



Communication Strategies Towards Preventing Violent Extremist Attacks in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

With unpredictable purposes, extremism in Pakistan has attracted considerable local and global attention, especially after 9/11. Due to war against terrorism, Pakistan has suffered tremendous losses both in terms of number of precious lives and billions of dollars in foreign investment; economic terrorism imposed by foreign sponsored and homegrown terrorist networks. The country has been facing the challenging situations in the form of target killings and bomb blasts. On 16 December 2014 the brutal terrorist attack on Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar Pakistan appeared as major catastrophe, as killing children has become a major puzzle to our understanding of terrorism. This research examines the consequences of extremist attacks in Pakistan while revealing APS attack and argues that communication strategies can be assimilated into policies as preventive measures to minimize extremism and establish peace. To investigate this, qualitative methodology has been used, based on in-depth interviews to provide comprehensive perspectives from field experts and practitioners, affiliated with the same area. Thus, with the observations of 13 Informants, the study revealed that strategic communication for countering violence extremism from both the long-term and short-time strategic approaches are expedient. The study discovered that plausible communication strategies required to counter violent extremist need to underscore preventive communication strategies and consistent use of credible sources of information. In order to support the findings, models were generated through NVivo 10. Finally, it is recommended that communication strategies should convey healthy messages regarding conduct and aptitude to far-reaching populations through media and other sources of communication.

KEYWORDS

Religious Extremism, Terrorism, APS Attack, strategic Communication.

INTRODUCTION

The smallest coffins are the heaviest. The feelings and experiences of Pakistani nation are insecure since the time of the most horrible incident in the history of Pakistan in December 2014. Though, violent extremism has remarkably subdued the entire social harmony of many nation states. From Middle East to South Asia and from Europe to the US, every other society is being challenged by the hardened ideological positions of religious extremists. However, one of the major causes of extremist violence in Pakistan is enacted by groups those actually use religion for motivation and acceptability. To handle this, Pakistan, and other countries should develop strategies based on clear understandings regarding religious elements, to address drivers of extremism (Lain, 2016).

In Pakistan, some extremist groups have specific goals aimed against other countries and some sects but some extremists' groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, also recognized as Pakistani Taliban TTP is mainly fight against the Pakistani state and in implementing nationwide Sharia law. As TTP's primary goal is to weaken the country, it is in the government's interest to tackle the alarming TTP threat (Ernst, 2015).

It will be recalled that, on the morning of 16th, December 2014 a brutal terrorist attack was directed on Army public school warsak road, Peshawar (the capital of the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) Pakistan. According to inter services public relations (ISPR), seven terrorists move into the school around 10am and reached to the auditorium where school children were attending a ceremony, the terrorists opened fire on them; the nature of attack involved hostage taking, free shooting and killings (Qayyum, 2015). Pakistani Army, Special Services Group's SSG Commandos arrived and succeeded in cornering the attackers within few minutes, all of the terrorists were wearing suicide vests of explosives. All seven terrorists deceased in confrontation with the army, though some of army soldiers got injured by shrapnel from their vests. The estimated time duration of this confrontation was about eight hours. During this time, the worried parents gathered at the school gates with prayers and hopes (Lewis, 2014). Around 150 people have lost their lives in this attack including 132 children (Qureshi, Gulraiz & Shahzad, 2016). All of the militants were recognized as foreign nationals, including Chechen, Arabs and Afghans (Qayyum, 2015).

Around the world, terrorism and violent extremism has long been a challenge, sensible countries are now developing comprehensive strategies to deal with the foundations of violent extremism.

In order to understand the effect way to handle this threat, it is imperative to inspect frontline states like Pakistan (O'Connor & Shumate, 2018).

While the policy implementation remains out of reach, the different models of countering violent extremism managed to establish new channels of communication. However, strategic communication has been the source of bridging the gap between a strategy and communication.

In tackling this, it has been noted that Countering Violent Extremism and strategic communication are interconnected, and thus deserve further examination of this research equation. Since strategic communication has the ability to influence change, this study explores further the argument that this communication process should not be taken lightly (Holzhausen & Zerfass, 2011). It is a rather powerful process since it has the ability to influence – and it also has the ability to create change (Ask, 2016). Moreover, the paper will explore the plausible communication strategies can be formulated and used to Counter Violent Extremism in Pakistan in the light of strategic communication.

