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Weaponized Faith: A Theoretical and Strategic Analysis of Religious Extremism in Pakistan

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Abstract:
Religion in Pakistan, previously a cohesive element of identity and spiritual direction, has become more often exploited to legitimize political motives and militant aggression. This study analyzes the militarization of religion in Pakistan using a theoretical and strategic perspective. Utilizing Constructivism, Framing Theory, Political Islam, and Social Identity Theory, the study analyzes how extremist factions, supported by both state and societal complicity, have harnessed faith to promote exclusionary, violent ideologies. The research examines the historical path of religious extremism, assesses the impact of digital media on radicalization, and emphasizes the intricate relationship between religious identity and national security. This paper examines the Lal Masjid siege case study to explore how religious extremism erodes state legitimacy and community unity. Ultimately, it presents extensive policy suggestions and proactive strategies to address the ideological, institutional, and social foundations of extremism. The study highlights the critical necessity for a nationwide realignment of the religion-state connection - one based on pluralism, justice, and inclusive governance.

Keywords: Extremism, Religion, Pakistan, Framing Theory, Political Islam, Radicalization, Constructivism, Lal Masjid, Social Media, Madrassa Reform

Introduction:

Sociologists and historians agree that religion remains one of the key foundations of identity and culture which has shaped nations, ideologies, and policies throughout human history. Meanwhile, in Pakistan the distinction between religious inspiration and religious manipulation has increasingly softened within the post-1980s context. The regretful trend of Islamic zealotry wherein feelings, symbols, slogans and discourses around Islam are exploited for incitement of violence, extremism, power consolidation intensifies as a pressing challenge to internal counter-peace and terrorism control efforts. This paper analyzes how extremist groups have integrated religion to justify violence within a given framework through pluralistic socio-political violence disregard state authority be it aligned or non-state Pakistani actors. The use of religion as a weapon in Pakistan is not a coincidence or an isolated case. Instead, it is woven into the socio-political fabric of the nation. The radicalization of Pakistan's religion climate stems from Zia- ul-Haq's Islamization policies of the 1980s, state-influenced sectarian groups, and continual disregard for madrassa regulations *(Nasr, 2000).* The US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistans backed Afghan jihad put into action the use of jihadist ideologies undergoing a militant indoctrination that mixed warfare with exclusive religious ideology. This gave rise to radical groups Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and later Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with great ease *(Abou Zahab & Roy, 2004).* The Constructivism and Framing Theory offer an important understanding of this change. Beliefs, culture, interest and identity are not given but rather socially created through

discourse, institutions and interaction *(Wendt, 1992).* Pakistan's religious extremists have effectively created an "us versus them" binary wherein everyone who does not subscribe to their version of Islam a sect, a political group or even the state is condemned as apostate. The other side Framing Theory analyzes how actors select particular segments of reality to focus on in order to promote a specific meaning and rally support for it *(Snow & Benford, 1988).* TLP surpasses TTP has chronicled religious grievances particularly dealing with blasphemy of westernization and what they call the government betrayal framing as existential threats that justify violence. The state response towards the emergence of religious extremism has been erratically contradictory and at sometimes supportive silent or benevolent strike. While at one end organization bans posed, state permitted certain groups to operate under different names or political disguises. In this context, religion in Pakistan is not merely a spiritual or cultural element; it has become a strategic resource manipulated by militant groups to justify terrorism, by politicians to mobilize votes, and by regional actors to engage in ideological proxy warfare. The consequences are severe: deepening sectarianism, shrinking space for minorities, violent attacks on educational institutions, and increasing radicalization among youth. As author Karen Armstrong aptly noted,

"Religion is not inherently violent; rather, it becomes violent when it is used to mobilize hatred and justify power"

(Armstrong, 2014)

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the weaponization of religion in Pakistan requires a multidimensional theoretical lens that addresses both the construction of extremist narratives and the social identity dynamics that sustain them. This essay utilizes four interrelated theories: **Constructivism**, **Framing Theory**, **Political Islam**, and **Social Identity Theory**. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious ideology is mobilized, manipulated, and maintained in the Pakistani context.

