

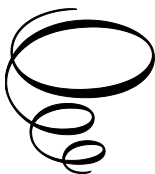
A Survey on Extremism and Religious Leaders in Pakistan

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By

Iffat Hussain

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FOREWORD

Islam has gained a negative reputation as extreme and violent. This has contributed to making the lives of its followers miserable. Islamic fundamentalists or extremists are known as aggressive and uncompromising, and as a group who aim to recreate a perceived medieval ideal. As a result, followers live under an extremely conservative system.

The purpose of this book, *A Survey on Extremism and Religious Leaders in Pakistan*, is to serve as a source to improve the lives of Muslims in Pakistan, foster better relations and resolve conflicts between Muslims of Pakistan and Islamic clerics. It is a voice for Pakistani Muslims against false Islamic rules imposed on them; and against religious clerics who preach extremist interpretations of Islam. They instil fear and resist progressive ideas and economic development. They declare their version of Islam as absolute truth, forcing stricter controls and harsh punishments that dehumanize, degrade and silence Pakistani Muslims.

This study examines and explores the experiences of Muslims in Pakistan under the influence of religious extremists. Its goal is to provide a comprehensive description of Muslims living under extremist religious rules; and to establish a framework for Pakistani Muslims to live better lives within an Islamic theoretical context. It is crucial to bridge the gap between a true understanding of Islam and the distorted version propagated by extremists, so that Pakistani Muslims can demand a re-examination and re-interpretation of Islamic teachings. Islam should be employed to enhance the quality of life for Pakistani Muslims and empower their spirituality.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be applied in Pakistan. It declares: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance" (United Nations, 1948).

INTRODUCTION

Religion is incredibly important and holds great significance for the Muslims of Pakistan. They believe in God, seek God's guidance for answers through prayers and look forward to please their God. For many Muslims, religious activities are the major source of everyday pleasure and a major topic of conversation. Discussions revolve around issues such as marriage, divorce, diet, gay marriage, punishments, abortion and other everyday concerns and problems. Solutions are sought through religious perspectives. Many practice blindly and follow rules without question. Additionally, they tend to mix culture and religion while seeking solutions.

People believe that they get their moral views from religious texts. But most of these views are actually drawn from the society and the culture in which they live. Religion and culture are intertwined and together they form the foundation of society. In Pakistan, practicing religion in social places acts as a social glue for people who share the same religion and faith. It has both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, individuals sharing the same belief feel a sense of closeness because they share rituals, believe in similar principles and meet regularly. This creates an environment where people become more generous and kinder towards one another and build trust within the community. Because they meet regularly and develop respect for these sacred places, there is a reduced likelihood of dishonesty or betrayal. Praying together and engaging in discussions fosters a sense of belonging, solidarity and strength among individuals, as well as reinforcing social bonds and mutual support.

However, extremism in religion has affected people in a very negative way, forcing them to act in ways against their religious beliefs. Extremist religious groups in Pakistan are targeting Pakistani people. They claim to be fighting for Islamic Pakistan because they believe that Pakistan is not truly Islamic. These groups aim to impose their own interpretation of Islam. It is an interpretation that is shaped and demanded by their funders and financiers; and they are paid generously for their work, often at the cost of countless lives. These groups enforce their vision of Islam and disrupt the freedom of individuals to practice their faith in their own ways. They push the country and its people towards a dark and oppressive future. Millions of dollars from foreign sources fund religious institutions known as madrassahs to promote the type of religion where militants are developed

and brainwashed. These institutions preach violence in the name of religion, promising a reward and goodness in the afterlife in exchange for bloodshed. Madrassahs also educate young children with religious beliefs that have been manipulated to suit the agendas of the educators' financial backers. Many financially poor people who can't afford to send their children to private school, or even to free schools, send their children to these madrassahs, where they get free education along with free meals. For these families, it is a privileged opportunity as their children receive religious education and sustenance. But this privilege comes at a great cost, as the children are indoctrinated into a narrow and harmful worldview.

Extreme religious interpretations teach a blind obedience to God. The religious leaders are presented as the voices of God, meaning that followers should therefore obey the leaders. Blind faith can lead individuals to engage in actions they would otherwise avoid. And the further they get down the path, the more their faith becomes more uncompromising and radical. Blind faith leads these individuals to believe in unnatural rules without questioning anything. For example, acts of cruelty such as inhumanely slaughtering animals in the name of a religious miracle and to please God; the adoption of extreme clothing and customs; segregation of men and women in public places; and placing women's lives in danger to avoid abortions. These all stem from unquestioning faith and a refusal to consider any rational arguments.

