

Changing Public Opinion on Sectarian Differences among Pakistanis: Some Trends from Gallup Pakistan History Project Polls Data by Abdullah Tajwar, Research Executive at Gallup Pakistan

Abstract: The conclusions presented in this article are predicated primarily on the results of a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, first in 1991 and again in 2015, with the intent of measuring changes in the sectarian divide among the Pakistani public over a time span of 24 years. This article also makes use of the results of three more surveys conducted by Gallup Pakistan, which further serve to illustrate a growing fragmentation and subsequent intolerance based on religious differences in Pakistani society. The primary survey asked the following question: ‘Some days before a few Sunni Ulema had offered prayers behind a Shia Alim. Some people have appreciated this while others believe that the prayer of Sunnis behind a Shia Imam is un-Islamic. What is your opinion?’ In 1991, 33% Pakistanis said that they believed it to be acceptable while 42% said that it was not acceptable and 25% had no opinion. Comparatively, in 2015, 27% people believed that a Sunni Muslim’s prayer behind a Shi’a Imam is acceptable while 48% believe that it is not acceptable and 26% did not have an opinion. Additionally, another survey, carried out by the Gilani Research Foundation in 2009 showed the influence enjoyed by Imams and religious clerics in Pakistani society. A nationally representative sample of 2578 men and women were asked the question: Who do you refer to for guidance in religious matters? The results showed that a majority of the respondents (37%) stated that they refer to religious leaders or Ulema for guidance in religious matters. Furthermore, 27% of the Pakistani public stated that they seek the guidance of an Imam for matters of religion. The proportion of the public that asked their family elders for religious guidance ranked in third at 24%. Meanwhile, 9% said that they follow their own understanding of religion while 3% chose to not respond. For the intent of measuring the importance of religion in the lives of Pakistanis, Gallup Pakistan conducted a survey in Pakistan in 2012 as part of the World Values Survey Sixth Wave, a survey administered in 60 other countries, whereby a nationally representative sample of 1200 men and women across the four provinces of Pakistan were asked the question: ‘Please tell us, how important is religion in your life?’ An overwhelming 90% of the people said that religion was Very Important in their lives, whereas 8% said it was Somewhat Important, while 1% said that it was not important. A further 1% also said that Religion is Not Important at All. Finally, with regards to gauging levels of tolerance among Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan, Gallup Pakistan conducted the fieldwork for a survey authored by Niloufer Siddiqui and Michael Kalin for their report on Religious

Authority and the Promotion of Sectarian Tolerance in Pakistan published by the United States Institute of Peace. The survey asked a series of questions intended to gauge the tolerance of the respondents for the sect other than their own. The survey was conducted for a representative sample of Shia and Sunni men and women across Punjab (1580 people) living within the vicinity of Shia and Sunni houses of worship, and a representative sample of Quetta (800 people), the capital of the province of Baluchistan. The respondents were asked three questions: "To what extent do you believe that a politician of a different sect can represent your concerns or solve the problems you and your community face?"; "To what extent do you agree with the statement that parents should not punish their children for marrying members of different sects, and that Sunnis should be free to marry a Shia and Shia free to marry Sunni?"; "To what extent do you agree with the statement that, if violence arises between Shia and Sunni communities, you should support the other sect if your group initiated the violence?". The results of the survey show that roughly six in ten Shia respondents expressed some level of agreement with statements about nonsectarian political representation, openness to sectarian intermarriage, and support to the other side in the event that one's own community initiates sectarian violence. By contrast, among the Punjabi Sunnis interviewed, overall agreement with any of these statements never went beyond 40 percent. 15 to 20 percent, however, were neutral. On the question of sectarian intermarriage, approximately one in three Sunnis surveyed indicated total disagreement. Among respondents from Quetta, total agreement with any of the statements was generally rare. 31% Shia respondents again expressed overall levels of agreement with the statements in higher proportions than Sunnis. A majority of Sunni respondents in Quetta expressed some level of disagreement with all of the statements on sectarian tolerance, with pronounced disagreement on sectarian intermarriage and the question of supporting the other side in the case of Sunni-initiated violence.