Constructivism: Constructivism, as one of the principles in international affairs and political sociology, focuses on the concept of reality as something that is socially made. Wendt A.'s (1992) statement *"anarchy is what states make of it"* emphasizes how both international and domestic orders are not immutable and transcend fixed structures. Within the context of Pakistan, religious identity has not only been constructed socially but bound to politics from both state and non-state entities. Through constructivism, we can evaluate how violence-oriented ideologies are produced through discourse, education, and art aimed at symbolically creating divisions between 'us' and 'them'. In Pakistan, cultivating an Islamic national identity results in the denial of diverse religious traditions paving the way towards acceptance of exclusionary ideologies. Extremist groups promote Islam as a purely monolithic doctrine which enables them to vilify devotees of other faiths such as Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and even Hindus and justify their oppression as a holy struggle for maintaining religious sanctity. Constructivism helps analyze religion's role in delineating "real followers" from "false ones," which allows violence to be rationalized as morally justified *(Jackson & Sorensen 2016).*

Framing Theory: Framing Theory, originating from media and communication studies, is central to understanding how extremist actors craft narratives that resonate with the public. *Snow and Benford (1988)* argue that frames are interpretive schemata that enable individuals to locate, perceive, and label occurrences within their life space. Extremist organizations in Pakistan, such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) or the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), utilize highly emotive frames often rooted in blasphemy, honor, or anti-Western sentiment to justify their actions and gain public support.

For instance, the TLP's framing of blasphemy issues as existential threats to Islam mobilizes thousands of followers on the streets, pressuring the state to capitulate to their demands. Similarly, TTP's framing of the Pakistani military as an agent of Western secularism has helped them justify violent attacks on soldiers and civilians alike. Framing Theory helps explain how religious sentiments are not inherently extremist but are selectively emphasized and emotionally charged to serve strategic political and militant ends.

Political Islam: The concept of Political Islam or Islamism refers to the instrumental use of Islamic doctrines and identity for achieving political goals. As described by *Olivier Roy (2004),* Islamism is not a return to tradition but a modern ideological construct that uses religious references to challenge both secular governance and Western hegemony. In Pakistan, Political Islam became institutionalized during the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977–1988), when Sharia laws were introduced, blasphemy laws were strengthened, and jihad was promoted as state policy during the Afghan war. This ideological infrastructure later gave rise to non-state actors who adopted political Islam to contest state legitimacy. Groups such as SSP, LeJ, and the TTP do not merely oppose the state but claim religious legitimacy in doing so. Political Islam theory is vital in understanding how these actors interpret governance, law, and justice through their own theological lens often contradicting the modern, pluralistic constitutional structure of Pakistan *(Nasr, 2001).*

Social Identity Theory: Social Identity Theory, developed by *Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979),* posits that individuals derive a sense of self from the social groups to which they belong. This in-group/out-group dynamic fosters favoritism for one's group and prejudice against others, especially under conditions of perceived threat or marginalization. In the Pakistani context, sectarian groups often use religious identity to solidify in-group loyalty while dehumanizing the out-group. For instance, Sunni supremacist organizations like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan label Shia Muslims as apostates, creating a moral and social justification for violence. Similarly, Ahmadis are frequently portrayed as enemies of Islam, despite being peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Social Identity Theory is particularly useful in exploring the psychological dimensions of extremism how individual alienation and group-based narratives of victimhood lead to collective radicalization *(Hogg, 2006).*

Interplay of Theories: Together, these four theories provide a layered understanding of religious extremism in Pakistan. Constructivism explains how religious identities and ideologies are built; Framing Theory shows how these identities are emotionally charged and mobilized; Political Islam identifies the ideological goals behind religious militancy; and Social Identity Theory reveals the psychological and group dynamics that sustain extremist beliefs.

Research Questions:

1) How have extremist groups in Pakistan constructed and weaponized religious identity to gain ideological legitimacy?
2) What role has the state played directly or indirectly in enabling religious extremism?
3) How has digital media transformed the scale and method of religious radicalization in Pakistan?