In almost all religions, people believe that there is life after death. This belief usually sits alongside a view that their individual human actions in this world determine whether or not they will go to a good place (heaven) or a bad place (hell) in the next. There is also a belief that some great figures, such as prophets, will arrive at an unspecified future date to rescue humanity. For most people, this world is a challenging and complicated place, so they seek solutions from religion, which makes it easier for them to understand and address their problems. They believe that praying solves problems and that God is there to help them find solutions. The true purpose of a religion is not to elevate or diminish the values of individuals, or to dictate and impose laws, but to enhance one's spirituality without fostering a feeling of superiority or inferiority. Religion is about understanding the meaning and purpose of life and to enrich one's heart with light. If religious leaders do not have this in themselves, they cannot guide people in this direction. To maintain their power and authority, those leaders impose strict rules and create chaos and confusion in people's hearts by setting superficial standards of superiority and inferiority. Unfortunately, this is what Islamic leaders are doing in Pakistan.

History shows that religions have always been used as a tool to dominate and hold power over other people. Religious leaders consider themselves to be “the chosen ones,” believing that God is “on their side.” These leaders also convince their followers that they are special individuals who have been chosen by God. The more a leader sees themselves as special, the more they persuade their followers that they are favoured by God, and that their special status will remain as long as they continue to follow their leader’s (God’s) directives. Extreme religious rules suppress rational thinking because the primary purpose is to control people’s minds and emotions. Many religious beliefs are presented as facts, despite not being verifiable truths. And questioning this means rebelling against the religion. An example of what to question in Islam is the idea that whatever someone does on earth can be forgiven in a delusional heaven. This is particularly true for men and less true for women. Islamic religious practice has been presented in such a way that it has created more restrictions for women than it has for men. As a result, Muslim women lag behind in almost all sphere of life, especially in rural areas of Pakistan, where women are relegated to traditional roles such as childbearing and caregiving. Unfortunately, religion is used as a tool to justify these restrictions, rather than to empower women. There is no rational thinking in this; it is just another form of manipulation for the believers.

To not question (or to not think) is another form of manipulation. If believers started questioning and thinking, life would be terrible for the preachers and the funders, and their authority would be undermined.

The teachings of all religions are inherently non-sensical unless believers can find ways to rationalise them. People are taught to believe in a power called God, based on historical narratives. It is valuable to understand the stories of our ancestors, but it is equally important for religions to evolve to meet the world’s changing needs and demands. Religion should not cling to the past and ignore the present and future. Outdated rules cannot be applied in the present. Progress and innovation improve general quality of life and are necessary human advances. Our advancement from the Stone Age to the present day has led to safer and more comfortable living. Religion must adapt to contemporary challenges in order to remain relevant and meaningful.

Religion can foster positive moral behaviour such as altruism, charity, honesty and a sense of responsibility. People trust religious teachings because they believe in the divine source. Holy texts make explicit claims about charity, helping the poor, and fulfilling certain duties. Followers accept these teachings, both explicitly and implicitly, integrating them into their daily lives and accepting them as faith.

It should be emphasised that human worth is determined by deeds, not by the religion one follows. Religions should not limit or restrict a person's ideas and thought processes, nor should they hinder world progress. Instead, religion should encourage innovation, discoveries and advancements that would benefit humanity and foster an environment in which individuals are free to explore, create, and develop new ideas and solutions for the betterment of society. Islam is believed to be a diverse religion. Large numbers of populations in Pakistan believe in moderation and religious toleration. Although religion's rituals and prayers are an important part of their lives, they also believe in a modern society and advanced technology. They want to compete in a competitive world. They understand that an extreme interpretation of Islam promoted by religious extremists holds them back from progress and will keep them in a mindset akin to the Stone Age.

People who genuinely follow their faith believe in true religious devotion which encourages acts of kindness, charity, and generosity. When messages from religious leaders are focused on love, kindness, and social justice, they inspire actions that benefit others, which is key to having a positive impact on society. But extremism and religious leaders prevent individuals from thinking critically. They teach their followers to fight in the name of God. We all know God is all-powerful and almighty and does not need human help to survive. It is unacceptable that religious leaders believe and preach that they can somehow fulfil God's will through strength or coercion, when it is God who created everything, including humans. The notion that God needs human intervention to achieve His purposes is both illogical and contrary to most religious teachings. When people are overly immersed in religion, they develop a mindset of being "ready to die for God," which often translates into being willing to sacrifice one's life for their own beliefs. This often leads to negative feelings towards people of different faiths, believing them to be the root cause of the world's problems. While strong religious conviction is common, it's important to recognize when it leads to hatred and division. Violent culture is created by religious extremism, which comes from an environment of excessive control. When people are categorized as "good" or "bad," based on criteria set by religious extremists, society becomes hostile, oppressive and toxic. This leads to a reduction in social commitment and trust which, in turn, leads to ongoing negativity. In many non-Muslim countries, there is a misconception that cruelty and violence are celebrated by all Muslims. The reality is that an ordinary Muslim is a regular person with common sense, who does not condone violence or cruelty towards anyone, regardless of their race, religion, or sect. Religion is supposed to foster forgiveness, kindness, unity, and empathy. Practices like killing, forced conversions, animosity, hatred

and the imposition of faith should be abolished to maintain peace and a healthy society. The people of Pakistan seek to build and live in a society that reflects shared values, where everyone is free to practice their religions without fear and hostility.

