslim rulers are agents of the West.
- The establishment of Israel is a humiliation and an injustice that Muslims must rectify.
- Muslims have a duty to wage violent jihad in order to achieve justice.
- Self-sacrifice is the route to victory.
- Ending injustice and suffering requires restoring Islamic rule according to al-Qaeda's version of Islamic law.[2]

Pakistan is home to a complex and diverse array of political and religious groups. Alongside al-Qaeda are groups such as the Pakistani Taliban that espouse and carry out acts of violence for similar, yet more localized, aims. Others, such as the right-wing Difa-e-Pakistan alliance,[3] do not take part in violent activities as a group but, broadly speaking, share al-Qaeda's worldview. Some groups have geographically specific aims, such as the ousting of India from the Kashmir region. At the same time, some religious groups are nonpolitical, while some political actors use religious rhetoric to justify their promotion of conflict. Al-Qaeda's greatest success has been to establish its ideology as the premier articulation of Islamist extremist thought. Its success is evident in the way militant organizations and ultraright political groups, which may previously have had only local or regional aims, now see their own struggles as part of al-Qaeda's "war against Islam" narrative. As a result, this wide array of political actors does not necessarily need to coordinate its actions or strategy to give rise to an environment where Pakistani audiences are presented with stories that emotionally resonate and reinforce al-Qaeda's master narratives.

Two recent events—the attack on Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousufzai in October 2012 and the assassination of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer in January 2011[4]—show how narratives around events undertaken by other actors (such as the Taliban or individual gunmen acting for what they describe as an "Islamic cause") can be successfully presented to promote a worldview that agrees with that of al-Qaeda.

The attack on Malala Yousufzai illustrated extremists' ability to both stifle competing points of view and change the contours of public debate to suit their vision. In the days immediately after the shooting, a number of rallies were held in support of Yousufzai. Most crowds numbered no more than a few hundred people,[5] though the largest—organized in Karachi by one of the city's most prominent political parties—attracted tens of thousands.[6] However, as time passed, sympathy for Yousufzai started to give way to suspicions in Pakistan that there was an ulterior motive behind her actions or behind the sympathetic response she had received.[7] At first, the Pakistani Taliban, perturbed by the unusually negative reaction directed toward them, responded by threatening media outlets.[8] The

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heavy-handed response ultimately proved unnecessary. The manner in which the initial reaction gave way to suspicion showed that even an obviously condemnable act could become a test of religious and political loyalty when one side was seen as somehow aligned to Western views. Pakistani journalist Jahanzaib Haque pointed out that widely disseminated SMS and Facebook messages complained that the attack on Yousufzai received a high level of sympathetic media attention, while drone attack victims were ignored.[9] Other messages complained that Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani female scientist imprisoned by U.S. authorities under terrorism-related charges,[10] did not receive the same sort of coverage. One post by a mainstream Pakistani religious network made the claim that, whereas Siddiqui's sympathies lay with Islamic sentiment, Yousufzai's were with U.S. president Barack Obama.[11] The text below images of the two individuals asked readers which of the two they would pick, adding, "It's a matter of faith."[12]

The January 2011 killing of Taseer resulted in a similar reaction, with the criminal nature of the assassination somewhat overshadowed by arguments about loyalty to Islam. The killer, police guard Mumtaz Qadri, was not part of a violent extremist organization, but he justified his actions on the basis of Taseer's support for a Christian woman who was accused of blasphemy. Thousands of Pakistanis signed Facebook pages in honor of Qadri. Crowds gathered in the thousands to shower him with flowers during his initial court hearings.[13] Jamaate Ahle Sunnat Pakistan, considered a moderate religious network, issued a statement celebrating his "bravery, valor and faith."[14] The reactions to Taseer's killing effectively turned the issue of minority rights into a Western—and therefore suspicious and dangerous—concept. In much the same way, the support Yousufzai received from liberal Pakistanis and Western organizations caused many Pakistanis to perceive the issue of female education as part of a foreign-imposed agenda.

