SECTARIAN CONFLICT IN PAKISTAN: SOME LESSONS FROM THE IRISH EXPERIENCE[*]

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Pakistan in the context of lessons that may be learned from the Irish experience. The application of conflict resolution (CR) in the context of Pakistan and Northern Ireland raises two arguments: First, in both cases, the resolution of conflict is yet to take place and second, pending issues seem to be impeding the final settlement. The CR process in case of Pakistan is more complicated as unlike Northern Ireleand, where a substantive agreement in the shape of Good Friday Agreement (GFA) mediated by the then US President Bill Clinton in April 1998 exists, no substantive effort has been made to establish a mechanism for durable peace between the Shi'a and Sunni communities. Case studies of the conflicts in the two countries can provide a conceptual framework for the application of conflict management (CM) as a viable approach for disengaging the conflicting parties and allowing them a cooling off period pending a final settlement. The lessons learned from the management of the Irish conflict can be of great help to those who are involved in seeking a better understanding of the sectarian conflict in Pakistan. These lessons are: first the conflicting parties have the political will to sit down and talk, second, adoption of a moderate approach by the Irish Republican Army and the Unionist party and third, readiness to accept third party mediation. The Irish example also shows the way for the transformation of sectarian conflict in Pakistan from a high to a low intensity conflict.

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Introduction

*T*his paper attempts to analytically examine the dynamics of the sectarian conflict in Pakistan in the context of lessons which may be learned from the Irish experience with particular reference to the following questions:-

1. What is the background of sectarian divide in Pakistan and how has sectarian polarization between the Sunni and Shiite communities impacted on state and society?
2. How has the phenomenon of religious extremism and intolerance led to the emergence of sectarian violence in Pakistan?
3. Why has the state of Pakistan failed to curb sectarian conflict and how has polarization at the societal level promoted the forces of religious extremism?
4. What is the role of external factors in augmenting the sectarian divide in Pakistan and why did foreign forces get a free hand to launch their proxy war in Pakistan on sectarian grounds?
5. What strategies should be formulated to deal with the challenge of sectarian violence in Pakistan?
6. What is the nature of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and how was the process of conflict management and resolution started there?
7. What lessons Pakistan can learn from the Irish experience to manage its sectarian conflict?

From the definitional point of view, a sectarian conflict "refers to violent conflict along religious and political lines such as the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (although political beliefs, ethnicity and class divisions all played major roles as well). It may also refer to general philosophical, political or armed conflict between different schools of thought such as that between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Non-sectarians espouse that free association and tolerance of different beliefs are the cornerstone to successful peaceful human interaction.[1] Whereas, "sectarianism is bigotry, discrimination, prejudice or hatred arising from attaching importance to perceived

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[1] For further information see "Sectarianism," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sectarianism.

difference between subdivisions within a group, such as between denominations of a religion or the factions of political movement."[2]

According to the Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus, the term sect means, "a body of people subscribing to religious doctrines different from those of an established Church from which they have separated."[3] The word sectarian means "of or concerning a sect; bigoted or narrow-minded in following the doctrines of one's sect."[4] Sectarian feelings permeate in a society when parochial and short sighted approach is pursued by a group of people belonging to a particular sect against another sect. The feelings of intolerance, prejudice and bigotry thrive in an environment which is suppressed and devoid of the culture of humanity and enlightenment. In a society where democratic values with a progressive leadership shape popular perceptions on vital issues, sectarian discord cannot get any space. Sectarian intolerance grows in a society in which the mindset of the people and their leaders is narrow.

Sectarianism also reflects deep polarization in a society because of rejectionist approach pursued by various groups belonging to the same religion. When a particular sect feels that it has been excluded from the mainstream religious domain, it adopts a violent course resulting in sectarian violence.

If one views the above definitions of sectarian conflict and sectarianism in the context of Pakistan, it becomes clear that when intolerance and bigotry permeates in a society, one cannot stop those groups who exploit the narrow religious feelings of people for their parochial interests. A society, which is open and tolerant, will have no space for sectarian forces to operate.

