

Role of Religious Leaders in Mobilizing Communities to Counter Violent Extremism: A Case Study of Dir Valley of Pakistan

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Abstract

Swat and Dir valleys in Pakistan have seen the brunt of post 9/11 violent extremism in the recent past. Because this extremism was generated and exploited by a few religiously motivated violent organizations, a popular perception emerged that all religious leaders of the society were involved in terrorism. Therefore, this research focuses on the role played by those religious leaders who involved themselves in mobilizing local communities against violent extremism. Employing a mixed-method research approach and sequential analysis strategy our data shows that most of the common local religious leaders played positive role in building community resilience to countering violent extremism during the early phase of the War on Terrorism in these two valleys.

Key words: Community Resilience, Dir, Religious Leaders, Swat, Terrorism, Violent Extremism.

Introduction

As religion is one of the significant parts of the lives of people around the world,¹ it is commonly thought that religious extremism develops because of extensive practice of religion. This realization

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has also led policy makers to focus on religious communities, especially religious leaders, to seek ways through which they could be engaged for projects of community resilience towards countering violent extremism.² In the post 9/11 context, for instance, the wave of violent extremism generated a significant interest among policy makers to reach out to local religious community leaders of Swat and Dir valleys.

Given the context, this paper looks at the role of religious leaders in countering violent extremism in Dir valley. The year 2008 saw a surge in extremist activities in Malakand division of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which includes district Swat, Dir Lower, Dir Upper, Chitral, Shangla, and Bunir. The major area of counter-terror military operations was Swat from where these violent extremists expanded their sphere of influence to adjacent valleys including Dir.³ After initial silence, people in Dir later strongly resisted the extremist elements through many measures including building 'local peace committees'.⁴ Exploring the community perception towards countering militancy in Dir, we aim in this paper to find out the specific role of local religious leaders in dealing with this wave of violent extremism.

In 2014, the Pakistani State devised a counter-terrorism scheme, called National Action Plan that suggests measures for countering religious persecution. The plan included registration of religious seminaries and strict actions against sectarianism, however, engaging religious leaders and building community resilience were not taken into consideration in enforcing this plan. Because religious leaders are an important part of civil society with deep roots within communities, this paper fills this gap. It engages with religious leaders to know their contribution in dealing with the challenge of religious militancy in two terror-hit districts of Malakand division—Upper Dir and Lower Dir—in particular and rest of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in general. We argue that extremism and terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular and in the restive bordering region of Pakistan and Afghanistan in general could not be automatically attributed to ideological factor that is religion. While the role of religious circles could not be ignored, more important are those geostrategic factors, including the regional black economy, that become an engine for fomenting violence and eliminating which

could result in ending militarized violence continued in the region since 1979's U.S-led so-called Afghan *Jehad*.

Genealogy of the Local Challenge of Extremism

Following the U.S attack on Afghanistan in 2001, Al-Qaida-led militancy spread to Pakistan's bordering tribal districts of ex-Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Allied with the U.S, Pakistani State's counter-terrorism operations in FATA (FATA was merged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018) could not stop this expansion in terror from the tribal areas to the adjoining Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KP). Two districts suffered the most: Swat and Dir. Leader of the local Taliban group in Swat named Molvi Fazlullah actually belonged to the adjacent Dir district, but have settled in Swat long ago. After becoming Al-Qaida's front man in the region, Fazlullah's followers announced implementation of Islamic Sharia in the twin districts following which the State started military operations in the region in 2008. While the young Fazlullah kept on attracting thousands of followers, inciting them to attack the State installations, encouraging them to kill civilians as well as local government officials in Swat, he could not make a strong headway in the local population in Dir. This lack of support could partly be attributed to historical reasons.

