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## Actionable Community Engagement Strategies for Government Officers: PVE in Context

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### ABSTRACT

Despite being in limelight for nearly a decade, the discourse on PVE is overly vague and largely speculative. Although the non-kinetic predisposition of PVE outlines a boundary of sorts, there is confusion over the specificity of roles that need to be played out by key actors' such as government officials. This article sets out to identify actionable strategies that will not only help rationalize the otherwise abstract contours of PVE but will also enable government officials to develop and carry out targeted PVE interventions in a community that is either vulnerable to or a victim of violent extremism. Even though the proposed strategies are applicable to the Pakistani context, they can adequately be modified to fit other contexts as well. The PVE strategies being proposed in this article are by no means exhaustive, since not only is there room for more potential strategies but the specificity of the context could verily necessitate an entirely new set of strategies.

**Keywords:** PVE, CVE, Non-Kinetic, Community Engagement, Strategies, Terrorism, Violent Extremism, Root Causes, Government, Pakistan.

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### INTRODUCTION

Active engagement with government officers is at the heart of all Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) initiatives. In fact, any PVE undertaking cannot be successful if it does not adequately account for official government involvement. Alongside concerned civil societies and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), government officers are an indispensable part of the PVE triad. Although the specifics and exact role of government officials vary from place to place and context to context, their significance and centrality to PVE however is largely undisputed.

Owing to the context-specific nature of PVE in general, it is crucial to discern and determine the role of government officers in light of the respective indigenous realities of the concerned community. Though understandably some strategies can find common ground and transcend context, it is crucial still to prioritize indigeneity and deal with each case separately. This is why even though this article identifies broad actionable strategies for government officials, which although applicable to other contexts, is primarily tailored according to the Violent Extremism (VE) landscape of Pakistan.

Pakistan, of late, has shown a lot of interest in PVE. Despite this interest however, the country has largely fallen short of actually realizing the goals and ambitions of the PVE discourse. While part of it is owing to the country's unhealthy obsession with War on Terror (WOT) and Counter Terrorism (CT) discourse, the failure, in part, can also be attributed to lack of understanding regarding PVE and what it fundamentally entails. This confusion has created numerous problems for government officials in particular, who are not sure about how to quite proceed with PVE. This article sets out to address part of this confusion by proposing eight actionable community engagement strategies for government officials in the context of PVE.

At the very outset, it is worth keeping in mind that community engagement is central to any PVE undertaking, getting it right therefore would go a long way in ultimately realizing the overall goals and ambitions of PVE.

Having directly been involved in drafting official PVE policies and implementation mechanisms, the author has firsthand experience of working closely with senior bureaucracy and policymakers in the country, especially in the context of CT and PVE. In fact, the motivation for this article is primarily stemming from working in mainstream government bureaucracy for over two years. The ensuing discussion, in spite of being intellectually and academically grounded, therefore also reflects the personal experience and impressions of the author.

Though specific to the context of Pakistan, the list of proposed strategies is far from exhaustive and can be modified to fit any particular community or society. Before discussing the strategies however, it crucial to first briefly engage with the history and background of PVE in Pakistan.

### **Brief History and Background of PVE**

Pakistan has been a frontline state in the so-called 'War On Terror' for well over two decades. Despite being engaged in it for a quarter of a century, the country has up until now largely failed to uproot terrorism and violent extremism from the country. In fact, both terrorism and VE have constantly been on the rise and have managed to produce various new faces and tangents. Part of the reason for this failure is owing to near total reliance on kinetic and military options alone. While the country's policymaking mechanism is partially to be blamed for this failure, a major reason however is in fact the contours and confines of the WOT paradigm itself.

Product of the extremely narrow, uncompromising and rigid standpoint following 9/11 attacks, the WOT paradigm with its CT discourse, leaves little to no

room for non-kinetic solutions and alternatives. As the failures in the war on terror began to mount, the scholarly community began to criticize the credibility and feasibility of the WOT thesis (See e.g., Crenshaw, 2008; Jackson, 2016). As opposed to the one-dimensional and militaristic approach of WOT paradigm, a strong case was made for flexible, reflexive and non-kinetic alternatives that would not simply deal with terrorism and violent extremism in isolation but instead would seek to engage with their fundamental drivers and root causes (See e.g., Crenshaw, 2012).

The product of this profound and purposeful alternative came in the form of Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) discourse. PVE, in many ways, represents a significant paradigm shift that seeks to do away with not just the glaring shortcomings but also inherent biases and prejudices of the WOT paradigm. Despite its visible advantages, many countries, including Pakistan, have not made any meaningful transition to the PVE discourse.

Caught and perhaps in some ways even trapped by the WOT and CT paradigm, Pakistan's kneejerk response to terrorism and VE has been an impulsive resort to more kinetics and military operations. Perhaps more alarmingly, even though the country has shown an increasing interest in PVE and has also officially adopted a National Prevention of Violent Extremism Policy (NPVEP, 2025), strict adherence to the WOT paradigm has prevented Pakistan from fully appreciating the contours and demands of PVE. Most notable perhaps, is the confusion surrounding the role of government officials in any proposed PVE undertaking.

