

Impact of Violent Extremism on Pakistani Youth

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ABSTRACT

Events following the 9/11 attack have fundamentally changed the political landscape, especially for the Muslim World. A new wave of violent extremism emerged, altering the structure of global world order. Pakistan has suffered impending consequences following the ‘global war on terror’. Currently, Pakistan has been ranked at number five in the Global Terrorism Index of 2017. The magnitude of Pakistan’s loss is not limited to its economic or political instability, but it has crept into the very fabric of the Pakistani society. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the impact of violent extremism on Pakistani youth.

Key Words: **Violent Extremism, 9/11, Pakistani Youth.**

Introduction

Pakistan has one of the fastest growing populations in the world, with 60% comprising of the youth (Ali, 2016). The ‘global war on terror’ has exposed the youth of Pakistan to everlasting consequences of violent extremism. The aim of the paper is not to dwell on the root-causes of extremism as an ample amount of literature and research exists in that context, but to underline the grey area regarding the lack of research in the aftereffect of violent extremism. Less work has been done in the aftereffects of violent extremism, especially, in the countries where they do the most damage, for example, Pakistan. Identifying and measuring the impact of violent extremism is difficult due to the lack of literature and research which deals with the subject matter specifically. Most of the research and literature concerning extremism and terrorism is primarily focused on: 1) the root causes or the drivers of extremism or religious fundamentalism; 2) terrorist incidents; 3) Islamic extremism. Due to the lack of scholarship available in the subject the research study looks at the more general literature on the impact of conflict on youth to offer a more comprehensive assessment of the literature available.

The definition of Violent Extremism holds various manifestation, how we define violent extremism helps to determine how we see and address it. ‘Violent extremism’ is usually considered to be a synonym term for ‘terrorism’. The act of ‘Violent extremism’ does not hold an official definition by the United Nations or the European Union. The FBI defines violent extremism as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals” (FBI, 2017) . The USAID situates the act of violent extremism as “speaking a variety of languages,

born of many races and ethnic groups, and belonging to diverse religions continue to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize people — especially young people — to engage in terrorist acts” (USAID, 2016). Although the USAID definition is broad, the act of violent extremism is applied much narrowly to Islamic violent organisation, while many other extremist organisation working for their own ulterior or ideological motives are ignored. According to the research this paper argues violent extremism in Pakistan exists in the form of sectarianism, Islamization and Talibanization. Other forms of extremism manifest in nationalist-separatist insurgency in Balochistan. Hence, there is a consistency in the extreme ideology propagated by various terrorist organizations for their own ulterior motives that can be in the form of ideology, political or economic gains.

Forms of impact of extremism

Violent extremism tends to have a deep-rooted impact on the youth in Pakistan. The youth formulates the most vibrant yet the most vulnerable part of our society; making the youth most exposed to the impact of violent extremism. Therefore, this contribution will draw on the importance of studying the impact of violent extremism on youth in-depth in Pakistan especially the areas hard hit by violent extremism. The paper examines the impact of violence extremism on youth and the impending consequences it holds for the future of Pakistan. Through this, it will highlight the importance of preventing violent extremism (CVE) programmes specifically targeted for the youth. The security community has struggled with the problem of how to measure the impact of violent extremism. What complicates the process is the challenge of identifying the key variables that examine the impact of violent extremism on youth. The paper has identified the key variables that can be used to measure the impact of violent extremism on youth. Psychological, socio-cultural, economic, educational, political and contemporary security issues are studied as key variables in analysing the impact of violent of extremism on youth. The research covers Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Federally Administrated Tribal Area. The research design and instrument is to measure youth opinion about the impact of violent extremism on their lives. Structured/semi-structured interviews, focused group and survey questionnaires were conducted to analyse the short-term and long-term impact of violent extremism on youth. A comprehensive questionnaire was disseminated among 80 stakeholder. Structured/semi-structured interviews were also carefully designed to gauge the opinion of youth on violent extremism. The research also conducted focused group discussion from December 2017 to February 2018. The report examines the interaction between youth and violent extremism.

