
Evolving the Dynamics of Violent *Takfir* in Pakistan (1980-2024)

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Abstract:

Takfir (declaring a believer as a non-believer) is an ideology based on an extremist interpretation of Islam. This ideological line represents a significant threat to almost all religious sects, including vulnerable communities within Muslim society and non-Muslim minorities. When discussing the Islamic world in general, at its extreme level, the *Takfir* poses a serious threat to the security of Muslim states. In case of Pakistan, this rigid ideology has fueled sectarian violence, targeted killings, and marginalization of minority communities and terrorist attacks on state's security forces.

Covering period of 1980-2024, the current study explores the historical evolution of ideological intolerance based on *Takfir* in Pakistan, its spread through sectarian organizations and religious extremist and *Takfiri* groups in three phases of post-Afghan Jihad, post-9/11 and post-Arab spring eras. The research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing primary sources, documents, and scholarly works to identify the ideological footings and means of the violent *Takfiri* proliferation. The findings highlight the role of Afghan Jihad, Islamization of Pakistan, and growing number of unregistered Madaris (Religious schools) and growth of fierce sectarian and extremist groups in spreading *Takfir* and the state's shaky response in the diffusing *Takfiri* narratives in aforementioned periods.

Furthermore, the study underlines the socio-political consequences of this ideology, including increased division, destruction of interreligious trust, and weakening national unity. Apart from military action, the paper concludes by presenting some policy recommendations to counter violent *Takfiri* ideology through

meaningful educational reforms, strengthened rules to stop hate speech, and fostering interfaith discourse.

This research contributes to understanding religious *Takfir* and its impact on the Pakistan's social environment and offers useful guidelines for the concerned authorities, religious leaders, and civil society to foil threats of violent *Takfir*; so that they may generate religious and sectarian harmony and secure the country.

Keywords: Pakistan, *Takfiri* Ideology, Minority Communities, Religious Extremism, National Harmony.

1. Introduction

The Takfir is an ideology based on an extremist interpretation of Islam that declares almost all other Muslim sects and similarly all non-Muslims (Jews and Christians) as Kafir (infidels or non-believers). Rooted in an extreme religious dogma erupted from early disputes in the Islamic history, the prominent emergence of *Takfir* occurred with the rise of harsh and non-tolerant religious movement of Muhammad Ibne Wahhab in Hijaz (Makka and Madina). Then, it was reborn in Pakistan after Islamization of Pakistan with arrival of violent sectarian and extremist groups to counter the Shiite political activism inspired by Islamic revolution of Iran. Later, *Takfir* got further progress in the country with emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The appearance of aggressive Pakistani *Takfiri* groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Pakistan based offshoots of foreign terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and ISIS has been contributory sources in raising this ideology in different phases. Since, the Pakistani extremist groups with anti-Pakistan ideology, have built their strong relations with the foreign violent religious organizations, the country continuously remained a safe anchorage for the terrorist activities. Although, several military operations were conducted to dismantle many of the violent extremist and

terrorist networks, the ideological reinforcements of these groups linger unaddressed.

2. Research Problem

The research problem concerning this topic is threats of *Takfiri* ideology to religious minorities, societal harmony and state's security. This study achieves its purpose by examining the emerging *Takfiri* ideology, its reasons and consequences in Pakistan through research questions about key drivers of persisting the rigid religious doctrines and their effects on religious minorities, national cohesion and military capabilities as an important aspect of the national security.

Covering period of 1980-2024, the research focuses on brutal extremist militancy based on the ideology of intolerance in Pakistan through studying development of *Takfir* in three phases of post-Afghan Jihad, post-9/11, and post-Arab Spring lies in its origins, targets and ideological evolution. Subsequently, a well-structured study of literature entails to lay the foundation for understanding the research context, identifying gaps, and framing its objectives, this study has been guided by examination of accessible scholarly work on *Takfiri* ideology and activities of *Takfiri* groups, extending threats to minorities and state's security in Pakistan.

This study addresses the unexplored aspects of the spreading violent *Takfiri* ideology in Pakistan and its threats that pose to social cohesion, religious minorities and state's security. Additionally, this author reviews the historical evolution, spread of *Takfiri* ideology and its adverse effects and consequences on the social and political aspects of the country and formulates actionable recommendations for policy makers, religious leaders and civil society.

3. Key Factors Contributing to Rise of *Takfir*

Surely, *Takfir* is rooted in early Islamic history, particularly during periods of internal conflict of initial Islamic caliphates. Nevertheless, in the case of rise of contemporary *Takfiri* ideology, many factors

have caused its development in different parts of the world, particularly in Pakistan. These causes can be outlined as follows:

1) Afghan jihad

The violent *Takfiri* ideology entered in Pakistan largely throughout Soviet Afghan War which was widely referred to as the Afghan Jihad and almost all *Takfiri* groups in Pakistan were ideologically inspired by the socio-political environment of this Jihad (1979–1989). Movement of militant groups through bordering areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Afghan Jihad and post-Afghan Jihad intensified the *Takfiri* ideology in the country. By declaring Jihad as a holy war against Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the foreign funded armed Afghan Mujahideen (fighters) fought against the Soviet's forces. Pakistan being a base camp for the Mujahideen, played very important role in the Afghan Jihad.¹ A large number of foreign fighters including groups from Arab world and Pakistan participated in the war and most of these fighters were influenced by the radical interpretation of Islam and many of them had *Takfiri* views against "secular" Muslims and secular governments in Muslim countries identified as un-Islamic. For example, many of important figures of Afghan Jihad including Ayman al-Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda and Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi of another radical group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad were adhered to *Takfiri* ideology.²

