

Post 9/11 Redefinition of Violence in the Name of Religion in Pakistan

¹Dr.Minhas Majeed Khan ²Dr.Inayat Kalim ³Dr.Saima Gul ⁴Dr.Manzoor Khan Afridi

1. Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.
2. Assistant Professor, Program of International Relations, COMSATS University Islamabad, Pakistan
3. Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, Pakistan
4. Associate Professor, Dept of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

The phenomenon of violence, with its changing nature and dynamics, omnipresent across the globe, has become a challenge requiring utmost attention. In history, the use of violent acts for the pursuit of vested interests is the approach most often used for politically motivated aims and ideological objectives by extremist groups. Pakistan has been tackling the menace of violent extremism in the name of religion since 9/11 due to the Afghan invasion, which created spaces for extremist groups to spread and propagate their twisted narratives. The unpredictable menace of religious intolerance and extremism that emanates from internal and external security issues has disrupted the social fabric of society and impacted Pakistan's standing in regional and global politics. The current study investigates the changing dynamics of violent extremism in Pakistan and the root causes behind it to effectively tackle the menace. It also examines the measures adopted by the government to counter violent extremism by identifying extremist ideologies and introducing de-radicalization programmes at various levels.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Religious Extremism, Religious Intolerance, De-Radicalization, Sectarianism

Introduction:

The manipulation of religion for political and economic purposes has led to contentious religious issues among nations resulting in conflicts. The 21st century has witnessed a new phase of the struggle for global hegemony, focused on religious and civilizational issues, according to Koehler (n.d.). Tanner disapproves of the connection between religion and violence and suggests that religious scholars avoid discussing this connection. Those with no faith indicate that violence results from being religious in the first place, as per Tanner's argument in 2007. The irrationality of such belief makes violence, if not inevitable, at least likely.

Khan (2013) suggests that when religion and political identity are overlapped, the followers of religion tend to take some political actions, such as injecting their religious values and laws into the laws of their country and supporting the causes of their co-religionists living in other countries or regions. Similarly, Mogahed (2009) explains that political conflicts that divide different faith groups can grow into religious conflicts, while religious conflicts can change into political conflicts.

The role of religion in society is becoming more prominent as economic and social changes weaken nation-states, which were once a source of identity. Rashid (1997) argues that fundamentalist movements in all faiths are filling the gap left by the decline of nation-states. Cavanaugh (2007) identifies two groups, one believes that religious violence is primarily driven by economic and political motivations and not by religion, and the other believes that those who commit violent acts in the name of religion are not truly religious.

Kimball (2002) suggests that throughout history, religion has been responsible for more wars, killings, and evil acts than any other institutional force. Religious extremist groups use moral beliefs to justify violence and bring societal order. Salafi jihadists, for example, have a national and international agenda to eliminate evil and establish their version of an ideal society (Carter & Denoux, 2009). Some argue that these groups manipulate religion for their political goals and grievances (Interview, November 2015) and incite violence due to their frustration with local and global political environments (Khan, 2015).

The growth and strength of religious beliefs have led to increased sectarian hostilities. The Shia-Sunni conflict has divided Muslim states. There are also sectarian alliances among states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, deploying resources to proxy battles in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where the stakes are high. This religious divide has revitalized conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries, posing a threat to alter the region's map and widening the gaps in some Gulf States. The growing sectarian clashes have also sparked a revival of Jihadi networks, such as Al-Qaeda, Jabhat al Nusra (JN), and ISIS, which pose a threat beyond the region (Khan, 2015).

Extremists have been using religious schisms to achieve their objectives. A report by TACSTRAT disputes the notion that only some extremists tarnish the image of Islam and argues that jihadist violence is a natural outgrowth of a faith that has become violent. Furthermore, conflict in the world is not connected to religion but

rather is a war between agencies that use religion to market themselves and fulfill their agendas. (Interviews, December 8, 2015; 2016)

Many scholars claim that religion at a global level has been used to pursue power politics. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is essential to avoid using cultural or religious identity to gain power and advance national interests. Doing so can exacerbate conflicts that might otherwise be manageable through rational means. It is, therefore, advisable for intellectuals to reject the notion of a “Clash of Civilizations,” which has been popularized among the uninformed. This idea seeks to justify conflicts between civilizations in economic terms, but by attaching a metaphysical dimension to these conflicts, it risks complicating them beyond resolution. The real danger lies in promoting the idea of a “Clash of Civilizations” (Koechler, n.d).

