

## **Countering Sectarian Extremism in Pakistan: A Study of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi**

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This study examines the factors responsible for the creation and rise of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). It also explores the process of its transformation from a purely sectarian outfit to a combination of sectarian cum terrorist organization. The research is mostly analytical and comparative and is based mostly on the qualitative research technique. The research finds that protection to sectarian organizations like LeJ by the military establishment and the State's indifference or only selected operations against it during various regimes had only enhanced its power. However, since the introduction of the National Action Plan, some reasonable and effective measures to eliminate LeJ from its roots have been taken. Still, a lot more is required to get rid of such extremist groups and to revive a culture of religious tolerance in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Shia-Sunni sectarianism, extremism, lashkar e Jhngvi, terrorist outfit.

This paper studies the phenomenon of sectarian violence in Punjab with major emphasis on Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the anti-Shia terrorist outfit. The study seeks to discover the factors historically responsible for its creation, its ideology based on extremist religious beliefs. LeJ tried to put into practice through violence, especially in dealing with other sects, and how Malik Is'haq, one of its founders, emerged as a terror even for the judges and the police. It further explores the circumstances which led to its downfall. The study discovers that anti-Shia violent sectarianism took roots during the Zia period as by-product of Saudi-Iran rivalry, which erupted as a Sunni-Shia conflict in the Middle East following the Iranian revolution of 1979. In the 1980s, this sectarian rivalry got entrenched during the Zia period resulting in the creation and rise of various extremist religious groups whose violent nature was further augmented by the arms flow during the Afghan jihad. Finally, after the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the Afghan Taliban, the situation worsened further in Pakistan. In this geo-political context, LeJ emerged as the radical form of sectarian outfit in Pakistan in 1996 after the rise of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) as a political party. The study determines that the realization of the issue of rising tide of sectarianism and role of LeJ as a serious threat to the society and a subsequent all-out operation against LeJ improved the situation only after 2015-16. The killing of LeJ's top leadership in police-encounters in 2015 had reduced the power of LeJ to a large

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Contribution of Authors:

1. Dr. Naumana Kiran has contributed in research conceptualization, acquisition and data analysis, draft and realized the idea of paper. This manuscript is a part of her Post-Doctoral Project.
2. Dr. Mohammad Iqbal Chawla has worked on methodology and guided to improve the paper.

extent. Still, more policy intervention are needed to promote sectarian harmony and peaceful coexistence in Pakistan.

### **Factors Leading to the Creation and Rise of LeJ**

Pakistan's Muslim society has, throughout the centuries, been largely a non-sectarian and peaceful society. When some micro-conflicts emerged among various sects they were settled at the community level through mediation or dialogue. (Waseem, 2010). Smith did not give separate space to Shia in his research and gave following justification:

We have not given the Shi'i group separate treatment in our study of the changes wrought in Islam by modern social processes, because there is nothing in the differences between Sunni and Shi'i fundamentally relevant to those processes. The two groups diverge over what answers are to be given to questions which today do not arise (Smith, 1947, 138).

Pakistan movement was totally non-sectarian. Sir Agha Khan, the first President of the All India Muslim League (AIML) was an Ismaili Shia, and Jinnah, the undisputed leader of the Pakistan Movement and Pakistani nation, was a Shia. In addition to this, political discourse, in most of the parts of Pakistan, was shaped more on the basis of ethnicity or regionalism rather than religion (Asia Report, April 2005). For centuries, the region had a strong impress of *Sufis*, *Pirs* and *Sajjadanashins* of both Brelvi and Shia sects. They usually lived in harmony. Practically, the colonial State was secular and unrepresentative, 'therefore, the use of sectarian idiom was limited to the purpose of self-identification' (Ahmed, 2001) only.

This paper disputes the concept that 'in Pakistan, the situation of sectarianism has remained terrible and fearsome since the time of its establishment' (Shah, 2014). An alleged account of a meeting has been publicized by many writers that Shia leadership had met with Jinnah and showed its concerns about the future of Shia community in Pakistan (Reick, 2001). A thorough examination of Jinnah Papers does not lend credibility to this claim. Although the alleged meeting did take place, however, they always remained on the same page (Saeed, 2019). It is also true that almost all Islamic political parties in pre- and post-independence era were sectarian in nature. They were either Deobandi, Brelvi, Ahle-hadith or Shia but never confronted each other in the name of religion. Punjab being largely a non-sectarian society, religious tolerance and relative harmony prevailed among various sects of Muslims in the province during early decades of Pakistan's history. The State's policy, ever since its creation, also had its basis in co-existence and no census had been organized on the basis of sectarian affiliation in Pakistan; the anti- Ahmaddiya movement was an exception.

