

## Radicalisation and deradicalisation in Pakistan: a case of Madarassahs from a security, psychological, and sociological perspective

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| <b>Article History</b>     | <b>Abstract:</b>  |
| Received:<br>20-Mar-2025   | This paper explores the complex phenomenon of radicalisation in Pakistan, focusing on madrasahs as pivotal sites for the propagation of extremist ideologies. It examines the interplay of security, psychological, and sociological factors that contribute to radicalisation, emphasising social grievances, feelings of injustice, and external influences. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the study applies key theories, including the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the staircase model of terrorism, and social identity theory, to understand the cognitive processes and social dynamics underlying radicalisation. The frustration-aggression theory elucidates how socio-economic and political frustrations can drive individuals toward radical ideologies. The staircase model illustrates the cognitive progression leading to extremist actions, while social identity theory highlights the role of group dynamics in forming radical identities. The paper advocates deradicalisation efforts, emphasising the importance of community-based initiatives, youth engagement, and religious reforms. By providing a comprehensive analysis of these interconnected factors, the research aims to offer valuable insights to policymakers and stakeholders for developing effective strategies to combat radicalisation and promote societal resilience in Pakistan. |
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## 1. Introduction

Radicalisation is one of the most serious challenges, having implications on a global level that significantly impact security, stability, and the very social fabric of a society suffering from the menace. Pakistan is one of the nations that, since its inception, has been a victim of radicalisation. Radicalisation has deep roots in the history of Pakistan, with madrasas being the hub of it. Madrasas, despite playing a crucial role in religious education, have been a centre of production of radical thought and extremist ideologies. Social grievances, feelings of injustice, and the influence of external forces have created a complex nexus of militancy and radicalisation in Pakistan. The case of Pakistan is concerning, as radicalisation in Pakistan goes beyond security measures, as the process of radicalisation in Pakistan involves injustice, deprivation, and exclusion. All these factors are deeply rooted in the very basic fabric of Pakistani society. These deep roots provide a fertile ground for radical identities to grow. Moreover, the influence of external factors, the sectarian divisions, and self-centred state policies has further deteriorated the condition, adding fuel to the fire. The aim of this research is to explore radicalisation from a psychological, sociological, and security perspective, along with understanding the process of deradicalisation. The research is multidisciplinary in nature, and theories like the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the staircase model of terrorism, and the social identity theory are applied. The frustration-aggression theory by John Dollard is used for understanding how aggression stems from socio-political-economic frustration that leads an individual to become radicalised. The staircase to terrorism model by Fathali M. Moghaddam is used to study the cognitive process that leads to radicalisation. Lastly, the social identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner is used to examine the formation of radical identity through group formation. Using three different theories from diverse disciplines, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the process behind radicalisation and to explore the factors that contribute to radicalisation. The research furthermore presents the need for deradicalisation and the process to de-radicalise society by highlighting the importance of youth, religious reforms, and community-based measures.

The Process through which an individual is motivated to carry out acts of violence against targeted groups with the purpose of achieving political goals. Doosje et al. (2016) presented a model inspired by the staircase model of terrorism, having three phases. In phase 1, individuals are characterised by sensitivity to a radical ideology. In phase 2, an individual gets membership in a radical group. In the final phase, an individual is motivated and all set to act on radical ideologies. The core of radical groups is suffering and grievance from societal injustices. There are three levels that present factors behind radicalisation, i.e. micro, meso and macro levels. At the micro level, an individual's personal factors influence him or her to act. At the meso level, the root of radicalisation is the social environment. At this level, ties between the individual and the group are strengthened. At the macro level, there are larger factors influencing radicalisation. The prime example is the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq, which likely had increased levels of group efficacy (Doosje et al., 2016).

The trend to study the concept of radicalisation from a psychological perspective came into being after the September 11 attacks, with the motive to explore personality traits and cognitive characteristics that lead an individual towards acceptance of violence and extremism. Studying radicalisation from a psychological perspective, it was explored that factors like clinical disorders, childhood trauma, low self-esteem and unemployment or underemployment lead an individual on the path of becoming radicalised (Abbas, 2023). In 2005, the term "cognitive opening" was introduced by Wiktorowicz. According to Wiktorowicz (2005), cognitive

opening is a moment when a victim of discrimination, socioeconomic crisis and political repression tries to understand life at the point when his or her belief system is already shaking. At this moment of vulnerability, they become a target and get receptive to radical ideology. According to Moghaddam (2005), it's the elements of unfairness and injustice that make an individual a radical individual. Furthermore, the absolutistic demands for fairness are identified as a starting point of cognitive openness leading to radicalisation (Trip et al., 2019)

