OCTOBER 2013

Mightier than the Sword?

The Role of the Media in Addressing Violence and Terrorism in South Asia

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CENTER ON GLOBAL
COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION

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Design: Stislow Design

Front cover photo credit: © Arko Datta/Reuters/Corbis

Suggested citation: Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Karin Deutsch Karlekar, and Rafia Barakat. "Mightier than the Sword? The Role of the Media in Addressing Violence and Terrorism in South Asia." Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, October 2013.

www.globalct.org

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore for gracious hospitality and support in facilitating the workshop "The Role of the Media in Addressing Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asia." CGCC is grateful to the government of Denmark for support of the workshop and to the government of Norway for support for this report. We thank each of the experts and participants who shared their experiences and insights on this topic. We are also thankful to Daanish Masood, Nidhi Razdan, and Mehmal Sarfraz for their input to this publication. We thank Andrew Rizzardi at Freedom House for research assistance. The views in this paper, along with any errors and omissions, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the views of CGCC or our donors.

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Boxes

Acronyms

AOC	Alliance of Civilizations
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EU	European Union
GCTF	Global Counterterrorism Forum
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IFS	Instrument for Stability
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NBA	News Broadcasters Association
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
PCI	Press Council of India
PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
STOMD	Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk
UN	United Nations

Executive Summary

The threat posed by emerging terrorist groups, "self-radicalized," and "lone wolf" individuals has prompted greater focus on countering violent extremism (CVE) as part of the effort to prevent terrorist attacks. This strategic shift toward a more preventive approach to counterterrorism, of which "CVE" has become an increasingly prominent component, has broadened the scope of actors beyond those traditionally associated with counterterrorism/countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) efforts. As a result, policymakers have begun to consider new audiences, constituencies, and organizational actors whose work can inform, shape, and contribute to international terrorism prevention efforts. In these efforts, the Internet and the media have taken on roles of greater proportions. Violent extremist groups have used the media, and in particular platforms like the Internet, to link local narratives and grievances to global narratives, and to radicalize and mobilize supporters, consequently diminishing the need for direct contact between potential attackers and a centralized terrorist organization or support facilities. However, the media is also a vital platform for challenging extremist narratives, through the provision of balanced information and alternative voices. As a professional body, the media can also help shape perceptions through reporting practices, thereby offering audiences a space for critical debate where extremist ideologies and groups can be challenged and delegitimized. For these reasons, efforts to develop CVE policies and practice have increasingly focused on the roles of the media.

Drawing on discussions during the workshop "The Role of the Media in Addressing Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asia," held in Singapore on 6-7 December 2012, a desktop literature review, and discussions with practitioners, experts, and government officials, this report analyzes the media's important role in contemporary terrorism. The first section of the report considers how terrorism and violent extremism are evolving in South Asia, especially considering the availability of new technologies, such as broadcast media and the Internet. The second section delves into CVE's evolution and the increased international focus on prevention as a means of addressing drivers of violent extremism. A discussion of the media in South Asia follows, focusing on its history and the impact of its relationship with the state on reporting about terrorism. The fourth section identifies challenging issues for South Asian media practitioners, issues which also affect the role of the media in addressing violence and extremism. Finally, the conclusion offers a set of recommendations for actors at the national, regional, and international levels to consider in relation to the media's roles in addressing terrorism and violent extremism in South Asia.

These recommendations offer ways to strengthen and empower the media to investigate, verify, and report on the critical issues confronting the region. Such actions would challenge narratives that promote intolerance, fuel violence, threaten pluralist and critical discourse, and even democratic governance. These recommendations can make an impact even if not implemented as part of an explicit "counterterrorism" or "CVE" effort. However, few media outlets can claim full impartiality. The media may intentionally or unintentionally shape a narrative to protect their own independence, to support the maintenance of space for pluralist debate, or to report or censor communications by extremist groups; all of which influence whether and to what extent certain stories receive coverage. Therefore, ensuring practitioner sensitivity to the possibility of their reporting being instrumentalized is important. Finally, there is a need for greater awareness of the resources and opportunities to challenge extremist narratives. These narratives often promote an insular and violent perspective that seeks to constrain public debate and critical dialogue, which runs counter to the traditionally perceived role of the media as offering unbiased information and a range of perspectives on contemporary events and issues.

Introduction

The threat posed by newly emerging terrorist actors, including "self-radicalized" and "lone wolf" individuals, has also prompted greater focus on countering violent extremism (CVE), challenging extremist ideologies and narratives, as part of the effort to prevent terrorist attacks. This strategic shift toward a more preventive approach to counterterrorism, of which "CVE" has become an increasingly prominent component, has broadened the scope of actors beyond those traditionally associated with counterterrorism/countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) efforts. As a result, policymakers and practitioners have engaged with new audiences, constituencies, and organizational actors whose work can inform, shape, and contribute to international terrorism prevention efforts. While some of these engagements have taken place under a specific "CVE" label, in many instances relevant work may not have an explicit CVE label but may be "CVE-relevant" in having the attendant benefit of challenging or delegitimizing extremist narratives or ideologies.

Violent extremist groups have used the media, and in particular platforms like the Internet, to link local events and grievances to global narratives of conflict and intolerance, and to radicalize and mobilize supporters through targeted communications materials including online chat rooms, magazines, videos, and other publications that can be transmitted virtually. Consequently, the need for direct contact between potential attackers and a centralized terrorist organization or support facilities has been diminished; many necessary training materials and ideas are now freely available online, such as the infamous article on "How to Make A Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom" in al-Qaida's *Inspire* magazine.[1] Another illustrative example is the case of "Irhabi 007" who took the initiative to redirect stolen credit card information to generate funds and recruits for terrorist groups.[2] So important is the media to contemporary terrorist groups that *Inspire* magazine elevated the communications function, or the act of inspiring others to terrorism, to the same level as martyrdom or battlefield operations, seen as the most valuable means of fulfilling the obligation of *jihad* as they perceive it.

However, the media is also a vital platform for challenging extremist narratives through the provision of balanced information and alternative voices. As a professional body, the media can also help shape perceptions through reporting practices, thereby offering audiences a space for critical debate, a space where extremist ideologies and groups can be challenged and delegitimized. For these reasons, efforts to develop CVE policies and practices have increasingly focused

[1] *Inspire* magazine, Summer 2010, page 31. Source: http://gawker.com/heres-the-jihadist-magazine-that-taught-the-boston-bom-478605581.

[2] "Terrorist 007, Exposed," *The Washington Post,* 26 March 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/25/AR2006032500020.html.

on the roles of the media. However, the potential role of the media to be a force in CT/CVE is closely tied to the perception of the media as a credible interlocutor, which is in turn associated with the standards of reporting and analysis. Therefore, ensuring space for the media to function independently is critical to its ability to be a trusted resource for analysis and information, the availability of which can limit extremists' abilities to hold a monopoly on framing narratives and to enhance recruitment.

This report articulates how the media can provide a valuable platform for preventing and countering violent extremism in South Asia. It makes a series of concrete recommendations for actors at the national, regional, and international levels. It draws from discussions during a workshop on "The Role of the Media in Addressing Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asia," a desktop literature review, and discussions with media practitioners, experts, and government officials. The workshop was co-organized by the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation and the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. Participants at this "track 1.5"[3] workshop included media practitioners, regional experts, representatives of the United Nations (UN), and academics, representing between them all seven countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The first section of the report explores the evolution of terrorism and violent extremism in South Asia, particularly with the availability of new technologies, such as broadcast media and the Internet. The second section delves into the evolution of CVE and the increased international focus on developing a more preventive and multidimensional approach to addressing terrorism and violent extremism. This is followed by a discussion of the media in South Asia, particularly its historical evolution and how its relationship with the state impacts reporting on terrorism. The fourth section explores the challenges faced by media practitioners in the region, particularly in terms of defining media responsibility, pressures from the state and/or terrorist groups, the quality of journalism/reporting, and the media's role in providing counter-narratives. These challenges, however, need not be limited only to media practitioners in South Asia, but have been raised in many other regions as part of a conversation on CVE. The concluding section offers a set of recommendations for actors at the local, regional, and international levels to consider in relation to the role of the media in addressing the challenges of terrorism and violent extremism in South Asia.

[3] In diplomacy, Track 1 refers to formal interactions between government officials while Track 2 diplomacy informally engages retired government and military officials, academics, civil society members, and other private sector stakeholders. Track 1.5 engagement is a combination of Tracks 1 and 2, bringing together government officials, civil society members, academics, and private sector representatives.

Contemporary Terrorism in South Asia

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in South Asia, with a range of terrorist groups that espouse various ideological, religious, or ethno-nationalist causes. Its prevalence there is reflected in the Global Terrorism Index, which ranked three countries from the region among those with the highest incidence of terrorism—Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India.[4] The region's history has been shaped by political violence, sectarian tensions, and postcolonial experiences that continue to inform the process of nation- and state-building and shape the expectations (and disappointments) of citizens about the roles and functions of their governments. The region also faces a broad spectrum of development and governance challenges; at times, these have constrained central governments' authority and compromised their monopoly on violence, seen as an essential function of the Weberian state.[5] This contributes to an environment that enables the spread of terrorism and violent extremism by generating support, sympathy, and even recruits for militant groups among citizens discontent with the state or disillusioned by the development, social, or political opportunities afforded them within it.

