

Emergence of Sectarian Indigenous Militant Groups in Pakistan and Politicization of Militant Thought

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ABSTRACT

The rise of sectarian groups in Pakistan has sprouted many internal challenges for the state as well as for the society. The issue of sectarianism is directly linked with the security and harmony of Pakistani society as it has culminated into a grave internal security challenge causing violence and loss of human life. The institutionalization of these groups and their role in the political landscape of Pakistan reflects their complicated nature, objectives and the overall discourse on which these groups are built. Despite the fact that government in various time periods have banned these sectarian militant groups but they were able to operate in shadows or under the banner of different names and roles. This piece of research aims to explicate their multidimensional roles and their capacity to operate and affect the security paradox as well as society as a whole.

Key Words: Sectarianism, Security, Tehrik-e- Nifaz-e Fiqh-e- Jafria (TNFJ), Siph-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Splinter Groups

Introduction

The complex juncture of militancy in Pakistan initially has roots in its institutionalization. The element of organizational approach has strengthened the overall militant discourse and their placement within the society. Militants have emerged in the shape of clusters illustrating distinct structure, objectives and operational capability. Operating on the lines of organizations, militants have managed to inbuilt strong connections within the local cadre of population. Consequently, these groups have been a grave challenge for the internal security of Pakistan. With the passage of time, the nature of militant groups has been changed. Initially, these groups were formed on the basis of sectarian lines. But later on, not only the number of militant groups increased but their orientation also changed. Years following 2001, the nature and nexus of militant outfits changed considerably as they not only operated in organizational framework independently but also operated as loose networks at tactical level on shared ideological basis. Influx of regional and global terrorist organizations also contributed towards the development of such groups. The origins of militant outfits in Pakistan dates back to 1980s. Afghan Jihad of 1979 against the Soviet Union, Iranian Revolution (1979) and Islamization process of General Zia within Pakistan and absence of democratic system proved as the four major factors in providing the motivational

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valor, religious zeal and state patronage to intrinsic such groups. It was the time when the element of religiosity was used as means to fulfill political objectives in the cold war politics by US against Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Moreover, internally within Pakistan Islamization reforms were politically driven. Internal politico-religious grouping along with the external regional and global setting somehow aggrandize the overall environment which paved the way for militant organizations to establish themselves within Pakistan and across the borders. In addition to it, culmination of militant groups in Pakistan can be referred as a set of spin groups that has been affiliated with some religious political parties or religious based organizations in the past. For this reason, most of them had indigenous support along with the knowledge of societal and political dynamics. Political backing of such groups has been the main source for their nourishment as organizations and strong influential groups.

With the passage of time, militant groups have become more inclusive in their formation and objectives. Broadly, militant outfits in Pakistan are categorized as having local, regional and international nature. Local militant outfits are indigenously sectarian in nature. Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and then its splinter group Laskar e Jhangvi (LeJ) were followers of Sunni Deobandi theology and Tehrik-e –Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria (TNFJ) and its splinter group Sipah e Muhammad Pakistan (SMP) were followers of Shia interpretation of Islam.

Politicization of militant thought

The emergence of sectarian groups in 1980s and their role in local and national politics of Pakistan strengthen the roots of hatred, animosity and extremism within the societal cadres. Therefore, the issue of sectarianism not only fueled extremism and intolerance in the society but it also affected the political landscape as the sectarian groups did not only operate as an independent entity but either they were affiliated with political groups or they directly participated in the electoral process like SSP. In addition to it, the culture of supporting local political groups and parties has been a popular trend during national, provincial and local elections throughout the electoral history of Pakistan.

Emergence of Tehrik-e- Nifaz-e Fiqh-e- Jafria (TNFJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)

Formation of TNFJ and SSP along with their off shoots is directly linked with the issue of sectarianism in Pakistan. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution, which resulted in the rise of Shias in power under Ayatollah Khomeini in January 1979, TNFJ was formed as a representative body of Shia*¹ community living in Pakistan in the same year. It was on 13th April 1979 that All Shia convention was held in Bhakkar, Punjab in which formation of TNFJ was decided (Rana M.A, 2009).