This schism is as ancient as Islam itself. Essentially born out of a politico-religious disagreement within the Muslim community with regards to succeeding the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of Islam, this cleavage would become a permanent feature of Islam after the death of Hussain ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the hands of the then self-proclaimed caliph Yazid, grandson of Abu Sufyan, a chieftain of the Ummayyad tribe of the Quraish and a most staunch opponent of Islam in the early days. These tidal events, happening in the time span of a mere century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, would forever divide the Muslims into two opposing camps of religious thought, namely the Shia and the Sunni school of thought. The branch that considered Ali ibn Abu Talib, nephew of

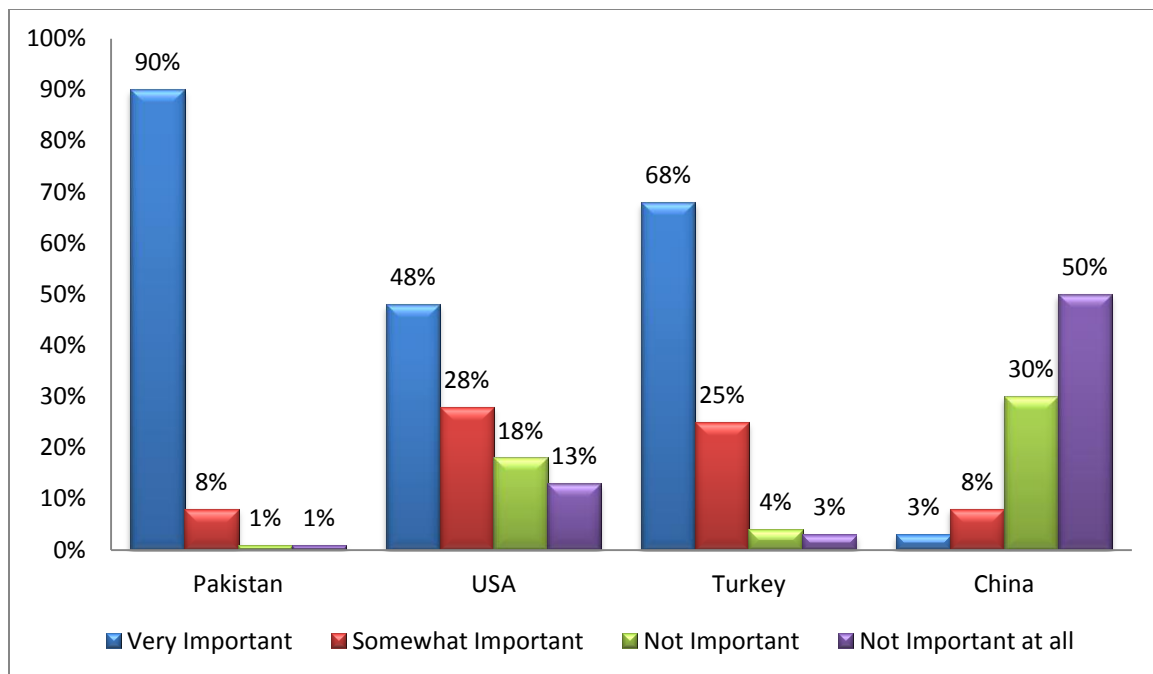
Prophet Muhammad, and the progeny of his house and their descendants as the rightful and divinely guided Imams or leaders of the entire Muslim community would be called the Shi'as. The other branch of the Muslims, that would oppose this thought and instead consider as legitimate the rule of the Rashidun or Rightly Guided Caliphs and after them any such person who was deemed capable of leadership by the Islamic community regardless of birth, would be called the Sunnis. These sects comprise the two largest denominations of Islam in today's world, with differences in certain beliefs, customs, traditions and matters of Islamic jurisprudence.

Though much of the Islamic World today is predominantly Sunni, there are sizeable Shia minorities, as well as majorities in countries such as Iran and Iraq. Pakistan, a rather populous country with a majority of people following Sunni Islam, also ranks as the country with one of the largest Shia populations, behind only Iran. Since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, the sectarian divide between these two religious denominations has mostly followed a rocky trajectory. At first, there wasn't a lot of animosity between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan and their relations, for the most part, remained nonviolent and civil. However, sectarianism in Pakistan became increasingly heightened in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, with the Ayatollah's thrust towards exporting Iran's ideology to the rest of the Muslim World culminating in a direct confrontation with the Saudi Arabian Monarchy, the official representative of Sunni Wahhabism in the world. Thus, Pakistan became a strategic battleground for Iran and Saudi Arabia as they vied with each other for gaining religious influence in Pakistan. This proxy war would have ominous consequences for Pakistan's society, as it would cause the Shia-Sunni divide to become increasingly politicized, and give rise to growing intolerance between the two largest religious denominations of Pakistan.

