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Countering Violent Extremism in Bangladesh: Harnessing Faith Perspectives for Peace and Progress

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has seen recent years the growing incidence of violence and extremism across the nation evidence of the revival of hate crime, communalism and fundamentalism. Attack on minorities, dissidents and bloggers shows the existence of different terror outfits, though the law enforcers rejected the possibility of interlinking with global terror networks like the Al-Qaeda, IS, and Taliban. The religious dogmatism, intolerance, and misinterpretation mainly cause the spread of the religious extremism. Government and Nongovernment organizations have taken different initiatives to combat this violent extremism. However, it fails to foil the growing incidents indicating some loopholes in the approach. The article mainly examined the different initiatives taken by the GOs, NGOs, and International actors in combatting religious extremism. It has also developed a model of combatting violent extremism with special reference to contribute to the national policy formulation process. In doing so, it has examined the reports, proceedings, articles, news articles and other materials.

Keywords: Violent extremism, Counterterrorism, Peace, Faith perspectives in CVE, and Social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION:

Religions and Violence Extremism

Throughout the world, the core principle of peace is cherished by every major religion. It is crucial to recognize that acts of the terrorism do not accurately represent the genuine teachings or beliefs of any religion. Terrorism frequently arises from the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the religious texts, orchestrated by individuals or groups with particular political or ideological motives. Religious scriptures, including the Quran, the Bible, and others, emphasize compassion, justice, and harmony among individuals and communities. They advocate for peace, forgiveness, and understanding. However, some individuals or groups may selectively interpret and exploit religious texts to the justify violence or serve their personal interests.

Christianity

The teachings of Christianity emphasize non-violence and love for others. The Bible explicitly states, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus, 20:13), and Jesus Christ reinforces this message by instructing his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew, 5:44). The scriptures emphasize that violence is never justified, encouraging Christians to the respond to aggression with non-resistance. Jesus teaches, "Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone slaps you on

the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew, 5:38-39). These teachings are highlighting the importance of peace, forgiveness, and turning away from violence in Christian faith.

Islam

The Quran, the holy scripture of Islam, emphasizes that violence should only be employed in self-defense or in defense of others. It promotes mercy, the compassion, and the pursuit of peace. The Quran states, "Fight in the way of the Allah only against those who wage war against you, but do not transgress limits. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors" (Quran 2:190). It teaches the sanctity of life, stating that taking one life is equivalent to killing all of humanity, while saving a life is akin to saving all of humanity (5:32). The Prophet Muhammad further emphasized the prohibition of shedding Muslim blood, stating, "No Muslim may shed the blood of another Muslim nor may he exile him" (Bukhari). These teachings highlight the Quranic emphasis on self-defense, presservation of life, and the prohibition of aggression within the Islamic faith.

Judaism

The Torah, the sacred scripture of Judaism, unequivocally declares that violence is never justified and emphasizes the pursuit of peace. It states, "Do not murder" (Exodus, 20:13), emphasizing the sanctity of human life. Additionally, the Talmud, a compilation of Jewish teachings, expands on this principle, tea-ching that the destruction of a single human being is akin to destroying the entire world (Sanhedrin, 43a). These teachings highlight the Jewish belief in the inherent value of every human life and the imperative to the promote peace and preserve the sanctity of life.

Buddhism

Buddhism, a philosophy and spiritual tradition, identifies violence as stemming from ignorance and hatred, which are seen as the root causes of suffering. The enlightened teachings of the Buddha emphasize the futility of responding to hatred with more hatred, stating that only through non-hatred can hatred truly be overcome. This timeless principle is expressed in the words of the Buddha found in the Dhammapada (15.1). The Buddha taught that the eradication of violence lies in the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, recognizing that by developing these qualities, individuals can bring an end to the cycle of violence and promote peace.

Hinduism

Hindu scriptures emphasize the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) and its importance in the countering violence extremism. The Bhagavad Gita states, "Non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger...are declared as the austerity of the body" (Chapter 17, Verse 14). It highlights that non-violence is a form of spiritual discipline that leads to inner purity. The Mahabharata further emphasizes, "Ahimsa paramo dharma" (Non-violence is the highest virtue). This verse underscores that non-violence is the ultimate moral duty. By following these teachings and cultivating a mindset of non-violence, we can contribute to a more peaceful and harmonious world, the combating violence extremism through compassion, understanding, and the peaceful actions.

