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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Sectarian Insecurities and Terror Driven Violence****Dr. Tehmina Aslam (Corresponding Author)**

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[muhammad.ziaulhaq@iiu.edu.pk](mailto:muhammad.ziaulhaq@iiu.edu.pk)**Abstract**

In Pakistan, a sectarian conflict is necessarily a post-Partition development. Precisely, in the 1980s, when religion was used to launch a fight against communism which intended to expand its advance south-wards to reach warm waters of the Arabian Sea. The fight engulfed Pakistan, which saw the use of religion to meet one's objectives. In the meantime, the Iraq-Iran war accentuated the sectarian divide existed within the fold of religion, Islam. Both wars together poured the division into communities living otherwise together peacefully. Further damage in terms of intensity and frequency of violence was done by the war on terror which ran from 2001 to 2021 in the region. Sectarian insecurity is a product of the internecine conflict which has been spoiling religious harmony since the 1980s and got a spike after 2001. Advanced means of war added advanced tactics to the religious discord making terror-driven violence possible. A qualitative research study done on sectarian prone cities in South Punjab such as Sargodha and Jhang came up with certain findings. First, in the region of Central and South Asia, wars in the name of religion wedged open the door of sectarian disharmony, which is refusing to die. Second, from 1980s to 2000s, sectarian disharmony instilled divisions in the domains of political capital and economic resources in South Punjab. Third, the addition of explosive self-controlled jackets, improvised remote-controlled or time-controlled volatile devices and a surfeit of ever-willing suicide bombers, besides target killers, pushed sectarian discord to new limits of terror-driven violence. Fourth, a deep division in the interpreter of religion such as religious and spiritual scholars solidified the grounds taken by religious extremists for perpetual dissonance. Fifth, all efforts of the state to bring about sectarian harmony and sectarian security are still short of bringing the society back to the era of peaceful co-existence. Conclusion drawn is that wars fought near Pakistan's borders affected society adversely, one example of which is sectarian conflict causing now a perpetual disharmony. No doubt, the state of Pakistan has brought the situation under control, sectarian divisions in society have gone deeper than before and may take some years to get healed.

**Keywords:** Sectarianism, Conflict, Shia, Sunni, Religion, Punjab, Pakistan.**Introduction**

Pakistan deals with a myriad of challenges, issues and controversies. The prominent among these is its relation to the religion of Islam in fact it is complicated and puzzling if compared to other Muslim countries. It came into being in the name of Islam with its *raison d'être* being in reference to Islam as well. This reflects that Islam would have been a binding force and guiding light. However, the reality is rather heartbreaking as teachings of Islam have never

been incorporated in its letter and spirit and worst of all the rulers who had to be flag bearers of Islam had done nothing except lip service. This loophole gave birth to misuse of Islam and rise of sectarian insecurities and terror violence. (Ahmad, 2013). The paper explores the root causes of sectarianism, its impact and repercussions. The paper further analyzes the issue of sectarianism through the lens of constructivism and securitization and presents recommendations to overcome sectarianism through contact hypothesis theory. Sectarian violence is a multilayered issue with deep social, political, and geopolitical roots which has evolved through time and has become endemic in Pakistan (Grare, 2007). According to (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968: 130 “The term Sect is used in the sociology of religion to designate a particular kind of religious group”. Moreover, according to The Oxford English Dictionary, 1961: 361 the word sect is normally used for a “separately organized religious group having its typical name and its own places of worship”. In the case of Pakistan there are multiple sects and differences and misunderstandings among those sects have put Pakistan under serious threats since its inception. The main cause of conflicts is between Sunnis and Shias with nature of hostility not only being inter-sects but also intra-sects. Religion of Islam has been misused for worldly gains. (Shah, 2014)

### **Theoretical framework**

#### **Constructivism**

Constructivism is an important theory in the field of International Relations having a holistic ontology that came into being after three debates in international relations and rose prominently during the 1980s when thinkers and authors challenged the materialism and individualism foundational to realist theory and were well-equipped to consider the developments surrounding the end of the cold war (Kappenberg, 2019). According to constructivism social interactions, perceptions, and mutual understanding shape International Relations. One of the core concepts of constructivism about social reality i.e. power and identity is constructed through interactions and social agreements. Moreover, another important key concept of constructivism is about the identity and the role of actors i.e. states develop identities through social interaction (Burchill, 2005). According to Ted Hopf(1998), identity construction shapes how actors see themselves and others (Hopf, 1998). Alexander Wendt is an important scholar of constructivism credited for writing a book titled Social Theory of International Politics. In his book Wendt mentions that “the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces” (Wendt, 1999).