The sectarian conflict in Pakistan is unique in the sense that it has both internal and external dimensions. For more than a quarter of a century of Pakistan's existence, both Shi'as and Sunnis have lived in peace and harmony. There were small frictions between the two communities, yet the level of tolerance was maintained by the two sides. Things however began to take an ugly turn when violence and terrorism was inducted in the sectarian conflict in Pakistan resulting in the deaths and injuries of thousands of people. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, was called an occupied territory of the British Army and London

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[2] Ibid.
[3] *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1393.
[4] Ibid.

was accused of patronizing the Protestant majority. A conceptual framework that may help understand the similarities and differences in the two violent conflicts is discussed below.

Conceptual Framework

Two arguments could be given for examining the application of conflict resolution (CR) in the context of the sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and Northern Ireland. First, in both cases, the resolution of the conflict is still not to be seen as in both cases, one can see pending issues impeding the final settlement. The CR process in case of sectarian conflict in Pakistan is more complicated because unlike Northern Ireland where at least there is a substantive agreement in the shape of the Good Friday Agreement between the conflicting parties mediated by the then US President Bill Clinton in April 1998, there is no such mechanism for peace between the Shi'a and Sunni communities here. Second, the application of conflict management (CM) as a viable approach for disengaging conflicting parties that provides a cooling off period in a conceptual framework drawn from case studies of the two conflicts can be tried to ensure peace pending a final settlement. CM is less ambitious than CR but of course, it has its own requirements which must be met by the parties concerned if they want to move step by step for the final resolution of conflict.

When conflict resolution fails, an intermediate solution which minimizes the intensity of any armed or violent conflict is offered by conflict management in a professional manner. The final settlement of a conflict may be quite intractable and may take a long time because of complexities and complications, both intended and by default, This may result in cost escalation of the conflict and push the concerned parties to seek an alternate approach for peace in the shape of conflict management.

The concept of conflict management has been tested in case of Kashmir, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, yet there still exists some ambiguity as to considering CM as an alternative approach to peace. Like conflict resolution, in conflict management too, the parties must fulfill the following requirements:-

1. Political will and determination
2. Risk taking capacity
3. Clear communication

4.   Outside help and assistance
5.   Marginalization of extremist groups
6.   Support from the civil society

To what extent are these requirements present for the CM process in sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and in Northern Ireland? How are the conflict management techniques applied in both case studies and what are the impediments in this regard?

Peter Wellensteen, who is a renowned expert in the field of peace and conflict studies, argues that "Conflict Management can help in reducing the danger of crisis, creating some confidence and lessening (potential or actual) suffering. Conflict resolution is more ambitious as it tries to affect the basic issues, the incompatibilities that direct the conflicting parties.[5]" Sometimes, conflict management may also appear to be ambitious if the parties involved are not interested even in giving a break to the conflict proceedings. In case of Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Pakistan, there was a time during 1990s and till 2006 when it appeared very difficult to de-escalate violence and reduce the level of human casualties, but in the recent past, because of concerted efforts of the government, the religious leaders from both sects and the civil society, it has now become possible to manage the conflict and lessen its intensity. Also since the Lal Masjid incident of 2007 and the military operation against Pakistani Taliban groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North Western Frontier Province (NWFP), the intensity of the sectarian conflict in Pakistan has been reduced to a great extent. Other issues like the judicial crisis and the critical situation in Balochistan have also diverted the attention from sectarian to other issues in Pakistan. In case of Northern Ireland, it was the conflict fatigue and the desire among the people of that region to pull down the walls of mistrust, paranoia and suspicion among the communities which paved the way for reaching a conflict management mechanism through the GFA.

According to Mark R. Amstutz, the process of CM appears to manage issues which can escalate a conflict. He argues that, "Conflict Management assures that conflict is in part constructive and beneficial. It seeks to manage social and political conflict, rather than to eliminate it altogether or to disregard its consequences. This approach seeks to

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[5]   Peter Wellensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 4.