Exploring radicalisation from the perspective of sociology emerged out of exploration and studies on social movements, collective behaviour, and deviance (Della Porta, 2013). The role of grievances, resource mobilisation, political opportunities, and collective identities is the key area in which radicalisation is explored through the lens of sociology. (Abbas, 2023). Being social beings, humans interact, and their experiences are shaped by the norms, values, and beliefs they share collectively, creating a sense of identity and purpose. However, elements of inequality and injustice are also relatively present in any society, which, according to Dorling (2010), remains in a way that it becomes a part and parcel of everyday life. Due to normalisation of inequality and injustice, discrimination and stigmatisation are normalised, igniting the feelings of rejection, self-deprivation, shame, victimhood, and low self-esteem. These feelings create a chain reaction resulting in consequences like group protest or, in the worst case, leading to violence like target killings (Shafieiou & Haq, 2023)

Understanding radicalization requires a holistic approach because with progress of time the radicalization studies is evolving into a multidisciplinary field of study incorporating elements of multitude of disciplines like psychology, political science, international relations, criminology, law and sociology etc. the significance of research aligns with the multidisciplinary nature of radicalization studies as it explores the case of Pakistan and madrasas from three main lens i.e. psychology, security, and sociology. The research aims to provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of factors contributing to radicalisation, its impact, and the process through which society can be de-radicalised. Considering the sensitivity of Pakistan's geostrategic location, this research provides essential outlooks helpful in the realm of policy making, reforms, and deradicalisation.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

For the purpose of analysis of the data collected in paper three, theories are used from diverse fields like psychology, sociology, and security studies for a holistic outlook. Theories used in the paper are the frustration-aggression theory by John Dollard from a security perspective, the staircase to terrorism by Fathali M. Moghaddam from a psychological perspective, and the social identification theory by Henri Tajfel & John Turner from a sociological perspective.

### **2.1. Frustration-Aggression Theory**

The frustration-aggression theory is one of the high-profile works on studying elements of aggression in relation to frustration. The theory was originally proposed and formulated by John Dollard in 1939, and he states that "the occurrence of aggressive behaviour always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression". Concept of frustration here is defined as an "interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response," and aggression is one of several possible consequences of frustration. The theory has been in use since the late 1930s, and it has been applied in multiple areas of work, including security studies, psychology,

criminology, and sociology. The frustration-aggression theory was used by Berkowitz (1983) and Scott (1948) to study and examine animal behaviour; however, the theory is popularly used to exclusively study human behaviour with a focus on social science and psychology. From self-regulation to developmental and media psychology, this theory is widely used in a variety of domains. The theory provides significant empirical evidence showing a link between frustration and aggression. Moreover, the theory upon its evidence has been refined and developed over decades. (Breuer & Elson, 2017)

The basis of the frustration-aggression hypothesis is a psychodynamic approach. According to this approach, people experiencing frustration have the drive to be aggressive towards the object on which frustration is projected. However, it is inappropriate to project aggression on the object of frustration, so the source of aggression is displaced to something else (Nickerson, 2023).

## **2.2. Theories of Cognitive Radicalisation: The Staircase to Terrorism**

According to Stritzke (2009) terrorism is “politically motivated violence, perpetrated by individuals, groups, or state-sponsored agents, intended to instil fear and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision-making and to change behaviour” (Stritzke, 2009). The theory of Theories of Cognitive Radicalisation: The Staircase to Terrorism, credited to Fathali M. Moghaddam, was formulated in 2005. The motive of Moghaddam to formulate this theory was to provide an in-depth understanding of terrorism. For this purpose, he used a metaphor of narrowing the staircase that leads to terrorist acts at the top. According to this metaphor, the staircase leads to higher floors, and remaining on a particular floor depends on the door a person imagines to open. The important feature of this situation is not the number of floors and stairs but rather the perception of buildings and doors that people think are open. The more an individual climbs up the staircase, the fewer choices are in front of them until the only possible choice is the destruction of either themselves or others. This conceptualisation, according to Moghaddam, is called the decision tree, which happens to be a powerful tool in the realm of psychology. According to the metaphor of a staircase, Moghaddam presented a staircase to terrorism with six floors starting from the ground floor, leading to five higher floors, and each floor characterises a particular psychological process. On the ground floor, there is a dominant feeling of relative deprivation. The conditions in which a million people occupying the ground floor perceived injustice. However, there are still some individuals among them who would take a step and head to the first floor, and these are individuals who tend to seek ways in pursuit of achieving justice. In case they don't see possibilities to mobilise individuals and don't feel like they can create an influence, such is the situation when they tend to continue climbing on higher floors until they reach the summit, i.e., the sixth and final floor (Moghaddam, n.d)