2. IMPACT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM ON PAKISTAN

In war against terrorism Pakistan has reached an alarming stage. Pakistan has lost more men as well as women and children to terrorism attacks than any other country in the world, particularly from the unfortunate Army Public School (APS) attack by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, also recognized as the Pakistani Taliban. According to Said and Ahmad (2016), Ahmad, Liaquat, and Rana (2019) In Pakistan violent extremism is becoming a problematic factor and effecting the country's security, political, economic, religious and overall social system. While instigating discontent, and violence in Pakistani society, extremist's conflicts resulted into thousands of deaths in the form of bomb blasts, suicide attacks, assassinations and other terrorist acts.

Establishing this further, Karamat, Muzaffar and Shah (2019) also observed that Pakistan has been affected with religious extremism few years after its independence. However, Pakistan witnessed forceful demonstration by the “introduction of Islamic regime” into the objective resolution of 1949; this empowered the Mullahs in the legislative assembly. Later, in the 1970s, liberal Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gave way to the requirements of Islamic parties by declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslim,

this step gave ground to religious extremism. The Jihad against communism and Zia's support for the spiritual right, converted society from a tolerant Islamic community to one hi-jacked by the Wahabi/ Deobandi attitude, of Taliban.

This all pave way to never ending religious differences and especially in the first 1.5 decades of the 21st century, Pakistan has seen many bomb blasts, suicide bombings, target killings, sectarian conflicts etc; and then APS attack happened as the deadliest terrorist attack ever to happen in Pakistan, even greater the 2007 bombings in Karachi. Number of news agencies reported that, and groundwork and nature of the attack was very similar to the Beslan school hostage crisis occurred in the North Ossetia–Alania region of the Russian Federation in 2004 (Qayyum, 2015). The death toll of 186 children, highlighted the fact that how vulnerable educational institutions can be to terrorist attacks. The Army Public School attack in Peshawar, brought back the memories of Beslan school siege (Malik, et-el, 2017).

In Pakistan, People particularly children and youth have been affected by the impact of violent extremism, directly and indirectly. In a study conducted by Fayyaz (2019) to observe the impact on youth, a large number of young people from Mardan shared experiences and issues like stress, anxiety and more broadly PTSD while facing violence. In relation to that, emerging empirical literature revealed thoughtful influence on the mental health of a young individual after losing their loved in a terrorist attack.

Based on the literature review, adopting strategic communication might help in Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan. The main goal of this research is to analyze the varying aspects of violent extremism in Pakistan. The research study examines the changing patterns that developed extremism in the country and provide current insights, while attempts to answer the important research question that what are the plausible communication strategies require to counter violent extremism in Pakistan in the light of role of strategic communication?

3. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TO COUNTER TERRORISM

Strategic Communication is an emerging field of study in communication and management social sciences. Strategic communication stands at the intersection of management strategy and

communication, and this intersection is somewhat undeveloped in the academic literature (Thomas & Stepes, 2015). It has been discussed that strategic communication must progress, not only as a theory but as a practice as well (O'Connor, & Shumate, 2018).

Strategic Communication deals with the application of theory to this emerging field, provides forum, for multidisciplinary approaches and diverse research traditions; and advocate real international perspective that gives voice to cross-cultural research and scholars in all around the world (Sida, 2006).

The foremost objective of Strategic communication is to impart information that appeal and effect views groups. During the last few years, the term influence has increasingly been used in combination with military audiences. Influence does not mean the prohibiting of hard power, nor is influence focused exclusively on enemy (Tatham, 2009).

Within the large scope of foreign policy, application of strategic communication includes messages sent through democracy promotion, development aid, public diplomacy, and other policies that support and communicate a strategic narrative. Research and analysis concerning counter radicalization efforts highlight the importance of specific messaging in all features of preventative strategy, including inter-agency coordination and narrowing the gap between political rhetoric and policies. When integrated into counter radicalization efforts, strategic communications may be considered as a means to deliver effective policy and produce anticipated responses from target audiences (Brownlow, 2013). The conception of strategic communication planning has extended outside the traditional academic model to a military one well-defined by Tatham (2009) as “a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of targeted audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior” (Williston, 2015).

