



# PAKISTAN COUNTERS TERRORIST NARRATIVES

A PATIENT MEDIA CAMPAIGN, COMBINED WITH  
DECISIVE MILITARY ACTION, IS CLEARING  
TERRITORY OF VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

## By Col. Sajiid Muzaffar Chaudray,

INTER SERVICES PUBLIC RELATIONS, PAKISTAN ARMED FORCES

Narratives, in essence, are stories and have been around as far back as humans learned to communicate. Their role in statecraft is also recognized. The advent of the information revolution ensured that the checks — if not monopoly — on the flow of information enjoyed by states in the past are no longer applicable. Any person or group connected to the internet can tell their own story. Interestingly, the dawn of the information revolution coincided roughly with the rise of global terrorism, bringing into common usage the terms “narratives” and “counternarratives.” It is common to hear these terms used in a homogenous sense. What is not well-understood are the complex dynamics behind terrorist narratives and the formulation of a counternarrative. To be successful, any narrative has to be embedded in an already existing “frame.” Terrorists normally employ the “religious frame” that is deeply embedded in their target audience.

Pakistan’s understanding of this issue has evolved. The country and its Armed Forces have been facing the full scourge of terrorism for about 15 years, resulting in huge losses and suffering. However, after a long and bitterly fought war, the tables have finally been turned upon the bastions of terror. A study of Pakistan’s response at the politico-military level clearly reveals that although the terms “narratives” and “counternarratives” were not commonly used at that time, the concepts were understood and successfully applied.

### ROOTS OF THE ENEMY’S NARRATIVE

To understand the dynamics of terrorist narratives in our region, it is necessary to understand the historical context. In 1979, two globe-shaking events erupted on Pakistan’s western borders, namely the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These events, but primarily the Afghan jihad period of the 1980s, formed the background to Pakistan’s domestic terrorist threat and its related ideology.

Occurring at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet invasion was an alarming development for the West as well as for Pakistan (for its own legitimate security reasons). A partnership gradually evolved between Pakistan and the United States — involving a large number of Western and Muslim countries — making Pakistan a front-line state in the effort against the Soviets.

A narrative of jihad with a global outreach against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was espoused. Abdullah Azzam, the chief ideologue of the Jihad Project as well as the later-to-come al-Qaida, was based in the Peshawar region from 1984 until his assassination in 1989. Although the Jihad Project achieved its intended objectives, it also formed the metanarrative of jihad, which later shaped various narratives of terrorism and extremism domestically and globally. Continuation of conflict in Afghanistan ensured that the base narrative remained alive.

The Afghan war period had a profound and lasting impact on Pakistani society. The resistance narrative obtained wide acceptance due to its legitimacy (provided by the state) and length of time (over two decades), and consequently became deeply entrenched, giving rise to extremist tendencies in society. A parallel war economy, including foreign and domestic funding, emerged and later morphed into the terror economy. The most significant effect was the destabilization of the traditional tribal system of governance in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that had served rulers admirably for more than a century. Before the Afghan conflict, Pakistan’s FATA was one of its most peaceful and easily governed areas.

With 9/11 and coalition actions in Afghanistan to uproot terrorists, the geopolitical environment underwent a paradigm change. While Pakistan’s foreign and domestic policies could be recalibrated to adjust to the changed environment, it was almost an insurmountable task, at least in the short term, to change established narratives and perceptions. The policy shifts by Pakistan’s leadership were perceived by the public as political expediency and caving to foreign pressure.

### THE REVERSAL BEGINS

Pakistan did not face serious, widespread domestic terrorism until 2001. Therefore, when the state revised its narrative, the greatest challenge it faced when communicating to the public was answering two simple questions: How could the mujahedeen of yesterday be the terrorists of today? And if jihad (holy war) against a foreign invader like Russia was legitimate, then why didn’t that apply to other foreign invaders? It was difficult to explain away these questions, and the vacuum formed by this disconnect was filled by counternarratives, propaganda and conspiracy theories that bred societal confusion.

This disconnect also affected military operations. Pakistan’s Army moved into the previously peaceful FATA in December 2001, initially to seal the porous border with Afghanistan and carry out selected operations against the large number of al-Qaida operatives who had fled Afghanistan. Major operations were carried out from March 2004 onward, but despite suffering a large number of casualties, the terrorists continued to expand their influence and at their peak controlled about 32 percent of the FATA and Swat, with another 31 percent of the area under contested control. This state of affairs had less to do with the Army’s military capabilities and more to do with the politico-military effects of the disconnect between the state’s narrative and public perceptions.