The religious military structure built in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union did not end, but it left a far-reaching impact on Afghan and Pakistani societies. In particular, it extended a wider opportunity for *Takfiri* ideologies to spread and flourish, accusing of being Muslims an infidel or an apostate and can be put to death as obligatory. Robert M. Cassidy, the American scholar of security studies highlights how the Afghan conflict fuelled by militant training and collaboration among the militant

groups, shifted religious militancy from Afghanistan to Pakistan and provided a new fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist ideologies, including *Takfir*.³ According to his scholarly work, during 2001-2002, soon after the origination of the international war on terror, the center of global jihad spawned by the foreign militant groups including Al-Qaeda aiming at recreation of transnational caliphate approximate the geographic scope of the former ottoman Empire at its peak, was relocated from Afghanistan to Pakistan's tribal areas. These groups established safe havens in the Pakistan's bordering regions for offering military training and other support to the religious extremist groups in commencing their terrorist activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Thus, during and after the jihad in Afghanistan an aggressive extremism appeared in that country and the former Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which later merged as part of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, became a hub for radicalism enthused by Takfir. In this context, there were already effects of the Islamization implemented by General Zia ul Haque's regime in the Pakistani society. Accordingly, the influx of radicalized Takfiri militants, combined with state-sponsored controversial Islamist policies in Pakistan, had already deepened sectarian divides and laid the groundwork for the emergence of extremist groups in the country.⁴

2) Islamization of Pakistan

Apart from the Afghan Jihad, General Zia-ul-Haq's controversial Islamization and his victimizing policies in the 1980s also paved the way for the rise of *Takfiri* groups. By imposing biased Islamic laws, Zia' regime generated a significant challenge to Shia population in Pakistan, endangering their basic religious rights that led to the emergence of a Shias' movement for acceptance of their jurisprudence. Subsequently, for countering the Shia's religio-political activism, Zia's regime triggered some Sunni *Deobandi* extremist figures, who in 1984 founded the Sipah-e-Sahaba, the radical group, demanding to declare Shias a "non-Muslim minority in the country".⁵ Hence,

in 1980s, it was a state strategy of then regime which encouraged sectarian *Takfiri* groups such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) to call Shias infidels and to target their professionals, religious congregations and mosques as an obligatory act.

In outline, along with effects of Afghan Jihad, the violent *Takfiri* sectarian groups emerged through Pakistan's stat policies, nurtured *Takfiri* ideologies in the country. These ideologies transformed militant groups into potent threats to Pakistan's national unification, social harmony and internal security. Legacy of the Islamization continues to influence the country's religious and political dynamics, posing challenges to minority community, state stability and interfaith cohesion. It was influence of the *Takfir* that in 1990s, SSP was also able to introduce anti-Shia legislation through a bill "Namus-e-Sahaba" (Honor of the Companions of the Prophet) with an intention to greatly limit the scope of popular Shia remembrances (Stanford University, n.d.).⁶ Another SSP's sponsored bill was prepared and presented in the Pakistani parliament in 2023.⁷

The Zia's policy of Islamization was center of attention of his government to establish an Islamic state influenced by a specific brand of Sharia law. According to the literature, Zia's religious policy was a tricky formula of Deobandism (*Deobandi* School of thoughts, a rigid branch of Sunni Islam) based on repackaged Wahhabism which along with some other factors contributed to shaping the militant ideologies such as Talibanization in Pakistan. Even, it was the Zia's strategy which enriched the ideology underpinning the practices of Taliban regime guided by *Deobandi* School in Afghanistan.⁸

3) Unregulated Madaris (Religious Schools)

Unregulated *Madaris* (religious schools) also played a vital role in

perpetuating *Takfiri* narratives in Pakistan. Particularly, the educational institutions, which can lead children towards both good and evil directions, serve a vital source of transformation in society. Recognizing the education's importance, a section of the literature clarifies, "Education has been leveraged to both radicalize and to de-radicalize young people".⁹ The influence of *Takfiri* groups expanded in the 1980s and 1990s because they exploited Pakistan's weak governance and religious sentiments of the masses through occupying newly built mosques and establishing *Madaris* through their supporters. Especially, they made proliferation of *Madaris* for promoting extremist views, hate speech and the accessibility of illegal arms in society. Their narratives gained traction, particularly in the tribal areas and other regions with poor state presence and underprivileged segments of the society, where they offered an alternate socio-religious order.

Initially, during the Afghan jihad, along with Pakistan's political and logistical support, foreign funds were supplied to build new *Madaris* in the country (Pakistan), supporting Afghan Mujahideen, but these activities continued even after the jihad. Proving foreign funds for Afghan jihad, an article bared that "Throughout the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and other countries funneled considerable funds through Pakistan for the creation of religious seminaries for Afghans in Pakistan's tribal areas, and many of these seminaries began promoting extremist agendas."¹⁰

After the Afghan war, due to existence of large number of the elements freed from the Afghan war, the implementation of controversial Islamic laws in Pakistan and the militarily skilled people of these *Madaris*, the environment of the country became militarized and extremist. In such an extremist atmosphere, *Takfir* and militancy certainly took roots, intensely affecting the political, social, and religious values of society. Hence, these arguments are directly aligned with the

works of some scholars claiming, “The radical *madrasas* preach a jihadist version of *Takfiri* ideology, viewing contemporary society as antithetical to Islamic values and consider the killing of fellow Muslims to be justified in their cause to purify the community of alien influences”.¹¹