Religion should contribute to increased levels of happiness, kindness, a sense of discipline and spiritual power, and foster a harmonious and compassionate society. When religion becomes too enmeshed with culture and it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two, it can hinder societal progress and individual freedoms. In its ideal form, religion should create a society where people feel fulfilled and at peace with their faith. Compared to other major religions, Islam is less tolerant towards people of other religions. It is important that people should be taught to acknowledge equality and respect for others' beliefs and religions. If Islam encourages disrespect or harm towards other beliefs, and it promotes the idea that Islam is the only true religion, this indicates a failure in the teachings of Islamic leaders and a gap in their knowledge. A lack of proper knowledge can misrepresent religious principles and lead to misinterpretation. Religion should help shape individuals who naturally practice kindness and decency as part of their daily lives, not because they are in fear of divine punishment. They should understand the inherent goodness of such practices. The fear of God is a positive motivator but true goodness should come from within, not from the desire to avoid divine retribution. Furthermore, an extreme version of religion, that has been blended with culture, has led to a distorted view of faith. This version focuses heavily on rituals and physical religious practices; and it imposes rules and certain behaviours that conflict with individual desires and beliefs. This results in a lost sense of spirituality, as well as a withdrawal and disconnection from a deeper essence of faith, because the focus is primarily on outward conformity. It is a common belief that God offers prosperity, love, care and success, and that religion provides guidance on how to navigate life in a way that maximizes spiritual fulfilment, moral integrity, and a connection to the divine. Therefore, it's important for religious teachings to be interpreted in ways that promote well-being, equality and personal growth.

CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Religious extremism is not a new phenomenon and has been a problem in Pakistan for decades, which was the result of political, social and economic factors. These factors had a profound impact on the country's society and economics and have led to a range of negative consequences including intolerance, which has destroyed the country's social fabric. These extremist ideologies are characterized by a narrow and rigid interpretation of Islam. Pakistan has been battling against this problem for several decades. The existence of Muslim extremism dates back to late 1979, when religion was used to recruit Muslims against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan; and later with the terrorist attack on the twin towers in the USA, which took place on 11th September 2001. This changed religion extremism and was associated with terrorism.

In South Asia, religious extremism presented a challenge to peace and security. International and national terrorist organizations became active in the region and started creating a hostile and toxic environment. Political and religious parties used this for their own ends. In 1977, the military took over and Gen Zia-ul-Haq regime promoted an Islamic agenda, introducing sharia law and supporting Islamic groups. These groups promoted a radical form of Islam based on their own agendas. These laws rejected any advancement in Pakistan and devalued anything that was not in accordance with their Islamic agenda.

But after 9/11, Pakistan became one of the USA's major allies in the War on Terror, which was actually a war on Islamic extremist groups. But the effort in Pakistan was half-hearted, meaning that extremist groups were never completely dismantled and eradicated. The activities of extremist groups led to violence and intolerance in Pakistan.

Religion extremism is a hotly debated topic and is linked with religious violence. But there are many different dimensions of religion. According to Wibisono et. al (2019), religious extremism has four dimensions: theological; ritual; social; and political. To understand religious extremism, it is important to understand the different aspects and dimensions of extremism more generally. Religious extremism should not just be

connected to terrorism. Wibisono's dimensions provide a peaceful aspect of religion extremism.

Table 1.1.

Mapping out the moderate and extreme end-points of the four dimensions of religion, by Wibisono et al. (2019). (Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02560).

Four Dimensions of Religion.

Dimensions	Moderate end	Extreme end
Theological	Main characteristic: gracious theology. In the context of Muslims: 1. Emphasis on God as a loving God and 2. A flexible interpretation of "jihad" with connotations of positive change.	Main characteristic: authoritarian theology. In the context of Muslims: 1. Emphasis on God as an angry God and 2. "Jihad" refers only to a holy war.
Ritual	Main characteristic: tolerance of diversity. In the context of Muslims: 1. Viewing the integration of rituals from Islam with local traditions as positive cultural practices.	Main characteristic: intolerance of diversity. In the context of Muslims: 1. Actively rejecting local traditions and judging actors involved in them as sinful.
Social	Main characteristic: complexity acceptance. In the context of Muslims: 1. Attributing in-group problems to anti-intellectual biases, geopolitical instability, and corruption and	Main characteristic: complexity avoidance. In the context of Muslims: 1. Attributing in-group problems to out-group conspiracies and 2. Judging others by in-group's specific norms.