It was during the Zia era that sectarianism moved from margins of society to the mainstream of public discourse and sphere in Pakistan. Zia's Islamizing dictatorship had involved the state in sectarian issues especially the Deobandi-Shia conflict. Zia regime designed *zakat* laws with the help of an Arab theologian and scholar Dualibi and it was imposed through an Ordinance in the spirit Saudi Arabia desired. In this way, the state became involved in the beginnings of the sectarian conflict. The state's agenda of Islamization of the country and society brought it closer to the Deoband *sunni* version of Islam, which eventually resulted in the Shia-Sunni conflict. (Rafiq, 2014) In the subsequent years, the state either remained as a silent spectator or served the purpose of facilitator in the moves of Shia extermination especially since establishment of Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in 1985.

Almost all sectarian outfits including LeJ have their origins in madrassas or have been given birth by the students of madrassas (Nasr, 2000). There were only 137 madrassas in Pakistan in 1947 but currently each district has either close to or more than that number of madrassas. There were 185 registered madrassas in the Dera Ghazi Khan district in 2008-09, ninety of which were affiliated with the *Deobandi* group and all of them were spreading either anti-Shia propaganda or propagating against non-Deobandi groups (*The Nation*, 29 April 2009). According to an estimate, the number of madrassas all over Pakistan rose to 7,000 in 2003 and to 16,000 in 2009-10 (Riaz, 2005). This resulted in an enhanced sectarianism and militancy in Pakistan. The madrasa graduates did not have enough employment opportunities so many turned towards criminal activities like robbery, kidnapping, drug trade, etc. Such criminals joined sectarian outfits on the basis of their affiliations with one or the other madrasa and resultantly, the sectarian parties started providing religious cover to such criminals (Nasr, 2000).

LeJ was established by Riaz Basra in 1996. It was eponymous with the name of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the teacher and ideologue of Malik Ishaq, Akram Lahori and Riaz Basra. All three had served in the SSP for a long period before joining LeJ. The other version mentions that LeJ had been established by SSP in 1996 to fulfill the responsibility of anti-Shia violence as SSP itself had by then emerged as a regular political party and had won seats from the Jhang's urban constituencies in the Punjab and the Centre during 1990, 1993 and later in 2002 (Crisis Group Report, 2009, 157). The state patronage played a significant part in the establishment of firstly, SSP, and later, LeJ, besides opening of sectarian madrassas. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) espoused LeJ openly as it used the group as 'a proxy in Afghanistan and India as well to counter Shia militant groups in 2000 and 2001' (EASO Report, 2019).

One major reason for LeJ's expansion was the economic factor. In absence of job opportunities in the areas of South Punjab, LeJ provided its members, especially from the madrassas, with jobs especially if they were willing to undertake militancy according to its guidelines. The workers of LeJ routinely visited urban and rural areas of Muzafargarh, Rajanpur, D. I. Khan, Bahawalpur, Jhang and other districts to enlist young volunteers, mostly madrasa graduates, in their cause of waging Jihad (Bhatti, 2019). Disparities in the land ownership also played its part. The droughts in Rahimyar Khan and floods in other parts, especially those of 2010, further damaged the economic infrastructure and rendered many tenant farmers jobless thus providing a big group of people for recruitment into criminal and sectarian groups (International Crisis Group Report, 2016, 17).

### **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi: Its Organizational Structure and Beliefs**

LeJ remained the most 'ferocious militant group,' which was involved in 'full scale sectarian war in Pakistan' (Feyyaz, 2013, 10). Its militant history began as a local sectarian Party in South Punjab, but later on it expanded its operational base to the other provinces of Pakistan. At the height of its power, it had turned into a transnational network. LeJ's hard core membership always consisted of only a few hundred as it was mandatory for them to take oath to devote their lives for Jhangvi's mission and to break their ties with their families and friends. (International Crisis Group Report, 2016, 5) Initially, its *shura* was headed by *Salar-i-Ala* (Commander in Chief) and consisted of twelve commanders who were given control of a handful of districts. But later on, its activities expanded to other provinces and Afghanistan as well so local commanders were given autonomy to deal with the local issues (International Crisis Group Report, 2016, 5). Its operational forces including commanders

and foot soldiers had been mostly recruited from South Punjab and included some local recruits, too. Above all, in turn LeJ largely produced Punjabi Taliban in later years (Haqqani, 2009).