Pakistan's Fragile Narrative

The constant expansion of what is considered "anti-Islam" in Pakistan's public discourse, so that what is seen as authentically Islamic more closely resembles an extremist worldview, encourages other actors in Pakistani society to position themselves accordingly. This was well illustrated by the Punjab Assembly in January 2012, when, following the death of three girls in a stampede at a concert, it attempted to ban music events in educational institutions. A member of the assembly, Seemal Kamran, who supported the bill, argued, "Pakistan is an Islamic republic and permitting music concerts to take place in public and private educational institutions is against the morality and ethics of Islamic culture."[15]

Similarly, this approach to public life is manifested by a number of television personalities who attempt to boost ratings by playing to their conception of popular concerns. In January 2012, Maya Khan, a well-known anchor on SAMAA TV, caused controversy by hosting a live television show in which older women ambushed and interrogated young couples meeting in Karachi parks. Khan initially justified her program by claiming her intention was to highlight social problems.[16] In July 2012, Khan caused uproar once more in a broadcast for rival channel ARY when she hosted an on-air conversion of a Pakistani Hindu to Islam.[17]

The death of Pakistan's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, only a year after the country's declaration of independence in 1947, is often cited as the reason behind the enduring ambiguity over Pakistan's original purpose. Jinnah had appealed to Islamic political identity to argue for a separate state for British India's Muslims. However, Islam meant different things to the disparate Muslim communities that made up the massive territory. Jinnah turned an emotional appeal to religious identity into a political platform without delineating what role Islam would play in the new state. Still today, the question hangs over Pakistan as to whether it is meant to be an Islamic nation run according to the rules of Islamic law or a

refuge for Muslims. Quaid-e-Azam (Great Leader), as Jinnah became on Pakistan's creation, bequeathed to his country these competing narratives, which have influenced the decisions of its future leaders and colored its social and political development.

Jinnah's incomplete vision has had a fundamental impact on Pakistan's development. Pakistan's other early supporters—including the national poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal—emphasized the need to purify the future Pakistan from Hindu influences as a prerequisite to fulfilling their vision of a South Asian Muslim cultural and political powerhouse. Pakistan's founders thought Islamic identity would defuse regional and class differences and build a new sense of national social cohesion. But without policies and the resultant state-driven action to build a reality out of the rhetoric, Pakistanis failed to abandon ancient regional and clan-based loyalties and hostilities. Instead, poor governance and rising inequalities saw the emphasis on Islamic purity become a source for division. Shortly after the state's creation, religious-political groups, empowered by the Islam-based narrative, began to agitate for influence over the contours of the state. The Islamist political movement, Jamaat-e-Islami, instigated riots targeting the Ahmadi community, which was seen as heretical by mainstream Islamic orthodoxy.[18] In 1974, Pakistan passed a law declaring Ahmadis to be non-Muslims.[19] Since then, Pakistan's religious ruptures have deepened. Sunni and Shiite divisions have widened, and divisions within the mainstream Sunni community have gone from disagreements over matters of obscure doctrine to increasingly violent confrontations. The religious ruptures have deep roots in the founding justification for the state, which relied fundamentally on exclusion rather than inclusion. Over time, this has *resulted in fewer groups having the privilege of belonging*. As Farzana Shaikh notes, "The state's engagement with sectarianism is neither a recent phenomenon nor one that breaks with any established tradition of state neutrality. It is in part a legacy of the movement for Pakistan."[20]

In later years, the purity Pakistan's founders originally endorsed came to be seen as a path to salvation, and the conduct of society came to be seen as a manifestation of that purity. In this paradigm, Western culture came to be seen as a corrupting influence (supplementing the place of Hinduism) and ultra conservatism became the embodiment of purity.

Although the image promoted by Pakistan's rulers shifted according to the needs of those in power, a wider rhetorical vision emerged that amalgamated present and previous efforts to mold Pakistan's view of itself. A reading of scholars on Pakistan, including Shaikh and Stephen Cohen,[21] shows this vision to include the following master narratives:

- Pakistan was established as a service to Islam.

- Pakistan is beset by non-Muslim enemies who are inimical to worldwide Muslim interests.

- The army not only embodies national pride but also protects the country ideologically.

- Pakistan's destiny is to be an Islamic superpower.

- "Pure" Islam free of corrupting influences (originally Hindu and now Western) is the answer.

Al-Qaeda's Pakistan Narratives

On arriving in Pakistan in late 2009 to manage Karvaan-e-Amn,[22] an initiative to undercut extremist claims to religious legitimacy, the author began a cursory narrative analysis of al-Qaeda's Pakistan messaging. The analysis, which was updated with newly released messages and is current up to late 2012, draws upon cross-referenced lists of al-Qaeda messaging compiled using online resources, including counterterrorism blogs *Jihadology* and *Jihadica*.[23]

From 2003 until the present, al-Qaeda, through its various media entities, has released eighty-five videos and audio messages from its two most senior figures, the late Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. There have been many more instances of direct messaging on English, Arabic, and Urdu Internet forums by al-Qaeda in the form of testimonials from

fighters, local commanders, and ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki.[24] However, for the sake of simplicity—and based on the assumption that these messages largely contained stories that fed into narratives already espoused by al Qaeda's leadership—they were left out of the analysis and referred to only as a cross-check. In any case, the messages of bin Laden and Zawahiri alone are enough to illustrate how well al-Qaeda has absorbed Pakistan's existing narratives into its worldview.

