The Role of Clan Elders and Local Justice in Building Resilience against Extremist Ideologies in Pakistan

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Terrorism studies for the past two decades have been reliant on an insistent Euro centrism that consistently overlooks indigenous resilience capabilities and resilience opportunities in the Global South. This article examines the role of traditional governance and justice mechanisms (clan elders, jirga justice and community based processes) in Pakistan in relation to how they shape responses to extremist ideologies. It combines decolonial theory and primary data from North Waziristan, Dir Valley, Khyber District and urban students to demonstrate key features of localized mechanisms that allow for family and community resilience against extremist ideologies. The results indicate that traditional authority, alongside youth mobilization, religious authority and state-led P/CVE agendas can provide communities with significant capacity to enact Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE). Resilience mechanisms are simultaneously mobilizing resources that create social cohesion and challenge extremists narratives to form a multi-layered resilience model. There are some limitations to resilience mechanisms such as the impacts of gendered biases, hierarchical abuses and elite capture that lessen inclusiveness and sustainability. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on state-led counterterrorism or Western theoretical models, this article introduces a *decolonial and community-centered framework* that foregrounds indigenous justice systems— such as jirgas and clan elders—as viable mechanisms of resilience against extremist ideologies in Pakistan. It fills a major gap in terrorism studies by systematically connecting decolonial theory with empirical insights from Pakistan's tribal and urban contexts.

Keywords: Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, Community resilience, Resilience mechanisms, Global South

For decades, terrorism studies have been shaped by Western-centric epistemologies that privilege Euro-American security concerns. Emerging during the Cold War and consolidated after 9/11, this perspective has tended to emphasize state-centric, militarized, and surveillance-based solutions while overlooking the socio-historical and cultural dynamics of political violence in the Global South (Burnett [i] & Whyte, 2005; Herman & O'Sullivan, 1989; Stampnitzky, 2014). In countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Nigeria, academic and policy discourses often portray local populations as passive victims or security risks, neglecting their agency and indigenous mechanisms of resilience (Oando, 2024; Achieng & Oando, 2023).

Decolonial scholarship challenges this imbalance by advocating for epistemic justice and the recognition of knowledge produced outside Western frameworks (Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2012). To decolonize terrorism studies is to move beyond narratives that reduce counterterrorism to drone strikes and border securitization. Instead, it means recognizing indigenous traditions, local authority structures, and grassroots systems of justice as legitimate and vital sources of peacebuilding.

Despite growing interest in community-based approaches, few studies have systematically examined how indigenous governance structures interact with formal P/CVE strategies through a decolonial lens. This research makes a unique contribution by bridging decolonial theory and resilience frameworks to contextualize Pakistan's community-led resistance. It further provides a comparative analysis across tribal, rural, and urban settings, highlighting the diverse mechanisms through which communities sustain resilience. Additionally, the study introduces Ayaz Khan's Community Resilience Model as a localized conceptual framework that integrates cultural, social, and institutional dimensions. Collectively, these contributions underscore the article's novelty in reorienting counter-extremism discourse toward indigenous agency and epistemic justice.

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Historical Role of Traditional Systems

Pakistan's experience highlights the importance of such a reorientation. Since 2001, the state has been central to the global "War on Terror," oscillating between military operations and development initiatives. While these efforts weakened militant networks, they also displaced civilians, caused collateral damage, and fostered mistrust between communities and the state (Yusuf, 2012; ICG, 2015).

In the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), clan elders (maliks), jirgas (tribal councils), and hujras (communal gathering spaces) historically anchored social governance. These institutions, predating both colonial and postcolonial states, mediated disputes and preserved social order through consensus and restorative justice (Spain, 1962; Ahmed, 1980). Under British indirect rule, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) institutionalized such practices, and Pakistan retained this arrangement until the 2018 FATA–KP merger (Caroe, 1958).

Extremism, Erosion, and Resistance

The rise of militancy since the late 1970s, intensified by the Afghan jihad and post-9/11 conflicts, eroded these indigenous structures. Extremist groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan exploited state neglect and corruption within tribal leadership to gain credibility, offering their own swift but coercive "Sharia courts" as alternatives to jirgas (ICG, 2009). Militants assassinated clan elders and paralyzed local councils, deliberately weakening institutions that might mobilize resistance.