resolve disputes without destroying the fabric of a free society based on the political independence of actors. Conflict Management thus seeks to maintain human communities based on the free and responsible action of members, while establishing procedures and institutions that resolve conflicts and settle disputes effectively and efficiently.[6]” Whereas, on the other hand, according to Peter Wellensteen, “Conflict management typically focuses on the armed aspect of the conflict: bringing the fighting to an end, limiting the spread of conflict and thus containing it. Such actions may even be regarded as successes. The interest in a particular conflict may disappear.”[7] Conflict management thus refers to actions taken to mitigate or contain ongoing violent conflict, trying to limit the scale of destruction and suffering in order to avoid spillover potential into other regions or neighboring countries.[8] In both the cases of the Shi’a-Sunni and the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland, it was possible to scale down the level of violence. In case of Northern Ireland, a full-fledged mechanism of conflict management is in place, (despite its fault lines) whereas, in case of sectarian conflict in Pakistan, both Shi’a and Sunni communities still have a long way to go in order to give an institutional shape to the process of CM. Religious tolerance and intra-faith dialogue to rebuild sectarian harmony is a viable option to manage sectarian conflict in Pakistan.

In the recent past, in Pakistan, the sectarian conflict got more complicated when different Sunni sects began to squabble over leadership and parochial interpretation of Islam by some of the leaders of the Deobandi and Brelevi schools. In the wake of these changes in the dimension of the sectarian conflict, the Shi’a-Sunni conflict got marginalized whereas, inter-Sunni conflicts assumed prominence. No doubt, one important result of unleashing the process of exclusion is that when it comes to discrediting and denying non-conformist groups, there can be no end to that. First, the Ahmedis were excluded from the religion of Islam by the parliament of Pakistan. Following that similar demands of terming Shi’as as non-Muslims were made by various Sunni

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[6] Mark R. Amstutz, *International Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Mc Graw-Hill College, 1999), 91.

[7] Peter Wellensteen, 50.

[8] Lionel Cliffe and Philip White, “Conflict Management and Resolution in the Horn of Africa,” in Ciru Mwaura and Susanne Schmeidl (eds.), *Early Warning and Conflict Management in the Horne of Africa* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2001), 46.

leaders and, then, the Sunni sects, the Deobandis and Brelevis, started attacking each other challenging the correctness of their faith.

Another expert of conflict resolution and management, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, also believes that CM aims to control and limit the intensity of conflict rather than eliminating its causes. According to him, "Conflict management means controlling, limiting, and containing conflict behavior in such a way as to make it less destructive or violent. Thus, conflict management does not necessarily eliminate the causes of conflict; however, its success may help toward resolving it. When the parties of a conflict, for various reasons, are unwilling or unable to resolve their conflict, conflict management is the only option to make a conflict less violent and more tolerable."[9] Therefore, Peter Wallensteen argues that, "Conflict management can help in reducing the dangers of crisis, creating some confidence and lessening (potential or actual) suffering."[10] Two important variations in terms of the application of the concept of conflict management in the sectarian conflicts in Northern Ireland and Pakistan are: first, the different geography, social and religious systems in Northern Ireland and Pakistan. As the approaches, concepts and theories of CR and CM primarily originated in the West where Northern Ireland belongs, the CM process there could be applied more appropriately. Second, Ireland had the professional and advanced techniques available that Pakistan lacked. But, as far as the conceptual framework is concerned, one can no doubt see its possibility in case of sectarian conflict in Pakistan regardless of geographical, cultural and political variations. In fact, Pakistan provides a fertile ground for meaningful research on managing and resolving not only sectarian but also other inter and intra-state conflicts.

Background of the Sectarian Divide in Pakistan

It is not only Pakistan in the Muslim world where the Shi'a-Sunni divide is a cause of instability and crisis. Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and some of the Gulf countries are also a victim of the sectarian tussle. Particularly, one saw sharp escalation of sectarian violence in Iraq when the Shi'a majority which had been suppressed by a Sunni minority for centuries got the opportunity of asserting its position after the

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[9] Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Learning Conflict Resolution," *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 32, No. 1, (1994): 75-76.
[10] Peter Wallensteen, 5.

overthrow of the Sunni dominated regime of Saddam Hussain by the United States in April 2003.

