

Qur'anic Ethics for Peacebuilding: An Islamic Counter-Narrative to Religious Extremism in Pakistan

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Abstract

The expansion of religious extremism in Pakistan entails an intricate reaction of sectarian polarization, religious politicization, geopolitical conflict, educational fragmentation, and the selective misuse of Islamic texts. Since extremist actors often use the Qur'an to identify the reasons to commit violence, exclusion, and takfīr, such positive actions should not avoid interacting with Islamic sources but act to address them. This paper claims that the Qur'an does include a consistent peacebuilding ethic that can be used as an Islamic counter-virality to religious extremism in Pakistan. The article presents justice, reconciliation, mercy, forgiveness, restraint, consultation, and human dignity as the principal Qur'anic principles applicable to counter-extremist efforts through a qualitative design that relies on textual analysis of the major themes of the Qur'an, discourse analysis of the lecture and writing of Pakistani Islamic scholars, and their public discourse. It also reveals that mainstream Pakistani scholars of various orientations generally oppose terrorism, have a negative stance on the unjustifiable violence, and advocate contextualized understandings of jihad and anti-takfīr discourse. The article concludes that Qur'anic ethics can reinforce the counter-extremism agenda in Pakistan when strategized in education, discourse in

mosques, communal peace building, and mass policy. By bridging Islamic scripture, religious authority, and the modern needs of peace building, this study adds to the literature on religion and violence, Islamic ethics, and culturally based counter-extremism.

Keywords: conflict resolution; counter-narrative; Islamic ethics; jihad; peace building; religious extremism; sectarianism

Introduction

Religious extremism is one of the most egregious factors facing Pakistan in terms of social cohesion, political stability, and religious life in the country. Sectarian militancy, anti-state insurgency, vigilante religious violence, and digitally amplified hate speech have all transformed public space over the last several decades and increased communal mistrust. Several factors have contributed to these developments, such as the state instrumentalization of religion, the heritage of Islamization, the wars of the region, poor governance, and the expansion of sectarian and militant groups.¹ Nonetheless, extremism in Pakistan is not just a security problem but also an interpretative crisis. Radical movements tend to stake mostly Islamic legitimacy by giving rise to certain unjust interpretations of the Qur'an and identifying violence as a religious duty, thereby creating an illusion that militancy is based on religious obedience.

This poses a major challenge towards counter-extremism. Militant organizations can be broken by security measures, legal restrictions, and surveillance; these measures alone cannot break the theological and moral scripts through which the extremist actors recruit, justify, and furnish violence. In Muslim societies, where the Qur'an is the ultimate source of religion, responses to questions that do not mention Islamic sources may lack credibility. It is more so true of Pakistan, where the influence of religious scholars and mosques and Islamic institutions of learning has had a deeply felt impact on societal attitudes. Hence, we need a sustained and socially compelling reaction to extremism, which entails a solemn interaction with the Qur'an and its mediating interpretive traditions.

This article claims the Qur'an provides a logical system of ethics that can be leveraged against religious extremism in Pakistan using the Qur'an as a counter-narrative in peacebuilding. Instead of focusing on peace as a slogan, the Qur'an explains precise ideals such as justice, reconciliation, mercy, forgiveness, patience, consultation, and human dignity that can confront sectarian hatred, abuse of Jihad, takfīr, and vigilante violence. These themes have gained growing importance in modern scholarship of Islamic ethics and peacebuilding,² yet there is a need to link them more closely to the Pakistani context and to the work of contemporary Pakistani Islamic scholars.

This article fills this gap by integrating textual and discourse analyses of the corresponding themes in the Qur'an and religious scholarship in Pakistan, respectively. It demonstrates that anti-extremist Islamic materials are already present in the popular religious discussion and that the same materials can be reinforced at the educational, communal, and policy-making levels. The article is structured as follows: a brief explanation of the approach; the elucidation of the principles most relevant to counter-extremism in the Qur'an; how the principles apply to the extremist context in Pakistan and how they are perceived by Pakistani scholars; and a conclusion of the article, which focuses on the general significance of the principles to building peace.

