
“Weeding Out the Heretics”: Sectarianism in Pakistan

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The ongoing war in Iraq has drawn the world’s attention to sectarian violence between Islam’s Sunni and Shi’a sects. Terrorists operating under orders from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the now-dead leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq who proclaimed himself the “Slaughterer of Infidels,” have bombed Shi’a mosques and killed hundreds of Shi’a in attacks on civilian targets.

The American military presence in Iraq has made the Sunni-Shi’a sectarian rivalry relevant to the Western world and resulted in stories of intra-Muslim sectarian violence finding play in the Western media. But Shi’a-Sunni violence did not start in Iraq, nor was Zarqawi its initiator. Pakistan has been a sectarian battleground for almost twenty years. The International Crisis Group pointed out in a report released in 2005 that “Religious sectarianism is, in fact, the principal source of terrorist activity in Pakistan.”¹

The Sunni-Shi’a rivalry goes back to Islam’s earliest times. The sects were born as political factions, soon after the death of Islam’s founder, Prophet Mohammed. The Sunnis believed in choosing Mohammed’s successor through the consensus of the majority of believers. The Shi’a considered Mohammed’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, to be the Prophet’s rightful heir.

The Sunnis founded the *Khilafa* (or Caliphate), which changed hands many times and ended only in 1924 with the fall of the Turkish Ottoman empire. The Shi’a adhere to the notion of the Imamate, which passed on to Ali’s sons and direct descendants. Mainstream Shi’a are known as “twelvers” because they believe that the twelfth and final imam, Mahdi, is still living but in hiding; he will appear before the Day of Judgment to establish justice on earth. Other Shi’a sub-sects, such as the Ismailis led by the Paris-based Aga Khan, have a different line of imams from among Ali’s descendants and believe in a contemporary living Imam.

Throughout history Shi’a and Sunnis have clashed as often as they have cooperated. But until now the sectarian conflict in Islam had been far less brutal than, say, the sectarian wars in Christian history. One reason for that might be that Sunnis overwhelmed the

Shi'a in numbers during the period of Islam's expansion. Even today, less than 15 percent of the world's estimated 1.4 billion Muslims are Shi'a. They are a majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain and a plurality in Lebanon and Azerbaijan.

In contemporary times the Sunni majority in the Muslim world largely ignored the Shi'a until the 1979 Islamic revolution brought Shi'a clerics to power in Iran. Authoritarian governments in several Muslim countries started worrying about the prospect of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution spreading through their lands. Countries with mixed Sunni and Shi'a populations started looking upon their Shi'a compatriots as potential revolutionaries and troublemakers. The Iranians' rhetoric of exporting the Islamic revolution did not help, nor did the war between Sunni-led Iraq and Shi'a Iran. The conservative Arab Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, funded fellow Sunni Saddam Hussein in an effort to contain the Iranian revolution, notwithstanding Hussein's previously proclaimed aversion to religion.

Pakistan, then under the Islamizing military regime of General Ziaul Haq, was also affected by the sectarianism brewing in the Middle East. Fifteen percent of Pakistan's population is Shi'a. The country borders Iran and has a rich Persian heritage. But Pakistan's ruling elite is close to Saudi Arabia. Under Ziaul Haq, Pakistan even provided troops for the protection of the Saudi royal family in return for generous Saudi economic assistance.

Soon after the Iranian revolution Pakistan became the staging ground for the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan. Pakistan's intelligence service channeled around two billion dollars in covert American aid to anti-Communist guerilla fighters in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states also provided billions of dollars for the Afghan war, which was fought under the banner of Islamist ideology. Radical Islamists from all over the world poured into Pakistan to join the Afghan *jihad*. Some of these radicals morphed into al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups currently confronting the West.

Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was a secular Shi'a lawyer who demanded a separate homeland for India's Muslims that he said would not be a theocracy. And Pakistan started out on a non-sectarian track. Its first law minister was a Hindu; its foreign minister belonged to the Ahmadiyya sect, which opposes violent *jihad*. Over the years, however, Pakistan has become a major center of Islamist extremism. A 1974 amendment to Pakistan's constitution declared the Ahmadis (followers of the Ahmadiyya sect) non-Muslims. Subsequent legislation forbade them from describing themselves as Muslim or from publicly using Muslim terminology or religious symbols even when their religion required them to do so. Religious minorities, such as Hindus and Christians, complain of discrimination and have periodically been subjected to violent attacks by extremists. The disproportionate influence wielded by fundamentalist groups in Pakistan is the result of the state sponsorship of such groups.

Jinnah embraced religious symbolism just before Pakistan's independence in an effort to rally India's Muslims to his cause. His successors relied even more on Islam as a

national unifier, and the process of casting Pakistan as an Islamic ideological state intensified further under the military rule that began in 1958. Through its complex post-independence history, Pakistanis have debated vehemently whether Pakistan was created to be an Islamic state or a secular state with a Muslim majority. General Ziaul Haq hoped to end this debate once and for all. He proceeded to Islamize Pakistan's laws, involved clerics in legislation and appointed Quranic scholars as judges.