Yet communities were not passive in the face of this assault. Lashkars (tribal militias) and jirgas organized resistance, such as the Salarzai uprising in Bajaur Agency, demonstrating the resilience of indigenous governance when mobilized against extremist encroachment (Abbas, 2008). These examples reveal that, although weakened, traditional systems retain latent capacity for collective security and grassroots justice.

Indigenous Resilience and Theoretical Significance

Resilience is increasingly defined as the capacity of communities to withstand shocks, adapt, and recover while maintaining cohesion (Ungar, 2011; Khan, 2021). In Pakistan, resilience draws from indigenous traditions: jirga deliberations, hujra hospitality, and the authority of clan elders offer culturally embedded mechanisms of solidarity and order. These practices challenge securitized views that depict communities merely as breeding grounds for extremism or passive recipients of state policy.

Practically, integrating such traditions into Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) strategies— like community policing or Paigham-e-Pakistan—can enhance legitimacy and sustainability. External models often fail due to mistrust, while indigenous systems already command cultural authority. The 2018 FATA–KP merger illustrates these tensions: abolishing the colonial FCR extended constitutional rights, but under-resourced courts and governance vacuums left communities uncertain, allowing extremists to exploit gaps by posing as alternative authorities.
A hybrid governance model that blends constitutional safeguards with reformed jirga practices offers a way forward. Rather than discarding traditions, synchronizing them with formal institutions can strengthen resilience, uphold human rights, and limit militant exploitation.

Theoretical Framework: Decolonising Terrorism Studies

A decolonial approach to terrorism studies (Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2012) challenges the dominance of Western paradigms that universalise Euro-American experiences of violence and counterterrorism. Conventional studies emphasise militarisation and securitisation, often casting communities as threats rather than sources of resilience. By contrast, a decolonial framework values indigenous knowledge, local practices, and community-led responses as essential to countering violent extremism (CVE).

In Pakistan, this perspective is vital. The jirga system, though criticised for gender exclusion, provides a long-standing mechanism of justice and reconciliation that resonates with local communities more than external institutions. Recognising its role in CVE reflects a shift from viewing indigenous governance as an obstacle to treating it as an asset. Together, jirgas, lashkars, youth organisations, and religious leaders highlight how resilience is embedded in community networks and cultural heritage. Decolonial terrorism studies thus reframe CVE as empowerment rather than control, countering securitisation policies and unsettling the coloniality of knowledge that dominates global security discourse.

Literature Review

Community-led interventions have gained increasing recognition in countering extremist ideologies in Pakistan, as state-centric approaches alone often fail to address the roots of radicalization. One example is the emergence of community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) in North Waziristan after years of insurgency and displacement. As Makki and Akash (2022) note, young people organized cultural activities, promoted education, and mobilized around the slogan "We want peace." This declaration, rooted in local idioms, directly challenged militant narratives that normalized violence.

Despite growing interest in community-based approaches, few studies have systematically examined how indigenous governance structures interact with formal P/CVE strategies through a decolonial lens. Historical legacies of colonial administration continue to shape local governance and social organization in Pakistan's tribal and rural areas. Malik and Ali (2020), for example, examine the bio-political strategies and medical missions implemented during the colonial period in NWFP, illustrating how colonial institutions influenced local governance structures and social hierarchies. Understanding these historical foundations provides a critical backdrop for analyzing contemporary indigenous governance and its interaction with formal P/CVE strategies. Several studies have also explored community-level responses to violent extremism and the mechanisms through which resilience is cultivated. For instance, Zaman and Munib (2020) conducted an exploratory study among survivors of the Bacha Khan University attack in Charsadda, Pakistan, highlighting how affected communities mobilized social support networks, local leadership, and coping strategies to overcome trauma. Building on these insights, the present research bridges decolonial theory and resilience frameworks to contextualize Pakistan's community-led resistance and introduces Ayaz Khan's Community Resilience Model as a localized conceptual framework integrating cultural, social, and institutional dimensions. Collectively, these contributions underscore the article's novelty in reorienting counter-extremism discourse toward indigenous agency and epistemic justice.

