

From Counterterrorism to Countering Violent Extremism: Pakistan's Rehabilitation and Deradicalization Initiatives

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Abstract

The post-9/11 global security environment led the United States to launch the War on Terror, adopting a force-centric strategy against terrorism. Despite these efforts, militant violence continued to rise worldwide between 2002 and 2004, prompting the United Nations Security Council to shift focus from counterterrorism to countering violent extremism CVE.[Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), p.30.] Ironically, the same concept of jihad had earlier been encouraged in Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979. Recognizing the limits of kinetic measures alone, the U.S. adopted a non-kinetic CVE strategy in 2005.[Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, *The Globalization of Countering Violent Extremism Policies: Undermining Human Rights, Instrumentalising Civil Society*, (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2018), p.4.] This article examines Pakistan's policies and initiatives aimed at transitioning from counterterrorism to countering violent extremism, with a particular focus on rehabilitation, deradicalization, and reintegration programs. It also evaluates the outcomes and achievements of these initiatives.

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Introduction

In the backdrop of Soviet Union invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan's decision to help the *jihadis* in Afghanistan with the help of foreign donors, like the U.S and Arab countries resulted in sectarian violence in Pakistan. A large influx of militants from Western countries travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and various Middle Eastern states to take part in what they considered a self-declared jihad.¹ According to Haqqani, during 1978 to 1988 the U.S. provided Pakistan with \$2.5 billion in economic and \$1.7 billion in military aid on a bilateral basis.² The focus of religious madrassas was to recruit more jihadis in Pakistan for the holy war in Afghanistan. Several organization were established like *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP) in Jhang, Punjab by Mawlana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, *Tehrik-i-Nafaz-i-Shariat-i-Muhammadi* (TNSM) in Malakand division by Maulana Sufi Muhammad³ *Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami* in Karachi, and *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen*.⁴ But consequently, when these jihadis return of to their homes, they created a menace to the internal security of their respective countries.⁵

Later, the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda on American soil were declared by President Bush of the United States as an attack on the heart and soul of the world. One again, a self-proclaimed Jihad was initiated against the US, prompting a large number of militants from the West to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁶ Consequently, the president declared war against all actors who were involved either in exporting or supporting terrorism, and decided to initiate a kinetic approach of the War on Terror and to get rid of terrorism. Such an approach did not halt the terrorist menace proliferation, and between 2002 and 2004 the world witnessed several major terrorist attacks. A broad scholarly consensus has emerged that relying solely on kinetic measures is fundamentally insufficient and ill-suited for addressing complex challenges such as radicalization and violent extremism. On account of devastating activities, the UNSC passed several resolutions and shifted the policy of countering terrorism to countering violent extremism.⁷

Paradoxically, the same jihad was initiated in Pakistan with the patronage of the US and the UN in 1979 to contain Soviet Union expansionism in South Asia. While the use of force remains a crucial component of counterterrorism efforts, the processes of disengagement, deradicalization, and reintegration are equally important in ensuring a comprehensive and effective strategy. Therefore, in May 2005, a shift in the U.S. counterterrorism strategy occurred, adopting a non-kinetic approach called Counter Violent Extremism.⁸

Because of its frontline role in the War on Terror and its close geographical connection with Afghanistan, Pakistan became one of the most heavily affected states by violent extremism.

¹ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*. (London: Routledge, 2017), p.4.

² Haqqani, Hussain. (2005). *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. p.137.

³ Ali, I. (2009). *Militant or Peace Broker? A Profile of the Swat Valley's Maulana Sufi Muhammad*. The Jamestown Foundation; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 7. <https://jamestown.org/program/militant-or-peace-broker-a-profile-of-the-swat-valleys-maulana-sufi-muhammad/>,

⁴ Irfanullah Khan. (2017). *The Deoband Movement and the rise of Religious Militancy in Pakistan*. Latest - Asian Research Thesis Index; Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. p..72-78.

⁵ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*. (London: Routledge, 2017), p.4

⁶ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), p. 2.

⁷ Ibid.p.30

⁸ Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, *The Globalization of Countering Violent Extremism Policies: Undermining Human Rights, Instrumentalising Civil Society*, (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2018), 4.



Since 2001, the country has endured nearly 70,000 fatalities and economic losses estimated at around 150 billion USD. The cooperative relationship Pakistan once maintained with the Afghan Taliban ended abruptly. After 9/11, Islamabad chose to support the United States and NATO forces. This policy shift triggered the rise of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which emerged in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Many extremist factions interpreted Pakistan's support for the international coalition as a betrayal of the wider Muslim community and, in response, declared their own so called jihad against the Pakistani state and its armed forces.⁹