## **2.3. Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory was proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. According to Tajfel and Turner, when an individual admits themselves into a social group, they lose and are deprived of some parts of their self-concept. This theory explains cognitive processes and social conditions that influence intergroup behaviours related to prejudice and bias. This is so because social identity groups give individuals a sense of belonging, meaning that being a part of a certain group inculcates the feelings of being connected and united, giving an individual a sense of belonging. The underlying motive and purpose behind it is that group affiliations come

with common missions and collective groups providing a sense of direction. Moreover, this affiliation boosts self-worth in individuals as they derive pride and a sense of accomplishment from group achievement, building a positive image. This furthermore provides individuals with frameworks to understand themselves in order to define who they are based on shared values. The theory presents several stages, i.e. social categorisation, social identification, social comparison, in-groups and out-groups, and positive distinctiveness. Social categorisation is when people classify themselves into groups on the basis of race, gender, nationality, etc. The categorisation occurs in order to understand and identify the social environments of individuals. Categorisation is helpful for individuals in simplifying their social environment. It can also lead them to stereotyping. Nevertheless, individuals find out things about themselves according to the category they belong to. This way, individuals define behaviours by reference to the group they belong to.

The next stage is social identification, which occurs once individuals categorise and identify themselves as part of that group, meaning that they now tend to see themselves according to the terms and conditions of the group they belong to. At this stage, individuals will witness emotional significance to the identification within the group, and hence their self-worth will be bound to group membership. The third stage is that of social comparison, in which individuals put themselves under comparison to others, which is biased in one group's favour, leading to ingroup favouritism and prejudice. At this stage, when two groups identify themselves as rivals, they tend to place themselves in a situation where they compete to maintain their self-esteem. In the fourth stage, the ingroup and outgroup are created. In-groups are the groups individuals identify themselves with, while out-groups are the groups they don't identify themselves with. According to this theory, people have a natural tendency to perceive their ingroup in a positive manner and the outgroup negatively. The last stage is called positive distinctiveness, i.e. desire to portray a positive self-image that would motivate ingroups to be perceived distinctively from outgroups (McLeod, 2023)

### **3. Radicalisation in Pakistan: an overview**

According to a study conducted in 2013 by the Pew Research Center 93% of people from Pakistan consider radicalisation to be the most pressing issue in Pakistan. Moreover, the Global Terrorism Index concludes that Pakistan is the third-most affected country by extremism, terrorism and radicalisation, after Iraq and Afghanistan. (Javed et al., 2023). Religion, politics, ideology, societal elements, economics and ideologies are important factors that have played a crucial role in promulgating Islamic militancy and radicalising Pakistan. Challenges like illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment are prominent contributors that radicalise Pakistan to its core. Moreover, access to guns and Kalashnikovs, poor governance, lack of strong institutions, and marginalisation are also significant contributors to radicalisation (Javed et al., 2023). Pakistan has been suffering from the menace of radicalisation, which is complex and shaped by the trinity of history, politics and ideology (Muzaffar, Khan & Karamat, 2017). The roots of radicalisation and militancy can be traced back to Pakistan's inception, but the roots got stronger mainly due to the Afghan jihad and inter-state wars. These factors openly operate the structure of the state and are a pertinent asset in the conduct of foreign relations. The radicalised groups and their activities have serious consequences on security, international relations and the soft image of Pakistan. (Saeed et al., 2025)

Right after its inception, Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Hind declared its restoration as a Pakistani religious unit. Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Hind was a major religious party at that time, which was against the

partition of united India. Due to this, they got to be active in Punjab. Since then, Pakistan has been a victim of frustration and ignorance. Despite the fact that Quaid-e-Azam played his part to put down religious extremism with an iron hand, as he was aware that religious fanatics and the use of religion in politics would damage society. Therefore, he declared in his first address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11th August 1947 that religious faith and sectarian beliefs would play no part in the politics of Pakistan. His efforts went in vain as right after his death, Pandora's box of extremism opened up. The time period between 1952-54 was when the Ahmadi community were agitated, and Bhutto, with his decision to declare them non-Muslims in 1974, added fuel to the fire. Moving further to Zia's regime, his pro-Sunni policies and Islamization, Iran's funding to the Shia group, and Saudi's funding to the Sunni group in their war created havoc of sectarianism, and hence Pakistan was further radicalised. Pakistan's decision to ally with the USA post 9/11 to fight against radical groups created security havoc with a significant increase in terrorist attacks, bomb blasts and suicide bombings (Tanoli et al., n.d.).