Several studies have explored community-level responses to violent extremism and the mechanisms through which resilience is cultivated in affected populations. For instance, Zaman and Munib (2020) conducted an exploratory study among survivors of the Bacha Khan University attack in Charsadda, Pakistan, highlighting how affected communities mobilized social support networks, local leadership, and coping strategies to overcome trauma. Their findings underscore the role of indigenous social structures in fostering resilience, providing empirical grounding for examining how community-led approaches operate in both crisis and everyday governance contexts. Building on this foundation, the present research bridges decolonial theory and resilience frameworks to contextualize Pakistan's community-led resistance and introduces Ayaz Khan's Community Resilience Model as a localized conceptual framework integrating cultural, social, and institutional dimensions. Collectively, these contributions underscore the article's novelty in reorienting counter-extremism discourse toward indigenous agency and epistemic justice.

Religious leaders have also been central to community resilience. In Dir Valley, clerics have used sermons and community gatherings to denounce militancy (Ahmed et al., 2021). Since extremist groups often seek religious legitimacy, such interventions erode their credibility.

Traditional authority has also been mobilized through tribal lashkars. The Mullagori tribe in Khyber District organized 3,000 volunteers to expel Taliban militants, reviving mechanisms of collective defense rooted in the Pashtunwali code of honor. While armed lashkars risk escalation and long-term militarization, they underscore communities' willingness to reclaim security in the absence of the state.

Beyond armed resistance, socio-cultural resilience is a key protective factor. Survey research in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar shows that family bonds, cultural traditions, and peer networks shield youth from radicalization (Rehman & Behlol, 2022). Resilience theory underscores the importance of social capital in mitigating vulnerability. Yet vulnerabilities persist, Accountability Lab Pakistan (2025) reports that extremist groups exploit unemployment, school dropouts, and social isolation to recruit. Economic marginalization creates openings for extremist organizations to offer financial incentives and belonging. Families and elders, often the first line of defense, face structural barriers such as poverty and lack of educational opportunities.

Another important dimension is community policing. Bhatti (2025) finds that partnerships between police and communities can disrupt extremist networks if they prioritize trust, dialogue, and cooperation over enforcement alone. Such approaches encourage communities to share information and collaborate with authorities.
Indigenous justice systems such as the jirga also play a complex role. Operating as councils for dispute resolution, jirgas derive legitimacy from collective participation and local traditions. In tribal areas, they remain trusted institutions that promote social cohesion by reducing grievances (Khan, 2020).

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the diverse ways communities contribute to countering violent extremism in Pakistan. CBYOs create youth-driven alternatives to militancy; clerics provide theological counterweights; lashkars assert traditional authority in security; cultural practices reinforce identity resilience; families and elders serve as early warning systems; community policing builds trust with state institutions; and jirgas mediate disputes to sustain cohesion. Though challenges remain—gender biases, risks of militarization, structural inequalities—these mechanisms affirm that resilience is not solely the domain of the state but is deeply embedded in local social structures and traditions. Importantly, these approaches embody the principle of local ownership, now recognized as crucial for sustainable peacebuilding. While international counterterrorism frameworks emphasize state-centric models, Pakistan's experience shows that effective resilience emerges from the interaction of grassroots agency and supportive state engagement. By integrating community-based mechanisms with broader socioeconomic reforms, Pakistan can build a holistic model of countering violent extremism that reflects local realities while challenging Western-centric security narratives.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a comparative case-study design, as it provides the most suitable lens for examining the socially embedded and context-specific role of clan elders, traditional justice mechanisms, and community-led interventions in building resilience against extremist ideologies in Pakistan. A qualitative method allows for deeper engagement with lived experiences, institutional arrangements, and historical trajectories shaping community responses to violent extremism, particularly in areas where state authority is weak or contested. By situating the analysis within Pakistan's socio-cultural fabric, the study moves beyond conventional security paradigms and captures the nuanced interactions between traditional structures—such as jirgas and panchayats—and modern policy frameworks like the National Action Plan (NAP) and the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Act of 2017.

The primary foundation rests on peer-reviewed research published in reputable journals and edited volumes, ensuring scholarly rigor and empirically grounded findings. Works such as Makki and Akash (2022) and Ahmed et al., (2021) provide insights into the operational dynamics of clan elders, the evolution of traditional justice, and the challenges of integrating indigenous systems with state-led counter-extremism frameworks.