The religious schools in Pakistan, specifically *Madaris* of *Deobandi* religious school were rapidly increased during and after Afghan Jihad. The religious clerics belonging to the *Deobandi* sect exploited the opportunity and increased number of their *Madaris* in the country.¹² Although, there is no reliable data about unregistered *Madaris* but according to Pakistan’s ministry of education, around three million students are apparently enrolled in 35000 *Madaris* out of which 26,160 *Madaris* are registered with under society act with the government.¹³ Although, *Deobandi* population in Pakistan less than *Brelvi* school of thoughts, another Sunni sect but 65% *Madaris* in the country are affiliated to the *Deobandi* order.¹⁴

Due to the distinct schooling system of these *Madaris* with promotion of extremism and militancy, the trained people of these institutions were mobilized in the extremist and terrorist groups at the national and the transnational levels. A research paper found that some *Madaris* were propagating extremism and were subjected to foreign and internal political influences.¹⁵ The article under discussion explores that the political and religious affiliation of *Madaris* to some extent, remains intact and their sectarian linkage is also deep rooted because of sectarian divisions among them, describing that foreign funding and interference in *Madaris* is another reason for sectarian violence.

4) Islamic Revolution at Iran

Beside the Afghan jihad, Iranian Islamic revolution was also a

great development in the region and growing Iranian influence was a matter of concern for some of the regional states. Thus, the Afghan conflict, rise of extremism and Islamization in Pakistan and Iranian revolution were extended with the competition for influence among the regional powers specially contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan with a large number of religious radical and extremist groups provided a fertile ground for clash of interests between the two countries. Many of these groups were inspired by fanatic interpretation of the religion and most of their members were part of Afghan jihad or were influenced by such radical ideology.

Accordingly, during the 1980s and 1990s, some of Pakistani *Deobandi* groups and their seminaries became under influence of extremist ideology and these extremist elements pushed them to a sectarian oriented *Takfiri* stance. This happened, in fact, as a response to growing influence of the Islamic revolution of Iran in Pakistan. Such *Deobandis* not only expressed their *Takfiri* views against the Shia Muslims in Pakistan, but they also opposed increasing influence of Iranian revolution by blasting its leadership. Particularly, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the founder of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) attempted to deter the Iranian influence in Pakistan.¹⁶

The SSP first appeared in Jhang city of Punjab province in 1980s and founder (Haq Nawaz) of this group was belonging to the *Deobandi* religious and political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. SSP's offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which was founded in 1990s, also explicitly embraced *Takfiri* ideology, focusing on declaring Iran a Shia Muslim country a "Kafir" state and justifying violence against Iranians based in Pakistan. Thus, SSP and LeJ not only raised slogans and held rallies against Iran in Pakistan while these groups were also involved in killings of Iranians including diplomats in the country in

1990s.¹⁷ The accessible literature further claimed that Iran also supported some Shia groups such as Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP), the anti-SSP group in its retaliatory strategy in Pakistan.¹⁸ Despite, SMP stopped its activities and the group was disappeared in 1990s but anti-Iran activities of SSP and LeJ are persisted in Pakistan.

Though, some portions of the literature claimed of Iranian help towards Pakistani Shias in their difficult times including people of Parachinar, the Shia dominated town located near Afghanistan border, but the literature also highlights that Iran just projects its own interests but did not help Pakistani Shias when Sunni extremists target them.¹⁹ The circumstances and events over the past four decades have demonstrated that *Takfiri* ideology has been used as an effective tactic to curb Iranian's influence in Pakistan as the anti-Iran extremist groups like SSP still continued their activities.

5) Geopolitical developments (2001–2010)

The geopolitical developments of 21st century also caused the modern appearances of *Takfiri* ideology. After September 11, 2001 (9/11), in response to Pakistan's support for US-led international operations in Afghanistan, Pakistani extremist groups influenced by *Takfiri* ideology expanded their operations against Pakistan Army, security installations, religious minorities and religious and public places in Pakistan. All this happened at a time when Pakistan was playing the role of a frontline state in America's war against terrorism. The country was participating in two fronts; on the one hand supported the US-led global coalition and on the other hand faced intense militancy influenced by *Takfir* within the country.

Pakistani militants strengthened ties with international and regional *Takfiri* groups including Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda during period between 2001 and 2010 and because of this,

their actions against the state were certainly accelerated. This was the period, when many of these foreign terrorist groups fled from Afghanistan due to international operations led by the US and became refugees in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Besides, providing logistic support and intelligence sharing in the war on terror, Pakistan also conducted a number of military operations against the foreign militants and their Pakistani associates based in Afghanistan and Pakistan's bordering tribal regions. The tribal regions, particularly North and South Waziristan, became safe havens for both foreign militants and their Pakistani allies.²⁰ Thus, the areas not only became a shelter for these groups, but they also manipulated this opportunity to be reorganized and continued their violent activities. Particularly, the inflow of radicalized Pakistani militant groups led to formation of the umbrella terrorist organization "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan-TTP" in 2007.²¹

The global terrorist narrative also influenced the Pakistani *Takfiri* groups during this period because Al-Qaeda operatives in the region provided ideological guidance, physical training, and financial resources to local militants. This collaboration was evident in joint operations and in the spread of propaganda justifying attacks on both domestic and international targets. Aforementioned period (2001-2010) saw *Takfiri* groups in Pakistan grow into a multifaceted threat because their activities were no longer confined to sectarian violence but also expanded to include anti-state insurgency and transnational terrorist agendas. This decade laid the foundation for enduring instability, as since then the state struggles to counter the ideological and operational resilience of these militant groups.