Table I. Major Drivers of Religious Extremism in Pakistan and Their Analytical Significance

Driver	Description	Relevance to Extremism in Pakistan	Implication for Islamic Counter-Narrative
Sectarian polarization	Deepening hostility among sectarian groups, especially through polemics and exclusionary preaching	Encourages takfīr, communal mistrust, and targeted violence	Requires Qur'anic emphasis on dignity, justice, and ethical disagreement
Politicization of religion	Use of religious identity and rhetoric	Creates moral confusion and	Requires distinction between Islamic

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	for state legitimacy, party mobilization, or strategic interests	legitimizes coercive religious claims	ethics and political instrumentalization
Misinterpretation of Qur'anic concepts	Selective use of verses on jihad, loyalty, punishment, and unbelief	Supports militant and vigilante readings of Islam	Requires contextual interpretation and mainstream scholarly correction
Weak religious literacy	Limited understanding of tafsīr, legal method, and ethical complexity	Makes youth vulnerable to simplified extremist messaging	Requires education in Qur'anic ethics, interpretation, and critical literacy
Foreign and regional conflict spillover	Afghan jihad legacy, transnational militancy, and ideological importation	Militarizes religious identity and sustains extremist networks	Requires localized, indigenous Islamic peace discourse
Digital radicalization	Online sermons, propaganda, and conspiracy narratives	Increases speed of recruitment and emotional mobilization	Requires digital counter-content based on Qur'anic values
Weak governance and selective enforcement	Inconsistent legal response to hate speech and militant activity	Reinforces grievance and distrust in state institutions	Requires justice-based governance consistent with Qur'anic moral principles

Table I summarizes the key structural and ideological factors of religious extremism in Pakistan discussed in the article. It demonstrates that theology is not the cause of extremism but a convergence of politics, education, identity, and media. The final column is especially important because it links

each driver to the kind of Qur'anic or Islamic counter-narrative needed to respond to it.

Method

The article employs a qualitative, interpretive research approach that integrates two complementary methods: thematic textual analysis of the Qur'an and discourse analysis of modern Pakistani Islamic intellectuals. The first element pinpoints major Qur'anic principles applicable to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The second focuses on how these principles are perceived and publicly expressed by mainstream Pakistani scholars as being applied to the issue of religious extremism.

The textual aspect is concentrated on Qur'anic themes that are repeatedly interlinked with conflict resolution, such as justice,³ reconciliation,⁴ mercy,⁵ forgiveness and restraint,⁶ consultation,⁷ dignity and diversity,⁸ and ethical regulation of force.⁹ These verses are discussed in the framework of classical and contemporary scholarship, including the works by Fazlur Rahman, Farid Esack, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Muhammad Asad, and other Islamic ethics and law scholars.¹⁰ It is not an attempt to engage in exhaustive exegesis but to find a unified normative system.

The discourse component is based on publicly available works by leading Islamic thinkers in Pakistan, such as lectures, sermons, books, fatwas, and interviews. These include scholars of different orientations, such as Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, and others, whose social discourse addresses the issues of violence, sectarianism, jihad, social harmony, and the role of religious authority. Such records are deemed interview-type qualitative data, which contain sustained and attributable messages on the issues of concern in this study. The analysis is based on thematic reasoning relevant to qualitative coding, as the author concentrated on recurring themes, including anti-takfir, legitimate power, charity, anti-sectarianism, educational reform, and state-scholar cooperation.

This contextual discussion of Pakistan is based on the current academic scholarship of Pakistan studies, terrorism studies, and religion and politics,

such as Hassan Abbas, Ayesha Jalal, Vali Nasr, Ahmed Rashid, C. Christine Fair, and more recent work on radicalization and counter-extremism.¹¹ The multi-source qualitative method enables the article to establish a link between Qur'anic norms, academic discourse, and the socio-political context within a unified interpretive framework.

Discussion

I. Religious extremism in Pakistan and the need for a theological response

The historical evolution of religious extremism in Pakistan ensures that this is a multidimensional issue. The use of Islam in the constitutional and political state-formation efforts of Pakistan produced such a structure, where the issue of religious identity became the subject of lawful politics. A militarist policy of Islamization, particularly under the Zia-ul-Haq leadership, increased clerical domination and accepted conservative religious discourse in law, education, and state.¹² The Afghanistan jihad also paradigmized the militarization of the religious space by creating armed struggle as sacred symbolism and transnational networks.¹³ This atmosphere gave rise to sectarian organizations, anti-Shi'a militant forces, and then anti-state jihadist alliances, which were helped along by the state's ambiguity or selective patronage.¹⁴

These developments demonstrate that theology alone cannot explain extremism in Pakistan. It entails politics and geopolitics, identity formation, social grievance, and institutional incompetence. However, material accounts are not isolated enough to enlist and rationalize extremist actors. It is widely used in religious language, especially when they introduce violence as a pious or communal action. This is what makes the theological response significant. Non-religious counter-messaging can no longer compete with the Qur'an in its legitimacy when it is placed in the hands of the same interpreting powers of the extremists. The only way to respond to this well, then, is to re-appropriate the tradition of the Islamic moral language.