Data were collected through a triangulated qualitative approach that combined document analysis, semi-structured interviews with key informants, and field-based case comparisons. The document analysis encompassed key policy texts such as the National Action Plan (NAP) and the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Act of 2017, along with NGO and International Crisis Group (ICG) reports and scholarly publications produced between 2015 and 2025. In addition, twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with community elders, religious scholars, police officers, and youth organization leaders from North Waziristan, Dir Valley, Khyber District, and Islamabad. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns of resilience, authority, and legitimacy across different contexts. A cross-case thematic analysis was employed to compare rural–tribal and urban–institutional dynamics, thereby ensuring analytical depth and contextual robustness. To enhance data validity, the study employed source triangulation and peer debriefing, while strict ethical protocols were followed to maintain participant anonymity and informed consent. This multi-source research design enhances methodological rigor and ensures that the findings are grounded in empirical realities rather than limited to secondary abstraction.

Policy documents form a second layer of evidence. The ADR Act of 2017 institutionalizes non-formal justice mechanisms, granting legal recognition to practices long associated with community arbitration. Examining this legislation allows assessment of whether state recognition enhances or undermines the legitimacy of indigenous practices.

A third strand of evidence comes from secondary sources, including NGO reports, think tank studies, and media accounts. These offer valuable insights into recent initiatives, community responses, and field-level challenges that may not yet appear in academic literature. For example, reports on jirga mediation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, clerical engagement through Paigham-e-Pakistan, or NGO-led youth and women's empowerment initiatives illustrate how resilience is constructed and contested in practice.

The study employs cross-case thematic analysis, comparing tribal, urban, and religious interventions to highlight similarities and divergences in resilience-building. In tribal contexts, such as the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), clan elders and jirgas historically served as primary arbiters of justice. Here, the study explores how these mechanisms have adapted to militancy, military operations, and constitutional reforms.
This comparative approach ensures triangulation of evidence, strengthening the validity of findings. Academic research highlights theoretical contributions of traditional systems; policy documents reveal state attempts to codify these

practices; while secondary reporting captures grassroots perceptions and evolving realities. Together, these sources generate a grounded and balanced understanding of how resilience is fostered or undermined.

The methodology is also informed by a decolonial perspective, recognizing that terrorism studies have long been dominated by Western-centric frameworks that marginalize Global South experiences. By foregrounding indigenous justice systems, community interventions, and local religious authority, this study recenters the analytical gaze on those directly affected by extremist violence. This is not merely about adding alternative voices, but about treating local knowledge as a legitimate source of theory and practice.

Nonetheless, the methodology acknowledges limitations. Secondary sources such as news reports may reflect selective reporting or political bias, while policy documents often present official narratives rather than lived realities. Academic studies, though rigorous, may lag behind current developments.

Findings

The findings on community-based mechanisms in countering violent extremism (CVE) in Pakistan reveal a complex ecosystem of resilience that integrates youth organizations, religious leaders, tribal lashkars, universities, families, policing, and indigenous justice systems. Each plays a distinct role in fostering resilience, though structural, financial, and sociopolitical challenges complicate sustainability.

Community-Based Youth Organizations

In conflict-prone regions such as North Waziristan, CBYOs have mobilized youth for peacebuilding, education, cultural programs, and vocational training, diverting them from extremist recruiters who exploit frustrations and economic vulnerabilities (Yousaf, 2021). These initiatives are vital in areas with weak state presence, but they face sustainability challenges due to reliance on short-term donor funding and logistical constraints (Qazi, 2020). Institutional support and integration within national CVE strategies are needed to ensure scalability and trust.

Religious Leaders

Clerics in areas like Dir Valley influence community perceptions through sermons, madrassa teaching, and gatherings, countering extremist misuse of religion by promoting peace and coexistence (Ali, 2022). Their credibility makes them indispensable, but risks of politicization, sectarian alignment, and threats from extremists undermine their safety and neutrality (Khan, 2019). Support through capacity-building, protective frameworks, and inter-sect dialogues can enhance their effectiveness in reclaiming religious narratives.