LeJ's headquarters were located in Rahim Yar Khan, south of Punjab. Muzafargarh, located between Multan and D. I. Khan, besides Bahawalpur district, was the biggest stronghold of LeJ. The terror group inducted mostly those trained militants who were expert in guerrilla tactics and use of explosives, into its ranks. Most of such zealots were trained in Afghanistan, mostly in the camp of Sirobi near Kabul (Kamran, 2009). LeJ, before its collapse in 2015, was sponsored widely by wealthy urban Deoband donors of South Punjab as well as from Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Gulf States.

The core belief of the outfit was that Shias were non-Muslims (Mahmood, 2015). As far as its religious ideologies and leaning was concerned, it was Sunni *Deobandi* and extremely intolerant towards other religious factions or creeds. It was specifically extremely anti-Shia and considered Shias as heretics and liable to be killed. It is usually notified outside the gates of the mosques of LeJ/SSP in Jhang even today that 'the entry of a dog and a Shia is prohibited in the mosque' (Reza, 2019). It wanted to 'purify' land of Pakistan from 'impure Shias.' Following pamphlet and its translation describes the rigidity and intolerance of LeJ:



All Shias are wajib-ul-qatl (worthy of killing). We will rid Pakistan of [this] unclean people. Pakistan means land of the pure, and the Shias have no right to be here. We have the fatwa and signatures of the revered ulema in which the Shias have been declared kaafir [infidel]. Just as our fighters have waged a successful jihad against the Shia-Hazaras in Afghanistan, our mission [in Pakistan] is the abolition of this impure sect and people, the Shias and the Shia-Hazaras, from every city, every village, every nook and corner of Pakistan. Like in the past, [our] successful Jihad against the Hazaras in Pakistan and, in particular, in Quetta is ongoing and will continue [in the future]. We will make Pakistan their graveyard — their houses will be destroyed by bombs and suicide bombers. We will only rest when we fly the flag of true Islam on this land. Our fighters and suicide bombers have [already] successfully operated in Parachinar, and are awaiting orders to operate across Pakistan. Jihad against the Shia-Hazaras has now become our duty. Our suicide bombers have successfully operated in Hazara Town on May 6, and now our next target is your houses in Alamdar Road.<sup>51</sup>

The Principal, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Pakistan

Source: Report of National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan, "Understanding the Agonies of Ethnic Hazaras," (Islamabad: National Commission for Human Rights, 2018).

LeJ exceeded SSP in violence, killing and spreading terror. It was essentially involved in killing Shias all over Pakistan but more specifically in South Punjab, Jhang, D. I. Khan, Muzaffargarh and later in Quetta, Balochistan, etc. SSP had also earned a bad name because of the highly violent activities of founders of LeJ including Riaz Basra, Akram Lahori, Malik Is'haq and Asif Ramzi as all of them had affiliation with the SSP also. Azam Tariq and other leaders of SSP, continuously denied any relationship of SSP with LeJ, yet a lot of proclaimed offenders besides founder members like Salim Fauji, Ijaz Ali as Jajji and Talib who had spread reign of terror in Jhang, were affiliated both with the SSP and LeJ. (Kamran, 2009) SSP's attempt of keeping itself aloof from the activities of LeJ could never

fully succeed. Unlike the SSP, LeJ did not make its space in the politics of Pakistan yet got more sophistication in terrorist activities.

Anti-Shia beliefs of LeJ took it closer to those international terrorist organizations which also had extremist policy towards Shias. The Organizations included Taliban, Al Qaida and ISIS popularly known as Daesh at a later stage. It worked in coordination with both Taliban and Al Qaida through its strong base and training camps in Afghanistan. In addition to it, LeJ had established training camps in Erbil in Iraq and worked closely with ISIS (Johnston, 2016). Its close connections, even working relations with all these terrorist organizations transformed it into a terrorist organization besides its sectarian credentials.

