

Protracted Conflict and Pathways of Radicalization in South Waziristan: The Intersecting Roles of Internal and External Drivers

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the local dynamics underpinning conflict-induced radicalization pathways in South Waziristan, filling a gap in existing literature that overwhelmingly emphasizes external drivers. Drawing on primary data from in-depth semi-structured interviews and secondary data from scholarly sources, the research identifies five key local factors providing key pathways and thus inducing radicalization: places of worship (mosques), Islamic seminaries (madrassahs), networks of the Society of Preachers known as Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), jihadi literature, and public gathering spaces. These institutions and venues act as vital conduits for the formation, dissemination, and normalization of radical thoughts and discourses within community life. Findings reveal that these local mechanisms interact with conflict-induced grievances to produce and sustain ideological shifts toward radicalization. The study's implications highlight the need for counter-radicalization strategies that attend not only to external threats but also to the embedded role of local religious and social infrastructures. Effective prevention programs must target these grassroots environments and engage community stakeholders in reform efforts.

Key Words: Conflict-induced Radicalization, Pashtun Borderland Militancy, Public Space Radicalization, South Waziristan, Tablighi Jamaat.

Introduction

Radicalization in this paper refers to the method and process of adopting an extremist ideology in public life mostly induced by socio-religious and cultural norms. The study of *radicalization* has now occupied a central position in peace and conflict studies (Austin and Geissmann, 2018). Our aim is to examine supporting institutional spaces of radicalization with a regional focus on South Waziristan. The research site lies along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border—specifically the erstwhile tribal agency of South Waziristan—a region that has been a stronghold of religious

militancy and the focus of sustained military operations since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. The spread of extremism and radicalization in Waziristan region, we argue, is not solely the product of external factors but a phenomenon which is primarily entwined with several supporting institutional dynamics alongside the legacy of colonial intervention, tribal structures, and evolving state dynamics (Khan and Kiran, 2014). Some facets of radicalization are also deeply rooted in Pashtunwali code which created fertile ground for radical ideologies to emerge and endure. Thus, using an inward-looking approach, we emphasize on the role and contribution of several religious and social spaces providing fertile ground for radicalization. Moreover, this paper also traces the historical evolution of radicalization in Waziristan, from the colonial period through the post-9/11 era, analyzing how local customs, state policies, and international forces converge to shape contemporary manifestations of extremism.

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, key militant organizations—including the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani Network—relocated to Waziristan. Their presence transformed the region's social fabric, reinforcing radical Islamism and embedding it into local everyday life. Tribal norms under Pashtunwali have historically valorized honor-based violence and clan rivalries, which facilitated resistance against the British and later Pakistani state adoption of non-interference policies—a legacy that institutionalized autonomy and hindered effective governance. (Rehman, 2004)

The paper is structured into three interlinked sections. The first sets out conceptual foundations—defining radicalization, examining the Pashtunwali code, and tracing pre- and post-partition developments that seeded and accelerated radical pathways in South Waziristan. The second section explores the institutional ecosystem enabling this trajectory—how mosques, madrassas, and Tablighi networks alongside the circulation of jihadi literature created a coherent ideological infrastructure receptive to extremist framing. In the final discussion and conclusion, the study argues that public spaces—transport hubs, cafes, sports grounds—have evolved into everyday theaters for the dissemination and normalization of extremist narratives. Seen together—tribal honor norms, state absence, external militant influx, and organized religious networks—these forces have collectively institutionalized radical attitudes and symbols across the region, embedding them into ordinary social life. Advocating effective de-radicalization, the conclusion emphasizes the need for culturally resonant institutional and community-based counter-narratives.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study combines primary evidence from a purposive sample of eight face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in Waziristan—engaging political activists and regional experts—with secondary material derived from books, peer-reviewed journals, government documents, and print and digital media. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic coding: after an initial read-through to surface key ideas, key themes were derived and gradually refined by systematically reading line-by-line, comparing segments across interviews, and clustering similar subthemes into broader themes. The primary researcher maintained reflexive awareness of his own positionality and meticulously

tracked thematic decisions to ensure clarity and credibility. In addition, some secondary texts—such as firsthand reports or local narratives—were treated as “primary-like” data, enabling more nuanced triangulation with interview responses. This integration of sources allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and interpretive themes, providing a coherent foundation for the analysis and conclusion stages of the study.

Conceptualizing Radicalization

The term radicalization originated in 17th century Europe. (Alonso et al, 2008) In the post-Glorious Revolution England, being radical was termed as a marker of enlightened liberal political ideas. It represented a political doctrine based on core values of freedom, rights and democracy. It also became a political movement advocating republicanism and resisting aristocratic and monarchical systems. It was portrayed as a revolutionary left-wing subversive force (Botticher, 2017). In modern times, the term radicalization got wide spread currency in the European policy circles after 2004 Madrid attacks.