Identification of the youth

The definition of youth differs from country to country. This research has identified youth age bracket ranging from 18 to 30-years-old. According to the population census 35% of KP population is comprised of active youth. The presence of a huge bulk of youth in KP would mean there is an urgent need to address the growing extremist narrative and rehabilitate the youth with jobs, food security, increased social vibrancy, and political participation.

Sampling and presentation of results

The research used non probability quota sampling across the whole KP and FATA for survey questionnaire. 20 in-depth interviews were carried out from December 2017 to February 2018. The participants were chosen on the basis of their education level, age, sex and district with 45% of participants comprising of females. The interviews were held in Islamabad. Around 100 questionnaires were disseminated on the basis of quota sampling. The researcher could not ensure a complete gender balance due to social and cultural constraints. Hence, a random selection procedure was used to select the participants of the survey questionnaires. There was a 40:60 ratio of female to male participation.

The impact of violent extremism on mental health

In the case of Pakistan, the youth has been exposed to direct and indirect impact of violent extremism. Youth experiences the impact of violent extremism in multiple of ways, 1) proximal contact (being present in a city or a specific location under terrorist attack or losing a loved one in an attack); 2) constant exposure to a climate of threat, insecurity (concern about the safety of oneself, friends and family); 3) exposure of violent extremism through media-based contact. All form of these contacts place youth at the heightened risk of the development of psychopathology, depression, anxiety, mood disorder and most importantly post-traumatic disorder (PTSD) (Pfefferbaum, et.al, 2000). PTSD is the most common of mental clinical diagnosis following exposure to a traumatic event, political violence or war/conflict (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

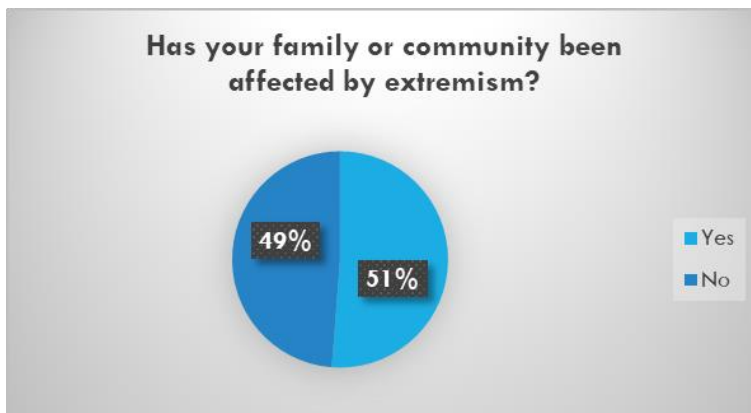
Moreover, other indirect factors can also take a toll on mental health of youth. Lack of opportunities, unemployment, cultural relevant syndromes, difficulties of daily lives. With a stagnant unemployment rate in Pakistan since 2015 at 5.9% there is a sense of frustration and mental disengagement among the youth (Tradingeconomics, 2018).

In the survey questionnaire the respondents were asked regarding the impact of violent extremism on their daily lives. To our surprise, every young individual who took part in the survey agreed that the violent extremism is present in their society. As postulated below in the diagram, 100 per cent of the individuals reported in witnessing various manifestation of VE.



Moreover, interviews conducted to gauge the opinion and youth, a large portion of young individuals from Mardan reported experiencing stress, anxiety or more broadly PTSD in the face of a violent act. Similarly, Arooj a girl from the Peshawar University stated she nearly lost her life in a bomb blast; “I just left the Hayatabad market and after a few minutes a suicide blast took place in the area”- a survivor of a Hayatabad 15 February, 2017 attack.

