Farhadi, A., Sanders, R. & Masys, A.J. (eds.)
Great Power Competition Volume 3: Cyberspace: The Fifth Domain

Springer

Countering Violent Extremism in Central Asia and South Asia: Islamophobia and Cyber-Radicalization in the Digital Era

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Abstract Widespread political and economic uncertainty following the COVID-19 pandemic, paired with increased access to digital messaging and online social media platforms, has rendered vulnerable populations in Central Asia and South Asia (CASA) even more susceptible to misinformation, radical propaganda, and population targeting by violent extremists. More, studies show that violent extremism is inextricably linked with Islamophobia. Violent extremist recruiters frequently capitalize on publicized Islamophobic events to spread digital misinformation and lure disenfranchised recruits, particularly among youth populations. A debilitated Afghanistan only compounds these issues in CASA. The growing humanitarian crisis in the wake of U.S. military withdrawal, leaves this impoverished nation ripe for the proliferation of violent extremist activity that will reach far beyond its borders. Weaponized cyber-misinformation is a moving target that threatens even rural populations. Effective deterrence calls for novel multilateral efforts between great and local powers, both on and offline, to dispel skewed narratives and reinforce positive counter-narratives. While expanding access to digital communications in CASA presents obvious challenges for countering violent extremism, it likewise affords vital new opportunities for cooperation between global and regional powers to reach previously unreachable, vulnerable populations.

Keywords Great power competition · Islamophobia · Countering violent extremism · Radicalization · Central Asia and South Asia · Afghanistan · Counter terrorism · Cyber messaging

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A. Farhadi et al. (eds.), *The Great Power Competition Volume 3*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04586-8_5

Introduction

Widespread political and economic uncertainty following the COVID-19 pandemic, paired with increased access to social media and digital messaging platforms in rural areas, has rendered already vulnerable populations in Central Asia and South Asia (CASA) more susceptible to misinformation and population targeting by violent extremists. In Bangladesh, for instance, Islamic radicalization has "surged in the COVID-19 period as more terrorist organizations take to the internet to propagate their cause," according to Shafi Md Mostofa, Assistant Professor of Religion and Culture at the University of Dhaka. He explains that the destabilizing effects of COVID-19 alongside "persistent social deterioration will aggravate young people even more and create the perfect conditions for terrorist organizations to recruit them" (2020).

Exacerbating underlying regional vulnerabilities is the destructive stigma, pervasive in popular thought and amplified in global digital media, that Islam is largely synonymous with violent extremism. This demoralizing stigma further marginalizes already at-risk youth populations by reinforcing suspicion of "outsiders" and expanding target audiences in the region. These vulnerable youths are often subjected to misinformation and the radical counter-narrative that "Westerners" seek to stifle or even eradicate the Islamic religious way of life.

Compounding these factors since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, is the popular claim that the U.S. was "defeated" by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (popularly known as the "Taliban"). Frequently touted online by Islamist propagandists, this claim has amplified Islamist appeal in cyberspace, heightened recruitment efforts and enrollment, and spurred a dangerous new era of violent radicalization. Violent extremists capitalize on these divisive narratives in CASA and beyond to convince target audiences that the religion of Islam itself is under attack and must be protected at all costs. For example, the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS K) targets youth populations in Afghanistan and the wider region. Muggah has explained that ISIS K's "attacks against U.S., Pakistani, Russian, and other countries' security forces—skillfully shared on social media—may solidify its base and attract new recruits sympathetic to its harsh brand of political Islam." Moreover, "the group's active digital outreach could likewise inspire organized or lone-wolf attacks not just in Afghanistan, but also in neighboring countries" [1].

The defensive stance of violent extremists has been inadvertently legitimized in the "West" by mainstream media and radicalization theories that support the notion that radical religiosity, specifically within the Islamic religion, is a primary catalyst for acts of violent extremism [10]. Amnesty International recognizes that Muslims are often targets of hate crimes arising from anti-terror campaigns, reporting that "discrimination against Muslims in European counter-terrorism efforts has helped to create an environment in which Muslims are more likely to be the subject of hate speech and attacks" [2]. Additionally, anti-Muslim hate crimes, often prompted by misinformation, elicit retaliation by violent Islamic extremists who then use these hate crimes to justify further acts of violence at home and abroad—and the vicious cycle of retribution is continued.