Research Objectives:

1) To explore how religious narratives are constructed and weaponized by extremist actors in Pakistan.
2) To examine the historical and political role of the Pakistani state in shaping religious extremism.

3) To assess the impact of digital media on the spread and normalization of extremist ideologies.

Research Methodology: This research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating thematic analysis with a case study strategy. Sources of secondary data encompass peer-reviewed journals, newspaper archives, think tank reports, and government publications. The Lal Masjid siege serves as a central case study to demonstrate how extremist beliefs establish themselves, garner public backing, and confront the legitimacy of the state. Framing theory and content analysis were utilized to analyze media reports, speeches, and online content for narrative development

Literature Review: The roots of religious extremism in Pakistan lie not in the foundational idea of the country, but in the manipulation of religious identity by successive political regimes, regional geopolitical shifts, and state-sponsored ideologies.

Historical Evolution of Extremism in Pakistan: The origins of religious extremism in Pakistan are deep-seated in its political past, ideological foundations, and changing state policies. Since its birth in 1947, Pakistan struggled with the halting coexistence of Islamic identity and state, seeding fertile ground for the eventual weaponization of religion by state and non-state actors alike. The development of religious extremism in Pakistan has gone through a few crucial phases each characterized by changing domestic politics and outside pressures.

Ground-level Ambiguity and Initial Religious Mobilization (1947–1970s):
At independence, the founding vision of Pakistan had been intentionally vague over the position of religion in the state. Although Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah had fought for a secular Muslim nation famously declaring on 11 August 1947, "You are free to go to your temples, mosques or any other place of worship… that has nothing to do with the business of the state" the early governments were not able to institutionalize this vision of secularity. The Objectives Resolution of 1949 was an ideological realignment that, for the first time, wedded governance to Islamic tenets. This created space for religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami to demand further Islamization. During the ensuing decades, Islamic forces more and more dominated public debate, molding education, legislation, and social mores even though they had very little electoral standing.

Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization and the Emergence of Jihadism (1977–1988):
The actual turning point was during General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship (1977-1988), whose Islamization agenda in full tilt institutionalized religious identity into statecraft. His regime established Shariah courts, Hudood Ordinances, Zakat and Ushr system, and substantially overhauled educational curricula to be more theocratic in outlook. These policies not only pushed religious minorities and women to the sidelines, but also legitimized clerics and religious entities to become self-appointed custodians of religion. At the same time, the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) made Pakistan a front-line nation of the Cold War, bankrolled by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Thousands of madrassas were constructed — many of them under the Deobandi and Wahhabi thought to produce mujahideen fighters. Organizations such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and then Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) found themselves in this environment, radicalizing generations under the banner of jihad.

Post-9/11 Reconfiguration and the Spread of Domestic Extremism (2001–2014):
After 9/11, Pakistan faced immense international pressure to join the U.S.-led War on Terror. While the state publicly aligned with the West, elements within its security establishment covertly supported or tolerated militant proxies for strategic depth in Kashmir and Afghanistan. This dual

policy backfired, as groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) turned inward and launched brutal attacks on Pakistani soil, including the APS Peshawar massacre (2014). During this era, sectarian violence, blasphemy-related lynchings, and targeted killings intensified. Religious extremism was no longer confined to tribal regions it had penetrated urban centers, educational institutions, and civil society. The Lal Masjid siege (2007) symbolized the breakdown between radical religious actors and the state, leading to long-term security consequences.

Emergence of Populist Religious Movements (2015–Present):

Post-2014 has witnessed the advent of populist religious parties such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which acquired enormous street strength by rallying on touchy religious issues such as blasphemy. These parties don't hide in the shadows like old militant groups rather, they challenge state power openly and influence political dialogue, frequently pushing the government into appeasement through the use of violent protests. At the same time, the digital era has facilitated the viral dissemination of extremist ideology using vehicles such as WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. Young people are being radicalized not just in madrassas but also through echo chambers online, where selective religious readings are used as weapons without context.

