[**The sustainable approach**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690913/the-sustainable-approach)

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A COMMON perception that holds true within our society is that poverty and lack of education are the major factors contributing to youth being engaged in violent extremist activities. Knowing that Shari Baloch belonged to a highly educated, upper middle class, respectable family in Balochistan was therefore a major ‘shock’ to the nation. How could someone so literate, so open-minded, belonging to such a respectable family, be brainwashed to commit such a horrific act?

**Read**: [*An insurgency restructured*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1680914)

Unfortunately, this common perception is a flawed one. Over the last 30 years, we have repeatedly witnessed highly educated, middle-class youth being involved in terrorist activities all over the world, including here in Pakistan. Many of the United States 9/11 hijackers had middle-class, educated backgrounds, and in some cases grew up in secular families. Similarly, research points to the fact that youth joining the Islamic State group are not driven by poverty; in fact, the number of IS fighters joining from a particular country positively correlates with the country’s per capita GDP, with many foreign fighters originating from highly developed European countries. The tragic [Safoora Goth massacre](https://www.dawn.com/news/1181698) in 2015 in Karachi, where 43 civilians were killed, was perpetrated by youth who attended some of the most prestigious institutes of Pakistan such as, IBA, NED and Karachi University.

The point here is not to fixate on simply structural factors like the lack of education or poverty, but to get to the core of why youth, in this case Baloch youth, are being attracted to violent extremism by groups such as the [Baloch Liberation Army](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687256) (BLA), because unless we do that, we will never be able to achieve any semblance of a sustainable solution to this problem.

Residents of Balochistan in general and Baloch youth in particular, have been grossly marginalised and disenfranchised for decades, despite having their province significantly contribute to the welfare and prosperity of Pakistan for decades. What BLA provides Baloch youth with is a sense of purpose, a sense of shared Baloch identity and belonging, which they feel has been trampled upon by Pakistan’s government and military for decades.

There is a solution to Baloch militancy that does not involve disappearances and arrests.

With the advent of [CPEC](https://www.dawn.com/news/1664655) and other China-led projects in Balochistan, the exploitation of Balochistan in the eyes of Baloch youth has greatly increased, adding more fuel to their already defensive, marginalised mindset. The resulting effect is, unfortunately, what we saw in the form of the [suicide attack](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687196) by Shari Baloch.

**Read**: [*What the state must do to prevent others from following in the KU attacker's footsteps*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1688085/female-suicide-bombers-what-the-state-must-do-to-prevent-others-from-following-in-the-ku-attackers-footsteps)

One approach of fixing this problem is the counterterrorism one — going after the BLA perpetrators, conspirators and masterminds behind this and any possible future attacks, which the government and military are rightly doing. I put this akin to bandaging or treating an open wound, which is necessary, but unless we address the cause behind the wound and take preventive measures, we are highly likely to get hurt repeatedly.

Countering violent extremism experts will tell you that there is actually a sustainable solution to this, one that doesn’t involve disappearances, arrests and capital punishment, but rather, requires painstaking efforts to be taken, which start by engaging the community in a sincere manner, especially the youth at various levels of Baloch society — including in universities, vulnerable neighbourhoods within districts, cities and even down to the union council levels.

**Read**: [*Renewed insurgency?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1672064)

The first step is to give the disenfranchised Baloch youth a platform to voice their genuine concerns — one that is legitimised by the state machinery so that the youth believe the endeavour to be a sincere effort for the betterment of Balochistan. This can be done through gatherings in universities across the state and public places in vulnerable neighbourhoods, where there is representation from not only Baloch youth and intellectuals, but also the civil government and military leadership. Such gatherings should be given local and national media coverage whenever possible, as having these discussions in a publicised, open and transparent manner will act as a deterrent to the recruitment efforts of radical groups such as the Majeed Brigade, as youth will have a positive platform to air their grievances.

Once trust through sustained engagement has been established between the Baloch community and the government and military leadership, the key is to not simply leave it at that stage, but to follow it up by giving Baloch youth a greater practical role in shaping the development programmes in their regions. If gentrification and exploitation of the Baloch due to ‘[Chinese exploitation projects](https://www.dawn.com/news/1450491)’ is the concern, then Baloch community leaders and youth should be included in the decision-making process of how Chinese projects will benefit Baloch youth, instead of threatening the erosion of Baloch society.

It is important that this entire process is led by a central government agency such as the National Counter Terrorism Authority, whose official mandate is to “to assume the crucial role of an effective coordinating entity ... synergise the efforts of law enforcement/intelligence agencies and other departments/ministries in countering terrorism, extremism, and factors leading to terrorism in the country” and implemented through local NGOs or organisations. What’s imperative for long-term success is that the organisations implementing these community engagement activities have the trust and buy-in of the community and youth leadership in Balochistan. This can only happen if the implementing organisations are already known to and trusted by the communities on ground. Simply awarding the funding for such programming to large national or international NGOs having little or no contextual knowledge and community buy-in, could further exacerbate the problem.

It is paramount for us to understand that no matter how many terrorists we arrest and punish, no matter how good our counter-intelligence becomes to prevent similar BLA attacks, we will never be able to find a solution to Baloch militancy unless our civil, political and military leadership engages Baloch community leaders, especially the youth in good faith, treating them as equals and giving them ownership in shaping the future of Balochistan.

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