Pakistan has been struggling with the terror of radicalisation since 1947, but it was the September 11 attacks that worsened the situation post the era of Islamization. Pakistan witnessed a huge rise in anti-American and anti-Western sentiments because of the USA's declaration of war in Afghanistan, with Pakistan becoming its ally, and subsequently due to drone strikes in Pakistan. Extremist organisations cashed in on the opportunity and exploited the situation, which resulted in radicalisation on a very large scale for decades. One of the most tragic outcomes of this radicalisation was the 2014 APS Peshawar Massacre that killed 145 students (Javed et al., 2023). Foreign funding pertinently from the USA and the Middle East played a crucial role in intensifying the situation of radicalisation in Pakistan, as the money was used to ignite religious, emotional and ethnic sentiments of laymen. The aim of funding, however, was to disintegrate the Soviet Union, and this well-articulated plan was successful; however, being a middleman suffered the harsh consequences. Pakistan, since then, became a breeding ground for jihadis who kept on searching for new battles, and hence, Pakistan has been a battlefield. Decades later, after the Soviet disintegration, the September 11 attacks occurred, and Pakistan once again became a target nation. The USA threatened to bomb Pakistan back to the Stone Age if Islamabad did not comply with Washington, D.C., in the war against terrorism. Under the severe pressure of Bush, Pervez Musharraf decided to join the war against terror and welcomed the wrath of the then mujahideen, now Taliban. With Pakistan providing its soil for a foreign war, its own land became a breeding ground for bomb blasts and assassination attacks, propelling radicalisation. Year 2008 was the deadliest of all years with around 2148 terrorist attacks taking place, a death toll of 2267 people and around 4558 injuries. (Khan & Khan, 2018)

In the year 2021, almost two decades of war ended with the USA's withdrawal from Afghanistan, but left Pakistan in a vulnerable condition, suffering from militancy to such an extent that in the current state, there has been a disturbing rise in violence due to cross-border military operations, particularly putting provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan at stake. The year 2024 is marked to be the year with militant assaults spiking, with around 785 occurrences documented, resulting in around 951 fatalities and more than 100 injuries. The increase in such militant attacks deteriorated the security landscape of Pakistan, especially in KPK, where such incidents occurred at a rate of 87%. The situation of violence and radicalisation escalated significantly in August 2024, marking it as the deadliest month of the year due to dangers and threats presented by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and certain other militant organisations. Reports have indicated that there was a 60% increase in militant

factions and TTP's activities being backed by Afghanistan. The condition of backfired cross-border violence, and Pakistan's strategies in its efforts for counterterrorism, got complicated. (Saeed et al., 2025)

### 3.1. Madrassah and Radicalisation

Madrasas are the institutions that have played a crucial role in radicalising the society of Pakistan. The 9/11 Commission Report termed madrassas "incubators of violent extremism", to which Pervez Hoodbhoy further stated that "Pakistani schools – and not just madrassas – are churning out fiery zealots, fuelled with a passion for jihad and martyrdom." (Puri, 2010). On its inception in 1947, the Ulema decided to continue following their doctrines, and eventually they formed religio-political groups that further evolved and shaped the madrassah. Since then, they have played an active role in national politics and have been growing rapidly in numbers. At the time of creation, there were 245 madrassas, and in 1988, the number exceeded 2861. Between 1988 and 2005, the number further exceeded 11922 (Shah, 2011)