The concept of Strategic communication deals with the challenge to think and act with techniques well-matched with objectives, whether this means instigating them to embrace a particular course of action and simply to understand better and accept more (US Department of State and United States Agency for International Development. 2016).

Communication will be likely to take the practice of two-way dialogue, though there will surely be chances for unilateral communication (especially demonstrations of support). Within strategic communication, there are certain strategies one can adapt if needed when in certain scenarios such as terrorism attacks. One of these is called a persuasive strategy which can be used when connecting to the public's emotions and/or values. It often consists of a selected part of information that one chooses to present to the public. When presenting it, it is not unusual to talk in a language that is not neutral. Furthermore, a persuasive strategy consists of persuasive messages calling for the need to act by highlighting the situation that is at stake. Another one is called power strategy, which is considered to be a coercive technique due to the fact that one brings out one's use of power as an attempt for compliance by the other party. This sort of strategy is seen to be useful when there might be potential resistance to change (Werder, 2015).

There might be a reason as to why strategic communication has been successfully expanded from the world of military into the world of business administration and organizations, and that reason might be that strategic communication ultimately focuses on conflict and not the use of force (Nothhaft & Schölzel, 2015).

So, this piece of writing will contribute to identify Plausible communication strategies to counter violent extremism in Pakistan in the light of role of strategic communication? The researcher wants to put its due share to tell the world that Pakistan is neither terrorist nor extremist nation, but has been suffering and fighting since so long; and will keep on fighting till the country can get rid of this tag of being an extremist state. In this regard, the study will try to raise curtains from some hidden facts and bitter realities with the help of APS attack's consequences.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research study is experiencing qualitative method with in-depth interview methodology to explore how plausible communication strategies can be formulated and used to Counter Violent Extremism in Pakistan in the light of the role of strategic communication. This is achieved through purposive sampling design to select 13 informants chosen mostly from Capital city Islamabad. According to Yin (2011), in qualitative research method, the samples are deliberately selected to be acknowledged as purposive sampling.

In current study, data were thematically analyzed by NVIVO 10 software while in-depth interviews were conducted. Interviews results appeared as the generation of coding frames comprised of conceptualizing elements enlightened the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees. Formerly, subcategories were further established in order to deepen the probing for rigorous and reliable.

The purpose of this study is to learn that how the reflection of few judicious approaches via strategic communication if practice will provide us a gateway towards better change by decreasing violent extremism. The emphasis is on violent extremism, and then how it contributes towards terrorists attacks in the country. Furthermore, the findings of the present study may suggest Plausible solutions to balance the extremism and to bring the wave of peace and harmony in the country. In order to formulate and implement effective counter radicalization strategies, it is necessary to understand what causes and motivates radical operators.

5. FINDINGS

The purpose of the study is to extant, discuss and analyze the collected data. The thematic approach consents the analysis to be presented in themes, sub-themes and sub sub-themes in addition to the graphical models through which the perspectives and the actual words of the informants were systematically illustrated.

Arising from the exploration carried out by this study, there is a need for increased knowledge about plausible communication strategies. New approaches in relation with strategic communication that compete, and conquest to counter extremist and terrorist's goals must be acknowledged. However, in order to be able to influence and improve peace negotiations and conflict resolutions by communication, one must realize not only what the core of communication is but also to achieve a sense of understanding concerning the power that communication actually entails (Ask, 2016).

There are several examples regarding media and communication strategies being used to stimulate violence. Whereas the link between media and violence has fascinated scholars and policy makers, present-day global challenges modeled by violent Islamist extremism (VIE) has intensified the

necessity for an evidenced-based understanding of how democracies can react to such threats. Therefore, in line with these perspectives, the analysis of interviews shown the emerged themes, as indicated in Figure 1, are communication strategies for countering violent extremism.



Figure 1. Communication strategies for countering violence extremism.