While no causal link between poverty and terrorism has been established, research suggests that conditions such as sociopolitical inequality, prolonged violence and conflict, repression of civil liberties, and negative experiences with law enforcement and security officials may be drivers of violent extremism.[6] In many parts of South Asia with weaknesses in governance and service delivery, other actors such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups have filled the void. Many have been a force for positive change throughout the region. Others have, however, argued that the failures of the state to meet citizens' expectations is cause to challenge the nature of the state and political process and replace it with alternative forms of government, such as communism in the case of the Maoists or an Islamic Sharia state in the case of Islamist groups. For example, in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan Islamist parties have built networks of schools, hospitals, and other social services, highlighting the government's limitations in meeting citizens' needs.[7] In Nepal and India, Maoist rebels claim to represent the rural poor. This demographic is associated with a belief that it has been neglected and

[4] Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012 Global Terrorism Index: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism for the Last Decade. The ranking of SAARC countries with the highest impact of terrorism are as follows: Pakistan (2), Afghanistan (3), India (4), Sri Lanka (16), Nepal (22), Bangladesh (39), and Bhutan (72). Maldives was not ranked.

[5] In his 1919 essay "Politics as a Vocation" Max Weber defined the state as a "human community which (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."

[6] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is there a causal connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* Vol. 17, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 119–144.

[7] Sabrina Tavernise, "Pakistan's Islamic Schools Fill Void, but Fuel Militancy," *The New York Times,* 3 May 2009.

treated as a second-class citizenry by the government; the result is local support for these rebels.[8] The state's inability to meet basic needs raises questions about its ability to meet its institutional responsibilities and limits its capacity to extend its authority throughout its territory.

The confrontational political culture in many parts of South Asia has created disillusionment with political processes, increasing the appeal of the military or alternative political actors as sources of change or as governing authorities. For example, Maoist insurgents currently use terrorist tactics to pressure the Indian state; in Nepal they initiated a conflict which resulted in 17,000 deaths and culminated in the monarchy's dissolution and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fought the Sri Lankan government for an independent state. In some cases, religious extremists have capitalized on a culture of political violence by questioning the legitimacy of secular governments and proposing a violent transformation of the state. For example, extremists on both the political left and right have used violence to pursue their goals; Islamist groups have called for the establishment of an Islamic state and imposing of Sharia law.[9] Moreover, extremist groups have not only facilitated the use of violence to effect political change; their ideologies have also impacted the prospects for security and development, and they have often sought to reduce the space for pluralist discourse and engagement, threatening minority rights and civil liberties, as has been demonstrated by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Hefazat-e Islam in Bangladesh, and Hindu nationalists in India, for example.[10] Given this history, the line between violent politics and terrorism in South Asia is sometimes difficult to identify.

While local and national events and grievances appear to be primary drivers of violence and extremism, terrorism over the past decade and a half has become increasingly transnational. Benefiting from globalization, illicit groups have been able to exploit travel and communications opportunities to move ideas, goods, and operatives more easily across political boundaries. Groups like al-Qaida have often acted as a business conglomerate, providing some centralized services to increasingly decentralized and autonomous regional "franchises" or groups, like Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula for example.[11] The 2008 Mumbai bombings, attacks linked to ongoing conflict in Afghanistan-Pakistan[12] and even a series of nearly 400 simultaneous bombs across all but one of 64 districts in Bangladesh in 2005, all reflect a confluence of ideas and resources that traveled across borders. Attacks such as the failed bombing of Times Square in 2010 or the foiled attempt to bomb the New York City subways in 2009 are also associated with ongoing conflicts and tensions in South Asia. This transnational nature of contemporary terrorism has offered violent extremists and terrorists new tools to empower small groups, even individuals, to do great harm without ever having formalized contact with terrorist groups. This makes it even more imperative to understand how or why individuals may be driven to support violent extremism or commit terrorist acts, and the opportunities that may exist to undertake preventive engagement.

[8] "Profile: India's Maoist Rebels," *BBC News,* 4 March 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12640645.

[9] Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "On the Borderlines: Politics, religion and violence in Bangladesh," in *Political Violence in South and Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives,* ed. Itty Abraham, Edward Newman, and Meredith L. Weiss (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2010).

[10] See, for example http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/2-mumbai-girls-in-jail-for-tweet-against-bal-thackeray/1/229846.html.

[11] See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

[12] Stephen Tankel, "Sharing is Caring: Containing Terrorism in South Asia," *Foreign Policy,* 20 July 2012.

Media and CVE in South Asia

The Evolution of "CVE"

In recent years, policymakers and practitioners have recognized that "hard" counterterrorism measures alone such as the use of intelligence, law enforcement, and defense forces cannot address the increasingly unpredictable and diffuse nature of terrorism. Nor do these approaches do much to address the enabling environment for violent extremism—conditions, grievances, and ideologies that can generate ideological or operational support for terrorism. Concerns about "lone wolf" actors inspired over the Internet through minimal contact with organized terrorist groups have further underscored the importance of proactive prevention and of delegitimizing and challenging the messages and incitement propagated by violent extremist groups. Furthermore, the potential for catastrophic damage—from even a single attack on infrastructure, on major events, or in dense urban settings, and the prospect of the use of weapons of mass destruction—has compelled governments and international organizations to focus greater attention to addressing drivers of violent extremism in order to deny terrorist groups support and recruits.

A variety of terms have been used to describe these emerging efforts, including "counter-radicalization," countering "violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism" and CVE. Currently, CVE programming can be grouped into three broad categories. The first is public engagement, which includes reaching broad audiences through media campaigns or entertainment, cultural, and athletic activities. The second category is targeted interventions of identified vulnerable communities or individuals. Interventions include social and health services; law enforcement; youth, education, and employment programs; and demobilization or rehabilitation initiatives. The third category involves capacity building of government or nongovernmental actors, including police, NGOs, and conflict mitigation and peacebuilding policymakers.

CVE efforts span a cross-section of policy disciplines including development, conflict prevention and management, law enforcement, education, culture, and diplomacy. While related to these practices, CVE reflects a particular policy objective that denotes efforts to prevent violent extremism with a view to diminishing the terrorist threat. This broadening scope of counterterrorism activities has raised concerns and elicited criticism about the securitization of aid and development, the cooptation of civil society organizations, and the possibility of jeopardizing the neutral space needed for humanitarian action. However, security challenges have become increasingly interrelated and opportunistic illicit groups involved in drug or human trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism have engaged in tactical or strategic cooperation. The potential for such groups to develop either a symbiotic or predatory relationship with key institutions of the

state and threaten human and national security and development has generated calls for a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach to terrorism and violent extremism.[13]

This preventive and multidimensional approach has also been reflected in evolving international norms and protocols, for example, at the UN. In 2006 the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which is notable for urging states to take a complementary and parallel approach to addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, promoting the rule of law and respect for human rights, building state capacities to prevent and combat terrorism, and strengthening the role of the UN in this regard. In other words, it draws on existing international norms and initiatives. Together with a series of resolutions adopted by the Security Council, the Strategy forms a normative basis for collaborative international approaches to terrorism and has prompted greater focus on regional and sub-regional cooperation in implementing these global norms.[14]

Other international actors, such as the European Union (EU) and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF),[15] have also invested in efforts to counter violent extremism. Since the adoption of its Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment in 2005, the EU has stressed the importance of preventing terrorism by addressing the challenges of radicalization and recruitment. Under the Instrument for Stability (IfS), the European Commission has taken steps to counter violent extremism by supporting vulnerable countries "in their efforts to counter radicalisation, tackle terrorist recruitment and promoting counter-narratives to terrorist ideologies."[16] The GCTF, a multilateral counterterrorism body made up of twenty-nine countries and the EU countries, launched the Hedayah International Center of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism in December 2012. Hedayah aims to assist governments and the CVE community through training workshops, dialogue, collaboration, and research.[17] These multilateral platforms, in which several South Asian countries have been participating actors, provide a valuable basis for regional cooperation and interaction at the political and practitioner levels. They also provide a common set of obligations and norms that, especially under Resolution 1373 which is binding on all UN member states, can facilitate stronger regional approaches to addressing cross-border threats like contemporary terrorism.

At the regional level, in 1987 SAARC adopted the Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism which includes a definition of "terrorist acts" and calls for greater cooperation on legal issues including evidence sharing, extradition, and information and expertise exchange.[18] A 2004 Additional Protocol to the Convention aimed to strengthen regional cooperation and criminalize the "collection and acquisition of

[13] See UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Sahel region," S/2013/354, 14 June 2013, and Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw, and Arthur Boutellis, "The Elephant in the Room: How Can Peace Operations Deal with Organized Crime?" International Peace Institute, June 2013, http://www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/ipi_e-pub-elephant_in_the_room.pdf.

[14] Resolution 1373 (2001) lays the groundwork for preventing the financing, support, and operations of terrorists, and calls on member states to improve cooperation to prevent terrorist acts. Resolution 1963 (2009) expands the terms of 1373 to include broader aspects of the Strategy, recognizing "that terrorism will not be defeated by military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations alone" but also through strengthened preventive efforts to address conditions conducive to terrorism. In addition, Resolution 1624 (2005) urges member states to adopt measures to prevent apologia of terrorism and incitement, which were considered to be central factors in motivating the perpetrators of the 2005 London bombings.