### THE RED MOSQUE CRISIS

Outside of the FATA, a significant event took place in July 2007 at a mosque complex called the Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, in the federal capital of Islamabad. Its founder, Qari Abdullah, had preached holy war during the Afghan period, later forming a close association

with al-Qaida. His two sons were clerics in 2007 and started challenging the writ of the government, calling for enforcement of Sharia and the overthrow of the government. The media criticized the government for failing to tackle the issue, and Pakistani authorities besieged the mosque July 3-10, 2007, simultaneously trying to negotiate with the militants to avoid military action. When negotiations failed on July 10, Operation Silence was launched by the Army's Special Service Group (SSG). After intense fighting, the mosque was cleared by July 11. The ferocity of the action can be judged by the 10 SSG personnel killed, the 33 wounded, and the 91 militants killed.

This action triggered an avalanche of terrorism. The same media that had demanded government action now started criticizing it. Narratives about indiscriminate military action were created, and the officers and men killed in action became controversial figures. This was extremely disturbing, because the Pakistan Army enjoys a deep societal respect and such perceptions hurt its morale. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, which henceforth would be the leading vehicle of terror, emerged after Lal Masjid.

Before the mosque action, 37 suicide attacks had taken place nationwide from 2002 to 2007, but after this action, in the six months between July 4 and December 27, 2007, 44 suicide attacks took place in major cities. This included an attack on an SSG base that killed 22 commandos. In terms of perceptions, Lal Masjid was the low point in Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, in which the state, while exercising its

legitimate authority, was made to appear as a brutal oppressor while the terrorists were glorified. Lal Masjid formed a key component of the terrorists' narrative until its gradual elimination, when the state's narratives became well-established during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in North Waziristan in June 2014.

After this crisis, due to the huge spike in terrorism, a perception emerged that any decisive action by the state would be met with immediate and terrible reprisals, anytime and anywhere. Taking advantage of these conditions, the terrorists established a hold over the Swat region. Extremist leader Mullah Fazlullah, nicknamed "Mullah Radio," used radio communications to successfully reach the public. He rallied significant support in sections of the local population. The government, having absorbed its lessons from the Lal Masjid crisis, did not opt for immediate military action but rather undertook an elaborate exercise in which it negotiated with the militant leaders and appeared to yield to their demands for Sharia rule by signing a peace agreement on February 16, 2009.

Afterward, Fazlullah and his terrorists unleashed a wave of terror in Swat that received wide media coverage. By showing the true face of the terrorists and exposing what they meant by Sharia rule, public opinion turned against them. In late March 2009, a video emerged of a girl being flogged by the terrorists, which shifted public perceptions. The barbarity of the terrorists was firmly established in the public mind, and there was an overwhelming nationwide demand to clear Swat



Pakistanis rally in Karachi in June 2014 in support of operations against the Taliban in North Waziristan. Pakistan has successfully countered extremist narratives, earning more support from the civilian population for military action. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

of this menace. It was only then, on April 26, 2009, when proper perceptions were established, that the Army moved into Swat.

The operation, code named “Rah-e-Rast,” meaning the “the Right Path,” was aptly named and was a narrative in itself. Considered a classic in counterterrorism operations, Rah-e-Rast highlighted the importance of narratives and perceptions. After Swat, the Army successfully established control of the various agencies of the FATA until only North Waziristan remained. Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in June 2014 to clear this last remaining pocket of terrorist dominance. However, by that time, the state’s narrative was overwhelmingly dominant.

In the long war of narratives, the state, at great human and material cost, clearly established that this is our war, the Taliban are the enemy, and there was no way they could stand up to the Pakistan Army.

## THE BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

The main themes of the terrorist narratives in the period from 2001 onward can be summarized as the following:

- The West had launched a crusade against Islam; jihad was therefore mandatory for each Muslim.
- The Pakistani State is un-Islamic. Democracy is *kufir* (an infidel system) that requires replacement by Sharia.
- Pakistan’s government is a U.S. ally and is attacking the Taliban at the behest of the U.S.
- Pakistan’s Army is an ally of the U.S., and therefore a *murtid* (out of the fold of Islam) army. Jihad is therefore permissible against it.
- Drone attacks are done with the government’s consent.
- The war on terror is a U.S. war; Pakistan is killing its own Muslim citizens.
- Media is a *fitna* (lure) that is misleading the masses.
- Western education is un-Islamic. Educating girls is haram (forbidden).