These examples highlight the perspectives of major religions on violence extremism, but it is crucial to recognize the diversity within each religion and the varying viewpoints on this matter. Nevertheless, it is evident that the overwhelming majority of people of faith denounce violence extremism. The major religions unanimously condemn violence, emphasizing the principles of love, forgiveness, and compassion. They advocate for the pursuit of peace and fostering mutual understanding as the sole means to eradicate violence.

The Abuse of the Religion in Driving Violent Extremism

Religions, revered by millions worldwide as a source of peace, compassion, and moral guidance, are sometimes exploited for nefarious purposes. Violent extremism can arise when individuals or groups manipulate religious teachings and doctrines to the justify their extremist ideologies and acts of violence. This abuse of religion involves misinterpretation, distortion, and selective interpretation of religious texts, often driven by political, ideological, or personal agendas. It is crucial to recognize and address how religions can be misused to fuel violent extremism, while emphasizing that such actions do not reflect the true essence and teachings of these faith traditions.

Mobilization

Religion can serve as a source of collective identity, particularly when other forms of identity are blocked. Extremist groups target disaffected individuals, such as young Muslims in Europe, offering a religious framework for belonging and collective action.

Narrative Framing

Religion helps extremist movements organize grievances & give meaning to world events. For example, the Hindu nationalist movement in India uses religious ideology to rally supporters for political causes.

Moral Justification

Religion can provide a moral warrant for extremist acts, including violence. It can persuade individuals who have experienced mistreatment or violence to engage in behavior they may perceive as transcending existing laws.

Higher Purpose

Religion can elevate conflicts by imbuing them with higher or eternal significance. Extremist groups may use religious narratives to transform political conflicts into grand, eschatological struggles. For instance, Israeli settler groups justify violence based on territorial claims rooted in scripture.

Countering Violence Extremism (CVE)

Countering Violence Extremism (CVE) consists of the three different words- countering, violence, the extremism. Here the first comes about Extremism, which refers to being extreme, far beyond from laxity and moderation. Usually the extremism is narrowly defined as the mere extreme nature of ideologies or religion, but the real meaning is far wider. It includes the excessive forms of culture, ethnicity, race, cast- everything on what an exclusive identity could be made up. Violence extremism is while the idea gets fuel the violence either it is in physical forms or abstract forms of violence. It includes all kinds of destructtion, damage, assault in physically or verbally oriented to political, cultural, religious, ethnic or any other identity. CVE refers to the counter measures in preventing violence extremism including the recruitments, training, radicalizing & mobilizing to violence. It includes the publicity, publication and networking of all kinds of activities related to extremism. The US homeland security department has termed CVE as the proactive actions in countering violence extremism, which includes public safety, resilience, inclusivity, and security (Homeland Security, 2016). The dealing of a situation, which provokes into violence, is also included in CVE activities. Humera Khan has emphasized over the use of non-coercive measures to dissuade individuals engaged or in risk of terrorism (Khan, 2015). In according to the European Union (EU) all sorts of actions, which contribute in building resilience of the individual and the communities against the radicalization and extremism, are CVE measures.

CVE Components

In according to the Council on the American-Islamic Relation (CAIR) pointed towards three key components of CVE including- intervening in an individual's path toward violent extremism, interdicting in criminal activity, reintegrating those convicted individuals into society and help to come back in normalcy.

Components	Period/stage	Activities
Intervention	Initial Stage	Awareness raising, Motivation, workshop programs, emphasize over the familial and social relationships, Social, community and faith leaders involvement
Interdiction	While in action	Policy planning, technological development, building up skilled manpower, intelligence sharing, interstate communication and cooperation and overall coordination
Integration	Comeback	Motivation, counseling, physiological and psychological support to victims, familial and social set up for cooperation to bring victims into normalcy.

Source: CAIR 2018

Intervention

Intervention comes at the initial stage while recruitment or pre-recruitment process is going on. It includes the promotion of counter narratives against the extremism, emphasizing over the social and familial engagement, inform the concerned agency about the suspected ones, ending the way of recruitment- brainwash, indoctrination, abduction, spreading disinformation & religious misinterpretation. Motivation, workshop programs to raise consciousness about individual,

familial, social and national losses, damages and other consequences caused by terrorism and extremism. It emphasizes over the engagement of not only security apparatus rather other stakeholders like local administration, political leadership, and general people. The networking and communication, social and familial relationships are also emphasized on this stage.