During the era of Zia ul Haq, with his Islamization agenda, he legitimised the concept of jihad and changed the country's landscape that favoured madrasahs. Due to this, there was a significant increase in religious schools and institutions that belonged to radicalised groups. There were around 2801 madrassas during Zia's era, as compared to the mere number of 300 in 1978. In order to gain an advantage from madrassas, Zia ul Haq legitimised zakat because, according to him, in order to reform madrassas, the foreign aid was pretty negligible. In the 1990s, mujahideen introduced military training in madrassas to create a new generation of so-called holy warriors. Mujahideen's victory over the Soviets was something Pakistan policy makers and politicians envisioned to replicate in Indian occupied Azaad and Jammu Kashmir. 911 shifted the entire landscape as Madrasahs in Pakistan became a pivotal point of international studies to explore their linkages with extremism that consequently led to terrorism. Therefore, under the pressure of the US government, Pervez Musharraf decided to make reforms for madrassas. For that, the US government provided hefty financial aid and promoted the new reforms. With US support and aid, Musharraf aggressively worked on reforming madrassas by promoting policies aimed at creating a shift from Islamization to Modernization. No matter what government came, Madrasahs have been a target to exercise the national policies through funding and support. In April 2010, it was revealed to the former law minister Rana Sanaullah that a madrasa operated by the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba and a terrorist group, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, received around one million dollars from the government of Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz for various educational programs being run at the madrasahs and religious schools. Madrasahs are considered to be an important instrument in providing a safe haven for radicalisation to prosper. They have played a crucial role in creating an influence on young minds for acting on radical ideologies (Atran, Magouirk & Ginges, 2008; Magouirk, 2008) and believing that apocalyptic images of destruction are key ingredients to their holy mission. By contrasting good and evil, they have categorised themselves into self and others, which provides them with a belief system that justifies violence against people, which is termed moral justification. Not only that, but this categorisation also justified killings as a divine duty for catharsis to destroy bad (Frontline, 2002).

Madaris in Pakistan play a crucial role in the indoctrination of young and fragile minds. They teach students a suffocatingly rigid version of Islam, and students are brainwashed to the point that they develop a very extremist and intolerant mindset. Students, therefore, target all those individuals who don't abide by their version of Islam. In the madrasa system, students are

confined in a limited environment with no contact with the outside world. Students are provided with food and shelter, and in return for this provision, their activities are controlled by the heads who further propagate their ideologies. The instructors of Madarassahs capitalise on emotions by emotionally highlighting situations of Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir and other places where Muslim conditions have deteriorated. This hypes up the emotions. Ignites anger and frustration, and consequently, extremist ideologies are instigated in their minds. Madarassah instructors further use the Islamic concept of jihad to further their agenda. Eventually, students are trained to become active Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and to fight in Kashmir, Bosnia and Iraq (Zafar, 2022).

### 3.2. Impact of Radicalisation

Terrorism and radicalisation disrupt the very fabric of society and have severe consequences on a psychological and political level. One of the most harmful consequences of radicalisation is the polarisation of society, which creates tensions and insecurity as a ripple effect. Non-Muslims blame Muslims for terrorism, and hence, a level of mistrust is created between segments and groups of a society. Moreover, due to radicalisation fear, terror, and a feeling of insecurity and threat are instilled in the minds of people (Feddes et al., 2020). The case of Pakistan suffering from the consequences of radicalisation is a harsh reality. Despite the military putting endless and continuous efforts to curb the menace of radicalisation, challenges and the aftermath of radicalisation still persist pertinently due to a lethargic political system. The most pressing consequences of radicalisation in this regard are the decline of public trust in the security system of Pakistan, which is manifested in their anger about ineffective law enforcement agencies (Saeed et al., 2025). The radicalisation of society has damaged the socio-politico-economic environment of Pakistan. There has been a rise in injustice and intolerance towards non-Muslims and other minority groups. This injustice is fuelled by the abuse of the legal system. Moreover, geopolitically, Pakistan is at a crossroads, putting it at a vulnerable location. The vulnerability is further exploited by radicalisation due to fear and risk of terrorist threats, further compromising the security landscape of Pakistan. The Soviet-Afghan War was a notable event that, on the domestic level, radicalised Pakistan, and this radicalisation was a key contributor to the spread of extremism and intolerance in society (Javed et al., 2023)