Most of the seven districts of Malakand, including Dir and Swat, had for centuries remained under big empires' rule such as Greeks in 327 BC to later dynasties of Buddhists, Huns and Hindus. However, the influenced of latter Muslim rulers remained the most powerful and permanent one. In 16th century, Yousafzai tribe of Pashtuns, after descending from the mountains of Afghanistan, defeated the local rulers and established their sovereignty from Peshawar up to Swat, Dir and Buner. These rules not just held political power but most of them also carried spiritual connections that they used to reinforce their control over the local population.⁵ This mix of religion and politics, however, was not a guarantee for regional stability. Internecine wars fought between different Khans (leaders) of the same and others tribes marred regional peace giving birth to a contested style of power politics dominated by dynasty rule dependent on outside support for internal stability. For instance, the British colonizers of United India helped Sharif Khan of Dir in 1895 to regain his lost power by defeating the Khans of adjoining Jandool, a local power shift as a result of which Sharif Khan not only became

the first Nawab (nabob) of Dir, but this colonial support stabilized the Nawab's dynasty to resist frequent assaults from Khans in the neighboring Swat valley.⁶ Making instrumental use of the local rulers, the British role in bringing local stability helped them to focus on suppressing anti-colonial resistance in the adjoining Yousafzai tribes up to FATA.

Interestingly, the last rulers of Swat and Dir were diametrically opposite in dealing with their local community and geographical resources. For instance, Shah Jehan Khan ruled the independent state of Dir from 1924 up to early 1960s leading to the inclusion of Dir in Pakistan in 1969. His rule is generally known for depleting local forests because of excessive timber supply, complete ban on education and non-existence of health facilities. Even construction of big houses were not allowed and people were legally restricted to wear only certain color of dress and provide for the rulers' need such as grains, meat, pleasure and services.

In the adjoining Swat, the situation was different. The last Wali (ruler) of Swat is known for his enlightened personality and visionary approach to prepare his people and rule for future progress. Schools were in abundance and health facilities were free. The Wali patronized liberal art, but kept his authoritarian presence by strongly maintaining dynastic politics. Despite these differences, the community in Swat and Dir remained equally vulnerable to religious extremism in a sense that orthodox Sunni believers used mosques and shrines as their strongholds. Religious violence became an intrinsic part of local politics and society following the merger in Pakistan of both the princely states of Swat and Dir in 1969. After the Soviet's intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, a new phase of violence started in the region the flames of which also reached Swat and Dir. Hundreds of local youngsters joined the U.S funded proxy Afghan *Jehad* to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. Once the *Jehad* ended, the same youngsters came back forming *Tahreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadia* (TNSM), demanding Islamic Sharia in the province. They TNSM members lived ever since in the local mountains, controlling the local black economy to raise funds for challenging the local administration and in this way they to became an engine of local extremism. The high water mark of this religious extremism was 2001, the year when President Musharraf of Pakistan joined the U.S alliance in the latter's "war on terror" following which the local

community became the target of the Al-Qaida affiliated Taliban violence and the U.S-sponsored Pakistani State's counter-terrorism's military operations. Despite the authoritarian nature of politico-spiritual rule in Dir, it is pertinent to ask why religious extremism, which devastated the relatively liberal neighborly Swati community, could not found a strong foothold in the Upper and Lower Dir valleys?

Literature Review

This section reviews available and accessible literature on role of religious leaders in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). The review suggests that although the role of religious leaders in CVE has been explored to some extent in Pakistan, nonetheless, the role of religious leaders' remains under researched an area that we explore in the case of Dir Valleys.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND CVE

The USIP Special Report 413 recognizes potential role that religious leaders can play in peace and in conflict. Before discussing the role of religious leaders in CVE, the report thoroughly discusses religion and religious leaders as potential drivers of violent extremism.⁷ Nonetheless, the report asserts that "High levels of religious devotion or observance are poor predictors of support for or participation in violent extremism". The report concludes that 'right-sizing' of the role of religion and religious actors in CVE ought to be the focus of CVE policy.