LeJ emerged as such a terror in South Punjab and later, Quetta, at the height of its power that even security forces and judicial system was unable to control sectarian killings. Is'haq was so notorious about use of power and threatening judges before whom cases against him were heard in the courts, that many of the cases were either dismissed or he was released on account of lack of evidence (*Foreign policy*, 19 August 2014). Although two hundred cases of murder were filed against him, yet the judges always welcomed him with great honor in the court at every hearing (*Dawn*, 28 October 2011). LeJ leadership adopted all measures of threatening or intimidating the security forces also, if they tried to obstruct their efforts of killing Shias in very sensitive areas. He confessed to one hundred murders in an interview to an Urdu newspaper and eleven in police interrogation. A number of judges, witnesses, police officers, etc., related to his case were killed during the period of his stay in jail (*Dawn*, 19 July 2011). Is'haq was convicted by Judge Bashir Ahmed Bhatti of Multan for his involvement in bombing of the Iranian cultural center in Multan in 1997 although the Supreme Court overruled that later due to lack of evidence. Unfortunately, the judge Bhatti was killed in a bomb blast on his way back to the Court (Mahmood, 2015, 16). Pakistan's judicial system seemed to have totally failed in dealing with this sectarian cum terrorist organization.

Generally, LeJ had emerged as a brand name or a tag name. Many operations against it by the state had resulted in total disaster of the outfit but it re-emerged stronger every time. Further, its name tag was used by many to display and publicize their anti-Shia sectarian credentials. Security agencies identified seven outfits with the name of LeJ which did not have any affiliation with each other. Currently, it seems to be inactive as it has not found to be involved in any noticeable activity all over the country except few minor incidents of killing Hazara Shias in Quetta.

### **Rise of Sectarianism and Concomitant State Policy towards Lashkar-e-Jhangvi**

The seeds of violent sectarianism which had been sown in the 1980s ripened in the decade of 1990s. Country-wide sectarian violence had been started for the first time in the history of Pakistan. Around 395 incidents of sectarian violence took place and 422 deaths were observed from 1990 to 1997. The sectarianism had found its deep roots especially in South Punjab due to presence of strong non-state actors like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and SSP besides LeJ. They emerged as the so-called de-facto masters of the South Punjab, even big land owners were powerless without the support of so-called sectarian clerics (Hussain, 2009). There are 13 districts in south Punjab with a total population of 27 million. The districts are Bahawalnagar, Bahawalpur, Bhakkar, DG Khan, Jhang, Khanewal, Layyah, Lodhran, Multan, Muzaffargarh, Rahimyar Khan, Rajanpur and Vehari.

**Map of Pakistani Punjab (South Punjab is identified with red dots)**

*Source The Nation, May 6, 2012*

Jhang was the city most affected by sectarian violence. Many businessmen shifted from Jhang to Faisalabad and Chiniot, which, therefore, badly damaged the sources of public and business revenue there.

Sunnis, in Pakistan, generally, constitute 70-75% of the population while Shias comprise 15-20%, (Malik, 2002), however, exact figures are not available. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of sectarianism prevails between Deoband and Shia Muslims in Pakistan, and LeJ had proved a major source of spreading sectarian extremism all over the country. The comprehensive study of the phenomenon needs the issue's evaluation during three political phases: parliamentary era from 1988 to 1999, military regime era from 1999 to 2008, and post-Musharraf period from 2008 to 2018.

#### **a. The Beginning of Violent Sectarianism and the State's Policy (1988-1999)**

In the post-Zia era, the violence against the Shias, started by SSP, was expanded by LeJ after its formation. Riaz Basra, one of the founders of LeJ had killed Agha Sadiq Ganji, Iranian consul general, on 19 December 1990 (Abbas, 2005). Around 300 people died in sectarian clashes only in Jhang during the 1990s (Shah, 2014). Iranian cultural centers in Multan and Lahore were set on fire in 1997. In Punjab alone from January to July of 1997, around 100 casualties had resulted due to sectarian strife. Another 70 people were killed in August 1997 in and around Lahore in sectarian violence (Nasr, 2000). On 11 January 1998, 27 Shias were massacred in Momenpura and in January 1999, another 17 were killed in Muzaffargarh.