Counter-Terrorism Policies Worldwide

Over the past two decades, several countries have developed their own Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies based on local conditions, institutional capacity, and the nature of the threat. Saudi Arabia introduced one of the most widely cited models, built on prevention, rehabilitation, and after-care. Its structured religious counselling, psychological support, and vocational training, combined with extensive financial and social incentives, produced comparatively low recidivism rates and earned global recognition. Yemen, on the other hand, adopted a prison-based religious dialogue program after 2002, releasing detainees who pledged to renounce their extremist views. But this model is considered unsuccessful due to the absence of psychological assessment, weak economic support, and limited post-release monitoring, resulted in high levels of re-radicalization. Western models like Denmark's Aarhus and Germany's BIGREX emphasized early intervention, community involvement, and mentorship, proving effective in preventing radicalization. Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group provided theological counselling and family support, gradually gaining legitimacy. The UK's "Prevent" program and Canada's "Re-Direct" initiative targeted vulnerable individuals through tailored interventions, though both faced criticism for intrusive monitoring. Australia integrated prison-based and community outreach programs combining vocational, psychological, and religious support, producing mixed but notable outcomes. These CVE strategies succeed when they combine psychological, social, and economic measures with community participation rather than relying solely on religious dialogue or security-focused measures.¹⁰

Pakistan's Response to Terrorism

In Pakistan, religious fanaticism that has been initiated with the Afghan-Soviet war, posed a major threat to the internal security of Pakistan. Recently, the political polarization of society and severe economic crises in the country have further intensified the situation.¹¹ In Pakistan-like societies, people accept anything that has been offered in the religious coating that provides unconditional support to extremist groups in the region. On the other hand, on the opinion of Abdul Basit, most of the militants are not ideologically motivated but they do Jihad merely as a source of income.¹² On the words of Muhammad Naeem Dar, a veteran of the Pakistan Army, who regarded the cultural context of Pakhtun society significantly contributed

⁹ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), p.4-5.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp.32-37.

¹¹ Ihsan Ghani, *Pakistan's Response to Extremism and Terrorism* (Islamabad: Institute for Strategic Studies, ISRA Paper, 2019), 4.

¹² Abdul Basit. *Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and de-Radicalization Initiatives*. IPRI Journal 15, no. 2 (2015), 44-68



to the cultivation of violent tendencies in the society.¹³ According to research carried out by Imtiaz Gul, it was stated that among the terrorists recruited from erstwhile FATA, 80 percent were unemployed.¹⁴

Strategy for Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) in Pakistan

As discussed earlier, the unwitting support of illiterate individuals posed major threat to the national security, in the view of worldwide deradicalization and counter extremism programs, the government of Pakistan initiated Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) to prevent radicalisation, recruitment of individuals into terrorism, and extremist ideologies and transform local society through peace education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in the erstwhile FATA region. The origin of the Pakistan-based CVE program was back in 2008¹⁵ when the government sought assistance from the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of Singapore regarding the establishment of a rehabilitation centre and providing a second chance of life to incarcerated militants to reform ideology. After Operation Rah-e-Rast in Swat, the first ever Deradicalization and Emancipation Program (DREP)¹⁶ started with three major components: Sabaoon for juveniles at Batkhela, Mishal for adults at Mingora and Rastoon for youth at Barikot Swat.¹⁷

In 2011, the *Naway Sehr* and *Ghalani* projects were launched in the Bajaur and Mohmand districts (formerly part of FATA), followed by the *Heila* and *Sparlay* initiatives in Tank district in 2012. Additionally, several deradicalization centres were established across various districts in FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan.¹⁸

The Sabaoon-II programme was established in December 2014, the only model that still exists, with collaborations of the Frontier Corps of KP and the FATA Secretariat. The project is based on an open-prison model that not only provides a conducive environment for the radicalization of ex-militants but also transforms the whole of the society of Tehsil Bara, district Khyber.¹⁹

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: A Transformative Approach

No transformative model can be considered precise or perfect, as there is no universal standard to measure its performance and efficiency. Around the world, various approaches have been implemented to transform violent behaviours in society through peace education.²⁰ While these models may differ in structure, they share a common goal: rehabilitating individuals and reintegrating them into peaceful communities. The success of such transformative models largely depends on how well they integrate fundamental human values

¹³ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 65.

¹⁴ Ibid. 56.

¹⁵ Abdul Basit. *Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and de-Radicalization Initiatives*. IPRI Journal 15, no. 2 (2015), 55.

¹⁶ Sheharyar Khan, "Disengagement and Deradicalization Programs in Pakistan: A Comparative Analysis," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2021), 36.

¹⁷ Muhammad Amir Rana. *Swat Deradicalization Model: Prospects for Rehabilitating Militants*. Conflict and Peace Studies 4, no. 2 (2011): 1-6.

¹⁸ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 44.

¹⁹ Ibid., 83-84.