In his doctoral research focused on role of religious leaders in CVE in Kenya, Hassan⁸ reported that religious leaders took several measures in CVE in Kenya. These measures include advocacy, education and training, convening dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and making forums with government agencies. However, the most significant measure taken by religious leaders to CVE was education and training followed by advocacy and reconciliation. His research also reports on effectiveness of religious leaders in CVE. The researcher measured effectiveness in terms of enhanced cultural identity, peace-building, community cohesion, restoration, and intra-cultural interactions. Hassan reported that religious leaders were found to be significantly effective in peace-building and community cohesion. Nonetheless, they were moderately effective in enhancing cultural identity, restoration, and/or intra-cultural interactions.

Amongst the many challenges faced by religious leaders, the most significant is the lack of trust and cooperation from the state-apparatus. In some communities of Mombasa, Kenya, many *imams* (religious leaders) were asked to identify suspicious activities in terms of violent extremism. When they did so, they lost trust and credibility of the very communities they served. They were considered as government agents.⁹ Neither the state apparatus trusted them nor their own local communities. The state apparatus even considered them as part of the problem and not solution. Religious leaders often receive death threats from both the government agencies and terrorist groups.¹⁰ This demands an assurance of protection from government agencies to religious leaders.

Although comprehensive in many ways, the dissertation of Hassan¹¹ does not include the concept of community resilience and how religious leaders may enhance community resilience to CVE. This leaves room for further research, a blind spot we examine in the context of Pakistan.

Box 2.2: Measures by Religious Leaders for Countering Violent Extremism

- Advocacy
- Education and Training
- Convening Dialogue
- Mediation
- Reconciliation
- Forums with Government Agents

Source: Hassan, M A. *The Role of Religious Leaders in Countering Violent Extremism in Mandera and Mombasa Counties*. Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi, 2017

Box 2.2 summarizes role of religious leaders in CVE in Kenya. This may be used as a basis for exploring the role of religious leaders in CVE in Dir Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Pakistan and Counter Violent Extremism (CVE)

In the context of Pakistan, Abdul Basit¹² suggested that the official policy to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) ought to focus on “individual-focused de-radicalization” and “environment-focused counter-radicalization strategies”. He asserts that increasing religiosity may not be the right indicator to measure violent

extremism in Pakistani context. He criticizes the religious based analysis of violent extremism in Pakistan and considers them 'flawed' and 'misleading' to counter violent extremism. He also suggests understanding of religious, ethnic, and identity dynamics of violent extremism in Pakistan. Criticizing the current de-radicalization focused policy of the state, he considers community approach, a combination of state and society response, "to resist the appeal of militant ideologies".

The theological support to CVE in Pakistan was first provided by Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri when he issued a *Fatawa* (edict) against Terrorism and Suicide bombing in December 2010.¹³ Although other voices were also raised against terrorism but the loudest and clear theological decree on terrorism in Pakistan and elsewhere was provided by Qadri (2009). His edict provides a detailed pronouncement against terrorism and suicide bombing in Islam against Muslims and Non-Muslims alike from all major schools of thought in Muslim history. He decreed in the light of Quran and Sunnah that terrorism and suicide bombing are unlawful. He also declares today's terrorist as *Kharijites*, historically a particular radical and violent segment within Muslim population. After denouncing terrorism and suicide bombing, he provides peaceful ways of conflict resolution in today's world. His book was the one of the loudest voice that came against violent extremism at the right time. Before this book, religious scholars would usually refrain from providing a clear stance while he denounced terrorism without any 'ifs' and 'buts'. This decree was given a huge coverage by print and electronic media globally. Indeed, it was this *Fatawa* that was used for de-radicalization programs in Pakistan.