#### **Securitization theory**

The securitization theory was developed by Copenhagen School credited to Bary Buzan and Ole Weaver which explains how certain issues are labelled as security issues or threats by influential actors like politicians, states or even individuals. According to this theory various sectors like military, political, economic, environmental and societal are interconnected and defines something to be a security issue in the contemporary and evolving global dynamics of world politics pertinently between center i.e. great powers and periphery i.e. developing states (Buzan, 1991). The theory of securitization came into being due to debate between a wide and narrow view of security over how issues of security are framed or how it should be framed. According to the widening perspective non military issues like environmental and societal issues fall under the umbrella of security issues. According to a narrow perspective securitizing non military issues dilutes the meaning of security and risks the loss of intellectual coherence. Moreover, security in international relations according to the theory of

securitization is not only about object threats rather something to be considered as security threat is done through a discourse according to which an issue is framed as existential threat to referent object and requires emergency measures to be taken beyond political process. (Buzan et al., 1998)

### **Intergroup Contact Theory**

The intergroup contact hypothesis is a psychological phenomena which was for the first time proposed by Allport in 1954, Allport suggested that under equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals and support by social authority's positive impact is created in intergroup contact. (Everett & Onu, 2013). According to this psychological phenomena if there is social contact between groups it is more than enough to put prejudice down with an iron hand. This is because it is believed by psychologists that ingroup having more interaction which outgroup the result will be development of more positive perception and fewer negative perception. Therefore, psychologists suggests and emphasis on direct contact between diverse members of society in order to reduce prejudice and promote mutual understanding which is done through equal status between groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, Support of authorities and customs, positive contact norms, personal accountability and empathy (McLeod, 2023)

### **Sectarianism in Pakistan**

#### **Overview**

In case of Pakistan sectarian insecurities and terror driven violence pertinently in cities of Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, Gilgit Balistan, Lahore and even in Islamabad is due to Shia Sunni divide. Since its inception or more precisely after Zia's regime Shia and Sunni extremists have attacked each other all over Pakistan creating a dilemma of insecurities and threats. According to analysts, a number of sectarian violence has occurred from Sunni extremists following Al Qaeda's ideology. During the 1980s and 1990s sectarian violence skyrocketed in Karachi as well as in Sindh. Year 2010 was the worst era for sectarian violence in Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies' annual report on Pakistan's national security in 2010 there was an increase in sectarian and ethnic violence with a total of one hundred fifty two incidents of sectarian violence, including sectarian-related attacks and clashes, killing six hundred sixty three people. (PIPS 2011) Balochistan being adjacent to Afghanistan and Iran has been a victim of sectarianism and terror violence due to influence of Afghan Jihad and Islamic Revolution of Iran. In 2005 there were fifty three assassination and fifty seven innocents wounded due to the terrorist attack on a Shia Mosque during Jumma prayer. Quetta being adjacent to Afghanistan's Kandahar and being a Shia populated region, the province has been viewed as the terrorist center (Underlying the Causes of Sectarianism 2011). Moreover, it has been a hub for Iran to undertake its agenda.

Madrassah system has played a significant role in breeding sectarian insecurities and violence in Pakistan as sectarian extremists are trained at Madrassas. In 1950, there were only five Madrassas in Karachi which and the number of madrasa increased to twenty in 1971 with four among them being of Deobandi and one for Shia. (Crisis Group 2005, also Ahmed 1979). There are around 979 madrassas in Karachi. For Deobandis there are more than 3000 religious institutions, 791 institutions of Barelvi in Sindh. In Hyderabad there are 121 Madrassas of Shia, and 56 Madrassas of Ahle Hadith (Monthly Wafaq alMadaris 2004).

#### **Zia's Islamization**

Zia's Islamization Policy sowed seeds of sectarian insecurities and terror violence in Pakistan to such an extent that roots got stronger and repercussions are being faced till today. Zia ul

Haq abrogated the constitution and imposed a martial law and Pakistan entered into a third military regime. His government was heavily funded by the USA and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the purpose to establish Mujahideen, a Sunni dominated group with the purpose to fight against and defeat the Soviet. At the same time Shia revolutionaries toppled the Iranian government. Both of these parallel incidents caused a rise in insecurities among Pakistanis (Bowes, 2024).