*¹ For more details see (Haydar, 1993, pp. 75-93)

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Allama Jaffer Hussein led the organization till 1983. They were also successful in staging massive protest in the capital city of Pakistan, Islamabad against the Zakat and Ushr ordinance of Zia regime in July 1980. As the ordinance was purely based on Hanafi jurisprudence and the method of distribution of *Zakat* is different under Jafaria jurisprudence. Consequently the then government took back the ordinance and renewed it in align with both the sects. This event provided strength and empowerment to TNFJ followed by the funding by Iran to the organization as well as to Shia madrasa within Pakistan. In addition to it, they were able to cater large support among the Shia population mainly because at that time the Islamization policies of Zia somehow alienated the Shia sect from the politico-religious setting. This deliberate sunnization by the Zia regime created a sense of insecurity among the Shia population which was cashed by TNFJ and it was also accelerated by the ongoing Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Pakistan.

After the death of Allama Jaffer Hussein in 1983, TNFJ was divided into two groups, one led by Agha Syed Hamid Ali Shah Moosavi which had a more religious posture and the other faction was led by Arif Al Hussein, which had a more political and violent posture. He belonged to the Toori tribe of Parachinar- an area where sectarian conflict was on rise between the local Toori and Mujahedeen and refugees coming from Afghanistan in the aftermath of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Furthermore, Al Hussein had strong and close relations with Ayatollah Khomeini as he accompanied him in Najaf, when Khomeini was in exile (Hussain M. , 2012, p. 14). That is the reason that he was highly respected among the Shia clerics and Iranian circles. Such background also provided a proficiency to Al Hussein to build a strong, systematic and organized organization of Shias in Pakistan. Moreover, he capitalize Imam Khomeini as a superior religious leader and *Gaib Imam of Shias* (Rana M.A, 2009). It in turn constructed strong connections of Iranian government and TNFJ. At the domestic level, Imamia students' organization was used as a recruitment cell from TNFJ by Hussein. Thus under the leadership of Al Hussein TNFJ became more organized and proactive, and was actively involved in sectarian conflict against their rival organization i.e. SSP. After the assassination of Arif Al Hussein on 15th August 1988 in Peshawar, Allama Sajid Naqvi became the leader of Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan (TJP)*² (www.refworld.org, 2008). They remained active in major parts of Punjab and most of the northern areas of Pakistan which has majority Shia population*³. TJP was symbolized as a means of exporting Khomeini's Revolution in Pakistan. TJP had strong anti-government sentiments and accused Zia ul Haq for maligning the rights of Shias in Pakistan. Gradually TJP tactfully engaged itself in politics to distance itself from militant outlook just like her rival organization Sipha Sahaba. They joined Movement for Restoration of democracy (MRD) in 1983 in

*² In 1987 Arif al Hussein changed the name of the faction from Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e- Fiqh-e- Jafria (TNFJ) to Tehrik-e- Jafaria-e-Pakistan (TJP)

*³ Gilgit-Balistan, Sakardu, Khurram agency in FATA

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opposition to the government of Zia as they had strong association with Pakistan People's Party (PPP) since 1970s (Postel, 2017, p. 85). Then in the post Zia era, TJP was more inclined in taking a political role. It was the same time when Sipah e Muhammad Pakistan was formed as a militant wing. Later on, they remained the part of Mutthida Majlis e Amal (MMA) from 2002-2008.

In this context, supporting the formation of a Sunni based organization was instrumental in Zia's decision. In response to the organizational structure of Shia sect, Zia backed the organization like SSP which at first place has hard religious posture based on Hanafi interpretation of Islam and secondly government find it an appropriate tactic to counter Shia influence within the population. On the other hand, Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was formed in September 1985 by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi which had staunch anti-Shia objectives. The organization was set up in Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan in terms of population. SSP had support of Zia regime and outside funding, mainly coming from Saudi Arabia. It is caustic that a hard liner sectarian group was supported by the then government. Resultantly, it alienated other groups from the mainstream and incarnate religious sentiments according to their own objectives. In addition to it, SSP was involved in various acts of terrorism mainly against the Shia population. At that point of time, the formation and development of such militant tendencies were not countered by the government but rather a shelter was provided to them, which gradually overshadowed Pakistan's ideological and security doctrine.