2. Justice as the foundation of Islamic peacebuilding

The first Qur’anic ethos to be applied in combating extremism is justice. Qur’an 4:135 tells Muslims to be fair even with themselves and their kin,¹⁵ and 5:8 says that no one should even propagate hatred to the detriment of injustice.¹⁶ These lines offer some moral code that resists sectarian biases, revenge, and communal blame. In support of the claim that accountability, balance, and anti-oppression are highly ordered in the moral vision of the Qur’an, Fazlur Rahman provides the ground that justice is centralized in all justifiable social order.¹⁷ This is particularly crucial in the Pakistani situation, where the sectarian polarization and political manipulation are ready to distort the moral judgment.

Justice also plays an anti-extremist role, as extremist speech is often performed on an ethos of moral asymmetry: the group’s self is framed as innocent, and the other group is deprived of rights or dignity. This reasoning is directly challenged by the Qur’anic demand of fairness in times of hostility. Besides, justice is institutionally connoted. Lack of adherence to the law, discriminatory tolerance towards certain militant groups, and the lack of accountability can strengthen the grievance and contribute to the radicalization indirectly. According to McCauley and Moskalenko, perceived injustice and hypocrisy tend to have a powerful effect on radicalization processes.¹⁸ Both moral impartiality and rule-of-law consistency are therefore facilitated by a scheme based on the Qur’an.

Table 2. Core Qur’anic Principles Relevant to Peacebuilding and Counter-Extremism

Qur’anic Principle	Key Verses	Ethical Meaning	Anti-Extremism Relevance
Justice (‘adl / qist)	4:135; 5:8; 16:90	Fairness, impartiality, due rights, anti-bias	Counters sectarian prejudice, revenge, and selective violence
Reconciliation (ṣulḥ / iṣlāḥ)	49:9–10; 4:128	Settlement, social repair, restoration of relations	Counters escalation, communal fragmentation, and local hostility

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Mercy (raḥmah)	21:107; 3:159; 6:54	Compassion, humane treatment, gentleness in leadership	Counters brutality, harshness, and dehumanization
Forgiveness (‘afw / ṣafḥ)	42:40; 41:34; 24:22	Pardoning wrongs and interrupting retaliatory cycles	Counters revenge-based mobilization
Patience and restraint (ṣabr)	3:134; 16:126–127; 2:153	Self-control, perseverance, restraint of anger	Counters impulsive and outrage-driven violence
Consultation (shūrā)	42:38; 3:159	Deliberation, inclusive decision-making, collective wisdom	Counters authoritarianism and unilateral militancy
Human dignity and diversity	17:70; 49:13; 2:256	Honor of all humans, diversity, non-coercion	Counters takfīr, sectarian exclusion, and coercive religiosity
Verification and ethical speech	49:6; 49:11– 12; 33:70	Truthfulness, anti- rumor, no ridicule or suspicion	Counters hate speech, misinformation, and mob incitement

Table 2 outlines the main Qur’anic principles that constitute the ethical foundation of Islamic peacebuilding. The Qur’an presents a multidimensional morality that combines fairness, restraint, dignity, and reconciliation rather than providing a single concept of peace or mercy. The relevance column of anti-extremism clarifies that every principle can be linked to particular types of religious violence or religious intolerance.

3. Reconciliation, mercy, and the interruption of violence

Justice is not the only way the Qur’an addresses conflict; it also aims at relational repair. Qur’an 49:9-10 instructs believers to resolve disputes between fighting parties and calls them brothers whose quarrels require direct intervention.¹⁹ It is a peaceful language of *iṣlāḥ* and *ṣulḥ* that considers that peace is not the opposite of violence but the rebuilding of social relationships. Abu-Nimer posits that Islamic peacebuilding especially has the most to say in

this respect since Qur'anic and Prophetic doctrines speak not of coercive settlement but of reconciliation, restraint, and moral change.²⁰

Mercy elaborates on this framework. The Qur'an states the Prophet as "a mercy to the worlds,"²¹ and 3:159 attributes gentleness as a leader to communal cohesion.²² Such verses can be a powerful corrective in an extremist case, where severity and punitive zeal are presented as evidence of religious seriousness. Mercy in the Qur'an does not denote the denial of justice, but only the protection of humanity and the pursuit of truth and reform. Similarly, 42:40 and 41:34 are verses exalting forgiveness and rejection of evil by the greater, thereby interrupting patterns of vengeance.²³ This restraint ethic is especially important in Pakistan, where active mobilization can too easily be transformed into the violence of vigilante and sectarian vengeance.