Pakistanis have always been a deeply religious lot. For a nation that was advertised as a homeland for the Muslims of India where they could live free from the dominance of the Hindu and freely practice their religion, it hardly seems extraordinary to see that the people of Pakistan take their religion very seriously. Islam has always been associated, in one way or another, with the state as well as with the public. The institutionalization of religion in Pakistan can be illustrated best by the former president of the state, Zia ul Haq, who promulgated an extensive Islamisation Programme for Pakistan, under which extensive legal amendments were made in Pakistan's legal system so as to make it in line with Islamic law or Sharia. However, this state sponsored Islamisation was bound to have major social repercussions for Pakistan because of the sole fact that Islam is not a monolith. Islam comprises of numerous orders, denominations and sects, with each one differing from the other in matters of religious doctrine,

traditions and jurisprudence. More importantly for Pakistan, having a predominantly Sunni population, any such measures that institutionalized a Sunni understanding of Islamic life were bound to be treated by the other religious minorities of Pakistan as oppressive and tyrannical. That is precisely what Zia's Islamisation achieved. Zia-ul-Haq was a Sunni Muslim and an adherent of the Deobandi school of thought within Sunni Islam. Therefore, much of the legal amendments that were fashioned under his Islamisation scheme naturally had their roots in the jurisprudence of an orthodox Sunni Islam of the Deoband School. Furthermore, organizations like the Jamat e Islami which was a Sunni religious political party were given free rein during his time to advance their scope into the institutions of the state as well as in the social sphere of Pakistan. Therefore, Islamisation caused the Barelvi order of Sunnis as well as the Shia community to become alienated from the state and ended up heightening Pakistan's sectarian divide as the Shia community opposed the legal injunctions that were not in line with Shia jurisprudence, thus becoming increasingly politicized in the process. As a result of these events, religion came out in the open in Pakistan, thus causing a community already awash with religious zeal to become even more involved with religion and between considerations of right and wrong within the Shia and the Sunni schools of thought.

To further emphasize this particular point empirically, Gallup Pakistan conducted a survey in Pakistan in 2012 as part of the World Values Survey Sixth Wave, a survey administered in 60 other countries, whereby a nationally representative sample of 1200 men and women across the four provinces of Pakistan were asked about the importance of religion in their lives. The question, to be specific, that was put forward to the Pakistani public was: Please tell us, how important is religion in your life? An overwhelming 90% of the people said that religion was Very Important in their lives, whereas 8% said it was Somewhat Important, while an almost negligible 1% said that it was not important. The same proportion (1%) also said that Religion is Not Important at All. Needless to say, an outright majority of People in Pakistan consider religion to be supremely important in their lives. Thus, one can effectively conclude, with empirical backing, that religion is a staple of the Pakistani public. A bar chart illustrated below provides a comparison of the statistics of this survey between Pakistan and a couple of other countries, thus showing, that even on a comparative basis, Pakistan outranks all other states in terms of the importance that is given to religion by the people.