5.1 Role of strategic communication for Countering Violence Extremism

Mass media campaigns carry messages regarding healthy behavior to far-reaching populations via Internet, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and other printed materials. They intensify the volume of information on a topic and may decrease undesirable behavior. Media campaigns use different strategies to change cultural and social norms.

5.1.1 Long-term strategic goals

The basis causes of violent extremism are complex, multifaceted, entangled, and connected with the structural environment where radicalization and possibly violent extremism can start to take footing. Violent extremism can be the foundation of historical, political, economic and social issues, comprising the impact of regional and global power politics.

In relation to this perception, Informant 1 also described the role of strategic communication for countering violence extremism from the long-term strategic approach. “National Action Plan is the most effective effort of CVE, though internationally it is not much appreciated as CVE effort because internationally these 20 points of NAP are those points required by any state to function properly”.

Corroborating this line of views, informant 2 also stated how the strategic communication can be achieved through a national plan:

Well it's quite comprehensive, in terms of formulating strategies we have so far come up with the National Action Plan and if you will look at the civilian side of the national action plan; all those steps have yet to be done. The problem is, those 20 points are very comprehensive; have you got the will and capability to do it? Another important thing is if those points really relevant to deal with? (Inf. 2).

Corroborating this line of views was Informant 6 who however explained that to achieve, there is a need for good strategies in addition to implementing them:

Without any doubt the role of strategic communication in countering violent extremism can be helpful only if we make good strategies and implement them as well. From International to national level we badly need to revise our policies and strategies, though we are not bad in making strategies but certainly reluctant in its implementation (Inf. 6).

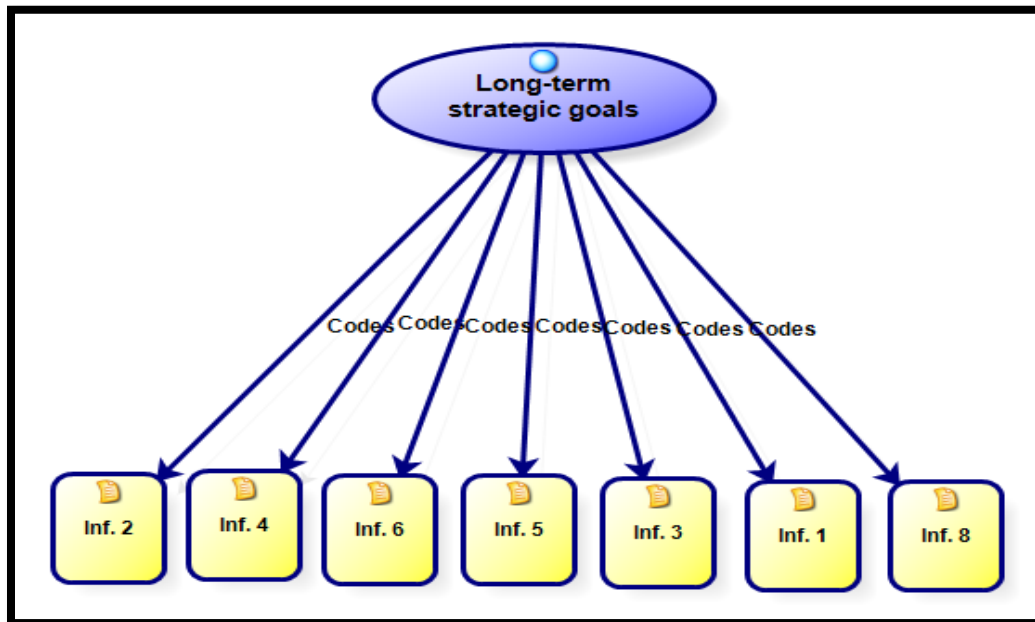


Figure 2. Violent extremism as a complex, multifaceted and intertwined

5.1.2 Short-term strategic goals

According to Informant 9, part of short-term strategy which can be applied is understudying how Malaysia has managed to appear as a peaceful and successful nation:

Strategic communication is very effective in terms of giving guidance, what they have to respond to, it can make a person more intelligent who is working on a particular subject. In theoretical terms, in the form of policies on the paper, strategic communication can work with the particular group of people in the form of discussion, for guidance and demonstration to counter the argument for some good reason.