Ziaul Haq's Islamization empowered the Sunni clergy and antagonized the country's Shi'a minority. When the Shi'a demanded protection of their religious rights, Ziaul Haq and his intelligence services saw their protests as a sign of potential Iranian subversion. The Iranians were, most likely, assisting Pakistan's Shi'a with money, and Ziaul Haq invited the Saudis to help Sunni sectarian groups.

The Afghan *jihad* had already resulted in the free flow of arms and military training for Sunni Islamists. Soon, some of these Sunni militants were attacking the Shi'a in an effort to purify Pakistan of their "heterodoxy." Shi'a militias emerged to fight the Sunni extremists with similar tactics. During the last twenty five years, nearly two thousand people have been killed, and thousands more maimed, in attacks by zealots of the rival sects in Pakistan. Official Figures are not available for the period 1980-1989 but deaths by sectarian violence during that phase are estimated at several hundred. Between 1989 and 2004, 688 people were killed in 1,837 reported incidents of sectarian conflict. In 2005 sixty-two incidents resulted in 160 deaths, and in the first three months of 2006, six incidents occurred in which 136 people reportedly died.²

Sectarian Identities

In Pakistan's formative years the sectarian affiliation of the country's leaders did not seem to matter. The Pakistani nation accepted in stride the nominal Shiism of Jinnah and several of his leading colleagues. In many cases no one was sure whether a particular official was Shi'a or Sunni as there was no official need to state one's sectarian affiliation. But in 2004, in a sign that times had changed, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz found himself compelled to declare publicly "I am a Sunni Muslim" to counter rumors that he was an Ahmadi.³

According to Syed Vali Nasr, sectarianism in Pakistan is "organized and militant religious-political activism whose specific aim is to safeguard and promote the sociopolitical interests of the particular Muslim sectarian community, Shiite or Sunni, with which it is associated." Pakistani sectarianism has its own "discourse of power," which "promises empowerment" of a particular sect "in tandem with greater adherence to Islamic norms in public life." Sectarian Islamist organizations hope to achieve greater power and greater piety "through mobilization of the sectarian identity in question and the marginalization of the rival sectarian community, largely through prolific use of violence."⁴

Ninety-six percent of Pakistan's 150 million people are Muslims. Sunnis are estimated to account for 75 to 85 percent of the country's Muslim population, and Shiites are believed to number between 15 and 25 percent.⁵ One must remember, however, that like the term 'Muslim,' the terms 'Sunnī' and 'Shī'a,' 'Shī'i' or 'Shiite' encompass groups with widely differing views. There are many Shi'a sects, such as the Ismailis, the Bohras and the Ithna Asharis (twelvers). Sunnis in South Asia include such groups as the Sufi-inspired Barelvīs, the puritanical Deobandīs, and the Wahhabi-like Ahl-e Hadith.

The Barelvīs are traditionalist Sunni Muslims who describe themselves as Ahl-e Sunnat wa-al Jamaat ('followers of the Prophet's way and that of the majority of the believing community'). They trace their origin to Ahmed Raza Khan of Bareilly (1855-1921) who opposed Wahhabi ideas as they gained ground in the India-Pakistan subcontinent. For the Barelvīs, custom-laden religious practices and the intercession of Sufi saints are an integral part of Islam, not the innovation the Wahhabis denounce in describing the syncretism of South and Central Asian Islam.⁶

Included in the Sunni groups is Jamaat-e-Islami, a revivalist organization similar to the Arab world's Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1941 by Maulana Abu Ala Maududi, Jamaat-e-Islami considers itself the vanguard of the Islamic Revolution and is focused primarily on the creation of an Islamic state. The Jamaat-e-Islami initially shied away from being identified as Sunni because, for them, the central issue was the political struggle between "Islam and un-Islam." Maududi reinterpreted Shi'a doctrines in an attempt to bring the Shi'a within the broader discourse of Islamist politics, and Jamaat-e-Islami welcomed Iran's Islamic revolution despite its Shi'a foundations. In 1995 Jamaat-e-Islami played a leading role in unifying Pakistan's Islamist political parties under the umbrella of the Milli Yikjahati Council (Council of National Unity)—the MYC—in an effort to end Shi'a-Sunni sectarian violence. It is interesting to note that all the groups in the MYC are unified in their antagonism toward Ahmadīs.

The Deobandīs grew out of a reform movement that originated at the Dar ul Uloom, a traditional *madrassa* set up in Deoband, India, in 1867. The Deoband *madrassa* emphasized the purification of Islam from cultural accretions, and a return to the teachings of the Quran and the practices of the Prophet. The Deobandīs opposed westernization and were suspicious of all modernity. They were also inclined to issue *fatwas* against other Muslim sects as part of their quest for religious purity.