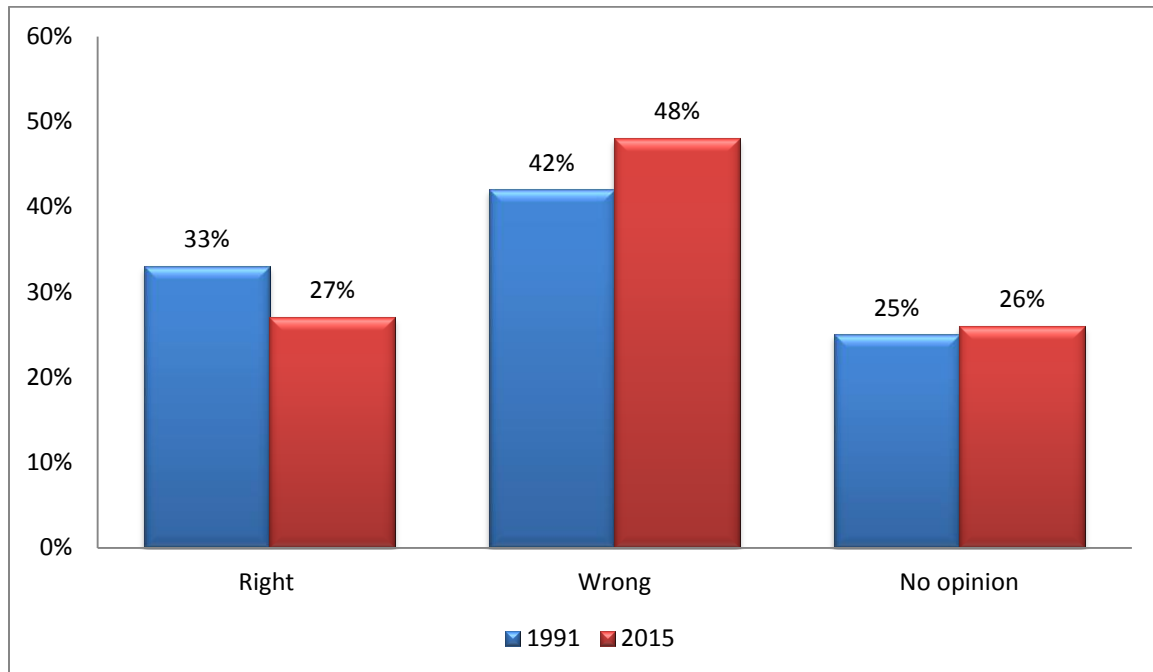


Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)

As can be seen above, the percentage of Pakistanis taking their religion very seriously is far above the proportion of People in the US, Turkey or China. This study provides an important conclusion for the overarching argument of this article. Firstly, that religion is deeply embedded within the social fabric of Pakistan. However, since Pakistanis are divided religiously on the basis of their respective sects, i.e. Shias and Sunnis, that means that people naturally follow their own interpretations of Islam, as per their respective denomination, but they follow them rather seriously. This therefore creates a problem for maintaining social order and harmony within Pakistan, in light of a growing intolerance between the two sects, since the people of Pakistan, split along religious differences, would be unwilling to compromise or soften their beliefs.

In lieu of this divide that has increasingly become more permanent over the years in Pakistan, Gallup Pakistan conducted a survey, once in 1991 and again in 2015, in order to gauge the prevalence of sectarianism among the Pakistani public while also making a comparison based on empirical evidence gathered over a time span of 24 years to document and analyze the changes within the sectarian divide among the Pakistani public. To be more specific, Gallup Pakistan conducted a national survey with the aim of identifying the opinion of the Pakistani public over embracing the act of praying by a Sunni Muslim behind a Shia Imam. The question asked in the survey is as follows: ‘Some days before a few Sunni Ulema had offered prayers behind a Shia Alim. Some people have appreciated this while others

believe that the prayer of Sunnis behind a Shia Imam is un-Islamic. What is your opinion?' The results of this questionnaire are presented in a table below and offer us a quantitative insight regarding the issues of religious intolerance and pluralism in Pakistan.