While deterring the spread of violent radicalization globally, particularly in CASA, has been a vital national interest for decades, increased regional access to online social media and messaging platforms has escalated this issue to a near-crisis level. Additionally, violent extremist recruiters have become more adept at understanding and utilizing specific population dynamics and human trauma variables to target online audiences through sophisticated digital messaging. According to Dr. Aleksandra Nesic of the J.F.K. Special Warfare Center, "ISIS and Al-Qaeda […] understand the need that is missing [in their target audience] and then tailor their messaging to fulfill the need" (2020). Even in remote areas of CASA, many communities are swiftly gaining access to the internet and online social networking platforms that violent extremists commonly utilize to spread radical propaganda and misinformation. This is also true internationally in diaspora populations that maintain communication, influence, and interests in their native countries [12].

Before any lasting and meaningful progress against violent radicalism can be made in CASA, false narratives surrounding Islam, violence, and the "West" must be expeditiously addressed and countered with regional local leaders and populations. The negative portrayal and false narrative that the religion of Islam is synonymous with violent extremism (popularized in the "West"), inhibits building key alliances with local communities and tribal leaders who are essential to countering violent extremism, especially in rural areas. In their comprehensive RAND report, *The Muslim World After 9/11*, Rabasa, et al. suggest that "tribal culture and affiliation can play a substantial role in the extent to which radical, violent forms of Islamism prosper in some regions of the Middle East and South Asia" (2004).

Additionally, there is the ongoing problem of mitigating "skewed perspectives" that arise from the prolific output of digital misinformation on social media and other cyber-messaging platforms regarding current events, religious tenets, the scope of insurgencies, etc. Misinformation campaigns are not limited to events in CASA or issues of violent Islamic extremism. Rather, they remain "moving targets" in global cyberspace, ranging from international and local news to politics, and most recently, events relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. False narratives that conflate Islam with violent extremism are only one example of how weaponized digital misinformation can become dangerous. Speaking at the third biannual Great Power Competition Conference (GPCC), General Richard Clarke, Commander, U.S. SOCOM, stated that, "social media has reshaped political warfare, allowing the delivery of information operations effects at unimaginable speed and scale, empowered by tech in cyberspace" [7].

Currently, Afghanistan and its neighbors in CASA face the greatest imminent threat of accelerated violent extremism since the withdrawal of U.S. military troops in late 2021 and the subsequent reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The "military victory" of the IEA is currently being exploited on social media to embolden support in the region and beyond. The BBC reports that tweets from Taliban members, "boasted about the group's recent victories—sometimes prematurely—and pushed several hashtags, including #kabulregimecrimes (attached to tweets accusing the Afghan government of war crimes); #westandwithTaliban (an attempt to drive grassroots support); and #نَصْرٌ_مِّنَ_اللهِ_وَفَتْحٌ_قَرِيبٌ (help from God and victory is near). The first hashtags at least trended in Afghanistan" (2021).

Afghanistan's present volatile and vulnerable state, now on the verge of becoming a failed state, renders it ripe for a significant resurgence in violent extremism. In recent history, Afghanistan has found itself in the crosshairs of violent extremists who capitalized on its fractured ethnic identity and weak governance by taking refuge in the country to further their violent agenda against the "west". The most notorious and tragic manifestation of violent extremism planned and carried out from Afghanistan resulted in 9/11. The attacks were orchestrated by Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, resulting in a U.S. military response in Afghanistan and the longest war in U.S. history.

Outcomes of violent extremism, exacerbated by an Afghanistan left fractured and vulnerable in the past, should serve as a cautionary tale for future cooperation between great powers and local leaders in CASA. To avoid such devastating outcomes in the future, the U.S. must remain strategically engaged in Afghanistan. Continued U.S. engagement in Afghanistan benefits all stakeholders in the region, including powerful influencers like China, Russia, and Pakistan. Now is the time for expedient, multilateral cyber-initiatives that focus on mitigating misinformation to affirm U.S. intentions for the continued support of the Afghan people, and to dispel the notion that the "West" is the enemy (and a "weakened" one at that) of Islam or Afghanistan.

While rapidly evolving technology offers violent extremists unmatched opportunities for messaging and population-targeting in CASA and globally, it likewise affords unprecedented opportunities for great power cooperation to mitigate violent radicalization more effectively across vulnerable youth populations. Shared cyber platforms can be employed to positively engage local leaders and vulnerable populations in the region and to encourage unity against violent extremism. Afghanistan must also be re-engaged through economic development such as the New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) that can stave off an imminent state failure. While Afghanistan remains critically debilitated, heightened threats from violent extremist organizations (VEO) in cyberspace and on the ground remain potent. Policymakers, reticent to engage in initiatives that may strengthen the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) position, can balance future risks with contingent development strategies, as well as short-term humanitarian aid, that increase strategic leverage and oversight.