Jhang district became the main tributary of sectarian strife. It is an exceptional case study to understand that how socio-political, economic grievances, kinship politics and rivalry can amalgamate with religious sentiments which can bring a strong response with a violent expression. Tahir Kamran has explored the local context of Jhang to understand the sectarian strife which later on not only spread in others parts of Punjab but across Pakistan. Jhang being a traditional city of Punjab and its outskirts have been a strong foothold of landlords mainly belonging to Shia sect. The urban centers of Jhang are mainly concentrated with middle class and business community, who were mostly Sunni followers. Haq Nawaz Jhangvi belonged to a middle class family and studied in a Deoband Madrassas. Later he was affiliated with JUI-F, as its vice president of Punjab. (Background of Religious Extremism And Terrorism ... - Pakistan Herald, 2014). That is the reason SSP had strong affiliation with JUI and the associated madaris of Sami ul Haq (Nasr, 2000, p. 163). Thus from a low rank cleric of JUI, Jhangvi became the leader of SSP. Jhangvi was able to get support from the local ranks of population in Jhang as he was able to capitalize a strong resistance against the feudalist set up (which were mostly Shia). Mariam Abou Zahab, a French researcher narrates that SSP emerged with the assistance of the then government and intelligence agencies mainly as a response to Shia protests against government Zakat and Ushr Ordinance (Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni-Shia Violence and its links to the middle east*, 2011, pp. 26-38). SSP emerged as a strong and vocal anti-Shia organization. Azam Tariq, who also remained the minister in 1993 in Punjab, once said that 'agar Pakistan main musalman ban kar rhen hey, tou Shia ko kafir kehna

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hey’*⁴ .(if one want to establish Islam in Pakistan then Shias should be declared as infidel’s) They went so far to declare Shia as Infidels through a resolution of national assembly. SSP has also been very vocal in declaring Pakistan a Sunni state, based on Hanafi jurisprudence, thus denying the representation of more than one fifth of the population of Pakistan. The political role of SSP provided them leverage to reach out the local masses. SSP continued to work as a political party too and was able to win the seat of National Assembly in 1988 elections. This combination of political role with a militant posture strengthen the roots of sectarianism not only in Jhang district but across Pakistan*⁵. SSP was not only supported by the charity of market owners and business community of Jhang but soon they became an active recipient of mainly Saudi and Iraqi funding to counter the Iranian influence and funding in Pakistan after the revolution in Iran. Hate speech and notion of violence became a common feature of SSP gatherings. Jhangvi was very vocal against the Shia clerics and the Iranian support to them. Moreover, he blamed Shia scholars for maligning the Sahaba, and particularly the first three caliphs. It generated revulsion, hatred and extremist tendencies towards the other sect. In order to determine the intents and mode of indoctrination used by SSP, following main themes have been extracted by analyzing the content of speeches delivered by SSP leadership. It gives an insight into the thinking of the organizations that how they operated among the masses.

Table I

Context Analysis of SSP leadership speeches

Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan leadership	Main Themes
Haq Nawaz Jhangvi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberation of Ahl e Sunnat as one nation • Provocation of Sunni rights • Targeting the youth for revolution (Inqilab) • Defining Shias as a pocket of minority • Demand for legislation and lawmaking according to Hanafi interpretation of Islam • Strengthening legislation reading against the defamation of Sahaba (companions of Holy Prophet PBUH) • Cognizance for Sunni revolution • Demand for declaring Pakistan a Sunni state • Emphasis on Mdaris education to both male and female • Frequent use of words like ‘Sunni Mother’, ‘Sunni Child’, ‘Sunni nation’, and ‘Sunni youth’

*⁴ If one wants to establish Islam in Pakistan, then Shia should be declared as infidels