Tribal Lashkars

Local militias, such as those mobilized by the Mullagori tribe in Khyber, have expelled militants and reasserted community sovereignty (Abbas, 2018). Rooted in traditions of self-defense, lashkars provide immediate relief from militant control. However, reliance on armed non-state actors carries risks of violence, human rights abuses, and entrenched power hierarchies (Yousaf & Javaid, 2020).

University Youth

In urban centers like Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar, student societies organize debates, arts events, and peace conferences, creating alternative spaces for identity-building and self-expression that counter extremist narratives (Hassan, 2021; Malik, 2019). These activities foster critical thinking and resilience, but vulnerabilities persist due to exposure to online radicalization via social media and encrypted platforms (Khan & Ahmad, 2022). Current state strategies focus heavily on surveillance rather than prevention, highlighting the need for digital literacy, counter-narratives, and student-led monitoring.

Families and Clan Elders

Families and elders in rural and tribal contexts provide moral guidance, discipline, and early detection of radical tendencies (Khan, 2021). Elders, respected as mediators, can prevent youth from embracing extremism through social pressure and counseling. However, patriarchal dominance often excludes women and youth from decision-making (Shaikh, 2020), limiting inclusivity and leaving space for extremist recruiters to exploit grievances.

Community Policing

Community policing initiatives aim to bridge the gap between law enforcement and local populations by fostering collaboration in intelligence-sharing and conflict mediation (Rana, 2019). When effective, these efforts reduce perceptions of state coercion and enhance citizen trust. Yet, weak institutional follow-up and under-resourced units limit

impact, as projects often remain short-term and sidelined within militarized counterterrorism frameworks (Abbas & Yousaf, 2021).

Jirgas and Indigenous Justice

Customary justice systems like jirgas and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) remain central in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former tribal areas, resolving disputes quickly and culturally legitimately (Ahmed, 2018). In CVE, they help reduce grievances that extremists exploit, offering accessible alternatives to communities with weak access to formal courts. However, gender exclusion and elite capture undermine fairness and credibility (Shinwari, 2016).

Synthesis

Together, these mechanisms illustrate Pakistan's layered resilience against violent extremism. CBYOs highlight youth mobilization; religious leaders reclaim faith-based narratives; lashkars demonstrate community-led defense; universities cultivate critical thinking while facing digital risks; families and elders provide early guidance; community policing fosters state-society trust; and jirgas maintain culturally grounded conflict resolution. Each mechanism carries strengths and vulnerabilities, underscoring that resilience cannot be achieved through top-down security approaches alone.

Discussion

The empirical findings substantiate and extend the decolonial theoretical framework by demonstrating how community resilience operates as a *form of epistemic resistance* against imposed security paradigms. For instance, jirgas' reliance on consensus aligns with decolonial theory's emphasis on relational knowledge, while youth-led peace initiatives embody transformative agency that challenges colonial hierarchies of expertise. Each finding—whether on CBYOs, clerical counter-narratives, or community policing—illustrates how indigenous mechanisms function as *decolonial counter-epistemologies* that redefine resilience not as adaptation to state power, but as reclamation of local authority and social harmony.

The Ayaz Khan Model operationally maps these connections, linking theoretical constructs (local authority, socio-cultural capital, youth empowerment) with empirical manifestations (jirgas, CBYOs, religious leadership), thus translating decolonial concepts into measurable resilience pathways.

Community resilience in Pakistan is deeply rooted in indigenous institutions that predate the modern state. Clan elders and jirgas have long functioned as justice mechanisms with cultural legitimacy, often outperforming formal systems that lack contextual sensitivity. These institutions sustain cohesion, maintain order, and prevent disputes from escalating into violence.

From a decolonial perspective, these practices highlight how Global South communities generate resilience outside Western epistemologies. Terrorism studies and countering violent extremism (CVE) discourses, dominated by Euro-American models of surveillance and militarization, often overlook relational and cultural mechanisms of resilience. Pakistani communities demonstrate the limits of importing such frameworks.

This interplay between state policy and indigenous institutions calls for hybrid approaches that integrate, rather than replace, local authority. Supporting Community-Based Youth Organizations (CBYOs) with resources while preserving autonomy ensures authenticity in grassroots interventions. CBYOs engage vulnerable youth in constructive activities, leadership development, and peacebuilding, reducing susceptibility to extremist recruitment.