This chapter broadly surveys how Islamophobia and weaponized misinformation interact with social media and digital messaging in cyber space to catalyze violent Islamic radicalization. The chapter further suggests that effective mitigation of violent extremism in cyberspace necessitates a cooperative, inter-state approach to countering violent extremism initiatives by regional actors and great powers. Such initiatives may include (1) multilateral efforts aimed at dispelling Islamophobic rhetoric linking the religion of Islam with violent extremism; (2) building trust and alliances with local populations and tribal leaders to mitigate violent extremist rhetoric both online and offline; and (3) sustained cooperation between great powers and regional actors in areas of cyber intelligence sharing, cyber mitigation, and cyber counter-messaging in CASA.

Stigmatized Islam and Radicalized Cyberspace

The Rise of Modern Islamophobia

Following the tragic events of 9/11 in 2001, discourse and theories on radicalization and violent extremism have increasingly centered on the role of religion (Islam) in the development of violent extremism. Behavioral models ranging from Moghaddam's staircase to Hafez's puzzle model (Hafez and Mullins 2015 as referenced in Farhadi 2020) have largely focused on social theory aspects of radicalization, particularly the social process of religious indoctrination. Though most modern radicalization theories agree that violent Islamic extremism arises from a skewed understanding of the Islamic faith, the direct correlation between Islam and violent extremism emerging from such studies persists in mainstream Western thought today.

Social theories of radicalization that support the notion that religion (Islam) is the essential impetus for acts of violent extremism are often used to support radical Islamophobic ideologies [10]. The conflation of Islam with violent extremism often leads to the false narrative that Islamic extremism is the most prevalent form of violent extremism today. Modern theories of radicalization, developed to address and mitigate threats from violent extremists, may themselves, unwittingly include Islamophobic language that further legitimizes the false perception that Islamic extremism is more radical, more dangerous, and more prevalent than other forms of violent extremism. Additionally, "Americans have consumed media headlines about the Patriot Act, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, violent extremist organizations, and the Muslim ban, all perpetuating an association between Muslims and terrorism" [18].

While theories that emphasize the prominent role of religion (Islam) in "violent radicalization" may have negatively influenced public perceptions of religion and Islam in general, the emergence and proliferation of online social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and the resulting rapid spread of misinformation, have facilitated increasingly more virulent expressions of Islamophobia worldwide.

Recent statistics show that there are "over 3.30 billion [users on] Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp or Messenger each month and according to Facebook…over 2.80 billion monthly active users and growing as of January 27, 2021" [24]. Such statistics demonstrate that social media is far from waning in popularity or its ability to influence global society. Social media usage is expanding by approximately 12% each year on average globally. Exact social media and internet usage statistics for predominantly rural states such as Afghanistan are less clear. However, recent trends confirm expanding access to internet services, primarily through increased availability and use of cell phones in rural areas. A recent report shows that Afghanistan had 7,337,489 regular internet users, and in 2018, "over 4.7 million of the population of Afghanistan had access to the internet" (Internet World Stats 2021). Additionally, Facebook now has "3,848,400 users in Afghanistan," according to one online source [21].

Digital social media platforms offer users a significant amount of anonymity, allowing for a freer sharing of radical views and statements that might otherwise remain hidden during face-to-face group gatherings. The continuous exchange of radical and often violent anti-Islamic rhetoric with other "like-minded" users often creates a dangerous false sense of individual and group primacy that can lead to "mob rule" victimization, both online and offline. Countering the continuous output of Islamophobic hate speech and misinformation on digital platforms lies at the core of mitigating violent Islamic radicalization and its dangerous outcomes globally. Ironically, it is often the emotional and psychological phenomena directly resulting from Islamophobic victimization and targeting, including feelings of alienation and helplessness, that can and do render victims of hate speech more susceptible to the counter-narratives (equally isolating) of violent extremists and possible radicalization [23].