*⁵ i.e. in Bahawalnagar, Sargodha, Multan, Bahawalpur, Kabirwala, Faisalabad, Muzaffargarh, Karachi and Peshawar

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Zia-ur-Rehman Farooqi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denoting Shias as non-Muslims • Narrating Shias as kafir (non-Muslims) • Demand of banning books written by Khomeini and Iranian funded literature • Declaration of Khilafat world order against US new world order • Formation of Sipha e Sahaba lawyer's forum • Formation of Pakistan Sunni employee's forum in every government institution • Sunni teacher's forum (including teachers from schools, universities) • Denoting Sunni as a nation
Maulana Azam Tariq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declaring Shias as kafir (non-Muslims) • Stating marriage contract between Shia and Sunni un-Islamic*⁶ • Considered Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Shias of Kuwait as a main source of funding to Shias in Pakistan • Iranian Funding to Literature defaming Sahaba (companions of Holy Prophet PBUH).

Source: (www.dailymotion.com, 1984) (www.dailymotion.com, 1994)
(www.dailymotion.com, 2018)

The above analysis explores that the main idea on which the outfit was built stood acutely sectarian in nature. Religious incitement along with proliferation of Sunni interpretation of Islam was extensively emphasized and was used as a provocation tactic by the leaders. Additionally, the political outlook of SSP and their leaders was a main source which provided them a sense of power which in turn was backed by the state. It seemed that the proxy war of Iran and Saudi Arabia was well distributed by SSP and TFJ among the common people of Pakistan. Murder of Arif al Hussein in 1988 and Haq Nawaz Jhangvi's murder in 1990 became catalyst in ongoing sectarian conflict mainly in Punjab. It was claimed that TNFJ and other Shia pockets were involved in his assassination. Series of sectarian killing became a common notion, as Shia-Sunni leaders were killed on tit for tat basis. After the assassination of Jhangvi, Maulana Zia-ur-Rehman Farooqi assumed the command of SSP till 19th January 1997, when he was killed in a bomb blast*⁷. Then Maulana Azam Tariq remained the chief of SSP till 6th October 2003 (Portal, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Terrorist Group of Pakistan), when he was killed in an attack when he was going to parliament for National Assembly session. Azam Tariq was politically militant, as in all his tenure was vocal in declaring Shia as non-Muslims through a constitutional amendment. After the 9/11 attacks Azam Tariq supported the Taliban regime in

*⁶ During his speech, Mulana Azam Tariq narrated his meeting with the then Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. He told Benazir that he does not consider the nikkah (marriage contract) of Shia and Sunni Islamic. He also said in his speech that his leader Haq Nawaz Jhangvi considered Benazir Bhutto as Kafir (non-Muslim), because she was a Shia and that is the reason that he also believed that to topple down her government is a right and just act according to his belief

⁷ He was killed in a bomb blast near session court, Lahore

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Afghanistan and condemned Pakistan's decision to support US in war on terror along with waging war in Afghanistan. He allied SSP with other religious parties including JI, JUI-F, JAH and JUI-S on the matter of Pakistan's support to US. It is reported that he vowed to send 500000 activists in occupied Kashmir in 1999. Furthermore, he has been visiting Afghanistan and had ties with Taliban government members (Rana A. , 2009, pp. 307-322). Such extended activities of SSP reflects their strong base and connections within and outside the society. Besides this, attacks on Mosques and Imam bargahs, targeted killing of doctors, business community, teachers based on sectarian identity continued.

Militant extensions: Laskare e Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah e Muhammad (SeM)

Laskare Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah e Muhammad (SeM) were the two main splinter militant groups of SSP and TFJ respectively. It is said that both SSP and TJP created their militant wings to remain active in politics by projecting SSP and TJP as political parties. This strategy has paid them off as they were able to get authority and power by becoming the part of state structure and on the other hand, they continued their militant activities through their armed wings. Though mostly it is said that LeJ is a breakaway faction of SSP, but practically SSP had strong influence on Jhangvi group. On the ideological lines set up by SSP, LeJ also aims to declare Shia as non-Muslims. In addition to it, they are against the Barelvi*⁸ sect and aims to build a system of Khilafat in Pakistan based on Deoband interpretation of Islam.