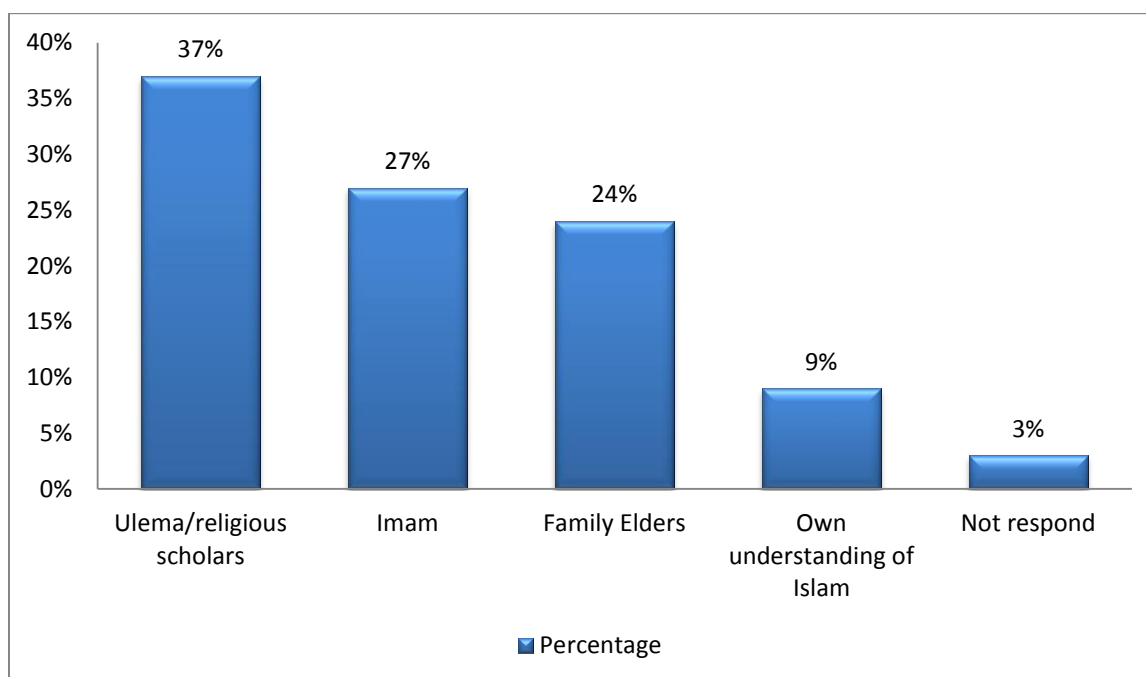


Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)

The results of this survey carried out on a representative sample of the Pakistani population show that the proportion of the Pakistani public that consider it acceptable for a Sunni Muslim to pray behind a Shia Imam reduced from 33 percent in 1991 to 27% in 2015. In contrast, the percentage of people that considered this act to be unacceptable rose by another six percent. Even in 1991, an outright majority (42%) of the public considered the act of praying behind a Shia by a Sunni Muslim to be unacceptable. This percentage rose even higher to 48% of the population in 2015, thus exhibiting the rise in intolerance among the two largest sects of Islam in Pakistan. The percentage of respondents who chose to not express their opinion on this question rose by a single percent, from 25 percent in 1991 to 26 percent in 2015.

These statistics unfortunately regurgitate the sad reality of Pakistani society which is still a long way away from becoming pluralistic and tolerant of religious differences. In fact, based on the outcome of this survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, if anything, the religious differences between Shias and Sunnis seem to have become more entrenched within the social fabric, as can be seen by the fact that nearly

half of Pakistan's population simply considers it wrong for a Sunni to be standing in prayer behind a Shia Imam, despite the fact that both these sects fall under Islam and have no differences with each other over the essential tenets of Islam. The reason why this comparative study conducted by Gallup Pakistan serves as a significant indicator of religious tolerance between the Shias and Sunnis is also because of the position of the Imam and the religious leader or Alim in Pakistani society. To highlight the sway that an Imam exercises over the people in Pakistan, a survey was conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 2009 with the purpose of finding out who the public mostly goes to for guidance on matters of religion. This survey of the Gilani Research Foundation asked a nationally representative sample of 2578 men and women the following question: Who do you refer to for guidance in religious matters? The results showed that a majority of the respondents (37%) stated that they refer to religious leaders or Ulema for guidance in religious matters. Furthermore, 27% of the Pakistani public stated that they seek the guidance of an Imam for matters of religion. Ulema, the plural of Alim, is a word used for religious scholars who are considered an authority on religion as a result of their extensive knowledge on Islam. Imam is usually a title given to the leader of a mosque who leads the people in prayer and addresses them at the Friday prayer every week. Therefore, in that respect, an Imam is an important cog in the Pakistani society as he is in constant interaction with the public by virtue of leading the people at prayer. The proportion of the public that asked their family elders for religious guidance ranked in third at 24%. A meager 9% said that they follow their own understanding of religion while 3% chose to not respond. A tabular chart illustrated below shows these respective proportions of public opinion on religious guidance.



Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)

As can be seen above, an overwhelming 64 percent of the Pakistani public seeks the guidance of religious scholars and imams on matters of faith, thus highlighting their importance in the social setting of Pakistan. Therefore, as a result of their elevated position, the fact that a majority of Pakistanis deem it unacceptable to be praying behind an imam of the other sect points to a hardening of the sectarian divide within the country.