Historically speaking, the Shi'a-Sunni discord is centuries old originating in the bloody conflict among the successors of the last Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). That conflict became a source of division among Muslims on sectarian grounds. But, sectarian conflict in Pakistan is not merely limited to Shi'a and Sunni segments of society but has also permeated in the Sunni sect. Therefore, as argued by Katja Riikonen,

> Although, sectarianism in the Pakistani context often refers to the conflict between the majority Sunni and minority Shi'a traditions, the definition is misleading. These two groups are not homogenous, having their own sub sects, local variants and different schools of thought. These two are in opposition to each other, the divide between different Sunni subjects being equally wide as the divide with the Shi'as. Even though most of the violence branded as sectarianism is violence between Deobandi and Shi'as, the sectarian terrain is wider. Not only different sects like Sunni and Shi'a, but also different schools of thought like Barelvis, Deobandis and Wahabis are in opposition to each other. Thus, looking at sectarianism in Pakistan only as a Shi'a-Sunni problem is too simplistic, as it (is) to assume that there is only one sectarian conflict in Pakistan.[11]

Pakistan as the second largest Muslim country of the world is facing a daunting task of curbing intolerance, hate, extremism and violence targeting Shi'a or Sunni communities. The cycle of sectarian violence has also targeted the holy places and religious schools of both sects resulting in the shameful carnage of fellow Muslims. The Sunni population in Pakistan is 75-80 per cent of the total population while the Shi'a population is roughly 20 per cent. Since the early 1980s, when sectarian politics got an impetus in Pakistan till today, thousands of people have been killed in sectarian violence in different parts of the country. Countless suicide attacks at the religious sites of Sunnis and Shiites not only deepened religious schism but also led to the assassination of hundreds of professionals from the two sides. Sectarian groups, which emerged during 1980s and early 1990s, pursued a policy of annihilating each other. Khalid Ahmed, a noted Pakistani writer during

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[11] Katja Riikonen, "Sectarianism in Pakistan: A Destructive Way of Dealing with Difference" in Brief Number 2, *Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU)*, University of Bradford, March 1, 2007.

his stint at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in 2006 is working on his book entitled, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Shi'a-Sunni Violence and its links to the Middle East* argues that,

> Thousands of lives have been lost in Pakistan's sectarian war in the last two decades of the 20th century. And the mayhem continues into the 21st century. A tolerable level of Sunni-Shi'a tension was inherited by the country from British Raj, but the two sects squared off violently only after 1980. Like all internecine conflicts, the war of the sects has been characterized by extreme cruelty. It coincided with the onset of the Islamic Revolution of Imam Khomeini in Iran and the threat its "export" posed to Saudi Arabia and other Arab states across the Gulf.

While sectarian violence in Pakistan has become frequent, historically speaking, "the first sectarian trouble in Pakistan arose during the month of Moharram in 1950 in the city of Hyderabad in Sindh in which nine Mohajirs (migrants) who had come to Pakistan from India after 1947 were killed by police firing. While the violence was rooted in a rumour that a Sindhi Shi'a had kidnapped a Sunni mohajir child during the Ashura procession, the day long disturbances that it gave rise to had strong underpinnings of mohajir-maqami (local Sindhi).[12] The worst part of sectarian violence in Pakistan is periodic attack on each other's mosques and religious schools by various extremist Shi'a and Sunni groups. By late 1980s, as a result of sustained violence against each other, a stage had come when some Sunni and Shi'a groups began to declare each other as non-Muslims. By attacking each other's religious beliefs, various Sunni and Shiite leaders augmented instability and crisis at the societal level. Giving a vivid account of the emergence of Shi'a-Sunni cleavage in Pakistan, it has been argued by Irfani that,

> The scale, intensity and pattern of organized sectarian violence in Pakistan today are in sharp contrast to anti-Ahmadi movement of 1953, where public rallies and street processions went on for several months before culminating in the Lahore riots. Moreover, the on-going Shi'a-Sunni violence is also marked by

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[12] Oskar Verkaaik, "May 1990 and Muharram 1950: Two Cases of Political Violence in Hyderabad Pakistan," *The Eastora Anthropologist* 53 (2000), quoted in Suroosh Irafani, "Pakistan's Sectarian Violence: Between the Arabist Shift and Indo-Persian Culture," Satu P. Limaye, Robert G. Wirsing & Mohan Malik, (eds.), *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (Hawaii: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), 153.