Scholars and policymakers have dedicated significant effort and analysis to investigate the phenomenon of violence committed in the name of religion, exploring the relationship between the two concepts. While it is widely acknowledged that violence is not an inherent part of religious teachings, individuals adhering to various faiths have sometimes engaged in violent extremism under the guise of religion. To comprehend the link between religion and violence and the reasons behind using religion as a means to incite violence, it is imperative to understand the historical association between these two concepts.

Tanner (2010) notes that violence committed in the name of religion has a long history, dating back to events such as the Crusades, religious killings in the 16th century, and the partition of India. While many assume religious violence is more prevalent in Asia, it has also occurred in contemporary Europe. It has led to mass killings and the division of countries along religious lines. The Western world must acknowledge the existence and persistence of religious violence in contemporary times instead of solely associating it with non-Western societies.

Karaman (2004) posits that religion has been an enduring human value with functional significance for centuries and has served as a tool against evil. The belief in a higher power can generate the idea that despite their best efforts, gods cannot prevent unfortunate events from occurring. The antithetical force of Satan is believed to exert an influence over individuals and nations, making them its agents and consequently leading to social and economic conflicts. This contentious influence has been evident

throughout history, manifested in conflicts between nations and class and sect conflict within countries (Interview, 2007).

Now, turning to the issue of violence in Pakistan, there is an ongoing debate and discussion that it is multifaceted and often viewed solely from a religious perspective, disregarding other underlying factors. While studies on religiously motivated violence in Pakistan often attribute it to the Islamization process of the 1970s, some argue that Pakistan's alignment with the capitalist bloc during the Cold War also contributed to the rise of violent extremism. Additionally, the involvement of foreign fighters in the Soviet-Afghan War, followed by the US invasion of Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, led to their seeking refuge in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Taj asserts that beyond the groups mentioned above, militant organizations exist in central Punjab, contributing to the escalation of violent religious extremism in Pakistan, which indicates that religiously motivated violence in Pakistan is not limited to certain geographical areas or specific groups but rather a pervasive issue that affects various regions of the country. It highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing this problem, which takes into account the multifaceted nature of the issue and addresses the root causes of violent extremism in Pakistan (Taj, 2011)

The emergence of violent religious extremism and terrorism in Pakistan after the 9/11 attacks has destabilized various domains in the country, including politics, society, religion, and security. Religious intolerance and extremism have fueled this violence, leading to concerns about the internal and external factors driving this phenomenon. One prominent factor contributing to the increasing levels of violence is the radicalization of ethnic and religious identities, which provides a basis for religious and non-religious militancy and a narrative and funding source. While some argue that poverty, economic inequality, illiteracy, political marginalization, and other pressures are the main factors fueling violent extremism, others suggest that including religion in statecraft has exacerbated divisions and promoted intolerance and extremism in Pakistan. Consequently, religious identity is often valued more highly than national identity, and the misuse of religion for personal gain harms society.

This study examines the intricate nature of violence in Pakistan and its religious underpinnings, particularly after 9/11. To achieve this goal, the study poses several research questions. First, it explores the connection between religion and violence. Second, it seeks to understand the concept of violent extremism and how it has become

pervasive in Pakistani society. The study also examines the internal and external factors contributing to the proliferation of violent extremism in Pakistan. Finally, the study investigates the strategies implemented by the government to address this challenge. By answering these questions, the study hopes to better understand religiously motivated violence in Pakistan and provide insights into potential solutions to address this issue.