Most of the elected governments of this era were weak and had to depend on Islamist Parties to keep their governments in power. So, no appropriate action was taken against sectarian groups until the second regime of Muslim League (N), which could get a large majority of seats of the Assembly in the elections of 1997 and did not need support of the sectarian or Islamist parties to form the government. This regime systematically fought against sectarianism on multiple fronts. Initially, it disapproved sectarianism and militarism and while adopting zero tolerance policy, it

started crackdown against sectarian outfits, which resulted in restoration of peace to a large extent (Kamran, 2009). The 1997 crackdown resulted in a drop in sectarian killings and attacks in 1998-99. Secondly, Pakistani government demanded from the Taliban regime of Afghanistan in 1997-98 to stop training the militants who were majorly involved in sectarian killings in Pakistan. LeJ, while enjoying support of the Afghan Taliban carried out an assassination attempt on then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on 3 January 1999 near Raiwind road, Lahore. Fortunately, the blast took place prematurely. The killing attempt resulted in a total crackdown by the Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, against LeJ leadership through extra-judicial killings (Abbas, 2005). However, its leader, Riaz Basra, among several others, fled to Afghanistan. LeJ got training in al Qaida camps of Afghanistan and later. It was the start of LeJ's ties with al Qaida.

Thirdly, the Punjab government tried to create homogeneity among the ulema of different sects. It established the Muttahida Ulema Board (MUB) (United Scholars' Board) to bring sectarian leaders on one platform. The strategy proved gradually effective. 'First, the ulema would not even shake hands. Then they ate together and later they prayed together' (Rafiq, 2014). The MUB banned sixty-three books which were extremist in nature and a source of spreading sectarianism. Sunni-Shia Ulema agreed on a code of conduct and were close to reaching a compromise but unfortunately, Musharraf toppled the Sharif government.

In sum, the crackdown in 1997-99 against LeJ, pressure on the Taliban regime and conciliatory efforts of the Punjab government resulted in restoration of peace on broader scale (EASO Report, 2018). Sectarianism decreased and from February 1999 to December 2000, not even a single event of sectarianism had taken place. Nonetheless, it again prevailed during the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **b. The Military Regime and Transformation of LeJ into a Terrorist Outfit (1999-2008)**

LeJ re-emerged during Musharraf regime with a slightly different facade. It was split into two factions in 2000; one, the hardliner, under Riaz Basra which wanted to restart killings of Shia with full force and the other was more moderate under Qari Abdul Hayee (also known as Qari Assad Ullah and Talha), which wanted to upgrade and spread the organization with a more moderate approach to attain its original target of the establishment of a Deoband-Sunni State with the help of Pakistan's military (Jamal, 2009). The faction under Riaz Basra was among early diverted organizations which started attack on State offices and officials in close connections with TTP and Al Qaida (Fair, 2015). Musharraf sent interior minister, Lt. General Moinuddin Haider, to Kabul to sign an Extradition Treaty with Taliban government so it could return LeJ's wanted terrorists to Pakistan but the Taliban regime refused plainly due to its close affiliation with the LeJ and same belief system.

As LeJ's activities in coordination with Taliban and al-Qaeda were totally unacceptable for Musharraf regime, so Musharraf banned LeJ in August 2001 and an all-out operation was initiated. Various leaders were killed or arrested. It was brought under control for the time being in northern Punjab, (Shah, 2014) but it continued operating in South Punjab, Balochistan and some parts of KP and areas of former FATA (Chandran & Khanyari, 2015). Bonds between LeJ and al Qaida were further cemented after 9/11 as it never betrayed al Qaida, rather helped it a lot in its battle of survival. Moreover, it not only helped the Taliban during War on terror with its fighting force but also provided safe heavens to them in various parts of Punjab and the other provinces. (Shah, 2014; Zahid, 2017, MEI)

LeJ's new appearance was more dangerous than its earlier façade as it was found to be involved in a number of terrorist operations besides the sectarian ones. LeJ was part and parcel with the killing of Wall Street Journal's reporter, Daniel Pearl on 21 March 2002 (Musharraf, 2007) along with al Qaida, Harakat ul Jihad al Islami, and Harakat ul Mujahedeen. However, sectarian killings in South Punjab especially were brought under control in 2002 after the banning of a lot of sectarian outfits. Basra was killed on 14 May 2002 in a police encounter at Mailsi in district Vihari. His associate Akram Lahori (M. Ajmal) was also arrested. The operation in Punjab resulted in shift of LeJ's battleground to Balochistan and FATA exclusively. The other point of view suggests that although Musharraf banned LeJ and its mother organization SSP, yet he allowed various leaders of SSP to contest 2002 elections with different affiliations and with changed names of their Parties (Jamal, 2009).