Islamophobia in Cyberculture

With the constant stream of digital news today, Islamic hate speech is on the rise among social media outlets, with serious consequences for victims in the "real" world. A recent study by Castano-Pulgarín et al. found that "the most attacked religion in the world is Islam and it seems to be motivated by an Islamophobic sentiment, favored by the cultural processes of globalization and digital media circulation (Horsti 2017)" [5, p. 2]. Regarding outcomes from news events, the authors concluded that, "Overall, these expressions found Muslims being demonized online through negative attitudes, discrimination, stereotypes, physical threats and online harassment, which all had the potential to incite violence or prejudicial actions because it disparages and intimidates a protected individual or group" [5, p. 4].

According to Irene Zempi and Imran Awanin, in their book entitled *Islamophobia: Lived Experiences of Online and Offline Victimization*, "…given that they [the victims] were targeted because of the 'visibility' of their Muslim identity —which was easily identifiable because of their Muslim name and/or Muslim appearance either online or offline—participants were unable to take comfort in the belief that what happened to them was simply random and 'could have happened to anyone'… [and] at the same time, online Islamophobic hate crimes made participants particularly fearful due to the anonymity that the internet provides its users" [[23], p. 2].

One striking illustration of the widespread online victimization of Muslims was the proliferation of the hashtag "#StopIslam", popularized in 2016 on Instagram. A recent study on the "demonization" of Islam, and the #StopIslam hashtag campaign specifically, revealed that "prejudices and stereotypes about the Arab world continue to expand and spread in the digital environment so that in recent years, the social alarm has increased over the ability of these media to increase and propagate hate speech. The current media ecosystem offers social intercommunication, which

has affected how societies are built, social relations, and the concept of "us" and "them". Additionally, researchers suggested that hate speech has become so normative within social media communities that platforms such as Instagram "accept it in their behavior policies" [6, p. 15].

While some theorists claim that "discrimination" (here, Islamophobia) is not a significant factor in the cycle of violent radicalization, recent research demonstrates a distinct correlation between anti-Muslim and pro-Islamic extremism in online search queries, suggesting that Islamophobic "content" may catalyze interest in Islamic radicalism. "There are higher reports of news regarding people joining ISIS in communities where people express a strong anti-Muslim sentiment, finding that 'anti-Muslim searches are strongly associated with pro-ISIS searches, particularly in communities with high levels of poverty and ethnic homogeneity'" (Fox 2018 as referenced in [10]).

Regarding the central role of Islamophobia in the cycle of Islamic radicalization, Clinton Watts, a violent extremism expert with the Foreign Policy Research Institute, states, "this [Islamophobic rhetoric] plays [right] into the hands of [violent radical jihadists] because it doubles down on Al Qaeda's justification for attacking the United States, to begin with" (Almedia 2017 as referenced in [10]). Violent extremist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) intentionally target marginalized Islamic youth populations with ultra-slick, glamorous online campaigns to attract potential Jihadis [3]. Violent extremists seeking to recruit potential radicals through online internet platforms rely heavily on Islamophobic digital "content" to support their own violent rhetoric. They frequently use news events such as Muslim travel bans in the U.S. to legitimize the counter-narrative that all Westerners see Muslims as terrorists and ultimately seek to eradicate Islam.

Utilizing various digital channels, sophisticated and predatory recruiters attract potential followers by targeting and exploiting distinct population dynamics. They then focus on individual traits and emotional needs, such as the desire for greater peer acceptance, to cultivate a contrived sense of intimacy and community through online correspondences. Recruiters create a "safe space" to slowly introduce their radical counter-narratives and begin the deliberate process of indoctrination into a culture of radicalized violence. Husain Ehsani from the University of Baghdad notes that ISIS employs "sophisticated digital recruitment and radicalization efforts through virtual coaches" on social media platforms with encrypted messaging [9].

To effectively counter violent extremism, policymakers must recognize the overarching role of Islamophobia in the cycle of violent radicalization, and more specifically, the dangerous impacts generated on social media platforms utilized by violent extremists. "Not only does Islamophobia contribute to alienation and discrimination, which are popularly cited grievances that leave individuals vulnerable to radicalization, but the direct correlation between a rise in hate crimes with a rise in ISIS support shows that Islamophobia may also exacerbate the radicalization process" [10].

Social Media and Radicalization

The ability to reach marginalized populations grows as regional access to the internet rapidly expands in developing nations. Today, little question remains that violent extremist groups utilize social media to attract and recruit potential radicals. It is unclear exactly how these groups determine which platforms are most effective for their specific agendas. Unlike ISIS, most armed groups strive to maintain a lower international profile on social media but have become more adept at utilizing these platforms for attracting regional support [8].