The terrorist narrative was meant to negate the very basis of the state and its system of governance. These narratives sought to portray the Taliban as true Islamic soldiers, sow confusion among Pakistani security forces and deny education to large parts of society.

In the initial period, the target audience of the terrorists was quite wide: illiterate and semi-literate people who could be easily influenced by religious arguments, literate people with religious leanings who could be persuaded to support the cause of the terrorists, and families of suspects in custody in terror-related cases. Drone attacks (with their collateral damage) were a major theme. Initially, even members of law enforcement and security forces were targeted to sow doubt that they were actually operating against fellow Muslims and ex-mujahedeen.

These narratives were spread through a variety of means. In the FATA and settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, large amounts of hate literature and CDs were easily available. Al-Qaida’s sophisticated social media expertise was transferred to the Taliban. In the FATA, “night letters” and pamphlets were a feared form of communication, and

noncompliance led to brutal persecution. Radio broadcasts were used successfully by Fazlullah in Swat. In the hinterlands, a new and unregulated media also served to spread the terrorist narrative through the presence of sympathizers or through intimidation. In the pre-Swat and Zarb-e-Azb period, the terrorist narrative found wider acceptance than the state’s narrative, which was struggling to adapt to the new conditions. A major reason was the existence of an already established terror narrative. Continuing conflict in Afghanistan meant that the basis for such narratives remained. Perceptions of injustice to the Muslim *Ummah* (Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, the destruction of Iraq, Libya and Syria) was an overall theme that helped propagate the narrative of “Islam under threat.”

## THE STATE'S COUNTERNARRATIVE

Narratives belong to the cognitive domain, and counternarratives must be formulated in the same domain to be effective. Essentially, there are three psychological approaches to countering terrorist narratives. They are called the “Toward, Against and Away” approaches. In the “toward” approach, the extremist group is provided some recognition and space by engaging in negotiations or accords. This approach was used occasionally to suit tactical objectives. None of the accords negotiated with the terrorists lasted long. In the “against” approach, all-out force is employed to eliminate the terrorist groups. From 2002 until June 15, 2014, we followed a combination of the “toward” and “against” approaches, as was the requirement at the time. With the “away” approach, the terrorists and their sympathizers are treated as being of no consequence or nonentities that simply need to be eliminated. Since Operation Zarb-e-Azb, this is the only approach being followed.

The target audience for the state’s narrative or counternarrative is not homogenous and can be divided into various segments. It is pyramid shaped, in which the majority population forms the base and the terrorist sympathizers, supporters, abettors and facilitators form the other end, with the hardcore terrorists at the tip. Between these segments lie the neutral element, which could be swayed either way and is therefore very important. Generally, the bulk of the general population would go along with state action in matters of terrorism. The hardcore terrorists and their facilitators cannot be persuaded by narratives alone, but require the state’s deterrent and coercive powers. A defined hierarchy exists within the hardcore terrorists, with the “mastermind” at the top of the pyramid and the “fodder” at the base. The success of any counterterrorism operation can be measured not by the number of terrorists eliminated, but by analyzing which segment of the terrorist organization they belong to. A counterterror operation may eliminate some “fodder,” but it wouldn’t affect the organization’s operations, because the fodder is easily replaceable. Counterterror operations have to hit the upper rungs to damage a terrorist organization’s capability. In other words, the battle of narratives may not mean much in isolation. Belonging to the cognitive domain, narratives and counternarratives at some stage require translation into physical



actions to be effective. Inability to transition from the cognitive to the physical means a lack of results.

In Pakistan's evolutionary process of countering terrorist narratives, a clear distinction was made within the two domains. In the cognitive domain, the salient points of the counternarratives were as follows;

- This is our war (not America's war).
- Pakistan's constitution is Islamic.
- Pakistan's society and Armed Forces have made huge sacrifices to crush terrorism.
- Terrorists are foreign-funded Khwaraj/barbarians, with no linkage to Islam, who kill women and children.
- Acquiring education for males and females is an Islamic injunction.

These counternarratives clearly reject the terrorist narratives mentioned earlier. In the battle of narratives, the greatest challenge to overcome was establishing that this is our war. Once that was achieved (partially in Swat

and comprehensively in Zarb-e-Azb), the identification of the terrorists as the enemy and the legitimacy of Pakistan's security forces automatically fell into place.

Much work was done to explain how the terrorists misused the Holy Quran by quoting its verses out of context. For example "kill them wherever you meet them" is one of the more well-known verses, but it was used out of context by omitting the operative first part which says "and fight in the cause of Allah against those who fight against you but do not transgress, surely Allah loves not the transgressors."