The Deobandīs' hardline religious and political discourse inspired the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the movement's extreme vision can be understood by examining the practices of the Taliban. Pakistan's Deobandīs have been most ardent in igniting sectarian warfare, including campaigns against Ahmadīs and Shi'a. As early as the 1940s, the Dar ul Uloom in Deoband had issued a *fatwa* that declared the Shi'a were infidels, and Pakistani Deobandīs have published anti-Ahmadi pronouncements since the 1950s and anti-Shi'a tracts throughout the 1970s.

The Jamaat Ahl-e Hadith (party of the Tradition of the Prophet) was founded by Sayyid Nazir Husain Muhaddith Dehlavi. The Ahl-e Hadith differ from the Deobandis in holding that the Quran and the Hadith (recorded traditions of Prophet Mohammed) are the sole sources of law, while the Deobandis accept the vast corpus of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and follow the Hanafi school of *fiqh*. Often called Wahhabis in South Asia, the Ahl-e Hadith have maintained close ties with the Wahhabi religious establishment of Saudi Arabia since the 1960s. They are vehemently opposed to Bareilvi custom-based Sunni Islam; they are both anti-Sufi and anti-Shi'a.

Another South Asian Sunni group is the Ahmadis or Ahmadiyya, who regard their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, as a messiah and prophet of God and thereby sanction the possibility of revising Prophet Mohammed's message. Most Muslims consider Mohammed to have been the last of the prophets, and consider his the final word from God to humanity. Although Ahmadi religious rituals and almost all their practices are derived from Sunni Islam, their aversion to violence and *jihad* and their refusal to recognize the absolute finality of Mohammed's prophethood account for the conflict between them and other Muslim groups.

Targeting the Ahmadis: The First Sectarian Agitation

Religious political parties have been a part of Pakistan's political scene since its inception. As the Pakistani state increasingly adopted an Islamic identity, sectarian differences and theological arguments led to the formation of sectarian political movements. The slogan "Islam in Danger" was widely used during the campaign for Pakistan's creation, and it remained a powerful rallying cry for religion-based politics. Even secular civilian and military leaders found it expedient to argue, from time to time, that the nation must mobilize to fend off threats to Islam or to Pakistan's Islamic ideology.

As Pakistan's character as an Islamic state became more established, sectarian groups resorted to a variation on the "Islam in danger" theme. New groups emerged, focusing on supposed threats to their interests or to Islam as interpreted by them. Just as Benedict Anderson described nationalism as an "imagined" constructed identity,⁷ Muhammad Qasim Zaman has justifiably argued that sectarian identities in Pakistan were also "constructed and redefined" through a process of political imagining.⁸ Although differences between Shi'a and Sunnis have existed for centuries, the form of sectarian identity that has emerged in Pakistan over the last several decades is relatively modern and new.

The first violent outbreak of sectarianism in Pakistani history targeted the Ahmadis. The Objectives Resolution adopted by Pakistan's Constituent Assembly in 1949 declared that Pakistanis would "order their lives in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam." This wording created more problems than it solved because the resolution defining the basic principles of Pakistan's future constitution did not specify

if *sharia* would be the law nor—if it were—who would define *sharia* for the purpose of state law and how. The question of the status of minorities was also left unresolved.

Soon after the adoption of the Objectives Resolution, the first challenge to a consolidated Muslim identity in Pakistan surfaced with the rise of the “Ahmadiyya question.” Most leaders of Sunni radical movements were initiated into the world of militant sectarianism through the Ahmadiyya controversy. During the early 1950s, the Anjuman-e Ahrar-e Islam (Society of Free Muslims) demanded that the Ahmadiyya be defined as a non-Islamic sect and converts to it be treated as heretics and apostates. The Ahrar argued that the Ahmadis’ wealth and prominence were responsible for the misery of the poor⁹ and that, in addition to being declared non-Muslims, they should be removed from positions of power in the Pakistan government. The fact that Pakistan’s foreign minister at the time, Sir Chaudhry Zafrullah Khan, was an Ahmadi led the anti-Ahmadi protests to become part of a campaign against the fragile government of conservative Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin. The prime minister’s rivals covertly helped the violent agitators, and martial law was imposed in parts of Pakistan in 1953.

Vali Nasr attributes the rise of the Ahmadi issue so soon after Pakistan’s independence to the internal dynamics of the two major Islamist groups, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Deobandis. Neither Maududi’s Jamaat-e-Islami nor most Deobandi leaders had supported the creation of Pakistan, though they eventually accepted the new country and even migrated to Pakistan. Secular elements within the Muslim League, the dominant Pakistani political party of the era, stigmatized the Islamists as anti-Pakistan for opposing the campaign for a state separate from India. The Deobandis, in particular, needed to deal with the stigma of their pre-independence position, and a sectarian campaign against the Ahmadis helped them carve out a positive political role—that of the protectors of true Islam—in the new State of Pakistan.