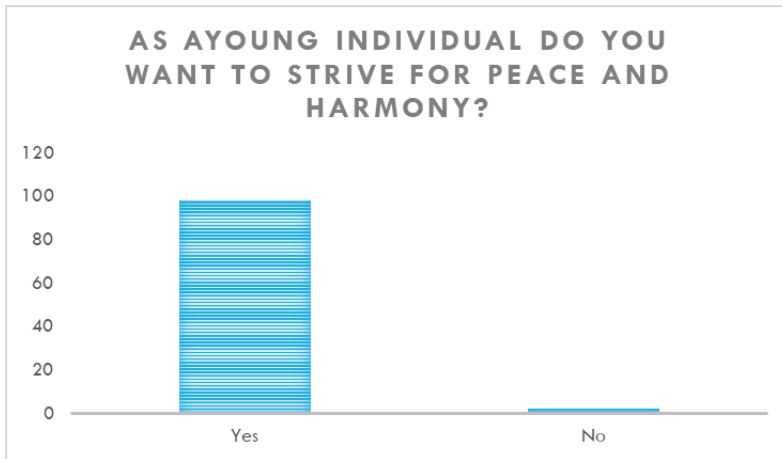
Emerging empirical literature suggests the profound impact on the mental health of a young individual after losing their loved in a terrorist attack. Wali Saad from Peshawar, reported loss of family member in Army public school massacre.



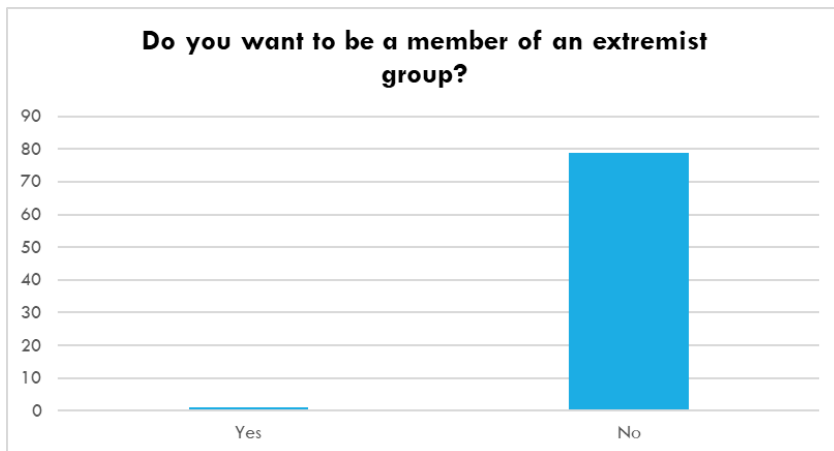
Moreover, wide evidence suggests despite witnessing a traumatic event like exposure to violent extremism or conflicts, many young people do not develop adverse psychological conditions. In fact, they emerge as the change makers or peacebuilders of tomorrow, this is characterized as ‘resilience’. Resilience by definition means the development of positive traits within individuals who were previously exposed to adversities or faced challenging circumstances (Masten, et.al, 1990). The graph below shows the 98% of young individuals in areas

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severally affected by VE stated that they want to work towards peace and harmony. In an interview conducted with a young university student of Peshawar University stated, “If the of youth in Pakistan gets united under the banner of peace and tolerance, we can easily defeat extremism”. Hence, a more ecological understanding of the impact of violent extremism is necessary for successful policy interventions for psychological well-being.



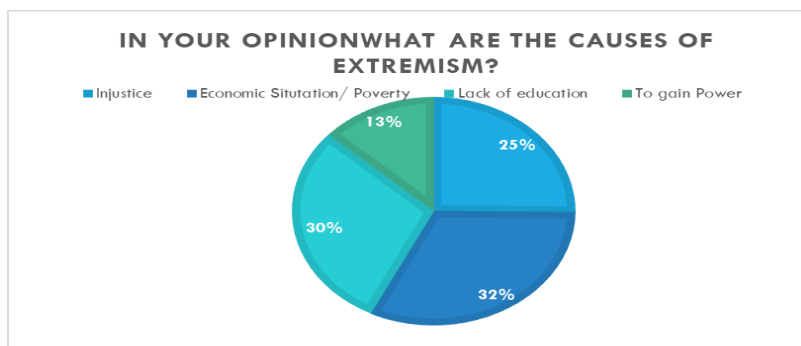
Whereas, when asked if they wanted to join extremist group 98% stated they do not want to, while only 2 % were in favour. Thus, showing the resilience and eagerness of youth to fight violent extremism and work towards the building a peaceful Pakistan.