Broken down by main themes, the eighty-five messages released by bin Laden and Zawahiri focus on:

- conflict in Afghanistan;
- conflict in Iraq;
- conflict in Somalia and Ethiopia;
- denouncing other religions (largely Judaism and Christianity);
- denouncing the West, the United States in particular;
- events in Pakistan;
- matters pertaining to al-Qaeda's own activities;
- miscellaneous world events; and
- Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Bin Laden issued thirty-one of the statements before U.S. forces killed him on May 2, 2011 (the remaining statements were made by Zawahiri before and after bin Laden's death). Of bin Laden's messages, the largest number, nine, were denouncements of the West and the United States. There were five messages related to Pakistan, and five related to al-Qaeda's own activities. Four were related to Israeli actions and Palestinian rights. Four of the messages related to Iraq, and another four focused on Afghanistan.

Zawahiri issued fifty-four statements from 2003 to the present. Al-Qaeda's own activities accounted for eleven messages. Nine of his messages concentrated on world events, particularly the Arab uprisings. Eight focused on Palestine and Israel. Seven were on Iraq. Six targeted the West and the United States in particular. Pakistan was featured in a total of five videos.

Pakistan accounted for 16 percent of bin Laden's messages and 9 percent of Zawahiri's. If we take bin Laden and Zawahiri to represent what some analysts have dubbed "al-Qaeda Central," then ten messages on Pakistan out of a total of eighty-five suggests the organization gives the country a relatively high degree of importance. Al-Qaeda documents corroborate this view. For example, a strategic outline titled "Management of Savagery,"[25] which appeared on al-Qaeda-related websites in 2004, identified Pakistan as a territory the organization felt Islamist militants could seize control of and use as a base to expand their power. The document outlines a strategy based on instigating resistance to state control, provoking the state to resort to repression and then assuming control once the area descends into chaos. Alongside Pakistan, the author of the document, Abu Bakr Naji, identifies North Africa, Nigeria, and Jordan as having the right combination of circumstances to facilitate a takeover by al-Qaeda and its allies.

Pakistan, however, offers al-Qaeda an asset that is not available in the North African states, Nigeria, or Jordan. Pakistan as a state has relied on a particular portrayal of Islam to justify its existence as well as its policies. Therefore, it is vulnerable to opponents who can claim to be more "Islamic" than the state, which they can accuse of acting against Islam. By using Islam to justify its existence and actions, Pakistan allows Islamist opponents to claim "un-Islamic" actions to negate the basis of Pakistan's existence. The political situation in Pakistan presents al-Qaeda with ample opportunity to "prove" its point on the world stage. For example, the 2007 siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad was presented as a prime example of two of al-Qaeda's master narratives: Muslim rulers act as agents of the West, and the West is conducting an "anti-Islam crusade."[26]

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The ten Pakistan-related messages produced by bin Laden and Zawahiri were studied in the language in which they were delivered—mostly Arabic but occasionally in English—and then checked against the translations provided by news producers.[27] The emerging narratives were then cross-referenced against messages by other al-Qaeda operatives, in particular those of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, who was the organization's commander in Afghanistan until he was reportedly killed in 2010.

Based on bin Laden and Zawahiri's messages, al-Qaeda's Pakistan narratives present the country as

- an Islamic refuge for persecuted Muslims;
- a hope for a strong Muslim government;
- a bastion against the "anti-Islam crusade";
- a victim of greedy rulers who betray Islam and Pakistan;
- the home of a population that supports and welcomes al-Qaeda.

Comparing al-Qaeda's narratives relating to Pakistan to Pakistan's own narratives suggests that the organization's communications strategy is to appropriate the country's vision for itself while proposing that its enemies (in this case the Pakistani government) are violating the key principles that the state is built upon. At the same time, the charge of hypocrisy and betrayal plays into its own master narratives. In one message addressed to a Pakistani audience, Zawahiri states that by acting as the "hunting dog" of the U.S. "neo-crusaders," the Pakistani military had effectively negated the reason for the state's existence.[28] The claim is a devastating critique designed to emotionally resonate with an audience that has been raised since childhood on a diet of state-sponsored messaging presenting Pakistan as an experiment in the service of Islam and its army as the guardian of that Islamic identity.