differences, along the tribal-urban divide. In the cities of Parachinar and Hangu in the tribal northern areas, sectarian strife has at times virtually taken the form of a tribal war, with the army and paramilitary forces having to be called in to restore order.[13]

Tracing the deepening of sectarian violence in Pakistan during 1980s onwards, *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* holds that, "the present state of organized sectarian conflict can be traced to the murder of TNJF leader Arif Hussain Al-Hussani in August 1988. Others date it to 1987 when Ahl-e-Hadith leaders Allama Ehsan Elahi Zaheer and Maulana Habibur Rehman Yazdani were killed, along with six others, at a meeting in Lahore. From June 1985 to 1995, the dominant pattern of sectarian violence was targeted killings of leaders and militants of each other's sects. The spiral violence registered a sharp rise in February 1990 with the murder of Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, founder of SSP. This led to violent clashes resulting in dozens of casualties and burning down of many houses and shops in Jhang. Then, by the mid-nineties, the pattern of sectarian violence shifted to targeted attacks on religious gatherings and mosques, even with hand grenades and time bombs. At that time, office bearers and government officials also were targeted. Since 1997, a new feature of sectarian violence appeared with indiscriminate gunfire on ordinary citizens not involved in sectarian activity, and tit-for-tat killings targeting doctors, lawyers and traders. Finally, in the post-September 11, 2001 context, suicide bombing tends to become the dominant pattern of sectarian violence.[14] According to the Brussels based International Crisis Group (IGC), "sectarian conflict in Pakistan is the direct consequence of state policies of Islamization and the marginalization of secular democratic forces. Instead of empowering liberal, democratic voices, the government has co-opted the religious right and continues to rely on it to counter civilian opposition. The political use of Islam by the state promotes an aggressive competition for official patronage between and within the many variations of Sunni and Shi'a Islam, with the clerical elite of major sects and sub-sects striving to build up their political parties, raise *jihadi* militias, expand madrassa networks and, as has happened on Musharraf's watch, become part of

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[13] Ibid., 154.

[14] *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, http://www.massviolence.org.

the government."[15] As mentioned in the IGC report, "like all other Pakistani military governments, the Musharraf administration has also weakened secular and democratic political forces. Administrative and legal action against militant organizations has failed to dismantle a well-entrenched and widely spread terror infrastructure. All banned extremist groups persist with new labels, although old names are also still in use. The *jihadi* media is flourishing, and the leading figures of extremist Sunni organizations are free to preach their *jihadi* ideologies. The banned groups such as the *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, the *Sipahe Sahaba* and the *Jash-e-Mohammad* appear to enjoy virtual immunity from the law. They have gained new avenues to propagate their militant ideas since the chief patrons of *jihad*, the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI) and the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, have acquired prominent and powerful roles in Musharraf's political structure."[16] The IGC report blaming the state of Pakistan of promoting sectarian violence was contrary to the claims made by Islamabad that the Musharraf regime was deadly against sectarianism and had taken numerous measures to cut various sectarian groups to their size. Particularly since September 11, 2001, the government had launched a massive crackdown on various religious extremist groups, including sectarian groups and is pursuing a policy of "enlightened moderation."

External factors like the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Saudi role of promoting Wahabi sect of Islam and the involvement of hard line religious groups of Afghanistan in Pakistan's internal politics further complicated the sectarian conflict. The support rendered by Iran, Saudi Arabia and some other Muslim countries to various Shiite and Sunni groups of Pakistan resulted in the outbreak of a sectarian proxy war. One needs to contemplate *how* the menace of sectarian polarization and violence in Pakistan could be tactfully handled and *why the* fault lines in sectarian conflict have not been properly dealt with so far? If the state of Pakistan and its apparatus seriously try to weed out terrorist and violent elements from various Sunni and Shiite groups and curb the external hand in fanning sectarian feelings, much can be done to sort out things which cause and promote sectarian violence in the country. Therefore, strategies to deal with sectarian conflict in Pakistan must be formulated and followed at the state and non-state level.

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[15] For more information on the report of International Crisis Group (IGC) see www.hinduonnet.com.
[16] Ibid.