[15] See www.thegctf.org.

[16] Instrument for Stability, "Thematic Strategy Paper 2012-2013: Assistance in the context of stable conditions for cooperation," http://eeas.europa.eu/ifs/docs/ifs_2012_13_strategy_en.pdf.

[17] Global Counterterrorism Forum, "Co-Chairs' Fact Sheet: Countering Violent Extremism Deliverable (International Center of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism," http://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/13878/Co-chairs+Fact+Sheet+-+CVE+COE.pdf. For more about Hedayah's work see www.hedayah.ae.

[18] SAARC Regional Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism (1987), http://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv18-english.pdf.

funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts."[19] To further implement these provisions, SAARC created the Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) located in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Monitoring Desk is made up of experts from the region working to "collate, analyze and disseminate information about the [incidents], tactics, strategies, and methods."[20] Complementing the work of STOMD are the Drug Offences Monitoring Desk and an Expert Group on Networking Among Police Authorities. In 2008, SAARC leaders approved the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, which aims to eliminate the need for separate bilateral agreements by harmonizing the domestic legal systems of member countries. This convention is particularly helpful for intelligence sharing to counter terrorism and other transnational crimes. Additionally, the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters urges cooperation on counterterrorism activities, particularly in the areas of "prevention, investigation and prosecution."[21] Nonetheless, despite these measures regional cooperation at the political level remains impeded by political differences and ongoing conflicts.

The recent development of the normative framework on CVE has prompted closer engagement with practitioners whose work brings them to the frontline of efforts to challenge and counter violent extremism; hence the increased attention to the role of the media.

The Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism Today

Because of its capacity to relay information, frame narratives, shape public opinion, and inform both politics and policy-making, the media is a critical vehicle to convey ideas that legitimize or delegitimize terrorists to potential supporters and recruits. The transnational nature of contemporary terrorism and its dependence on a compelling narrative that not only *radicalizes* but *mobilizes*—that is, can move individuals from passive support to operational action—makes the media essential for both terrorists and their opponents. To paraphrase the dictum made famous by Carl von Clausewitz, communication may be considered a continuation of terrorism (or indeed, counterterrorism) by other means. The March 2013 issue of *Inspire* magazine, produced by al-Qaida's media wing and popularized by the late Anwar al-Awlaki, emphasizes communication's importance to terrorism, arguing that "[fighting] in the way of Allah is an obligation, so is inspiring to jihad."[22] Such publications underscore the investments made by terrorist groups like al-Qaida in strategic communication and messaging. These groups have become adept in developing a global master narrative that can be linked to local events and grievances, and even reach audiences far afield who may develop a set of vicarious grievances on behalf of communities with whom they feel an emotive bond.

It is therefore unsurprising that efforts to address violent extremism have centered to a large extent on the role of the media, both as a tool or platform as well as a professional community. The content and polish of products like *Inspire* demonstrate the importance placed on outreach to a wide group of current and potential supporters. On the Internet, individuals can

[19] SAARC Additional Protocol to the Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism (2004), https://www.unodc.org/tldb/pdf/SAARC_ADDITIONAL_PROTOCOL_2004.pdf.

[20] Shamsul Islam, "Combating Terrorism in South Asia: Challenges and Prospects," paper presented at the conference "New Life Within SAARC," Kathmandu, July 15-16, 2005, p. 136.

[21] SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (2008), http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/Various%20Publications,%20Agreements,MOUs,%20%20Conventions.%20Charters/PUBLICATIONS/Pdf/Convention%20on%20MACM%2031%20July%202008.pdf.

[22] *Inspire,* Issue 10, Spring 2013, obtained from http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireWinter2013.pdf.

create forums to find like-minded supporters and validation for their personal views in privacy. As a consequence, the Internet creates a virtual community whose bonds cement since they can shut out contradictory voices, what Marc Sageman has called "in-group love" versus "out-group hate."[23] However, as one South Asian media professional expressed, "we need to use the same tools, but with a different message."[24] Professionals trying to delegitimize the narratives of militant groups and to offer positive alternatives are focusing on the same mediums—the Internet, radio, television, or billboards—whichever promises to be most effective in reaching target audiences.

For example, some organizations have produced high quality content for mainstream entertainment, with messages about the dangers of radicalization, the effects of radicalization and terrorism on families and communities, and the impact of violence on victims and survivors. In some cases, governments and non-governmental actors have gone head-to-head with violent extremists in Internet chat rooms, challenging narratives and positing alternatives, even clearly tagging themselves as government spokespersons. In some cases, theological experts have directly engaged Internet users and offered varied interpretations and responses to questions about religious beliefs and practices.[25]

In areas where literacy rates and access to television or newspapers may be low, radio has proved a potent vehicle for reaching communities. While the programming may not directly relate to extremism or militant groups, it may provide an alternative vehicle for those seeking to air grievances, ask questions, and share experiences to address what have been perceived as drivers of violent extremism. In many areas where militant groups may have uncontested control of the marketplace of ideas, programming to counter violent extremism has sought to multiply the channels of communication to eliminate, or at least challenge, the intolerant and violent narratives expounded by extremist groups.

Early modern terrorist groups such as *Narodnaya Volya*, the anarchist group responsible for assassinating Russia's Tsar Alexander II in 1881, relied on pamphlets and newspapers to communicate their message. Nineteenth century revolutionaries also developed the idea of "propaganda of the deed," arguing that action had a greater communicative or persuasive power than words alone, and that actions could inspire others to action. Almost three decades ago, Margaret Thatcher remarked on the complex relationship between the media and terrorists, observing that

> For newspapers and television, acts of terrorism inevitably make good copy and compelling viewing. The hijacker and the terrorist thrive on publicity: without it, their activities and their influence are sharply curtailed. There is a fearful progression, which the terrorists exploit to the full. They see how acts of violence and horror dominate the newspaper columns and television screens of the free world. They see how that coverage creates a natural wave of sympathy for the victims and pressure to end their plight no matter what the consequence. And the terrorists exploit it. Violence and atrocity command attention. We must not play into their hands.[26]

She continued, making the well-known plea to "starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend. In our societies we do not believe in constraining the media, still less in censorship.

[23] Marc Sageman, discussions with Naureen Chowdhury Fink, New York, 2009-2010.

[24] South Asian media professional, discussions with Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Washington, D.C., March 2013.

[25] Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay, "Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communication and the United Nations," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013, http://www.globalct.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013_CT_StratComm.pdf.

[26] Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the American Bar Association, 15 July 1985, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106096.

BOX 1. EDITOR CALLS FOR TOLERANCE AND NATIONAL UNITY TO FIGHT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH

Expressing dismay over an attack on a Buddhist community in the southern area of Bangladesh, the editor of a prominent newspaper in the country called for tolerance and national unity as a means of defeating extremist elements within society. He urged that all Bangladeshis "work together to prevent our state from being weakened, our national purpose for a democratic polity being distracted, our core values of religious tolerance being subverted, our culture of celebrating diversity being destroyed and the principles of our Liberation War of establishing a multi-religious, multi-ethnic democratic state being defeated."[a]

His commentary was particularly relevant as intolerance and violent views are often cited as contributing to drivers of violent extremism: "militancy in Bangladesh feeds off of national challenges, such as divisive and violent politics, weak governance, and the social impacts of underdevelopment."[b] Combined, these challenges can create an "enabling environment for the emergence of political violence and terrorism by promoting a culture of impunity [and] promoting confrontational means of resolving political differences."[c] The editor cautions against this kind of divisive politics: "It will be suicidal to politicise this very serious threat to the religious harmony that characterizes Bangladesh before the world ... politicising these issues is a sure formula for disaster and a sure chance for the culprits to escape and repeat their heinous crimes."

The full article is replicated in the Annex to this report.

[a] Mahfuz Anam, "Nip Intolerance in the Bud: Political Blame-Game Will Only Strengthen Extremists," *The Daily Star,* 3 October 2012, http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=252209.

[b] Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Governance in Bangladesh," International Peace Institute, February 2010, http://www.ipinst.org/media/pdf/publications/e_pub_bombs_and_ballots.pdf.

[c] Ibid.

But ought we not to ask the media to agree among themselves a voluntary code of conduct, a code under which they would not say or show anything which could assist the terrorists' morale or their cause while the hijack lasted?"[27]

For counterterrorism practitioners, the media has been a means of information and data collection about individuals, groups, and ideologies. Many states and organizations engaged in CVE issues have developed programs to directly engage users in extremist fora and attempted to delegitimize or challenge their narratives and ideas, or offer a compelling alternative. However, governments and international organizations constrained by bureaucratic protocols and departmental silos have often struggled to catch up to the speed with which some terrorist groups are able to produce and disseminate audience-specific messages and narratives. The advent of new communication technologies and social media has empowered consumers to demand coverage of certain stories, contribute to news reporting, or influence—and be influenced by—the media. Media organizations and personalities are accessible through "comment" or "have your say" sections and through Facebook or Twitter accounts; individuals can share their own perspectives, images, and experiences

[27] Ibid.

more directly than ever before. CVE practitioners have therefore sought to engage the media in trying to develop and disseminate narratives and information to counter those put out by extremists. Media outlets might not deliberately create or convey a particular narrative, but may do so through the placement and prominence given to stories, the quality of journalism such as whether stories are factually accurate or can be corroborated, or the material published in editorials and opinion sections (see for example Box 1).