According to Laura Courchesne and Brian McQuinn, on the relationship between social media and armed groups, "[T]here are over 1,456 armed groups operating in civil wars in Mali, Libya, and Syria. Almost all use social media to target regional and local audiences but vary in their choice of platform. Social media is also providing novel and underexplored funding channels". Further, "the next global threat to exploit social media will emerge from the groups currently avoiding detection or attention by platforms" (2021).

In a worrying recent development, the private company Electronic Horizons Foundation (EHF) launched a new, more secure, cloud platform to facilitate digital interactions and online activity among ISIS supporters globally [13]. EHF's inaugural announcement stated that "[I]n light of recent developments in the media arena and the restriction of technology companies to content, we resorted to developing solutions that provide a space for propagation between the fellow supporters and the general Muslim community, so that the benefits may prevail." As explained by Bridget Johnson of Homeland Security Today, "The Electronic Horizons Foundation launched in January 2016 as an IT help desk of sorts to walk ISIS supporters through how to encrypt their communications and otherwise avoid detection online while coordinating with and recruiting jihadists" (2021). Sophisticated measures such as this, taken to ensure a meaningful online presence with targeted audiences, clearly demonstrate the critical role of social media in garnering support for groups like ISIS and other violent extremists.

A poignant example of how violent extremists aptly manipulate social media is the bold, though now defunct, ISIS Android Twitter app known as "The Dawn of Glad Tidings," released in 2014. The app allowed ISIS recruiters to randomly upload their propagandist tweets using followers' accounts (often thousands at one time) along with news and other media. According to J.M. Berger, Associate Fellow at The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, "It's one of many tools that ISIS uses to manipulate the perception on social media that their content is bigger and more popular than it might be if you were looking at just their organic supporters" (Berger as cited by [20]).

Groups like ISIS are savvy and strategic in appealing to wider audiences using sensationalist and violent propaganda aimed mainly at younger audiences. Often, their messaging has less to do with fulfilling a religious call to duty and more to do with the "noble aim" of defending group principles using violence. A recent study that examined the content of 20,000 ISIS followers' accounts on Twitter between

2016 and 2017, determined that consistent with the nature of ISIS social media content, the users (ISIS supporters) with the most significant number of followers frequently posted jargon related to revenge, violence, and extremism. By contrast, those ISIS supporters with fewer followers were engaged in dialogue primarily related to religious concerns, such as "religious justifications for the use of violence" [22]. In other words, violent radicalizers strategically broadcast violent imagery and language online to elicit widespread attention that will yield a handful of individuals susceptible to recruitment.

Though IS factions and supporters have now migrated the bulk of digital communications to more sophisticated encrypted messaging platforms, such as Threema, they continue to post new recruitment and violent teaser videos aimed at younger target audiences on Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram, among other sites [4]. Rita Katz, director of the SITE Intelligence Group, predicts that groups like ISIS will continue to grow their presence on social media: "At this stage, with the addicted usage of Twitter by the jihadists, I'm not sure how it can be stopped…for the last three years we have been warning that social media is becoming a hydra, an uncontrollable source for jihad, due to its easy use, rapid updates with easy connection and unlimited viewers" (Katz as cited by [20]).

While far from exhaustive, these findings broadly illustrate the scope of social media employed by extremist groups like ISIS, including the sophisticated measures undertaken to engage and maintain their online audiences. Additionally, these findings suggest the efficacy of violent propaganda to attract attention (and subsequent followers) to social media sites, while highlighting the less significant role of religiosity or religion in attracting (at least initially) online followers to the cyberculture of violent extremism. Further research is necessary to determine how less-prominent violent extremist groups in CASA and beyond utilize social media to effectively motivate regional supporters and gain funding, while remaining, at least in part, "under the radar" [8].

Weaponized Misinformation and Messaging

One of the more challenging aspects of countering violent extremism is mitigating the proliferation of digital misinformation custom-tailored to specific populations and online demographics. In the case of Islamic violent extremist recruitment, aspects of the Islamic cultural narrative (such as Sharia) are often intentionally skewed and presented online to entice young male populations to enlist in a "just cause." Those who succumb to radicalization may not hold grievances related to any specific extremist agenda but are often instead attracted to the notion of defending a just cause in and of itself, a "cause" primarily supported by skewed narratives. In this case, misinformation becomes a dangerous weapon employed by violent extremists to elicit a desired emotional response.