Internal and External Dynamics of Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan

According to a well-researched study on sectarian conflict in Pakistan with a case study of Jhang district in the province of Pakistan, Mukhtar Ahmed argues that the, "nature of Shi'a-Sunni violence under the British was radically different than it had been under the earlier Muslim empires or caliphates. Previously, it was always a conflict either between the established Sunni authorities and anti-status quo Shi'a denomination (that is Ummayeds/Abbasides vs. followers of Fatimides dynasties) or between the Sunni-Shi'a dynasties or caliphates (that is, Mughals vs. the Shi'a dynasties of Deccan and Abbasides vs. Fatmides in Egypt). Unlike the alien rule of the British, the conflict declined to communities' level, involving the general public and theologians alike in sectarian violence. The role of the government was limited to that of arbiter, enforcer of law or manipulator, if so required, in the larger colonial interests. However, the state was secular and largely unrepresentative and, therefore, the use of sectarian idiom was limited to the purpose of self-identification"[17] But, after the creation of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, the Shi'a-Sunni relations were not ideal but shrouded with mistrust and suspicion against each other. Muslims from India, who migrated to Pakistan after the partition of August 1947 brought with them the baggage of sectarian bias and hatred. Yet the two communities lived side by side and there were very few incidents of sectarian violence causing physical casualties of the two sides.

It was only after the controversial process of Islamization unleashed by the military ruler of Pakistan, General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq that sectarian conflict took a violent turn. Zia's policy to introduce Islamic Sharia, which is termed as a radical brand of Sunni Hanifi system of jurisprudence, shattered the bond of unity between Shi'as and Sunni communities. The imposition of Zakat in Pakistan by the regime of Zia-ul-Haq in 1980 was vehemently resisted by Shi'a leaders. An important Shi'a cleric, Mufti Jaafar Husain (1916-1983) argued that if Pakistan was to have Islamic law, the Shi'a should be allowed to follow their own jurisprudence known as Jaafariya *fiqh* after the sixth Shi'a Imam Jafar al-Sadiq.[18]

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[17] Mukhtar Ahmed, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang* (Colombo: Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 2001), 15.

[18] Hussain Haqqani, "Weeding Out the Heretics: Sectarianism in Pakistan" in *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology* vol. 4, (November 1, 2006). Hudson Institute's Center for Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World.

The Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Pakistan has more economic rationale than religious or political. Particularly in the district of Jhang of Punjab, the worse phase of sectarian bloodshed was the outcome of grievances held by the peasants belonging to the Sunni sect and the feudal landlords belonging to the Shi'a sect. According to Dr. Mohammad Waseem, a Pakistani political scientist, "the social base of sectarian conflict has significantly expanded because of the following factors:

1. The use of print media.
2. Accessibility to the means of electronic communications.
3. Better transport services which have increased mobility of sectarian activists. It helps people from district areas to join sectarian networks, generate funds and plan concerted political activities at the provincial and national levels."[19]

The assertion of militant Sunni and Shi'a Islam is also the outcome of external factors. Iran and Saudi Arabia were held responsible for fighting their proxy sectarian war in Pakistan. The imposition of Fiqah-i-Jafria in Iran by Ayotullah Khomeini and the fear of a revolution spillover in the neighboring countries led the Arab world, particularly Iraq and Saudi Arabia, to a confrontational path with Tehran. This perceived fear engaged Iran and Saudi Arabia in a proxy war for religio-political influence and clout in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the newly independent Muslim republics of Central Asia.[20] In 1998, a new sectarian group called as *Sunni Tehrik* (movement) was established in Karachi under the leadership of Maulana Saleem Qadri. It needs to be mentioned that in a deadly suicide attack in Karachi in a religious gathering organized by the Sunni Tehrik on April 11, 2006, its entire leadership was wiped out. According to a Pakistani analyst now based in the United States,

> The Iranians were, most likely, assisting Pakistani's Shi'a with money and Ziaul Haq invited the Saudis to help Sunni sectarian groups. The Afghan *Jihad* had already resulted in the free flow of arms and military training for Sunni Islamists. Soon, some of

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[19] Mohammad Waseem, "Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan" (Unpublished): 4-5 quoted in Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, 1.

