

Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves and remember Allah's Favor on you, for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts together, so that, by His Grace, you became brethren..... ***The Noble Qur'an 3:103, 105***

If there is one year in which the fate of our region was sealed it was 1979. In Pakistan, a democratically elected Government was overthrown in a military coup followed by the hanging of the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a controversial court verdict. In the same year, in Iran the 2500 years of continuous monarchy ended when the King of Iran Reza Shah had to leave the country against the popular Islamic revolution lead by Ayatollah Imam Khomeini. In the same year the Socialist Republic of USSR invaded Afghanistan forcing many to migrate from Afghanistan to their eastern and western neighbors.

In the year 1980, the US – Iran diplomatic relations broke down completely when the staff of the US embassy was made hostage in Tehran. On the other side, for the US, the Soviets came closer to Arabian Sea, gulping another country in its fold. For the neocons in the US they were in a situation in this part of the Middle East. It had lost a major ally “Iran” the policeman of the Middle East to anti West Islamic Regime. In Iran & Afghanistan US had unfriendly powers. Considering these developments, the US did what every King would have done to retain its power. The Brzezinski strategy of pitching the ally against the enemy was at work. In order to get its influence back, it supported, encouraged Military Dictator of Iraq Saddam Husain to attack Iran on one side and took the other Military dictator Gen Zia ul Haq on board to fight the USSR in Afghanistan. In both cases KSA remained an obedient friend who was used frequently to meet the end objective.

In the backdrop of these conflicts, some smaller events were cooking up in a peaceful land of Punjab.

In 1978, a renowned Shia cleric Mufti Jaffar Hussain formed a political party called “Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiq-e-Jafria” (TNFJ) with the objective of giving the Shia's a common political forum to address their grievances arising out of what they regarded discriminative policies of Gen Zia - ul –Haq. Mufti Jaffar Hussain worked extensively to connect Shia's across Pakistan under the banner of Millat-e-Jafria or sometimes called TNFJ. In 1983, after his demise, a well-known Shia cleric Arif-ul-Hussaini took the charge. Alama Arif-ul-Hussaini was also the official representative of Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, for dispensation of his religious rulings in Pakistan. After taking over, Alama Arif ul Hussaini made it clear that the intention of his party is to safeguard the religious interests of Shias. The teachings of Imam Khomeini were spread religiously across Shia community which was previously not actively connected. Alama Arif-ul-Hussaini worked for inter sectarian harmony especially with the Ahl-e-Sunnat religious leaders which earned him a respectable name for Itihad-e-Bain-ul-Muslemeen.

Within two year of Arif-ul-Hussaini's activism for Pakistani Shias, in Sept 1985, a Sunni Deobandi organization called Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was formed in District Jhang by Mulana Haq Nawaz

Jhangvi and his five associates. Its stated goal was to deter major Shia influence in the wake of Iranian revolution. It wished Pakistan, Sunni state and declared Shias non-Muslims. The organization also demanded the restoration of Khilafat. It started abusing Shias on general and Imam Khomeini in particular, publically in their rallies. A BBC documentary "Assignment" covered their rallies extensively in Pakistan. Being anti-Iran and anti-Shia the ideological & financial support for this organization started coming from the same source that was funding Afghan Jihad. Though Mujahedeen & SSP had clearly two different objectives but they had a common beneficiary. SSP started spreading its wings in Punjab, Sindh and particularly Gilgit & Sakardu which had a significant Shia population.

Interestingly the head of Millat-e-Jafria, Alama Arif-ul-Hussaini had a base in his ancestral village in Parachinar in the then NWFP. This district had a Shia majority population with borders connecting to Afghanistan from three sides. Considering the proximity of Parachinar with Afghanistan Pakistani establishment started settling in Afghan Mujahedeen in the otherwise Shia populated district. Within 8 years of this strategic relocation, the demographics of Parachinar changed completely. The Kalashnikov brandishing Mujahedeen with their "Jihad" mindset saw their Shia hosts as infidels and a 5th column of Iran who were strategically not aligned with them. Alama Arif-ul-Hussaini was very vocal about it. He started a campaign against the appointments of Maliks in his district and demanded the expulsion of political agent who he felt were in cahoots with the Mujahedeen.