During the 1980s when Zia rule was there, Shia-Sunni clashes were a norm. Shias represented about 20 percent of the population and were never excited about Islamization; rather in the 1970s they were in support of the Pakistan People's Party, the party having a rather secular and socialist approach. With the rise of Islamization, Shias were under the fear that rise in militancy would turn against them and they would have a fate similar to that of the Ahmediyya community. The fear of the Shia community was not an irrational one as leaders of Jamaat Ulema Islami (JUI) and Jamaat Ulema Pakistan were already actively taking an aggressive stance against Shias, and had created a scenario of sectarian dilemma particularly in Karachi and Punjab. With the fear being manifested, the Zia's military regime witnessed a wave of Shia activism. In 1979 Tehriq-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqah Jafria (TNJF), later renamed Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP) was established in response to Zia's Islamization policies. Its objectives were explicit which were to assert separate Shia identity, protect their religious rights and prevent the Sunni majority from imposing its own interpretation of the Sharia. TNJF violently opposed the imposition of Zakaat by Jammat-e-Islami challenging Sunni as well as military hierarchy. Moreover, the wave of Shia activism was heavily being sponsored by the newly-established Islamic Republic of Iran. The Shia activism and sponsorship from Iran placed the Sunni dominated government at conflict and pushed the nation into the quagmire of violence and insecurities. While Iran-Iraq war was ongoing, Pakistan found itself fighting a proxy war with Shia allied with Iran and Sunni allied with Saudi Arabia and Iraq and specialists and analysts present these incidents as a cause and suffering of nation due to sectarianism as Zia regime systematically promoted sectarianism which was pertinent due to rise of Iranian influence and to contain it (Grare, 2007)

### **Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)**

The creation of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi worsened the situation of sectarianism in Pakistan in 1985. One of the prominent demands of SSP was to pronounce Shias as non Muslims and Pakistan to be declared as a Sunni state. Jhangvi was murdered by his opponents and his followers and held the Shia community responsible for his assassination. The creation of SSP gave room for instance conflicts amongst the sects. As after his assassination, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) entered the scene with Riaz Basra and they exterminated Shias. In reaction to this Shias from Thokar Niaz Beg created Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP) and prepared to wage a fight against Deobandis. (Rana, 2004: 415). Later down the years both the organizations were banned but despite that Pakistan suffered harsh consequences and years were gone in bloodshed and innocent lives were taken in target killings. (Shah, 2014)

### **The Soviet Union Invasion of Afghanistan**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave birth to the Afghan crisis that further played a vital role in adding fuel to fire in Pakistan and the situation further deteriorated with US involvement. While USA was fighting a proxy war for the purpose of containment of Communism, the already terrorizing situation of sectarianism got further alarming as USA was funding Pakistan militarily as well as financially. The funding of the USA to Pakistan

increased the situation of radicalization in Pakistan. Organizations like SSP, LeJ, and LeT were formed. Moreover, mujahideens were recruited to fight against communism and most of the recruited individuals belonged to Sunni sect. This increased terror and fear in the hearts of Shia Muslims. The reason for fear was that Afghan refugees who came to Pakistan were Sunnis and this influx created a situation in which the balance of population was in the favour of Sunnis. In order to fight this fear, Shia organized under the platform of SMP in 1991 (Moonis Ahmar and Ali Riaz 2005).

The Afghan Crisis significantly contributed in supply of manpower, training, weapon supply, terror financing and terror networking to militants that added to the sectarian insecurities. After 1989 with Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and after 1996 after Taliban takeover of Kabul, Pakistan became a hot spot for numerous young jihadis and Pakistan witnessed a qualitative change. Now the battlefield was shifted to Kashmir as soon as Soviet withdrawal occurred. Significant number of youth received military training in Afghanistan and multiple camps were formed and with the rise of Taliban each of these camps got to be very close and many militants came back to Pakistan. The coming back of militants further impacted the sectarian violence and contributed to terror (Grare, 2007)

### **Impact**

Sectarianism serves as a severe threat to the ideology, nation, security and society of Pakistan. Sectarianism gave rise to violence, disturbance, hatred, fragmentation and insecurities in society igniting fear and mistrust. It is due to sectarianism and terror driven violence that created a situation in which suicide bombing, blasts, drone attacks and assassination became a norm. sectarian strife is an immediate threat to Pakistan to such an extent that innocent lives have been lost in millions, many children got orphaned, many women became widowed and many mothers lost their children. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal 2009 report, from 2002-08, there were a total of 642 sectarian violence incidents that occurred in which 1,518 people were killed and 2,817 people were injured. (Afzal et al., 2012)

The Afghan crisis ended with the dismantling of the Soviet Union but since 1979 till date Pakistan has been suffering from security threats both internal and external pertinently because of the arrival of Afghan refugees in millions. The refugee situation widespread terrorism, militancy and extremism. After 911 the fuel was added to fire as the society of Pakistan underwent Talibanization and suffered from ethno-political crisis pertinently in Balochistan and Karachi. Moreover, the society of Pakistan became a victim of huge drug supply, Kalashnikov culture and lawlessness (Nasar Dotani 2011).