6) Post-Arab Spring (2011-2024)

Initially, on 17 December 2010, the anti-state protests were

triggered in Tunisia but later were extended to other countries of North Africa and Middle East. The protest moves in these regions, which were coined by some western commentators as “Arab Spring”, provoked large scale political and social unrest across the regions. Primarily, post Arab spring clashes between various political and religious groups and state’s forces in the different regions provided a productive base for the rise of violent *Takfiri* groups in Syria, Iraq and Yamen and other countries particularly Pakistan.

In 2013, a larger *Takfiri* militant organization “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gained significant ground in the backdrop of political protests in Iraq and Syria. Success of this group in declaring formation of "Islamic caliphate" inspired existing religious militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan maintaining similar *Takfiri* ideologies. Various splitting factions of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and others, intensified their activities under the influence of ISIS's rise. The groups and individuals inspired by ISIS’s narrative introduced ISIS’s regional chapter with title “Islamic State Khorasan Province-ISKP” soon after creation of its mother organization based in Iraq and Syria.

Subsequently, ISKP, which offered local *Takfiri* militants a larger platform to connect with and magnify their activities, launched the global style of elimination of ideologically opponents with assistance of the likeminded elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Especially, the Pakistani groups and individuals such as some likeminded members of TTP and LeJ who already viewed Shia Muslims, Sufi practitioners, and other religious minorities as misbelievers and considering them deserving of death, became effective instruments for this global terror organization involved in the various terrorist events such as suicide bombings and target killings in the country.

In the period from 2011 to 2024, with entry of ISKP in Pakistan,

this group and other the *Takfiri* groups including TTP and LeJ committed brutal attacks on civilians including Shia Muslims, Non-Muslims, mosques and other worship places, holy shrines and public spots in different areas including Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Tribal Areas and Gilgit-Baltistan. The *Takfiri* terrorist used tactics of suicide bombings, bomb blasts and target killings.

Apart from civilians, 5,673 security forces personnel have lost their lives in terrorist attacks, most of which were committed by *Takfiri* elements associated with TTP and ISPK in this period (2011-2024).²²

7) Lack of Anti-Takfir Strategy Amidst Weak Governance

The state carried out military operations against terrorism and terrorist groups in the last forty years, but there have been no significant soft measures to eliminate the *Takfiri* ideology, which may be due to the unstable political system of the state or other priorities of the governments. Moreover, when the state itself supported certain *Takfiri* groups such as SSP for political purposes, it was not a smooth task to control *Takfir* in the country. It was one of the reasons for the rise of Takfir in Pakistan that state supported some sectarian *Takfiri* groups.²³

It was the era of 1980s, when Zia's regime introduced Islamization, this regime patronized the groups including SSP, involved in declaring Shia a *Kafir*. Later Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), which emerged in 1990s after the assassination of Jhangvi holds an ideology that promote more violence against Shias and its members such as deceased Riaz Basra often had been operated underground.²⁴In this era, the grip of the state remained weak and even some state's elements continued to patronize the *Takfiri* elements.

In post-9/11, the *Takfiri* groups such TTP having connection with foreign terrorist organization appeared in Pakistan's

scenario and state engaged a large number of its military forces to counter terrorism. The military operations continued in the further periods. In the post Arab spring, the Pakistan's state formally declared grown militancy as a new enemy of the country. Pakistan deployed hundreds of thousands of military forces for the broader military operations like Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) aimed to dismantle militant networks inspired by the *Takfiri* ideology in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.²⁵ But the *Takfiri* terrorists continued their violent activities due to their ideological nature, which thrives the local grievances and sectarian divides.

Additionally, the complicated borders with Afghanistan allowed *Takfiri* militants associated with various networks to regroup and operate transnationally. Hence, the local sectarian *Takfiri* groups in Pakistan sustained their growth in the post-Arab Spring era by establishing connections with global terrorist networks like ISIS. These groups, empowered by regional instability and ideological reinforcement continue to pose a significant threat to Pakistan's security and social cohesion. Addressing this challenge requires not only military action but also soft action based on a comprehensive strategy to counter the extremist narratives and foster inter-sectarian harmony. The weak governance along with the poor efforts for national harmony has been also considered an important factor that caused the wider spread of *Takfiri* ideology in Pakistan.

Another factor which can be considered as a part of state's weak governance is misuse of social media for expanding narratives of *Takfiri* groups. Due to ineffective measures of the state to control fake propaganda and unlawful narratives through communications links, the *Takfiri* groups are able to amplify their narratives among vulnerable populations, particularly youth. Besides the physical interpersonal communication, the easy access of the extremists to the cyber space, the online communication became a quicker and speedy facilitator for enhancement of radicalization of the society.²⁶

The religious and religio-political extremists and terrorists use social media platforms to spread their message as according to a report, for instance, nearly two-thirds of extremists (65 %) use Facebook to communicate their views and message.²⁷ Without curtailing freedom of expression of the masses, the state of Pakistan requires to adopt policy to control the use of social media by the *Takfiri* groups.

4. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of *Takfir*

The rise of violent religious groups influenced by *Takfir* in Pakistan can be understood in light of 'social movement theory' and 'rebellion concept'. Social movement theory explains how grievances, mobilization of resources, and ideological framing intersect to fuel the rise of militant groups. According to literature on this theory, the social movements are created when social conflict are transformed to political action which is translated through social factors where networks, organizations and mass media are particularly important.²⁸ In case of *Takfiri* activism in Pakistan, Ideological beliefs of the *Takfiri* groups become a resource for mobilization of these groups to show extremist behavior towards others and commit violence in the society.

The concept of *Takfir*, which involves declaring other Muslims as apostates, provides the ideological foundation that justifies violence against perceived groups within and outside the Muslim community.²⁹ Hence, the debated doctrine of religious extremist or *Takfiri* groups, believing in declaring other as apostate and killing them obligatory, can be considered among the reasons for the terrorist attacks committed by Pakistani *Takfiri* extremists.³⁰ In post-Afghan Jihad, this ideology was rooted in sectarianism, while in post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring eras, it expanded to include anti-state and global *Takfiri* narratives aiming at gaining political interests through

implementation of idea of a universal caliphate. Additionally, the concept of 'rebellion' offers to assess a political uprising motivated by greed and grievance, using violence to break down the power structure of society and turn it to an anarchic state.³¹ The 'rebellion' theory which explains insurgent violence as an attempt to challenge state authority, is appropriate to analyze assaults of *Takfiri* militants on Pakistan military forces, enforcing state sovereignty and resisting insurgencies.

This study employs a qualitative approach, using historical-comparative analysis to trace the evolution of *Takfiri*-inspired extremist groups in Pakistan during the three key periods: post-Afghan Jihad, post-9/11, and post-Arab Spring eras. It draws on secondary data sources, including policy reports, academic articles, and militant groups' statements, to analyze the socio-political contexts and ideological shifts in each era. Key variables include sectarianism, transnational jihadism and Islamization, and anti-state militancy, which are examined to identify patterns of growth and transformation among the extremist groups.

The analysis focuses on the role of terrorist groups, their extremist narratives and state policies in shaping the trajectory of *Takfir* in Pakistan. For example, post-Afghan Jihad groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi focused on anti-Shia sectarian conflict, while post-9/11 groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), achieving connections with Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda targeted state institutions along with the sectarian violence. In the post-Arab Spring period, the rise of ISIS and its affiliates introduced a transnational dimension to *Takfir*, influencing local groups and international elements to adopt more violent and expansive agendas. This multi-era analysis provides insights into the adaptive strategies and ideological continuity of these groups.

5. Consequences of *Takfir* in Pakistan

Scholars argue that *Takfiri* ideology not only targeted some Muslim sects like Shia and non-*Takfiri* Sunni Muslims, it also targeted non-Muslim religious minorities, like Christians, Sikhs and Hindus. Moreover, it also extremely affected Pakistan's solidarity, stability and harmony; as some *Takfiri* groups declared all authorities in Pakistan to be illicit. For example, TTP having support from both Pakistani and foreign terrorist networks, not only affirms Shia a *Kafir* (non-believer) but getting stimulation from Al-Qaeda, it also calls the authorities in the Muslim land (Pakistan) to be illicit and apostate, to include their civilian employees and military forces and any persons collaborating or engaging with those authorities.³² This narrative of TTP has been verified by many portions of the literature. Likewise, a scholar describes that TTP considers "any Pakistani standing up for its country's traditions, constitution, and values as infidel (*Kafir*) punishable by death".³³ When comes to ISIS's narrative of *Takfir*, this ideology diverged from the *Wahhabi* doctrine, and the group uses it a tool to rally its members.³⁴ As members of ISIS systematically exploited ideology of *Takfir* or *Takfir* in their extremist doctrines³⁵, many violent groups follow this ideology in Pakistan.

Primarily, 1980s was the period of emergence of sectarian violence in Pakistan with declaring Shia a *Kafir* and assassination of prominent Shia clerics and leaders. Allama Syed Arif Hussain Al-Hussaini was among the key Shia figures within Pakistan's Shia community, who was assassinated in Peshawar in August 1988. Although, involvement of SSP in death of Al-Hussaini was not formally proved but through his statements in public, then leader of this sectarian organization (SSP) endorsed this murder.

In 1990s, with rise of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and further escalation of sectarian violence, LeJ and SSP increasingly targeted Shia professionals, including doctors, lawyers, academics, pilgrims and prayers in different areas of Pakistan,

particularly Karachi and Lahore witnessed killings hundreds of them. For example, on January 11, 1998, in Mominpura Cemetery in Lahore, LeJ gunmen attacked Shia worshippers, killing 25 people and injuring several others during a funeral.³⁶ This was the period (1990s), Shia population in different areas including members of the Hazara Shia community in Quetta were attacked by LeJ's militants and Iranian nationals working in the cities of Lahore and Multan were also killed by this terrorist group.³⁷

Then TTP, inspired by *Takfiri* ideology, not only ratified anti-religious minorities campaign of sectarian extremist groups but also declared a war on the Pakistani state, labelling it apostate for supporting US-led war against Afghan Taliban. Unlike earlier groups that primarily focused on violent sectarianism, the TTP extended its fierce actions to the Pakistani military, intelligence agencies, and police forces. A critical development during this period was the adoption of suicide bombings and mass-casualty attacks as a primary tactic. This group launched several high-profile attacks, including the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007.³⁸