On a political front Alama Arif-ul-Hussaini arranged a famous Quran o Sunnat conference, on 6th July 1987 in Lahore, which saw massive crowd participation from Shia, Ahl-e-Sunnat, Barelvi sects. The impressive turn out alerted many who perceived him and his movement as a threat to their cause. It was later confirmed by a senior journalist that all Urdu and English newspapers of 7th July were taken by the US embassy in Islamabad and many cassettes of the 6th July program were sent to the USA. 11 months later on 5th Aug 1988, Alama Arif ul Hussain Al Hussaini was shot dead in his Iranian funded Madrassa in Parachinar. Though it is still not revealed who really was behind the conspiracy and how many took part in it, but it is confirmed that the Captain Majid Raza Gillanii who was once deputed by the army in the protection team of President Gen Zia ul Haq, played a key role in his execution. This was the first high profile sectarian murder in Pakistan's history and probably the end of inter sectarian harmony. Killing of Alama Arif ul Hussaini was not less than killing of Ambassador of Iran in Pakistan while on official duty. He was the conduit between the Iranian clergy and Pakistani Shia population.

The next decade saw a blood bath of tit for tat in which common man suffered. An average Pakistani who was far away busy in making both ends meet was in shock.

His murder was suspected on SSP who was backed by the establishment to counter potential Iranian influence. The establishment's focus was not "Shias in general" but the "Iranian Influence" whereas the SSP the counter force which was used for that purpose considered both as the same thing. SSP was very active in anti-Shia propaganda rallies, literature, and wall chalkings. It wasn't surprising to see a tit for tat killing of the founder of SSP, Molana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi within few months. This murder was well thought through and couldn't have been an act of individual. According to some information, the person who shot him, fled to Karachi. An influential friend in the Army took him to the airport while in uniform to help him board a Dubai bound flight. Later the army officer was arrested and court martialed. For some odd reason, the SSP suspected a political leader Sheikh Iqbal from Jhang in this murder conspiracy. Within few days Sheikh Iqbal's brother was murdered allegedly by SSP activists. They also used the murder of Molana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi as a further propaganda tool against the general Shia population. The result was obvious, Iranian diplomat Sadiq Ganji was killed in 1990 when he was coming out of the Ambassador Hotel Lahore. The person who shot at him was a young madrassa student Riaz Basra, who till then was little known. Very recently it was revealed that the other person who was sitting with him

giving directions was a lower level ISI operative Atif from Pakistan Air force. However, its still not clear whether he acted alone or on someone's direction.

There is a different angle of looking at these acts. It is a fact now that the CIA provided "Stinger Missiles" to Mujahideen as part of Operation Cyclone. These were the shoulder-fired, antiaircraft weapons that they used against Soviet helicopters and that later were in circulation among terrorists who have fired such weapons at commercial airliners. In late 80s the war with the USSR was over. CIA was looking for the leftover stocks to be taken back as they didn't want anyone else to get that smart weapon. Apparently, the Pakistani establishment was trying to buy back these Stingers from open market via a middleman known as Mullah Rockety from Quetta. Iranian Gov. got to know about it. After 8 years of bloody war with Iraq they wanted to replenish their weaponry. It is rumored that the Iranian diplomat or even Alama Arif ul Hussaini might would have been eliminated by the CIA when it found out that they are negotiating "Stinger Missiles". It is generally perceived that the act was committed by the SSP, but under some level of support from the establishment, who was working with the CIA closely. Later CIA sent an audit team to Ojri Camp in Rawalpindi to get the "Stinger Missile stocks". Few days before their arrival, the army depot at Ojri camp mysteriously had a blast, triggering multiple blasts, few deaths & a national tragedy. ISPR came out with a strong patriotic campaign on how the brave soldiers manually took out the unexploded ammunition from the depot. The nation believed in the hidden hand of the ever active CIA. Facts point out to an internal hand which wanted to conceal the rich bounties from Afghan war. Its not surprising that later in Kargil conflict, Stingers were fired at Indian Air force shooting down at least a fighter plane and a chopper.