Impact of Weaponized Religion on Society and National Security:

The systematic weaponization of religion in Pakistan has left a profound and dangerous imprint on the nation's societal dynamics and security landscape. Through the manipulation of religious sentiment for political, ideological, or militant ends, both state and non-state actors have created a volatile environment where violence, intolerance, and radicalization have become normalized. The consequences range from institutional erosion and sectarian fragmentation to the rise of religious vigilantism and national security paralysis.

Polarization and Fragmentation of Society:

The spread of extremist religious narratives has significantly fractured Pakistani society along sectarian and ideological lines. Groups such as Ahmadis, Shias, Hazaras, and even Barelvi Sunnis have faced violent discrimination and exclusion. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), over 4,000 people were killed in sectarian violence in Pakistan between 2001 and 2023, with thousands more injured (SATP, 2024). A 2022 report by Pew Research Center found that over 70% of Pakistanis support making Sharia the official law, and many consider apostasy and blasphemy to warrant the death penalty. These figures reflect an intensified public alignment with conservative interpretations of Islam, making society vulnerable to extremist manipulation (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Rise in Mob Violence and Blasphemy Vigilantism:

Religious weaponization has emboldened mob justice, particularly in the context of blasphemy accusations, which are often rooted in fabricated or personal disputes. Between 1987 and 2023, at least 1,900 people were accused of blasphemy, and at least 85 were killed extra-judicially before any legal process could occur (Centre for Social Justice, 2023). High-profile cases include:

- Mashal Khan (2017): A university student lynched on false blasphemy charges.
- Priyantha Kumara (2021): A Sri Lankan manager lynched in Sialkot by factory workers.
- Mardan Temple Incident (2023): A Hindu temple was attacked over rumors of desecration.

These acts are often captured and celebrated on social media, creating a dangerous culture of religious vigilantism, fueled by both offline and online radical content.

Impact on National Security and Counter-Terrorism:

Religious extremism, in its most weaponized form, has directly challenged Pakistan's internal security. Groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) have used

religious justification to conduct attacks against military installations, police forces, and civilians. Between 2001 and 2023, Pakistan lost over 83,000 lives to terrorism, with the majority of attacks carried out under religious pretexts (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). Despite military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), the ideological machinery behind extremism remains largely intact. Extremist organizations often re-emerge under new names and continue recruiting by portraying the state as "un-Islamic" or "Westernized," which undermines the state's legitimacy and weakens its control over peripheral regions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Suppression of Civil Liberties and Academic Freedom:

Religious weaponization has extended its reach into academic institutions, journalism, and civil discourse. Teachers, journalists, and human rights defenders face threats and harassment for challenging extremist interpretations. According to Amnesty International (2022), Pakistan ranks among the top countries where blasphemy laws are misused to silence dissent, especially against minorities and progressive voices. Academic research on religious pluralism or interfaith harmony is often censored or avoided due to fear of retribution, resulting in a shrinking intellectual space and the stifling of counter-narratives.

Role of Social Media in Religious Radicalization in Pakistan:

The digital age has revolutionized the way extremist religious ideologies are constructed, disseminated, and consumed. In Pakistan, the weaponization of religion has extended from the pulpit to the pixel, as extremist groups increasingly utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok to propagate hate, recruit followers, and incite violence. These platforms act as echo chambers where selective religious narratives are amplified, decontextualized, and emotionally manipulated to radicalize impressionable minds especially the youth.

Digital Ecosystem of Radical Content:

Social media enables extremist clerics and groups to circumvent traditional gatekeeping structures (e.g., state censorship, editorial oversight) and directly reach large audiences. Platforms like YouTube are flooded with religious speeches (often in Urdu or regional languages) that glorify martyrdom, vilify minority sects, or attack secularism. According to a 2021 report by Digital Rights Foundation, extremist groups have created "micro-influencers of hate" by building large followings among young users, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas (DRF, 2021). Even banned outfits like Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have used social media as a political weapon. During the 2021 protests, TLP used Twitter and WhatsApp to mobilize thousands of supporters within hours, spread anti-state narratives, and circulate videos of violent clashes often edited to portray themselves as martyrs of Islam (Abbas, 2021).