	2. Respecting people living with different norms.	
Political	Main characteristic: maintenance agenda. In the context of Muslims: 1. Integrating Islamic values with modern political concepts.	Main characteristic: radical agenda. In the context of Muslims: 1. Advocating for the resurrection of an Islamic empire.

In terms of theological dimensions, Granqvist et. al (2010) highlighted the importance of conceptual representations of God in understanding people's engagement with their religion. Moderate views of God (Bader and Palmer, 2011) present an image of God as fostering love, thus expanding an acceptance towards different patterns of norms. In contrast at the extreme end, God is authoritarian. Thus have a rigid interpretation and suppresses different narratives. They further believe that disasters and misfortune happen to those of whom God disapproves; and that "jihad" is a holy war that should be performed as a duty by Muslims. Believers in an authoritarian and angry God consider people to be evil, whereas believers in a nurturing God react in more social ways towards others and consider "jihad" more flexibly attributing it to behaviour that creates positive change.

Like all religious-minded people, Muslims believe that their religious rituals are directed and guided by God. The five-times prayers are their main ritual, in addition to fasting and reading the Quran in Arabic and then in their own language. They believe in keeping rituals in a pure form by not diverting from fixed practice or adding or compromising in these practices. The moderate group of people, however, accept customs and traditions within rituals and do not consider every ritual to be directed by God.

The social dimension also shows two groups: one that has a hostile view of other faiths and views their own religion as the only pure religion; and a moderate group that is more tolerant of other faiths and emphasises the need to change and adapt in a changing world. This second group is open to collaboration with other religions and cultures.

The political dimension is the adoption of religious rules and laws to gain political power. In the case of Muslims, sharia law is used and promoted by some political parties to gain power and reject current political systems or democracy. This is done without violence: laws articulated in the Quran are the main focus and the way to influence people.

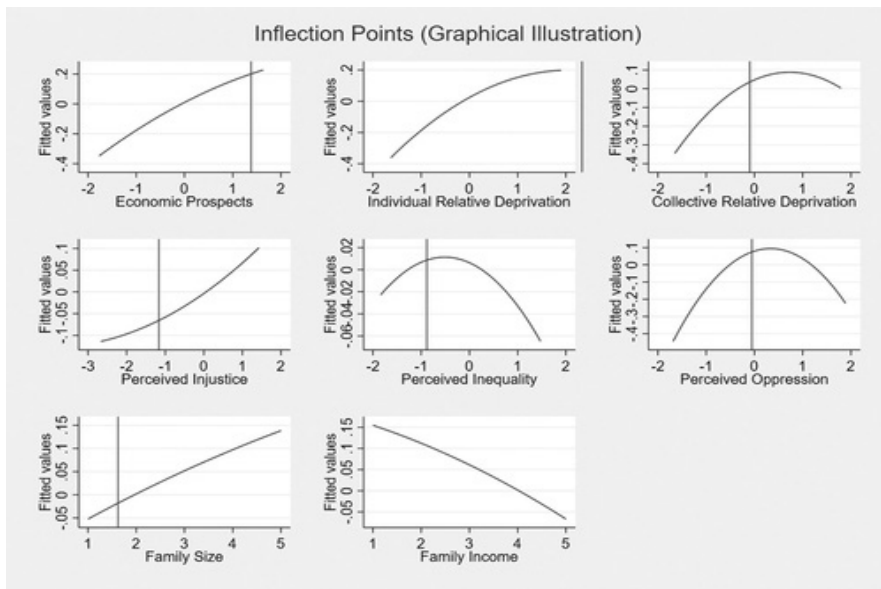


Figure 1.2. The relationship between different forms of radicalization and indicators of individual socio-economic conditions
(Ref: Nawaz F. (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2286042>).

Pakistan has faced serious challenges due to radicalization and religious extremism. Radicalization has a statistically significant positive relationship with indicators at an individual level of socio-economic conditions such as the perception of poor economic prospects, individual relative deprivation, injustice, and inequality. This sits above the religiosity threshold which supports that socio-economic hardships drive radicalization only in sufficiently religious people (Fahim, 2023). Socio-economic differences may catalyse the perception of injustice among individuals, which can provoke anger and violence as compensatory reactions (Al-Saggaf, 2016). Poor economic prospects can considerably influence the radicalization process. Lehmann and Tyson (2022) found that economic development and improvements in future prospects can significantly reduce terrorism. Yusuf (2008) studied the process of youth radicalization in Pakistan and concluded that the lack of socio-economic opportunities was a catalyst of this process. According to Fahim (2023), radicalization is a trade-off between material and mental rewards. Material rewards, such as income, are obtained by refraining from extreme acts and participating in activities that produce material well-being. Conversely, mental rewards, like social recognition,

feelings of significance, power, and martyrdom are obtained by supporting or committing extreme acts. Individuals opt for extreme acts to seek mental rewards, provided the resulting benefits exceed the (opportunity) costs. According to Fahim (2023), the mental rewards of extreme acts may depend upon the degree of personal religiosity of individuals, since religion bestows ideology and purpose. This is to say that a certain level or threshold of religiosity must be reached to perceive extreme acts as avenues to mental rewards during socio-economic hardships. Franc and Pavlović (2021) argued that the perception of social inequality is related to radical attitudes.