In the next few years, SSP geared itself up for political venture. It managed to secure one seat in the parliament. SSP head, Molana Azam Tariq who was wanted for murders, inciting for murders, was now the honorable Member of the Parliament. His stints in and out of the parliament continued till 2002. There were at least three attempts on his life but he survived most. Later he was shot dead by a group of Shia militants who came in an entourage bigger then SSP leader's caravans on a highway. Without establishments "green signal" it wouldn't have been possible. It seemed like SSP leader had served his purpose for its mentors.

In the meantime in 1992, Riaz Basra who was still at large after killing the Iranian diplomat was arrested under tremendous pressure from Iranian Gov. on Pakistan. However, his escape was managed successfully by his operators in 1994 while he was being taken out for a court hearing. Riaz Basra found SSP less militant then he wanted it to be. He made his career out of killings, he had more audacious plans. After his escape, he formed his own outfit by the name of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) named after the founder of SSP, which many regard as an underground militant arm of SSP which by then was a registered political party. Riaz Basra formed links with few Arab financiers and developed links with Taliban who were now fully active to take over Afghanistan. Taliban provided him with a base camp as well. LJ was behind numerous Shia targeted killings of lawyers, doctors and community leaders. The renowned CEO of PSO Mr. Shukat Mirza, was also shot dead by the same outfit outside PSO House in Karachi. From 1992 onwards the funding of SSP increased manifold. They started opening madrassas right, left and center. Now they had a political face and an underground militant wing. This increase in their activity and anti Shia propaganda resulted in more audacious attacks and killings during Moharram across the country. The common Shia came under attack as well when the Imam Bargahs and Shia Mosques were bombed. The result was creation of Sipah-e-Mohammad, a Shia militant wing, which started getting its funding from Iran and Shia sympathizers of the victims. They targeted SSP leadership one by one. There was even a day long pitch battle between Punjab Police & Sipah-e-Mohammad in Thokar Niaz Beg near Lahore. In Karachi, it had its bases in FB Area & Jafer-e-Tayar Colony. It was a state within state.

In later years Iranian Cultural centers in Multan and Lahore were also targeted by Riaz Basra. Another Iranian diplomat Mohammad Ali Rahimi was killed. Basra became a nightmare for the Pakistani Government. He was the most wanted fugitive of his time. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif led Gov. faced all the criticism of political impotence by general public and international pressure from Iran. It is also said that Riaz Basra shook Nawaz Sharif's hand while in a guise at Rai Wind at a public rally. He handed over an application which later turned out to be a "threat letter" stating that if I could shake your hand, I can take you down as well. After the incident Nawaz Sharif ordered to apprehend LJ at all cost. Many LJ terrorists were killed by police in staged encounters in Punjab. These encounters did scare them away but the root cause was yet not treated. Riaz Basra who was spearheading the attacks fled to Afghanistan. A senior Punjab police official Aslam Marth was assigned the task on the instructions of the then Prime Minister. He was instrumental in cracking down on LJ. He came very close to the source. He gathered evidences of foreign links, fund transfers, credit cards being issued from the US, the list of operators & their hierarchy. The Punjab Police Officer Marth was later shot dead while he was heading towards the tennis club in the same week.

Over 12000 people were killed in this insane violence which was unheard of in the subcontinent for centuries. The formation of LJ provided the conduit to many SSP trained militants to train alongside Taliban thus sowing the seed for Punjabi Taliban which the nation had to cultivate in the next decades. It was in 2001, when Gen Musharraf's Gov. announced non bail able arrest warrants of all Lashkar's and Sipah's calling them illegal private armies. Over 6000 militants with alleged links with SSP, Sipah-e-Mohammad or LJ were arrested across a country wide operation. Since, these were arrested under presidential order; therefore no one could dare to secure their release for few months. Police was given the task to gather evidences against them so that they could be tried in Anti-Terrorist Courts for speedy justice. Gen Musharraf also stated his Gov.'s policy of fighting the Taliban, a complete U-turn to Gen Zia-ul-Haq's policies. With this announcement the establishment didn't see any further use of SSP / LJ for the time being. Fearing arrests many of the SSP / LJ members moved to FATA. This gave them the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of Al Qaeda.