Decontextualization and Emotional Framing:

Extremist content on social media is typically stripped of religious nuance. Verses from the Qur'an or Hadiths are presented without context, often paired with background music, emotional speeches, or visuals of suffering Muslims in Kashmir, Palestine, or Myanmar. This emotional framing triggers outrage, bypasses critical thinking, and reinforces binary worldviews such as "Islam vs the West", or "true believer vs apostate" (Yusuf, 2022). Short-form content like TikTok videos and Instagram reels is particularly dangerous because it uses quick dopamine-driven engagement to radicalize users in subtle but consistent ways. A 2022 study by PakVoices revealed that some TikTok accounts sharing incendiary religious content had over 500,000 followers, despite repeated bans and takedowns (PakVoices, 2022).

Targeting of Marginalized Groups:
Social media is frequently used to spread disinformation and incite hatred against Ahmadis, Shias, Hindus, and Christians. False blasphemy accusations are often amplified online, sparking offline violence. For instance, before the 2021 lynching of Priyantha Kumara in Sialkot, a fabricated narrative branding him a blasphemer spread rapidly via WhatsApp groups directly contributing to the mob violence (BBC, 2021). According to the Centre for Social Justice (2023), at least 40% of blasphemy-related mob incidents over the past five years had an online component either in the form of viral hate speech, fake screenshots, or doctored videos.

Weak Regulatory Oversight:
Despite the known risks, regulatory oversight remains weak. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) often blocks political content or pornography but is less consistent in removing hate-driven religious material. The lack of digital literacy, combined with algorithmic amplification, allows extremists to game the system and rebuild digital networks even after takedowns (Baloch, 2023). Moreover, freedom of speech vs hate speech remains a blurry legal line, which complicates judicial responses. Existing laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, are poorly enforced when it comes to prosecuting online radicalization.

Challenges to Countering Extremism in Pakistan:
While Pakistan has launched multiple initiatives to curb religious extremism ranging from military operations like Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) to the national counter-narrative Paigham-e-Pakistan (2018) the results have remained limited. The persistence of religious radicalization stems from a complex set of structural, ideological, political, and institutional challenges that have hindered sustained progress.

Legacy of State Complicity and Strategic Use of Religious Militancy:
One of the most enduring challenges is the historical complicity of the Pakistani state in nurturing certain religious groups for strategic depth in regional conflicts particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir. During the 1980s and 1990s, jihadist groups were supported as instruments of foreign policy, which blurred the line between militancy and patriotism. According to the International Crisis Group (2023), even after 9/11, some groups were treated as "good militants" due to their strategic value, while only "bad militants" who attacked the state were targeted. This selective counterterrorism policy created grey zones where extremism was tolerated or even empowered.

Politicization of Religion and Electoral Incentives:
Many mainstream political parties have sought alliances with sectarian or religious outfits for electoral gain. For example, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), despite being associated with violent protests, was allowed to participate in elections and negotiate with the state. These compromises send mixed signals to the public and embolden extremist groups. As per HRCP (2022), such political maneuvering undermines de-radicalization efforts and fuels a perception that the state lacks the political will to challenge religious extremism.

Weak Judicial Response and Legal Ambiguity:
The legal system in Pakistan has struggled to effectively prosecute hate speech, incitement, or religious violence. Blasphemy laws are widely misused and rarely subjected to judicial scrutiny. At the same time, hate preachers and banned outfit leaders often evade consequences by exploiting legal loopholes, changing organizational names, or securing political protection. According to the Centre for Social Justice (2023), only a fraction of blasphemy-related violence leads to convictions, and even fewer result in meaningful deterrence. Meanwhile, anti-terrorism courts often delay high-profile cases, reducing public trust in the rule of law.

