

Impact of sectarian insecurities and terror-driven violence in South Punjab, Pakistan

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Article History	Abstract:
Received: 27-Jul-2025	A qualitative study was conducted on sectarian-prone cities in South Punjab, i.e., Sargodha and Jhang, and yielded 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 refuses to die. Second, from the 1980s to the 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 interpretation of religion, such as religious and spiritual scholars, solidified the grounds taken by religious extremists for perpetual dissonance. Fifth, all state efforts to foster sectarian harmony and security still fall short of restoring society to the era of peaceful coexistence. The conclusion drawn is that wars fought near Pakistan's borders affected society adversely, one example of which is sectarian conflict, causing a perpetual disharmony. No doubt, the state of Pakistan has brought the situation under control, but sectarian divisions in society have gone deeper than before and may take some years to heal.
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1. Introduction

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 southwards to reach the 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 that existed within the fold of religion, Islam. Both wars together created division in communities that lived 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 spiked after 2001. Advanced means of war added advanced tactics to the religious discord, making terror-driven violence possible.

Pakistan faces myriad challenges, issues, and controversies. The prominent among these is its relation to the religion of Islam; in fact, it is complicated and puzzling when 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 the misuse of Islam and the rise of sectarian insecurities and violent terror. (Ahmad, 2013). The paper explores the root causes of sectarianism, its impact, and repercussions. The paper further analyses the issue of sectarianism through the lens of constructivism and securitization, and presents recommendations to overcome sectarianism through the contact hypothesis theory. Sectarian violence is a multilayered issue with deep social, political, and geopolitical roots that has evolved through time and has become endemic in Pakistan (Grare, 2007), according to the 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 the nature of hostility not only being inter-sects, but also intra-sects. The religion of Islam has been misused for worldly gains (Shah, 2014).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. 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 with 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).

2.1.1. Securitization Theory

The securitization theory was developed by the Copenhagen School, credited to Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, which explains how certain issues are labeled 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 define something to be a security issue in the contemporary and evolving global dynamics of world politics, pertinently between the center, i.e., great powers, and the periphery, i.e., developing states (Buzan, 1991). The theory of securitization came into being due to a debate between a wide and narrow view of security over how issues of security are framed or how they 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, but something to be considered as a security threat is done through a discourse according to which an issue is framed as an existential threat to the referent object and requires emergency measures to be taken beyond the political process. (Buzan et al., 1998)

2.1.2. Intergroup Contact Theory

The intergroup contact hypothesis is a psychological phenomenon that was first proposed by Allport in 1954. Allport suggested that under equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social authorities, a positive impact is created in intergroup contact. (Everett & Onu, 2013). According to this psychological phenomenon, 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 the ingroup having more interaction with the outgroup, the result will be the development of more positive perceptions and fewer negative perceptions. Therefore, psychologists suggest and emphasize 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)

3. Sectarianism in Pakistan

3.1. Overview

In the case of Pakistan, sectarian insecurities and terror-driven violence, particularly in cities of Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, Gilgit Baltistan, Lahore, and even in Islamabad, are due to the 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 instances of sectarian violence have occurred from Sunni extremists following Al-Qaeda’s ideology. During the 1980s and 1990s, sectarian

violence skyrocketed in Karachi as well as in Sindh. The year 2010 was the worst year 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 terrorist violence due to the influence of Afghan Jihad and the Islamic Revolution of Iran. In 2005, there were fifty-three assassinations and fifty-seven innocent people wounded due to the terrorist attack on a Shia Mosque during Jummah prayer. Quetta, being adjacent to Afghanistan's Kandahar and being a Shia-populated region, 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.

The 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, and the number of madrassas 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 al Madaris 2004).

3.2. Zia's Islamization

Zia's Islamization Policy sowed seeds of sectarian insecurities and terrorist violence in Pakistan to such an extent that the roots got stronger and repercussions are being faced till today. Zia ul Haq abrogated the constitution and imposed 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 of establishing Mujahedin, a Sunni-dominated group, with the purpose of fighting against and defeating the Soviets. 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's rule was in place, Shia-Sunni clashes were the 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, the Shia were under the fear that the rise in militancy would turn against them, and they would have a fate similar to that of the Ahmadiyya 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 a 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 Zakat by Jammata-e-Islami, challenging the Sunni as well as the military hierarchy. Moreover, the wave of Shia activism was heavily sponsored by the newly

established Islamic Republic of Iran. The Shia activism and sponsorship from Iran placed the Sunni-dominated government in conflict and pushed the nation into the quagmire of violence and insecurity. While the 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 the nation due to sectarianism, as the Zia regime systematically promoted sectarianism, which was pertinent due to the rise of Iranian influence and to contain it (Grare, 2007).

3.3. 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 for Pakistan to be declared a Sunni state. Jhangvi was murdered by his opponents and his followers, and he held the Shia community responsible for his assassination. The creation of SSP gave room for instance conflicts amongst the sects. 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 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).