In line with this, informant 1 pointed to the National action plan and legal framework as short-term strategy towards countering violent extremism:

If we can implement the legal framework with the true spirit then yes, we can solve the problem to much extent, we need to analyze the 20 point of National action plane one by one; as these points of National Action Plan itself is a drive of countering violent extremism.

5.2 Plausible communication strategies to Counter Violent Extremism in Pakistan

Different terrorist and violent extremist groups are gradually using communication technologies to threaten, radicalize, fundraise, train, convert and provoke innocent people to take part in violent extremist and terrorist activities. Governments should take appropriate steps to stop and counter the misuse of the Internet for violent extremist and terrorist tenacities (including through social media).

In this regard, media and technology can act as a powerful disrupter to question extremist narratives (Ferguson, 2016). Presently, unsatisfactory attention is being paid to suitable medium and towards significant opportunities to engage with youth in particular.

In view of this position therefore, this study has explored the communication strategies required. To establish clear cut perspectives, critical stakeholders were interviewed and the perspectives were explained.



Figure 3. Plausible communication strategies to Counter Violent Extremism in Pakistan

5.2.1 Message Conceptualization

Messages that focus on what individuals want are messages that depend on positive stories about tolerance, social norms & values, honesty, liberty, and democracy. Such messages target individuals who are already at-risk of being radicalized from specific communities or even with general public.

In line with this, informant 11 expressed a feeling on the importance of productive and planned communication strategies:

There can be many productive and planned communication strategies like correct interpretation of religious books by authentic scholars, making movies and dramas on this subject, and reforming education sector etc, involving civil society along with armed forces can be the best and simplest plausible communication strategy to work on CVE (Inf. 11).

Strengthening this point, Informant 3 emphasized proper implementation of communication strategy as one way to counter violent extremism in Pakistan:

The previous government did make some progress as the NAP come in the start of 2015, in January 2015; later on, some of them became a law. Although it was considered as a basic step towards CVE with some promises, like we will resolve some refugees issue or we will revamp the system, though nothing in this regard has happened yet. The refugees issue is still lingering, but yes Fata

has been merged, Baluchistan issue is in the process to some extent. So, the problem is in the proper implementation (Inf. 3).

Describing the relevance of strategic communication system by creating the environment to change the mindset of the people, informant 5 copiously explained the role individual Pakistani thus:

We cut it down in two things, first we will kill terrorist and secondly through system of strategic communication, we will create the environment to change the mindset of the people by developing a balance so that they somewhere in the middle not to any extreme and that is the essence of National Action Plan, at least the way I look at it.