The war on terror brought a respite for Pakistan in terms of rest in sectarian violence. The SSP / LJ were busy with Taliban in fighting Jihad. Some leftover members of SSP had changed their plans and joined LeT for better career options. LeT was nonsectarian, Indian centric organization which had a stated policy to liberate Kashmir from Indian armed forces. Now that the war on terror is coming to an end, some wise brains have still not learnt from the past mistakes. Last year, under the umbrella of LeT, a new organization of Difa-e-Pakistan was formed. In order to strengthen the ranks of DeP, the SSP leader Molana Ishaq Ludhianvi, who was serving his 14 years in Lahore Central Jail, was released in Oct 2011. There are 44 murders linked to him. The court though has released him but he is under restrictive order. He cannot leave his district without prior approvals. However, he has influential friends in the high places which allow him to roam around freely and make speeches in rallies from Karachi to Islamabad. It's not a coincidence that his release has resulted in a series of attacks on Quetta Hazara Shias, Shia lawyers in Karachi, Shia pilgrimage bus in Baluchistan, Shia passengers in Gilgit Baltistan. In between these killings, two SSP lawyers were also shot dead in Karachi.

Unlike the 80, there are clearly no threats from Iranian influence probably there never were. However, the SSP which was created for the purpose to counter that perceived influence is still active under LJ and Defah-e-Pakistan umbrella. The attacks on Sunni Tehreek in Karachi, Christians in Gojra are all associated with this organization. Apparently there is an attempt by the establishment to redirect SSP (former or current militants) towards Afghan proxies or Kashmir cause. They have been brought under the umbrella which is headed by Hafiz Saeed who is completed India focused. SSP / LJ is now very active in

Balochistan. There are two key assumptions here. Either they have been assigned to keep any eye on "Iranian influence in Balochistan" or they have been sent there to join hands with the "Taleban" to get active in Afghanistan. In both cases it's a strategic mistake which has a far bigger downside. There will never be an end to Hazara killings in the Quetta. In few more months when they won't see any respite, this over half a million population will find friends somewhere. The game which was played in 90s in Punjab and Sindh will be played in Balochistan in the coming years.

The intelligent brains are at work again all in national interest leaving collateral damage for the democratic governments to manage. A common man doesn't see that. He complains for poor law and order situation. Politicians knowing fully well stay quite except "condemnation" because they fear to be labeled as anti-establishment. Media and Judiciary has started talking. Politicians are still quite. The half a million Pakistan army is also the victim of the same "strategy which only delivers on the defence objectives but destroys the social fabric in the process". The watchmen can only make "foreign / internal policy" purely from the defense point of view. They are trained to do so. The establishment is a fiercely patriotic. There is neither a question on their patriotism nor a question on their operational excellence. The problem comes when they see weak political government; disoriented diplomacy; and weaker economic clout. They being the ultra-patriots assume the role of the custodians of Pakistan and start getting engaged in the affairs which are not their domain at all. Pakistan needs a strong statesman who could redefine the job descriptions. If a leader comes on the shoulders of establishment, he won't be able to change anything. There was a reason why there was least sectarian violence in former President Musharraf's time. His crackdowns were effective. The religious, sectarian and even ethnic minorities felt relieved from this menace. What he eliminated from Pakistan has somehow is being resurfaced / reorganized these years. It seems like we are not learning at all. If the public will be more vocal, so will be the politicians and media as they just follow the masses and trends. A public backlash will redefine the domains quicker than what people expect. These are not 80s, today there is judicial activism, far greater public awareness and fierce media trial which gets picked up internationally. We as citizens of this country have a moral obligation to shout when we see the neighboring street on fire. You stay silent now, tomorrow the fire will be in your street.