Militant organizations like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Sipah-e-Mohammadi Pakistan (SMP) worked under the shadow of sectarianism in the name of religion brainwashed and spoiled minds of youth and destroyed the young generation. (Hamza, 2020)

September 11 attacks in 2001 flipped the landscape of Pakistan upside down making it a hotbed of sectarian violence and terrorism. The sectarian organizations used the teachings of Islam in a wrong way and manipulated innocent laymen against military forces and organized them under one platform in the name of Jihad. Due to this, the population in huge numbers was badly affected in which thousands were killed and millions were injured. The external influence deteriorated the scenario further with Saudi Arabia supporting Wahhabi sects to spread their agenda against Iran in the name of spreading real Islam politically as well as ideology. On the other hand, Iran played its part by supporting Shia sect in Pakistan against Saudi Arabia (Hamza, 2020)

## Theoretical Analysis

### Constructivism

#### Sectarian Identities: A social construct

Sectarian identities are social constructs developed by political, historical and religious factors. Discourse and elite players are prominent actors in developing a construct around defining what it means to be part of a particular sect. Shia and Sunni narratives are constructed and shaped by century old religious text interpretation and power struggles along with historical grievances and differences. These narratives place one group or sect as the true flagbearer of the authenticity of religion and the other sect as deviant one. This is where conflict arises and power struggle occurs. Power hungry Political leaders cash on these gaps and reinforce sectarian identities to justify and legitimise their power. For that state institution promotes a specific sect's ideology and marginalises other sect's identity. In this constructed view survival of people belonging to a certain sect is proportional to sustaining their identity and any challenge to their ritual is deemed to be a threat to their very existence.

#### Role of conflicting norms and values

Shia and Sunni sects have norms and values that conflict with one another. These conflicting norms and values are the bone of contention that serves as a major driver of insecurities. Their norms are at conflict with each other when it comes to authority, religion, governance and societal structures. The difference over religious leadership on the basis of who is authentic causes chain reaction when it comes to sectarianism and ignites tensions leading to violence. The sect which is more dominant enforces norms in order to marginalise the sect in minority by portraying them disloyal. This dominance creates a social hierarchy in which a minority sect is constructed to be others and someone who doesn't completely belong to islam. Therefore, in the light of constructivism these conflicting norms have created power dynamics where imbalance is manifested.

#### Terror-driven violence and identity threats

Identity threats is a constructed perception in which terror driven violence is deeply rooted. Acts of violence against a sect by another sect is deemed necessary through framing them as a necessity to protect the sanctity of religion. Attacks on Shia mosques are manifestations of these violence as they aim to weaken Shia identity through violence driven by terror and threat. Moreover, on flip side due to attacks, both minority and majority sects construct the victim identity framing themselves being under threat in order to justify measures like target killing, brainwashing, suicide bombing and destruction of mosques.

#### Polarizing identities

The conflict in norms, values and ideologies constructed a polarized identity amongst the sects creating a vicious cycle of violence. Sunni portrays Shias as blasphemous and Shias portrays Sunnis as oppressive and dominant. Both the sects aim to reinforce their constructed identities and justify violence. Militants often frame violence as a manifestation of strength and loyalty to their sect.

#### Securitization theory

##### Roots of threats

In the case of Pakistan, sectarianism is a dilemma caused by factors like marginalization, power imbalance and historical grievance. These factors are primary causes of sectarian insecurities. Dominant sectarian groups particularly Sunni and state are speech acts that use discourse to portray minority sects particularly Shias as threat to national security as well as human security. State leaders and Sunnis narratives label Shia practices as un-Islamic and

foreign funded. On the other hand minority sect as speech act labels state and sunnis as oppressors and cause of insecurities. For sunnis religious orthodoxy and nation's integrity as referent objects and for minority sects or precisely Shia sect their survival and safety are referent objects. The already existing socio-politico-economic divide defines acceptance of audience and masses that synchronises with securitization narratives that further leads to community polarization

### **Consequences of securitizing sectarianism**

Securitizing sectarianism by extremists perpetuated terror-driven violence by mobilizing communities under the banner of existential threats. Non-state actors like militant leaders frame violence as speech act as a justified response to existential threats posed by minority sects. This propaganda promotes victimhood and in return the necessity of jihad. Sectarian militants view survival as referent objects and their actions hence targets shrines and mosques. Masses' acceptance of extremist rhetoric indicates success of securitization which is facilitated by societal mistrust, economic shortcomings and historical violence. Violence, terrorism and target killing are justified by securitization discourse and state responses such as militarized crackdowns, intensifying insecurities and creating a never ending vicious cycle.