Thus, even though some media professionals have been reluctant to be associated with CVE or any formalized "guidelines" that impinge on their freedoms, there has been increasing recognition among them of the role they can play in substantiating or contradicting extremist narratives and messaging.

The Media Landscape in South Asia

Although the media's level of development, penetration, and freedom to operate varies across the countries of South Asia, certain common traditions and trends over the past decade have affected the media landscape of the region. Most of the countries in South Asia have had a tradition of vibrant print media dating back to the colonial period, with a range of diverse newspapers publishing both in English and a range of vernacular languages. In contrast, most countries have had a relatively less open and diverse framework for radio, with more state-imposed attempts to control the broadcast of news on FM channels. Nepal is the exception, with a thriving community radio sector. For example, in India the 225 FM stations are only permitted to air news bulletins provided by the government-owned All India Radio network or audio provided by Doordarshan, the state television channel.[28] Although similar rules have been somewhat relaxed in Pakistan, in 2012 the broadcast regulator did ban the broadcast of BBC Urdu news bulletins on 24 of the BBC's 34 partner FM radio stations.[29] This has resulted in fewer private stations offering news programming, which has adversely affected the spread of information. A significant proportion of the population in the region has had limited ability to access print media due in large part to low literacy levels and the relative cost of communications equipment (TV, radio, computers).[30]

Nevertheless, the past decade has seen a significant expansion of the broadcast space, with an increase in the number of private television outlets, many offering 24-hour news programming. This phenomenon has been especially dramatic in India and Pakistan, but has also occurred in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. As of early 2013, India had 386 registered private television stations categorized as news channels. In Pakistan several dozen of the 84 satellite channels contain news programming.[31] Over the past decade, the information landscape has been transformed even further by more use of new media and social media—via both the Internet and mobile phones—as news conduits. Most news outlets have an Internet presence and actively engage readers using social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Other forms of digital interaction include comment functions on the web versions of news stories. Internet-based news websites, as well as blogs, which offer citizens greater opportunities to share views and content online, have diversified the amount of information and range of viewpoints available to citizens, particularly across national boundaries. For example, in India, there are an

[28] Navya P K, "The People's Airwaves, but Controlled," *India Together,* 26 August 2012, http://www.indiatogether.org/2012/aug/med-radio.htm.

[29] Barbara Trionfi, "Pakistan Bans Broadcast of BBC Urdu News Bulletins," International Press Institute, 30 April 2010, http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/pakistan-bans-broadcast-of-bbc-urdu-news-bulletins.html.

[30] For literacy levels in the region, see: http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/about/sgreport-pdf/07_AdultLiteracy_D7341Insert_English.pdf.

[31] See Government of India, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, http://mib.nic.in/ and Government of Pakistan, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulator Authority, http://www.pemra.gov.pk/pemra/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=11.

estimated 898 million mobile subscribers, with 292 million of these living in rural areas,[32] and over 125 million people with Internet access, which is expected to nearly triple by 2016.[33] Pakistan is the fifth largest mobile phone market in Asia, with 11 percent of Internet visits done on mobile devices,[34] and Bangladesh has seen a 300 percent increase in access to the Internet since 2010.[35]

While the rise of private broadcast media has exponentially increased viewership and access to information, critics have also argued that it has led to a degradation in reporting standards, which favor sensationalized stories over balanced reporting in a bid to outdo competitors and attract audiences/consumers. When the media has reported on or conveyed the words of terrorist groups, critics have argued that in a bid to attract viewers, they have served as a mouthpiece for terrorists. This rapid expansion of the media sector has also resulted in inadequate staffing of trained personnel at many outlets. A common complaint by officials and private citizens is the "unprofessionalism" of certain media outlets and individual journalists. In the "new media" sphere, there is even less quality control than in traditional media and the speed at which information can be spread is exponentially faster, thus creating challenges of separating fact from rumor or opinion.

Regulatory Environments

The changes and openings in South Asian media environments have also raised questions in terms of existing regulatory frameworks and the capacity of these institutions to address issues concerning media diversity, professionalism, and coverage of sensitive topics, including terrorism and violent extremism. Across South Asia, as in many parts of the world, current best practices and standards favor industry self-regulation, while the broadcast sector has traditionally been subject to greater controls, often in the form of statutory regulatory bodies that play a role in licensing radio and television outlets, and sometimes also developing codes of conduct or policing content. For example, in Pakistan, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) is a government body that is charged with issuing licenses but which also enforces rules on content, and in other countries in the region official ministries are commonly charged with licensing and regulation. PEMRA has on several occasions developed rules regarding the coverage of terrorist groups or violent attacks. In October 2009, a rule prohibited the broadcast of statements by militants, live footage of suicide bombers or terrorist attacks, or any content deemed ideologically detrimental to Pakistan.[36]

Currently, India is the only South Asian country with a robust self-regulatory mechanism for print media in the form of the Press Council of India (PCI); its neighbors have been less successful at establishing similar mechanisms. Efforts by media outlets or industry-wide groups to develop self-regulatory structures for the broadcast sector have not been effective, though some steps have been taken in both India and Pakistan (see for example Box 2). In recent years there has been some discussion of governments establishing new statutory bodies in Bangladesh and India to regulate the media, but these do not yet exist.

[32] Rajini Vaidyanathan, "Is 2012 the year for India's Internet?" *BBC News,* 3 January 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16354076.

[33] Priya Nair, "Internet Users in India to Triple by 2016," *Business Standard,* 25 April 2013, http://www.business-standard.com/article/technology/internet-users-in-india-to-triple-by-2016-1130425001851.html.

[34] "30m Internet Users in Pakistan, half on mobile: Report," *The Express Tribune,* 24 June 2013, http://tribune.com.pk/story/567649/30m-internet-users-in-pakistan-half-on-mobile-report/.

[35] Nazimuddaula Milon and Nasheet Islam, "Internet Trends in Bangladesh," *The Daily Star,* 13 June 2012, http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=241836.

[36] "Journalists Targeted by Insurgents and Draconian State Censorship," *ifex,* 11 November 2009, http://www.ifex.org/pakistan/2009/11/11/censorship_violence/.

BOX 2. DEVELOPING VOLUNTARY CODES OF CONDUCT IN INDIA

In India, the debate over broadcast media regulation came into sharp focus after the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks when media, especially television, drew criticism for coverage characterized as jingoistic and inflammatory. This was viewed as putting national security at risk and inciting passions against neighboring Pakistan. Most damning were reports that the terrorists' handlers monitored the live coverage and relayed the latest developments by telephone. The coverage was also criticized for including "disturbing imagery of gory scenes, with aggressive and sensational reporting."[a] The coverage of the attacks was considered a watershed in India's media history. Practitioners and policymakers began broader reflections about existing codes of conduct as well as the development of new rules and standards.

In response, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting proposed 19 amendments to the Programme Code under the Cable Television Network Act, with the aim of increasing government regulation of television coverage during times of crisis. The new amendments included restrictions on broadcasting images of violence and disclosing information regarding security operations. However, the prime minister suspended the progress of the draft legislation after broadcasters would not accept imposed regulations and local media watchdogs warned against increased censorship. In response, the News Broadcasters Association (NBA), a private coalition of over 40 television outlets, expanded self-regulatory guidelines to include emergency protocols for crises. The new regulations prohibit the broadcast of operational details, the repetitive use of "distressing visuals and graphics," and live contact with perpetrators, victims, or security personnel during a crisis.[b]

In December 2012, the News Broadcasting Standards Authority, which enforces the NBA's Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards, issued its "guidelines to prevent communal colour in reporting crime, riots, rumours and such related incidents," cautioning against referencing a perpetrator's community as this "does irreparable harm to the community."[c] Some individual television stations have decided not to give any airtime to known leaders of extremist/terrorist groups and to avoid "hysterical, minute-by-minute reporting."[d] The PCI has an established "Norms of Journalistic Conduct," which continues to evolve with journalistic practice.[e] For example, since the 2008 attacks, the PCI has been lobbying the Indian government to bring electronic media under the council's/the norms' purview as its jurisdiction is currently only print media.[f]

[a] Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "Media and Counter Terrorism Responses: Analyzing the 2008 Mumbai Terrorist Attacks," Institute of South Asian Studies, December 2012, http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_261_-_Media_and_Counter_Terrorism_Responses_14122012211535.pdf.

[b] See http://www.indianexpress.com/news/broadcasters-agree-to-create-emergency-protocol/397024/ and http://www.indianexpress.com/news/broadcasters-accept-protocol-for-emergencies/400161.

[c] News Broadcasting Standards Authority, "Guidelines to Prevent Communal Color in Reporting Crime, Riots, Rumours and Such Related Incidents," 13 December 2012 (copy on file with authors).

[d] Broadcasting professional, discussion with authors, December 2012, Singapore.

[e] Press Council of India, "Norms of Journalistic Conduct," 2010 Edition, http://presscouncil.nic.in/norms-2010.pdf.