In Peace and Conflict Studies literature, radicalization is viewed *as a process of change in ideas, feelings and behavior of an individual, espousing extremist attitude, justifying violence and rendering sacrifice in defense of one's group or community.* (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008) Jana Meier and her colleagues in their article titled “*A biographical perspective on process of radicalization*” figure out three conditions leading to radicalization that includes poor social control, increased interaction with ideological groups and finding a sense of purpose in one's social life (Meier et al, 2022). Lorenzo Vidino in his article “*Countering Radicalization in America lesson from Europe*” has emphasized on the structural causes of radicalization like political and cultural insecurity prevailing among individuals and groups. He also contends that sometimes life-altering events lead individuals to radicalization (Vidino, 2010). Most of the scholars believe that propaganda plays an important role in spreading radical ideas. Professional radicals and groups target individuals that are vulnerable to be mobilized and recruited. Once an individual becomes attracted to radical ideas then a process of self-radicalization starts which change the world view of the person (Schmid, 2023).

In some recent articles, scholars have broadly categorized radicalization as ideological and behavioral process or in other words “radicalization of thought” and “radicalization of method”. Ideological radicalization refers to the adoption of extremist ideas while radicalization of methods refers to the use of violence to impose one's world view on others. Sometimes, the individual is willing to use violence while at other times he/she perpetrate violence (Crone, 2005).

The radicalization of an individual and their subservient resort to violence happens as a result of acceptance of extreme ideas and beliefs. These ideas and beliefs provide legitimacy to perpetrate violence. The beliefs may have religious, political or social motives (Government of Canada, 2018). According to John T. Picarelli, the process of conversion of radicalization into violent extremism involves multiple factors varying by individual, group, ideology and context (Picarelli, 2016). It means that there exists an interplay between external and internal factors influencing an individual's grievances and making them a violent extremist. In addition, the recruitment models adopted by radical organizations also influences the process (Holmer and Bauman, 2018). Furthermore, there is a fine connection between

radicalization and a narrative. A narrative feeding on grievances have a larger effect on individual behavior. Similarly, the strength of cohesion and unity among the followers of a particular radical ideology also brings noteworthy changes in an individual's outlook of life (US Homeland Security 2011). However, Fernando Reinares et al contends that in actual practice only a small number of people involve in use of violence. This small group considers itself as the vanguard protecting the ideological, political and cultural boundaries of the larger community of which they are a part (Reinares et al, 2008). Every individual espousing radical ideas and beliefs may not be necessarily a violent extremist.

Radicalization is thus a ubiquitous phenomenon prevalent through ages, regions, cultures and religions. Radicalization may be secular or religious in nature. However, studies have shown that religion is the primary cause of radicalization in Muslim countries. It is seen as a reaction of Muslims to the increasing influence of Western countries and the decadent condition of the Muslim World (Kasehage, 2021). This research specifically focuses on religious radicalization in the context of South Waziristan. The scope of this research extends to the events in the last two decades that resulted in radicalization. It deals with both radicalizations of ideas and actions. In other words, it covers violent extremism in the region in the last two decades.

Elements of Radicalization in Pashtuns' Code of Life - Pashtunwali

Historically, the Pashtun borderlands have remained independent for centuries. Due to its harsh geographic location and fierce tribal resistance, no ruler of Afghanistan or India ever tried to bring this region under their control. In the absence of any state system, the tribes developed a customary law over centuries to govern their affairs called *Pashtunwali*. According to Allaudin, *Pashtunwali* is not just a set of rules but a way of life. It is a code of life that regulates the life of the Pashtuns. Pashtunwali shapes the individual and collective behavior and ethics of tribesmen (Allaudin, 2018).

Tom Ginsburg in his article "*Economic Interpretation of the Pashtunwali*" contends that provision of justice in such societies becomes a private affair. The victims himself carry out sanction rather than the government. In his opinion, private violence in most cases becomes a source of further escalation and perpetuation of violence. He asserts that only institutions can limit the level of violence and the absence of any such institutions in tribal areas results in an unending cycle of violence and counter violence (Ginsburg, 2011). Thus, the absence of any central authority and a system of self-help are by design violent and radical.

According to Raja G. Hussain among all conducts of life under Pashtunwali 'loss of life' is at the top of the hierarchy of violation of the rights of an individual. He writes that even in the case of accidental loss of life retribution is the solution. Its due to the fact that only revenge can restore the "lost honor" of an individual, family or a tribe (Hussain, 2008). In a tribal society, to be perceived as dishonorable is a shame for an individual and his family. That's why; murder in a tribal society is sometimes considered as an acceptable act for the restoration of the 'lost honor' (Land Info 2011). It shows that radicalization is embedded in social fabric of the society in

South Waziristan. It is believed that people of Waziristan only know ‘how to kill’ or ‘to be killed’.

In the same vein, Sana Ullah writing about Pashtun society asserts that ‘honor’ or ‘*namus*’ is a mandatory component of ‘Pashtunwali’. According to him honor in Pashto has a broader meaning than in English. He says that damage to honor in Pashtun society brings shame and causes feuds and vendettas. The victim party then looks for an opportunity to take revenge because a dishonor person loses dignity and doesn’t get same respect. This sense of revenge causes feuds and vendettas which lasts from generation to generation (Sanaullah, 2011).