Interdiction

Interdiction refers to take necessary measures to deter the acts of the terrorism on the ground like preparing security plan, developing the technology and tools, maintaining observation and monitoring, and offering training and improving the overall coordination into security management. The involvement of other social stakeholders including political leadership, clerics and general people is also important. The transnational cooperation, inter-state security engagement, training and intelligence sharing are also the key task of this phase. Regular analysis of the extremist's movements and nature are required to be recorded. Local and global security think tanks and research organization shall be engaged in the information sharing & strategy formulation process (Shahjalal, 2020).

Reintegration

Reintegration of the extremists into their family and society with arranging proper rehabilitation process is always considered critical. In most of the time, their appearance, lifestyle, orientation, attitude and behavior have been different always. The counseling, education and physiological and psychological training, support and treatment are also required here. Social and political arrangement to accept a particular individual assisting him to normalcy is also included here.

CVE Steps

Messaging

All kinds of messaging and manifestation are included here in Electronic Media, Print media, Publications, Schools, Institutional training and work-shops, Films, programs etc. The social media can also play the significant role here.

Community Engagement

Community engagement and outreach includes the programs and campaigns lead the public engagement into making plans against the terrorists. The awareness campaign, dialogues with local leaderships, informs the locals about the possible indication of extremism so that they can make police know about extremists.

Capacity Building

Capacity building refers to institutional and individual development. Institutional building includes the policy development, strategy formulation, technological appropriation and the mobilization of resource and manpower. Sufficient training, the technological adaption, team building, interpersonal development including motivation & determination are also pivotal. Individual capacity building refers to work on building up the resilience of the general people against the extremism. Proper knowledge & education to protect from extremism, social and familial awareness building, & the program on dealing with extremists are essential points of individual capacity building.

Education and Training

A special program on dealing & preventing extremism- ideas and propagandas and the responsibility in against that are the burning necessity at every educational institution. A special chapter on extremism; how to figure out extremism, what to do in response, the consequence of extremism shall be included in the text book. In addition, the training and programs to educate people from all wake of life on extremism are also included.

Faith Leaders Involvement

Faith community leader's engagement is also a key measures of CVE. The majority and minority ethnic community should must represent into the national policy & strategy formulation process against extremism. It also encourages the faith leaders to face and demystify the misinterpretation of extremist ideas from faith perspective. The involvement of faith must be confirmed at every stage of CVE activities including intervention, interdiction and integration. They can motivate, counsel & train up the victims with offering counter narratives of extremism.

Meeting Social Problems and Anarchy

Extremists always take the scope of social problem and anarchy and lure vulnerable one into extremism very easily. Most particularly the youth and women are always their target of victimizing. So, CVE includes the program and policy for inclusivity and confirming social justice. It indicates also the necessity to take

action in meeting up the social problems and demands like poverty, inequality, unemployment, marginalization and injustice.

CVE in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has implemented various measures to combat the escalating threat of extremism in the South Asia region. Since gaining independence, Bangladesh has witnessed a constant evolution in the nature of extremism within its borders. Shortly after independence in 1971, radical Marxist-Naxlist groups emerged, perpetrating violence against civilians & engaging in subversive activities. Subsequently, from the 1990s to the 2000s, religious extremism gained prominence, exemplified by the notorious 1999 attack on the Udhici program at Ramnar Botomul in Dhaka. Various terrorist organizations, such as Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team, and others, emerged during these period and targeted individuals and installations.

Key Takeways
National counter-terrorism strategy by national consensus
Skilled professional team for countering extremism
Advanced technology for counter-terrorism unit
Monitoring online radicalization, especially on social media
Engaging faith leaders, academics, and NGOs in countering extremism
Inter-state and global cooperation against violent extremism
Robust operational chain for coordination and information sharing
Supporting faith leaders in promoting counter-narratives
Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for extremists
Diverse messaging (conventional and social media)
Community Leaders engagement and outreach
Capacity building (youth, women, community leaders)

In response to these attacks, the Bangladesh Police adopted a zero-tolerance approach and implemented several initiatives. Initially, the Ministry of the Home Affairs established a specialized task force called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in the early 2000s to counter the increasing number of militant activities. RAB swiftly took action against organizations like JMB, HUJI, AI, and others, successfully apprehending key figures from these militant groups by 2005.