[f] "Press Council Wants Electronic and Social Media Under its Control," *The Hindu Business Line,* 23 August 2012, http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/industry-and-economy/press-council-wants-electronic-and-social-media-under-its-control/article3831639.ece.

Relationship Between the Media and the State

In South Asia, the media's ability to operate freely can be correlated to the overall level of democratic space, which has varied by country and over time. For the past ten years, India has had the greatest level of political stability, openness, and media freedom as measured by the Freedom House indexes. Levels of media freedom have oscillated more in its neighbors over this same period. Improvements have been seen in Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Nepal that have generally tracked with broader opening of political space. In contrast, free media in Pakistan has been threatened in the past several years by increasing levels

of violence and harassment of journalists. Sri Lanka's media space has also closed, during two notable periods. Government intolerance of criticism is the most recent cause; previously, the long civil war had a similar impact.

Some media environments in South Asia have a great diversity of voices, but this is coupled with significant threats and violence against journalists. Three South Asian countries—Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India—are included on the 2013 index of impunity compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists, which ranks countries by the level of unsolved murders of journalists per capita.[37]

Within this context, official constraints have been placed on journalists by the state in South Asia who attempt to cover political violence, conflict, and terrorism. Media have also faced pressure from non-state actors including insurgent or terrorist groups. Restrictions have included use of anti-terrorism and national security laws to prosecute journalists in India and Sri Lanka.[38] In Sri Lanka, amidst heightened struggles between the government and the LTTE from 2006–2009, and even after the group's military defeat in May 2009, the government employed strident negative rhetoric against journalists and media outlets that it perceived as being "traitorous" or critical of its approach towards ending the war, particularly at international fora such as the UN.[39] These attacks have been directed at journalists working for Tamil-language news outlets perceived as being affiliated with the LTTE, and also at any journalists deemed to be overly critical of official actions.

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan issued unofficial guidelines on coverage of terrorist incidents or groups. In 2006, Afghan intelligence officials developed a list of guidelines on coverage of security issues, terrorism, and other subjects that could broadly harm the national interest; in 2010, media were specifically instructed not to cover stories live from terrorist attack sites, a move that drew criticism from local journalists. As a result, the Ministry of Information and Culture worked jointly with members of the press community to agree on protocols for how the press and state agencies would cover terrorist incidents. Beginning in 2010, both houses of Pakistan's parliament were developing proposals to restrict live television coverage of violence, specifically terrorist attacks.

Blocking media content is another strategy relevant to CVE. In Pakistan, the broadcast regulatory authority has ordered the blocking of television transmissions during certain sensitive periods. Censorship of the Internet and digital media content, including text messaging and social network posts, has also become more common. While Pakistan and Sri Lanka have long employed blocking technologies against separatist websites (while ironically in Pakistan extremist websites are not generally subject to similar blocks), more countries, such as Bangladesh and India, have begun blocking content more recently after communal or sectarian violence. In these situations, the stated aim is to suppress revenge attacks or slow the spread of rumors and false information. In August 2012, India's government blocked several hundred websites and social media accounts, also temporarily restricting text messages, ostensibly to combat serious outbreaks of communal violence in several states.[40] Authorities alleged that some of the inflammatory content originated from Pakistan. In 2013, authorities in Bangladesh intensified efforts to monitor and censor online content as part of a response to civil unrest and heightened tensions between secular and Islamist factions. A controversial decision by the country's war crimes tribunal

[37] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Getting Away with Murder," 2 May 2013, http://www.cpj.org/reports/2013/05/impunity-index-getting-away-with-murder.php.

[38] For examples of some recent cases in India, see http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/india.

[39] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Sri Lankan Government Calls Journalists 'Traitors,'" 22 March 2012, http://www.cpj.org/2012/03/sri-lankan-government-calls-journalists-traitors.php.

[40] Madeline Earp, "India's Clumsy Internet Crackdown," 22 August 2012, http://cpj.org/blog/2012/08/indias-clumsy-internet-crackdown.php.

sparked this episode of intensified tension. Websites, blogs, and Facebook pages were shut down and four bloggers were arrested, ostensibly for blasphemous writings concerning Islam that could be considered hurtful.[41] Citing security concerns, the Pakistani government has blocked regional cellular services during religious holidays such as Muharram, celebrated primarily by the Shia sect of Islam.[42] Surveillance of online media serves as a form of indirect intimidation that can hinder free expression, as does direct censorship of news content.

Finally, threat of physical violence—by the state and by insurgent groups—restricts media freedom and has had a chilling effect across the region, from Afghanistan to Pakistan, India (particularly Kashmir and other states wracked by separatist or Maoist insurgencies), Nepal, Sri Lanka, and to a lesser extent in Bangladesh. In a number of conflict environments, reporters have been caught between warring factions, facing the challenge of being seen not as impartial actors but as openly aligned with one side in the fight.[43] Sri Lankan journalists perceived as supportive of Tamil interests have been targets of government officials and Sinhalese nationalist vigilante groups; threats and attacks on Tamil-language media outlets are frequent. In Pakistan, journalists attempt to walk a fine line, balancing the opposing risks posed by coverage of security forces and militant groups.

The critical challenges confronting South Asia's media are taking place within a global context where media freedom is on the decline and cannot be taken for granted even in established democracies.[44] While some pressures still emanate from governments or military and security forces, non-state actors, such as terrorists, violent extremist groups, and religious fundamentalists, represent the main threat to media and free expression. This threat, coupled with repercussions for certain types of reporting—including, but not limited to, physical attacks or legal action—and the self-censorship by journalists and editors which can result, may all negatively impact the media. These pressures also curb the media's ability to represent diverse views, to provide an outlet for dissatisfaction with ruling authorities, to serve as a check on government power, and ultimately to contribute to strong and effective democratic systems.

The Challenges of Confronting Extremism

Media and communications have always been a key element of terrorism; however as a 1997 Congressional Research Service report notes, three new trends emerged and impacted the relationship between the media, the terrorist, and government. These include: (1) anonymous terrorism; (2) more violent terrorist incidents; and (3) terrorist attacks on media personnel and institutions.[45] These trends have continued to shape a more complex environment for the media as a professional community. The often unpredictable sociopolitical climate, varying degrees of government support for media freedom, limitation in training and developmental support for investigative and editorial staff, and physical security concerns, shape concerns of media professionals engaged in reporting on conflict

[41] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Four Bloggers Arrested Amid Crackdown in Bangladesh," 4 April 2013, http://www.cpj.org/2013/04/four-bloggers-arrested-amid-crackdown-in-banglades.php. The editor of a leading pro-opposition daily was also arrested on charges of inciting violence: Anisur Rahman, "Bangladesh: Editor of Pro-Opposition Daily Amar Desh Arrested," *Gulfnews*, 11 April 2013, http://gulfnews.com/news/world/other-world/bangladesh-editor-of-pro-opposition-daily-amar-desh-arrested-1.1169286.

[42] "Muharram Security: Suspension of Cellphones in 50 Cities," *Dawn.com*, 24 November 2012, http://dawn.com/2012/11/24/muharram-security-suspension-of-cellphones-in-50-cities/.

[43] For an overview of the challenges facing Kashmiri journalists, see http://cpj.org/blog/2012/08/news-media-expand-but-freedom-lags-in-kashmir.php.

[44] For the findings of the most recent Freedom House media freedom index, see http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2013.

[45] Raphael Perl, "Terrorism, the Media, and the Government: Perspectives, Trends, and Options for Policymakers," CRS Issue Brief, 22 October 1997, http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/crs-terror.htm.

and violence, including terrorism. Moreover, the media is placed in a particularly difficult position relating to terrorism. If terrorist actors are ignored or not given airtime, the media are open to the accusation of bias and of failing to accurately report on events or different perspectives of key actors. If they do give airtime to terrorist groups or leaders, they are accused of providing the "oxygen of publicity" for such groups, or in some cases, of more explicitly supporting the terrorists' cause. On the other hand, a candid association of engagement in a CVE initiative—or the perception of association—can compromise the impartiality or credibility of the media and open them up to charges of partisanship or foreign influence.

However, in the current media-centric world, the potential of the media to frame perceptions has expanded with globalization and the availability of technology. Although there is now a wealth of information available at the consumers' fingertips, the proliferation of media outlets also means that audiences can choose to follow only those which already align with their own sociopolitical views. As such, it is unlikely that the media will be in a position to alter or shape views that are already hardened. It is more likely that the media can shape or inform the views of the "swing voter," someone as yet undecided and open to multiple perspectives. This is particularly the case relating to CVE; those with hardcore views or strong supporters of violent extremist ideologies or groups are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise by material available via the media, but those whose views are still fluid may be more easily persuaded by media products (see for example Box 3).

