

Book Review-II

Adil Rasheed, *Countering the Radical Narrative*, Knowledge World Publishers. New Delhi 2020, ISBN 978-93-89137-71-2. Review done by Dr. Jyoti M Pathania*

Dr Adil Rasheed is a Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) and is also the coordinator of the Centre for Countering -Terrorism at the Institute. He is one of India's noted scholars in the field of counter-radicalisation. His research papers namely ' Jihadist Radicalisation in India: Internal Challenges, External Threats and 'Countering the threat of radicalisation: Theories, Programmes and Challenges' are being widely read and referred to in the Indian strategic community. He writes extensively for Indian and international media organisations and is a scholar of Islamic theology and history.

Countering the Radical Narrative is both timely, topical and invaluable book based on comprehensive research on the conceptual underpinnings of narratives, countering the radical narratives and indoctrination with respect to the extremists, terrorists groups and organisations. Radicalisation has emerged as a significant challenge across the South Asian region over the past decade and it cannot be countered by kinetic measures alone, therefore the book is an apt reading and response mechanism in proposing not only deep insights but also proposing ways, methods and techniques for reversing or rather countering radicalisation with a particular focus on the threats posed by the global jihadists groups.

Though the definition is given by the author, 'The indoctrination of extremists ideologies lead to the transformation of law-abiding citizens into violent extremists'¹ is perhaps too simplistic a definition for such a complex and complicated phenomenon called radicalisation. In today's context, one can rightly argue that radicalisation is targeting our future generation i.e. the youth. The very notion that only madrasa educated youth are vulnerable to becoming radicalised and terrorist might not give a complete picture, therefore there is a need to revisit radicalisation with a new prism especially with concerning youth. The book examines the need to fight this by understanding the ideological and psychological domain of the terrorists.

Chapter two enumerates the various psychological operations and messaging which are conducted by many means of dissemination like face-to-face communication, print media (pamphlets, books, magazines, etc), audiovisual means (television), Audio media (radio or loudspeaker), visual media or the digital domain. Such operations have been divided into three categories as tactical, strategic and consolidation activities.

The methodology followed in the book is primarily analysing the techniques and literature from secondary sources like books, and religious literature like Quran. Detailed research has also been done on the very concept of Jihad and how it has been

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¹ Rasheed, Adil., Chapter 1, Introduction: The War of Narratives, New Delhi/Knowledge world/ 2020, p.3.

misinterpreted by the militant and deviant Islamic ideologies which not only alter the Sunni jurisprudential position of Pristine Jihad, which are not from the “Ulema” i.e. the religious scholars of orthodox Islam, but from radical modern Mujahideen that seeks to rewrite a new Jihad that legitimises their asymmetric form of warfare (which includes terrorism and ethnic cleansing) to defeat the imperial west.²

The author has highlighted the ways and methods of counter-radicalisation which includes counter-narrative campaigns against Jihadist organisations, clearly laying down how there has been a doctrinal shift in the very concept and understanding of the term ‘Jihaad’. Today deconstruction of such radical narrative is the need of the hour. Counter-narratives are written and explained eloquently in the book, but the fact remains that mostly the western authors have written on the subject. It is time that more South Asian scholars should research the theoretical underpinnings of this concept as it is organic to the region.

Chapter three very eloquently describes the meaning of the term “Narrative” as the construct of consciousness. The highly developed social and political narratives can provide an organisational framework for action and binding together people into a social-cultural and political fraternity, having a common tradition, values and a distinct sense of identity. A corpus of common literature, language, traditions, beliefs and values helps forge groups, organisations, religious communities, political groups and movements as well as nations. By organising and synthesising multiple and scattered events in time and space, human beings came to know, understand and make sense of the world around them and forge their social identities. Thus, ‘ narratives have rightly been called the the “equipment’s of living”.³ They help build collective identities and develop for their intended communities a common social, cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, national or linguistic heritage.

The meta-narratives which lie behind a narrative present themselves as theories like Marxism, Fascism and even modern Islamism. The author rightly mentions that by using propaganda tools, idea framing, narrative persuasion takes place. The Pakistan Inter-Service Public Relations is excelling in its fake news and propaganda exercises, they have separate departments of academic writers, authors, professional storytellers who showcase the Pakistan Army as the sole protector and caretaker of the nation’s national interest and ideology, and also run successfully an anti - India campaign.