3.4. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave birth to the Afghan crisis, which further played a vital role in adding fuel to the fire in Pakistan, and the situation further deteriorated with US involvement. While the US was fighting a proxy war for the purpose of containment of Communism, the already terrorizing situation of sectarianism got further alarming as the US was funding Pakistan militarily as well as financially. The funding of the US to Pakistan increased the situation of radicalization in Pakistan. Organizations like SSP, LeJ, and LeT were formed. Moreover, Mujahedin were recruited to fight against communism, and most of the recruited individuals belonged to the 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 favor of Sunnis. To fight this fear, Shia organized under the platform of SMP in 1991 (Ahmar & Riaz, 2005).

The Afghan Crisis significantly contributed to the supply of manpower, training, weapon supply, terror financing, and terror networking to militants that added to the sectarian insecurities. After 1989, with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and after 1996, with the 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 the Soviet withdrawal occurred. A significant number of youths received military training in Afghanistan, and multiple camps were formed. With the rise of the Taliban, each of these camps came to be very close, and many militants came back to Pakistan. The return of militants further impacted the sectarian violence and contributed to terror (Grare, 2007).

3.5. Impact

Sectarianism serves as a severe threat to the ideology, nation, security, and society of Pakistan.

The sectarianism in Pakistan gave rise to violence, disturbance, hatred, fragmentation, and insecurity 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 the norm. Sectarian strife is an immediate threat to Pakistan to such an extent that innocent lives have been lost in millions, many children have been orphaned, many women have become widowed, and many mothers have 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 to date, Pakistan has been suffering from security threats both internal and external, particularly because of the arrival of millions of Afghan refugees. The refugee situation is widespread terrorism, militancy, and extremism. After the September 9/11, the fuel was added to the fire as the society of Pakistan underwent Talibanization and suffered from an ethno-political crisis, particularly 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, brainwashing, and spoiling the minds of youth and destroying the young generation. (Hamza, 2020).

The 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 the 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 ideologically. On the other hand, Iran played its part by supporting the Shia sect in Pakistan against Saudi Arabia (Hamza, 2020)

4. Theoretical analysis

4.1. Constructivism

4.1.1. 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 a deviant one. This is where conflict arises, and a power struggle occurs. Power-hungry political leaders cash in on these gaps and reinforce sectarian identities to justify and legitimize their power. For that state institution promotes a specific sect's ideology and marginalizes other sects' identity. In this constructed view, the 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.

a) 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 in 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 a chain reaction when it comes to sectarianism and ignites tensions leading to violence. The sect that is more dominant enforces norms in order to marginalize the minority sect by portraying them as disloyal. This dominance creates a social hierarchy in which a minority sect is constructed to be other than 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.

b) Terror-driven violence and identity threats

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

4.1.2. Polarizing identities

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

4.2. Securitization theory

4.2.1. 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 the Sunni and the state, are speech acts that use discourse to portray minority sects, particularly the Shias, as a threat to national security as well as human security. State leaders and Sunni narratives label Shia practices as un-Islamic and foreign-funded. On the other hand, minority sects, as speech act labels, state that Sunnis are oppressors and the cause of insecurities. For Sunni religious orthodoxy and the nation's integrity as referent objects, and for minority sects, or precisely the Shia sect, their survival and safety are referent objects. The already existing socio-political-economic divide defines acceptance of the audience and masses that synchronizes with securitization narratives that further lead to community polarization.

4.2.2. Consequences of securitizing sectarianism

Securitizing the 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 a 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 a referent object and their actions hence target shrines and mosques. The masses' acceptance of extremist rhetoric indicates the 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.

4.2.3. Role of the state and leaders

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

5. Overcoming sectarian insecurity and terror violence through the lens of intergroup contact theory

5.1. Equal status between groups

According to the contact hypothesis theory, members of groups, or in the case of Pakistan, sects, must not have an unequal or hierarchical relationship. Both 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 to and during contact situations. According to research, equality among groups with respect to their status promotes positive intergroup attitudes despite differences in status (McLeod, 2023).

5.2. Common goals

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

5.3. 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 a spirit of conflict resolution.

5.4. 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 the state and policymakers are in a 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 the military, business, and religion as well. For example, civil rights acts in American society are instrumental in establishing anti-prejudicial norms (Pettigrew & 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 the state to legislate Hate Speech Laws to curb violence.

6. Conclusion

Pakistan has been suffering from the 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 event like the 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 to date. The conflicts of sectarianism are just a byproduct of religious difference, rather than a product of complex factors. The sectarian tensions in Pakistan, apart from religious differences, are a result of constructed identities, securitizing of issues, and a state's power-hungry nature. The paper analyzed the situation of sectarian insecurities using a constructivist lens and the theory of securitization. According to constructivism, sectarian identities are socially constructed due to historical, religious, and political factors. According to securitization, the framing of division between sects as security threats perpetuated terror-driven violence. It is crucial to address sectarianism using a comprehensive approach by promoting equal status, enforcing cooperation, personal accountability, and reducing prejudice.

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