Fahim's (2023) study looks at the relationship between different forms of radicalization and indicators of individual socio-economic conditions. It found that socio-economic hardship (or its perception) can drive radicalization in highly religious people.

According to Fahim (2023), this table (1.2) indicates the following:

- The perception of poor economic prospects has a statistically significant positive relationship with radicalization only above the religiosity threshold.
- Political marginalization lacks a statistically significant relationship with radicalization below and above the religiosity threshold.
- Individual relative deprivation has a statistically significant positive relationship with radicalization only above the religiosity threshold, which indicates that relative deprivation drives radicalization only in highly religious individuals.
- Perceived injustice has a statistically significant positive relationship only above the religiosity threshold, indicates that injustice catalyzes radicalization only in sufficiently religious people.
- Exclusion lacks a statistically significant relationship with radicalization below and above the religiosity threshold.
- Perceived inequality has a statistically significant positive relationship with only above the religiosity threshold, suggesting that inequality drives radicalization only in highly religious individuals.
- Perceived oppression has a statistically significant negative relationship with radicalization only above the religiosity threshold, which means that oppression reduces the likelihood of radicalization in highly religious individuals.
- Gender has a statistically significant positive coefficient only above the religiosity threshold. This means that highly religious men are more prone to radical world views.

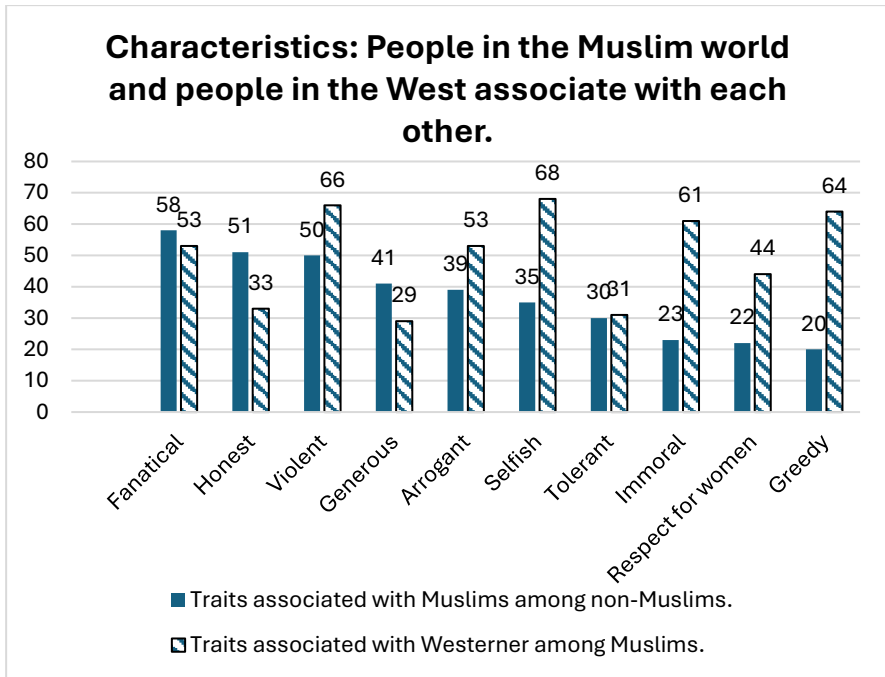
- Perceived inequality now has a statistically significant positive relationship with radicalization. Conversely, family income is negatively related to radicalization.

Several terms have been used for religious extremism. “Religious fundamentalism” and “radicalism” or “extremism” are used interchangeably. Religion has been linked to positive social outcomes, such as higher levels of well-being, spirituality and satisfaction, whereas religious extremism is characterized by anger and violence and is linked to negative traits such as hostility, prejudice and conflict. Examples of religious extremism include the use of religiously motivated violence, hate speech, a disregard for minority rights, the defence of Islam in an authoritarian way, a disregard for women’s rights, blasphemy, and the support of individuals and organizations engaged in such activities. In addition, religious extremism discourages the critical thinking, innovation and advancement that are essential for a society to grow. Political parties used religious extremism to dictate the lives of citizens.

After 9/11, the views of Muslims among non-Muslims and views about people from the West among Muslims changed drastically, as shown in the graph above. The Pew Research (2011) show that, across the seven Muslim-majority countries and territories surveyed, a median of 68% of Muslims said they viewed Westerners as selfish. Other negative traits Muslims associated with Westerners were violence (66%) and greed (64 %). Only 29% viewed them as generous; 31% thought they were tolerant; and only 44% thought they were respectful to women.