This article seeks to fill this gap and address the confusion regarding effective PVE strategies that can be taken up by government officials for proactively engaging a vulnerable community. It proposes eight actionable strategies, which on the one hand will help government officials devise targeted non-kinetic interventions in the community and on the other hand allow us to visualize the seemingly abstract contours of the PVE discourse.

Owing to the indigenous and context-specific nature of PVE in general, the proposed strategies are applicable primarily to the Pakistani context. With that being said, the strategies can however, be modified and altered according to the respective context and demands of other communities struggling with VE.

## **Actionable Community Engagement Strategies for Government Officials**

### **1. Rationalizing Good Governance**

Nearly everyone engaged in PVE, governance, and development, highlight the importance of good governance, yet despite this consensus, good governance is an extremely elusive term (Gisselquist, 2012).

The notion of good governance is understandably complex since governance itself "is a multi-faceted concept encompassing all aspects of the exercise of authority through formal and informal institutions in the management of the resource endowment of a state". The quality of governance is thus "determined by the impact of this exercise of power on the quality of life enjoyed by its citizens" (Huther & Shah, 2005, p. 2). In other words, good governance is the effective utilization of a country's resources coupled with near perfect execution by state authority, measured

subsequently by the level of satisfaction and quality of life enjoyed by the citizens.

Lapses in governance has frequently been linked to radicalization and violent extremism, especially in developing and underdeveloped parts of the world that either have dictatorships or flawed democracies. There is in fact overwhelming consensus in the academic community that poor governance and mismanagement directly contributes to VE and terrorism. As Yahia Zoubir (2017) notes, “The Maghreb region suffers from authoritarianism and bad governance; these two features, coupled with political exclusion, mismanagement of the economy, marginalization and repression have contributed to radicalization” (p. 2).

Similarly, Cortright et al. (2011) point out that the UN admits that the way to counter terrorism and violent extremism “is not only to enhance security...but to adopt preventive measures such as resolving conflict, ending foreign occupation, overcoming oppression, eradicating poverty, and promoting sustainable economic development and good governance” (p. 255). In a discussion on the importance of governance in combating terrorism and violent extremism in Mali, Gerald Krieger (2022) observes that “The overarching challenges and problems of terrorist groups and violence are made worse by Western intentions focusing on military solutions, which undermine the importance of good governance” (p. 23).

In addition to the conventional understanding outlined in this paper, good governance also necessitates that any prevailing grievances and feelings of marginalization by any segment of society are duly addressed and accounted for. VE takes hold of societies that feel marginalized and excluded from mainstream politics, governance and social activities, especially when there is visible imparity between different communities within a single political unit. It is important therefore that such communities see themselves as a vital and integral part of the wider society or nation. For this to materialize, government representatives, among other initiatives, must generate venues and opportunities for interaction between the affected community and the rest of the country. For instance, in the context of Pakistan, civil and district administration in remote regions of Balochistan could initiate interactive exercises with locals from Punjab to not only address feelings of marginalization but also help dispel some of the stereotypes and suspicions that keep the people of the two provinces apart. In addition to creating positive interactions, the exercise will additionally help in identifying relative gaps and lapses in governance in the affected communities.

Thus, in spite of the confusion surrounding the notion of good governance and what it fundamentally entails, it is possible to both quantify its operationalization and measure its subsequent impact on any concerned society or community. Rationalization of good governance and its measurement is the responsibility of the concerned government officials. As officially designated executioners of government policy, it is the job of government officers to record and keep an eye out for any potential lapses and provide timely assessment and feedback on key determinants of good governance like feelings of relative deprivation, levels of satisfaction and quality of life enjoyed by members of any given community. For good governance to

materialize, the officials, among other things, will have to institute and improve basic living facilities and delivery services to the affected community, a point that will be discussed in detail under the next strategy.

Whether the objective is to launch some new good governance program or to simply measure the impact of some previous initiative, community engagement will always be at the heart of any such undertaking. In fact, community engagement and good governance go hand in hand as the two both reinforce and complement each other.

It is worth bearing in mind that good governance can never work if, it is devised in a vacuum, its practices are developed in isolation or if it is simply imported from some foreign success story. In order to be effective and successful, good governance practices, as a rule, must either emerge organically or be constructed carefully and gradually through fully engaging the concerned community. Developing countries like Pakistan have a strong tendency to rely almost entirely on borrowed ideas, imported approaches and so-called best international practices, without actually taking account of ground realities, community preferences and underlying socio-political realities. Such alien and foreign strategies are often unable to resonate with the target audience and as a result, fail to have the desired impact.

Good governance, if understood and executed correctly, creates desirable and sustainable processes that prioritize the needs and demands of the community. Such communities are then subsequently far less susceptible to the vices of terrorism and violent extremism. While civil servants and government officials can certainly learn from and apply best international practices and successful foreign stories in this regard, good governance ultimately demands tailored responses that cater primarily and specifically to the targeted needs of a certain community at any given time. Government officials must therefore come up with innovative and novel good governance practices that both align with and account for local values and sensitivities of the community.