Religious leaders also hold significant potential. Religion in Pakistan shapes both private and public life, and while extremist groups exploit it for violence, faith-based authority can also promote peace. The Paigham-e-Pakistan fatwa illustrates this potential, but wider impact requires systematic training of ulema and imams in peace pedagogy—equipping them with skills in dialogue, mediation, and engagement.

Traditional mechanisms such as jirgas likewise require reform rather than abandonment. While effective in dispute resolution, their exclusion of women and vulnerable groups perpetuates inequality. Institutionalizing women's participation, embedding human rights standards, and ensuring transparency could transform jirgas into inclusive vehicles of justice and cohesion.

Enhancing police-community trust is equally vital. Law enforcement in Pakistan often suffers from corruption, coercion, and political interference, breeding mistrust that extremist groups exploit. Building localized partnerships where police collaborate with elders, CBYOs, and religious leaders can bridge this gap.

Ayaz Khan's Model of community resilience offers a useful framework to understand these dynamics. It emphasizes the interconnected role of socio-cultural capital, youth empowerment, and local authority in resisting extremism. In Pakistan, socio-cultural capital is expressed through kinship ties, reciprocity, and collective identity.

Youth empowerment is central in this model. With a majority of Pakistan's population under 30, extremists often target youth grievances and identity struggles. Empowerment through education, training, and civic participation redirects energies toward constructive ends.

Local authority, another pillar of Ayaz Khan's model, intersects with both socio-cultural capital and youth empowerment. Elders and religious leaders embody authority in rural contexts, while in urban areas activists and educators often assume this role. Recognizing this plurality ensures resilience strategies remain inclusive and adaptable. The interaction of socio-cultural capital, youth empowerment, and local authority creates resilience greater than the sum of its parts. This interwoven web sustains trust, fosters cooperation, and marginalizes extremist ideologies. It reflects the dynamic, relational nature of resilience embedded in Pakistani society.

A decolonial reading of these dynamics challenges Western-centric terrorism studies that privilege securitization and surveillance. By centering indigenous systems, decolonial approaches not only critique dominant paradigms but also propose alternative epistemologies grounded in lived realities. This is not to romanticize indigenous practices, which can perpetuate exclusion, but to recognize that resilience stems from cultural continuity and relational networks rather than external imposition.

The broader implications extend beyond Pakistan. Many Global South societies rely on indigenous institutions with enduring legitimacy alongside formal state systems. Lessons from Pakistan's hybrid model, aligned with Ayaz Khan's framework, can inform CVE strategies elsewhere where Western models lack traction.

The future of CVE in Pakistan rests on embracing this hybrid, decolonial approach. Policymakers must move beyond narrow securitized paradigms, recognizing jirgas, clan elders, CBYOs, and religious leaders as legitimate partners. Communities must adapt their institutions to contemporary realities, fostering inclusivity and addressing inequitiesthe author Khan's model provides a conceptual lens to design interventions that are contextually grounded and forward-looking.

Limitations and Implications

While the qualitative design provides contextual depth, reliance on secondary sources and limited field access in conflict-prone areas constrains generalizability. Interview data are localized to KP and may not represent broader national variations. Future research should employ longitudinal and participatory designs to capture dynamic changes in community resilience.

Policy Implications

The findings offer critical guidance for Pakistan's *National Policy on Preventing Violent Extremism (NPVE 2024)* by emphasizing the importance of institutionalizing hybrid governance that bridges formal justice systems with reformed jirga practices. Policymakers should prioritize capacity-building programs for clan elders and ulema, equipping them with skills in peace mediation, dialogue facilitation, and human rights awareness to enhance the legitimacy and inclusiveness of local justice mechanisms. Similarly, community policing units must be restructured to incorporate trained local mediators who can foster trust between law enforcement and communities, thus transforming policing from a reactive to a preventive model. In addition, sustainable support mechanisms for Community-Based Youth Organizations (CBYOs) should be integrated into district-level P/CVE frameworks to ensure continuity and long-term impact. These measures collectively align national policy with grassroots realities, reinforcing social cohesion, enhancing community resilience, and strengthening Pakistan's overall response to extremist ideologies.