The writing of Marc Gopin on religion and conflict resolution can help emphasize this. He explains that religious traditions can serve as sources of peace when they are capable of directing sacred feeling, piety, and indignation toward forgiveness and self-control.²⁴ The Qur'an does this by redefining strength as moral discipline rather than mad rage. This redefinition is essential in societies where violence is commonly moralized.

4. Human dignity, diversity, and anti-sectarian ethics

One of the most enduring forms of extremism in Pakistan is sectarianism. Sectarianism is often based on the dehumanization and erosion of moral boundaries in conflict, whether it is anti-Shiite violence, anti-Ahmadi exclusion, attacks on shrines, or extreme intra-Sunni polemic. Such predispositions are directly opposed in the Qur'an by the teachings of human dignity,²⁵ diversity as a basis of mutual recognition,²⁶ and the outlawing of ridicule, suspicion, and backbiting.²⁷

These verses do not resolve doctrinal differences, but they subject the differences to the ethical framework. Qur'anic justice and pluralism in Farid Esack's work are read as inseparable with solidarity against exclusion and oppression.²⁸ In Pakistan, this implies that anti-sectarian religious talk cannot

be content simply to demand unity in ambiguous terms; it must specify the basis of coexistence in terms of Qur'anic dictates as to dignified and virtuous speech. Sectarian mobilization does not necessarily begin with armed violence but with contempt, labelling, scorn, rumour, and takfīr. By meeting those preconditions, Qur'anic ethics can be both preventative and reactive.

5. Reframing jihad and challenging takfīr

Jihad and takfīr have to be dealt with by any serious Islamic counter-narrative to extremism. Extremist sects tend to reduce jihad to armed conflict and to render combat a religious duty that has ceased to be connected with law and moral regulation. However, the Qur'an does not support such a reading. Verse 2:190 permits fighting people who are fighting and expressly forbids transgression,²⁹ whereas 8:61 orders the taking of peace where the other party tends towards it.³⁰ The wider Qur'anic system of ethics, namely justice, dignity, sanctity of life, and restraint, further restricts the use of force.

Contemporary criticism has established that jihad can be deployed in militant ways with reliance on selective and decontextualized interpretations. David Cook demonstrates how the modern jihadist rhetoric oversimplifies a significantly more ambiguous heritage of legal and ethical development.³¹ Similarly, Jonathan Brown notes that context, the interpretive approach, and legal education are key to the study of texts in the context of violence.³² Contextual Islamic teaching is a necessity in Pakistan, where young people might be introduced to extremely emotional and simplified militant discourse.

Takfīr is a similar threat. It facilitates sectarian and militant violence by depriving opponents of those moral and legal safeguards that are owed to Muslims. Various orientations among mainstream Pakistani scholars have used numerous occasions to caution against careless excommunication and secret jihad declarations. This is an essential anti-extremist resource. According to Zaman, religious authority issues within the contemporary Muslim world have frequently been disputed on the basis of who has the

right to define orthodoxy and deviance, with restraint on takfīr playing a key role in social peace.³³

Table 3. Main Themes in Pakistani Islamic Scholars' Anti-Extremist Discourse

Theme in Scholarly Discourse	Typical Position Found in Scholar Material	Relevance for Counter-Extremism
Terrorism is religiously illegitimate	Violence against civilians and unauthorized militancy are condemned as un-Islamic	Delegitimizes extremist moral claims
Jihad requires lawful authority and ethical limits	Jihad is not a private license for violence; force must remain regulated	Counters militant recruitment narratives
Takfīr must be severely restricted	Declaring other Muslims unbelievers is dangerous and often abused	Reduces sectarian exclusion and legitimization of violence
Islam prioritizes justice and mercy	Justice and compassion are emphasized as core Islamic values	Reframes religiosity away from harshness
Sectarian hatred is destructive	Scholars frequently call for Muslim unity and respectful disagreement	Supports anti-sectarian peacebuilding
Mosques and madrasas must reform discourse	Sermons and curricula should address peace, coexistence, and anti-extremism themes	Provides a route for institutional implementation
Youth require guidance in the digital age	Scholars emphasize the need to engage youth through accessible and contextual teaching	Expands counter-narrative beyond traditional spaces
State and scholars should cooperate	Many scholars support constructive cooperation with state institutions in public reform	Strengthens policy legitimacy and outreach

Table 3 summarizes key findings of the discourse analysis of Pakistani Islamic scholars. It demonstrates that, as individual differences exist in

orientation, there are wide areas of convergence on various anti-extremist themes, notably abandonment of terrorism, prudence in takfīr, and necessity of legal government. This serves to uphold the argument made in the article that mainstream Islamic scholarship in Pakistan already offers hitches to construct a consistent counter-narrative.