Whereas it is true that not all of al-Qaeda's messaging hits home among the Pakistani public—particularly its attacks on the army and the promotion of sectarian strife—its careful positioning among Pakistan's narratives has earned it a significant degree of latitude. In practical application, this is best illustrated when the group—or organizations allied to it—attack military targets. A significant—and perhaps overwhelming response—is for public opinion to focus attention, not on al-Qaeda or Islamist groups in general but on seeing Indian or Western actors at play. Even when al-Qaeda's role in an attack is established and accepted, the narrative of a grander "invisible hand," again Western or Indian actors, quickly skews the public debate. The result for al-Qaeda is a situation where it is free to attack Pakistan's military in the physical and "hearts and minds" domain while being shielded from negative public-opinion blowback. Also, it is conceivable that more aggressive military action against militants may allow al-Qaeda the extra purchase it needs to leverage its ideological critique into a substantial breach between the army and public opinion that it so obviously desires.

It is clear that al-Qaeda's strategy is to exploit Pakistan's existing narratives—in some cases using narratives that have been established over decades through extensive state effort—to gain benefit in the Pakistani arena and on the global battlefield. To do this, al-Qaeda has drawn on its extensive knowledge of Pakistan's narratives and developed others of its own that are frequently deployed in multiple languages aimed at audiences in Pakistan, the West, and the wider Muslim world. In comparison, the communication efforts of counterextremists often ignore Pakistani narratives altogether, preferring instead to push out messages that present a reality from the point of view of the producers rather than from the intended consumers.

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The Role of Pakistan's External Patrons in the Narratives

As the reactions to the attack on Malala Yousufzai illustrated, al-Qaeda does not need to undertake actions itself to promote its worldview or its vision for Pakistan. It has

established a dynamic through the clever manipulation of narratives, creating an environment where other actors promote or reinforce its master narratives. A paradigm has developed as an extension of the "war against Islam" narrative, which encourages the audience to see events through an "us-versus-them" lens, with the "world of Islam" on one side and "the West" on the other. This auto classification by Pakistani audiences has become a powerful dynamic in the country. It creates a certain tolerance of extremism on the Pakistani street, which counterextremists struggle to dispel. For example, schoolgirl Malala Yousufzai, and her cause—female education—were both perceived to be on the Western side of this paradigm. On the other side, "Muslim" causes were portrayed as opposition to drone attacks or concern for terrorism suspects. At the same time, Western support for Malala and concern for her well-being played directly into the "war against Islam" narrative,[29] because they were seen as part of a conspiracy to discredit extremists or to divert attention from the anti-Islam videos produced in the West that had captured popular attention shortly before the attack.[30] As a result, many of those who condemned the attack by the Taliban displayed considerable ambivalence toward its wider implications for Pakistani society.

Extremism is a problem in many parts of the world, but as reactions to the shooting of Malala Yousufzai and the killing of Salman Taseer have shown, the situation in Pakistan is acute. Recent attacks and other less serious incidents suggest that extremist master narratives have begun to affect Pakistan's social identity.

Counterextremism strategic communications efforts by internal and external actors pale against the dynamic that has developed among Pakistani audiences. In order to begin to make a dent in the dominant discourse, it is necessary to start—as the extremists did—with the audience's narratives. Present strategic communication plans do not seem to take this into account.

Extremists' messaging in Pakistan resonates because the intended audiences—on some level—want to believe it. This is a key factor that goes to the heart of counterextremism efforts in general. Often, Western governments base counterextremism activity on the assumption that those who do not understand or misunderstand their actions and intentions are most likely to be drawn to extremism. This assumption leads to another—namely, that poorer audiences are more susceptible to extremist messaging (as they are less likely to be exposed to official Western points of view). Based on these assumptions, counterextremists often focus communications toward illiterate or non-English speaking audiences in Pakistan and elsewhere, while branding Westernized, liberal elites as "natural allies." The prevailing thinking is that audiences that are not exposed to the "right" information merely require more carefully targeted attention in the right languages and formats.