Another stronger voice to CVE came in the shape of Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), a conglomeration of comparatively liberal religious groups in Pakistan. Formed in 2009, the SIC openly criticized and denounced TTP and conducted anti-TTP rallies in cities around Pakistan.¹⁴ It also received backlashes from the extremist TTP. Attempts were made by TTP to kill the leaders of Sunni Ittehad Council. Some of the leaders were killed in suicide bombings.¹⁵

Religion is the recurring theme in almost all major discourses of extremism in Pakistan. Sial asserts the need of religious scholars, mainly Muslims, to counter radicalization and VE.¹⁶ Identifying the

ideological confusion over radicalization and terrorism, Sial presents findings from PIPS survey to assert importance of religion and religious scholars in the society. He highly recommends exposure of religious scholars to observe and understand state systems. Although Sial provided many good recommendations from state and civil society perspectives to religious scholars, his paper misses to mention how religious scholars can build community resilience towards CVE.¹⁷

Some academics have tried to explore the rise of violent movements in Swat and Dir valley in the 9/11 context. Aziz asserts that the bond between government and the people was weakened owing to failure of the government to serve the area people.¹⁸ Overall, he blames weak dispensation of justice, poverty and weak governance for the rise of violent extremism in Swat valley and its subsequent spread to Dir valley. Malik also concludes that the vacuum created by lack of governance generated support for the extremist movements in Swat.¹⁹ Anwar also asserts the delayed awakening of the government to violent movement as a cause of its spread in the valley.²⁰ While these discourses hold the State and political leadership responsible for poor governance, there is a need for shifting our inquiry toward religious circles who are generally always hold for fomenting the Taliban emergence in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This paper is part of a larger mixed method study whereby a survey of community perception was conducted regarding role of religious leaders in building community resilience to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE). This paper looks into the qualitative data in details and discusses the relevant quantitative results as well. The data was collected from two terror-hit districts of Dir valley: Lower Dir and Upper Dir. Because both the districts temporarily suffered owing to the bloody wave of terrorism in Pakistan, a relative peace later allowed the researchers to personally visit the area for observation and collection of data.

Conceptual Framework

The following framework given in Box 3.1 guided collection of data in this study.

Box 3.1 Conceptual Framework

Variables	Measures
Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advocacy against VE 2. Education of community members (Muqtadi) to CVE 3. Convening dialogues to CVE 4. Mediation to resolve disputes of community members 5. Engaged at different forums of government.

Source: Based on the works of Ellis and Abidi²¹

Nature of Respondent

Anyone whose minimum age was 30 and who was the resident of Dir valley was considered a potential research participant. This was influenced by the fact that the episode of violent extremism occurred in Dir valley during 2nd half of the 1st decade of 21st Century. We needed someone who was adult enough at that time (at least 18 years of age or above). Therefore, anyone with the age 30 and above was the criterion for inclusion of research participant. The respondents were divided into the nine (09) categories including 1) school teachers, 2) shopkeepers, 3) university teachers, 4) hospital staff, 5) labourers, 6) politicians, 7) transporters (Drivers/conductors), 8) NGO workers, and 9) religious leaders (imams). The reason this categorization was made was to diversify the nature of respondents. These categories represent people from almost all walk of life of Dir valley. This gave a perspective from almost all walks of life respondents to this research.

Sampling Design and Procedure

As far as the sample size is concerned, a minimum of 10 respondents from each of the categories mentioned above were included in this research. This way, a total of 180 (90+90) respondents at minimum participated in this study. Since the sampling method was non-probability, therefore, the researchers were not required to look for detailed randomization. The reason each category involves a minimum of 10 respondents was to achieve a uniform frequency of respondents.

Data collection also included in-depth interviews and focused group discussions; therefore it was decided to conduct at least 01 interview per day along with collecting data through questionnaires. In this way, a total of 22 interviews were conducted. However, for

simplicity of mathematical calculation purposes, the figure was rounded to 20 respondents (mostly *imams*).

Furthermore, 02 focused group discussions were also conducted: one in lower Dir and one in upper Dir. The reason was that in a personalized interview, the participant may not open-up fully. However, in an FGD, participants receive more democratic environment and open-up more actively.