Religion and Violence: A Theoretical Perspective

One perspective on religion and violence is the social identity theory. This theory explains how individuals derive their sense of self from their groups and how this can lead to intergroup conflict and violence (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to this theory, when individuals strongly identify with their religious group, they are more likely to engage in violent behavior to defend that group or in pursuit of its goals (Pyszczynski et al., 2006).

Another theoretical perspective that can be applied to religion and violence is the rational choice theory. This theory suggests that individuals weigh their actions' costs and benefits before engaging in violent behaviour (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). In the context of religion and violence, individuals may use their religious beliefs to justify violence when they perceive that the benefits, such as defending their group or achieving political goals, outweigh the costs, such as punishment or loss of life (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

These theories offer insight into how religion can contribute to violence through solid identification with religious groups or rational weighing costs and benefits. By understanding these underlying mechanisms, policymakers and researchers can develop strategies to address the root causes of religious violence.

Building upon the theoretical framework of social identity theory, scholars have examined the role of religion in promoting violence in intergroup conflicts (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive a part of their self-concept from identifying with a particular social group, such as a religious community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory proposes that intergroup conflict arises when individuals perceive a threat to their group identity, activating a "us versus them" mentality and increasing in-group bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Religion, a powerful marker of group identity, can exacerbate intergroup conflicts and lead to violence. Research has found that religious extremism is more likely to emerge in political instability, economic inequality, and perceived threats to a

group's identity (Ginges et al., 2009). Furthermore, when religious symbols and beliefs define group boundaries and create a sense of superiority over other groups, intergroup conflicts are more likely to escalate into violence (Ginges et al., 2009).

However, it is essential to note that not all religious individuals or groups are prone to violence. As Ginges et al. (2009) highlight, the relationship between religion and violence is complex and multifaceted. Some religious traditions may promote peace and nonviolence, while others may be more susceptible to radicalization and extremist ideologies. Moreover, factors such as individual-level psychological processes, social context, and political structures can all influence the role of religion in promoting or inhibiting violence (Ginges et al., 2009).

The theoretical framework used in this paper is social constructionism. Social constructionism is a theory that emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping human behavior and attitudes. It argues that reality is not objective but is constructed through social interaction and language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of violence in the name of religion, social constructionism suggests that violence is not an inherent characteristic of religion but is constructed through social and cultural factors.

In the post-9/11 era, religious extremism in Pakistan has been redefined as a response to the Western-led war on terror. The extremist elements in Pakistan use religion to justify their violent actions and portray themselves as defenders of Islam against the West. This construction of violence in the name of religion results from the social and cultural factors in Pakistan, including the history of religious extremism, the socio-economic conditions, and the political environment.

The history of religious extremism in Pakistan is a significant factor in the construction of violence in the name of religion. Pakistan has a long history of religious extremism, fueled by the state's policies of using religion as a tool of political control (Mumtaz, 2005). This has led to the emergence of extremist elements who use religion to justify their violent actions.

The socio-economic conditions in Pakistan have also contributed to the construction of violence in the name of religion. Pakistan has high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The extremist elements in Pakistan use religion to provide social services, such as education and healthcare, to the poor and marginalized sections of society. This creates a sense of loyalty and indebtedness among the beneficiaries, who are then willing to support the extremist agenda.

The political environment in Pakistan is another important factor in the construction of violence in the name of religion. The state's policies of supporting extremist elements to achieve its foreign policy objectives have created a culture of impunity for these elements. This has emboldened the extremist elements to use violence as a means to achieve their objectives.

Violence in Pakistan's Context

Some scholars say Pakistani society combines religious, ethnic, regional, and national identities. While some people may support religion's role in politics, they may not vote for religious political leaders. On the other hand, secularists advocate for the separation of religion and politics and are seen as supporting Western policies (Khan, 2015).

Some consider Islam as the binding force that creates a national identity in Pakistan, which is otherwise divided along ethnic, provincial, cultural, religious, class, and linguistic lines (Bajoria, 2005). However, some argue that Islam was imposed to unite feuding ethnic groups within an artificially constructed nation (Kaplan, 2009).