According to Oliver Roy from the European University Institute in Italy, "Radicalization is [typically] a youth revolt against society, articulated on an

Islamic religious narrative of jihad…It is not the uprising of a Muslim community victim of poverty and racism: only young people join, including converts who did not share the 'sufferings' of Muslims in Europe. These rebels without a cause find in jihad a 'noble' and global cause and are consequently instrumentalized by a radical organization (Al Qaeda, ISIS) that has a strategic agenda" (Roy as cited by [19]).

"Weaponized" digital misinformation campaigns, employed by violent extremists and their followers to whip up emotion, are prevalent on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have recently become more widely accessible in rural areas across CASA through the use of "smartphones." Naturally, as rural populations gain greater access to the internet and social media outlets, opportunities for violent extremists to reach larger groups of uneducated youth populations (those most susceptible to radicalization) will increase exponentially. Imran Awan of Birmingham City University emphasizes the influential role of information in social media, stating, "ISIS tactics of propaganda, recruitment, and radicalization all emerge within the online virtual space. The power of social media for groups such as ISIS is immense, as demonstrated when the Iraqi government blocked access to many social media accounts because they were being used to plan attacks" [3, p. 147].

To address the problem of mitigating online misinformation as it relates specifically to violent Islamic extremism, Roy suggests that "beyond increasing our intelligence capacity…we need to debunk the myth that radical terrorists are heroes and subvert the idea that the Islamic State is successful and impervious to our attacks. What's more, we need to foster the idea that Islam is a normal part of society, not a dangerous or oppressed minority. "Instead of 'exceptionalizing,' we should 'normalize'" (Roy as Cited by [19]). Ideally, this strategy can be extended to rural youth populations throughout CASA by employing regional entities who have established relationships with tribal and community leaders. While reaching urban youth with counter-messaging is essential, finding novel pathways to rural communities that have recently gained access to social media and online platforms is critical.

From Madrassas to Airwaves: Radicalization Among Afghan Youth Populations

Afghanistan has a long and troubled history with violent extremism. It's most notable and tragic culmination resulted in the attacks of 9/11, which were planned and executed by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda while taking refuge in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, at the end of the "longest war" between the U.S. and Afghanistan—a war initiated in direct response to the attacks of 9/11—the same pressing issue of preventing violent extremist groups from establishing a "home base" in a weakened Afghanistan (now facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis) still exists today.

The many geopolitical and economic factors contributing to Afghanistan's present weakened state and ongoing vulnerability to violent extremism are well

documented. The country's landlocked status and relative poverty arising from lack of sufficient market access are not least among them. Equally damaging, if less obvious, is Afghanistan's fractured cultural and ideological identity, exacerbated by decades of untenable foreign occupation and violent insurgencies. In conjunction, a continued lack of access to formal education has left rural male youths (a significant portion of the Afghan population at approximately 70%) underexposed to Islamic "thought" besides that offered by their local tribal leaders and mullahs. These local leaders may or may not be motivated at times by the financial support, protection, or ideological sway of various violent extremist groups vying for local influence. Rural male youth populations remain the most susceptible to the impact of violent extremism in Afghanistan— often falling prey to the romanticized, misleading promises of a new life of wealth, honor, and worldly adventure [11].

A special report by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) in 2015, including interviews and data collected in the Afghan provinces of Nangarhar, Balkh, and Herat, "to elicit views on extremist groups, both violent and nonviolent and factors thought to induce youth to join such groups," found that independent local mullahs (sometimes acting as proxies for organized extremist groups) had the most significant influence on rural youth populations. Additionally, the report found that rural youth populations were more susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups while educated urban populations were more inclined toward participation in nonviolent Islamist groups. According to the 2015 report, "It is [often] unaffiliated extremist mullahs, rather than the Taliban or other organized groups, who are believed to be [historically] the principal sources of radicalization… interviewees also noted that the outreach of these mullahs extended beyond the mosque and the madrassa, citing computer and English-language courses run by one cleric and naming several poor neighborhoods of Mazar-e Sharif as places where violent thought was being taught along with Excel and PowerPoint" [11, p. 8].