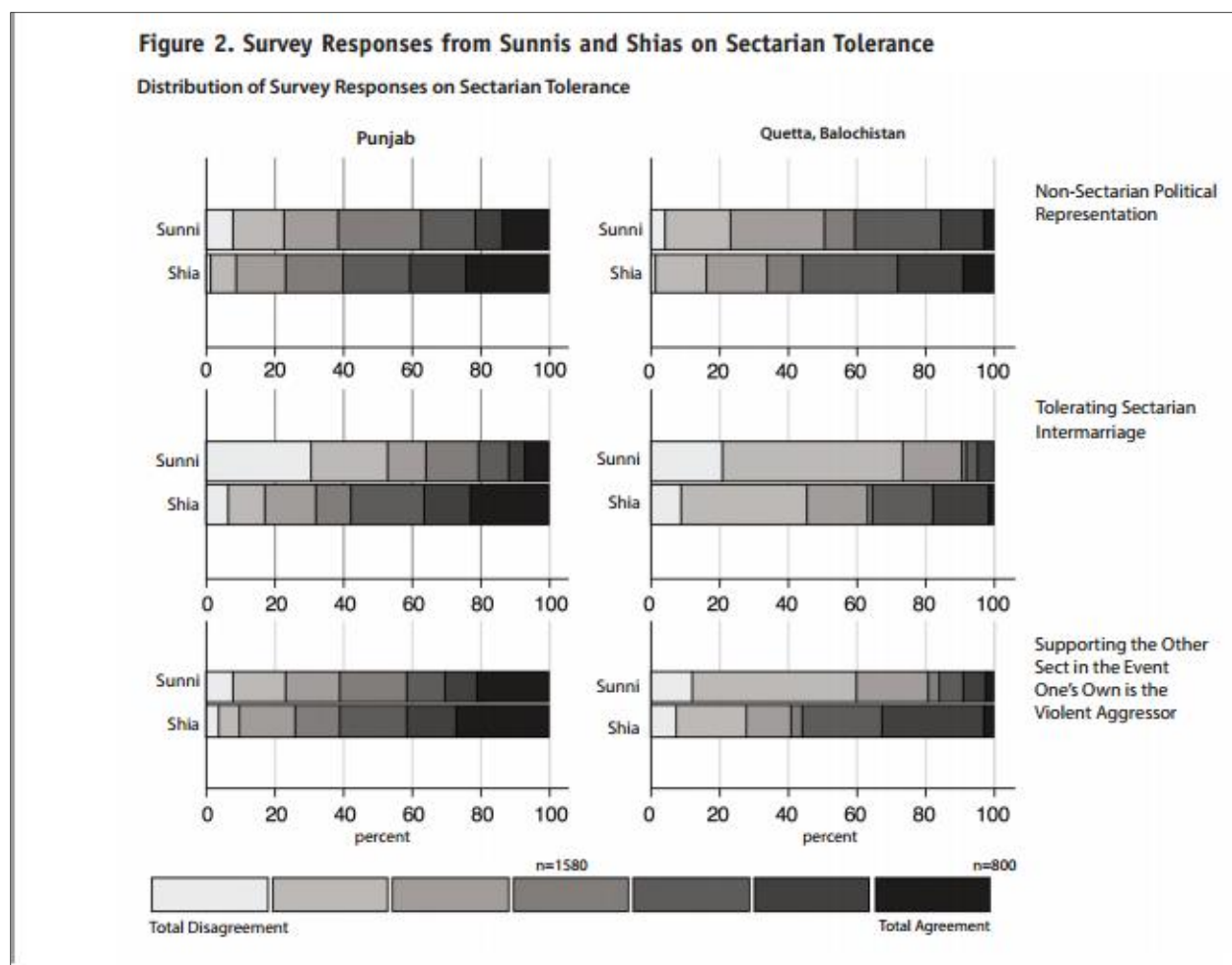
The empirical results of these public opinion polls conducted by Gallup Pakistan necessitate an explanation across time over the causes of a rise in religious intolerance in Pakistan since 1991. As has been stated earlier, it was Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation Programme that spawned an increase in the sectarian tendencies of Pakistanis. Furthermore, Pakistan's support for Afghanistan in the war against the Soviet Union in the 80s was also a contributory factor as Saudi Arabia and the US gave unprecedented aid to Pakistan in order to train and arm the Mujahedeen. The Afghan Mujahedeen were predominantly Sunni and this influx of money and arms further led to a strengthening of Sunni groups in Pakistan who were supportive of Afghanistan, thus laying the seeds for the future militant Sunni organizations operating in Pakistan to this day, with the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jahngvi and the more recent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan being the most prominent. Furthermore, the aid received at the time of the Soviet-Afghan War fuelled the exponential rise of Madrassas (religious schools) following the orthodox Deobandi sub-sect of Sunni Islam, thus causing sectarianism to seep into the grassroots of the country and providing a recruiting base for these militias. These militant organizations have, to date, carried out numerous terrorist attacks against Shias, Ahmadis and other religious minorities of Pakistan. However, militant groups have also been in operation among the Shia community of Pakistan, with the most notable one being the Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (the Soldiers of Muhammad), which was formed in the 90s as a response to the militant activities of the Sipah-e-Sahaba against the Shias in Pakistan. Iran has also been active in funding Shiite Religious Schools and Shia Alims in Pakistan as a counter to the numerous Sunni Madrassas operational in Pakistan today. However, what is even more alarming about this situation is the fact that these Madrassas are not administered by the state and are operating of their own free will. The madrassa curriculum is neither standardized nor is it approved by the Pakistani state. That is why madrassas have been deemed as significant potential recruiting grounds for terrorists and militants all over Pakistan.