Since 9/11, terrorism and violent extremism have significantly threatened Pakistan's national security. Incidences of religious intolerance and violent extremism have also damaged Pakistan's international image. Cases of violence against minority sects and religious minorities have raised concerns about the country's commitment to the cause (Khan, 2015).

To begin with, Pakistan acquired Islamic ideology from British India, as the minority Muslims became the majority in the newly formed state. Sunni nationalism held sway over the country, resulting in sectarian strife as some groups insisted on labeling other sects as non-Islamic. The emergence of Islamic militancy occurred during the Afghan wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 further fueled sectarian conflict (Waseem, 2011). According to some scholars, the Iranian Revolution became a model for the Shia community. At the same time, the Salafi school of thought took inspiration from the other, leading to a division among Muslims in general and in Pakistan in particular (Interview, 2016).

The global image of Pakistan is largely defined by perceptions about its role in international terrorism. According to Gul, Pakistan is accused of sheltering the most wanted leaders of Al Qaeda and Taliban and that terror groups inimical to India, China, the US and the West at large, use its territory (Gul, 2015). While rejecting these allegations, Pakistan has insisted on foreign interference on its soil and the subsequent

disorder. Pakistan raised these concerns at the UN and shared three dossiers, which comprised of pieces of evidence about Indian interference in Balochistan, FATA and Karachi in fueling ethnic and religious violence. This proved correct when recently an Indian RAW agent was arrested in Baluchistan.

Many quarters relate religious extremism with terrorism. It is believed that the miscreants (Taliban) and their actions have no connection to religion or religious people, nor is their claim that they represent the religious people. This is as much terrorism as it is in Karachi and Balochistan due to the ongoing conflicts there (Interview, 2016)

At the beginning of 2016, some healthy developments in Pakistan's foreign policy were observed when it focused on establishing strong ties with regional countries, including India and Russia, rather than relying on the faraway US with its aggressive and imperialist policy. Pakistan has maintained strong economic and military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Still, it has wisely refrained from joining the latter's war with Yemen and tension with Iran despite the commitment to the 34-nations coalition. Regarding the Iran–Saudi Arabia Cold War in the Middle East, Pakistan's rational approach to mediating between the two has relieved the internal tension inside the Pakistani Shia community (Ashraf,2016).

Challenges to Pakistan in Countering Violent Extremism

Religious extremism and terrorism are the major challenges posing serious threats at present to the national security of Pakistan and have affected the national economy and development. The threat scenario in Pakistan has international, regional and domestic aspects to its security. Pakistan's regional setup and relationship history with India have also added to its problems. Many find that ethnicity, sectarianism and economic instability are fundamental variables of internal security threats to Pakistan (Safdar,2004), intersecting with poor governance, political instability and grievances among provinces, economic disparity and illiteracy, which are affecting the country adversely (Khan,2015).

While different factors lead to violent extremism in Pakistan, religious extremism has been fueled by terrorist organizations and their links with hostile foreign agencies. Whether it is an ethnic conflict or religious, it allowed foreign powers to take advantage of the situation. Similarly, it is also debated that foreign agencies have also manipulated the killing of sectarian and religious minorities.

According to the 2014 Human Development Index (HDI) report, 52 percent of Pakistanis live in poverty. The HDI Multiple Poverty Index shows that the proportion

of the population living under multidimensional poverty in Pakistan has increased by almost 03percent in one year (Express Tribune, 2016). Henceforth, some associate religious extremism in society with poverty and believe that the poor can be exploited by recruiting them to commit violent acts (Interview, 2016). The religiously motivated extremism has created a situation where extremist elements of all shades play on the masses' religious sentiments and incite mobs. Therefore, it is important to analyze the state of suicide attacks in Pakistan from 2008 to 2023, considering the operations against militants in tribal areas as a counter-insurgency measure.

Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

History reveals that the phenomenon of religious extremism and intolerance led to the emergence of sectarian violence in Pakistan. The Islamization process of the 1980s further deepened the sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shias on the one hand and among Sunni groups on the other.¹A Forbes report observed, "Pakistan is a tragic land, an Islamic state increasingly turned fundamentalist and violent. It further states that as a nuclear-armed state, it is in a near conflict with India and is also facing civil war with extremists and is coming apart along sectarian lines" (Bandow, 2013).

Local terror networks are also believed to perpetrate most of the violence, but the phenomenon has important ties to regional security dynamics and transnational terrorist networks (Rafiq, n.d). It is also pertinent to mention that the effects of crises in Syria, Yemen and other sectarian conflict-prone sub-regions in the Middle East also affect Pakistan (Khan, 2015), as it is argued that Iran and Arab states back their sectarian proxies in the region.

For many years, Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims in Pakistan coexisted without conflict. The reasons for sectarian violence are not religious but rather political and social developments in Pakistan and the surrounding region. However, over time, the theological differences between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims have become a political conflict that has significant implications for law and order, social unity, and government authority. (Mir, 2007).

Different from this perception is the argument that Pakistan had no extremism. The external factors played a greater role in creating the chaos rather than internal factors (Interview, 2016) Similarly, some quarters believe that the Shia - Sunni clashes and the killing of a large number of Shia Muslims resulted in tension between Iran and Pakistan over time to time (Malik, 2008). Others, while denying the existence of

sectarianism in Pakistan, argue that it has been incited. The 8–years of war between Iraq and Iran produced sects in Pakistan that were equipped by these two nations. Before this, different sects lived peacefully and had no issues with each other based on hatred due to sects (Interview, 2016).

There are also reports that a number of terrorist organizations and madaris receive foreign funding to spread hate against minority sects from Muslim countries. In this regard, the Foreign Office of Pakistan, in a diplomatically reserved language, stated that money sent through informal channels from abroad would be scrutinized (*Dawn*, 2015). Understanding the issue's sensitivity, the government made efforts to place sectarianism among the most important national issue. Due to these efforts, a study conducted by PIPS shows that there is a marked decline in sectarian-related violence cases.

The Issue of Madaris

Pakistani madaris have remained a national and international concern but have been severely scrutinized after 9/11. The literature on the subject suggests that support extended to these madaris during Afghan jihad has transformed the peaceful culture of madaris into one based on intolerance and violence. It will not be wrong to say that, if on the one hand, they are catering to the poor strata of society; on the other, they have a role in violence and conflict. Many opinion and editorial writings in the West have also highlighted the role of madaris in propagating intolerance and extremism.

Due to these concerns, in mid-2005, the Government of Pakistan asked all Madaris to register with the government and expel all foreign students. Despite opposition from various quarters within the religious groups, including in some violent extremist groups, most of the religious schools had registered. Unfortunately, these steps had little if any effect on the curricula of madaris, which in remains intolerant and includes exhortations to violence.

Former FATA's Reforms

Another important aspect of violent extremism and security was the situation in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Due to the effects of Afghan jihad and post–9/11 attacks, the situation in FATA is often debated subject internationally. The Afghan Taliban consisting of Arabs and Central Asian Taliban, along with Al Qaeda leadership who took refuge in the FATA, started attacking military and para-military forces, including civilians inside the country, for Pakistan's alliance

in the war on terror. The Government of Pakistan, after exhausting attempts to bring the Pakistani Taliban to negotiating table, launched various military operations against the militants who were spreading their wings and aligning themselves with other criminals in the rest of the country.

The growth of radicalization and religious extremism in Pakistan is generally associated with Swat Valley and FATA. After partition, the feudal administration of Swat Valley, following some experimentation, was replaced with a mainstream legal, institutional system of administration. Unsatisfied with the incomplete integration into the state system, there was a desire to return to the old feudal system. It was in the 1990s when Sufi Mohammad started Tanzim Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) that continued to simmer into the 2000s (Abbas, 2009). Therefore, it was not surprising that Pashtuns of Swat provided cultural, geographical and political space to the incoming Taliban leading to demand for the implementation of the pre-colonial Nizam-e-adl (system of justice) (Waseem, 2011).