Chapter four rightly alludes to the many distortions in the methodology of jihad which are unique to groups like ISIS when they violate canonical law in the name “ijtihad” (independent Legal Reasoning). Therefore there is doctrinal deviance in the very concept of Jihad today. Three kinds of Jihadi narratives specific to India namely the Salafi-Jihadist terror group, Pak -based anti-India Groups and the homegrown jihadists groups. The author rightly portrays that the creation of a counter-narrative is not only infused by its content, but by the form and style of its medium of dissemination and target audience. Therefore, counter-narratives should be developed and disseminated as a coherent strategic communication policy and programme in sync with national and constitutional value and sensibilities. This is of utmost necessity and importance.

² Ibid, p.132.

³ Ibid,p.28.

Chapter five is my favourite read. It deals with the art of developing counter-narrative in a very interesting and insightful manner, by dwelling on the types of counter-narratives as political, religious, ethical, social and historical. But when the author writes about the need for the development of a grand narrative which could provide a principled ideological consistency in the counter-narrative campaign – that seems to be a real challenge. As on one hand, the author has listed nine types of counter-narratives there may be many more yet to be deciphered and to encompass all of these into a grand strategy, is it doable? especially when the target audience of the counter-narrative is also multidimensional and multifaceted.

For countering the narrative, we know that only a better idea can erase a former idea, meaning for an online and offline narrative of the radicalised organisations, we need a better and stronger set of counter-narratives, for this, it is important to have a good, solid-based partnership between Government and civil society to help counter such radical narratives. Cyber radicalisation and technologically savvy users are only growing in numbers, and this is an ever-increasing challenge.

The book discusses concepts which are devised by the so-called jihadist ideologues- “Offensive Jihad against Jahiliyya” by Sayed Qutb, Mohammed Frarg’s concept of militant jihad as “fard al ayn”, Taquiddin Nabhani’s Dystopian vision of “global Caliphate”, Abdullah Azzam’s ‘transnational jihad’ so on and so forth. But what remains revealing is the other distorted religious concepts such as Jihad, Darulislam, ummah, takfir, al walawalbara, along with the so-called master narrative of the so-called global jihadists such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The study in the book is also based on the two IDSA surveys conducted one in Hyderabad and the other in New- Delhi to understand the current ideological orientation of Muslim society. The results of the survey were interesting and revealed that the Indian Muslim community remains loyal to the nation but feels disenchanting from most state institutions except judiciary and believes that the dangers of radicalisation are more prevalent in the majority community. Radical views were found to be more prevalent among the elderly and educated Muslims, professors, journalists etc., while the younger generation particularly the student community’s responses were found to be remarkably moderate. I wonder why some other states with a large number of the Muslim population were left out, as these too could have provided valuable insights and more data?

Chapters six and seven are unique in providing religious counter-narratives themes from the Islamic scriptures (Quran and Hadeth). These scriptures on which the majority of Muslims scholars have consensus proves that Islam respects the plurality of religions and calls on the Muslims to be kind and just to the non-muslims. Jihad means to ‘strive for’ and not ‘war’ Islam considers war as an evil, and makes it mandatory to accept peace in the first instance. The author goes on to write that the “Ghazwa-e-Hind” is distorted, exaggerated and misunderstood.

The agents of disseminating counter-narratives should include the govt and the non-governmental organisations, the innumerable social media outlets and the civil society as well. The book has collected data on the several Muslim scholars who have produced themes for counter-narratives against the ideology of so-called Jihadi and Pak based

terrorism. It is an important contribution to the conceptual understanding and analysis of radicalisation, its techniques, radical indoctrination of the contemporary jihadist groups, including the ways and means to counter them.

The ten policy recommendations are given in the concluding chapters especially the creation of a central hub for monitoring radical narratives for developing counter-narratives and disseminating them; creation of an institution of assembly of experts; a library/database of counter-narrative related text; non-punitive moral code of conduct for various media houses; and hiring of public relations and advertising companies all seem to be workable measures for countering and keeping radicalisation in check. The findings of this book are of immense value, and it is a must-read for the counter-terrorism experts, strategic community, military and security agencies operating in terrorist infested areas, as well as media organisations and policymakers.