Although LeJ shifted its area of influences from Punjab to Balochistan and other regions yet continued its undercover operations in Punjab too. Further, LeJ decentralized itself more broadly after killing of Riaz Basra in May 2002 and arrest of Akram Lahori in 2002. Lahori told to a news reporter that the group would 'work at city level in different cities of the country and not on a national level (*Dawn* 2 July 2002). Later on, its new chief was Asif Ramzi, who declared:

All the major Jihadi organizations including Lashkar e Jhangi are gathering on a platform—the Muslim United Army. In the near future, guerrilla activities will be launched against anti-Islam police officers and other non-Muslims (*Herald*, December 2002, 45).

LeJ carried out an attempt on Musharraf's life on 14 December 2003. The year 2004 proved to be the worst one as many incidents of both Shia and Deoband killings took place that year in Sialkot, Multan and Lahore (Ahmar, 2008). Further, there was a gradual rise in sectarian clashes from 2006 to the end of Musharraf regime. In 2008, 30 were killed, 40 wounded in an incident in Dera Ismail Khan and another 25 were killed in Bhakkar. The triple alliance of TTP, al Qaida and LeJ during Musharraf regime had not only made this issue one of anti-Pakistan state but also of an international nature and had worsened anti-Shia situation in the country (Basit, 2013). Unfortunately, the regime could not handle the issue and reemergence of LeJ successfully and it was inherited by the next government.

### **c. Slow and Gradual Demise of LeJ (2008-2018)**

The State's policy towards LeJ observed gradual shift during post military regime. From 2008 to 2013, PML (N) was ruling party in the Punjab, whereas PPP established its government at the center. Two parallel policies towards sectarian outfits in Punjab, specifically towards LeJ, prevailed during this period; one initiated by the provincial government and the other by the federal government through security agencies. Shahbaz Sharif, on one side, adopted conciliatory policy, while LeJ's involvement in anti-State activities led the state to start an operation against the culprits.

The influence of sectarian parties continued and anti-Shia sectarian parties SSP (renamed as Ahli Sunnat wal Jama'at—ASWJ) and others managed to win elections and developed an alliance with the PML(N). Qamar Zaman Kaira, the PPP leader had also materialized an adjustment with the ASWJ for his seat which resulted in his victory (Basit, 2013). The provincial government of Shahbaz Sharif put deaf ears generally to Shia killings in the South Punjab and fixed monthly stipend for Is'haq's family in 2008 (*The Express Tribune*, 16 July 2011). Unfortunately, LeJ considered it as weakness of



the government and started materializing its new anti-State, terrorist plans. It targeted the state's sensitive areas including its main security infrastructure. The September 2008 bombing on Marriott hotel Islamabad, March 2009 police training academy attack and the March 2009 attack on Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore (International Crisis Group Report, 2016) were examples of its renewed policy of violence. Security forces started an operation against LeJ after these incidents and in reaction, LeJ laid a siege to army headquarters in Rawalpindi in October 2009. A military plane transported Malik Ishaq and other jihadist leaders, after its siege of army headquarters, from jail in Lahore to negotiate the end of the crisis. It was clear indication of the strong position of LeJ, which was dangerous for the security of the State.

On the other side, Law Minister of Punjab, Rana Sanaullah, visited Jhang in February 2010 to get votes from the followers of ASWJ for the victory of the ML(N) in by-elections from Jhang (Daily Times, 24 February 2010). He, along with Sheikh Yaqub, member of Punjab Assembly from Jhang, paid homage at Haq Nawaz Jhangvi's grave there. The graves of Maulana Israr ul Qasimi and Allama Azam Tariq were also visited by them (The News, 27 February 2010). The PPP was also in the race and Governor Salman Taseer tried to secure support of ASWJ to increase the vote bank of PPP candidates. During all this, the Federal government of PPP continuously blamed ML (N) for having a soft corner for ASWJ and its militant outfit, LeJ in the Punjab province.