Participants Identification, Mobilization, and Participation

As far as the identification of the participants is concerned, this job was performed by two graduate students for this study. Those students were included in this study as gatekeepers who could contact the potential respondents for this study. Furthermore, they were also domiciled and residents of Dir Lower and Dir Upper respectively. Being native, they were in a better position to identify, mobilize, and take informed consent of the participants to participate in this study.

Ethical and Social Consideration

The research team clearly explained the research aims and objectives to the research participants and no deception was carried out in data collection phase. Informed written consent was taken from research participant. Personal Information of the respondents is not disclosed to anyone. Research participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research; they had the right to not answer any particular questions. Questions were asked in local language (Pashto/Urdu) so that there is no or little room for misunderstanding questions. Further, since the researchers know the local language very well, there was no issue in translating questions from English to Urdu or Pashto.

Results and Discussion

Examining the local perspective—of religious leaders—on the spread of violent extremism from Swat to Dir valley, we found results quite contrary to common public perception in Pakistan. While it is generally believed that the Taliban militancy is the outcome of all out support from religious leaders in different parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, we found that this was not the case in Dir valley's of Malakand division. As mentioned before, the division is traditionally known for the rise of militant Islamist organization *Tahreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadia* (TNSM), which was led by

Sufi Muhammad of Maidan area in Dir. However, the local religious leaders associated the rise of this movement not just with regional geo-strategic interests such as the U.S funded *Jehad* in Afghanistan but also with politics of the mainstream political parties. According to them, the division has historically been a stronghold of the Jamat-e-Islami (JI), a mainstream right wing political party now headed by Siraj-ul-Haq. In early 90s, the then progressive ruling party, Pakistan People's (JI) Party, which was headed by Benazir Bhutto in the Federation and by Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, initiated a political struggle against JI in Malakand division. In doing so, they promoted the TNSM to weaken the JI.

One respondent said in an FGD:

Initially, TNSM was supported in order to weaken Jumat-e-Islami. TNSM was even supported back then by AftabSherpao of PPP, who was the Chief Minister of the then NWFP, in order to weaken JI's strength in Dir and whole of Malakand.

Although the religious movement of TNSM did little to weaken the far right JI, it contributed to militancy in the region. One respondent said:

Sufi Muhammad, the leader of TNSM, kept the movement non-violent till his last breath. His son-in-law, Mullah Fazlullah, brought the movement to Swat where it got violent. So we say that TNSM provide soft ground for a more violent Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement of Swat. TNSM's non-violent posture might be one reason why TTP couldn't succeed here in Dir valley.

Nonetheless, TNSM is considered as a movement that provided a level playing field to violence in Malakand division including Dir valley, a wave of extremism the local religious leaders claimed to have discouraged at the community level.

Role of Religious Leaders in CVE

Box 3.1 Conceptual Framework shows different measures taken by religious leaders to counter violent extremism. At least five major measures were identified in the literature and used in this study including 1) advocacy against VE, 2) education of community members (*Muqtadi*)²² to CVE, 3) convening dialogues to CVE, 4) mediation to resolve disputes of community members, and 5) engaged at different forums of government.

In terms of advocacy against VE, there was a mix response from the respondents. The data isn't significantly skewed to either side. However, as a whole, the findings suggest that the religious leaders did conduct advocacy against violent extremism.

Similarly, in terms of educating the community members (*Muqtadis*) against VE, the data shows that the religious leaders performed somewhat positive roles they would describe such acts as '*fasad*' during their Friday sermons.

In terms of convening dialogues to counter VE, the role of religious leaders seem to be insignificant as majority of the respondents, 44.4% (n=79) said that they don't know if any such dialogue was convened by their religious leaders.

A more significant role was performed by the religious leaders in terms of mediating to resolve disputes amongst community members. This is inherently included in the overall role-set of religious leaders in Dir valley to resolve minor disputes amongst the community members. However, here too the dispute resolution power lies more with '*ulema*' and lesser with '*imam*'.