Madrassa Networks and Education System Deficiencies:
Despite repeated promises of reform, over 30,000 unregistered madrassas continue to operate across Pakistan (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2023). Many follow rigid sectarian curricula and promote exclusionary ideologies. Simultaneously, public school textbooks also contain sectarian biases and lack emphasis on critical thinking, religious pluralism, or civic values. A study by the Brookings Institution (2022) found that only 14% of madrassa students in Pakistan receive education beyond religious instruction, contributing to limited worldview and vulnerability to radical ideologies.
Social Media Radicalization and Digital Illiteracy:
As explored earlier, digital platforms have become fertile grounds for radical content. The state's response remains reactive rather than preventive. Efforts to monitor online hate speech are under-resourced, and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 is inconsistently applied. Furthermore, a lack of digital literacy among youth makes them more susceptible to viral religious propaganda, emotional manipulation, and decontextualized religious messaging (DRF, 2021).
Public Sympathy and Social Legitimacy of Extremist Groups:
Some extremist religious figures enjoy public admiration and are seen as defenders of Islam rather than threats to national security. When individuals like Mumtaz Qadri are celebrated as martyrs or shrines are built in their honor, it reflects a deep-seated public sympathy for religiously framed violence.This creates a social environment resistant to counter-extremism narratives, especially when those narratives are perceived as Western, secular, or anti-Islam.

Case Study: Lal Masjid Siege (2007)
The Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) episode stands out as one of the most powerful illustrations of the weaponization of religion in Pakistan. Situated in the heart of Islamabad, Lal Masjid was not just a religious institution but a symbol of growing extremism that challenged the authority of the state under the cover of Islamic activism. The events leading to the 2007 military operation against the mosque revealed the extent to which radical ideologies had embedded themselves into urban religious networks and how state indecisiveness, followed by brute force, created a national crisis that reverberates to this day. The mosque was run by two clerics, Maulana Abdul Aziz and his brother Abdul Rashid Ghazi, both of whom preached a rigid, militant interpretation of Islam. Over the years, the mosque's affiliated madrassas particularly Jamia Hafsa, a seminary for female students became hotbeds for ideological indoctrination. By 2006–07, the mosque's leadership began taking the law into their own hands, launching an aggressive moral policing campaign in Islamabad. Their followers' kidnapped women allegedly involved in prostitution, attacked music shops, burned CDs, threatened businesses deemed un-Islamic, and issued warnings to government officials. Despite these open challenges to state authority, the government remained reluctant to act, fearing backlash from religious circles and conservative political elements. This hesitation reflects a broader trend in Pakistan's history where religious militancy is often tolerated or ignored until it erupts into crisis.

By July 2007, tensions had reached a boiling point. The government surrounded the mosque, urging the clerics to surrender. Negotiations failed as the mosque's leadership refused to back down, emboldened by their belief in divine justification and growing public sympathy. The siege escalated into a violent confrontation, culminating in a military operation named **"Operation Silence."** The operation lasted several days and involved fierce fighting between Pakistani security forces and armed students holed up inside the mosque complex. Over a hundred people were killed, including students, militants, and security personnel. Abdul Rashid Ghazi was killed during the operation, while Maulana Abdul Aziz was famously captured while trying to flee disguised in a