The existence of Westernized, affluent terrorists from Pakistan willing to attack U.S. and Western interests, such as Faisal Shahzad, a naturalized U.S. citizen of Pakistani birth who attempted to bomb Times Square in 2010,[31] illustrate the limitations of this approach. In reality, violent extremists come from a variety of backgrounds. A significant element of the complex and interwoven factors that contribute to their worldviews is a psychological makeup susceptible to a call to arms rooted in certain narratives. Counterextremism efforts have the best chance of success when they engage with those narratives, and they have the greatest chance of failure—or, at worst, run the risk of contributing to extremism—when they remain ignorant of them.

There are a number of similarities between counterextremist communication plans adopted by Western governments both in Pakistan and in other countries where extremists are gaining ground. These similarities frame the prevailing Western thinking around counterextremism method and application. The plans tend to focus on expanding media outreach. This involves "pushing" out the "right" message from a foreign government's point of view to Pakistani media by engaging with local journalists. The engagement tends to be based

on the assumption that negative media coverage is a result of lack of access to information rather than a deliberate function of journalists' desire to produce the stories they feel their audiences (and editors) want. One dominant premise is that if local journalists were better trained, they would be more accurate in their reporting and therefore less susceptible to repeating the conspiracy theories promoted by extremists. Again, this assumes that better access to Western points of view—through language, educational experience, and physical interaction—curbs the inclination to unquestioningly accept extremist messaging. Therefore, a lot of emphasis is laid on journalist training programs and exchange visits to Western countries. Countries like the United States have also instituted a rapid response team tasked with rebutting extremist messages, while communications officials regularly seek to engage in online and social media discussions about politics and extremism.

Public outreach is also used to amplify aid and other assistance programs, especially through local media outlets—often sponsored by external patrons. Media capacity-building activities—setting up new radio stations and television stations—often seem to focus on the ability to disseminate messages before deciding exactly what the intent of those messages should be. Local media proliferation is positive, in general, as it provides more avenues for alternative narratives to be aired and negotiated; however the mere presence of more local media is not an automatically positive outcome. Local media that are intimidated directly or indirectly into tailoring their output around the sensitivities of excessively conservative, conformist, or even extremist actors will not challenge an extremist worldview. In the same vein, local media seen to be overly influenced by foreign paymasters will not have the credibility necessary to successfully challenge extremism. Facilitating the involvement of producers already dealing in narratives that run counter to the prevailing extremist view (for example, filmmakers, musicians, and journalists) is likely to have a greater impact. Radio and television channels would then be required to offer these producers access that would allow them to reach their intended audiences. Although some of this has begun to happen now, this approach needs to be expanded and deepened.

A Plan for Working with Existing Narratives and Promoting New Ones

When there is intent to develop and deploy a narrative, it is usually along the lines of "violent extremists obstruct—and partnership (with Western supporters) promotes—Pakistani aspirations." Examining this narrative alongside the al-Qaeda and Pakistani master narratives previously mentioned would suggest it is likely to run aground against the definition of "Pakistani aspirations." The Pakistani master narratives suggest Pakistanis see their aspirations to be proud citizens of an "Islamic superpower," which the "West" (and the United States in particular) will not allow because it is engaged in an "anti-Islam crusade."

An alternative course of action would be to use the elements of the plan to build resonance around narratives that have a greater chance of obtaining traction. Just as extremists exploit Pakistan's master narratives, counterextremists must identify the narratives that can be used to best construct a potentially alternative rhetorical vision. Scholarly work on narratives and social action make it clear that developing new narratives is by no means quick or easy. As extremists have spent decades exploiting narratives that have deep roots in Pakistan, counterextremists cannot escape the fact that salvaging Pakistan's future will likely require slow and patient effort.

However, there is no reason that extremists should have any advantage in seeking to exploit Pakistan's existing master narratives. Half of Pakistan's population of 180 million people is under twenty years of age and 66 percent are under thirty. By 2030, there will be more people in towns and cities than in rural areas.[32] At the same time, cultural outlooks

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are differentiated on a multitude of religious, racial, regional, vocational, and socioeconomic lines. These social and demographic facts militate against extremist hegemony over the country's narratives. A short visit to Pakistan is sufficient to experience a vast array of narratives in conflict with extremist positions. A successful counterextremism campaign should start by seeking to identify existing narratives that run counter to extremist narratives as well as those that seek to settle unresolved "gaps" in Pakistan's master narratives. The most obvious of these relate to the ambiguity surrounding Pakistan's original intent: Was the country meant to be a refuge for Muslims or a country ruled in accordance with Islamic law? Other important narratives to identify are those that articulate Pakistan's aspirations and its place in the world. It is also important to remember that al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups, suffer a narrative vulnerability themselves. In 2007, Zawahiri announced a "town hall" style online interview, where people were invited to post questions for him to answer.[33] Observers noted that the engagement put Zawahiri on the defensive, as many of the questions related to al-Qaeda's record of killing Muslims.[34]

