Counter-Ideology:
Unanswered Questions and the Case of Pakistan

By Muhammad Amir Rana

A counter-ideological response to neutralise and defeat terrorism has become a popular theme in the anti-extremism discourse. It is widely believed that ideology is the key motivating force behind the current wave of terrorism. In fact, academics, journalists, and counter-terrorism experts take for granted that Islamic extremism has its roots in a particular extremist version of religion. Therefore, promotion of a moderate and peaceful version of religion is essential to combat terrorism at its roots.

This ideological approach has led to some interesting perspectives in the bid to find solutions to the problem of Islamic extremism. One of the more attractive ones is the "Radicals versus Sufis" perspective. According to this viewpoint, Takfiri, Salafi, and Wahhabi ideologies are radical and responsible for promoting terrorism. Opposed to these radical ideologies is Sufism, which is hailed as a moderate version of Islam capable of countering radical ideologies.

The following assumptions underpin this ideological approach to tackling terrorism:

- Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups gain ideological inspiration from Takfiri, Salafi, and Wahhabi versions of Islam. Jihad is central to these ideologies, so they are the sources of terrorism;
- The Salafi and Wahhabi extremist movements have political agendas and want to impose their version of Islam not only in Muslim states, but also throughout the world;
- Sufism, on the other hand, stresses self-purification and has little or no political dimension. So, it is a moderate movement and cannot pose any serious security or political threat to the world;
- A Wahhabi cannot be moderate; and
- A follower of Sufism cannot be an extremist.

Given the popularity of these theories, it is important to examine and question these assumptions. First, there is a need to define the objectives of this approach (i.e. what do we intend to achieve by promoting counter-ideologies?). The biggest challenges facing policymakers across the world today are: elimination of terrorism; and neutralisation of the systems created by the extremist forces. In that context, is it necessary—and possible—to eliminate radical ideologies? And can these ideologies be countered by Sufism alone?

Secondly, there is a need to comprehend the Wahabi and Salafi interpretation of Islam. Is extremism inherent in these ideologies? If so, how and in which regions can we see its impact? Can these ideologies not be transformed into the moderate ideologies? Conversely, are all Sufi movements moderate and incapable of generating any violent movement? Are Sufi ideologies intrinsically moderate or this perception is based on its cultural expression of music, dance, festivals, etc?

The Case of Pakistan

In the case of Pakistan, the situation is more complicated than the above "Radical versus Sufis" division suggests. There are 22 organizations and parties that represent the Wahhabi/Salafi sect. Out of them, only three—the Jamat ud-Da'wah (JuD), its subsidiary group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and another small group Jamat ul-Mujahedeen (JM)—favour militant jihad. Another Salafi militant group, Tehreek ul-Mujahedeen, which is active in Kashmir, considers its movement a part of the Kashmiri freedom struggle.

Apart from these groups, every other Wahabi party considers "Jihad against the Self" (*Jihad bil-Nafs*) as the greater jihad and believes that militant jihad cannot be waged until declared by the state. These parties do not consider the jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan obligatory. The JuD, LeT and JM are also antagonistic towards the current democratic system in Pakistan and want to enforce a *Khilafah*, or the Caliphate, whereas the other Wahabi parties not only recognise Pakistan as a legitimate, constitutional state, but also take part in electoral politics individually or in alliance with other political parties.

Similar differences of opinion on jihad and democracy are also found within the various groups of Deobandis,

which are usually put into the category of Wahhabis because of some common theological precepts. Out of 46 major Deobandi parties in Pakistan, 10 are militant in nature, with jihadist and sectarian agendas. Moreover, these militant parties do not enjoy popular support from the mainstream religious clergy. Even on the issue of support for the Taliban, there are diverse contradictory views within the major Deoband political party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. A large faction of the party, led by Maulana Muhammad Khan Sherani and Khaleed Somroo, remained critical of the Taliban, even when they were in power in Afghanistan. Last year, concerning the Lal Mosque issue in Islamabad, most of the Deobandi clerics from religious-political parties and the Madressah Board had denounced the activities of the students. So, the ideological demarcation within the school(s) of thought tends to revolve around jihad.

Sufism is a complex and cross-cutting belief system in Pakistan. Even the Deobandis believe in Sufism. Naqshbandi, the major Sufi cult in Pakistan, is mainly comprised of the Deobandis. Furthermore, it is also interesting that Maulana Masood Azhar, head of the major terrorist group Jaish-e-Muhammad, is also believer of Sufism and has restricted his followers to the practices of the Naqshbandi cult.

To further complicate the intermingling of beliefs and practices, the Barelvis, who are considered to be representatives of Sufism in Pakistan, are not free from pro-militant jihadi tendencies. In the Kashmir insurgent movement during the 1990s the Barelvis were quite prominent. Some Barelvi militant groups, such al-Baraq and Tehreek-e-Jihad, are still active. Sunni Tehrik, a major Sunni sectarian group, was found to be involved in the violent activities in Karachi and Interior Sindh. The Safi'es, an important Sufi group in Afghanistan, was an ally of the Taliban in their struggle to take over the country. They even managed to obtain a few important government offices under the Taliban regime.

Pro-Sufism Barelvis dominate Pakistan's religious landscape. The reason why they did not play a major role in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s was not because of any religious or ideological bindings, but because of political factors. The Saudi influence in the Afghan jihad was another reason for their marginalization. The Saudis had supported only Wahhabi and Deobandi groups during the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Arabs and Africans who took part of the Afghan jihad had similar sectarian orientations as the Wahhabis and felt more at ease working alongside the local Salafi and Deobandi commanders. The Afghan and Pakistani groups had also preferred to work with Arab and African mujahideen because they had the more substantial resources.

Had it not been for the Saudi and Arab factor, the Barelvis too would have been able to secure their share in the jihad effort. If that had happened, would the promotion of the Wahabi ideology be suggested as a counter-strategy today?

When one ideology is supported financially, morally and politically to counter the other, it can increase sectarian strife in a society. Pakistan faced the consequences during the Afghan jihad as sectarian strife dramatically increased in the country. Similarly, strengthening one group or sect can give rise to similar trends in other sects. So we see that many Sufi groups have also been radicalized and they are as anti-US and anti-Western as other violent groups, though they lack the training and resources received by the Deobandis and Wahabis.

Instead of targeting the entire Wahhabi/Salafi community, can terrorism and political extremism not be countered by encouraging the more moderate elements within the Salafi school of thought?

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that the Wahhabi movements have created challenges within Muslim societies. They have marginalised the elements of moderation by promoting a narrow vision of Islam. But how these movements are changing Muslim societies and what kind of political, economic, cultural and social challenges they pose is a separate issue. Their domestic and international implications demand different kinds of strategies to the one proposed by counter-ideology theorists.

It is not a surprise that campaigns to promote counter-Islamist ideologies like Sufism have had little success in Pakistan. The official moderate enlightenment and Sufism movements have failed to gain acceptance among the masses. Anti-US and anti-Western feelings are on the rise in Pakistani society and any campaign aimed to counter these sentiments is perceived as a part of the American agenda. It also remains a fact that a large majority of the educated class in Pakistan considers the spiritual rituals of the *Pirs* inappropriate and activities like

use of drugs and prostitution on the shrines immoral. The Sufi culture in Pakistan itself needs reforms. That is why the government-sponsored enlightened moderation has failed to attract common people. Instead, such efforts are increasing support for radical movements.

To develop a comprehensive counter-extremism strategy, there is a need to examine all the aspects of this problem and assess the impact of promoting so-called moderate counter-ideologies in Muslim societies.

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