## **2- Instituting and Improving Basic Facilities and Delivery Services**

A continuation and in many ways a sub-component of good governance is instituting and improving access to basic facilities and delivery service to communities that are struggling with VE and terrorism. Provisions such as Education, healthcare, sanitation and access to clean drinking water, constitute basic fundamental needs of any community or society. Lack of such adequate facilities could easily trigger anxiety and lead to grievances and a sense of deprivation, which in turn act as a leading driver of terrorism and violent extremism. As Daniel Koehler (2024) notes, “It is not unreasonable to expect that individuals who harbor grievances based on unjust and unfair treatment depriving them of important goods and values might eventually resort to deviance, crime or radicalize to political violence to satisfy their desires and mitigate their frustration” (p. 964).

It is frequently theorized in the discourse that if the government fails to provide basic services of health, education, sanitation and welfare, then that not only leads to grievances and discontent but it also creates space for parallel structures that

seek to gain recognition and legitimacy by exploiting the neglect and failure of the concerned government functionaries. A terrorist or a violent extremist organization can, for instance, provide or promise to provide these facilities and as a result increase and build their support base. As Harriet Allan et al. (2015) note, “In a number of contexts, extremist groups have proven able to deliver services. The impact is two-fold: extremist groups gain support and legitimacy while the government and state structures lose credibility and support” (p. 6).

Communities vulnerable to VE and terrorism in Pakistan, such as the ones living in the Newly Merged Tribal Districts (NMDs) of the KP province or the remote areas of the Balochistan province have a severe shortage of basic facilities. This shortage in turn gives rise to a strong sense of neglect and deprivation, which goes on to fuel grievances and discontent among members of the affected community. A discontented and aggrieved community is subsequently ripe for exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist organizations.

Government officers working in the field must diligently identify the gaps and limitations of basic delivery services in the community through regular checks and inspections. In this regard, they must work closely with the concerned civil society and representatives of the community and conduct periodic assessment of the available resources and infrastructure necessary for providing all basic facilities.

Inadequacies, discrepancies, and shortcomings must either be addressed swiftly or reported to concerned authorities for prompt action. The concerned government departments, such as the planning and development commissions and ministries, must then allocate the required number of resources, material or otherwise, to ensure the availability and sustainability of all necessary basic facilities. In order to ensure not just effective service delivery but also its timely accountability, the concerned community must also be educated about the provision of Right to Information or RTI.

Under Article 19-A of the Constitution, RTI is a fundamental right of every Pakistani citizen. The provision of RTI grants citizens of Pakistan the right to demand access to information over matters of public importance. RTI not only enhances transparencies and accountability but in principle, also leads to ‘improvement of public service delivery’ (Human Rights and Minorities Affairs Department, 2025). On the one hand, RTI allows citizens to hold public officials accountable, and on the other hand it significantly helps the government in identifying gaps and weaknesses, especially in matters of public service. Effective use of RTI is therefore clearly necessary for citizen engagement in the context of PVE. Government officials that are tasked with engaging the community, must both ensure active use of the RTI provision and timely disposal of any pending RTI requests.

It is worth bearing in mind that one of the primary purposes of government functionaries, especially those involved in district administration, is to ensure the availability of basic facilities and delivery services. Failure to provide and ensure these facilities therefore not only increases the vulnerability of a community to terrorism and violent extremism but also undermines and compromises the professional

responsibility and integrity of all concerned officials.

### **3- Establishing Liaison between Media and Community**

In an age, widely characterized as the age of communication, media plays an indispensable role. This indispensable role must be extended to communities that are either victims of or threatened directly by violent extremism. A close working relation between media and affected communities will not only help us better understand the plight and problems of the concerned communities, but will effectively also allow us to establish an early warning system, which is necessary for identifying and mitigating problematic extremist behavior before it captures the necessary space to become dangerous or violent.

In this vein, creating a structured mechanism for periodic meetings between citizens and media can be extremely beneficial. As potential linchpin between the community and media, the concerned government officials can play a crucial facilitatory role through establishing viable and sustainable channels of communication between media and the community. In Pakistan, at the moment, there are no such communicative mechanisms, as a result of which majority of the people are ignorant about the grievances, plight and difficulties of the communities affected by VE and terrorism. This oversight and neglect have unfortunately only aggravated the problems as the communities feel further ignored and marginalized.

In addition to the increasing demands of a structured communicative mechanism in the modern communication age, it is crucial to understand that media is also vital for dissemination and propagation of narratives necessary for countering and preventing violent extremism. The Internet, social media in particular, is rife with violent extremist and hateful content, which if not timely refuted or moderated, could easily become pervasive and insidious. As Wilner and Rigato (2017) point out, “The utilization of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have made the preaching of hate and the selling of extremist ideologies both simpler and much more perverse” (p. 241).