The rise of terrorism in Pakistan in wake of the attacks of September 11th by the Taliban against America led to a worsening of relations between the Shias and Sunnis as the intensity of sectarian attacks increased exponentially in Pakistan. The 21st century history of Pakistan is littered with terrorist attacks of a sectarian nature, with the death toll going into the thousands. Although there have casualties on both sides of the religious divide, it is predominantly the Shias, being the minority, who have borne the greater brunt of terrorism. Furthermore, the rise of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has corresponded with an almost exponential rise in terror attacks against the Shia community of Pakistan, as the TTP has repeatedly made them a target in their war against the Pakistan Army. As recently as February 2015, the TTP claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a Shia Imambargah (Shiite Mosque and religious center) in Peshawar at the time of the Friday prayer in retaliation to the Army's Operation Zarb-e-Az. The attack brought to an immediate end the lives of a dozen innocent citizens. This incident is just one of many.

However, it is in Quetta, the Capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan District that has reported the most incidents of violence, perpetrated almost entirely against the Shia Hazara Community that resides there and in the larger province. Militant groups, particularly the Lashkar-e-Jahngvi have been operating with virtual impunity in Baluchistan, killing Shia Hazaras by the thousands. What is more disturbing and frightening for Pakistan is the fact that there has been no concrete and concerted action taken by the state, the judiciary and the security officials against the perpetrators of these attacks. The unwillingness or inability of Pakistan's civil and military institutions to bring these terrorists to justice has further given wind to the notion that they are sympathetic to the cause of these militants, thus showing the extent to which sectarianism is rife in Pakistan. According to the annual report of Human Rights Watch on Pakistan, over 400 members of the Shia Muslim population were killed in targeted attacks that took place across Pakistan while out of that total, Baluchistan province reported the deaths of at least 200 Shias, mostly from the Hazara community, who were killed in and around the provincial capital, Quetta. This horrifying statistic implies that the death toll of the Hazara community was nearly half that of the total number of deaths of Shias in 2013. Attacks have continued to take place against the Shias, despite the army initiating operation Zarb-e-Azb with the intent of rooting out terrorism from Pakistan.