However, in the case of FATA, Wazir argues that underdevelopment and people's deprivation are due to the role of major powers, the civil and military bureaucracy of Pakistan and the ongoing militancy (Wazir, 2015). It is also believed that the military operations in FATA have led to the mass migration of locals to adjacent districts, which supplemented their miseries. Therefore, the area is in dire need of speedy reforms (ISS Seminar Report, 3127). One of the major steps taken by the government was the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 (Khan, 2018). This decision aimed to bring FATA under the legal and administrative framework of KP and remove the separate administrative structure of FATA, which was seen as a hindrance to its development and integration with the rest of the country. However, the fruits of the recent merger of FATA have yet to be seen, as it faces numerous challenges in terms of governance, security, and development. The area remains underdeveloped, and the people continue to suffer from poverty and deprivation due to the role of major powers, Pakistan's civil and military bureaucracy, and the ongoing militancy (Wazir, 2015). The military operations in FATA have also led to the mass migration of locals to adjacent districts, further adding to their miseries. Therefore, the area is in dire need of speedy reforms. The merger's success will depend on the government's ability to provide the region with the necessary resources and governance structure (ISS Seminar Report, 3127).

In addition, ideological indoctrination and political marginalization are also some of the factors in which the youth of these areas are more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. In this scenario, it is argued that the rise of ISIS in the region may prove to be an inspiration for militant organizations in such vulnerable areas, sharing a common ideology with the former.

National Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategy

The Army has conducted several counterterrorism operations in Pakistan since 9/11, including four large-scale and eight medium to small-scale operations against the Pakistani Taliban (Basit, 2015). Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in June 2014 in Tribal Areas, successfully dismantled militant organizations (Report, 2014). In addition, rehabilitation programs were initiated for indoctrinated youth under the supervision of the Army, with some programs supervised by Counter Terrorism Departments and others in collaboration with NGOs (Basit, 2015). The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was revitalized in 2010, and the National Counter-Terrorism Bill was passed in 2013 to support counterterrorism efforts (National Security Policy Report, 2014). The National Action Plan (NAP) was initiated after the attack on Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014 and outlines the government's counter-radicalism and counter-terrorism strategy (Khan, 2015). Military courts have convicted 31 hardcore terrorists out of 142 cases referred to them (ISPR Press Release, 2015), but there are concerns about implementing NAP in practice (Khan, 2015).

Pakistan has made significant efforts to combat violent extremism through military operations, rehabilitation programs, and legislative measures. The important aspects enshrined in NAP include; a counter-terrorism force, conviction of the terrorists through military courts and reformation of the criminal system. Moreover, it suggested that countering religious and sectarian terrorism, madaris reforms and scrutinizing of religious material are necessary to prevent the spread of hate material. NACTA was recommended to be strengthened and to make peace long-lasting. FATA reforms, the issue of Afghan refugees, Balochistan reconciliation and taking the Karachi Operation to its logical conclusion were enshrined in NAP (Khan, 2015).

Since the operations mentioned in the previous paragraph, Pakistan has continued to conduct military operations against militant groups. One such operation was Radd-ul-Fasaad, launched in 2017, which aimed to eliminate

remaining terrorist cells nationwide. This operation involved a coordinated effort between the army, paramilitary forces, and law enforcement agencies and successfully reduced the number of terrorist attacks in the country (Ashraf, 2020).

With regard to madaris registration, a uniform registration form was drafted in mutual agreement between the government and the madaris authorities. It was also decided that foreign financial aid would only go through the government to ensure proper auditing of their funds (*Express Tribune*, 2015). In Punjab, the government geo-tagged around 11000 madaris and recorded their sect-wise breakdown. Additionally, the military operation in Punjab was initiated after the brutal terrorist attack in Lahore.