The impact of radicalisation has been severe, and there has been a spike in terrorist activities in recent years, notably in Baluchistan and KPK. In this regard, the Baluchistan Liberation Army has been a key player who has claimed responsibility for attacks on military forces as well as civilians. The motive behind attacks by BLA has been driven by grievances over the exploitation of resources by the government as well as foreign entities. The rise in terrorist attacks caused the month of August 2024 to be the deadliest month in recent years in the contemporary history of Pakistan, causing 254 fatalities across the country, specifically in Baluchistan. TTP has further made the security landscape of Pakistan precarious by targeting military and civilians in high-profile attacks. In November 2024, around 74 civilians were killed in armed assaults in Baluchistan. The Pakistan army worked to curb the threat by increasing military operations, but they have been suffering from failure due to a lack of trust by the public and increased local support for militants. Apart from security, radicalisation has serious consequences on the economic environment of the state, particularly because of Baluchistan's stance on CPEC, which has two sides of the same coin, i.e. development and conflict. CPEC sites have been witnessing seasonal attacks on their infrastructure, which ignited a series of instability and insecurity (Sajid, 2024). Radicalisation has put human rights and human security at stake due to the increased cycle of target killings. Amnesty International

has documented multiple instances of target killings in Pakistan. From 2012 to 2018, around 3000 people lost their lives in targeted attacks. Mostly politicians, journalists, activists and minority groups have been the victims of target killings. Despite the orders from the Supreme Court to enhance security and accountability, there has been little to no improvement (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Ishfaq, 2016; Hussnain, 2024).

#### **4. Theoretical analysis**

##### **4.1. Frustration-aggression theory**

According to the Frustration Aggression theory, the cause of aggression is frustration, given that direct aggression is impossible. In such circumstances, aggression is displaced onto multiple other targets. Examining the case of radicalisation in Pakistan in the light of this hypothesis, it is explored that frustration among the militants and radicalised individuals stems from multiple grievances, namely social, political, economic and religious, and these grievances breed room for extremist activities as an outlet for aggression. In the case of Pakistan, frustration is a root cause of radicalisation, which happens to be a catalyst that psychologically drives aggression. The outlet of this aggression happens when any opportunity arises.

Firstly, there is social and economic frustration that stems from relative deprivation, meaning that poverty and unemployment are the root cause of radicalisation. When an individual from a marginalised group lacking opportunity feels deprived, aggression within them ignites as they feel excluded from society, which further contributes to injustice and alienation. These feelings of injustice and alienation motivate individuals to channel their aggression through violent means like terrorism and target killings. Secondly, there is political frustration that stems from injustice, discrimination, authoritarianism, corruption, and lethargic governance. Marginalised groups feel mistrusted and mistreated by the state, which adds up to grievances. Moreover, harsh and authoritative policies against marginalised and minority groups, be it extremist Islamization policies or liberalist Musharraf policies, played a part in adding to the frustration of such groups that pushed people to channel out their aggression through radicalised means. Thirdly, there is religious and ideological frustration with the huge influence of madrasa education and Western involvement. Madrasa education has been playing an important role in developing a radical mindset, as students in such madrassas feel frustrated due to a lack of secular education and opportunities, and eventually, they become vulnerable targets to extremism. Moreover, Western involvement, particularly US involvement, during the War on Terror and the demand to do more, be it through drone attacks or crackdowns, caused frustration among the masses, and this frustration was exploited by radical and militant groups. This frustration led to aggression that was channelled through attacks on military personnel as well as civilians.

The hypothesis further claims that aggression is a response to frustration. In the case of Pakistan, people aren't able to express their aggression directly on their sources of frustration, i.e., the state, foreign powers and inequality. They redirect their aggression to weaker targets, for instance, TTP, which directs their aggression by scapegoating and targeting the government, holding them responsible for socio-politico-economic grievances and injustices. Moreover, radicalised groups channel out their aggression on opposite sects, which led to Shia-Sunni clashes in Pakistan, and these clashes were further exploited by brainwashing done in Madrassahs. Lastly, militants in Kashmir and Afghanistan have been frustrated due to domestic

conditions and deprivations. They direct their frustration by taking out aggression on ongoing political conflicts and see jihad as a holy and legitimate response. This mindset is built in Madrassah training individuals to be holy warriors fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Radicalised groups and individuals displace their anger by dehumanising the government, the USA and religious minorities. Actions like suicide bombing are manifestations of their extreme form of aggression, which is justified through ideologies instilled in the minds of Madrassah students.