These verses, in the correct context, are self-explanatory. The meaning of transgression is also clear since Islam has clear codes about warfare that prohibit any excess in war and make a clear distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Therefore, the soldiers of Pakistan's Army could take pride in being Muslim soldiers and fighting against a fitna that distorted religion for its own objectives.



A boy attends Eid al-Fitr prayers at the Jamia Masjid in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in July 2016. Terrorists' false religious narratives must be countered within a religious domain. REUTERS

## WINNING THE WAR

The counternarratives needed to be built upon solid foundations that could turn into convictions. Without true conviction, it was not possible to fight the level of fanaticism among the terrorists. The three main pillars of the counternarrative were the legitimacy of the state's actions, which had public support; the fighting prowess of Pakistan's Army, which left no doubt in the mind of the citizen, the soldier and the terrorist that final victory was inevitable; and finally the relegation of the terrorist as the enemy belonging to an "out group" that was creating *fasad*, or disturbing the peace and tranquility of the land. These cardinal counternarratives were aimed at rejecting the entire terrorist narrative (linked with the "away" approach) and to continually shrinking societal space for them.

Aside from the cognitive domain, the most important aspect is the physical environment, which had to provide the requisite support or authentication to the counternarrative. In the physical domain, the terrorists aimed at creating an environment of

terror and fear by indiscriminate acts of killing and maiming civilians, women, children, political leaders and activists, and beheading captured soldiers. But gradually, these acts also created a feeling of revulsion.

Regarding the state's actions, Operation Zarb-e-Azb was the most high-profile response and one that greatly restored security. But there were other facets, too, such as legislation to support law enforcement operations, madrasa reforms, and improving the socio-economic conditions in the FATA through legislation and massive development. After the attack on Army Public School Peshawar on December 16, 2014, the government worked on a comprehensive national action plan to address all facets relating to terrorism. The overall effect of these actions has been that the terrorists' capacity to perpetrate mass attacks has been significantly degraded. As a result, the public's confidence in the state's capacity, especially that of the Army in providing security, has increased. With this increased sense of security, the public not only embraces the state's actions but reduces the support network for terrorists.

## SPREADING THE MESSAGE

To disseminate the state's narrative, all possible mediums were and are being employed. After the army school attack, new codes of conduct were formulated for the media. Media space was denied to terrorist sympathizers who had previously confused public opinion. A countrywide network of radio stations has been established to reach distant regions. Prominent religious scholars reject the terrorist narratives and highlight the correct spirit of Islam in their talks and media appearances. The Armed Forces public relations department, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), took the lead in encouraging counternarratives in the field of film and music. After the school massacre, ISPR released a song, *Bara Dushman* (Some Enemy), in which the children challenge the terrorists. The song captured the mood of the nation and became a great hit.

The song created strategic effects in the perceptual domain, as indicated when the Taliban issued a parody of this song; it had little or no effect. ISPR produced another song on the first anniversary of the school massacre on December 16, 2015. It, too, became a hit. The sequel song's theme was "we have to educate the enemy's children." It implies that while the complete destruction of the terrorists and their ideology is certain, the state has no quarrel with their children, whom it wants to educate using the same syllabus declared haram by the terrorists. In each of the two songs, the nation's enemy has been clearly identified and called out. After years of confusion, this was no small achievement.

## BEST PRACTICES

For Pakistan, reversing the metanarrative of jihad had been the greatest challenge. It has taken us 13 years and a huge cost in blood and treasure to accomplish. However, the battle of narratives is an ongoing one and requires a constant response to ensure long-term success. Here are some recommendations to keep in mind:

- Ideological or religious narratives can only be countered within their domain.
- Various segments of the target audience have to be analyzed carefully and an appropriate counternarrative designed for them. The mediums for propagation of narratives must have maximum outreach and effect.
- Media is the key to propagate narratives. Media space must be denied to terrorists and their narratives at all costs.
- Counternarratives (cognitive domain) can only be effective in the presence of matching measures/actions by the state (physical domain) and vice versa.
- Terrorism has no religious basis. Portraying terrorists as connected to Islam aids the terrorist narrative while blunting the spirit of a counternarrative.
- Maligning Islam or hurting the religious sensitivities of Muslims (e.g., films, cartoons, etc.) plays into the hands of the terrorists and extremists.
- There should be zero tolerance for extremist activities such as hate-preaching in Muslim communities in Western societies. □