A new approach was adopted by the regime and Malik Ish'aq was released by the Supreme Court in 2011 after agreeing to many conditions such as giving assurances that he would not materialize any terrorist attack in the Punjab or FATA and would not propagate anti-Shia feelings. It is worth mentioning that although Malik Is'haq had remained in jail for fourteen years but had been part and parcel of various sectarian attacks in Pakistan. The other version says that the said incident was part of the deal between SSP/ASWJ and the Provincial government that in result of release of Is'haq both SSP and LeJ would not be involved in *Jihadi* violence in the province. Ahmed Ludhianvi and Alama Tahir Ashrafi of SSP were instrumental in finalizing the deal (Rafiq, 2014). Muawiya Asmatullah, a prominent LeJ operative, was also released from jail after pledging that he would not be involved in any further terrorist attacks in Pakistan but would extend his services in Afghanistan for the strategic cause of Pakistan's security forces. Previously, especially after 2008, he had been involved in high-profile terrorist attacks in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Peshawar. Ghulam Rasool Shah, another official of LeJ, was also released in 2010.

The new approach of the state towards LeJ resulted in shifting of LeJ's headquarters to Balochistan on strong footings and it started a reign of terror there against the ethnic Hazara community of Balochistan and of Quetta specifically. It converted an all-time plural society of Balochistan into a sectarian one (Naumana & Chawla, 2019).

PML(N), however, adopted a tougher pre-election approach towards SSP/ASWJ and LeJ in 2013 as it stayed away from any settlement with the SSP/ASWJ and contested the elections independently even from Jhang. Malik Is'haq had also violated the terms of the agreement. He, gradually, went out of control and restarted making speeches of religious hatred after his release. He was rearrested by the Punjab government under Pakistan Penal Code 295-A in March 2013 (The Express Tribune, 15 March 2013).

In result of 2013 elections, the PMLN was voted to power and established its government in the Punjab and the Centre. This time, the PMLN adopted a hard policy towards LeJ. The federal

government passed an amendment in the Anti-terrorism Act, 1997 in June 2014. The purpose of the amendment was to empower the security agencies in dealing with the sectarian and terrorist outfits and their continued survival in Pakistan more precarious (The Gazette of Pakistan (Extraordinary), 2014). Previously, Pakistan's criminal justice system had only five to ten percent rate of conviction (Basit, 2013). Secondly, on account of weak and dubious court procedures in Pakistan, the PMLN government established military courts for the period of two years to deal with the cases related to terrorism and sectarianism under 21<sup>st</sup> constitutional amendment. It was clearly mentioned that all such culprits, arrested on basis of sectarian or religious violence or on act of terrorism would be tried in the Military courts (The Gazette of Pakistan (Extraordinary), 2015). It was after the establishment of military courts that some improvements was observed in dealing with such cases and around three hundred terrorists were awarded with the death sentence including Akram Lahori of LeJ; he was hanged in January 2015 (Mahmood, 2015). Malik Ishaq with thirteen other major hard-core leaders of LeJ was killed in gunfight with the police in July 2015. The hard-core leadership included Ishaq's two sons; Usman Jhangvi and Haq Nawaz Jhangvi besides Dawood Badini (Dawn, 30 July 2015).

His killing resulted in an immediate surge in attacks on Shias and taking out of anti-state processions in Rahim Yar Khan and some other areas. A police check-post and a Shia mosque in Gujrat was attacked by LeJ workers. Shuja Khazada, Home Minister of Punjab was killed in August 2015 by LeJ and TTP's splinter group, Jama'at ul Ahrar. Khazada was very active and faithful to the cause of overcoming sectarianism as more than 700 militants were killed due to his strong efforts and dedication (Mahmood, 2015, 16). Operation against LeJ, mostly in form of extra-judicial killings, continued after Shujja Khazada's assassination. Several of its members were killed or arrested as they were then included in the list of bad *jihadists*. Punjab's Counter Terrorism Department materialized large-scale operations against them. The first and second tier leadership was almost completely eliminated but their sleeper-cells persisted. Hundreds were kept in fourth schedule to be observed closely (International Crisis Group Report, 2016).

The National Action Plan (NAP) had also helped the security agencies in overcoming bad law and order situation in Punjab. It included non-militarized measures also such as banning of extremist *madrassas* and sectarian outfits, controlling the financial sources of terrorist groups, ban on hate-speech against ethnic minorities and some other related steps. Minister of State for Interior & Narcotics Control, Balighur Rehman, told the National Assembly that the government was trying to take action against such madrassas which were spreading sectarian feelings in the society under NAP in 2015-16. He further informed that 'the government is countering hate speech and banning dissemination of extremist material' (The Express Tribune, 25 February 2016). In addition to this, the alleged affiliation of LeJ with ISIS since 2017 had further made the security agencies more conscious. The sub-division of LeJ, affiliated to ISIS, was named as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (Zahid, 2017).