On the other side, 58% of non-Muslims thought that Muslims were fanatical. Other negative traits associated with Muslims were violence (50%) and arrogance (39%). Only 20% regarded them as greedy; 22% saw them as respectful of women; and 23% thought they were immoral.

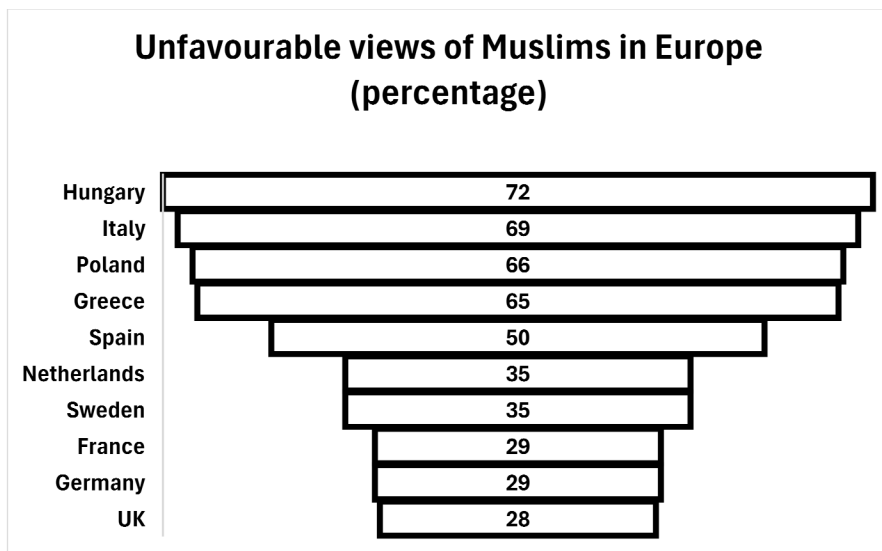
Islamic extremist and religious groups and parties have played a role in the overall political instability in Pakistan. Since Islamists were an important source of political instability in Pakistan, their impact was exaggerated in the western media, which presented them as a danger to the western world. A report from USIP (2003) pointed to three problems that contributed to the rise in popularity of the Islamist movement and to instability in the region.



Graph 1.3. The characteristics that people in the Muslim world and people in the West associate with each other.

Ref: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

First, the deep-rooted breakdown of law and order in Pakistan created a situation where the physical security of citizens was uncertain, and the inability of central government to provide social services left the leadership of Pakistan with weak support. Secondly, there was a breakdown in inter-ethnic trust and dialogue between India and Pakistan. This created a tense atmosphere between them. Thirdly, due to distrust and a lack of certainty around physical security in Pakistan, people were left feeling that they had no control over their own lives. With high levels of mistrust between different religions and ethnic groups, many turned to religion to regain a sense of control of their lives.