However, in subsequent years, militant organizations resurfaced and resumed their operations from underground networks. Bangladesh Police, in collaboration with affiliated organizations like RAB and BGB, continued to respond swiftly to these threats. In 2009, the Bangladesh government launched a dedicated special unit within the Bangladesh Police called the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT). This unit aimed to take rapid action against extremism and terrorism throughout the country, operating under the oversight of the Police Headquarters. Furthermore, in 2016, another specialized unit called the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) was established under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) to bolster counterterrorism efforts. This unit worked in tandem with the existing forces to address the evolving challenges posed by extremism and terrorism.

Strategies followed to Curb Militancy

Bangladesh's police department has implemented a multifaceted strategy to effectively combat the growing threats of militancy and violent extremism. Key measures include the development of a national counter-terrorism strategy in collaboration with various stakeholders, the establishment of specialized counter-terrorism units equipped with advanced technology, enhanced coordination among intelligence agencies, engagement with civil society & faith leaders, monitoring of online radicalization, international cooperation, and seamless coordination between local and central forces. Additionally, the focus on rehabilitation and reintegration of affected individuals contributes to long-term prevention & social cohesion.

Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) Unit

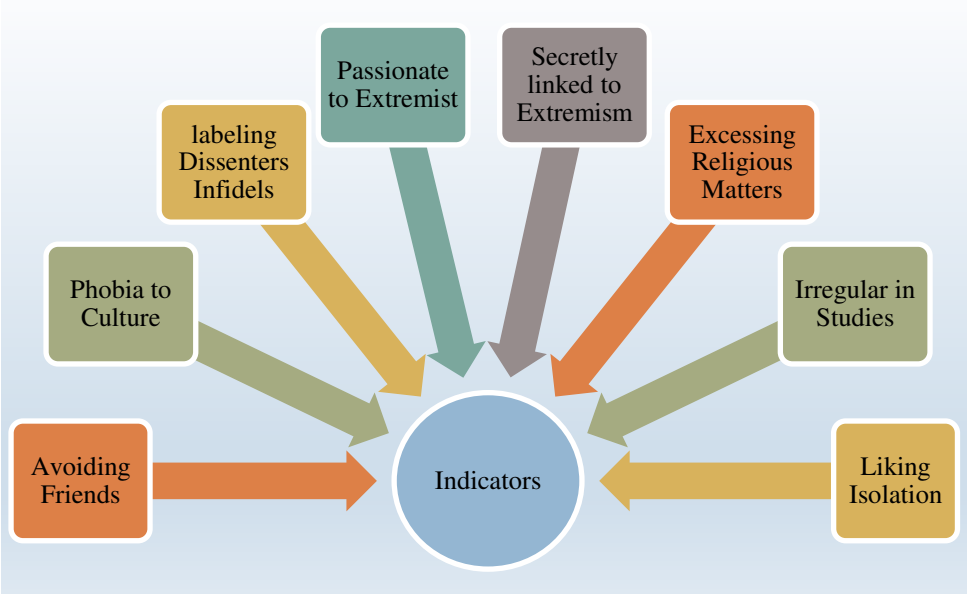
Hello CT App

The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) has developed a mobile app called "Hello CT" to engage people in counter-violent extremism (CVE) activities. The app allows users to anonymously share data, information, pictures, audio recordings, & videos

related to militancy in Bangladesh. It was launched in July 2016 to encourage public participation in CVE initiatives. The app also provides users with news feeds that share different leaflets, handouts, & instructions.

Social Campaign

CTTC has initiated a widespread social campaign to educate people about extremism and its recruitment strategies that target vulnerable youth. Through collaborations with mosques, schools, and local institutions, CTTC distributes leaflets and handouts that highlight the indicators of extremism and differentiate between genuine religious preachers and recruiters of extremists. The campaign aims to raise awareness about the growing level and nature of the extremism, enabling people to identify individuals at risk and report them to the police. By clarifying the distinction between true preachers and extremist recruiters, the campaign seeks to garner public support and participation in CVE efforts. With the cooperation of CTTC, many workshops, seminars and symposium are also held at the different educational institutions and other public outreaching platform.