Conclusion

Clan elders, jirgas, and community-led interventions offer culturally resonant and locally legitimate mechanisms to counter extremist ideologies in Pakistan. Their importance extends beyond conflict resolution, representing a long-standing tradition of community governance embedded in Pakistan's socio-cultural fabric, especially in tribal and rural areas where the state's presence is limited or distrusted. These institutions, through their cultural authority and social legitimacy, often command greater trust than state apparatuses, making them crucial in building resilience against extremist narratives that exploit alienation and governance vacuums.

The decolonial value of these mechanisms lies in their ability to resist Western-centric counterterrorism approaches, which often emphasize militarization and surveillance while ignoring local realities. In contrast, jirgas and councils derive authority from traditions of negotiation and consensus-building that resonates with community notions of justice and reconciliation. By restoring dignity, addressing grievances, and reinforcing belonging, they disrupt the social and psychological conditions extremists exploit.

Community-led approaches are also more adaptive than rigid state frameworks. Elders mediate disputes, balance intergenerational tensions, and draw on symbolic authority to enforce agreements, preventing extremists from exploiting social divides. Their capacity to convene diverse stakeholders within culturally legitimate spaces makes them difficult for militant groups to undermine.

Nonetheless, limitations exist. Traditional justice has been criticized for patriarchal and exclusionary practices, particularly regarding women's participation and youth empowerment (Qadir & Rehman, 2021). Excluding women ignores their critical role, as extremists often target them for recruitment.

Another concern is the potential misuse of authority. Some jirgas have reinforced regressive practices or colluded with local elites (Yusufzai, 2019). Balanced integration is essential: state oversight should ensure accountability without eroding community autonomy.

Empirical evidence highlights the effectiveness of such mechanisms. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA, jirgas mediated disputes that could otherwise have escalated into violence and militant recruitment. In Swat, elders facilitated reconciliation and reintegration after the Taliban insurgency (Khan, 2018).

Community-led interventions also address radicalization preventively. Through elders' networks, initiatives have promoted education, counter-narratives grounded in religious moderation, and the revival of cultural practices that affirm communal identity. These resonate with programs like Paigham-e-Pakistan, which mobilized religious scholars and traditional authorities against extremism (Shah, 2020).

Extremist ideologies thrive in contexts of betrayal and alienation, offering belonging and dignity to the marginalized. Clan elders counter this by reinforcing collective identity and demonstrating that grievances can be addressed through culturally familiar systems. This restoration of horizontal trust within communities, and vertical trust between communities and governance, is one of the strongest defenses against extremism.

Moving forward, Pakistan's challenge is to institutionalize these mechanisms without eroding their authenticity. Recognition should not lead to bureaucratic co-optation but to genuine partnership. Practical steps include training elders in human rights principles, facilitating women's and youth participation, and linking traditional mechanisms with formal institutions in ways that preserve autonomy while enhancing accountability.

In conclusion, clan elders, jirgas, and community-led interventions are vital components of Pakistan's counter-extremism strategy. They offer a decolonial alternative to securitized frameworks by privileging cultural legitimacy and community ownership. While patriarchal norms, elite capture, and generational divides pose challenges, these can be mitigated through thoughtful reforms and state-community partnerships.

Synchronizing Ayaz Khan's Model (Operational Mapping)

Ayaz Khan's community resilience model places the community at its core, highlighting the reciprocal reinforcement of social, cultural, and institutional capital. In Pakistan, resilience emerges where traditional authority, state initiatives, and grassroots mechanisms converge against extremist ideologies. Families, clan elders, and jirgas provide early-warning signals of radicalization while mediating conflicts that could fuel violence.

Notes:

Community-led interventions have gained increasing recognition in countering extremist ideologies in Pakistan, as state-centric approaches alone often fail to address the roots of radicalization. One example is the emergence of community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) in North Waziristan after years of insurgency and displacement. As note, young people organized cultural activities, promoted education, and mobilized around the slogan "We want peace." This declaration, rooted in local idioms, directly challenged militant narratives that normalized violence. Unlike state-crafted counter-narratives, youth-led strategies are embedded in everyday relations and thus harder to delegitimize. CBYOs highlight youth agency in resisting recruitment and illustrate how education, cultural revival, and creative expression provide alternative pathways of identity formation that undermine extremist appeal.