As a result, policies and programs focused on preventing or addressing the challenges of violent extremism, terrorist recruitment, or radicalization that leads to terrorism, particularly "lone wolves" or "self-starter" individuals or groups, have often centered on the media. These have particularly focused on the media

BOX 3. CHALLENGING EXTREMIST NARRATIVES IN PAKISTAN

Media companies have the opportunity to challenge extremist narratives by drawing on compelling stories and providing a forum for marginalized voices to speak out.[a] Media and strategic communication practitioners could develop campaigns to counter extremist narratives, which could reach a variety of target audiences, including women, youth, and others who may be inclined toward violent extremism. Such campaigns could include giving airtime to cultural, religious, and local authorities who could provide "powerful, organic voices that can delegitimize extremist groups purporting to fight for and protect their constituencies."[b]

One example of such a campaign is "Think Twice Pakistan."[c] The campaign included two projects specifically designed to counter violence and extremism. One was *Karwa Such* (The Bitter Truth), a series of short films that captured the pain and suffering of families of victims of terrorism. The films targeted young people and were aired on 13 TV channels across Pakistan and have gained immense popularity over the Internet.

Another project was *Kaho,* an interactive talk show aimed at creating agents of change amongst Pakistani youth. During the talk show, young people could listen to and interact with prominent speakers on topics such as religion, music, identity, and individual responsibility. Past speakers included education activist Malala Yousafzai, motivational speaker Sarmad Tariq, and political activist Taimur Rahman.[d]

[a] See http://www.blackboxsounds.com/.

[b] Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay, "Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communication and the United Nations," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013, http://www.globalct.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013_CT_StratComm.pdf.

[c] See http://www.thinktwicepakistan.com/.

[d] See for example http://www.thinktwicepakistan.com/kaho-2/.

as a tool, on using the same platforms as militant groups, but providing alternative content to challenge their narratives and their presence in media forums. Governments have used the media to directly engage audiences and address perceptions and questions relayed by Internet users. In Saudi Arabia, for example, members of the Sakhina program can respond to questions about theology and practice posed by Internet users, and issue corrective versions of what they believe are misperceptions about religious practice that may contribute to violent extremism. In the United States, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications is involved in a digital outreach program where government representatives directly interact online to provide factual information about U.S. government policies and programs, where the facts may be distorted or misrepresented to conform to militants' messaging.[46]

More indirect CVE efforts have been undertaken by local actors—civil society organizations, media outlets, or individual professionals—either independently or in partnership with other supporters. These are however rarely branded as CVE nor are they always particularly focused on a CVE mission but promote pluralistic dialogue, a critical approach to militant narratives, and positive messages, which may have attendant benefits in addressing violent extremism. For example, a radio program developed to allow communities to call in and discuss their concerns also addresses grievances and questions relating to violent extremism and militant groups. Newspapers are powerful vehicles for editorials and opinion pieces that seek to promote inclusivity and preserve space for critical dialogue. Television programs have melded entertainment and public outreach with efforts to promote positive messages about patriotism, civic engagement, education, identity, and youth. These have been done through game shows or reality shows, drama or documentaries, or short films that can be publicly distributed on mainstream channels (see for example Box 4).

BOX 4. MULTIPLE ROLES OF THE MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN

Media outlets need not create CVE-specific programs but could contribute to countering extremist narratives and propaganda through broader educational programs or shows aimed at raising awareness around relevant social and political issues. In addition, experts and practitioners have recognized that the promotion of a "credible media environment that encourages an exchange of ideas around needs and solutions" could also contribute to mitigating extremist messages.[a] In this regard, having a strong and vibrant media that does more than report news may be an effective CVE tool.

In Afghanistan, for example, the significant growth of the independent media over the past decade has led it to fulfilling a number of roles within Afghan society, including education, entertainment, advocacy, and the establishment of culture and identity.[b] In rural Afghanistan, radio programming is one of the most effective ways of reaching isolated populations and many radio shows feature a range of problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.

One such radio show is "New Home, New Life," a popular drama that reaches almost 40 percent of Afghan adults and covers topics such as women's rights, civic education, and conflict mitigation.[c] The show's impact was highlighted when a Taliban leader "released a decree giving widows more rights after an episode of the program was aired," suggesting a causal relationship between the two events.[d]

[a] Sheldon Himelfarb, "Media and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, 30 March 2010, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB15%20Media%20and%20Peacebuilding%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf; Eric Davin, Arezo Malakooti, and Alice Plane, Internews and Altai Consulting, "Signposting Success: Civil Society in Afghanistan," Internews and Altai Consulting, November 2012, http://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/AltaiConsulting-Signposting_Success_FinalReport.pdf.

[b] United States Institute of Peace, "Resolving Conflict One Airwave at a Time," 18 May 2012, http://www.usip.org/publications/resolving-conflict-through-one-airwave-time.

[c] Ibid.

[d] Ibid.

[46] See http://www.state.gov/r/cscc/index.htm.

What is clear from many of these programs is that an explicit counterterrorism label is likely to heighten skepticism and wariness of local actors in many countries, given the sensitivities regarding the word and the association with the post-9/11 "Global War on Terror." These programs are not explicitly, solely about addressing violent extremism; rather, they are designed to mitigate drivers of insecurity, violence, and exclusion which can create or enable environments in which militant groups gain support and recruits. The emphasis on communications as a vehicle of persuasion and change, and the battle for "hearts and minds" in contemporary terrorism makes it unsurprising that the media plays a prominent role in efforts to mitigate the challenges. However, a number of concerns have been expressed by media professionals about the role of the media in addressing violent extremism.

CREDIBILITY

Credibility is key to a journalist's success. Credibility with the audience and potential sources ensures access to information, consumers, and a level of traction with relevant actors. Some media professionals have expressed concern that being explicitly associated with counterterrorism or "CVE" efforts could compromise their impartiality. As one long-standing journalist told the authors, "The credibility of the media as an organization depends on the perception of being independent."[47]

For journalists and media outlets, credibility is often derived from their proximity and access to key events and actors. The media is placed in a difficult situation regarding access to militant groups and this impacts credibility. If journalists relay and report terrorists' views and statements, they are accused of giving terrorists airtime, the 'oxygen of publicity.'[48] If reporters do not give airtime to militant groups or leaders, the quality of their reports and their bias may be questioned. For one media outlet in India, the answer to this quandary was to refuse to speak directly to known terrorist leaders or give them direct airtime, but to continue to report on their activities or publicly made statements.[49]

SECURITY

Threats to physical and professional security constitute a significant danger for media personnel covering conflict and terrorism. In places where terrorist acts are part of a broader conflict dynamic, the overall security environment can make it difficult for journalists to gain first-hand access to key players or incident sites. In states where the political environment is not conducive to critical debate, journalists may be targeted for appearing to oppose government views or for maligning powerful figures; journalists reporting on terrorism may be caught between the insecurity generated by militant groups and the disapprobation of government authorities.

The death of investigative journalist Saleem Shahzad illustrates this in Pakistan. In 2011, Shahzad reported that al-Qaida had infiltrated the Pakistani Navy and was responsible for a violent siege at a military compound. Within days, his body was found in a canal with visible signs of torture.[50] The Supreme Court ordered an official commission of inquiry into the murder, but the Commission's report was inconclusive even though Shahzad had reported receiving threats from the Inter-Services Intelligence prior to his death.[51] Representatives of Inter-Services Public Relations, which handles public relations for the Pakistan Defence Forces, have denied its involvement.[52]

[47] South Asian media professional, discussion with authors, Singapore, December 2012.

[48] Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the American Bar Association, 15 July 1985, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106096.

[49] Senior South Asian broadcast professional, discussions with authors, Singapore, December 2012.

[50] See http://cpj.org/killed/2011/saleem-shahzad.php.

[51] Human Rights Watch, "Pakistan: Shahzad Commission Results Marred by Free Ride for ISI," 20 January 2012, http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/30/pakistan-shahzad-commission-results-marred-free-ride-isi.

[52] Carlotta Gall, "Pakistani Journalist Who Covered Security and Terrorism is Found Dead," *New York Times,* 31 May 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/01/world/asia/01pakistan.html; Asad Khalid Baig, "How to Protect Journalists," Open Society Foundation, 21 December 2011, Dexber Filkins, "Letter from Islamabad," *The New Yorker,* 19 September 2011, http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/how-protect-journalists-pakistan.; http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/09/19/110919fa_fact_filkins?printable=true.

The following year, the Taliban claimed responsibility for journalist Mukarram Khan Aatif's murder in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, citing his anti-Taliban reporting.[53] These were not lone incidents; given these levels of insecurity, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) have both declared Pakistan the most dangerous country for journalists.

These incidents are part of a growing trend of physical insecurity for media practitioners in the region. Since 1992, 77 percent of Bangladeshi journalists killed had covered official corruption and politics,[54] and in 2013, Islamist groups in the country have called for the death penalty for "anti-Islamic" bloggers. According to CPJ's Impunity Index, India ranks among the world's worst nations in combating deadly anti-press crime, and Sri Lanka has one of the highest rates of exiled journalists in the world.[55] A high risk of physical attack from state and non-state actors, combined with high levels of unsolved crimes against journalists has created environments in many South Asian countries where attacks against members of the media are perpetrated with impunity.

SUSTAINABILITY AND MARKET FORCES

The proliferation of media outlets and the growth of mobile Internet access have given consumers more power. While this presents opportunity for media development, it also increases the need to keep up with demands of the 24/7 news cycle; this raises the pressure to develop content that broadens the audience. As one long-standing journalist has observed, "this has changed the way in which incidents are reported. It used to be that the initial focus was on the drama, and then the detailed reporting came afterwards … now, the economics of the mainstream media is driven by whether people will turn on the TV to their channel."[56] The drive for sensational content has often come at the expense of the time and resources necessary for investigative reporting or fact-checking. Senior reporters and editors have observed that for young reporters in the field the priority is to get the story in, rather than to get it right, especially if they are under pressure to constantly feed the news cycle. "Nobody wants to report on 'shades of gray' in a story; no one is questioning (accepted) terms like 'Kashmiri freedom' and what that would actually mean," observed one longtime journalist who had worked for a prominent national newspaper.