The year 2009 was a terrible year in the context of threats to Pakistan's military security as TTP stepped up its terror campaigns against the military forces in that year. Police training academy near Lahore was attacked by TTP, killing eight recruits and trained security personnel on March 30, 2009³⁹ and killing at least 17 people in a bomb blast through a truck loaded with heavy explosive material at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar on June 09, 2009.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the General Headquarters (GHQ) of Pakistani Military in Rawalpindi was attacked by the TTP's militants on October 10, 2009, killing 10 security personnel including officers⁴¹, followed by death of 100 people mostly women and children and wounding 200 others in another attack by a massive bomb

detonate in a crowded commercial market in Peshawar on October 28, 2009.⁴² Attacks on state's security installations signaled a significant shift in *Takfiri* strategies, aiming to undermine the state's authority and create widespread fear among the security forces, protecting the state from internal and external threats. In addition to actions against state security institutions, *Takfiri*-inspired groups during this period also intensified violent actions against supporters of religious minorities and followers of other sects including carrying out violent attacks on Shia Muslims. The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) at first continued to harm Shia interests and committed their massacres on its own but after the TTP came into being, LeJ started co-ordinately working with this group.

In the year 2010, TTP conducted many major brutal acts in Pakistan, killing civilians and security personnel. The terrorists killed at least 15 security personnel in a suicide attack, a gun attack, and a helicopter crash in Tirah Valley of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province on February 10, 2010.⁴³ On March 8, 2010, 45 people were dead and over 100 injured when twin suicide bombings targeted military vehicles at R.A. Bazar Lahore.⁴⁴ Many other terrorist attacks against the military and police personnels and civilians were committed by TTP in different areas in 2010. Sectarian terrorist groups such a Lashkar-e-Jhangvi also continued their violent activities against the people from opponent groups including Shia and Sufi Muslims.

It was reported that Sufi shrine known as Data Darbar in Lahore was targeted through suicide bombings committed by TTP's activists on July 1, 2010, killing at 42 and injuring over 175.⁴⁵ On October 7, 2010, TTP in another devastating suicide attack targeted the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, the largest commercial and port city of Pakistan, killing at least nine people and injuring over 60 others.⁴⁶ These shrines as spiritual and traditional places always pack with a large

number of believers and followers for offering prayers and local folk artists for presenting traditional music and local arts and volunteers for distributing food.

In 2011, twin suicide attacks claimed by TTP on a centre of para-military forces in Charsada near Peshawar, killing above 80 trainee security personnel and injuring 120 others on May 13, 2011⁴⁷ and in another attack by same group in association with Al-Qaeda on Pakistan Navy Station (PNS) - Mehran (the Naval Military base) in Karachi on May 22, 2011, at least 10 security personnel were killed and 15 others injured.⁴⁸

Furthermore, a TTP's targeted attack in collaboration with sectarian terrorists of LeJ on a bus carrying Shia pilgrims in a remote locality of Mastung in Balochistan killed 26 people and six more Shias died in another attack in Quetta city in same province on September 20, 2011, exemplifying the terrorist group's sectarian agenda.⁴⁹

The period from 2001 to 2010 witnessed continuity of TTP's brutal moves along with extreme activities of sectarian groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Sipah-e-Sahaba persisted to declared Shia-Muslims as "*Kafir*" (infidel) and *Wajabul Qatl* (Obligatory to be killed) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and TTP remained involved in the brutal actions against civilians including religious minorities and Shia Muslims, common people and security forces as well. Spots like government buildings, centres of security forces, crowd public places, commercial markets and mosques of Muslims' sects and temples of non-Muslims were targeted in the attacks extended beyond tribal areas into urban centres like Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar. As the timeframe (2001-2011) of this section is crucial in the context of terrorist attacks on the state's security institutions, the statistics illustrate that the deaths of security forces due to terrorist

attacks, most of which were perpetrated by groups following *Takfiri* ideology, reached 3,381 during the period.⁵⁰

With the entry of ISIS in Pakistan terrorist environment in the post Arab spring, not only this group while other *Takfiri* groups such as TTP and LeJ continued their violent activities. For example, on January 10, 2013, the two suicide blasts at the Alamdar Road area in city of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan resulted in over 79 deaths of Shia-Hazara community and left nearly 180 injured and on February 16, 2013, in a persistence of the sectarian violence over 92 more from same community were killed and nearly 121 were injured in another devastating explosion in the Hazara Town area of Quetta.⁵¹ These atrocities committed by LeJ, targeting the Shia-Hazara community, highlighted the lasting threat to Shia Muslims in the region during this period.

ISKP in its broader terror move targeted a Sufi shrine namely the Shah Noorani in remote area of Hub of Balochistan province on November 12, 2016, through a local suicide bomber, causing death of at least 52 people and injuring above 100 others.⁵² On February 16, 2017, ISKP terrorists also bombed the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, another famous Sufi figure buried in Sehwan town in Sindh province, killing at least 75 people, including women and children, and injuring over 200 others.⁵³ Attacks on these shrines, which are distinguished spiritual places for both Sunnis and Shias, highlighted the vulnerability of spiritual and religious sites and traditional and cultural places to extremist violence in Pakistan. In this period, threats also continued to security forces, as TTP through its offshoot "*Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*" steered a suicide bombing near the Punjab provincial Assembly in Lahore on February 13, 2017, killings 13 people, including two high ranking police officers and injuring over 85 others.⁵⁴