The Ahmadiyya issue continued to plague Pakistani politics through the 1960s and was resolved to some extent only in 1974 when the secular social-democratic government of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, capitulating to the Islamist parties’ long-standing demand, declared the Ahmadis a non-Muslim minority. After coming to power in a 1977 coup, General Ziaul Haq expanded the restrictions on Ahmadis by decrees that forbade them from identifying themselves as Muslims. Criminal penalties were introduced for violating this law, leading to the imprisonment of many Ahmadis and giving the Islamists a powerful weapon against critics and opponents. Any mullah or Islamist activist could now punish anyone he disliked by accusing him of being an Ahmadi masquerading as a Muslim.

In the case of the Ahmadis, the state used a constitutional amendment to define a sect as an un-Islamic minority. This paved the way for Sunni sectarian groups to insist that the Shi’a be similarly defined, even though the Shi’a had supported the Deobandi and other Sunnis in their demands regarding the Ahmadis. Now that the “Islamic State” in Pakistan had established the right to determine who was and was not a true Muslim,

religious identity and religious correctness became larger issues in Pakistan's political discourse. The policies of Ziaul Haq's military regime, aimed at Islamizing the country further, aggravated Pakistan's slide into sectarian conflict and confrontation.

The Shi'a Awakening

General Ziaul Haq, who ruled Pakistan with an iron hand from 5 July 1977 to 17 August 1988, believed that “a state that is construed as a legitimate Islamic actor can both ride the tiger of Islamism and harness its energies in the service of the state.”¹⁰ Islamization under General Ziaul Haq affected four areas—judicial reform, the penal code, economic activity and educational policy. Two decisions that had a particularly significant, long-term impact on the rise of sectarianism were the imposition of *zakah* or *zakat* (a 2.5 percent annual contribution Muslims must make toward charity based on their net asset value) and the expansion and radicalization of traditional religious schools called *madrasa*.

The state funded the *madrasas* through *zakat*. In 1984, 9.4 percent of *zakat* funds went to *madrasas*, and in 1996, long after Ziaul Haq was gone, the government was giving various *madrasas* 3.5 million dollars a year.¹¹ In 1982 the government had announced that *madrasa* diplomas would be considered equivalent to formal school certificates as long as the *madrasas* reformed their curricula according to state demands. As the state and the Islamists collaborated during the Ziaul Haq years, many *madrasas* changed their focus from traditional religious education to training an Islamic bureaucracy that could assume positions in the lower and middle echelons of the government, thus creating a social base for a future Islamic state.

Islamist groups set up numerous *madrasas* with government *zakat* funding. The Jamaat-e-Islami, which had set up its first *madrasa*—the Ulema Academy at Lahore—in 1976, ran seventy-five *madrasas* by 1990. The Bareilvis set up a new network of *madrasas* called Ziaul-Quran (the Light of the Quran) in response to the government initiative, which was primarily benefiting politicized groups such as the Deobandi, Ahl-e Hadith and Jamaat-e-Islami.

The Shi'a were not too keen on Ziaul Haq's Islamization from the top, particularly when it strengthened Sunni Islamist groups. The Shi'a and Sunnis differ in their understanding of *zakat*. Unlike the Hanafi school of Sunnis, which accepts the government's right to collect and distribute *zakat*, the Shi'a consider *zakat* to be an individual obligation. They may voluntarily entrust the collection and spending of *zakat* to the Shi'a clergy, but Shi'a jurisprudence gives the state no role in the matter. This communitarian and voluntary approach to *zakat* among the Shi'a is probably a reaction to centuries of domination by Sunni rulers over most of the Muslim world. When Ziaul Haq decreed that 2.5 percent of all bank savings would be forcibly deducted every year and deposited in the government's *zakat* account, therefore, the Shi'a protested.

An important Shi'a cleric, Mufti Jaafar Husain (1916-1983), had argued for a long time that if Pakistan was to have Islamic law, the Shi'a should be allowed to follow their own jurisprudence—known as Jaafari *fiqh* after the sixth Shi'a imam, Jaafar al-Sadiq. Husain formed the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Fiqh-e-Jaafariya (TNFJ), the Movement for the Enforcement of Jaafariya Law, which was later shortened to Tehrik-e-Jaafariya. Soon after Ziaul Haq's decree authorizing the forcible deduction of *zakat*, the TNFJ started agitating against the decision. From Ziaul Haq's point of view, and that of other Sunni Islamists, the Shi'a demand was unjustified. Iran had just had an Islamic revolution the year before (in 1979) and had implemented the Shi'a interpretation of Islamic law. If the majority's jurisprudence prevailed in Iran, Pakistan's Sunni Islamists believed the majority should prevail in Pakistan as well, and they saw no reason to make special provisions for the Shi'a minority. The state had become not only more Islamized, but it was also now adopting a sectarian preference within the Islamic context.