burqa. While the government justified the operation as a necessary step to reassert state writ and eliminate a growing extremist threat, the aftermath proved far more complex. Religious groups across the country reacted with outrage. The operation was framed by radical elements as a war against Islam, with Abdul Rashid Ghazi portrayed as a martyr who died defending the faith. Militant organizations, particularly the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), began citing the Lal Masjid operation as a rallying cry for revenge, launching a wave of suicide attacks against security forces and civilians. In the months that followed, Pakistan experienced a dramatic surge in terrorist violence, much of it directly linked to the anger and radicalization triggered by the siege. One of the most troubling results of the Lal Masjid incident was the level of public empathy expressed for the mosque's leaders. Instead of facing condemnation for unlawful actions and armed resistance against the state, the clerics were welcomed by parts of the population as champions of Islam. Thousands were present at Ghazi's funeral, memorials and shrines were built in his honor, and Maulana Abdul Aziz began preaching again soon after his release from house arrest. This exaltation of rebellion in the name of religion demonstrated how profoundly extremist ideologies had infiltrated societal awareness. It also showed how the exploitation of martyrdom, sacrifice, and religious legitimacy might be utilized to rationalize violence and weaken state authority. The state's reaction added to this confusion. Following a comprehensive military operation, the government seemed to reverse its stance by releasing Maulana Aziz and permitting his return to Lal Masjid. This fluctuating approach first addressing extremism and then yielding to it fostered a sense of fragility and unpredictability. The communication to the public was unclear: the state could not or would not maintain its position against religious extremism in the face of public anger or political influence. Consequently, the radicals' long-lasting ideological defeat was never realized. Instead, they came back more powerful, equipped not only with weapons but also with the story of victimization.

The Lal Masjid incident showcases various aspects of how religion is manipulated as a weapon in Pakistan. It started with the tactical application of faith to confront the government, progressed into the armed transformation of a religious organization, and ended with a post-action narrative construction that converted fighters into heroes. The event revealed both the ideological power of religious extremism and the structural and political vulnerabilities of the state. It illustrated how religious legitimacy, once asserted, can serve as a potent instrument to avoid accountability, escape justice, and secure widespread backing even amid armed insurgency. Possibly most concerning, the case demonstrated how inadequate state action, when not accompanied by persistent ideological counter-narratives, can inadvertently amplify the extremism it aims to eradicate. The state's neglect in implementing educational reform, de-radicalization initiatives, and judicial accountability resulted in a void where extremist ideologies thrived. The story of Lal Masjid continues to be shared in religious communities and on online platforms, not as a warning about militancy, but as a heroic tale of sacrifice against secular oppression.

Policy Recommendations to Counter the Weaponization of Religion in Pakistan:

Develop and Institutionalize Counter-Narratives:
Extremist ideologies thrive in the absence of strong counter-narratives. The state must proactively promote pluralistic, inclusive, and contextually grounded Islamic interpretations that reject violence and uphold coexistence. The existing initiative, Paigham-e-Pakistan, though symbolically significant, remains underutilized due to poor dissemination, lack of credibility, and limited clerical reach.

Recommendations:

1. Empower moderate scholars from all sects, especially from Deobandi and Salafi backgrounds, to engage directly with communities.
2. Integrate Friday sermons (khutbas) into national counter-extremism messaging, without politicizing them.
3. Utilize radio, TV, YouTube, and TikTok to push engaging counter-narrative content in regional languages.
4. Frame counter-narratives around Islamic history and values of tolerance, rather than mere slogans of peace.

Reform Madrassa and Religious Education:

Madrassas remain influential in shaping young minds, especially in lower-income communities. While many offer free education and shelter, some promote sectarianism, exclusivism, and obedience to clerical authority above state institutions. A comprehensive madrassa reform program must target curriculum, registration, and integration with national education policy.

Recommendations:

1. Make registration of all madrassas mandatory, with transparent financial audits and academic inspections.
2. Introduce core subjects (math, science, civics, computer literacy) alongside religious studies.
3. Revise textbooks (in both madrassas and public schools) to remove sectarian bias, promote critical thinking, and include teachings on diversity and constitutional rights.
4. Launch teacher-training programs focused on de-radicalization pedagogy.

Strengthen Legal Frameworks Against Hate Speech and Extremism:

Despite the presence of blasphemy and anti-terror laws, hate speech, incitement to violence, and sectarian agitation continue largely unchecked. Part of the problem lies in legal ambiguity, enforcement gaps, and political reluctance to challenge religious groups.

Recommendations:

1. Enact a dedicated Anti-Hate Speech and Incitement Act, distinct from anti-terror laws, with protections for religious minorities.
2. Enhance the capacity of law enforcement and judiciary to handle cases related to religious violence and incitement.
3. Establish special courts or tribunals for speedy trials of sectarian crimes and public incitement.
4. Protect judges, lawyers, and witnesses from clerical intimidation through witness protection programs.