A powerful and contextually relevant narrative can however help dispel misconceptions, redress stereotypes and dismiss vile propaganda by VE and terrorist organizations seeking to gain recruits and sympathizers from a target community. However, it is worth keeping in mind that without media and relevant communication channels, narratives can never have the desired impact, regardless of how appealing and powerful they are. A healthy and close relationship between media and a vulnerable community, facilitated duly by concerned government officials, can ensure that narratives to counter and prevent VE are disseminated and propagated in an orderly and timely fashion.

However, prior to creating a communicative mechanism between the community and media, it will first be necessary to adequately train and sensitize the journalistic community as per the stipulations of the PVE discourse. In this vein, the authorities could utilize the “The Peace Journalism (PJ) model, originally proposed by John Galtung as ...[an] organizing principle for both scholarly research and practical application” (Lynch & Freear, 2024, p. 397).

Typically contrasted with the “violence-oriented, elite-oriented, propaganda-oriented [and] victory-oriented” war journalism, “peace journalism is conflict (and peace)-oriented, people-oriented, truth-oriented [and] solution-oriented” (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013, p. 1042). The PJ model, in other words, primarily seeks to expose and explore the structural causes of violence. Owing to its pacifist orientation, the PJ model highly supplements and compliments the PVE discourse.

The PJ model can be imparted through professional training programs and courses for all concerned editors and reporters. The efficacy of the model will ultimately depend upon “galvanizing journalistic agency to change the content of reporting” (Lynch & Freear, 2024, p. 397), so as to align it with the non-kinetic contours of the PVE discourse. Given its peace, people, truth and solution-oriented approach, the PJ model “could be seen as supplying some actual or prospective political efficacy in respect of grievances, and therefore as a community resource to safeguard against the messaging of violent extremism” (p. 401).

It is worth bearing in mind however that the PJ model, despite its visible advantages, faces a number of challenges in the developing and the underdeveloped countries. The biggest hurdle to its effective utilization is the lack of journalistic freedom, excessive control over media, agenda setting and dangerous work environment. As Shabir Hussain (2022) points out “the main obstacles to Peace Journalism in the non-Western world are lack of media freedom, threats to life and security, unfavorable socio-cultural conditions and lack of resources for journalists” (p. 116).

Governments serious about PVE and community engagement must therefore first provide the necessary journalistic freedom to create space for effective utilization of the PJ model.

With the power to shape public perception and influence an audience through effective dissemination and propagation of narratives, media’s role in community engagement specifically and PVE generally, simply cannot be overstated. Although specific to context and dependent on varying factors, the role of media, insofar as PVE and community engagement is concerned, typically ranges from creating awareness regarding PVE and dismantling prevailing myths that discourage communities from endorsing, encouraging or actively participating in VE. To accomplish this, media, among other things, can showcase successful PVE programs and initiatives in other communities, share powerful stories of unity and resilience, and promote indigenous cultures, values and sensitivities that resonate strongly with the target community. Awareness regarding signs of radicalization, early warning mechanisms, and the importance of community vigilance can also be raised through specially designed media campaigns. Furthermore, media can also play a crucial role in prevention of the spread of unwarranted fears and misinformation that terrorists and violent extremists typically exploit to further their nefarious agendas.

Promoting such positive messages and powerful alternate narratives that counter violent extremism and terrorist propaganda can only truly be achieved through effective collaboration between government officials, media, and the

concerned communities (Kruglanski et al., 2018).

While establishing and managing a collaboration between the government, media and target community was fairly difficult and challenging in the past, however, recent technological advancements have created tools capable of disseminating information, attaining feedback and effectively engaging large-scale audiences. Desired audience can in fact be reached easily by something as simple as an online ad campaign or even an SMS or WhatsApp message, provided it is circulated correctly with the right content and message. Wider audiences, particularly the youth, can most effectively be engaged through the use of online platforms. Gathering feedback, engaging with citizens and disseminating information can be done successfully if government officials help create interactive websites, social media pages and mobile applications with the support of media outlets (Counter Extremism Project, 2023).

Thus, in order to effectively engage a community in the context of PVE, government must make use of the technological advancements in mediums of communication to create a working liaison between media and the vulnerable community.

#### **4- Inculcating Critical Thinking and Developing Cognitive Skills**

Illiteracy and lack of adequate education is one of the leading drivers of violent extremism and terrorism. In a fairly comprehensive study on *The Role of Education in the Prevention of Radicalization and violent Extremism*, Sas et al. (2020) identify three major limitations in the education sector that in one way or another contribute to violent extremism. These three factors are, “The unequal access to education, the poor quality of education and the relationship between education and employment” (p. 9).

All the factors identified by Sas et al. (2020), appear prominently in communities that are susceptible to VE and terrorism, which makes it all the more necessary for government officials tasked with PVE to redress these shortcomings in the education domain. Among other things, government officials must ensure that all children are enrolled in schools without exception. This may be a tall order for communities that are economically backward or religiously conservative.

Where economically backward communities are usually reluctant to send their children to schools owing to their reliance on child labor, religiously conservative communities tend to oppose education over some conflated or misunderstood doctrinal grounds. Both kinds of communities severely hinder prospects of their children’s education, which subsequently increases the vulnerability of youth to the vices of radicalization and violent extremism.