Ziaul Haq's preference for an across-the-board enforcement of Sunni law in relation to *zakat* was challenged by large Shi'a demonstrations. On 5 July 1980 the TNFK brought tens of thousands of Shi'a from all over the country and laid siege to the government headquarters in Islamabad. The government backed down and exempted the Shi'a from the compulsory deduction of *zakat*. Although this measure appeased the Shi'a, it did not please the Sunni Islamists. They saw it as a dilution of Ziaul Haq's commitment to Islamizing the Pakistani state with their support. For his part, in an effort to limit any damage to his reputation among the Sunni Islamists, Ziaul Haq made a point of venerating Prophet Mohammed's earliest successors, the first three caliphs whom the Shi'a consider usurpers of political power from their first imam, Ali.

In articulating its ideology and position, the TNFJ avoided expressly sectarian arguments. It insisted that, like every other Muslim group in Pakistan, it considered the Quran and the Sunnah to be the fundamental sources of law. It sought only for the right of "all recognized schools of Islamic thought" to be governed by their own interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah. The TNFJ also talked about the creation of a popular Islamic army. Both these ideas—the concept of a popular army, as opposed to the professional one that dominated Pakistan, and the support for multiple interpretations of Islamic law—were viewed as dangerous by the army-run Pakistani state and its Sunni Islamist allies.

Outside Influences

Two international and regional events also had a profound effect on the rise and growth of sectarian conflict in Pakistan—the Iranian revolution and the anti-Soviet Afghan *jihad*. The Iranian revolution had a multifold impact. The first seizure of power by an avowedly Islamist group in an Islamic revolution brought Iran's Shi'a clergy to power and energized Shi'a all over the Middle East, particularly those in the Gulf states.

Saudi Arabia's monarchy was wedded to Wahhabism, and the Sunni rulers of all the Gulf states had suppressed their Shi'a minorities since the emergence of the modern Middle East.

The Iranian government threatened the Saudis and their allies with its rhetoric of exporting the Iranian revolution. Polemical tracts attacking the Gulf monarchies as un-Islamic were distributed throughout the region and beyond. The Iranians also provided overt and covert assistance to Shi'a organizations and movements. The Gulf states retaliated by emphasizing the heresy of Shiism in an effort to mobilize their Sunni and Wahhabi base. When Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies supported him as a defender of Sunni Arab interests in the face of Shi'a Persian threats. Sunni Islamist groups in the Gulf forgave Hussein's past attacks on Islamic observances and his repression of such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Shi'a clergy of Iran and Pakistan were linked historically, but these links became politicized only after the Iranian revolution. The changing role of the Shi'a Imamia Students Organization (ISO) provides an example of the new reality. Before 1979 the ISO took care of the material needs of Shi'a students in Pakistani educational institutions and facilitated Shi'a prayers and other religious observances. After 1979 the group began offering scholarships to Shi'a students to study in Iran. The increased contact between Pakistani Shi'a students and clergy and their Iranian counterparts created a cadre of politicized Shi'a leaders. TNFJ founder, Jaafar Husain, was succeeded as the leader of the Pakistani Shi'a by Allama Arif Husain al-Husaini (1946-88), who had studied at Shi'a academies in Najaf, Iraq and Qom, Iran. Husaini had come into close contact with Ayatollah Khomeini in both places. When Sunni sectarian terrorism began during the 1980s, Iranian diplomats in Pakistan were among its targets. In the minds of Sunni sectarian militants, Pakistan's Shi'a groups and Iran were closely linked.

Ziaul Haq's military regime, meanwhile, was closely tied to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Pakistan was also organizing and training Sunni mujahidin to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan—a project that was backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States. Islamists from all over the world converged on Pakistan to receive state-of-the-art training in guerilla warfare, and the Afghan *jihād* became a training ground for an entire generation of Islamist militants and terrorists. Pakistan's Islamists not only served as facilitators for the Afghan and international *mujahidin*, but also built a *jihadi* infrastructure and acquired a modern weapons arsenal in the process.

Although Pakistan officially maintained correct relations with Iran even after the 1979 revolution, Ziaul Haq saw its regime as a threat. And for their part, the Iranian mullahs did not like Ziaul Haq for his close ties to the Saudis and the United States. Given this state of affairs, the rise in Shi'a political activism in Pakistan was seen as a challenge by the Pakistani military and intelligence services, though large numbers of Shi'a served in both. Ziaul Haq's initial reaction to such activism was to use diplomatic means to

dissuade Iran from supporting local Shi'a political groups. Pakistani Foreign Minister Agha Shahi, himself a Shi'ite, traveled to Tehran in 1980-81 to convince Khomeini's regime not to try to export its revolutionary fervor to Pakistan. He argued that Pakistan's Shi'a were a protected and respected minority and that Iran would harm its relations with Pakistan, as well as the Pakistani Shi'a, by dabbling in Pakistan's internal politics.

The Iranians did not heed Shahi's advice, however, and Pakistan's permanent state structure and its Intelligence services soon turned to other means in an effort to contain rising Shi'a fervor and political activism. From 1981 onward Sunni sectarian groups began to emerge, and they often found a willing sponsor in the Pakistani state.