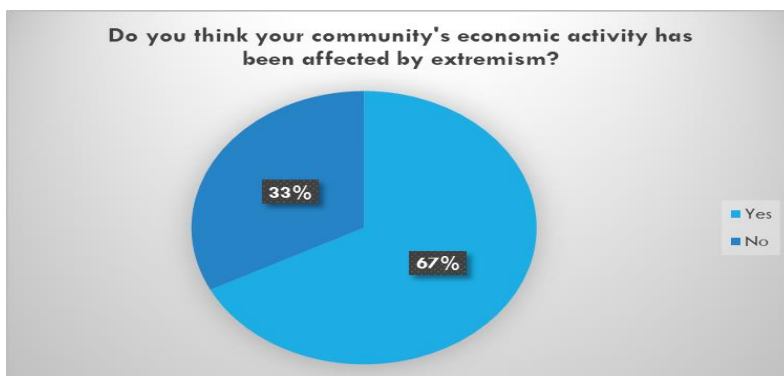
The impact of violent extremism on education and employment

Pakistan's economic growth has always remained volatile, however, in the face of rising extremism the economic opportunities have sharply declined in the country. Making it difficult to gain employment. These conflicts have severely affected the socio-economic structure of Pakistan. As extremist activities continue to rise in Pakistan, economic development and unemployment is one of the prime concerns of youth. Islamabad sustained \$123.13 billion losses on account of the war against terrorism since 9/11 (Rana, 2017). Thus, the unemployment rate has decreased from 6.2 percent in 2012-13 to 5.9 percent in 2014-15 (Finance Ministry, 2017).

In response to the question regarding the causes of extremism to be lack of education or economic situation 25% and 32% voted respectively. Showcasing the direct link between the deteriorating economic activity in face of VE and the negative impact it has on the future of youth.

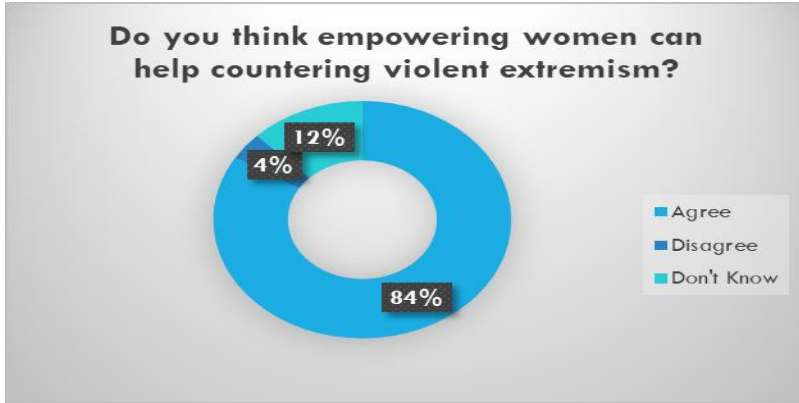


During the survey, 67% of youth from KP and FATA reported the negative impact of violent extremism on youth, while only 33% stated that their community or families economic activity has not suffered. Muhammad Irshad Ali, young boy from Mardan stated, "due to the lack of security in Mardan, we often feel as if the economic activity of Mardan has slowed down and offices have shifted to Peshawar or other bigger city".