De-Politicize Religion in Electoral Politics:

The mainstreaming of extremist groups for electoral expediency has allowed radical ideologies to gain public legitimacy. Parties such as TLP and SSP have exploited blasphemy narratives to mobilize street power and contest elections, often securing favorable deals from the state in times of unrest.

Recommendations:

1. Implement strict Election Commission regulations banning the use of religion, sect, or blasphemy charges as campaign tools.

2. Prohibit registered parties from affiliating with banned outfits or individuals involved in hate speech.
3. Amend electoral laws to prevent sectarian groups from registering under new names after being banned.

Regulate Digital Platforms and Counter Online Extremism:

Digital spaces have become the new battleground for extremist propaganda. Hate sermons, blasphemy accusations, and sectarian incitement are widely circulated on WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook. Without active monitoring, these platforms amplify toxic narratives and normalize violence.

Recommendations:

1. Strengthen cooperation with social media companies for quicker takedown of extremist content.
2. Train FIA's Cyber Crime Wing to identify and dismantle digital extremist cells.
3. Launch national media literacy campaigns, especially in schools and universities, to build resistance against digital manipulation.
4. Invest in AI-powered tools to monitor viral trends, hashtags, and accounts spreading religious hatred.

Engage Civil Society and Community Leaders:

Top-down state solutions are insufficient without grassroots participation. Civil society organizations, teachers, clerics, parents, and local leaders must be empowered to detect and deter radicalization at the community level.

Recommendations:

1. Fund local NGOs and religious institutions working on interfaith harmony and peace education.
2. Involve female religious scholars and educators in shaping de-radicalization initiatives in both madrassas and homes.
3. Establish community peace councils to mediate sectarian tensions before they escalate into violence.
4. Encourage youth-led peacebuilding initiatives in schools, universities, and mosques.

Rebuild Public Trust in State Institutions:

Radicalization often thrives in environments of mistrust, injustice, and perceived persecution. When the state is seen as unjust, corrupt, or anti-Islamic, extremist narratives gain legitimacy. Therefore, counter-extremism must go hand-in-hand with broader efforts to improve governance and access to justice.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure transparent trials in religiously sensitive cases.
2. Promote equal treatment of all sects and minorities in public service delivery.
3. Increase state presence and development projects in radicalism-prone regions, such as South Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and parts of Balochistan.
4. Reinforce constitutional values of pluralism, tolerance, and equality through mass civic education.

Conclusion:

The weaponization of religion in Pakistan is not merely a byproduct of fanaticism but a deliberate and strategic enterprise that exploits faith for political, ideological, and militant ends. Through an analysis of its historical roots, theoretical underpinnings, and strategic manifestations, it becomes evident that extremist narratives have been cultivated and sustained through state complicity,

educational gaps, legal inertia, and societal vulnerabilities. As highlighted in the case of the Lal Masjid siege, when religion is co-opted to challenge state authority, the resulting conflict extends beyond law and order it ruptures the social contract, fuels cycles of violence, and erodes the legitimacy of both religious and civic institutions. The failure to deconstruct these narratives ideologically has allowed extremist discourse to persist, mutate, and regain ground despite episodic crackdowns. True counter-extremism must go beyond militarized responses to include intellectual, legal, and cultural interventions that reclaim the narrative space. This demands a collective national effort to redefine the relationship between religion and the state one that preserves religious freedom but rejects its exploitation for violence and division. In reclaiming this space, Pakistan must invest in inclusive education, pluralistic religious discourse, social justice, and credible governance. Only by addressing the structural enablers of extremism can the nation inoculate itself against the recurring threat of religious militancy. As the world-renowned philosopher Karl Popper once warned:

"Those who promise us paradise on earth never produced anything but a hell."

Let this serve as a reminder that unchecked religious utopianism when fused with power can transform sacred ideals into tools of destruction. Pakistan's path forward lies not in suppressing religion, but in liberating it from those who wield it as a weapon.

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