The Emergence of Sunni Militancy

Ziaul Haq's policies of Islamization had strengthened Sunni Islamist institutions, especially the *madrasas*, and given influence to Islamist political parties disproportionate to their electoral strength. Even before their Iranian-inspired political awakening, Pakistan's Shi'a had been wary of the Islamist political formations and had tended to support secular political parties, notably the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Ziaul Haq had deposed Bhutto and executed him. The PPP and the pro-democracy movement it led were seen by Ziaul Haq as major challenges to his authority. It suited Ziaul Haq, therefore, to advertise himself as the defender of Sunni Islam and to identify the pro-democracy movement with Shiism for the purpose of mobilizing Sunni Islamists on his behalf. And it was not difficult to spread fear among Sunni Islamists about the Shi'a minority's possible rise to power. The Shi'a were an influential minority, prominent in the arts and literature. Several leading Pakistani politicians were Shi'a, and Shi'a support for the pro-democracy movement meant that Sunni Islamists would never have as much influence under a democratic government as they wielded under Ziaul Haq's Islamizing regime. More significantly, the number of Shi'a in Pakistan was rising.

In addition to making gains through effective proselytizing and natural growth, Shi'a ranks were swelling through conversions of convenience. Well-to-do secular Sunnis did not think much of declaring themselves Shi'a to enable their daughters to benefit from a larger share of their inheritance. While Islam's laws of inheritance are defined in the Quran, the Shi'a interpret them more favorably for women. The compulsory deduction of *zakat* from bank accounts, so essential to generating funds for Sunni Islamist *madrasas*, also became a reason for defections from Sunni ranks. Many non-practicing Muslims decided to become Shi'a, not necessarily to observe the sect's faith or practices, but to avoid having *zakat* deducted from their savings each year.

These circumstances, which appeared to threaten Sunni dominance and identity, provided an environment conducive to Islamist political activism and militancy. A

Deobandi cleric, Maulana Saleemullah Khan, founded Sawad-e Azam Ahl-e Sunnat (Greater Unity of the Sunnis) in 1980, demanding that Pakistan be declared a Sunni state and that the Shi'a be declared non-Muslims.¹² Soon after, sectarian riots erupted in the port city of Karachi, and Sawad-e Azam followers attacked Shi'a neighborhoods and religious gatherings. The Sawad-e-Azam was later instrumental in creating the strongest Sunni sectarian militia—the Anjuman-e Sipah-e Sahaba (ASS), or Society of the Army of the Prophet's Companions. Both organizations were run by Deobandi clerics who had little or no knowledge of English, and once the militant leaders learned the connotation of their English language abbreviation, they changed the name of their organization to Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), the Pakistan Army of the Prophet's Companions.

The Sipah-e Sahaba was formally established by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (1952-90) in 1985 in Pakistan's central Punjab province. According to the organization's literature, it is part of the global struggle between Western materialism and the true faith:

The greatest evil of our age is atheism, irreligion and the revolt against the true faith. Although those (in the west) who revolted against religion at the beginning of the twentieth century are now returning to religion themselves, the poison of their ideologies has seeped into our society's thinking. We need to generate the antidote.... Just as the Muslim Ummah got rid of the yoke of British and French colonialism, we need a major effort to protect ourselves from the demon of irreligion and secularity and immerse ourselves into the beauty of Islam and Quranic injunctions.¹³

Sipah-e Sahaba opposed the notion of freedom of religious observance if it meant that the Shi'a would be free to criticize the early caliphs and companions of the Prophet. "True faith is only that following the way of the Prophet's companions; anything else is heresy," declared Ziaur Rehman Faruqui, who took over as SSP chief after Jhangvi's assassination in 1990. The emphasis on following the Prophet's early companions is simply a subtle way of condemning the Shi'a as heretics.

The SSP's goals are to combat the Shi'a at every level of society, to have them declared a non-Muslim minority like the Ahmadis, and to proscribe their processions of self-flagellation during the month of Muharram. Sipah-e Sahaba also wants to impose its own version of Sunni Islam on the state and society. Its ideal polity is the *Khilafat-i-Rashida*, the rightly guided Caliphate that succeeded Prophet Mohammed and lasted for only thirty-one years. SSP justifies its virulent anti-Shiism as crucial to protecting Islam from Persian influence and saving the Muslim world from Khomeini's pernicious, heretical ideology.

The SSP gained influence in the rural parts of Pakistan's central Punjab province, partly

by criticizing the influence of Shi'a landowners. They accused the Shi'a of having maintained their large land holdings through close ties with the British, which made them representative of secular culture. It did not occur to SSP's militant Sunni followers that focusing on the large Shi'a estates might inadvertently endorse Shi'a inheritance laws, which prevented the kind of fragmentation of property that inevitably resulted from Sunni laws of inheritance.