[20] C.f. Mumtaz Ahmed, "Revivalism, Islamization, Sectarianism and Violence in Pakistan" in *Pakistan 1997* edited by Craig Bexter and Charles Kennedy (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 108, quoted in Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, 27-28.

these Sunni militants were attacking the Shi'a in an effort to purify Pakistan of their heterodoxy. Shi'a militias emerged to fight the Sunni extremists with similar tactics. During the last twenty-five years, nearly two thousand people have been killed, and thousands more maimed, in attacks by zealots of the rival sects in Pakistan. Between 1989 and 2004, 688 people were killed in 1,837 reported incidents of sectarian conflicts. In 2005, sixty-two incidents resulted in 160 deaths, and in the first three months of 2006, six incidents occurred in which 136 people were reportedly killed.[21]

Therefore, the two external events, which had a substantial role in shaping the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Pakistan were the anti-Soviet *Jihad* launched by a conglomeration of Afghan Mujahideen groups and second, the Iranian revolution which overthrew the monarchy but established a Shi'a ideological state. Nevertheless, "the Iranian revolution had a multifold impact. The First seizure of power by an avowedly Islamist group in an Islamic revolution brought Iran's Shi'a clergy to power and energized Shi'a all over the Middle East, particularly those in the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia's monarchy was wedded to Wahabism, and the Sunni rulers of all the Gulf States had suppressed their Shi'a minorities since the emergence of the modern Middle East."[22] Furthermore, "the Iranian government threatened the Saudis and their allies with its rhetoric of exporting the Iranian revolution. The Iranians also provided overt and covert assistance to Shi'a organizations and movements.

According to Khaled Ahmed, "it is not possible to examine the Saudi-Iranian conflict exclusively in a non-sectarian perspective. The schism was reflected in the Afghan Jihad, but after the Jihad ended, it was reflected in the ouster from the first government-in-exile of Mujahideen belonging to the Shi'a militia."[23] Unfortunately, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two Muslim countries, but following different sects of Islam, failed to understand that their political confrontation would create instability in other Muslim countries and endanger the sectarian harmony. Pakistan became an easy battleground of Iran and Saudi

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[21] "Sectarian violence in Pakistan," *South Asian Terrorism Portal*, http://www.satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/sect.killing.htm (quoted in Hussain Haqqani).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Khalid Hasan, "Sectarian conflict looms over Pakistan: study," *Daily Times* (Lahore), May 14, 2007.

Arabia of supporting their respective sectarian groups with money and political indoctrination while the state of Pakistan miserably failed to prevent foreign intervention resulting in the outbreak of sectarian violence in the country.

The Shi'a clergy of Iran and Pakistan were linked historically, but these links became politicized only after the Iranian revolution. The changing role of the Shi'a Imamia Student's Organization (ISO) provides an example of the new reality. Before 1979, the group began offering scholarships to Shi'a students to study in Iran. The increased contact between Pakistani Shi'a students and clergy and their Iranian counterparts created a cadre of politicized Shi'a leaders. TNFJ founder, Jaafar Husain, was succeeded as the leader of the Pakistani Shi'a by Allama Arif Hussan al-Husani (1947-88), who had studied at Shi'as academies in Najaf, Iraq and Qom, Iran. Husaini had come into close contact with Ayatollah Khomeini in both places. When Sunni sectarian terrorism began during the 1980s, Iranian diplomats in Pakistan were among its targets. In the minds of Sunni sectarian militants, Pakistan's Shi'a groups and Iran were closely linked.[24] The end of Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the internal power struggle in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal, the emergence of hardcore Wahabi Taliban and their seizure of power in 1996 and other subsequent events transformed the sectarian conflict in Pakistan. The level of polarization at the sectarian level rose with the rise of splinter groups of various Shi'a and Sunni religious organizations. The external factor is still relevant as far as sectarian violence in Pakistan is concerned, but its intensity has decreased. In the recent past, Iraq has emerged as a major battleground of Shi'a and Sunni communities with the alleged involvement of Iran in support of Iraqi Arab Shi'a groups growing with the passage of time.

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[24] Ibid.