Riaz Basra*⁹, who was previously an active member of SSP created LeJ in 1996*¹⁰. It shared the ideological basis and objectives with SSP. In fact, it was name Lashkar-e- Jhangvi, after the pioneer of SSP, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. LeJ, giving a new face to militancy has created links with Taliban in Afghanistan. It is said that Riaz Basra not only took refuge in Afghanistan but also had training camps in Sarobi (Farooqi, 2013). The attack on Iranian Center*¹¹ in 1997 was the first major attack of LeJ after its formation. Because of their anti-Shia views, they

*⁸ Barelvis are one of the sub sect of Sunnis. They believed on Shrines, devotion of Sufi saints and give immense respect to Muhammad (s.a.w.w) and Family of Muhammad (s.a.w.w). In Pakistan a large section of Sunni population has inclination towards such culture and teachings

*⁹ Riaz Basra belonged to Sargodha, Punjab. He belonged to a poor family and got education in madaris. He joined SSP in 1980s. He was arrested as the result of his involvement in the killing of Iranian diplomat in Lahore, but soon he was able to escape from the prison. It is said that he went to Afghanistan and it was the time when he created links with Afghan Taliban. Government of Pakistan announced a head money of five million on him. After the fall of Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, he managed to return to Pakistan and gave a new valor to LeJ. Previously ,He had been politically active under SSP, he had been a nominee of SSP from Lahore in provincial elections (www.guardian.com, 2002)

*¹⁰ Malik Ishaq, and Akram Lahori were also the pioneer members of LeJ. They had been previously associated with Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan

*¹¹ 25 people including Iranian Diplomat Sajid Ganj was killed in the attack on Iranian Center in Multan, Pakistan

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had staunch opposition for Iran which is reflected in their target selection. As a response to the murder of chief of SSP, Zia-ur-Rehman Farooqi in 1997, Iranian cultural center in Lahore was burnt and one Iranian diplomat, Muhammad Ali Rahimi was targeted and murdered in Multan (Sipah-e-Mohammed Pakistan, Terrorist Group of Pakistan)

Riaz Basra was also involved in the terrorist incident in Lahore, when a bridge was blown up few minutes before Main Nawaz Sharif was scheduled to pass from there in January 1999. (Portal, www.satp.org). It was a reaction to the then ongoing operation against them. It was from 1997-1999, that Nawaz government for the first time started counter operation against LeJ and SSP. During the operation thirty-six militants of the group were killed. It was mainly directed by Shahbaz Sharif, the then chief minister of Punjab and brother of Nawaz Sharif to contain sectarian killings in Punjab (Paracha, 2013). The then Information Minister Mushahid Hussain said that, "The government has taken stringent measures to root out terrorism and this incident has further strengthened our determination to fight against this menace (BBC News | South Asia | Assassination attempt on Pakistan PM, 1999)." The operation by the government slowed down their activities, as most of cadres of LeJ and SeM went underground and halted their activities. Later on, they were regrouped and reactivated after September 2001. The objectives of LeJ were extended so as their activities in post 2001 phase because their activities were not restricted against Shias only. By creating linkages with the other outfits they had an extended agenda. LeJ-TTP linkage on operational and tactical level acted as an instrument of destabilization in Pakistan. They aimed to challenge the writ of government by attacking government personnel and installations. Moreover, LeJ has strong anti-western and specifically anti-American agenda.

With the passage of time, Laskar e Jhangvi has extended their operation within and Pakistan outside the borders of Pakistan. Reportedly they were given space by Taliban regime in Afghanistan till 2001. Imtiaz Gul, a Defense Analyst in an interview with the researcher termed LeJ as a militant armed wing, which has become an instrument of instability in Pakistan. It could be used by Indians, Afghan secret service, CIA and all the forces who wants to destabilize Pakistan. It is quite operational in different parts of Pakistan. According to him, LeJ has hooked up with people of TTP and later on with Daish, who he termed as ex-TTP members. They are basically criminals and terrorist, people who are hired for assassination and terrorist activities (Gul, 2016). It depicts that later on LeJ became a loose-knit group in which in some cases they operated in align with their ideological aims, but in most of the cases after 2001 their activities were to create anarchy in the society.