Finally, whether religious leaders were engaged at different forums also received mixed responses. Engagement of religious leaders at some level was also conducted. Nonetheless, there was a very weak engagement of religious leaders on various forums to CVE.

Effects of Measures Taken by Religious Leaders to CVE

The next question that we were interested to answer was whether the measures taken by the religious leaders to counter violent extremism had any effect. This variable was measured through four (04) items including 1) enhancing *Dirwal* identity, 2) enhancing Muslim identity, 3) enhancing community cohesion, and 4) mistrust of community members. As a whole, our data shows that all these measures had slightly positive impact on CVE. They contributed significantly in enhancing local identity. Further, religious leaders also contributed significantly in enhancing Muslim identity amongst community members. Furthermore, religious leaders enhanced social cohesion amongst community members. However, measures taken by religious leaders to counter violent extremism also generated some mistrust in the community members against the religious leaders.

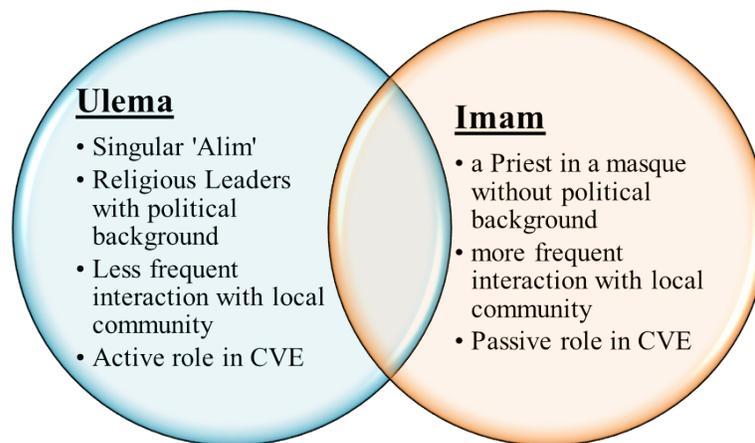
This study did not record silence as a measure to counter violent extremism. However, the overall slightly neutral position on five

positive indicators shows that the respondents' perception regarding an active role of religious leaders was lower. This finding came during in-depth interviews that most of the religious leaders remained silent during the entire period.

Ulema and Imam: Active and Passive contributors to CVE in Dir

Qualitative probe into the data through in-depth interviews revealed that there were two categories of religious leaders: *Imam Masjid* and *Alim* (singular of Ulama). *Imam Masjid* was only a priest and had no or very little political affiliation. An *Imam Masjid* would come for the prayers five times a day and would address the Friday sermons. As a principle, an *Imam Masjid* is financially very weak. They are sometimes referred to as *Mullah*. Such religious leaders are in every far-flung village and neighbourhood. However, in their Friday sermons and other gatherings, they wouldn't talk about the prevailing VE movement in Dir valley.

Fig 01: Types of Religious Leaders



Second category of religious leaders was those that may be called *Ulema*. *Ulema* were those who not only lead five time prayers and Friday sermons in some major mosques in Urban areas but they had political affiliations as well. Usually, *Ulema* have a financially sound position. They have political affiliation with either Jamat-e-Islami (JI), Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam (Jul), or any other national or provincial political party. *Ulemas* took an active part in CVE measures while *Imam Masjid* mostly kept indifference.

One respondent said:

Overall, religious leaders in our area kept quite during violent extremist period. They wouldn't even talk about the violent extremist events taking place in the valley or near valley. They would just talk about the routine matters (munz awdas masaly ba ye koly).

When inquired about the reason for this seemingly indifference, one respondent said:

Those religious leaders who would talk about VE would get calls from either security forces or the TTP.