Religious leaders have also been central to community resilience. In Dir Valley, clerics have used sermons and community gatherings to denounce militancy. Since extremist groups often seek religious legitimacy, such interventions erode their credibility. Locally delivered messages resonate more than state-issued fatwas, which are often viewed with suspicion. By embedding counter-narratives within Islamic discourse, clerics create theological deterrents that delegitimize violence while fostering trust between religious institutions and communities. This strengthens cohesion and narrows the ideological space exploited by extremist recruiters.

Traditional authority has also been mobilized through tribal lashkars. The Mullagori tribe in Khyber District organized 3,000 volunteers to expel Taliban militants, reviving mechanisms of collective defense rooted in the Pashtunwali code of honor. While armed lashkars risk escalation and long-term militarization, they underscore communities' willingness to reclaim security in the absence of the state. Their success challenges portrayals of local populations as passive victims, instead highlighting collective agency. Comparative cases elsewhere confirm that community militias can disrupt extremist networks, though sustaining such mobilization requires integration into broader peacebuilding efforts.

Beyond armed resistance, socio-cultural resilience is a key protective factor. Survey research in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar shows that family bonds, cultural traditions, and peer networks shield youth from radicalization. Resilience theory underscores the importance of social capital in mitigating vulnerability. Youth connected to supportive families and peers are less likely to be swayed by propaganda exploiting isolation. Cultural heritage—poetry, music, storytelling—offers alternative identities incompatible with extremism. These traditions, central to Pakistani social life, reaffirm community agency and pride, while countering narratives of alienation.

Yet vulnerabilities persist, reports that extremist groups exploit unemployment, school dropouts, and social isolation to recruit. Economic marginalization creates openings for extremist organizations to offer financial incentives and belonging. Families and elders, often the first line of defense, face structural barriers such as poverty and lack of educational opportunities. This underscores the need for layered strategies combining vigilance with socioeconomic reforms. Early detection mechanisms that empower local actors to identify behavioral changes before they escalate are critical. Community leaders thus become intermediaries between youth, families, and institutions.

Another important dimension is community policing finds that partnerships between police and communities can disrupt extremist networks if they prioritize trust, dialogue, and cooperation over enforcement alone. Such approaches encourage communities to share information and collaborate with authorities. Public awareness campaigns and involvement of enlightened religious leaders enhance effectiveness. However, mistrust persists due to past heavy-handed operations. Bridging this requires training police in community engagement, human rights, and cultural sensitivity. If successful, community policing can shift perceptions of the state from antagonistic to supportive, embedding resilience within broader governance frameworks.

Indigenous justice systems such as the jirga also play a complex role. Operating as councils for dispute resolution, jirgas derive legitimacy from collective participation and local traditions. In tribal areas, they remain trusted institutions that promote social cohesion by reducing grievances. Yet, critiques highlight gender exclusion and elite domination. The state's attempt to formalize jirgas under the 2017 Alternative Dispute Resolution Act has sparked debate: some argue codification dilutes authenticity, while others see it as enhancing legitimacy. While risks of instrumentalization exist, jirgas' cultural legitimacy makes them indispensable in resilience strategies if inclusivity concerns are addressed.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the diverse ways communities contribute to countering violent extremism in Pakistan. CBYOs create youth-driven alternatives to militancy; clerics provide theological counterweights; lashkars assert traditional authority in security; cultural practices reinforce identity resilience; families and elders serve as early warning systems; community policing builds trust with state institutions; and jirgas mediate disputes to sustain cohesion. Though challenges remain—gender biases, risks of militarization, structural inequalities—these mechanisms affirm that resilience is not solely the domain of the state but is deeply embedded in local social structures and traditions. Importantly, these approaches embody the principle of local ownership, now recognized as crucial for sustainable peacebuilding. While international counterterrorism frameworks emphasize state-centric models, Pakistan's experience shows that effective resilience emerges from the interaction of grassroots agency and supportive state engagement. By integrating community-based mechanisms with broader socioeconomic reforms, Pakistan can build a holistic model of countering violent extremism that reflects local realities while challenging Western-centric security narratives.

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