In 1990s SeM emerged on the forefront as a counter outfit against SSP and LeJ. Both groups were invariably involved in sectarian killings. As a response to Sunni-Deobandi based organizations, Sipah e Muhammad was formed tentatively in 1993 under the leadership of Maulana Mureed Abbas Yazdani who was later killed in August 1996 in Rawalpindi. Another source traces its origin in 1991.

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SeM tends to be more militant and violent in their activities and was closely associated with Tehrik e Jafaria. Later on, SeM was further divided into different factions. (Zaman, 2002, p. 118) (Tehreek-e-Jaferia Pakistan, Terrorist Group of Pakistan). There were invariably involved in a series of offensive between them and LeJ. They established their center in Lahore, in Thokar Niaz Baig along with strong footings across Punjab*¹² and in all provincial capitals. They took the responsibility of attack *¹³ on the prominent leader of SSP, Azam Tariq in 1994. Ghulam Raza Naqvi took the lead of SeM, later he was imprisoned on grounds of his alleged involvement in the murder of Azam Tariq. After his release in one of his interviews he said that, “ When a banned organization had started killing Shia Muslims with proper planning and started attacking our ‘azadari’ (Rememberan of Martyrdom of Hazrat Imram Hussain R.A) then we had to form Sipah e Muhammad in defend ourselves” (www.shittenews.com, 2016). Most of the leaders of SeM initially got education from madaris and participated in anti-Soviet jihad. Besides this, they have travelled to Iran for further education. On the other hand, recruits are mostly from local middle class. Soon Thokar Niaz Baig became a no-go areas and police started an encounter in July 1994, in which police faced strong resistance in the shape of cross firing between SeM members and police which lasted for nine long hours. The way weapons of police personnel were confiscated and were humiliated showed the strengthen of SeM in terms of its strength and tactical capability. (Ahmed, 2011, pp. 140-141). One of the sources figures that approximately Sipa e Muhammad had 30,000 followers (Iqbal, Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero, 2011, p. 213). After the operation led by government against sectarian groups, activities of SeM were halted but is said that they might exist in sleeper cells and are also getting assistance mainly from Iran. Sipa e Muhammad also faced internal divisions mainly between their top hierarchy on the role and position of the organization. Differences among Maulana Yazdani and Syed Raza Naqvi led to the murder of Yazdani by his own close associates in the organization. Yazdani’s participation in the Mili Yakjhetei council (MYC) and his wish to have a political posture were main issues of dissent.

Laskar e Jahngvi and Sipa e Muhammad both have been instrumental in giving birth to different splinter groups based on sectarian bigotry. Furthermore, both have created strong links with the other militant groups which makes the case of militancy in Pakistan more diverse. The sectarian rivalry of these groups remained a leading challenge to the state of Pakistan as they continued to operate in different roles ranging from politico-religious to religious militant and sectarian entities since 1980s. Due to their deep connectivity with the local cadres, political groups at times and even other militant groups have out reached them to get electoral benefits and tactical advantages respectively.

*¹² Multan, Jhang, Khanewal, Faisalabad, Chichwatani

*¹³ He survived an attack on Sargodha-Khushab road

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Thus the journey which started from the creation of TJP and SSP further stretched the institutionalization of sectarian thought. Social conflicts, economic and cultural disparities were also instrumental in shaping them (Zaman, 1998, pp. 689-716) (Abbas, 2010). Therefore the role of these two militant groups not only had strong local connections but they were knitted with the local political dynamics as well. The militant posture of these outfits not only affected the security but it also paved the way for the inclusion of sectarian identity in local politics thus making the juncture of militancy further complexed and complicated in Pakistan.

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