This corresponds to the quantitative findings in Table 04 and also to the study by Hassan.²³

Another respondent in an FGD said:

Time and again, religious leaders would receive threats from both sides. Police stations would call the religious leaders and would try to keep them on their side. One day, the Taliban came to stay for a night in a Masque. In the morning, when the Imam came for morning prayers, the Taliban had gone and there was no one in the Masque. He announced on the Masque's loud speaker and said 'hagha murdar antali di. Jumat ta razai' (those bastard had gone and now come for prayers). When he announced that, the Taliban came back and arrested him. They said, 'we are going to slaughter you'. However, the local elders intervened and saved him from the Taliban. So, yes. Religious leaders received threats more from the Taliban and few from the government side (Interview_2 in Lower Dir).

Furthermore, another respondent said in an FGD that:

Those religious leaders, who had some political background, they would talk more against the VE movement while those who were local imams kept quite.

Regarding the role of JI, the most widespread political party in Dir valley, one respondent said:

JI as a political and religious party didn't perform its proper role. They didn't guide people against the more radical TNSM and even more violent TTP in Swat and Dir.

However, another local political leader, who had a deeper understanding of the issue, shared his perspective on the role of religious leaders and said:

Our religious leaders played a very positive role. Some were emotional and did initially support the movement. And they would

say that a new system would come and would start from this area. The Sharia system will come like the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). We would tell them to be careful as this movement includes different people with different intentions. It includes those who are tenants in someone's house and are working in someone's orchard and they are looking for an opportunity to occupy the house and orchard for themselves. It includes those who are indeed against our country and they got an opportunity to openly speak their hearts against our country. It includes those who were wanted by police in different cases but got recruited by TTP and now became commanders of the new religious army. Some of the members of TTP indeed join them for purely religious purpose. But wise religious leaders would ask them to not take guns. Not to create fasad (Anarchy). There is a proper way to do things. So if we look at religious leaders of our area, they played a good role.

Religious leaders receiving "threats from both sides" identify something larger than the reducing this extremism to the local community. While common people as well as national and international expert in the rest of Pakistan generally attributed the TTP driven violent wave of extremism to religious activism or radicalization, the local religious leaders in Dir thought otherwise. Here, we see some guidance from the religious leaders to those youth who were willing to join the VE movement. In a nutshell, religious leaders had different categories. Majority of the religious leaders either kept quite or took measures to CVE. This corresponds to the study conducted by Hassan in Kenya where religious leaders initially supported the government in the violent conflict.²⁴ However, the opposing side got tough against religious leaders there. Therefore, the religious leaders in any violent conflict, be it Kenya or Dir, are in an awkward situation where they need to be highly wise to deal with warring factions. This local understanding of regional violence is also compatible with the history of the region. Because of the liberal history of the Swat's ruling regime, the Swati people trusted their State more than people in Dir. They, therefore, could not perceive the nature of the TTP threat. But people in Dir, on the other hand, had long experience of living under a tyrant rule and, therefore, understood their religious leaders' silence once they found that *threat is coming "from both sides."* In other words, the Pakistani State's foreign policy interest in Afghanistan has always benefited

the Taliban and the TNSM because these non-state elements, when under pressure from the State, move across the border to launch their violent extremist activities in Afghanistan.

Local Identity and Counter Violent Extremism (CVE)

Religious leaders did build upon such sentiments to counter violent extremism, but the history of local ethnic relationship also played a significant role in CVE efforts in Dir valley. For example, one respondent said:

In our area, there is a saying about Swatis (residents of Swat) that ‘Swatyan Fasadyan’ meaning Swatis are feud lovers. This local difference between Dirojis and Swatis kept us awake and vigilant during VE period. People of Dir were more aware and had greater knowledge of the VE movement and they knew that this is not a just or Islamic movement rather it is Fasad (invalid feud).

This historical form of ethnic tension and its stereotypical reflection in the local psyche reinforced religious leaders efforts to create community resilience toward CVE.

Another respondent said:

The CVE momentum in Dir was more energized through local Diroji values than anything else. I was sitting with a Swati in Islamabad who was talking against the security and intelligence agencies that they brought this disaster on Swatis. I said to him, did they provide you guns? Did they provide you trainings? He replied in negation. Then I said, if there were no germs of Fasad in Swatis then this wouldn’t have happened to them.