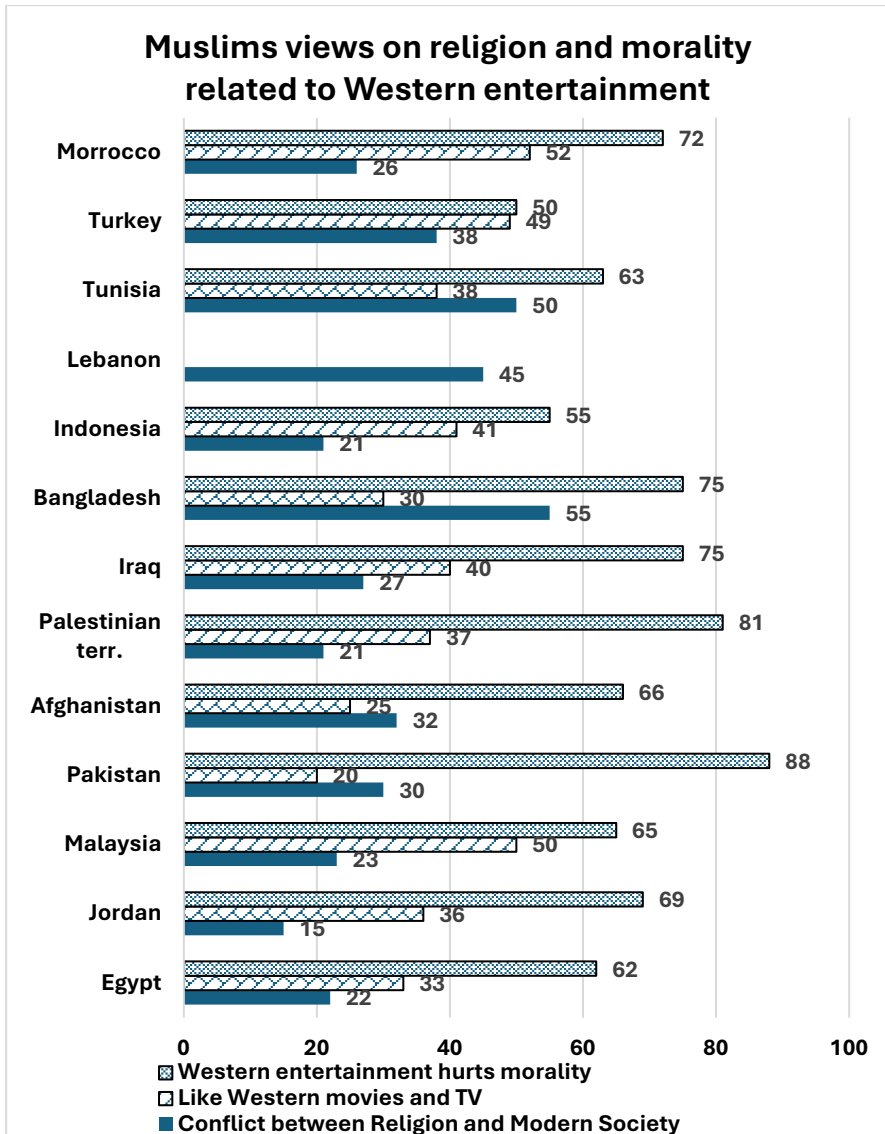


Graph 1.4. Unfavourable views of Muslims in Europe (percentage).

Ref: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

The same survey shows European perceptions about Muslims. Majorities in Hungary, Italy, Poland and Greece viewed Muslims unfavourably, with the highest rates in Hungary, at 72%. Negative attitudes towards Muslims are much lower in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe, with the lowest rates seen in the UK (28%).

On issues related to religion and modernity, there is divided opinion amongst Muslims on whether or not a religious person is compatible with life in modern society. A survey was conducted by Pew to see if there was a conflict between being devout and living in the contemporary world. Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely to say that religion and modernity are in conflict than those who pray less often.



Graph 1.5. Muslims views on religion and morality related to Western entertainment.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-science-and-popular-culture/>.

According to the graph above, Muslims in South Asia are among the least likely to enjoy Western cultural exports. Fewer Muslims in the countries surveyed in the region have a favourable opinion of Western music, movies and television. In Pakistan it is just 20%. Muslims who pray several times a day are less likely than those who pray less frequently to say they enjoy Western entertainment. According to Pew survey, the majority of countries surveyed believe that Western popular culture harms morality in their country. In nearly every country surveyed in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of Muslims say Western entertainment is bad for their society. In Pakistan this is 88%. In the South Asian countries surveyed, more than six-in-ten Muslims say Bollywood is bad for their society, including 88% of Muslims in Pakistan. The sample data taken from the Pew survey shows that the highest percentage that believe there is a conflict between religion and modern society is in Tunisia (50%); whilst the lowest is seen in Jordan (15%). Further, Morocco (52%) like Western movies and TV, which is the highest in the sample, with the lowest being Pakistan (20%). In Pakistan, 88% believe that Western entertainment hurts morality, which is highest in the sample. The lowest is Turkey (50%).

Methods and surveys

Religious leaders, religious clerics, mullahs and extremist religious leaders in this research refer to the Pakistani individuals who carry out their religious duties such as preaching, teaching, and leading collective worship services and religious rituals and provide care regarding these activities.

The objective of the research is to study religious extremism and does not include terrorism. It is important to be open to the idea that not all religious extremism is linked to or associated with violence or terrorism. After 9/11, 2001 incident about attack on twin towers in USA, US security targeted Muslims and associated them with extremism. As a result, negative stereotypes about religious extremism linked Muslims and extremism to ideas of terrorism and violence.

The study aims to explore attitudes towards religious extremism, its causes, and its impact on individuals and communities. The research seeks to understand public perceptions of religious extremism in Pakistan, and understand how religion's role in politics, society, and its influence on people's lives are all seen. The research takes social, economic and political factors into account, as well as the role of religious teachings or misinterpretations of religious rules, and how the people of Pakistan perceive these. In addition, it advances strategies for preventing extremism

through social, educational, and policy interventions. These findings can help inform future research, policy interventions, and counter-extremism strategies.

Participants of this research study included Pakistani Muslims (both males and females residing in various and diverse geographical locations in Pakistan) who were willing to share their opinions on Islamic extremism and its preachers. Interviews were conducted in different cities of Pakistan, including Karachi, Islamabad, Swat, Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Interior Sindh, Mardan, Hyderabad, Bhawalpur, Kohat, Nasirabad and Larkana. Random locations were selected to find out about changes in culture, as well as the ethnic, religious and political views of the respondents. The percentage of responses was different in each city, with the highest number found in Karachi (20%). Islamabad, Swat, Lahore, Faisalabad and Multan each, accounted for 8% of the interviews, while 6% were from each city: Interior Sindh, Mardan, Hyderabad, Bhawalpur, Kohat and Nasirabad. Only 4% came from Larkana.