The *Takfiri* terrorists also did not spare the political figures as

an election's rally organized by the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) was attacked by ISKP with a suicide bomber in Mastung town of Balochistan on July 13, 2018, killing 149 people including Siraj Raisani, a BAP's leading figure and leaving many others injured.⁵⁵ For targeting business communities and civilians in crowded areas, on November 23, 2018, a bombing as a part of the ongoing violence perpetrated by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) at a marketplace in the Orakzai district of Pakistan killed at least 32 people and 31 injured.⁵⁶ As for targeting innocent Sunni Muslims, on January 31, 2020, *Hizbul Ahrar*, another breakaway faction of TTP carried out a suicide attack on a Sunni mosque in Quetta, killing 13 worshippers including a senior police officer and injuring 20 others.⁵⁷

On January 3, 2021, ISKP claimed abduction of eleven Shia-Hazara coal miners and then killing them in a remote mountainous area in Machh locality of Balochistan.⁵⁸ On March 4, 2022, a devastating suicide terrorist attack carried out by ISKP on a mosque belonging to the Shia community at Kucha Risaldar neighborhood in Peshawar during Friday prayers that killed at least 56 people and injured 194 others.⁵⁹ In a TTP's deadly suicide attack on a Sunni Mosque located at a high-security area within the police headquarters in Peshawar killed at least 101 people mostly policemen, and injured over 200 others on January 30, 2023.⁶⁰

Furthermore, gunmen opened fire on two separate convoys of Shia pilgrims travelling with police escorts in Kurram district on November 22, 2024, resulting in at least 43 deaths and several injured.⁶¹ Although the attack is reported to have been carried out by unknown persons but Kurram District, which shares a border with Afghanistan, has frequently been targeted by banned terrorist groups such as TTP.⁶² Apart from civilians, religious minorities, 5,673 security forces personnel have lost their lives in terrorist activities, most of which were committed

by *Takfiri* elements associated with TTP and ISPK in this period (2011-2024).⁶³

6. Results and Discussion

In the above sections of this research article, this author analyzed the terrorist activities and sectarian violence attributed to the *Takfiri* groups such as SSP, LeJ, TTP and ISPK by dividing the study in the different eras between decades of 1980s and 2000s. The research has three partitions of the analytical timeframe—1980-2000, 2001-2010, and 2011-2024—each evaluated separately, with presenting a whole analytical overview.

Post-Afghan Jihad *Takfir* (1980s-1990s) in Pakistan emerged from the radicalization of militants during the Soviet Afghan war and controversial Islamization of General Zia ul Haque regime, with appearance of groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, targeting Shia Muslims and other sects domestically driven by sectarian hatred and influenced by rigid *Takfiri* ideology.

Post-9/11 violent *Takfiri* militancy (2001 onwards) intensified as militant groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) supported by Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda adopted *Takfiri* ideology, declaring Pakistani security forces as infidels and targeting them (for Pakistan's aligning with the US-led War on Terror), along with continuation of sectarian violence. Post-Arab Spring *Takfir* (2011 onwards) drew inspiration from the rise of groups like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its associations, marked by brutal tactics and spreading supra-state radical religious ideology. This period saw an escalation in *Takfir* representing the global terrorist alignment aimed at labelling the Pakistani state, military, and moderate Muslims as infidels, alongside intensified violence against smaller Muslim communities and religious minorities.

The four and half decades from the 1980 to 2024 has been distinct due to some significant geopolitical and socio-religious shifts such as Jihad of Afghanistan, Islamization of Pakistan, anti-Shia sectarianism and various waves of anti-state terrorism. In the first decade (1980-1990), due to the Afghan Jihad in Afghanistan, not only the proliferation of weapons occurred in Pakistan, but also the ongoing Islamization of the country greatly encouraged fundamentalism and *Takfiri* ideas. In the process of Islamization, General Zia ul Haque introduced strict religious laws, during which anti-Shia elements and extremist groups advanced their activities.

In the same decade, Sipah-e-Sahaba came into existence, calling Shia infidels and their killing obligatory. Islamic revolution of Iran was another event of this era which also caused irritation of anti-Iran *Takfiri* groups such as SSP and LeJ, the sectarian groups. Later, in the next decade (1990-2000), another group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) emerged to support extremist sectarian and *takfiri* ideologies, causing widespread violence against Shia Muslims and Iranian citizens including diplomats based in Pakistan.

The aggressive and violent actions carried out by these groups were included spreading extreme dislike, bombings and target killings. The brutal acts against Shia Muslims and spreading hatred towards Shias among the Sunni Muslims remains as their mission. Meanwhile, in this period non-Muslim minorities like Christians were also targeted by the *Takfiri* groups.

Similarly, in the period from 2001 to 2010, Pakistan was heavily affected by horrible acts of extremists having connections with Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda's members who were facing the large-scale US-led military operations in Afghanistan after the 9/11 events. The TTP, which was established by the Pakistani supporters of Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda, not only harmed the interests of the state by

attacking on the security forces but also targeted the Shia Muslims and non-Muslim minorities through its associates within the sectarian groups such as LeJ.

As the extremism and sectarian violence had been deep roots in Pakistan even before the TTP came into being, this group easily initiated attacks on the civilians and security forces, posing threats to Pakistan's internal security. The TTP therefore emerged as a dangerous non-state actor in destabilizing the state and launching insurgency against the state through terrorism, kidnappings, assassinations, suicide attacks and strikes on security forces. Meanwhile, the LeJ and SSP also continued their violent sectarian campaigns targeting Shia Muslims and religious minorities, while some elements of the group joined or aligned with the TTP for engaging in confrontation against the security forces of the state.