Similarly, Jan Alam et al in their essay titled “*Feud: An Arena of Pakhtunwali and Violence among Pakhtun of Afridi Tribe*” contends that ‘Pashtunwali’ has many negative elements like ‘anarchy and aggression’ promoting violence and radicalization. For instance, ‘*Tarborwali*’ besides a source of cohesion, sometimes become a cause of rivalry (Alam et al, 2014). Like Afridis, the tribes of South Waziristan also give primary importance to ‘*Tarborwali*’ in their social life. Most of the time, it becomes a source of promoting radicalization in the name of honor. It results in prolonged internecine feuds causing deaths and injuries to individuals and families. As according to Asif Iqbal Dawar, any deviation from ‘pashtunwali’ brings ‘*paihor*’ or ‘ostracism’ to an individual or a family (Dawar, 2019).

Thus, cultural elements of *Pashtunwali* like as honor codes, clan loyalties, and an ethos of struggle provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of radical ideas in the post 9/11 scenario in Waziristan. These elements not only legitimize violence but glorify and normalizes it in some instances. Consequently, the radical faith-inspired narrative fell on equally radical cultural breeding-ground appealing for hundreds and thousands of people in the region.

Radicalization During the British Raj

The tribes inhabiting South Waziristan are known for their fierce behavior. The other Pashtun tribes living adjacent to South Waziristan have historically unfriendly relations with Wazirs and Mehsuds. Colin Metcalfe Enriquez, famous military officer and author of the book “*The Pathan Borderland*” has written that “*a Wazir will murder you for the sake of your pugaree (turban)*” (Enriquez, 1921). Similarly, Hugh Beattie has stated that the tribes living in Waziristan are violent predators preying on each other (Beattie, 1997). The tribes had prolonged internecine feuds with each other from generation to generation. Due to harsh climate and limited economic opportunities looting and plundering had been a source of survival of the people. In other words, like in Hobbesian state of nature every individual and tribe in Waziristan is at war with other individual and tribe. It means violence is a part and parcel of the tribal life.

Before the advent of British, the tribes residing in Waziristan had maintained their internal independence. The famous warriors like Gengis Khan, Timur and Mahmud Ghaznavi treaded Waziristan and used its passes to attack mainland India. Although, they recruited people from Waziristan in their armies but none of them established any permanent settlements in the area. Similarly, the founding father of the modern state of Afghanistan, Ahmed Shah Abdali, also didn’t endeavor to bring the hilly tribes of Waziristan under his direct control (Caroe, 1958). In the same manner, the

successors of Abdali and later the Barakzai rulers also didn't interfere in the independent existence of the tribes of Waziristan.

After the annexation of Punjab, the British government came in direct contact with the tribes living on the border of North-West Frontier. The tribes vehemently opposed the British advances and started violent clashes with frontier forces (Warren, 1997). However, it was only in the early 19th century that the British troops made advances to Waziristan. Initially, the British Government adopted "Closed Border Policy" making little interference in the independence of the tribes of Waziristan. During this period, the relations between the British and the tribes of Waziristan remained friendly. At that time, the British only wanted to ensure tribal peace (Asfandiyar, 2020). However, with the changing regional and global geo-political realities, the British government abandoned the "Closed Border Policy" and adopted the "Forward Policy". This policy shift was what is usually called the "Great Game". In this "Great Game", the British wanted to check the growing Russian influence in the region. For this purpose, the British wanted to use Afghanistan as a "buffer state" to avoid direct contact with Russia. Secondly, the British government devised a policy of using the tribal areas a bulwark against any Russian aggression. That's why, the British endeavored to bring Waziristan under direct control. The tribes of Waziristan resisted this shift in British policy. Throughout this period, Waziristan remained an unmanageable region.

Owing to the need of the hours the British government decided to permanently station British troops in Waziristan in 1920s. This was the first direct affront to the independence of the tribes of Waziristan. It was viewed as an attempt on the part of British government to dominate the region. However, due the "Bolshevik Revolution" in Russia, the British officials wanted to get control of the Waziristan due to the importance of its geo-strategic location. As a result, the British established a large military garrison at Razmak, North Waziristan (Williams, 2005). Earlier, the British had established military stations in Wana in 1895.

The tribes of Waziristan viewed the presence of British troops in the area as a threat to their independence. It created a growing sense of mistrust between British government and the tribal people. In the late 19th century, Mullah Powindah started resistance against the British. He was using both religion and tribe for mobilizing people against the British. Mullah Powindah, through a religious decree asked other mullahs not to perform funeral prayers of those who lost lives while serving in British troops. He also succeeded in convincing some Mehsud tribesmen to carry out suicidal attacks to kill British official. Killing a British was portrayed as a token of paradise (Beattie, 1997). One such fanatic was Kabul, a Mehsud tribe man, who killed a British official stationed at Sarwakai, and he was subsequently executed in Dera Ismail Khan. Later on, his grave became a shrine for his tribe. In addition, Mullah Hamzallah and Lala Pir succeeded in mobilizing the tribes against the British (Nawid, 1997).

