[**Defeat the ideology**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642702/defeat-the-ideology)

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THE onslaught of militancy did not provide time and space to the state to focus on countering violent extremism (CVE); consequently, countering terrorism (CT) remained the top priority. Sole reliance on kinetic options resulted in the killings of militants, but the ideology remained intact. Without defeating ideology, sustainable peace cannot be guaranteed.

Violent extremism (VE) is a multifaceted phenomenon that undermines peace, security, human rights, and sustainable development. Misinterpretation of religion, weak rule of law, ungoverned or poorly governed areas, poverty, unemployment and unfair resource distribution, social marginalisation and political disengagement are push factors; the promise of empowerment and revolutionary change, implementation of Shariah, Islamic political system and jihad are pull factors.

Owing to statistical quantification, CT gets instant attention of the ruling elite, bureaucracy, media, and public. It is easy to quantify the number of operations, arrests, killings, recovery of ammunition, weapons, and explosives. However, CVE is a long-term, non-coercive and difficult to quantify endeavour to reduce space for violent extremists and make it difficult for them to attract volunteers. A proportion of existing funds dedicated for CT needs to be allocated for CVE while departments like education, health and social welfare should be provided funds for CVE.

A CVE policy needs to be based on a diagnostic approach: it needs to uncover why extremists see joining such a bandwagon as an aspirational social act and why, despite low educational credentials, the majority of them desire to reshape the world.

CVE is a long-term, but critical, endeavour.

Traditionally, extremist organisations preferred to reach out to the youth but now women are also their priority. Women are disproportionately affected by conflicts. Their extreme social exclusion and victimisation in patriarchal societies create incentives for some women to seek power and mobility by aligning with extremist organisations. The role of women as social influencers and agents of change in stabilising communities and preventing extremism needs rethinking.

Encrypted communication facilitates extremists to strengthen networking, seek finances and build capacity. Administrative reforms and policing cyberspace should therefore be accorded top priority.

Section 47 of The KP Police Act 2017 invested Public Liaison Councils (PLCs) with enormous powers to check the misuse of loudspeakers, monitor and verify the credentials of tenants and monitor the activities of released convicts but selection criteria of PLC members, their capacity, monitoring and evaluation needs a review.

Violent extremists effectively utilised ideology and technology to their advantage. However, countries are yet to use technology to the optimum level in countering VE. Through technology, public awareness can be created about the techniques of extremists regarding recruitment, funding, propaganda and facilitation. The recent establishment of an outreach branch by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) will strengthen CVE efforts with the help of the community.

Mental health and social wellbeing are also low priority areas. Though depression is a major driver in VE, it is usually ignored as a driver of behavioural change because mental health is considered a personal issue. The role of psychologists and psychiatrists is yet to be linked with the efforts of CVE.

A fair understanding of CVE dynamics requires credible research. That is not possible without collaboration between LEAs, including CTDs, and universities. The Higher Education Commission needs to encourage CVE research. Section 4 of the Nacta Act mandated Nacta to collaborate research in the fields of CVE and CT. The signing of a letter of intent between Nacta and HEC and an MOU between Nacta and the Higher Educ­ation Regula­tory Aut­h­ority KP are practical manifestations of the Nacta law.

In January 2021, the Indonesian president signed an exclusive National Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism (NAPCVE) that leads to terrorism. NAPCVE is based on the ‘whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach’. Pakistan’s implementation of NAP is a combination of CT, CVE and institutional reforms. For a more effective response, Pakistan also needs an exclusive CVE NAP.

The National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG) drafted by Nacta, is in the CVE domain. An outcome of 24 rounds of discussions with 305 stakeholders, the NCEPG cover 50 points primarily focusing on six areas including rule of law and service delivery, citizen engagement, media engagement, integrated education reforms, reformation, rehabilitation, reintegration, renunciation and promotion of culture. It is imperative upon all stakeholders including civil society, federal and provincial governments to convert these guidelines into reality.

Peaceful survival warrants winning the battle of ideas. Let’s plan, invest, and give it a try.

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