Raging terrorism and the countless victims that it has produced, particularly among the peaceful Hazara Community and a lack of any large scale public protest or demonstration against these attacks by Pakistanis puts into perspective the level of intolerance that currently persists within the people. It is a regretful realization and conclusion to come to, but it is unfortunately the reality of Pakistan's polarized

society. The suspicion and animosity between these sects have reached alarming levels and the chances of espousing tolerance between Shias and Sunnis seem far and few in between. With the intent of empirically measuring levels of tolerance among Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan, Gallup Pakistan conducted the fieldwork for a survey authored by Niloufer Siddiqui and Michael Kalin for their report on Religious Authority and the Promotion of Sectarian Tolerance in Pakistan published by the United States Institute of Peace. The survey asked a series of questions intended to gauge the tolerance of the respondents for the sect other than their own. Specifically, the respondents were asked three questions, “To what extent do you believe that a politician of a different sect can represent your concerns or solve the problems you and your community face?”; “To what extent do you agree with the statement that parents should not punish their children for marrying members of different sects, and that Sunnis should be free to marry a Shia and Shia free to marry Sunni?”; “To what extent do you agree with the statement that, if violence arises between Shia and Sunni communities, you should support the other sect if your group initiated the violence?”. These three questions measured sectarian political representation, sectarian social distance and sectarian allegiance and violence initiation respectively. The survey was conducted for a representative sample of Shia and Sunni men and women across Punjab living within the vicinity of Shia and Sunni houses of worship, and a representative sample of Quetta, the capital of the province of Baluchistan. The results of the survey have been explained on a seven point Likert scale, with 1 indicating complete disagreement with the statement and 7 indicating complete agreement. Therefore, a higher number on the scale corresponded to greater tolerance. An image of the results compiled on the Likert Scales for these regions is shown below.



Source: Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion and Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering Punjab province, Quetta City and Urban/Rural areas)

The results of the survey indicated that In Punjab, roughly six in ten Shia respondents expressed some level of agreement (5 or above on the Likert scale) with statements about nonsectarian political representation, openness to sectarian intermarriage, and support to the other side in the event that one's own community initiates sectarian violence. By contrast, among the Punjabi Sunnis interviewed, overall agreement with any of these statements never went beyond 40 percent, although between 15 and 20 percent were neutral (4 on the Likert scale). Sunni respondents expressed pronounced disagreement on the question of sectarian intermarriage, with roughly one in three Sunnis surveyed indicating total disagreement (1 on the Likert scale). Among respondents from Quetta, total agreement with any of the statements was generally rare. 31 Shia respondents again expressed overall levels of agreement with the statements in higher proportions than Sunnis. There was general Shia disagreement

with the notion of sectarian intermarriage, but most Shias expressed some level of agreement with statements on nonsectarian political representation and supporting the other side if the Shia community initiated sectarian violence. Results for Sunni respondents in Quetta were troubling. A majority of Sunni respondents in Quetta expressed some level of disagreement with all of the statements on sectarian tolerance, with pronounced disagreement on sectarian intermarriage and the question of supporting the other side in the case of Sunni-initiated violence.

In light of this illuminating poll conducted by Gallup Pakistan, one can clearly make the conclusion that Shias, on the whole, are more disposed towards tolerance than Sunnis, consistently endorsing statements favoring tolerance at higher rates than Sunni respondents. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that Shias have become more sensitive to the dangers of intolerance and the benefits of harmony by virtue of being a minority community in Pakistan. However, the other conclusion that comes out of this study is that intolerance in Pakistanis is generally rather high, even in Punjab, Pakistan's largest and most developed province.

In light of the various empirical evidences that have been unearthed in this article from the exhaustive archives of the Gallup History Project and the Gilani Research Foundation, religious intolerance in Pakistan is definitely an issue that has already spiralled out of control and if measures are not taken to address it imminently, then it has the potential to completely rip apart the social fabric of Pakistan. First and foremost, the civil and military institutions of the state need to develop and sincerely implement a cohesive and unanimously approved strategy for dealing with the terrorists that perpetrate these acts. Furthermore, the role of the Ulema and Imams cannot be understated in the endeavour of creating religious harmony and tolerance among the polarised public of Pakistan. As has already been seen from the empirical study conducted on the importance that Imams and religious figures enjoy in Pakistani society, a framework has to be devised for them to become directly involved in the process of building bridges between the estranged Shia and Sunni communities. These religious leaders should espouse messages of peace and harmony in their seminars and sermons so as to bring about a change in the mindset of the general public. It is the dissemination of messages of peace and tolerance by noted religious scholars of the country that will prove to be most fruitful in bringing about a more lasting change in the beliefs and biases of the people regarding the opposite sect. Finally, the state needs to fix its own house and actively work on repealing and rectifying laws that discriminate on the basis of religion and encourage sectarian differences in order to construct a more stable, tolerant and prosperous society for Pakistan.