However, the event of the conversion of Islam Bibi proved the trigger point in the resistance of the tribes of Waziristan against the British. Islam Bibi, a Hindu girl, who fell in love with a local Muslim boy, converted to Islam and eloped with him to Waziristan (Khan, 2014). The Hindu family piled a petition in court for the recovery of the girl. The court declared the conversion illegal. The British

government pressurized the tribes to return the girls to her parents. A local prayer leader Mirza Ali Khan, popularly known as Faqir of Ipi, declared this decision of the government against the teaching of Islam and a humiliation to the Muslims. Therefore, he mobilized the people of various tribes of Waziristan and started armed resistance against the British Government. Slowly and gradually, Faqir of Ipi gained fame and importance by waging Jihad against the British. He became a symbol of resistance against the British Raj (ibid). The importance of Faqir of Ipi lays in the fact that for the first time in history, he mobilized the tribal people in the name of religion. He radicalized people for a religious cause. Before this incident, the violence in the region was not on religious grounds. It was the result of the lack of any central authority to govern the region. However, by evoking religion, Faqir of Ipi for the first-time institutionalized radicalization in the region. Thereafter, the society in Waziristan became increasingly radicalized with each passing time. Radicalization and violence became a part and parcel of the daily life of the people.

Post-Partition Developments

When Waziristan became part of the new Pakistani state, the situation failed to improve—its Pashtun-majority border regions were claimed by Afghanistan on irredentist grounds. To counter this threat and redirect the militant energy of the Faqir of Ipi, the Pakistani government adopted Islamization as official state policy. At the same time, it enlisted respected *peers* to galvanize tribal *lashkars* toward the conflict in Kashmir. One such force, led by the so-called “Peer of Wana” or “Baghdadi Peer,” left Waziristan to join the struggle against Indian troops. In 1949, to further undercut the Faqir’s resistance—who viewed Pakistan’s independence as merely a continuation of British rule—the government dispatched a delegation of sixty-five eminent Islamic scholars to Waziristan. This delegation of ulema included Shabir Ahmed Usmani and the famous Amin al-Husseini, Grand mufti of Palestine, beside others. On their arrival to Waziristan, the ulema issued a religious fatwa declaring the war in Kashmir a jihad and the war of Faqir of Ipi in Waziristan against Pakistan as an un-Islamic and sinful act (Binder, 1963).

Pakistan decisively aligned itself with the Western bloc under Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, who chose an official visit to the United States in May 1950 over a prior invitation from the Soviet Union—an act that firmly established Pakistan’s Cold War orientation. During his address at Columbia University, he underscored Pakistan’s strategic position and advocated for the country’s role in resisting communism (Bahadur, 1998). As part of this policy shift, the state began promoting Islamic identity as a bulwark against communist influence—manifesting in Islamization initiatives across the Pashtun belt, particularly in the government-advised acceptance of religious leadership in local affairs. In the late 1950s, authorities extended patronage to a young religious scholar, Maulana Noor Muhammad, later instrumental in establishing the Jamia Masjid Wana and initiating the complex of Jamia Darul Uloom Waziristan, which became key centers of local religious education and communal cohesion.

In 1973, Muhammad Daud Khan ousted King Zahir Shah from power in Afghanistan and in order to get legitimacy supported the unification of Pashtuns and the creation of ‘Pashtunistan’ as independent state (Rottig, 2013). Thus, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government embarked on an institutionalized Islamization policy to counter Pashtun nationalism. Bhutto’s Islamization policy in tribal areas had been

designed to counter the increasing influence of Daud Khan. Thus, the government established a network of Islamic seminaries and extended the activities of Tablighi Jamaat to Waziristan in 1970s (Qazi, 2013). Similarly, Vahid Brown and Don Rassler in their book “*Fountainhead of Jihad*” argues that Pakistan established close links with Islamists in Kabul through Jamaat-e-Islami to create internal problems for Daud Khan. In addition, Pakistan extended official patronage to Jalaluddin Haqqani and convinced him to come to Madrassah Haqqaniyah in Akora Khattak to pursue higher religious studies. In Haqqaniyah, Jallauddin got necessary training to play a pivotal role in Afghanistan in the ensuing years. Jallauddin Haqqani established his headquarter and a network of seminaries in Waziristan. He chose Waziristan as headquarter of his activities due to its proximity to Kabul (Brown and Rassler, 2013).

However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought radical changes in the socio-political set-up of Waziristan. The presence of Soviet troops was viewed as an existential threat to national security by policy-makers in Islamabad thus they allied with United States to play the role of frontline ally in Afghan Jihad. The radical policy shifts weakened traditional authority in Waziristan and empowered religious groups dominating the scene in the coming decades (Zahab, 2020). Thus, Waziristan turned into a stronghold of mujahedeen and society became highly radicalized. Abubakar Siddiqui in his book “*The Pashtun Question*” writes that a state-sponsored ideological propaganda dominated and shaped social discourse in Waziristan. Mosques, Madrassah, Jirga, town halls and market places turned into propaganda machines churning disinformation and misinformation against the Soviets. According to him mullahs provoked public sentiments against the Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan in Friday sermons. They declared Afghan Jihad obligatory and appealed to people to fulfil their religious obligation by fighting for the cause of Islam. He further contends that arms and weapons became easily available in bazars. The small town of Azam Warsak turned into an arms market. Thus, the presence of a potential enemy in Afghanistan coupled with highly effective propaganda and the widespread availability of lethal weapons radicalized society in irremediable way (Siddique, 2014).