One example of how narratives can be engaged relates to Pakistan's "Islam is the answer" master narrative. Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups play to this through their own "ending injustice and suffering requires Islamic law" master narrative. The author's experience running strategic communications projects in Pakistan suggests that these narratives resonate because many young Pakistanis are in search of the personal agency to improve their conditions. It is this same emotion that makes Indian rags-to-riches films and youth-focused soft drink commercials that feature young men taking part in extreme sports immensely popular. Campaigns that present young Pakistanis with the chance to "make a difference" through their own actions—instead of merely by protesting—resonate. Campaigns that contain this enabling element find traction with the audience because they demonstrate a successful counternarrative: "I am the answer."

The next step would be to bring these narratives to the public sphere to be debated and negotiated. Although Pakistani broadcast media (radio and television) is seen as the best medium to disseminate messages, there are also drawbacks to it. There exists no reliable data on the popularity of Pakistani television and radio channels. Ratings are largely acknowledged within the industry to be guesstimates at best. Anecdotal evidence suggests Indian media are more popular than domestic fare. However, the growth of Pakistani youth-produced media online as compared with the relatively low Internet penetration rate suggests that there is pent-up demand among young Pakistanis to develop and negotiate their own narratives.[35] This is not to suggest that all—or even the majority—of Pakistani youth are antiextremist. However, allowing them access to expression via mass media increases the supply of narratives in the public sphere that can then be engaged with.

For Pakistani media to fulfill this role, development and reform is necessary. This should be a key element of long-term counterextremism efforts. This can be achieved through concerted political and commercial activity rather than through aid. The Pakistan government, or at least an influential actor within the state, needs to lead an effort to draw up and implement basic reforms around media ownership, content regulation, and ad revenue distribution, with the ultimate aim of attracting foreign investment and developing domestic industries. Despite its relatively small size, Pakistan's broadcast industry is potentially lucrative, with television attracting $200 million in advertising in fiscal year 2011, up nearly 30 percent from the year before.[36] With a growing, largely unserved youth population, and the possibility of tapping the Indian market, there is considerable upside potential. Ideally, foreign involvement would be limited to assistance on international best practice.

A counterextremism campaign should not limit itself to messaging around a single issue (e.g., appreciation for foreign assistance) or rely on a single platform (e.g., a particular brand identity or channel) for dissemination. As Margret Somers notes, people do not incorporate

narratives directly into their thinking. Rather, they are "mediated through the enormous spectrum of social and political institutions and practices that constitute our social world."[37] This suggests that counterextremists will not be able to dictate narratives or completely control how narratives develop or are received. Instead, they need to switch to a tactic of "crowding out" extremists' narratives by "giving air" to already existing counternarratives without seeking to control them totally. If this process is successful, the narratives should appear, be negotiated, and evolve as part of a national conversation on as many platforms as possible, thereby achieving as much presence as possible in the audience's social world.

Key Recommendations and Conclusions

There are a number of key points that those seeking to promote counterextremist narratives need to consider when devising a strategic communications approach to counter extremism in Pakistan:

- It is going to be a long process. The underpinnings that allow extremist narratives to resonate in Pakistan have been established over decades. Challenging those narratives effectively will take time.

- The process has to be Pakistani owned and led. Non-Pakistanis cannot generate narratives for Pakistan. They must be embedded in the values, experiences, and hopes of Pakistanis themselves. Non-Pakistanis will also lack the legitimacy to act effectively.

- Extremism presents itself not as a proponent of a single argument but as a system of values, identity, and worldview. Counterextremism, therefore, needs to identify, promote, and help develop alternatives.

- Counterextremists must not seek to put out the "right" message from their own viewpoints and should focus instead on emotionally engaging the audience.

- External actors must recognize that the narratives that work best may not—in fact, probably will not—echo support for all foreign policies of any particular actor, either in Pakistan or the wider Muslim world. This applies most to countries such as the United States, which, despite their generous aid, continue to be deeply unpopular in Pakistan.

- Working with the right stakeholders will be key. Engaging narratives does not require finding the right gatekeepers as much as it requires relying on engaging and facilitating those who are working with narratives.