Since government officials are mandated by the state to ensure universal access to basic education, it is effectively their responsibility to address both the economic and religious considerations that prevent communities from sending their children to schools. To accomplish this, they will have to work closely with both the communities and civil society organizations.

Addressing factors rooted in economy or religion demand time, patience and expertise. It is therefore necessary that where on the one hand government officials

dedicate a considerable amount of time and effort, there at the same time they must also utilize necessary expertise that can help facilitate the interaction with the community. In this vein, the government officials can significantly benefit from working closely with civil society organizations (CSOs) that not only usually have the necessary skill set but typically also enjoy confidence and support of the community. As Cortright et al. (2011) have noted that civil society groups can significantly help to “prevent violent extremism by pursuing their core mission of right-based development” (p. 255) and that “The positive work of civil society to alleviate social and political marginalization helps to reduce grievances that can lead to political violence” (p. 238). The discourse on PVE, in other words, necessitates that the government takes the CSOs on board.

While education is in and of itself a standout factor, it is not always owing to lack of education that people resort to terrorism and violent extremism. There is ample evidence that terrorism and violent extremism is often committed by highly educated people (See e.g., Korotayev et al., 2019). Some analysts have gone so far as to even suggest that “Educated terrorists cause the most damage and are the most dangerous” (Tinta, 2023, p. 4274).

Thus, if it is not education per se, then it is perhaps the content and subject matter of what is being taught that is problematic. Lately and understandably therefore, the discourse has shifted towards examining the curriculum of schools and colleges, especially in places that spawn VE and terrorism. There is an increasing consensus that education must be designed in a way that nurtures cognitive skills of students and encourages them to think critically (See e.g., Amit and Kafy, 2022).

Strong cognitive ability and critical thinking allows students to weigh the moral, social, political and economic implications of their actions and better manage their anger, frustration, annoyance and other negative thoughts and impulses. They also encourage students to explore pacifist, non-violent and peaceful means to address their otherwise genuine concerns and grievances. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, they allow students to acknowledge their personal preferences and biases and strongly encourage them to respect the personal choices and biases of others.

In other words, cognitive skills and critical thinking help develop lifelong virtues of tolerance, resilience and compassion. Once equipped with such qualities, the students would become immune to any kind of negative vices propagated by violent extremist and terrorist organizations. As Ghosh et al. (2017) note, “students must see the relevance of what they learn, and be able to develop a critical understanding of the world. To a great extent, this will preempt some of the triggers that push and pull them on to the dangerous path toward radicalization” (p. 120).

Developing strong cognitive skills and nurturing critical thinking however neither happens overnight nor can it be accomplished by some unqualified layperson. Instead, they demand patience, a long-term commitment and employment of formal expertise. Government officers tasked with the responsibility of PVE must therefore understand the necessary demands and dictates of developing cognitive skills and

nurturing critical thinking. In addition to working closely with the community and civil societies, they will also have to both identify and employ relevant expertise in the field that can help train local teachers and community leaders.

To sum up, it is necessary that government officials understand that raising literacy rates alone does not solve the problem of terrorist recruitment and violent extremism, as is the prevailing conventional wisdom in countries like Pakistan. In order to find a meaningful and lasting solution, they will have to help the communities develop strong cognitive skills and critical thinking.

### **5- Mitigating Identity Crisis**

A misplaced sense or perception of identity is one of the leading drivers of terrorism and violent extremism. While it may affect anyone, it is especially the youth that typically falls prey to the vices stemming from an unhealthy and tumultuous pursuit of identity. As Anders Strindberg (2020) notes, “Young adults or adolescents who are in the process of identity formation more generally, experiencing both uncertainty and anxiety about “who they are,” may be more sensitive to radicalizing impressions and influences than adults” (p. 40). It is in fact frequently theorized in the academic discourse that a “search for a meaningful identity” is “a fundamental reason that some youth radicalize to violence” (Ellis and Abdi, 2017, p. 293). If left unattended or not catered to in time, identity crisis (especially among the youth) therefore has an inherent propensity to spiral out of control and damage the very fabric of the society that it fails to respect or relate to.

Lack of a meaningful and purposeful identity can in fact actively prompt and encourage the struggling youth to search for one, which could potentially land them in the arms of violent extremist groups who are keen to exploit this vulnerability to their advantage. Terrorist and extremist groups promise a bogus sense of purpose, belonging and power, which the vulnerable youth find both attractive and alluring. As Ellis & Abdi (2017) aptly note that violent radicalization involves “...both the lure of an identity that promises power and significance, but also can grow out of the absence of a positive sense of social identity” (p. 293).