6. Pakistani Islamic scholars and the institutionalization of counter-narratives

The primary lesson of this work is that mainstream Pakistani Islamic thinkers already conceptualize much of the anti-extremist frame required in the Islamic peacebuilding response. Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, and Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, among others, repeatedly condemn terrorism, vindicate unauthorized violence, restrain takfīr, and insist on upholding a lawful and ethical order by popular lecture and treatise. They may differ in style and method but are inclined to agree where it concerns such matters of substance: there must be no violence above due authority, no hatred on a religious basis is more destructive of religion, and the moral content of the Qur'an is in justice and mercy and restrained moderation.

This is incredibly critical because counter-narratives need believable communicators. Research on combating violent extremism still suggests that these efforts by local religious leaders can be more persuasive than state messages or externally created content, especially when presented in culturally and theologically grounded forms.³⁴ Pakistan mosque sermons, madrasa lessons, TV advertisements, and online classes remain vital sources of religious influence. The strategic intensification of the anti-extremist Qur'anic message upon such channels may contribute to reshaping the moral imperatives among the population.

In the meantime, discourse would not be enough on its own. Theological counter-narratives must be made institutional; education is one important dimension. UNESCO has emphasized that education as a tool to counter violent extremism must include education with culturally relevant values as opposed to abstract slogans.³⁵ In Pakistan, messages found in the Qur'an about justice, verification, dignity, and coexistence can be integrated into

school curricula, madrasa reform, and mosque teaching. The other direction is community-grounded peacebuilding: community mediation, youth mentoring, and inter-sect dialogue can assist in making the Qur'an's ethics in a social setting. Finally, Qur'an-inspired ideas of justice, consultation, dignity, and rehabilitation may be applicable to policy models.

Table 4. Practical Arenas for Applying Qur'anic Peacebuilding Ethics in Pakistan

Arena of Application	Relevant Qur'anic Principle(s)	Suggested Intervention	Expected Outcome
School education	Justice, dignity, verification, coexistence	Revise curricula to include applied Qur'anic ethics and anti-hate education	Improved youth resilience against extremist narratives
Madrasa education	Contextual interpretation, anti-takfir, limits on force	Introduce modules on Qur'anic ethics, legal method, and social responsibility	Reduced vulnerability to militant textual misuse
Mosque discourse	Mercy, reconciliation, restraint, unity	Develop peace-oriented khutba themes and imam training	Greater public exposure to anti-extremist religious messaging
Digital platforms	Verification, ethical speech, patience	Produce short scholarly videos and online counter-content	Increased resistance to online radicalization
Community mediation	Reconciliation, justice, forgiveness	Establish local dialogue and peace committees	Reduced sectarian tension and escalation
Public policy	Justice, consultation, dignity, sanctity of life	Integrate faith-sensitive principles into CVE and anti-hate policies	Stronger legitimacy and public acceptance
Rehabilitation	Mercy, repentance,	Use faith-based	Better

programs	reform	counseling and reintegration models	deradicalization and reduced recidivism
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Table 4 contextualizes the theoretical argument outlined in the article into viable spheres of implementation. It reveals how the Qur'anic ethics do not exist individually in abstract preaching but may be implemented in the fields of education reform, community peacebuilding, online communication, and policymaking. The table further indicates that various Qur'anic principles are particularly applicable to various institutional settings.

Conclusion

Pakistani religious extremism is perpetuated not just by political and structural factors but also by interpretive and moral ones. Since extremist actors often invoke Qur'anic legitimacy, ideal interventions should not ignore the religious domain. This paper argues that the Qur'an contains a consistent peacebuilding ethic of justice, reconciliation, mercy, restraint, dignity, and consultation. These values are a direct contradiction to the logic of sectarian hatred, abuse of jihad, takfir, and vigilante violence.

The article has also demonstrated that mainstream Pakistani Islamic scholars have already provided a substantial source of anti-extremism in their publicity. Their interpretations offer a foundation for an indigenous and religiously plausible counter-narrative that could approach communities more effectively than purely securitized messages. The problem is how to bring the scattered discourse to systematic application. When institutionalized in the reform of the education system, mosque preaching, communal mediation, and policy frameworks, Qur'anic ethics can reinforce Pakistan in its struggle against the extremes of religious extremism in a theologically defended and socially acceptable manner.

In this regard, reclaiming the Qur'an towards peacebuilding is not an apologetic defensive act. It is a commendable and needed attempt to reinstate Islamic moral language to its appropriate position in the enforcement of justice, social peace, and human dignity in Pakistan.

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