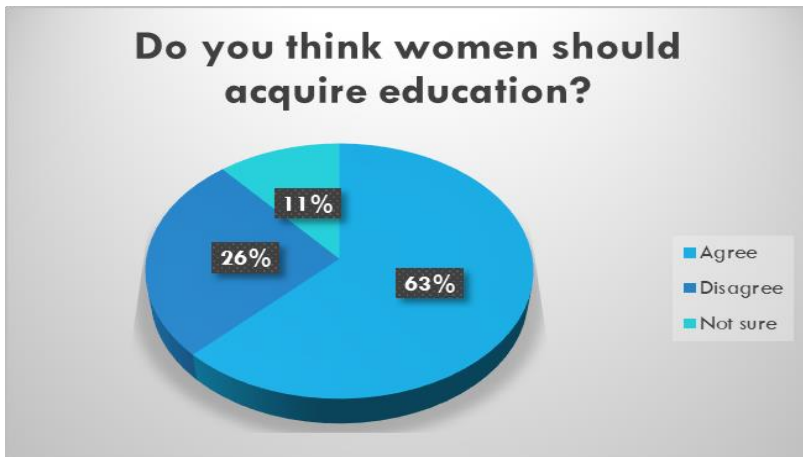


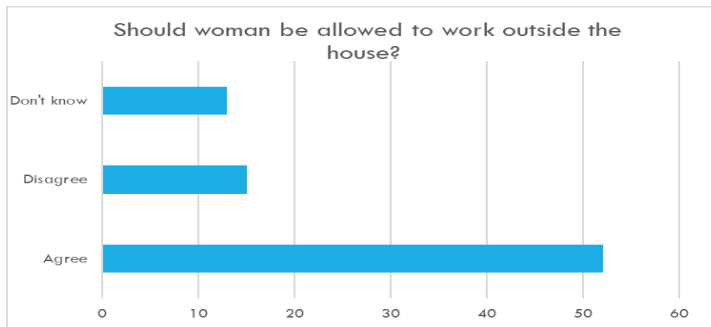
The impact of violent extremism on gender issues

Most of youth adversely impacted by violent extremism believes gender empowerment plays a critical in curbing violent extremism. When asked ‘Do you think empowering women can countering violent extremism?’ A vast majority of 84% responded yes while only 12% said ‘don’t know’ and 4% disagreed. As shown below:



Similarly, when asked ‘Do you think women should acquire education?’ 63% agreed while 26% disagreed and 11 % was unsure. One respondent said, “As daughter of an uneducated woman I have realised the need to be educated for my betterment”.





Conclusion

Pakistan's youth today, is coming of age surrounded by extremism, hate speech, intolerance and suicide attacks. Describing and studying the implications of growing violent extremism for economic social prospects of young people is essential. Moreover, placing emphasis on the physical, physiological well-being of youth is critical. Today's youth is tomorrow's future. They are the future leaders, policy makers and the keys to a stronger economy of Pakistan. Hence, analysing the impact of violent extremism on youth and ways of addressing it is important for stability and progress of Pakistan.

In the wake of 9/11 attack extremist narrative has been on the rise in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Like most of the countries facing violent conflicts, Pakistan also has the highest proportion of youth and thus is disproportionately affected by violent extremism. 'The war on terror' has taken a deadly grip on the country, having critical consequences for the youth. An environment of extremism and fear have taken a toll on the Pashtun way of life, adversely affecting everyone irrespective of their age. However, the youth constitutes to be the most vulnerable part of our society and the failure of the government to provide youth with possibilities to translate their energy towards positive activities, has resulted in young people looking for other sources of purpose and most importantly sense of belonging. In the wake of such discrepancies, violent extremist groups often try to fill the void by offering the disillusioned and disfranchised youth guidance and purpose. The resulting socio-political landscape has created breeding grounds for terrorist organisation recruitment. Young boys in particular fall prey to the greedy ulterior motives of extremist groups, germinating extremist tendencies. The growing extremist indoctrination has sharply increased hate speech and extremist thinking in KP and FATA. Therefore, there is a dire need to understand the impact of violent extremism on youth, for the future of Pakistan and to devise effective national counter-terrorism policy.

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