Issues of identity crisis, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, are indeed very serious and profound. As Bina Shah (2014) notes, “the one characteristic that all Pakistanis hold in common is an identity crisis” (p. 3). However, instead of taking the issue head on and dealing with it directly, it is customarily disregarded or simply brushed aside. Authorities in Pakistan, historically have a tendency to forcefully project some presumed national identity on both youth and communities that are otherwise grappling with a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Such “superficial markers of identity handed out to Pakistanis at birth often prove inadequate” (Shah, 2014, p. 3) and inadvertently lead to a profound crisis that paves way for radicalization and violent extremism.

Although quest for a sense of purpose and meaning in life is a universally shared attribute that all human beings intrinsically grapple with, the quest however has a tendency to aggravate when a community is already struggling with some profound and unresolved identity crisis. This is usually the case when the indigenous

values, customs and traditions of a community are being suppressed, substituted or bypassed. As noted elsewhere, “Without these values or defining characteristics [local customs, traditions and belief-systems], a community loses the right to be called a community, which could inadvertently trigger identity crisis or worse, an existential dilemma” (Gillani, 2025, p. 741).

Thus, the indigenous values, customs and traditions of any community not only allow it to tackle profound existential questions but also significantly help mitigate one of the leading drivers of violent extremism, namely identity crisis. To prevent a community from falling prey to the vices stemming from some outstanding identity crisis, it is therefore necessary to protect, preserve and promote indigenous values, customs and traditions of the community, especially the communities that are vulnerable or have fallen prey to VE and terrorism.

For effective PVE initiatives and community engagement, it is thus imperative to engage directly with matters of identity. Taking measures to strengthen “social identity within one’s ethnic or religious group” could be an important first step to “building community resilience to violent extremism” (Ellis and Abdi, 2017, p. 293). Additionally, government officers can take necessary steps in the field to directly promote indigenous values, customs and traditions. One way to accomplish that is through active protection, promotion and propagation of the local heritage and culture of the concerned community.

Communities that experience sporadic episodes of terrorism and VE are usually conservative, inward looking and highly protective of their culture, values, and heritage. More often than not, their identity crisis stems from a real or presumed threat to their longstanding values and customs. In such communities, PVE initiatives often cause friction as they are seen as foreign and alien values that are being imposed forcefully on the society. To gain trust of such communities, it is imperative to demonstrate the inclusive nature of PVE by actively protecting and promoting their culture, values and heritage.

It is also worth keeping in mind that promotion of indigenous heritage and culture, in addition to mitigating identity crisis, also serves the purpose of creating broader societal awareness that helps displace and dislodge the prevailing stereotypes about communities that are otherwise first and foremost victims of terrorism and violent extremism.

## **6- Promoting Sports and Recreational Activities**

Sports, recreation and healthy entertainment are an extremely important constituent of the PVE discourse. As Lenos and Jansen (2019) aptly note, “sports and leisure activities can contribute substantially to the prevention of radicalization” (p. 1). Similarly, Asif et al. (2025) have acknowledged the role of sports to enhancing community resilience and endorse it as a “powerful tool to promote peace and tolerance among communities” (p. 6).

Sports and recreational activities have a number of healthy ‘pull factors’ that not only make them attractive to youth but also effectively discourage the lure and appeal of radical narratives and ideologies. Sports can, for instance, provide a strong

sense of belonging to otherwise alienated or disillusioned youth that could have been exploited by VE and terrorist organizations. Sports can also “give structure and social support” (Lenos & Jansen, 2019, p. 3) to those seeking brotherhood or a substitute to family or communal bonds. Above all perhaps, sports, recreation and entertainment allow one to divert attention to healthier and constructive substitutes, leaving little to no room for negative, regressive and destructive thoughts.

Societies that fall prey to terrorism and violent extremism must be encouraged to divert their attention to healthier, constructive and productive alternatives. Such a diversion, however, is only possible if the necessary alternatives like sports, recreation and entertainment are readily available.

Unfortunately, however, venues and opportunities for sports and similar activities are typically fairly limited in communities struggling with terrorism and violent extremism, as is the case with Pakistan. In fact, in all such societies, venues and opportunities for sports and similar activities are often fairly limited and restricted. It is partly owing to lack of healthier options, recreational opportunities and entertainment facilities that the youth in such communities is somewhat inadvertently drawn to unhealthy and regressive alternatives, including violence prone ideologies and dangerous doctrines.

For any serious PVE undertaking, it is imperative first to understand the significance of sports and recreational activities and then work towards developing and establishing necessary attitudes, facilities and venues for the said purposes.

Government officers working in the field must actively promote sports, entertainment and recreational activities. Among other things, they need to first address and confront any negative stereotypes regarding sports and recreation generally. No amount of initiatives can work if the attitude or established practices of the concerned community is dead set against the culture of sports and recreation. To do so, they must run information campaigns that promote healthier life choices and educate communities about the importance of sports and other recreational activities. Following positive behavioral changes in the community, government officers must work closely with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that facilities and venues for the said activities are duly provided and catered for. In this vein, close collaboration and coordination with relevant government departments such as the ministry of planning and development and the ministry of sports would be crucial.

### **7- Close Relationship with Religious Seminaries and Places of Worship**

“Religions”, Elmira Akhmetova et al. (2021) argue, “could be exploited by extremists to mobilize people into helping them fulfill their ambitions” (p. 289).