When United States launched ‘War on Terror’ and toppled Taliban government in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, Haqqanis and other foreign fighters retreated to Waziristan. The already Islamized and radicalized society welcomed foreign fighters and extended full support to them. The situation exacerbated after a raid on a mosque of Jalaluddin Haqqani in Miranshah where the US special forces participated in the raid alongside Pakistani soldiers (Williams, 2014). Resultantly, Al-Qaeda and Haqqanis got the opportunity to reorganize in Waziristan and garner support of local people. Thus, owing to the radicalized nature of the society and new geo-political realities the phenomenon of Talibanization started in Waziristan in the wake of war on terror. This new wave of Talibanization proliferated in Waziristan and expanded to other tribal areas in a short span of time (Basit and Rathore, 2017). Hence, Al-Qaeda, Haqqani, and other foreign fighters succeeded in constituting ‘Neo-Taliban’ in their safe havens in Waziristan. The radicalization of society that ensued the US War on Terror surpassed all previous levels. This wave of radicalization pervaded all spheres of life.

Institutionalization of Radicalization

Numerous studies exist exploring the origin of radicalization in the tribal belt. Some scholars have laid emphasis on external factors while others focus on the importance of internal dynamics. Scholars like Ahmed Rashid (2000), Hassan Abbas (2004), Imtiaz Gul (2010), Abubakar Siddique (2014) and Christine Fair (2014) trace the origin of radicalization in the era of great game and cold war. According to these scholars, radicalization became the mainspring of official policy first that of British and later of Pakistan government to counter the increasing communist expansion. These scholar views radicalization as a consequence of external factors and hold state responsible for it. On the other hand, scholars like Farhat Taj (2017) and Mariam Abou Zahab (2020) lay stress on the role of agency in radicalization and argue that internal factors have exacerbated it more as compared to external factors. For instance, Farhat Taj contends that cultural and social fault lines provide fertile ground for global and state actors to prey upon and shape the society in a way that suits their agenda (Taj, 2017).

Similarly, Mariam Abou Zahab maintains that external factors can become effective only in a conducive atmosphere to influence society. She argues that changes in the socio-economic dynamics of Waziristan played a key role in the large-scale radicalization of society. She has particularly highlighted remittance from the Gulf countries and war economy as main factors giving birth to the emergence of affluent class (Zahab, 2020). Regardless of the external-internal factors debate it has been an established fact that institutionalization of radicalization is a complex and multi-dimensional process. In Waziristan, it has been the product of the interplay of both local and global/regional geo-political and geo-strategic realities. External factors coupled with local factors have shaped the contours of society that is conducive for large scale radicalization. This became possible in the presence of a highly radicalized narrative and institutions to propagate it. These institutions frame the narrative in an acceptable way and legitimizes it in the eyes of people. In the process of institutionalization of radicalization five factors have played a pivotal role. These include mosque, madrassah, Tablighi Jamaat, jihadi literature and public places.

The Role of Mosques

There is a popular saying ‘Pashtuns are the only ethnic who are hundred percent Muslim’. Regardless of the factual accuracy of this saying it shows that Pashtun society is highly religious. In Pashtun society religion plays key role in shaping values, norms and behavior. All social and political discourses revolve around religious teachings. In such a religious society mosque occupies a central place.

As stated above in tribal areas including Waziristan government embarked on a policy of countering Pashtun nationalism with Islamization. Therefore, officials framed a policy emphasizing on the role of Islam as a unifying force. To counter nationalist sentiments, the officials extended patronage to ulema and mashaikh to counterweight the established leadership (Haqqani, 2005). In order to enhance the influence of these ulema and mashaikh a network of mosques has been established throughout Waziristan. These mosques enabled the ulema and mashaikh to propagate a highly Islamized narrative at grass root level. For instance, Maulana Noor Muhammad established the famous Jamia Masjid in Wana. This Jamia Masjid later became a headquarter of ulema and gradually a network of mosques was established in every nook and corner of Waziristan.

According to Ishfaq, a local researcher, in South Waziristan on average every twelve households have a separate mosque. Over the last five decades' mosques have mushroomed in every street and neighborhood. Ishfaq explained that although people in Waziristan live in mud-made houses but all mosques are constructed of steel and concrete. Similarly, he told that on every major road in Waziristan, one finds people collecting donations and charities in the name of construction of a new mosque. Due to low literacy rate in both formal and religious education most of these mosques are run by non-locals. These non-local ulema has played a dubious role throughout the last five decades. They interpret religious teachings in a highly radicalized way (Ishfaq, 2024).

However, the number of mosques quadrupled after the US invasion of Afghanistan. These newly constructed mosques are run by fresh graduates from Peshawar, Akora Khattak, Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan and Karachi. These ulema propagate highly radicalized teachings in their Friday sermons. One such mosque known as '*Konra Cheena Jamaat*' became very famous in the last two decades. Its owner, Sultan, openly eulogizes Taliban and encourage people to join their ranks and fight against US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. His sermons attract a large number of people from all over Waziristan. Sultan is also popular among Taliban and most of them offer prayers at his mosque. Thus, '*Konra Cheena Jamaat*' became interaction point for Taliban and their supporters.