These narrations from the respondent indicate that the local *Diroji* identity played a significant role in countering local violent extremism.

Local Peace Committees and Religious Leaders

Based on this religious and ethnic consciousness, residents in Dir formed Local Peace Committees (LPC)—also called Village Defense Committees (VDC)—in the jurisdiction of every police station. The leader of the LPC would be either a politically elected district mayor called *Nazim* or other influential local figure including religious leaders. But the cost of such measures was quite high. One of the respondents said:

Indeed LPCs were established on police station level. However, most of the leaders of the local peace committees were killed by unknown men, mostly the TTP Talibs.

The threats of violence continued but they could not stop the local people from resisting the Taliban's extremism. Keeping low profile, the local people avoided openly confronting the Taliban for lack of official support. The primary data shows that the district officials had very weak connection with the local religious and political leaders. On the contrary the State officials were blamed for supporting the Taliban. One respondent said:

Overall, civil government ignored the religious leaders. They didn't provide them patronage. However, the DC office and civil government would have frequent contact with the Taliban. There are many incidences where people saw Taliban with DC officials.

Another respondent complained that:

Our political leaders were often on their own in talking to the Taliban to spare the civilians and let peace prevail locally. They held Jirgas to caution the local district officials about the Taliban subversive activities. However, the district government provided little support to the local people in this regard.

While strategic silence was used as a method to minimize the Taliban-inflicted damages, the local political and religious leaders did not hesitate from taking practical measures in the face violent extremism.

Conclusion

Religious extremism is a complicated phenomenon in Pakistan, especially in the Pashtun dominated bordering areas with Afghanistan. A long history of the absence of cordial relationship between the two States has not only promoted regional extremism, which, then, confronts the local population with existential problems such as wholesale violence, extremism and displacement. But the civil society's lack of trust over the State has also provided room for non-state actors such as TTP and TNSM to impose extremism upon the local populations, turning the entire region into a hotbed of militancy. This is what we found in the respondents' claims that they felt "threats from both sides" that means the lack of trust in the State as well as fear from violent extremist forces that ruled the bordering regions' resource through creating anarchy. In view of the debate on PCVE in this paper, we need to connect the role of the State to causes of broader-religious-inspired violent extremism. This will help to know that not just in Dir or Swat, but Pakistan as a whole is faced

with the challenge of non-State elements using religion as a ploy to foment violent extremism.

In this context, the role of local opinion leaders deriving identity from religion is very important. As Box 3.1 of conceptual framework shows that the major data revolved around measures taken by religious leaders to CVE in Dir valley. Such efforts were measured through a five variables scale vis advocacy, education, dialogue, mediation, and engagement with government. The data showed that religious leaders did perform well in terms of advocacy against violent extremism of the Taliban type. In terms of educating the community members against the Taliban violence, the data also shows that the religious leaders performed well at the grassroots level. However, the data shows little role of religious leaders in convening dialogues to prepare the community people against religious extremism emerging from the Swat and engulfing the Dir valleys. A more significant role was performed in mediating the disputes amongst community members. Nonetheless, the data shows that though there was very little engagement at different forums of the government, the local religious leaders' contribution to community resilience was noteworthy despite the lack of academic attention to this aspect of violent extremism in Northwestern Pakistan.

Recommendations

- a) We recommend that scholars/academics should avoid opaque ideological concepts such as “Islamophobia” or “religious extremism” “Islamic terrorism” because such overarching expressions are too ideological in nature and, therefore, undermine geo-strategic or geo-economic factors leading to larger confrontation/conflicts.
- b) We recommend a more active engagement of the religious leaders by the government at different forums to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE).
- c) We recommend religious leaders to educate community members during VE period.
- d) We recommend political leaders to have active contacts with the *Imam Masjid*.
- e) We recommend religious leaders to build upon local identities to counter violent extremism.

Notes

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