FATA, which was a hub of terrorist organizations, witnessed 36 percent decreases in terror attacks by the year 2015 after the successful military offensive. However, parts of Shawal valley still needed to be cleared, thereby putting surveillance and vigilance level high in the agency (Pakistan Security Report, 2016). The Army's successes in countering terrorism were also acknowledged by the US Senators when General Sharif visited Washington DC (*Express Tribune*, 2015). Moreover, kidnapping for ransom and collecting funds by militant networks showed a downward trend. The government also approached Saudi authorities for a clampdown on organizations and individuals financing sectarian and banned outfits operating in Pakistan (Pakistan Express Tribune, 2016).

Despite these measures, certain quarters argue that the implementation of military components of NAP is more substantive than the measure relating to the civilian setup, which is thwarting the government's CVE efforts. Moreover, the government has also failed to ban self-proclaimed militant organizations and to block the sources of terror funding (Khan, 2015). The Supreme Court of Pakistan also expressed its concerns over the ineffectiveness of NACTA in eradicating terrorism in the country (*Express Tribune*, 2015).

However, a global study ranking Pakistan as third on the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) list, however, highlighted a decline in acts of violence; that is, from twenty-nine in 2012, the number of acts of violence dropped to twenty-three in 2013 by different groups. Those responsible for violent extremism are from Islamist groups and separatist movements (*Dawn*, 2015). Similarly, there was a positive trend in terms of the security situation in 2014, as there was a decrease in the incidents of violence. The number of

terrorist attacks came down by 30 percent as compared to 2013 (Pakistan Time Line, 2015).

However, despite these efforts, violent extremism remains a persistent problem in Pakistan. Militant groups continue to carry out attacks, particularly targeting religious minorities and security forces. Additionally, some critics argue that the government's approach to counter-terrorism has focused too heavily on military action and that more attention needs to be paid to addressing socioeconomic factors such as poverty and inequality that can contribute to radicalization (Ali, 2020).

In recent years, Pakistan has also faced challenges in its relations with neighboring Afghanistan, where the Taliban regained control after US forces withdrew. This has led to concerns about the potential for increased cross-border militancy and the impact on Pakistan's own security situation. The government has emphasized the importance of regional cooperation and dialogue in addressing these challenges (Chaudhry, 2021).

Overall, while Pakistan has made significant efforts to combat violent extremism and terrorism, the issue remains a complex and ongoing challenge. Success in addressing this issue will require a multifaceted approach addressing the immediate security threat and underlying social and economic factors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Pakistan has been facing the challenge of violent extremism and terrorism in the name of religion for decades. The roots of this violence can be associated with various factors, including the country's alliance with the West, sectarianism, and socio-economic inequalities. Despite the government's efforts to curb this violence, the pattern of disturbing events has continued, significantly impacting Pakistan's security situation.

Addressing violent extremism and terrorism requires a long-term commitment and collective efforts from all stakeholders at the policy level. The government's decision and strategy of zero tolerance towards terrorism and violent extremism is a positive step in the right direction. However, there is a need for innovative political, economic and educational strategies to prevent and counter-violence in the name of religion.

Based on the study, several recommendations can be made to counter violent extremism and terrorism in the name of religion. The federal government needs to make genuine efforts to make the smaller provinces equal partners in the political system. The implementation of NAP in letter and spirit can effectively choke terror outfits and cut off their financing sources, promote zero tolerance for militancy and hate speeches

against minority sects and non-Muslims, strengthen NACTA, and prevent the abuse of social media.

It is also essential to create a national counter-narrative to refute the extremist's narrative, and the text inciting hate and biases against sects of Islam and religious minorities should be removed from textbooks. Tangible measures need to be taken to revise and modernize and regulate madaris syllabus. Public education on Pakistan's diversity should be advanced by introducing courses in educational institutions on related issues.

The government should not allow the regrouping of banned outfits under a different name. To curb religious extremism and intolerance, the government should engage and support civil society organizations, academia, religious scholars, and media in their efforts to promote inter and intra-faith harmony. With these recommendations, Pakistan can hope to curb violent extremism and terrorism in the name of religion and move towards a more peaceful and tolerant society.

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