SSP also attacked traditional, custom-based, mystical Sufi Islam that often allowed Sunnis and Shi'a in rural Pakistan to merge in their common reverence for particular saints and shrines. Seeking to impose a standardized, ritual-free, text-based Islam, SSP took pride in articulating the anti-Shi'a puritanism that other Islamist organizations shared but were unable to voice for the sake of political correctness. SSP maintained close ties with the leading Deobandi organization, Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam (JUI), and all its leaders were graduates of Deobandi *madrāsas*.

Almost all Sunni Islamist organizations quietly supported SSP's anti-Shi'a rhetoric and campaigns. The Ziaul Haq regime saw the SSP as a check on the rise of Shi'a influence and gave it a free hand. Soon covert links had been established between SSP and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which managed official Pakistani support of *jihadi* operations in Afghanistan and Indian-controlled Kashmir. SSP cadres attended Afghan *mujahidin* training camps and returned to kill Shi'a leaders within Pakistan. The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s further deepened the ties among Pakistan's various *jihadi* groups (see *Current Trends*, vol. 1), Deobandi *madrāsas* and Sunni sectarian organizations like Sipah-e Sahaba.

SSP's lethal attacks on Shi'a *ulema* and professionals generated a violent Shi'a backlash, however. The Shi'a Sipah-e Mohammed Pakistan (SMP)—Army of Mohammed in Pakistan—surfaced in 1991, almost a year after the assassination of SSP founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. Sipah-e Mohammed claimed to have more global aims than just protecting Pakistan's Shi'a. Its founder, Ghulam Raza Naqvi, declared that he wanted to set up a Quds-force of both Sunnis and Shi'a to liberate Palestine.¹⁴ But in practice SMP did little more than retaliate for SSP's assaults on Shi'a by killing SSP leaders and cadres, and occasionally by mounting attacks on Deobandi mosques in reprisal for attacks on Shi'a mosques.

The violence between Shi'a and Sunni extremist groups escalated further once Ziaul Haq's military regime came to an end and civilian rule was restored in Pakistan. Worried about the sectarian violence, the civilian political leaders attempted to co-opt the SSP into the political system. The group's candidates won some seats in the Punjab Assembly, and they were offered positions in the government in exchange for renouncing violence. One segment of the SSP found this bargain unacceptable, however, and responded by creating the secretive and uncompromisingly violent Lashkar-e Jhangvi (JI)—Jhangvi's Army. This group, founded by Riaz Basra in 1994, consisted mainly of Afghan *jihad*

veterans and worked closely with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It is important to note that since the collapse of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Pakistan's Baluchistan province has become a major center of anti-Shi'a militants. Their main targets have been the anti-Taliban Shi'a Hazara community.¹⁵

Sectarian conflict in Pakistan has not remained confined to the sphere of Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. Violence has erupted among competing Sunni organizations as well. Once the floodgates of discussion over who is or is not a Muslim are opened, any number of claims for excluding heretics from the mainstream can emerge. Although sectarian violence in Pakistan began with demands to declare Ahmadis and Shi'a non-Muslims, the rising tide of Sunni extremism has led the various Sunni organizations to vie with one another for the right to decide who can legitimately be considered a true Sunni Muslim.

As Deobandi and Wahhabi groups expanded through state patronage and organized militias, the traditionalist Barelvis found themselves marginalized. By the middle of the 1990s, a militant organization called the Sunni Tehreek (Sunni Movement) was founded in Karachi by Saleem Qadri. This movement sought to roll back the rising tide of Wahhabi and Deobandi influences and to restore the South Asian tradition of devotional and festive observance of Islam. This effort did not sit well with the Deobandi and Wahhabi groups, of course, who saw the revival of traditionalism as a setback to their successful imposition of fundamentalism in the preceding two and a half decades. On 11 April 2006 a massive bomb blast in Karachi on the occasion of *Eid Milad-un Nabi* (celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday), which the Deobandis and Wahhabis view as sinful, killed about fifty people and injured many more. Most of the casualties belonged to the Barelvi sub-sect of Sunni Islam, and many were affiliated with the Sunni Tehreek.

The Role of the State

The complexities of Pakistan's centralized militarist state have encouraged the rise of both Islamism and its sectarian manifestations. According to Vali Nasr, two distinct factors account for this development. The first involves the state's attempt to increase its own power by manipulating the rifts in society. The post-colonial state, though large and interventionist, has only limited capabilities. By manipulating social and cultural divisions and using a divide-and-rule strategy, however, the government is able to create a sphere in which it becomes the arbiter in any conflict. The state and its wings thus acts as an agent of identity mobilization and intensifies sectarian conflict.¹⁶

The second factor involves the Pakistani state's use of Islam or religious nationalism to bind the country together—which, in turn, gives impetus to fundamentalism and sectarianism. Since the days of Pakistan's first military ruler, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the country's military-technocratic elite or “establishment” has believed that Pakistan is

difficult to govern. They consider the masses not to be ready or fit for democracy, and they are in constant fear that ethnic and regional centrifugal tendencies will pull the country apart. The Pakistani state has, therefore, consistently felt the need for an ideology to bind Pakistan—and Pakistanis—together. Islam is seen as fulfilling that role.