The sustainability of a newspaper, TV channel, or website can be a critical factor determining the nature and quality of reporting. Reporting on terrorism or extremism may be undertaken with an emphasis on speed rather than quality, and may be shaped or constrained by the demands placed on the organization by key funders, advertisers, or audience groups. Pressure from funders and advertisers often prompted the media to favor content that was either politically palatable (especially for newspapers or media outlets where the government is the largest source of advertising revenue) or sensational material that was more likely to generate increased viewership or circulation.

ACCESS

One central difficulty about reporting in conflict or terrorist operations is access to personnel or conflict zones or attack sites. Including multiple viewpoints, particularly of key actors, is essential for balanced coverage. When key people become inaccessible, there is a possibility coverage will be biased in favor of one perspective. In discussions with this report's authors, media professionals recognized the possibility that stories are weakened when there is no opportunity for first hand reportage. For many reasons, including physical security, the willingness of sources to speak, and concerns about negative government or public

[53] "Gunmen Kill Pakistani Journalist Who Reported on Taliban," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 17, 2012, http://cpj.org/2012/01/gunmen-kill-pakistani-journalist-who-reported-on-t.php.

[54] See http://cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-bangladesh.php.

[55] See http://www.cpj.org/2013/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2012-asia.php.

[56] Senior journalist, discussions with authors, Singapore, December 2012.

reactions, reporters may not be able to speak with key actors. Safety threats, killings or disappearances of reporters covering sensitive issues like terrorism, and the risk of legal prosecution by state authorities can dissuade reporters from deepening investigations by interviewing actors relevant to a conflict situation.

BIAS

Although journalists may not intend to advance one narrative or message, examining their work cumulatively can reveal patterns. As one editor explained, journalists are products of the societies in which they live; preexisting bias and beliefs can creep into their work. In Sri Lanka, "partisan reporting is inextricably linked to political violence … often symptomatic of inherent biases and a lack of professionalism."[57] Even if a newspaper editor does not deliberately convey a specific message, favoring news reports of violence perpetrated by one group—for example, giving it disproportionate coverage in relation to violence perpetrated by other groups—is likely to create readers' perception that one group is responsible for the majority of violence. Distortions of reality can also happen by focusing on one aspect of a story, usually a negative, rather than other angles. As one broadcast reporter noted, during a set of elections in Kashmir, media outlets reported extensively on death threats received by local officials, while hardly any coverage reported the positive story during another local election, which witnessed a huge turnout despite such threats.[58] The placement and space accorded to stories are other factors contributing to a narrative; for example, if one group's violence is given front-page space, while others' is given smaller space on inside pages, the group carried on the first page is likely to be perceived as more violent.

Reporting on perpetrators without adding reactions from victims can give undue attention to violent actors, and risk glorifying their message or actions. Reports about victims of violence or terrorism that do not respect their privacy or dignity may do more damage, even further endangering, those who are suffering. From a different perspective, reports that feature groups that support terrorist acts, if they are not balanced by reports of groups protesting these incidents or ideas, can contribute to the perception of broad citizen support for violence or violent ideologies.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Regional tensions and rivalries in South Asia often make it difficult for citizens of one country to travel to another; this is exacerbated for members of the media whose travel and interaction is closely monitored, if even permitted. Confrontational politics also sometimes render public opinion unfavorable to dialogue or exchanges between different countries, or even among different domestic stakeholders.

Ongoing conflicts and engagement by intelligence services in proxy conflicts deeper complicate the regional environment for the media. In addition to reporting difficulties such as direct security threats and lack of access to conflict zones media professionals may also be unable to publish editorial content or stories deemed compromising to national security or authorities.

In some instances, the media's value for CVE initiatives is its use as a communication tool. In other ways, the media as a professional group make this sector an asset with expertise, experiences, and skills to challenge violent extremist messages. To support this latter role, the concluding section offers a series of recommendations for various stakeholders to strengthen the role and capacities of the media to address violent extremism.

[57] Sugeeswara Senadhira, "Role of the Sri Lankan Media in Peace Building and Conflict Transformation," *Explorations in Culture of Peace,* ed. Siby K. Joseph (Wardha: Institute of Gandhian Studies, 2006).

[58] Broadcast media professional, discussions with authors, Singapore, December 2012.

Conclusion

While the critical importance of communication to the success of terrorism is not a new phenomenon, the transnational nature of contemporary terrorism and the evolution of the media landscape have combined to enhance the potential of the media to support or challenge violent extremist narratives and groups, both as a technical platform and a professional community. In South Asia, which suffers numerous violent conflicts and terrorist attacks, the media plays an important role in framing and informing public opinion, especially because tense political and diplomatic relationships can hinder people from travel among the different countries.

As terrorism threats and violent extremism have become more diffuse, unpredictable, and shaped by challenges posed by conflict and development in many places, efforts to address it have increasingly focused on CVE as a preventive approach. While military approaches have had some short-term successes in mitigating the terrorist threat, many international actors recognize that a sustained long-term effort to reduce terrorism requires preventive engagement. This shift has expanded the framework of counterterrorism efforts to initiatives designed to counter conditions believed to be conducive to the spread of terrorism. Primary examples of these conditions are weak governance, rights abuses, inequality, and unemployment. A new set of actors has entered the policy domain traditionally reserved for military, law enforcement, and intelligence officials. Efforts to counter violent extremism, the ideologies and actions that underwrite acts of terrorism, have included engagement with development actors, educators, social and health workers, traditional and cultural leaders, and the media.

For media professionals, reporting on terrorism and violent extremist groups poses numerous ethical and political considerations. Stories about violent extremist leaders or actions make journalists vulnerable to charges of giving these individuals and incidents publicity or implicit support; failure to report on this subject yields accusations of partisanship or incompetence. Reporting on conflict and terrorism is accompanied by a number of physical and political challenges, with journalists lacking access to sites of conflict, concerned for their own safety as well as those of their families, and a lack of training for young journalists and editors which can contribute to bias. However, such challenges are also opportunities for local, regional, and international stakeholders—including governments, practitioners, and civil society—to support the media to effectively challenge ideologies of hate and intolerance. This is an urgent and long-term project since it is through these ideologies that extremists hope to fuel violence and jeopardize development.

Given the factors analyzed in this report, several recommendations should be considered by actors interested in engaging with the media for CVE purposes in South Asia.

Recommendations

At the national level

1. National governments and authorities could ensure access for media professionals to conflict zones or incident sites. One model for this could be embedding journalists with military units during conflict, though that practice has also been criticized for unduly shaping the perceptions of reporters and limiting access only to particular journalists or outlets.

2. Media associations or professional communities, particularly those focused on newer broadcast platforms, could consider the development of self-regulatory and industry-wide codes of conduct that inform their responses to national emergencies or events like terrorist attacks, considering models such as those developed in India following the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

3. Media associations and journalism schools can offer training and sensitization workshops on CVE-related issues and also draw on the expertise of the media in the development of culturally and regionally appropriate and sensitive CVE materials and initiatives.

4. Governments and civil society actors could put together a roster of credible messengers, such as victims of terrorism, to receive media training so that they can bring a human face to the suffering that terrorism causes as well as how to best respond to attacks, for example, through their own counter messaging. Training and professional development opportunities for journalists, editors, other media practitioners, and credible messengers can contribute to more balanced and informed coverage in instances where stories are weakened by poor reporting standards and practices.

5. Media outlets could foster diversity in the workplace to ensure multiple perspectives are available in the development of content, ensuring that women and minorities have opportunities to have their voices heard.

6. Governments and other national authorities, including frontline law enforcement practitioners, should participate in developing greater in-depth knowledge about CVE-related issues, as well as the regional and international protocols and resources available to support capacity-building initiatives.

7. Law enforcement officials should develop a strategic communications framework with clearly designated focal points and spokespersons to ensure smooth engagement with the media. The purpose would also be facilitating access for both sides in crises to decrease unverified reports. The cumulative effect would be preventing further exacerbation, or even de-escalating, tensions and violence.

At the regional level

8. Regional media associations, such as the South Asia Free Media Association or the IFJ, can offer regional forums for dialogue and training and integrate CVE-related issues that can support practitioners in their work. Workshops could also foster transfer of good practices and lessons across countries in the region and even neighboring regions.

9. A roster of regional media experts who can speak on CVE-related issues may be developed to allow timely access to key experts and practitioners; such a roster could be housed at a regional media association or in partnership with international actors.

10. A platform to train terrorism survivors how to effectively engage with media professionals to share their stories and experiences could help project the human cost of violence and conflict, especially if sharing their stories and experiences is conducive to their own recovery or coping strategies.

11. Civil society organizations and research centers can develop collaborative regional initiatives to inform policies and practices addressing violent extremism in South Asia; these might include joint research or monitoring, facilitating practitioner exchanges or development of shared content that may be published in each of the countries in South Asia.

