[**Systemic violence on local people**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1667930/systemic-violence-on-local-people)

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WHEN it comes to the coverage of terrorism in the Af-Pak region, journalists and analysts in Pakistan have one thing in common: their fixation on ideological aspects of extremism often overshadows territorial considerations rooted in actual power politics. This conceptualisation has detrimental implications for people in marginalised regions where violence is staged locally but reported from a distance.

This (mis)representation has its origins in the 1980s when the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan forced thousands of refugees to flee to Pakistan. ‘Resistance’ and ‘jihad’ were the two buzzwords representing Pakistan’s stewardship role in a subsequent anti-Soviet proxy war. With the help of US-Saudi petro-dollars, the Zia regime’s blending of extremism with warlord-ism birthed an alliance comprising four fundamentalist and three nationalist parties. This alliance was foisted on the ragtag refugees put up in over 400 camps in different parts of present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. To sustain this militarism, a madressah network was set up to turn local youth into extremists — lasting fodder for the proxy war. But the term ‘resistance’ itself was also gradually replaced by ‘jihad’. This transformation from the secular to the divine obscured over a period of time what went into the making of the conflict zone.

**Read:** [*How Zia ruled*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1342695)

Though a skewed reference, jihad as an abstract terminology also fits well into the imperialist tradition of grand western narratives. Celebrating the post-Soviet era, for instance, Anglophone academics strategically excluded context from their political analyses in the early 1990s. The win of capitalism over communism was termed ‘the end of history’ and a ‘unipolar moment’ (US the only superpower). This imperialist text not merely heralded capitalism’s domination over other forms of ideologies, but also inspired in commercial media the use of a wide brush in painting spatial realities.

In the Af-Pak region, at least, the use of ‘jihad’ as a lexicon began to develop double meanings: it legitimised terrorism in the name of religion, creating a break from the past.

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Throughout the 19th century, the British used violence for controlling north-western territorial fringes of colonial India (Af-Pak region). When the local people resisted, they were first blamed and then victimised for being unruly, violent and fanatical. Pakistan embraced this legacy from one colonial empire (British) and offered it to a neocolonial power (US). As early as the 1950s, the country’s elites fixed their own position in this cycle of regional oppression by joining two imperialist pacts: Seato and Cento. Ever since, Pakistani dictators have loyally defended US regional interests at the cost of local Pakhtuns.

As ‘jihad’ was a phase in Cold War politics, the US-led ‘war on terror’ was a phase in this violent regional history extending market interests in local space. This destructive imperialist cycle (call it the privatisation of ‘jihad’) never allows an alternative life form to locally grow which they fear might bring an end to the ‘unipolar moment’. In the media, the Af-Pak region’s portrayal serves this tradition, associating militarised violence with the local population’s love for ‘jihad’ and, despite tons of evidence of a state-created jihadist economy, this aspect is hardly contextualised in reporting on the region.

**Read:** [*The madressah riddle*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1660689/the-madressah-riddle)

Globally, digital technologies have helped people present an alternative coverage of their precarious conditions. From Twitter to Facebook, an ambitious group of area experts has emerged, who, in their eagerness to report on terrorism, offer rich data. But this data usually falls short on details for lack of either space or exposure. About the Af-Pak regions, for instance, the digitally mediated information often lacks insight into the tribal system of life, promoting a contextually impaired worldview. This limitation promotes bare claims and sovereign actions without any ‘grounded feel.’ This lack of tactile sense tends to marginalise the securitisation of everyday life, while essentialising extremism and terrorism — ‘this is what it is’ (one analyst said about tribal Pakhtuns: those who live by the gun, die by the gun).

With an expansion in violence from Afghanistan to Pakistan in post 9/11 context, a vast number of local journalists emerged whose job was to cover terrorism for media. The possibility of independent journalism further grew with the privatisation of the country’s airwaves in 2002 and expansion of the media landscape. But such hopes soon died down for want of access to the conflict zone. Only select journalists were given free chopper rides to battle sites — the ones ready to serve the state’s narrative. Defining media-military ties, this embedded culture imposes on the local population a view from elsewhere. Where movement is not a right but a privilege, the national level journalists and analysts project on the people meanings from outside, offering systemic violence as local in origin.

Terrorism in Pakistan’s border areas cannot be attributed to a bunch of lunatics dispatching the ‘civilised’ world to hell just for the fun of it. It is, instead, rooted in the state’s grand, imperialist designs to exercise control over Afghanistan. So, the violence we see is not local. It has a strong state and market connection and, therefore, it is systemic. From Zia in the 1980s to the contemporary elites, the use of state machinery in creating and mainstreaming extremism is a no-brainer. Yet, media professionals have been thriving on munching violent extremism as cash products.

This approach — using systemic violence as fodder for producing symbolic cultural artifacts — allows commercial media to conveniently ignore the systemic war on the local culture, ethnicities and their resources. Hence, this militarised production of ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ in the Af-Pak region is so interwoven with the interests of producers (military, media and militants) that ongoing wholesale violence seems to be no different than the production of market products. Any genuine step to discourage this devouring of the local space and resources requires media professionals to focus on the material implications of national policies and politics on local communities without reducing the grand narratives of extremism (‘jihad’) to ideological groups.

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*Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2022*