The dominance of extremist narratives in Pakistan's social identity is by no means a foregone conclusion. The country suffers from a certain narrative fragility, which is the result of the circumstances of its birth and the policy choices of subsequent leaders. However, its greatest liability in terms of developing a stable self-image has been the lack of opportunity for its varied communities to negotiate and develop narratives about themselves, their place in their country, and their country's place in the world. Extremist groups, al-Qaeda chief among them, have been able to exploit this vulnerability to powerful effect, using Pakistan to make global points while expanding their influence within the country itself. External actors can counter this effect, but they must do so as part of a long-term engagement. This engagement does not necessarily have to be costly, but it will require flexibility, creativity, and an element of trust in Pakistani audiences.

Non-Pakistanis cannot generate narratives for Pakistan. They must be embedded in the values, experiences, and hopes of Pakistanis themselves.

Notes

1. Steven R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication, Countering Violent Extremism, Scientific Methods and Strategies" (Topical Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment and Air Force Research Laboratory Multi Disciplinary White Paper in Support of Counter Terrorism and Counter WMD, September 2011).

2. Master Narratives, Al-Qaeda Master Narratives and Affiliate Case Studies: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Special Report (Open Source Center, Monitor 360, and Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, September 2011).

3. The Difa-e-Pakistan website (www.difaepakistan.com/about-us.html) describes the organization as a collection of forty-plus groups (some of which have been accused of being fronts for banned terrorist outfits) that formed out of a rally in Lahore on December 18, 2011, to protest what it sees as U.S. and Indian "aggression." The organization formed in response to an incident on November 26, 2011, when U.S. forces in Afghanistan fired on two Pakistani border posts, killing up to twenty-four Pakistani soldiers.

4. Malala Yousufzai is a fifteen-year-old Pakistani student and education rights activist from the northern region of Swat. On October 9, 2012, Taliban gunmen shot and seriously wounded her. A spokesman for the group said she was targeted for spreading Western culture. Salmaan Taseer was a Pakistani businessman and politician who served as governor of Punjab until his assassination on January 4, 2011. The assassin said he killed Taseer due to his opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

5. "Rallies, Protest Camps in Support of Malala," *Dawn*, October 12, 2012, http://dawn.com/2012/10/12/rallies-protest-camps-in-support-of-malala/.

6. "Pakistan Rally for Malala Yousufzai Draws Thousands," Associated Press, October 14, 2012, www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/10/14/malala-shooting-pakistan-uae.html.

7. There was scant coverage in the Western press about the ambivalence touching on negativity that developed around the attack on Yousufzai. However, a number of articles in the Pakistani press picked up on it. See, for example, "Malala Attack Fuels Pakistani Conspiracy Theories," *Daily Times,* October 25, 2012, www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2012\10\25\story_25-10-2012_pg7_5.

8. Jon Boone, "Taliban Threaten Journalists over Malala Yousafzai Coverage," *Guardian,* October 15, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/15/taliban-threaten-journalists-malala-yousafzai.

9. Jahanzaib Haque, "We Are Not Malala, We May Be the Taliban," Media Watchdog (blog), Express Tribune, October 15, 2012, http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/14351/we-are-not-malala-we-may-be-the-taliban/.

10. For more information about Aafia Siddiqui, see her biography on Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aafia_Siddiqui.

11. Haque, "We Are Not Malala."

12. Ibid.

13. Karin Brulliard, "As Progressive Pakistani Politician Is Mourned, His Suspected Killer Is Lauded," *Washington Post,* January 5, 2011, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/05/AR2011010500341.html?sid=ST2011010401338.

14. Saeed Shah, "Mainstream Pakistan Religious Organisations Applaud Killing of Salmaan Taseer," *Guardian,* January 5, 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/05/pakistan-religious-organisations-salman-taseer.

15. Abdul Manan, "Punjab Assembly Passes Resolution to Ban 'Objectionable' Concerts," *Express Tribune,* January 24, 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/326425/punjab-assembly-passes-resolution-to-ban-objectionable-concerts/.

16. "Maya Khan Dismisses Criticism," Samaa TV, January 31, 2012, available on YouTube, http://youtu.be/7N6zCbw0mvo.

17. Javeria Nasir, "Controversial Maya Khan: Live Conversion on her Show Stirs Anger," Aaj News, July 27, 2012, www.aaj.tv/2012/07/controversial-maya-khan-live-conversion-on-her-show-stirs-anger/.