Religious radicalization, as we know, is the leading driver of VE and terrorism in the world. In fact, it will perhaps not be an exaggeration to suggest that in the contemporary political discourse, violent extremism is first and foremost about religious fanaticism. “Understanding how religious factors affect violent extremism can’ therefore ‘help inform the design and implementation of CVE solutions” (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017, p. 1).

It is worth keeping in mind at the outset that neither religion nor its strict

adherence leads to terrorism or violent extremism. On the contrary, there is in fact evidence that a “strong grounding in religion can actually reduce the likelihood of people accepting the narrative of violent extremist groups” (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017, p. 3). Focusing on religion alone or its strict adherence, in the context of PVE, is therefore a misplaced and ill-informed venture that actually leads to greater friction, division and discontent in the society. Instead, the focus must be on the misinterpretation, misreading and manipulation of religious doctrines that nurture and create space for violent radicalization.

Although neither religion per se nor its strict adherence is responsible for VE and terrorism, communities with higher levels of religiosity must be extremely vigilant and cautious. This is because the more religious and conservative a community, the more active and pronounced will be the VE propaganda by terrorist and extremist entities. All such organizations tend to exploit the religious sentiments of the community by typically exaggerating prevailing socio-political grievances and conflating them with some distorted and corrupted interpretation of the religion. In all such communities, it becomes necessary therefore to engage directly with matters of religion, be it in relation to theology or practice. Establishing a close working relation between the government officials and the religious seminaries and places of worship is therefore a vital first step.

In the context of the Muslim world generally and Pakistan specifically, establishing and maintaining a cordial liaison between the government and Mullahs, Mosques and Madrassas is a social and cultural imperative. It is also extremely crucial for any serious PVE or CVE undertaking that seeks to positively engage the community.

It is important to note here that the relationship between the government and religious seminaries and places of worship must be constructive, positive and transparent. This is because whenever the triad of Mullahs, Mosques and Madrassas has been mishandled or manipulated, it has yielded disastrous results.

Be it the surge of VE at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century or the increasing radicalization in the region, an unhealthy, secretive and exploitive relationship between the government and the religious entities has proven to be outright catastrophic. This is of course not to say that government should simply let the triad be and not interfere or engage with it in anyway.

Giving a free rein to the triad with no checks and balances creates tremendous problems of its own. For instance, the unfiltered and unbridled speeches and sermons of Mullahs or religious figures have on numerous occasions contributed to religious bigotry, sectarianism and communal violence. To prevent this from happening, it becomes the responsibility of concerned government officials to observe and fact-check all such religious sermons and speeches for any hateful and divisive content that encourages or glorifies violence. All such problematic content must be duly brought to the attention of both the concerned authorities and the community elders.

While the government must regularly monitor and check any potential hateful content, it is important to understand that the relationship between the

government and the triad must be built on mutual trust, respect and understanding and not fear and intimidation. Alongside community elders, it is necessary therefore that the government also gains the trust and confidence of religious seminaries and places of worship.

The triad of Mullah, Mosque and Madrassa is indeed an extremely crucial part of the social fabric of fundamentally religious societies like Pakistan. The role it plays can shape the ideological, ethical and moral boundaries of the community. It is imperative for that reason that it plays a constructive and meaningful role that helps mitigate the challenges posed by VE, as opposed to playing a negative and regressive role that enables and facilitates it. The government officials, in this vein, must also lend a helping hand and build a relationship of respect and trust with the triad and the community, which will have the combined material and mental strength to face the challenges posed by terrorism and violent extremism.

### **8. Devising an effective Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Mechanism**

Deradicalization is an extremely crucial and standout component of PVE. Among other things, it represents a community's desire to graciously forgive and forget and reintegrate former terrorists and radical extremists back into the mainstream society. John Horgan (2009) defines deradicalization as "the social psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity" (p. 153).

Even though there is to date "no consensus on what constitutes success in reforming a terrorist, let alone what even constitutes reform" (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 268), there is however an increasing acceptance among states that "their respective national security interests maybe served by exploring how to facilitate and manage the reintegration of convicted terrorists back into society" (p. 268).

Effective engagement with community in the context of PVE is simply not possible without well thought out deradicalization and rehabilitation strategies. The government must devise clear plans for peacefully disengaging the violent radicals not only for the sake of the communal integration but also for gaining the trust and confidence of individuals that resort to VE and terrorism. As LaFree and Freilich (2019) note, "Deradicalization initiatives are designed to change radical political attitudes, promote prosocial integration, and reduce terrorist attacks" (p. 391).

The logic of deradicalization first and foremost rests on the assumption that a good majority of terrorists, radicals and fundamentalists are motivated by flawed ideologies, guided by false pretexts and manipulated by devious leaders who seek to only further their selfish interests and ambitions. Alternatively, deradicalization also accepts and acknowledges genuine grievances, disenfranchisement and disgruntled individuals who resort to terrorism or VE due to lack of or futility of viable peaceful alternatives. Additionally, within the discourse of deradicalization, there is also room for accommodating deliberately vicious elements in the spirit of forgive and forget for the greater good of the society.