The years 2016-17 were very crucial in dealing with LeJ as various steps were taken in these years against it. Large number of police was appointed to keep Muharram processions peaceful and that strategy yielded positive results. No sectarian violence attack was materialized. LeJ was found to be involved in killing seventy Christians on Easter 27 March 2016 in Lahore, which proved to be another death-knell on its existence. Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (elimination of discord) was launched on 22 February 2017 all over Pakistan, (EASO, 2018) which resulted in breaking down the power of the network. The last claimed attack was Parachinar Bazar, which materialized on 23 June 2017. Besides Radd-ul-Fasaad, various small-scale operations were launched against LeJ in D.I Khan, Islamabad, Karachi, Sialkot, etc. As a result of all these actions, a substantial number of the

leadership of LeJ have either been killed or captured including Naeem Bukhari, who was captured in 2017 and its commander Asif Chuto was killed on 19 January 2017 in an encounter with law-enforcement agencies.

The results of the state's efforts to curb LeJ from 2014 to 2017 were positive and none out of the four attacks in Punjab in 2018 was materialized by LeJ. However, few minor sectarian attacks were materialized by LeJ in Balochistan in 2018 in which six Hazaras had been killed. CTD continued its operations in Punjab throughout 2018-19 also. In May 2018, security forces killed the commander of LeJ's Balochistan chapter Salman Badeni. According to Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), in 2018, LeJ had further lost its operational strength' (Pakistan Security Report, 2018) due to consecutive operations of military, paramilitary, rangers and police. Rafiq's point of view that reasonable détente between militant Deoband factions and the PMLN government from 2013 to 2018 resulted in comparative peace in the Punjab (Rafiq, 2014) seems to be incorrect. It was basically the hard and fast policy of the government against LeJ and sectarian groups which restored peace in the Punjab.

Fortunately, due to constant efforts of the state and society, incidents of sectarianism are on the decline not only in the Punjab but also in the whole country. Only 12 such incidents had been observed in Pakistan in 2018, most of which were of minor nature. Whereas, in 2013, 220 incidents of sectarian violence were noted. (Institute for Peace Studies Report, 2019) Currently, LeJ is almost inactive or only its sleeper cells remain active. One respondent from Rajanpur (Wajid, 2019) and another from Jhang (Reza, 2019) shared that no activity of LeJ is visible and that security situation in their areas is smooth and under control. However, tendency of being violent is still as strong as it was in the past, which can be overcome by complete overhauling of education system, especially of Madrassas and by spreading true Islamic values of tolerance and co-existence in the society.

### **Conclusion**

It has been observed while going through the last thirty years of the sectarian history of Pakistan that the state's policy had generally remained ineffective as in most of the cases, it proved to be reactionary and short-term. Just imposing proscription and not attaining its effects, while having complete check on sectarian outfits, had kept such outfits operative again with the new appellations. Inefficiency and lack of police resources made the situation worse. Police generally is not equipped with modern technology, modern forensic facilities, DNA analysis, electronic data and poorly- trained individuals, working with obsolete tools. Issues are there with the criminal justice system also as culprits are often released due to lack of evidence. Mullah-military alliance is the core factor of continuing sectarian conflict in Pakistan. LeJ had passed through various phases of its rise and fall; emerging as a sectarian outfit operating locally, then nationally and later, internationally. Meanwhile, sometimes it enjoyed free hand from the state institutions to operate on its own as it did immediately after its emergence in the early 1990s and during the first decade of the twenty-first century though, apparently ban was imposed on it by the Musharraf regime. It had remained operational from Afghanistan in result of 1997-98 operation against it in Pakistan, reign of its terror was observed by Shia community in South Punjab and Quetta specifically from 2009 to 2013. However, operations against sectarian outfits and especially against LeJ, which materialized under the NAP proved to be affective and its operational structure badly disrupted since 2015-16. One prominent factor of its downfall or evaporation was its anti-State and terrorist approach, which was adopted by it in alliance with al Qaida and more specifically with Daesh. The military is no more protecting it and it seems that it has either been extinguished or is near to be destroyed.

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