### **Role of state and leaders**

State had played a dual role by securitizing actors and being responder to violence. For state shia sects are securitizing actors and frame them as threat to nation and ideology of state through discrimination, surveillance and campaigns against them. Acceptance of this state narrative by the majority of masses have further alienated the shia community. On the other hand rejection of this state narrative by minorities being framed as hostile justifies separatist agenda. The consequences of this securitization is that the state implements extraordinary measures like military intervention on minority sect contributing in continuation of cycle of violence

### **Overcoming Sectarian Insecurity and terror violence through the lens of Intergroup contact theory**

#### **Equal Status Between Groups**

According to contact hypothesis theory members of groups or in case of Pakistan sects must not have an unequal or hierarchical relationship. Both the groups must consider each other to be equal instead of superior or inferior. (Cohen, 1982; Riordan and Ruggiero, 1980; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2005). According to Brewer and Kramer, 1985 and Foster and Finchilescu, 1986 there should be equality among groups both prior and during contact situations. According to research equality among groups with respect to their status promotes positive intergroup attitudes despite difference in status. (McLeod, 2023)

#### **Common Goals**

Its important for groups and sects to have common goals for which members of a particular group or sect strives to achieve them through harmony and mutual aims. It is important for groups and sects to be making active efforts to achieve the desired goals. For example, according to Chu and Griffey, 1985; Patchen, 1982 a football team could draw people with different race and ethnicity in working together and relying on each other (McLeod, 2023). In case of pakistan harmony could be achieved if Shia and Sunni are put together to achieve a common goal for example through working towards preserving the finality of prophethood and working together to spread the word of finality of prophethood,

#### **Intergroup Cooperation**

To achieve harmony it is crucial for members of different sects to work together in a non-competitive environment because according to Allport (1954) to achieve or attain common goals the aim should be cooperation instead of competition. For example, in Sheriff et al. 's (1961) Robbers' Cave field study, researchers devised barriers to common goals, such as a planned picnic that could only be resolved with cooperation between both groups. and in another example Elliot Aronson developed a "jigsaw" approach such that students from diverse backgrounds work toward common goals, fostering (McLeod, 2023) positive relationships among children worldwide (McLeod, 2023). Implementing such tactics in Pakistan would help in overcoming sectarian insecurities and terror driven violence by encouraging positive relations and conflict resolution spirit.

### **The Support of Authorities, Law**

The support of authorities plays a vital role in creating a positive intergroup contact. This is so because authorities like state and policymakers are in position to establish norms for groups and sects on how to interact with each other through official law enforcement methods. The importance of authorities in this regard has been demonstrated in military, business, and in religion as well. For example civil-rights acts in American society are instrumental in establishing anti-prejudicial norms (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2005). (McLeod, 2023). In the case of Pakistan, the role of authorities to create harmony can be executed by ensuring equal representation of Shia and Sunni in governance by providing them with equal opportunities in order to build respect and trust. It is also crucial for Pakistani authorities and state to legislate Hate Speech Laws to curb violence

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan has been suffering from dilemma of sectarianism which is deeply rooted in history, politics, societal dynamics and religious practices. Moreover, Pakistan is at a geopolitical crossroads meaning it is a hotbed for other countries to attain their interest. Being at such a geopolitical juxtaposition events like Afghan crisis, Iran-Saudi rivalry and Zia's islamization significantly impacted Pakistan with intensified extremism giving rise to sectarian insecurities and terror driven violence that Pakistan suffers from till date. The conflicts of sectarianism are just byproduct of religious difference rather it is product of complex factors. The sectarian tensions in Pakistan apart from religious differences are result of constructed identities, securitising of issues and state power hungry nature. The paper analysed the situation of sectarian insecurities using constructivist lens and theory of securitisation. According to constructivism sectarian identities are socially constructed due to historical, religious and political factors. According to securitisation the framing of division between sects as security threats perpetuated terror driven violence. It is crucial to address sectarianism using comprehensive approach by promoting equal status, enforcing cooperation, personal accountability and reducing prejudice

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