²⁰ UNESCO, *Peace Education in the 21st Century: An Essential Strategy for Building Lasting Peace* (ED/PSD/GCP/2024/02, 2024), 16, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.unesco.de/assets/dokumente/Bildung/01_Bildung_allgemein/Peace_Education_in_the_21st_Century.pdf.

such as compassion, sympathy, care, and positive regard for others within their core framework.²¹

Unlike rehabilitation programs in other countries, Pakistan's initiative is distinctive as it deals with hardcore BLACK-category militants in open-prison settings.²² One of the flagship projects under this initiative is Sabaoon-II, which has demonstrated remarkable success in transforming former militants. The effectiveness of this program can be attributed to several key aspects, including therapeutic interventions, honour codes, and a commitment to unconditional positive regard for beneficiaries.²³

Pakistan's Deradicalization Strategy

Behavioral Transformation and Social Reintegration

During the initial phase of their induction into Sabaoon-II, many beneficiaries exhibited resistance and aggressive behaviours. One common act of defiance was disrespecting food, such as spilling meals, kicking utensils, or showing dissatisfaction with the menu. To address this, the psychological staff was instructed to dine alongside the beneficiaries, teaching them proper etiquette and reinforcing these lessons with relevant Ahadith and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).²⁴ Recognizing the energetic nature of Pukhtuns, the administration introduced sports activities and competitions, providing a healthy outlet for their energy. Additionally, life skills workshops were conducted to instil positive behaviours and raise awareness about women's rights, human rights, drug abuse, education, and peace.²⁵ To address the root causes of radicalization, the program conducted workshops that examined factors such as illiteracy (*Jihalat*), state negligence, lack of leadership, and poverty. These sessions not only helped identify key issues but also proposed solutions, including psychological and religious education to counter *Jihalat* and vocational training in practical fields such as heavy machinery operation, tailoring, computer education, and vehicle mechanics. By equipping individuals with professional skills, the program enabled them to reintegrate into society as productive citizens, reducing the likelihood of recidivism. The program also placed significant emphasis on commemorating national events and fostering patriotism. Beneficiaries were encouraged to participate in patriotic speeches, national songs, drama skits, and slogan-chanting to instil a sense of belonging and love for the state.²⁶

One of the most prominent initiatives under Sabaoon-II is the Active Bara Citizen Youth Program (ABC Youth Program). This project operates on both male and female fronts, focusing on Tehsil Bara, which was one of the worst-hit regions during the insurgency. The area suffered immense devastation, with its socioeconomic and institutional infrastructure severely weakened. In response, the program launched various initiatives aimed at restoring the town through self-help efforts, while simultaneously addressing the deeper psychological and social roots of extremism. It inaugurated community-led reconstruction projects to

²¹ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 125.

²² Ibid.,126.

²³ Naseer, Rizwan, Musarat Amin, and Zaib Maroof. *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: Methods, Challenges, and Theoretical Underpinnings*. (NDU Journal, 2019), 92. accessed March 13, 2025, <http://111.68.99.125/website/ndu-journal/pub-new/05-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>,

²⁴ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 132.

²⁵ Ibid.,88.

²⁶ Khan, Khurshid, and Afifa Kiran. *Emerging Tendencies of Radicalization in Pakistan: A Proposed Counter-Radicalization Strategy*. (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014), 27-30, accessed March 13, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/1361510895_4150114.pdf.

rebuild essential infrastructure and rehabilitate affected families. Moreover, the program conducted specialized workshops to analyse the factors that led local populations toward militancy, highlighting illiteracy, government neglect, weak leadership, and economic hardship as key contributors.²⁷

To provide sustainable solutions, the program introduced psychological and religious education as a means to counter radical ideologies, while also offering vocational training in various trades such as heavy machinery operation, tailoring, computer education, and vehicle mechanics. These efforts ensured that individuals had access to legitimate employment opportunities, preventing their return to extremist networks.²⁸

A unique aspect of Sabaoon-II is its reliance on religious teachings to counter extremist ideologies. Throughout the facility, Ahadith and Quranic verses are displayed to instil feelings of repentance and regret among the beneficiaries. These teachings highlight the prophecies of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) regarding the Khawarij, describing them as the worst of people, who would kill Muslims while sparing idolaters, speaking in attractive slogans but acting with cruelty and barbarism. This religious counter-narrative is crucial in challenging extremist ideologies and reshaping perspectives.²⁹

The accomplishments of Sabaoon-II and Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy can be credited to its therapeutic model, honour codes, and structured interventions. The program proudly claims a 100% success rate, with none of its 1,501 graduates returning to militancy. By offering a second chance through education, psychological therapy, vocational training, and community reintegration, the initiative has successfully rehabilitated former militants, equipping them with the tools to lead productive and peaceful lives.³⁰

Conclusion

Following other countries' counterterrorism policies, Pakistan also evolved its strategies of kinetic approach to a more comprehensive integrating Counter Violent Extremism initiatives. While military operations were crucial in dismantling terrorist networks and long-term stability required rehabilitation programs like Sabaoon-II, which focus on psychological counselling, vocational training, and social reintegration. These efforts have proven effective in preventing recidivism and addressing the root causes of extremism. However, long-term success requires ongoing efforts in education and job opportunities in regions where individuals are inclined toward militancy. Pakistan's model highlights that a balanced approach combining security measures with rehabilitation is essential for countering terrorism and ensuring lasting peace.

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²⁷ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 91..

²⁸ Parveen, F. *Project Sabawoon (1st Strategic Workshop on Rehabilitation and De-Radicalization of Militants and Extremists)*. International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2010, 7-9, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Report-1st-Strategic-Workshop-on-Rehabilitation-and-De-Radicalization-of-Militants-and-Extremist.pdf>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Muhammad Naeem Dar, *Sabaoon-II: A Study on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2023), 115.



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