The report further suggests that difficulty in countering violent extremism in Afghanistan "is partly the result of the absence of a clear, indigenous anti-extremist narrative" (Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson, and Peyton Cooke). The study claims that while the broader narratives of Islamic extremist groups typically treat the plight of Muslims globally, "the overarching narrative [in Afghanistan] is [usually] jihad against the 'occupying' U.S.-led coalition and the 'un-Islamic' Afghan government. The violence is more about fighting against uninvited guests than for a particular ideology" [11, p. 1]. The necessity of establishing a unified counter-narrative in Afghanistan, accessible to rural populations and designed to supplant the rhetoric of violent extremists, cannot be overemphasized here.

Though radicalization among Afghan youth populations has traditionally occurred at grassroots levels and in-person (through local madrassas, night letters, and community proxies) in rural communities, digital messaging by violent and nonviolent extremists are now on the rise, with rural areas in Afghanistan swiftly gaining access to cellular and internet services (Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson). Internet services are technically available in all thirty-four provinces in Afghanistan. Additionally, "cell phone messaging has grown in scope and appears to be especially powerful in light of the penetration of cell phones in rural areas and

their increasing use among literate and illiterate alike" [11, p. 11]. The USIP further suggests that "Islamist groups [may] have a role to play as partners in developing programs to counter the ideas of violent extremist groups. Though such a partnership is ambitious, that nonviolent groups are united in their stance on not using force suggests they can be engaged to make youth (potential recruits) understand that the use of force is un-Islamic" [11, p. 14].

Conclusion

The interplay of Islamophobia, digital messaging, and social media plays a critical role in the cycle of violent radicalization. The growing problem of cyber-extremism in CASA—primarily due to expanding internet access—points to a need for multilateral cooperation to more effectively address Islamophobia and violent Islamic radicalization in the region. This need is particularly acute during the present uncertain transition period in Afghanistan.

As widespread access to digital media increases in CASA, including and especially in rural areas, so does the effective reach of violent extremist groups such as ISIS, ISIS-K, and Al Qaeda. These VE groups now rely heavily on social media and digital messaging to reach target audiences in rural areas that until recently did not have access to online sources. Further, rural male youth populations are historically most susceptible to violent radicalization in CASA, highlighting the urgency for cooperative initiatives in these areas [11]. As Afghanistan faces a growing humanitarian crisis and volatile political uncertainty, the U.S. must act swiftly to mitigate the region's inevitable proliferation of violent extremism.

Weaponized cyber-misinformation is a moving target with the ability to reach the most vulnerable rural populations in CASA and beyond. Effective deterrence of violent radicalization among youth populations in the region now calls for novel, cooperative efforts between great powers and local regional influencers online and on the ground. Both religious and civil entities, having established their unique inroads with individual local populations, must act to dispel skewed narratives and misinformation and reinforce positive counter-narratives. The United States Institute for Peace makes the following specific recommendations for local entities working on counter-initiatives in Afghanistan, "messaging materials that focus on shared values, such as peace and unity within Islam, should be created after consultation with target beneficiaries and leaders in their communities (religious leaders, tribal elders…these messages and information will need to be tailored to the target beneficiaries but should not be overtly political" [11, p. 13].

Establishing sustainable inroads with local leaders and populations in CASA will require a network of actors, including international, state, local, and regional entities, to create a chain of communication ranging from rural areas to international governing entities. Naturally, such a holistic endeavor requires committed cooperative efforts between the great powers in the region, the enlisting of local entities, and a willingness to engage in realistic dialogues with governments and local and

tribal Islamic leaders who best understand the communities' grievances (Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson). In Afghanistan, for instance, each province, town, and village may have its micro-culture, replete with specific grievances, traditions, and concerns that require "insider" perspectives for developing effective counter-messaging strategies. Reflecting the need for targeted regional initiatives, the RAND corporation's report, The Muslim World After 9/11, states, "Every country in the Muslim world is riven by multiple cleavages among ethnic communities, tribes, and clans, which often constitute the principal basis of an individual's identity and the primary engine of political behavior" [17, p. 34].

While long-range outcomes in CASA remain uncertain, the present transitional period may afford a brief window of leverage to establish cooperative initiatives that effectively address disenfranchised, rural youth populations and leaders and bring strong messages of hope to a people beset by challenges. These messages must include counter-narratives that dispel the radical view that violence is the only option and affirm an Islamic cultural narrative based on non-violence. While expanding access to digital communications in rural Afghanistan and CASA presents obvious challenges for countering violent extremism, it likewise affords exciting new opportunities for cooperation between great and regional powers to reach previously unreachable, vulnerable populations.

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