Deradicalization and subsequent rehabilitation of ex-terrorists and former radicals is a very serious and solemn undertaking. It can neither be taken lightly nor can it be delegated to operatives or entities that are not adequately qualified to understand the demands and dictates of this extremely sensitive and complex process. Despite being a highly professional and specialized undertaking, deradicalization and rehabilitation, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, is typically done by unqualified non-professionals such as the security forces that clearly do not possess the required skill set. Even though data on deradicalization centers in Pakistan is fairly scarce, owing to needless levels of secrecy, the endeavor nevertheless is far from promising.

Due to these glaring failures, the process of deradicalization in all such under developed countries has largely been a near total failure. Instead of ratifying the mistakes, the governments instead have a tendency to denounce and dismantle the entire deradicalization enterprise on account of fallaciously assuming that it is a futile and useless undertaking. Such blanket denouncements not only seriously hamper the efficacy and credibility of all other PVE programs and initiatives but also strip the notion of deradicalization of its nuance, depth and subtext.

In popular parlance, deradicalization is erroneously believed to be almost entirely about hardcore terrorists and violent radical fanatics that are institutionalized over a considerable amount of time. In reality however, the process of deradicalization has numerous stages and tangents that in principle must correlate to the level or degree of the radicalized individual.

Deradicalization programs in schools, colleges and universities for instance would be directed towards those individuals that have been identified as radicals and are at the risk of joining a terrorist or VE organization. The programs tailored for such high-risk students will be very different from the ones designed for an extremist organization or an entire community that either supports or is on the verge of resorting to terrorism and violent extremism. There are then of course the violent radical fanatics that have been active members of terrorist or VE organizations. Deradicalization programs designed for them will understandably be far more elaborate and comprehensive, including dedicated institutions and centers. Additionally, all these former terrorists/violent radicals will also have to be rehabilitated back into the community, which would necessitate additional planning and programs.

To effectively undertake deradicalization, it is imperative therefore to first understand and acknowledge its numerous strands and tangents. In other words, the nature of the response and contours of the deradicalization programs must effectively be determined by the degree and level of radicalization and the disposition of the target audience.

While government officials, as formal representatives of the state, will essentially be at the helm of affairs, however given the nature and character of the deradicalization programs, it will be necessary to involve a range of professionals and subject experts. From religious scholars to impactful clergy, from sociologists to

political scientists, and from psychiatrists to psychologists, the government will have to engage specialists in all relevant fields.

It is crucial to bear in mind that the process of deradicalization, especially of former violent radicals and ex-terrorists, is not complete without their rehabilitation back into the community. In fact, if deradicalization of ex-terrorists and former violent extremists is not followed immediately by apposite rehabilitation strategies, the entire exercise will be rendered futile and there is even a possibility that the reformed individuals will simply relapse into old patterns and vile habits.

Impactful rehabilitation will therefore demand that the government addresses apprehensions of both the concerned individuals and community and over time help build trust between the two parties. It will be necessary to enable the individuals to become useful members of the community where they feel welcome, respected and ultimately integrated. To do so, it will again be imperative for the government officials to engage and work closely with subject experts, specialists and the all-important civil societies that understand the local dynamics, psychological challenges and the socio-political realities of both the community and the individuals being rehabilitated.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has identified eight actionable strategies that on the one hand help rationalize the otherwise abstract contours of PVE and on the other hand helpfully enable government officials to develop and carry out targeted PVE interventions with the complete support of the community they intend to engage. Although all of the actionable strategies are proposed primarily for the Pakistani society, they can adequately be modified for other contexts as well. It is crucial to also note that the proposed list of strategies in this paper is by no means exhaustive, since not only is there room for more potential strategies but the specificity of the context could necessitate an entirely new set of more pertinent and relevant strategies.

Nevertheless, the strategies proposed in this article are fairly diverse and wide ranging and intent to cover all aspects of community engagement in the context of PVE. From rationalizing good governance to establishing viable communication channels between the community and media, from developing and nurturing critical thinking to mitigating identity crisis, from ensuring basic necessities to providing recreational facilities and lastly from proactive engagement with religious seminaries and places of worship to devising effective deradicalization and rehabilitation mechanisms, the list of proposed strategies are clearly comprehensive and well-rounded.

Prior to undertaking any of the proposed strategies however, it is important to fully understand and appreciate the rationale behind PVE, how it is different from the WOT, CT and even CVE paradigms. The discourse on PVE, as opposed to WOT, CT and CVE, has no room for kinetic or military interventions. PVE is first and foremost non-kinetic and any commitment to it therefore must acknowledge this verity. Any attempt to engage a community in the context of PVE will inadvertently end up being futile if it fails to understand and appreciate the non-kinetic rationale

of PVE. This realization is all the more crucial for countries like Pakistan that somewhat impulsively resort to more kinetics and military operations every time there is a spike in terrorism and violent extremism.

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