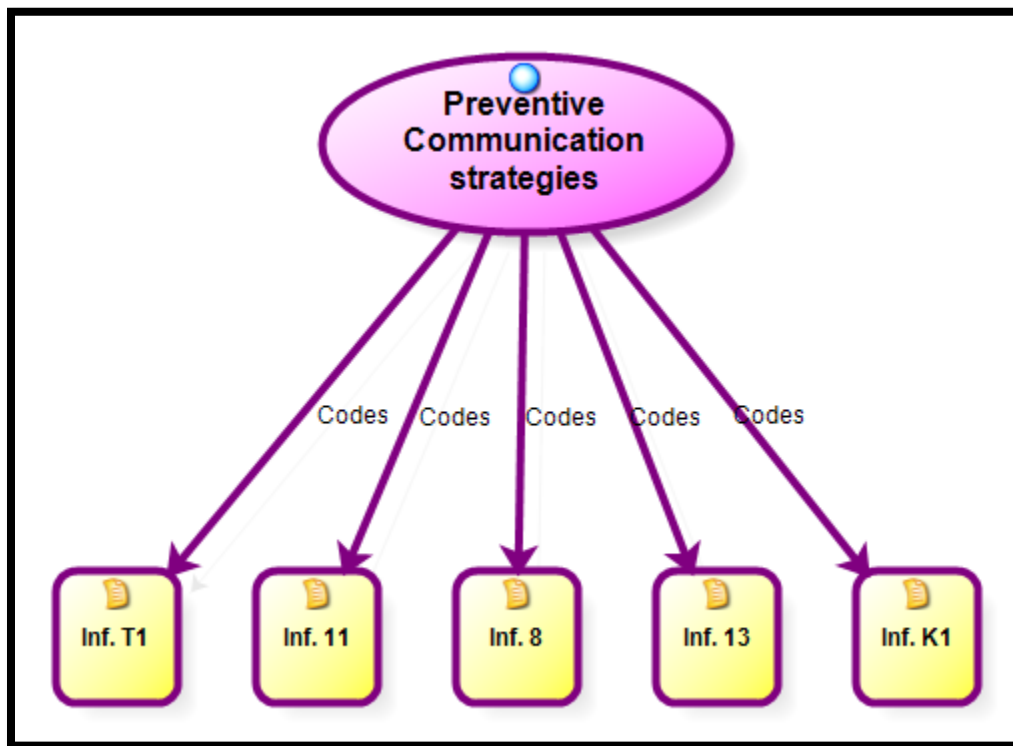


Figure 4. Message conceptualization towards countering violent extremism

5.2.2 Preventive Communication strategies

It's not about the question of countering violent extremism through hard power but it is required to prevent it via forms of 'soft power', to prevent threats determined by partial interpretations of culture, and society. Addressing the procedure of radicalization must start with human rights and

the rule of law, with dialogue across all boundary lines, by permitting all young women and men, and by starting as early as possible, on the benches of schools. Supporting this point, Informant 1 noted that:

What we lost and what we gained? We just gained its one point fully, the mobile verification system that we must destroy the communication network of terrorist. For this purpose, it was necessary to authorize all the sims under usage. So, you have finally achieved one point 100%, as now we can trace everyone on every phone call. So how it happened when you implement it properly and gave the capability to concerned institutions (Inf. 1).

In relation to this perception, Informant 12 also described the importance of preventive communication strategies thus, “developing a program to spread awareness among masses that how to get rid of this disease of mental depression, as people are getting mentally and psychologically disturbed”. In what appears to be a reiteration of what the earlier informant has said, informant 9 emphasized that:

There are so many issues those needs to be resolved but we have to make diverse strategies accordingly, as every different subject requires different types of strategies and policies. Take this example of fighting with religious extremism kind of war, so first we need to know that who is behind them, the non-state actors those are like robots as they are guided by some other people sitting behind them, to hit something particular, now this group here may be using national or other sentiments to reach to their objective (Inf. 9).

5.2.3 Credible Sources of Information

Most of the counter-narrative methods to deal with violent extremism is not working consequently, alternative media strategies could be operational, as long as information providers have confidence and reliability. Attesting to the values of credible sources of information when handling violent extremism, informant 1 also stressed:

Obviously, Government because Army’s work is to secure borders not to making policies and producing campaigns; though in Pakistan this is not the case, Army is almost everywhere taking extra responsibilities, but army also do not divert from its due responsibility; government must do

that. There is no single institution that is responsible for this, as there are many channels to communicate among countries (Inf. 1).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper examined communication strategies in the direction of preventing terrorists' attacks as experienced in the Army Public School (APS) attack by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the Pakistani Taliban. Based on the analysis of the data collected through the interviews with the educationists, military personnel and diplomats, the study's findings suggest that series of plausible communication strategies to counter violent extremism in Pakistan.

On the basis of study's outcomes, it can be concluded that extremisms sometimes lead towards aggression and violent extremism. At the moment, in order to counter extremist and aggressive destruction, it has become imperative to understand the contemporary worldwide challenges modeled by violent Islamist extremism and formerly intensify the need for an evidenced-based understanding of how democracies should respond to such threats as Pakistan operates democratic system.

This presented as the most basic explanation of this concept that simply signifies the need to deal with this mind set which is only destructive for any state and society.

Strategic communication is an emerging, very broad, phenomenon, and in order to attempt to find a united vision of what strategic communication actually entails, it has been suggested that one important aim of the strategic communication process should be to create a new group of practitioners that might be able to share their experiences and shed some light on what strategic communication truly entails.

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