#### **4.2. The Staircase to Terrorism**

Moghadam's staircase to terrorism model presents a psychological explanation of how an individual moves towards terrorism with a metaphorical staircase story with five floors. In this model, each step represents a behavioural transformation that leads an individual to conduct violent acts of extremism with injustice as a starting point. The case of radicalisation in Pakistan is analysed through this staircase model in the context of its socio-politico-economic environment. Starting from the ground floor, where psychological frustration is witnessed due to perceived injustice and deprivation. At these bases, individuals are frustrated due to injustice, and they develop a feeling of marginalisation in a social, economic and political context. According to Moghadam, the beginning of radicalisation is due to deprivation and alienation rather than actual violence. In the case of Pakistan, extreme poverty is a fuel for radicalisation. Unemployment and economic inequality ignited frustration, which became a source for individuals to seek extremist narratives as an alternative that validates their feelings of grievances. Political oppression at the state level is another source of psychological frustration. Sectarian divides between Shias and Sunnis, and the political exclusion of Baluchistan and Pashtun movements, generate a feeling of being alienated and hence fuel radicalisation. From a psychological point of view, at this step, individuals don't directly choose violence; rather, they are in search of ideologies that would validate and explain their frustration. Usually, such ideologies are radical.

The next or second step is where individuals seek solutions to injustices after displacing their aggression through ideological justification, which, in the case of Pakistan, is radical ideology. With the growth of frustration, the search for solutions is rapid. In case of failure in finding solutions through legitimate means, they begin to adopt extremist narratives that morally justify violence. In the case of Pakistan, Madarassahs and militant leaders preach ideologies aligning with radicalisation that validate an individual's feeling of injustice by shifting blame to the government, sects, and minorities. They reinforce the dehumanisation of enemies, which in the case of Pakistan are states, foreign governments, and minorities, that increases intolerance and ignites the desire for violence. Moreover, at this stage, a us vs them mentality is formed as individuals develop a cognitive opening as they become open to adapting radical ideologies. In Pakistan, individuals from FATA and Baluchistan, where conflict is highly developing, have developed the mindset that violence is self-defence. Madarassahs at this stage are a safe haven of radicalisation where ideological commitments are strengthened. Anger and repression are directed towards governments, being their scapegoat. Radical leaders in Madarassahs shape the victim mentality that prepares individuals to believe that jihad is the only solution.

The third stage is when an individual joins a radical group due to moral disengagement. At this stage, individuals commit to an extremist group that gives moral justification to their violence. Radical groups provide an organised environment that develops an individual's identity and purpose. In the case of Pakistan Madarassahs, TTP, Lashkar e Taiba, and other militant groups

target and recruit emotionally unstable and vulnerable individuals by offering them a sense of togetherness and brotherhood. Their networks are a portal for individuals, leading them to be part of radical organisations. At this stage, individuals who are recruited let go of ethics and morality linked to violence. Due to this, suicide bombers and radical leaders view their actions as part of religious obligations. Individuals, therefore, have at this stage internalised radical beliefs and are no longer receptive to alternative perspectives as their mindset has now become rigid.

The fourth stage is when commitment is solidified, training for violence begins, and death is accepted. Individuals are now fully committed to violence as they undergo a psychological transformation, due to which killing is considered normal. Madarassahs and militant leaders in the case of Pakistan make their students and recruited individuals undergo physical, ideological and psychological training that leads towards desensitisation. This desensitisation is finalised by writing a martyrdom testament, leading to a personal detachment. At this stage, deradicalisation is near impossible because the mindset has been developed in such a way that violence is considered a sacred duty towards religious divinity. The final stage is the point of no return to normal. It is when an individual carries out the final act of terrorism, which in the case of Pakistan is suicide bombing, sectarian violence and notably the 2014 APS Peshawar attack, at this final stage, individuals who conducted the terrorist act were at the final destination of radicalisation.

### **4.3. Social Identity Theory (Henri Tajfel & John Turner, 1979)**

Social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner explains how individual identities are developed due to group membership. According to this theory, radicalisation occurs when individuals identify themselves with an in-group and despise the out-group because they perceive them as a threat. This causes intergroup conflict, leading to violence. Social identity theory explains how grievances, in-group and out-group conflicts contribute to radicalisation and militancy. According to Tajfel and Turner, people categorise themselves into groups based on religion, nationality and ideology. This is called social categorisation, and this categorisation leads to social identification, the phenomenon according to which individuals consider their associated group to be superior, and hence they develop hostility towards the outgroup. In the case of Pakistan, this social categorisation is a driving factor behind radicalisation as sectarian groups like Sunni, Shia, Deobandi, Barelvi, etc. form rigid in-group and out-group distinctions. Madarassahs capitalise on this social categorisation and reinforce in-group and out-group distinctions by teaching their students that only their sect is true and divine. This categorisation instils hatred towards rival sects, leading to engagement in violent confrontation. This social identification is also manifested in regional divisions that fuel radicalisation, for instance, Baluchistan and Pashtuns' grievances led to ethno-nationalist movements, and they perceive hatred towards Punjab. This grievance is further exploited by TTP through the recruitment of individuals suffering alienation. The Islam vs the West mindset is a global manifestation of this social categorisation in Pakistan. Radical groups categorise the West, especially the US, as an outgroup, and their hatred is portrayed in global conflicts. This hatred is fuelled by anti-Western narratives due to drone strikes, the Kashmir conflict and the War on Terror.