12. A transnational media platform might be developed to allow for greater interaction between traditional journalists and bloggers and citizen journalists, which could also offer opportunities for the exchange of expertise and experiences.

At the international level

13. The UN could work with national representatives and practitioners to deepen awareness about international protocols such as the Strategy, relevant Security Council resolutions, or other initiatives among the media who may be less familiar with the international normative framework. The challenge remains as to whether various publics will have or develop an appetite to know about such normative legal frameworks and instruments.

14. The UN, the GCTF, or partners could support the development of tailored capacity-building initiatives, for both national authorities and expert practitioners, to strengthen their strategic communications capacities and understanding of CVE-related issues. For example, the UN's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force has supported a project of the Global Survivors Network,[59] an organization working with victims and survivors of terrorism around the world, to offer media training in order to help them share their experiences with the public and demonstrate the human cost of terrorism. Entities such as the UN Centre for Counter-Terrorism may consider further supporting such efforts and promoting an intra-regional network in South Asia so that the stories can reach communities across political boundaries.

15. The GCTF and Hedayah might support cross-regional platforms for victims and survivors of terrorist attacks, giving them a chance to contribute to campaigns highlighting the human cost of violence. This would promote a global movement against terrorism and violent extremism. Via an international platform, participants from several regions could share stories, develop greater comfort in engaging with the public and the media, and develop a global messaging campaign to delegitimize violent extremist groups who often hurt the communities they purport to protect.

[59] For more on the Global Survivors Network, see www.globalsn.net.

16. Actors like Hedayah might also offer opportunities for intra- and inter- regional workshops to familiarize journalists, writers, and other media professionals with new communications technologies, research resources, and relevant legislative or normative frameworks. This could increase the capacity of media organizations, especially those of smaller to medium size, to contribute a diversity of perspectives to discourse.

17. The Alliance of Civilizations (AOC), under the auspices of the UN, has developed a roster of Global Experts or opinion leaders from around the world who can provide reactions and analysis on complex political, religious, and social issues.[60] The AOC could develop a region-specific roster for South Asia and provide a web-based forum for expert commentary and analysis that becomes available for the media to use.

18. International organizations and NGOs could support local actors to become more engaged in reporting. For example, Equal Access International has trained women and youth in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the KP province to become community reporters in an effort to counter extremist messaging.[61] Such programs could be strengthened and replicated across South Asia.

The recommendations suggest means for strengthening and empowering the media to investigate, verify, and report on the critical issues in South Asia. These efforts need not be undertaken under a counterterrorism or CVE label; rather, in themselves, they ensure the space for numerous voices in the marketplace of ideas and contribute to efforts to challenge extremist narratives that seek to constrain pluralist discourse, critical debate, and democratic governance. However, few media outlets can claim full impartiality. The media may intentionally or unintentionally shape a narrative in their efforts to protect their own independence, or support the maintenance of space for pluralist debate, to report or censor communications by extremist groups, to cover certain stories or not, and the extent of that coverage. It is important to ensure that practitioners are sensitive to the possibility of their work being instrumentalized and that there is greater awareness of the resources and opportunities to challenge extremist narratives that often promote an insular and violent perspective that challenges the core function of the modern media. National, regional, and international actors are well positioned to engage with the media and support professional development opportunities and the creation of fora that will not only enhance their capacities but also empower them to be one of the many voices critical to challenging violent extremist narratives and ideas.

[60] See www.theglobalexperts.org for the complete AOC Global Experts roster.

[61] United States Institute of Peace, "Training Community Reporters in Pakistan to Counter Extremist Messaging," 24 May 2012, http://www.usip.org/publications/training-community-reporters-in-pakistan-counter-extremist-messaging.

Annex

Mahfuz Anam, "Nip Intolerance in the Bud: Political Blame-Game Will Only Strengthen Extremists," *The Daily Star,* 3 October 2012.

Nip intolerance in the bud: Political blame-game will only strengthen extremists

by Mahfuz Anam

There should be no doubt in anybody's mind as to the enormity and gravity of the meaning of what has happened at Ramu and in the adjoining areas. Never before in our history have places of worship of a religious minority been ravaged on such a large scale and in so deliberate a manner. Twelve Buddhist temples and more than 50 houses were burnt down and vandalised in a pre-planned manner. And these people are among the most peaceful, docile and non-violent that we have.

Just imagine the feelings of the Buddhist community and of the monks seeing their religious books and Holy Texts torn to bits and burnt, evidence of which was lying all around the destroyed temples for all to see. The best way to understand the agony of our Buddhist compatriots is to imagine how we would have felt if our Holy Book had been desecrated in any manner.

As *The Daily Star* and other print and electronic media reports make it clear, the whole tragic event was premeditated and carefully planned.

The natural question is: Who did it and for what purpose? Is it just to create unrest and tension in a disturbed region of our country? Is it to embarrass the government? Is it just to spoil the image of Bangladesh? Is it only to create misunderstanding between the majority Muslims and the Buddhists? The purpose, in our view, is far more sinister.

It is to weaken us as a people, as a country and as a culture. It is to hit at the very ethos of Bangladesh. It has been an attack on the very foundations of our state, our values and the principles of our Liberation War. And it has been done through using the religious sentiments of the majority Muslims.

It started with a posting on the social media Facebook. In the account of Uttam Kumar Burua, 25, an unknown Buddhist man, someone 'tagged' a picture that was insulting to the Muslim Holy Book. Facebook works on developing and enlarging the circle of online 'friends' who share messages, pictures, etc., between themselves. This 'circle' of friends grows exponentially as 'friends' of 'friends' and their 'friends' all become part of an ever widening group that grows all the time. In this scenario, anyone within a 'circle of friends' can 'tag' a picture on another's account. In fact, that is how this social media links people.

That is how someone 'tagged' a picture that was insulting to us, the Muslims.

As it is evident that the whole attack on the Buddhists was premeditated, pre-planned and quite meticulously organised, it is reasonable to conclude that even the 'tagging' of the picture in the account of a Buddhist youth was part of the plan. Otherwise how [could] so many people could come to know about it in such a short time? We have reports that the offensive picture was sent from one mobile phone to another using Bluetooth technology and through the internet.

The situation raises serious questions about the role, mindset and capabilities of the law enforcement agencies. The police inaction in the early hours of the tragedy, when prompt action could have prevented the burning down of 12 temples, raises doubts about their efficiency, and even their intentions. Can we really brush aside the possibility of local police being complicit? What about our intelligence agencies? We spend hundreds of crores of taka on them, and often see how they harass ordinary citizens over their slightest of 'mistakes'; and yet when it comes to such serious incidents of national security they fail us totally.

What about the ruling party's front organisations, some of whose leaders and activists were seen in the early processions that were inciting people to attack the Buddhists and their temples? The opposition MP was conspicuous by his absence from the scene. Given our propensity to try to cash in on any religious issue they could have well nigh participated in these activities.

What makes the situation highly complex and worrisome is the presence of a large number of Rohingyas in the area. Given the background of the movement for a Rakhaine state on the Myanmar side of the border and their possible and potential links with international and regional extremist groups, this might well emerge as a national security issue for Bangladesh.

What is of utmost importance at this stage is national unity. We must all work together to prevent our state from being weakened, our national purpose for a democratic polity being distracted, our core values of religious tolerance being subverted, our culture of celebrating diversity being destroyed and the principles of our Liberation War of establishing a multi-religious, multi-ethnic democratic state being defeated.

But at this very crucial stage we are, regrettably, witnessing a politicisation of this national threat. No sooner did the Buddhists have had their temples burnt and their houses gutted our political leaders went on a quick march to blame their opponents. The first salvo was fired by our newly appointed home minister alleging, without the slightest shred of evidence, the possible involvement of the local MP who, surprise, surprise, belonged to the BNP. The BNP secretary general, Mirza Fakhrul, soon accused the ruling party of being involved, followed by the BNP chairperson parroting the same. Then both parties' propaganda machinery went into overdrive and the blame game began to be played in full swing. All this while the extremists were safely nestled somewhere and were having a good laugh at our expense.

It will be suicidal to politicise this very serious threat to the religious harmony that characterizes Bangladesh before the world. We repeat, never in our history has such a massive attack been carried out on the minorities. Only a few days ago we saw massive unrest in Rangamati area that flared up because of an incident involving some boy talking to some girl of a different ethnic group.

When the situation is so fragile that minor interpersonal incidents have the potential of becoming inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, politicising these issues is a sure formula for disaster and a sure chance for the culprits to escape and repeat their heinous crimes.

Will our political leaders listen? Or will they be so overtaken by mutual hatred and so consumed by their thirst for power that they will ignore such a grave threat to what Bangladesh should, must and does, mostly, stand for?

CGCC is a nonprofit research organization that works to improve international counter-terrorism cooperation and capacity through collaborative research and policy analysis. CGCC develops innovative counterterrorism programming and training and assists key stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions for preventing terrorism. CGCC is working to improve intergovernmental cooperation at the global, regional, and subregional levels; support community-led efforts to counter violent extremism; ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law; and empower civil society and victims of terrorism to speak out. As transnational threats evolve, CGCC is also working to foster a new generation of holistic, rule of law-based responses to organized crime and other forms of transnational violence.

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