The ties connecting the state, the military and the Islamists have strengthened over the years to combat the growing power of secular and ethnic-based political parties that often do not share the Pakistani establishment's hostility toward India. Throughout the 1980s the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) supported militant Sunni Islamist groups in the northwest frontier bordering Afghanistan, as well as in Punjab and Baluchistan. And the government has funded Sunni *madrasas*, which in addition to preparing cadres for *jihad* in Afghanistan and India, have also become bastions of sectarianism.

The Iranian revolution and the reaction it caused in the Gulf states, especially in Saudi Arabia, also contributed to sectarian violence in Pakistan. The Gulf states with Shi'a minorities were worried about domestic rebellion and civil war. Iran challenged Saudi Arabia's pre-eminent position and status in the Muslim world—a replay of the Ottoman-Safavid power struggle of long ago. This led to large-scale pan-Islamization attempts by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, as well as by Libya and Iraq, to export Sunni-Wahhabi Islamism to other parts of the Muslim world. Pakistan was one of the key battlegrounds in this Iran-Saudi battle.

In 1984 the Deobandi scholar Muhammad Manzur Numani wrote a tract asserting that the excesses of the Iranian revolution proved that Shiism was un-Islamic. The preface to this work was written by Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, rector of the Nadwatul Ulema and recipient of Saudi Arabia's King Faisal Prize for Service to Islam. The fact that Nadvi was associated with the Saudi Rabita al-Alam al-Islami (Muslim World League) raised the suspicion that Gulf politics had a lot to do with the timing and virulence of the tract. Another pro-Saudi religious leader in Pakistan, Asrar Ahmed, went so far as to argue that Shiism, which originated soon after the demise of Prophet Mohammed, was part of an early Jewish conspiracy against Islam.

The assumption that Islamist forces and sectarian militias could be used and controlled has backfired against Pakistan's government and—especially—its military, which now face the serious challenge of rolling back extremist beliefs. So far the state is not doing well. The government is finding it difficult to shut down or control the numerous radical and militant *madrasas* that were set up during the Afghan *jihad*. As the Islamists have increased their ability to raise funds globally, their *madrasas* have become less dependent on *zakat* assistance and hence less amenable to state influence. In the case of militant groups, the state's periodic resort to force seems merely to substitute one combatant for another. The *jihadis* eliminated through the use of force are quickly replaced by more virulent cadres, who are constantly being produced.

The Islamists know their strengths and the government’s weaknesses. They also know that until Pakistan’s government decides, once and for all, not to rely on Islam for nation-building and state consolidation, it will continue to court Islamist partners. For the foreseeable future, then, sectarian Islamist militancy will remain a serious threat to Pakistan’s stability. In 1954 the Pakistan government appointed a court of inquiry into the anti-Ahmadi violence. The Munir Commission, named after the Supreme Court chief justice who headed it, published a report that contained a very prescient assessment of future Islamist politics in Pakistan. It concluded that the government should keep out of the business of defining who is, or is not, a Muslim and of how Islam is to be enforced as the state religion:

Keeping in view the several definitions given by the *ulema* (of who is a Muslim) need we make any comment except that no two learned divines are agreed on this fundamental? If we attempt our own definition as each learned divine has done and that definition differs from that given by all others, we unanimously go out of the fold of Islam. And if we adopt the definition given by any one of the *ulema*, we remain Muslims according to the view of that *alim* but *kafirs* according to the definition of everyone else.... What is happening now seems almost the writing on the wall, and God help us if we do not stop these...people from cutting each other’s throat.”¹⁷

NOTES

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4. Syed Vali Nasr, “International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979-1998,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 32,2 (January 2000): 171.
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10. Syed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan—The Making of State Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 136.
11. *The Economist*, 28 January 1996: 37.
12. Mehtab Ali Shah, "Sectarianism—A Threat to Human Security: A Case Study of Pakistan," *The Round Table*, vol. 94,382 (October 2005): 617.
13. Ziaur Rehman Faruqui, *Sipah-e-Sahaba Mein Har Musalman ki Sharnooliat Kyun Zaroori Hai? (Why Must Every Muslim Join Sipah-e-Sahaba)*, Sipah-e-Sahaba pamphlet in Urdu with no publication details, circa 2000.
14. Mariam Abou Zahab, "The Regional dimension of sectarian conflicts in Pakistan," October 2000, p. 5, at <http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/archive/octo00/artmaz.pdf>.
15. International Crisis Group, "The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan," *Asia Report*, no. 95 (18 April 2005): 21.
16. Vali Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization": 174.
17. *Report of the Court of Inquiry into the Punjab Disturbances: Munir Commission Report* (Karachi: Government of Pakistan, 1954), p. 35.