Once individuals categorise themselves into groups, they start to identify deeply with their group's ideologies and belief systems. This process is called social identification. The stronger the identity, the stronger the conformity, and eventually the stronger the justification for violence. In the case of Pakistan, Madarassahs and extremist groups like TTP give a platform

to develop a strong group identity. The indoctrination by Madrassah plays a crucial role in shaping young minds and brainwashing them to reject modern views and adopt rigid views due to this social identification. Out-groups are dehumanised, and violence against them is justified. Radicalised groups frame out-groups, which in the case of Pakistan are Shias, the West, and the government, as a threat to society; they view their acts, such as suicide bombing, as a religious duty targeting disbelievers who deserve to die.

## 5. Recommendations for deradicalisation

The role of youth is pertinent in the process of deradicalisation to curb violence and eradicate extremism. It is crucial to empower youth in capacity building and the promotion of peace. It is because young blood is active and ambitious for the national cause. Youth can serve as peace builders, given that they are provided with motivation, tools and strategies that would turn them into peace agents in conflict resolution. (Magsi et al., 2025)

In the light of the relative deprivation theory, in order to speed up the process of deradicalisation, the government ought to be more comprehensive in addressing social, political and economic grievances that fuel radicalisation. It is crucial to work on social and economic inclusion by prioritising development in marginalised regions like Baluchistan and KPK. Moreover, political empowerment of all ethnic groups so that they can have a voice in the political process and policy-making will help in curbing violence and the process of deradicalisation. Moving further, Madrassahs are a hub of radicalisation, hence it is a need of the hour to reform the curriculum of Madrassah education by inculcating modern subjects along with religious education in its true colours. (Saif et al., 2024)

In light of the frustration-aggression theory, the efforts for counterterrorism and deradicalisation must focus on the reduction of factors causing frustration by providing non-violent outlets for aggression. This can be done by addressing economic and social frustration through job creation, education reforms and by providing alternative opportunities where aggression can be redirected in a more positive and nonviolent way. For instance, it can be done by building intrinsic motivation among the deprived individuals to work for bringing positive change in society for collective well-being.

## 6. Conclusion

The research examined the issue of radicalisation and the process of deradicalisation in Pakistan using the case of Madarassahs, explored through a multidisciplinary lens of security, psychology and sociology. Three key theories were used in research for a holistic analysis: firstly, the frustration-aggression theory, secondly, the staircase to terrorism model and lastly, the social identity theory. The frustration-aggression hypothesis was used to explain how socio-politico-economic frustration leads to aggression that further contributes to extremism, violence and consequently radicalisation. The staircase to terrorism model was used to examine the gradual cognitive process leading an individual to perceive injustice towards violent consequences of terrorism and radicalisation. Social identity theory was used to understand group dynamics, fostering ingroup bias that further led to a militant mindset in a madrassah setting. The case of radicalisation in Pakistan, particularly in Madarassahs, was explored through these three lenses. From a psychological lens, the radicalisation of Pakistanis results from an identity crisis and a moral dilemma that makes an individual susceptible to an extremist mindset. Moreover, emotional vulnerability and factors like victim mindset, and perceived

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injustice are used, manipulated and exploited by radical groups and madrassah networks. Moreover, sociological factors like economic instability, deprivation from basic necessities, and division in society have created an environment sustainable for radicalisation. Madarassahs in Pakistan operate on sect-based ideologies that deepen societal divide, igniting radicalisation. From a security lens, it is analysed that Pakistan has a history of being a state sponsored by jihad and due to this, madrassahs received external funding in abundance, which played a significant role in the radicalisation of Pakistan. Moreover, military interventions played a significant role in militant networks and incidents like the Soviet-Afghan war, the US-led global war on terror, and the Lal masjid incident added fuel to the fire.

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