Mosques have contributed to the propagation of radicalization in many ways. The pulpit of the mosque has proved as an effective platform utilized by radical ulema and mashaikh to disseminate their ideas. Mosque has a central role in radicalization of society because every person goes to mosque five times daily. Thus, the illiterate and less educated people become exposed to the propaganda of eloquent orators who exploit them emotionally for their own purpose.

The Role of Islamic Seminaries (Madrassahs)

Primarily institutions for religious instruction, the madrassahs have played a pivotal role in promoting radicalization in Waziristan. The establishment of madrassahs started in early 1960s. In tribal areas, almost every mosque has an adjacent madrassah where the prayer leader (*paishimam*) teaches basic Islamic teachings to children. The first formal madrassah called '*Jamia Darul Uloom Waziristan*' was established by Maulana Noor Muhammad adjacent to his mosque in Wana in 1960s. With the passage of time, a number of small madrassah were established in other villages too. Most of the owners of this madrassah belonged to Jumiat-e-Ulama Islama and are directly linked to the Deobandi network. The network of Deobandi madrassah traces their origin to 'Darul Uloom Deoband' established by Maulana Qasim Nanautvi and Maulana Rashid Ahmed Gangohi in British India in 1860s (Mufti, 2012). Since, the earliest madrassahs established in Waziristan belonged to Deobandi school of thought therefore, other schools like Bareilvis, Shias, Ahl-e-Hadith and Jamaat-e-Islami has little or no presence in Waziristan.

In 1980s, with Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the number of these madrassahs increased exponentially thanks to the official patronage and the foreign aid from Saudi Arabia. These madrassahs served as nurseries for recruitment of Mujahedeen

to fight against Soviets (Wang, 2010). Madrasahs became a lucrative business and their owners made huge fortunes from it. It also increased the social status and prestige of ulema in the hitherto secular society. In addition, these madrasahs worked as bulwark against the growing menaces of nationalism and socialism. These madrasahs propagated a highly radicalized narrative inspired by the teachings of Syed Abul A'la Maududi. Although, ideologically the ulemas belonged to Jumi'at-e-ulema Islam but they utilized Maududi's radical interpretation of Islam as it suited their needs as compared to the relatively moderate pioneers of Deoband school of thought.

After Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, this network of madrasahs strengthened and spread across Waziristan. When in 2001, United States invaded Afghanistan, the madrasah in Waziristan turned into bastions for Taliban, Haqqanis, Al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters. Besides, their traditional role as recruitment centers and instruments of a radicalized narrative propagation, some of the madrasahs established training centers to train new recruits for fighting in Afghanistan. Moreover, the new leadership of Taliban, Haqqanis and local Taliban replacing the veterans of Afghan Jihad of 1980s are the graduates of these madrasahs. The madrasahs in Waziristan usually announced long summer vacations to provide an opportunity to their students to participate in summer offensives in Afghanistan.

The madrasahs attracted students from lower classes and Afghan refugees. Poor parents send their children to madrasahs offering free education, boarding and lodging. In addition, the government has declared '*sanad*' or diplomas awarded by madrasah as equivalent to college and university degrees making their students eligible for jobs in various departments at federal, provincial and local level. Every madrasah holds an annual graduation ceremony to award certificates to the outgoing students and to do campaign for fresh enrollments. These graduation ceremonies locally called '*jalsas*' are occasions of great fan fair and joy. Moreover, madrasahs hold large gatherings on all important events of Islamic history.

In the post-9/11 scenario madrasahs established closed links with Taliban and provided them shelter and logistic support. Some madrasahs even collected charities and donations for Taliban to provide them financial support. Furthermore, madrasahs facilitated the interaction between Taliban and the people enabling them to garner local support and sympathizers. The headmaster of Jamia Ashraf-ul-Uloom Wana, kept the gates of his madrasah open for Taliban twenty-four hours a day. Thus, ulema built a highly radicalized narrative and used the platform of madrasahs to institutionalize and propagate it.

The Role of Society of the Preachers (Tablighi Jamaat)

Although, the Tablighi Jamaat declares itself as an apolitical and peaceful preaching organization primarily concerned with proselytization of non-Muslims and exhorts Muslims to strictly follow Islamic teachings. Nevertheless, in South Waziristan, it played a significant role in promoting radicalization. The TJ promoted radicalization in a number of ways. First, it promoted a conducive environment enabling radical organizations to flourish (Mohapatra, 2018). Similarly, the Tablighi Jamaat worked as a platform of interaction for radical militants and their sympathizers (Basit, 2021). Since, the TJ has a loose organizational structure and does not keep proper membership record, therefore, many of its members come under the influence of militant groups. The members of TJ can join and leave the organization according

to their own will. Furthermore, a member of TJ can have double membership of another organization at the same time as TJ has no membership rules. Thus, the TJ provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of radicalization (Hedges, 2008).