For this research, a total of 50 in-depth interviews were conducted (50% were with men; 50% were with women). This number of interviews was conducted to ensure adequate data saturation and to capture a diverse range of perspectives on the topic. This number allowed me to reach a point where additional interviews were unlikely to reveal significantly new information.

In addition to extensive literature research, interviews were conducted with individuals who had never been involved in any kind of extremist groups. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it was emphasized that their confidentiality would be maintained and that the data would only be used for this research. They were informed they could skip questions with which they were uncomfortable.

A structured questionnaire was created to measure attitudes and beliefs related to religious extremism. Views and comments of individuals on digital media (e.g. newspapers) were also studied. In order to gain a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the issue, qualitative and quantitative methods were both used. Closed-ended and open-ended questions were both included. As some respondents preferred to remain anonymous, the findings are presented in a manner that respects participant anonymity.

The demographic information of participants included gender, education, profession, age group, city/town, religion and praying frequency. The questionnaire was a combination of both qualitative and quantitative questions. Qualitative questions were transcribed and then analysed thematically, whereas quantitative questions mostly consisted of yes/no

options. The respondents were also asked about their religious affiliations, frequency of attending religious meetings, and how often they pray. These questions aimed to assess respondents' levels of religious belief and explore if their religious beliefs have an effect on their views and opinions about religious extremism. There were not any questions that directly inquired about their views on religious extremism. However, some questions addressed laws enforced by extremists.

Data was collected by telephone interviews and transcribed. Participants were selected according to education level. Selection criteria stated that all participants must be Pakistani Muslims residing in Pakistan, and that they must have at least a bachelor's level of education.

All respondents were highly qualified: 5% had a bachelor's degree; 42% had a master's degree; 20% had a double master's degree; and 33% had an MPhil or PhD. They were working as professors, lawyers, chemists, engineers, computer engineers, accountants, managers, project managers, directors, doctors, dentists, veterinarians, statisticians, executive assistants, IT professionals and analysts.

They were all Muslims but none were extremely religious: 78% called themselves somewhat religious; 22% called themselves very religious. Their praying frequency also varied: 50% prayed at least once every day; 21% prayed at least once a week (Friday prayers in most cases); 14% prayed at least once a month; and another 14% prayed only once a year.

Table 1.6. The demographic detail of respondents.

Participants	Percentage *
Gender	
Male	50
Female	50
Age (Years)	
18 – 25	23
26 – 35	35
36 – 45	23
45+	17
Education Level	
Bachelor	5
Master's	42
Double Master's	20
MPhil/PhD	33

City/Town in Pakistan	
Karachi	20
Islamabad	8
Swat	8
Lahore	8
Faisalabad	8
Multan	8
Interior Sindh	6
Mardan	6
Hyderabad	6
Bhawalpur	6
Kohat	6
Nasirabad	6
Larkana	4
Religion	
Islam	100
Praying Frequency	
Never	0
1 – 2 times /year	14
1 – 2 times /month	14
1 – 2 times /week	21
Everyday 1-5 times	50
Consider her/himself as:	
Extremely non-religious	0
Non-religious	0
Somewhat Religious	78
Very Religious	22
Extremely Religious	0

*Percentage in rounded figures

CHAPTER 2

THE START OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq of the Pakistan Army, illegally seized power to become President of Pakistan and declared martial law throughout the country. He established an Islamic system with conservative and fundamentalist views. Islamic clerics were empowered and granted significant authority. Religious leaders took strong positions and prominent roles in the country's political affairs. General Zia relied on Islamic political parties to rule the country and to interpret Islamic teachings.

General Zia-ul-Haq ruled Pakistan for ten years (1977-1988). During his regime, religious groups became stronger and gained political dominance, leading to the rise of religious extremism in the country. Religion was used as a means of social control, intertwining government and religious authority. Government leaders leveraged religion to boost their popularity and legitimacy, while religious leaders used political power to access resources. Together they became powerful partners. The government was increasingly reliant on the power of religious leaders who had entered politics. The rhetoric of religious leaders became the language of political discourse and the dialogue of politics.

After the death of General Zia-ul-Haq in 1988, Islamic extremism began to decline somewhat. People started to voice their opposition to the religious leaders and their interpretation of Islam. However, despite his death, many of the ideologies from the ten years of his regime persisted, leading to lasting beliefs among some people about concepts such as certain aspects of women's behaviour and men being more dominating. In addition to this, issues like bribes, robberies, killing, shooting, violence and other negative influences remained prevalent and continue to be evident today.

After General Zia was killed, the politicians he had strengthened and empowered took control and continued their corrupt practices to establish themselves as leaders. Three major parties emerged as the main powers in Pakistan, along with several religious parties.