Terrorist attacks on military and police centers and crowded public areas were continued during the decade, which was a sign of enlarged militancy and sectarian violence. The state was unable to stop or thwart the activities of these groups, which increased the security challenges faced by the nation. Despite the extending threats of the extremism, the state's response to the *Takfiri* ideology has repeatedly been inconsistent and irresponsible.⁶⁴

From 2011 to 2024, *Takfiri* terrorist groups have increased their violent activities in the backdrop of the advancing ideology of intolerance and the ongoing regional dynamics. In this era, the turmoil of Arab Spring in Middle East, gave birth to a new wave of religious extremism by appearance of more religious extremist groups, particularly Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inspired by the *Takfiri* ideology. This tendency left a deep impact on Pakistan and Afghanistan, which were already disposed to violent extremism based on *Takfiri* ideology by posing threats to Shia Muslims, non-Muslim minorities and

state's security forces. Then, with the defection of Afghan Taliban, TTP and Al-Qaeda's militants active in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the regional branch of ISIS was established under the name Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in 2014. This chapter of ISIS quickly got attention of the Pakistani extremists; *Takfiri* individuals and groups. A number of *Takfiri* elements of LeJ and TTP declared their allegiance to ISKP, which brutally picked goals and launched attacks on Shia Muslims, non-Muslim minorities and security apparatus.

Despite several military operations aimed at destroying TTP's strongholds in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, the militant group having constant suicide bombings; killings of civilians and security forces, stayed a dreadful force in this period. Consequently, the extremist and violent passages adopted by SSP, LeJ, TTP and ISKP paid to predominant uncertainty in the different areas of the country, particularly Shia dominated zones and non-Muslim localities and tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The lasting challenge of sectarian violence, religious extremism and militant insurrection attributed to the *Takfiri* groups in the scenario of domestic and regional political dynamics and ideological influences was surfaced in period from 2011 to 2024.

In the whole of 1980-2024, SSP, LeJ, TTP and ISKP achieved violent sectarian and terrorist campaigns against the aforementioned targets (Shia Muslims, non-Muslim communities and security forces), triggering an extensive fear and uncertainty throughout the country. With the formation of SSP and LeJ and their operational activities through spreading *Takfir* and propaganda against the opponent sects, the country remained under sectarian uncertainty in 1980s-1990s, and the brutal rise of the TTP was proved through terrible acts of this group such a suicide bombings and killings of civilians and security forces in 2001-2010. Besides, continuation of violent

activities of SSP, LeJ and TTP fueled by both internal and regional dynamics, the dreadful entrance ISKP further enhanced the threats of violence to civilians and security forces in 2011-2024.

7. Conclusion

The examination of sectarian violence and severe extremist activities executed by SSP, LeJ, TTP, and ISKP in Pakistan in the phases of 1980-2000, 2001-2010, and 2011-2024, verifies the insistent and growing threats of the *Takfiri* and extremist ideologies in the country. The endless violence started from sectarian militancy by local sectarian groups such as SSP and LeJ in the aftermath of Afghan Jihad and Islamization of Pakistan and threats to Shia Muslims and non-Muslims and hateful reaction of *Takfiri* groups to Iranian revolution caused emergence of regional and international terrorist networks such as TTP and ISKP involved in civilians and military forces' killings, badly impacting human and economic security, national fabric and religious harmony of the country. Despite various military operations and counterterrorism efforts, the state's failure to completely dismantle these terrorist networks has allowed their *Takfiri* ideologies to persist in the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

The research identified historical influence of *takfiri* and vicious sectarian movements, inspiration from the radical ideology of Afghan jihad, state's sponsored Islamization, rigid curriculums of some of unregulated Madaris, connections of foreign terrorist organizations with local *takfiri* terrorists, weak governance, and misuse of social media for *Takfir* and polarized society as the reasons for growth of violent *takfiri* groups in Pakistan. As for impact of evolution of *Takfiri* groups, Pakistan perceives the violent activities of *Takfiri* groups in the country heightened sectarian violence, persecution of religious

minorities, damages of interfaith harmony, radicalization of youth and destabilization of society in many parts of the country, fear at worship places, weakening national unity, threats to traditional political interest and democratic values, economic crisis, problem of law and order, deteriorating state's security and stability and increasing refugees and migration within country and out of country.

The prevention of the violence erupted due to *Takfiri* ideology requires a comprehensive approach to address not only the immediate security challenges posed by extremist groups, but it also needs to handle the socio-political and ideological factors, enabling country to progress in these extents. Strengthening interfaith harmony, intersect connections, introducing educational reforms including reforming *Madaris'* syllabus to counter extremist narratives, strengthening rules to stop hate speech and fostering interfaith discourse, advancing an affective governance, providing social justice to the deprived communities and offering useful academic and health services at the grassroots are essential for mitigating the underlying causes of violent sectarianism and religious extremism.

Additionally, enhancing intelligence coordination and regional cooperation among the state's security institutions such as police and military forces can play a crucial role in curbing internal and transnational support existed for *Takfiri* groups. A broader strategy that combines counterterrorism with socioeconomic reforms is imperative to break the cycle of sectarian and *Takfiri* violence and ensure long-term stability in Pakistan.

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