The TJ initiated its work in Waziristan in the early 1970s (Saeed, 2024). Mubarak, Qutab Khan, Booz Haji, Behram Khan, Maulana Saeed and Hazrat Khan are a few to name who introduced TJ in Waziristan and established a small '*markaz*' (center) adjacent to Wana bazar. Subsequently, the building underwent two extensions and now occupies over a hundred kanals. The first major gathering (*ijtima*) at the Wana Markaz was convened in 1988, attended by senior figures from Raiwind and hundreds of Tablighi devotees across Pakistan. The movement preached a strict, puritanical form of Islam, denouncing many local practices—particularly certain marriage and burial customs—as superstitious and urging their replacement with what it considered “authentic” Islamic traditions. Music and communal dancing were explicitly discouraged. Community members were guided to adopt a uniform dress code—white shirts and trousers typical of core Tablighi circles—in lieu of tribal attire. They were also encouraged to cultivate a distinctly “Islamic” appearance by growing beards. These measures reinforced a collective identity closely associated with the movement over time.

After the outbreak of militancy, the TJ became more active and multiplied its activities. Asif, a local researcher on militancy and radicalization, in his interview with the researcher argued that TJ augmented militancy and radicalization in Waziristan. He believes that Tablighi Jamaat makes people practicing Muslim and regular mosque goers. In mosques, the receptive youth become an easy prey for the predator ulema. Due to Tablighi Jamaat militants come in direct contact with people. Asif argues that Tablighi Jamaat instead of opposing militants worked for their cause. For instance, they preached that cruel rulers, hardships and wars are test from Allah to judge the level of our commitment and resolve. They also preached that this world is a prison for believers and paradise for nonbelievers. Thus, they killed the potential of people to resist militancy. Instead of urging people to struggle for changing their situation they stressed on offering prayers and observing fasts. Rather than identifying the actual causes of militancy they blamed people for what befall them (Asif, 2024).

Thus, the TJ created in environment that was conducive for the spread of radical ideas. Tablighi Jamaat facilitated the interaction of exponents of radical Islam and the people. They declared the situation as the result of the actions of people and preached that Allah will change their fate if they become practicing Muslims.

The Role of Jihadi Literature

The militant narrative voiced from mosque pulpits and taught in madrassas gained powerful reinforcement from jihadi literature that glorified martyrdom, dehumanized perceived adversaries, and offered emotional empowerment to those who felt socially or politically marginalized. Far from remaining abstract, these texts reshaped how young people of the region perceived themselves and others—defining sacrifice as heroic, legitimizing violence as service, and reframing socio-economic aspirations around loyalty to militant causes. Over time, that discourse became embedded in everyday moral frameworks, driving a perceptible shift in both

individual mindsets and collective ideals (Rana, 2014). This literature normalized violence consequently people stopped seeing it as something unusual or unnatural.

In South Waziristan, the jihadi literature made its circulation widely present. The jihadi literature included books, newspaper articles, magazines, and pamphlets printed and distributed by various organization. Some of the important books available in Wana bazar included those authored by Maulana Asim Umer, the deceased leader of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Mufti Abu Lubaba Shah Mansoor. Some widely read books written by Maulana Asim Umer included '*Bermuda Tikoon aur Dajjal*' (Bermuda Triangle and Anti-Chirst), '*Teesri Jang-e-Azeem aur Dajjal*' (Third World War and Anti-Chirst), '*Imam Mehdi ke Dost aur Dushman*' (Friends and Foes of Imam Mehdi) and '*Dajjal ka Lashkar: Black Water* (Army of Anti-Chirst: Black Water). Similarly, a number of books written by Jamia Banuri Karachi based Taliabn ideologue, Mufti Abu Lubaba Shah Mansoor, like '*Dajjal*' (Anti-Chirst), '*Harmain ki Pukar* (Call of the Holy Places) and '*Haspania se America tak*' (From Spain to America) were easily available on bookstalls. Beside this some other books like Guantanamo, '*Haq aur Batil ki Pehchan*' (Identification of Righteousness and Falsehood) and '*CIA ke Aqoobat Khane*' (Dark Cells of CIA) were also widely available in abundance in Wana Bazar. This literature was available easily and freely. Some of the distributors were non-local,

Similarly, the society was inundated with newspapers promoting radical interpretation of Islam and an anti-West narrative. Chief among this newspaper were *Zarb-e-Momin* (Strike of the Believer), *Islam* and *Al-Qalam*. Beside this, the mainstream newspapers like *Mashriq* and *Ausaf* published long features and stories on the legitimacy of Jihad in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya and Palestine. For instance, Ofcom revoked the broadcasting license of a proposed Urdu TV Channel belonging to Ausaf Group in United Kingdom for its alleged praise of Jihadist leaders and their narrative in 2018 (Iqbal, 2018). Although, these newspapers belonged to various people and organizations but promotion and justification of violence was common among them all. Muhammad, the only newsagent in Wana Bazar revealed that *Zarb-e-Momin* remained best-seller and *Dawn*, the prime English daily in Pakistan, least sold newspapers from 2004 to 2009 (Muhammad, 2024).

The data show that the widespread availability of jihadi literature added fuel to the fire in an already radicalized society. This literature particularly influenced youth and shaped their world view. The main role that literature played was the provision of ideological foundations and justification to radicalization and violence.