18. The Muslim World League, a Saudi-led international Islamic educational, religious, and charitable body founded in 1964, passed a religious ruling in 1974 declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim. The state-run religious establishments of a number of Muslim countries have followed the league's lead, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. See Irshad.org, www.irshad.org/exposed/fatwas/islamonline.php and www.irshad.org/exposed/fatwas/binbaz.php.

19. Pakistani journalist Huma Yusuf, writing for the *New York Times,* said former Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto oversaw the amendment to Pakistan's constitution that declares Ahmadis non-Muslim in order to secure the backing of religious parties. Later governments further curtailed Ahmadi rights, she says. See Huma Yusuf, "Minorities Report," New York Times, December 6, 2012, http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/ahmadis-a-special-target-of-discrimination-in-pakistan/.

20. Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan* (C Hurst & Co. Publishers: London, 2009), 65.

21. Ibid. and Stephen Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Brookings Institution: Washington, DC, 2004).

22. Karvaan-e-Amn was a UK-government supported effort to use the influence of international Islamic scholars to counter the influence of religious extremism in Pakistan. The project ran from 2009 to 2010 and was operated by London-based Radical Middle Way, a British Muslim organization. See http://bbp.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/index.html.

23. Run by Aaron Y. Zelin, Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the blog Jihadology operates as a hub for primary jihadi sources. See http://jihadology.net/about/about-me/. The Jihadica blog is a key source for primary material and analysis on Islamist violent extremism. A number of prominent scholars of Islamic extremist ideology and practice contribute to the blog, including William McCants, extremism analyst, author, and translator of al-Qaeda's strategic outline titled "Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass." See www.jihadica.com/about/

24. Awlaki, an Arab-American who was reported killed by a U.S. drone in September 2011, was responsible for a high volume of al-Qaeda's English language output, including the highly professional Inspire magazine.

25. Abu Bakr Naji, "Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass," trans. William McCants (John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 2006).

26. The Red Mosque Siege, as it became known, took place in July 2007. The siege was a standoff in the capital city Islamabad between militants who ran the mosque and Islamic seminary and Pakistani forces. The operation to end it resulted in 154 deaths. See Aryn Baker, "At Pakistan's Red Mosque, a Return of Islamic Militancy," *Time,* April 17, 2009, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1892254,00.html.

27. It is now commonplace for the media units that produce and disseminate the video messages of al-Qaeda and some other groups to provide English subtitles on the video footage.

28. The 2008 statement by Ayman al Zawahiri titled "A Message from Shaykh Aiman al Zawahiri to the Pakistan Army and the People of Pakistan" is available on YouTube, http://youtu.be/mc7fH6n7QwU. A transcript is available at http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f18/message-sheikh-ayman-al-zawahiri-pakistan-army-15718/.

29. Among other expressions of support, former British prime minister Gordon Brown, in his role as UN special envoy for global education, announced a petition calling on the government of Pakistan to ensure universal female education. See Gordon Brown, "A Unified Global Moment to Honor Malala Yousafzai," *Huffington Post,* November 6, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/gordon-brown/a-unified-global-moment-t_b_2081970.html.

30. Demonstrations broke out in September 2012 in a number of Muslim countries against Innocence of Muslims, a low-budget film mocking the Prophet Mohammad. In Pakistan, thousands of protesters took to the streets in several cities, leading to approximately thirteen deaths and widespread destruction. "Death, Destruction in Pakistan amid Protests Tied to Anti-Islam Film," CNN.com, September 21, 2012, www.cnn.co.uk/2012/09/21/world/anti-islam-film-protests/index.html.

31. Michael Wilson, "Shahzad Gets Life Term for Times Square Bombing Attempt," *New York Times,* October 5, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/10/06/nyregion/06shahzad.html.

32. Pakistan: The Next Generation Report (British Council, November 2009).

33. Ian Black, "Al-Qaida Deputy Goes Online to Justify Attacks," *Guardian*, April 4, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/04/alqaida.

34. Ibid.

35. According to the Internet Service Providers Association of Pakistan (www.ispak.pk), the country has 25 million Internet users as of April 2012. Estimates quoted by the Pakistani press put the population at about 185 million. See "Pakistan's Looking Crises: Increasing Population, Dwindling Resources," *Dawn,* September 27, 2012, http://dawn.com/2012/09/27/pakistans-looming-crises-increasing-population-dwindling-resources/.

36. Kazim Alam, "Despite Rapid Growth Pakistan's Media Remains Financial Lightweight," *Express Tribune,* July 6, 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/404162/despite-rapid-growth-pakistans-media-remains-financial-lightweight/.

37. Margret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (Oct. 1994): 605–649.

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