Source: Handouts, leaflets published by CTTC 2019

Indicators describe which the features/characteristics if you find any youth suddenly which very much similar to extremists. The indications are also given to inform the police about them with using CTTC initiated app 'Hello CT'.

Preacher	Extremist recruiter
Preach religion publicly	Always try to hide themselves and preach there
Religion for mitigating peoples' weakness and helplessness	They abuse the scope created for the individual helplessness and weakness
Emphasize over spiritual and empirical studies	Emphasize over the political objectives of the religion
Attempt to develop the spirituality	Develop the sense of political consciousness in pursuing political objectives

Source: Handouts, leaflets published by CTTC 2019

The fundamental distinction between a true preacher and an extremist recruiter lies in their objectives. A true preacher guides followers to uphold prophetic ideals, the promoting peace, stability, and harmonious social, familial, and the patriotic relations. In contrast, extremists disregard the pursuit of peace, opting for instability, disorder, & chaos. They prioritize isolation, severing ties with family, society, and the state, while neglecting the prophetic teachings on the maintaining peace, order, and patriotism. True preachers lead their

followers towards love, fairness, and humanity, while extremists incite violence, cruelty, injustice, and destruction. Therefore, CTTC emphasizes the importance of discerning the difference between true preachers and extremist recruiters.

Anti-terrorism Financial Regulations in Bangladesh

Regulation	Purpose	Measures
Money laundering prevention act, 2012	Prohibits money laundering	Customer due diligence, suspicious transaction reporting, record-keeping
Counter-terrorism financing act, 2015	Prohibits the financing of terrorism	Similar measures to those required under the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012
Financial intelligence unit act, 2016	Establishes a Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) to receive and analyze suspicious transaction reports	The FIU is responsible for sharing information with law enforcement and other government agencies to investigate and prosecute money laundering and terrorist financing

Bangladesh has implemented anti-terrorism financial regulations to prevent terrorist financing and other crimes. The government has created a National Counter Terrorism Authority, improved cooperation with international partners, and invested in law enforcement & intelligence. Challenges remain, including incomeplete compliance and public awareness. Nevertheless, the government remains committed to implementing the regulations and combating terrorism.

Islamic Foundation

The Islamic Foundation has launched a nationwide campaign to combat violent extremism and terrorism. It focuses on engaging Imams, who play a key role in motivating people against extremism, by providing instructions and guidelines for addressing extremism in their weekend prayer speeches. The foundation also assists law enforcement agencies by offering Islamic viewpoints for the formulation of their leaflets. They lead a comprehensive social campaign across the country, both physically and the virtually. The campaign includes several distinct initiatives

1) Preparation, design, and distribution of Islamic viewpoints on religious extremism.
2) Offering counter narratives to Islamic fundamentalists.
3) Clarifying the difference between Islam and the terrorism.
4) Providing unified sermons (Khutbah) on the Fridays.
5) Conducting training programs for Imams.
6) Promoting Islamic viewpoints of tolerance, harmony, peace, and coexistence.
7) Collaborating with law enforcement teams, stake holders, and the government in the policymaking and strategy formulation.

Mobile App 'Social Action (YPSA)'

The non-government organization Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) has developed the 'YPSA CVE Initiative' mobile app to provide information on extremism. It delivers leaflets, slogans, and instructions from law enforcement teams to educate youth about extremism and its consequences. The app aims to build a mindset and social consciousness against extremism, targeting the local community of Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. It is available in Bangla and seeks to the engage the youth in CVE initiatives.

Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO)

The Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) is the research wing of the local think-tank, the Center for Genocide Studies, based at the University of Dhaka. In collaboration with UNDP, it has launched the 'Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB)' project. BPO publishes monthly reports on terrorism incidents, government responses, and the reactions of other stakeholders. It also monitors socio-political and economic factors contributing to violent extremism in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS)

BIPSS is a local think-tank dedicated to the studying violent extremism and terrorism in South Asia, including Bangladesh. It operates the 'Bangladesh Center for Terrorism Research (BCTR)' which aims to the

analyze terrorism threats, their nature, and potential solutions. BCTR publishes monthly evaluation reports on terrorism and violent extremism incidents, as well as government responses. Additionally, BIPSS regularly releases commentaries, special reports, and policy papers on national and regional security policies and strategies.

Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT)

BIIT is a leading think-tank that focuses on exploring religious extremism and peace issues from a faith perspective. As a predominantly Muslim nation, Bangladesh faces threats of violent extremism based on misinterpretation of Islam. BIIT publishes monographs and books regularly to demystify extremist ideas and promote values such as tolerance, humanity, equity, justice, and freedom from an Islamic viewpoint. It houses a dedicated research cell called 'Peace Corner,' which organizes workshops, seminars, & conferences. The institute also maintains a specialized section within its library, called Peace Corner, which collects rare materials and resources on extremism to the facilitate research.

Dhaka Declaration

In response to the growing threat of extremism in Bangladesh and its association with religion, Ulemas from across the country united to issue a declaration against extremism. The primary objective of this conference was to clarify the Islamic position of Ulemas regarding religious extremism. The Ulemas firmly rejected all forms of aggression, destruction, killing, injustice, and suicide, considering them entirely un-Islamic. They emphasized that Islam does not endorse compulsion, cruelty, or extrajudicial barbarism. The Prophet (PBUH) established a state characterized by peace, stability, progress, and coexistence with multicultural and multi-religious populations. During the conference, several factors contributing to extremism were mentioned:

1) Extremists lack knowledge and insight into the underlying purposes, spirit, and essence of faith. They often prioritize a literal interpretation of Islam rather than the understanding its broader meanings. For instance, the literal interpretation of a saying by the Prophet advises not to carry the Quran to non-Muslim households due to concerns of desecration.
2) Extremists lack a comprehensive understanding of Islam and attempt to reshape society solely based on the past without considering the context. The Prophet always considered contextual and situational analysis.
3) Extremists label laxity as disbelief (kuffar), but this is an inaccurate understanding. Sometimes people are compelled to show leniency or flexibility.
4) Extremism is often fueled by oppressive political rulers to mislead the people and divert attention from their own oppressive actions.

Recommendations

To effectively counter violent extremism in Bangladesh, several measures can be implemented:

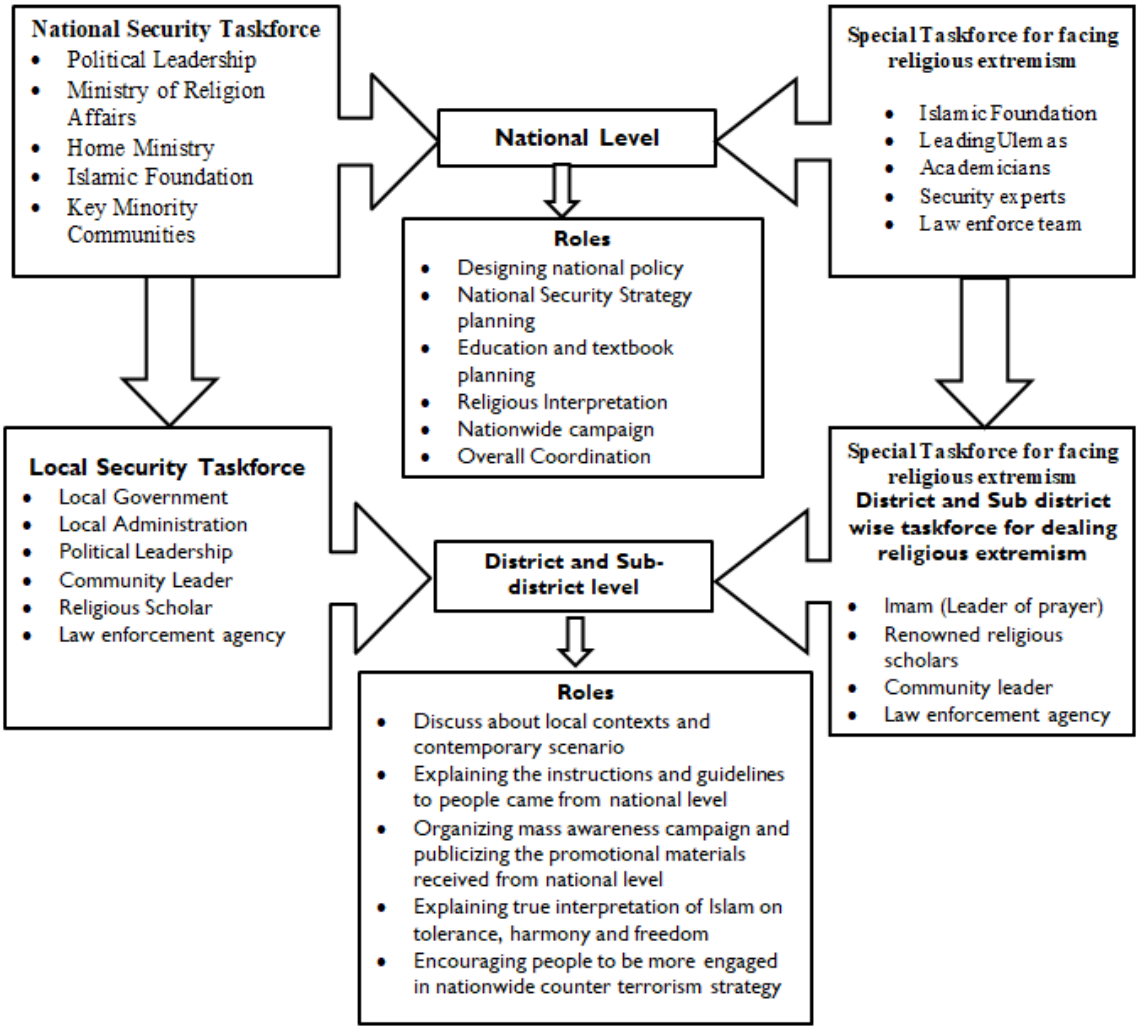
1) Comprehensive Counter-Narrative Strategies: Develop and disseminate counter-narratives that challenge extremist ideologies & promote peace, tolerance, and inclusivity. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, the social media outreach, & collaborations with religious leaders, community organizations, & educational institutions.
2) Strengthening Community Engagement: Foster strong partnerships between government, civil society, and communities to promote dialogue, understanding, & trust-building. Encourage community-led initiatives that address local grievances, promote social cohesion, and provide support and opportunities for vulnerable individuals.
3) Enhancing Education and Youth Engagement: Improve access to quality education and promote critical thinking, empathy, and resilience among young people. Incorporate peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the tolerance education into curricula and extracurricular activities. Engage youth in constructive dialogue, mentorship programs, and leadership opportunities to empower them as agents of positive change.
4) Promoting Social and Economic Development: Address socioeconomic disparities and reduce inequalities to alleviate grievances that can contribute to radicalization. Invest in infrastructure, job creation, and skills development programs, particularly in marginalized communities. Pro-

vide avenues for economic empowerment and social inclusion, reducing vulnerability to extremist influences.

5) Strengthening Rule of Law and Justice Systems: Enhance the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies, judiciary, and intelligence services to prevent, investigate, and prosecute extremist activities. Ensure that justice is served, and perpetrators are held accountable to build public trust and deter future acts of violence.
6) Countering Online Radicalization: Collaborate with internet service providers, the social media platforms, and tech companies to monitor and remove extremist content online. Promote digital literacy and empower individuals to critically evaluate online information & recognize propaganda and radicalization attempts.
7) International Cooperation: Foster collaboration with international partners, sharing best practices, intelligence, and resources to address the transnational nature of the extremism. Engage in multilateral efforts to combat terrorism, exchange expertise, and coordinate actions to disrupt extremist networks.

It is important to implement these measures holistically, addressing the root causes of extremism, promoting inclusivity, and involving various stake-holders in a collaborative and sustained effort. Additionally, regularly evaluating and the adapting these strategies based on emerging trends and challenges is crucial for long-term effectiveness.

National Strategy Framework of CVE (Proposed)



CONCLUSION:

Bangladesh is currently grappling with the escalating threat of violent extremism, as global terrorist organizations seek to the establish their presence in the country. This article underscores the imperative to counter violent extremism from a faith perspective and assesses the effectiveness of existing strategies implemented by relevant authorities. It emphasizes the significance of incorporating faith perspectives into Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives, highlighting that the Islam unequivocally condemns extremism while promoting values of peace, harmony, stability, and progress. By examining Islamic teachings and the perspectives of Islamic scholars and leaders, it becomes evident that Islam advocates for peaceful coexistence, as exemplified by the Medina Charter. In light of these insights, the article proposes a national strategy framework as a proactive measure to effectively address and combat violent extremism in Bangladesh.

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