Radicalization of Public Spaces in Waziristan

Public spaces play a pivotal role in the social fabric of Waziristan. They serve as key sites for community interaction and engagement. Their significance extends beyond recreation or commerce—they actively shape and reshape collective narratives, social attitudes, and worldviews. While such spaces are typically managed by state authorities or private individuals, in certain instances, militant groups have established their own venues such as bookshops, cafes, academies, training centers, and recreational spots as tools for recruitment and indoctrination (Yahya, 2023).

In Waziristan, public spaces commonly include hotels, cafes, juice corners, tourist locations, sports grounds, and even public transport. Most of these are privately owned and operated. Due to the absence of public parks or formal relaxation spots in local bazaars and marketplaces, people often gather in these informal settings during their leisure time. These venues frequently function as *de facto* town halls where residents engage in open discussions about local issues, exchange ideas, and collectively form public opinion.

When the Taliban emerged, they exploited these communal spaces by ordering cafe, hotel, and shop owners to install televisions and broadcast jihad-related content. In most cases, owners were compelled to play highly radicalized material including footage of combat, IED explosions, suicide attacks, and beheadings. Some establishments also broadcasted audio songs glorifying violence. Those who refused to comply faced intimidation, physical abuse, imprisonment, or monetary penalties. As a result, radical content became pervasive across nearly all public venues.

Public transport also played a significant role in the dissemination of extremist propaganda. Given that most of Waziristan's population belongs to the lower-middle and working classes, private vehicles were uncommon, particularly in the early 2000s. With limited infrastructure and long travel times between villages and towns like Wana, passengers often spent hours commuting. Prior to the rise of militancy, transport owners were known for their lively humor and would frequently play music during journeys. However, following Taliban ascendancy, all forms of music were banned, and drivers were instructed to play Taliban chants and hymns. In addition, militants used public transport to spread their message and win over supporters. Thus, what was once a space for entertainment and connection gradually became a channel for radicalization.

Sports grounds and tourist destinations were similarly co-opted. Sporting tournaments, widely attended by local youth, were traditionally important outlets for recreation and social bonding. Young people would also visit scenic spots such as Shawal, Razmak, Makeen, Preghal, Margha Cheena, and Marsadeena during culturally significant occasions, engaging in music, dance, and celebration. According to Wali, a local social activist, "the people of Waziristan are singers and dancers by nature—music runs in their blood." Recognizing this cultural affinity, the Taliban imposed harsh bans on music, singing, and dancing, often punishing violators severely. Their objective was to foster a sense of cultural suffocation, thereby pushing disillusioned youth toward jihadist alternatives (Wali, 2024). On such festive occasions, the Taliban would often arrange for the broadcast of their own anthems, glorifying violence and praising militants.

This radical transformation of public spaces normalized violence and militant ideology as an everyday reality. The systematic use of communal venues to propagate extremist narratives contributed to a cultural shift in which aggression and militancy were perceived as socially acceptable behaviors, fostering deeper ties between ordinary individuals and militant organizations.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although external influences have been instrumental in promoting radicalization in Waziristan, this study reveals that a range of local factors has also profoundly shaped the region's trajectory. Indeed, the radicalization of Waziristani society reflects a complex interplay between external pressures and indigenous dynamics. Within the local context, institutions such as mosques, madrassas, and Tablighi Jamaat networks have played a central role in institutionalizing extremist ideologies, embedding them within everyday religious and communal life. Complementing these institutional conduits, the widespread circulation of jihadi literature has further reinforced a compelling radical narrative, normalizing violence as an accepted path. Equally significant has been the transformation of public spaces—cafes, transport hubs, recreational areas—into arenas for propaganda where extremist messages are disseminated and internalized through daily interaction. Layered beneath these visible structures, cultural elements rooted in Waziristani identity—such as honor codes, clan loyalties, and an ethos of struggle—have provided fertile ground for radical ideas to take hold. Together, these local institutions, narratives, and cultural predispositions—when combined with insurgent propaganda and geopolitical upheavals—have created a self-sustaining ecosystem of radicalization that is deeply resistant to external countermeasures.

This study illuminates how deeply embedded local dynamics—including mosques, madrassas, Tablighi Jamaat networks, jihadi literature, and radicalized public spaces—have shaped and sustained the process of radicalization in South Waziristan. These institutional and cultural factors amplify conflict-induced grievances and support extremist ideologies within daily community life. By synthesizing these findings, the research underscores a critical theoretical insight: radicalization in this setting is not solely driven by external influences, but is deeply rooted in locally conditioned infrastructures and narratives. Such a conclusion builds on and expands the research problem laid out in the introduction by situating internal mechanisms at the heart of radicalization dynamics.

The implications are twofold. First, counter-radicalization strategies must extend beyond external security measures and engage with community institutions and public cultural spaces, offering locally grounded counter-narratives. Second, this research lays a necessary groundwork for future investigations into how external pressures interact with internal structures to produce radical trajectories—especially comparative or longitudinal studies that explore variations across tribal or geographic subregions. In a nutshell, addressing radicalization in South Waziristan demands institutional interventions that are both geographically and culturally cognizant. The absence of an inclusive counter-narrative at the grassroots level remains a significant barrier; only through sustained, locally tailored engagement can the trajectory toward extremism be effectively disrupted.

Conflict of Interest

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