Major players in the Sectarian conflict in Pakistan

TABLE 1

S. NO	NAME OF PLAYER	TYPE	ROLE
1	STATE	Neutral	Blamed of not controlling the sectarian violence
2	MILLAT-E-ISLAMI-YE PAKISTAN (MIP) previously known as Sipah-Sahaba-Pakistan banned by the Musharraf regime	Sunni	Held responsible for fanning sectarian conflict
3	LASKHAR-E-JHANGVI	Sunni (Banned by the Musharraf regime)	Involved in targeting Shi'as
4	ISLAMI TAHRIK-E-PAKISTAN (ITP) previously know as Tehrik-I-Jaffaria-Pakistan	Shiite	Militant Shi'a organization held responsible for targeting Sunnis
5	SIPAH-E-MUHAMMADI PAKISTAN (SMP)	Shitte (Banned)	Militant Shi'a organization
6	SIPHAH-I-SAHABA PAKISTAN	Sunni (Banned)	Militant Sunni organization
7	SUNNI TEHRIK	Brelvi Sunni	To counter the influence of Deobandi and Wahabi Sunni groups

According to a report published in monthly *The Herald*, Karachi, "Sectarian tensions have become more pronounced in the Orakzai Agency, widely seen as the birth place of Talibanization in Pakistan, following the establishment of *Tehrik Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) by a close

aide of Mullah Omar, Akhunzada Mohammad Aslam Farooqui. The political agent of Orakzai agency said that the Orakzai Taliban are using the platform of *Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Islam* (JUI-F) to promote the agenda of *Sipah-e-Sahaba*. The group is strongly connected with the elders of Hangu and takes instructions from outside. Like the culture of suicide bombings, the idea of parting of ways by Shi'a and Sunni committees also comes from across the border where the Pushtoon Taliban could not take over Mazar-e-Sharif."[25] Recently, the TTP took the control over some of the areas of Swat district of Pakistan and also the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. They have attacked Shiite Muslims settled in Parachinar. For instance, "thousands of displaced Shiite from Parachinar are forced to take refuge in Peshawar, the capital of NWFP. In Kurram agency, the general areas where Parachinar is located, the Taliban are a relatively new phenomenon, exploiting the generations old sectarian conflict as a way of keeping the government out of the strategically important piece of territory. But Shiite, say the Taliban are doing more than just keeping the government at bay. They say that because they are stopping the militants from entering Afghanistan, the Taliban are attacking them. The situation has attracted the attention of the leading Shiite figure in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has encouraged all Shiites in Pakistan to do what they can to help their brethren in Parachinar."[26]

How to Manage the Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan?

In the last twenty-six years, sustained violence resulting in the killing, injury and material losses of both Sunni and Shi'a communities seem to have made the task of sectarian reconciliation difficult. Not only militant sectarian groups happen to further divide the Shi'a and Sunni communities, but external factors also fuel sectarian conflict in Pakistan. Yet, some of the strategies, which could be helpful in controlling sectarian violence, are as follows:-

> 1. *There should be a constitutional provision to declare promoting sectarian hatred and violence a serious crime by awarding severe punishment.*

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[25] See Abdul Sami Paracha, "Cementing Sectarian Divisions," *The Herald* November, 2007, 68-69.

[26] See Jane Perlez and Zubair Shah, "The Taliban Exploit Sectarian Rift in Pakistan siege," *International Herald Tribune*, July 16, 2008.

2. *The state apparatus must be neutral as far as dealing with Shi'a and Sunni conflict is concerned. State should not favor any sectarian group.*
3. *The media, both print and electronic, must be instructed to do responsible reporting on Sectarian matters.*
4. *Those sectarian organizations, which have been banned by the government, should not be allowed to reappear under a different name.*
5. *External intervention in sectarian matters must be effectively checked.*

Sectarian conflict in Pakistan needs to be managed with the help of civil society, religious scholars and above all by convincing Iran and Saudi Arabia that their political differences should not be at the expense of the country's sectarian harmony. Shi'a-Sunni and inter-Sunni conflicts are not beyond proper management and resolution. What is required is political will and determination among the stakeholders to decide on four things. First, religious groups who thrive on fanning sectarian conflict must be restrained by the State from pursuing such a course. When extremist religious groups and their leaders were given a free hand to preach intolerance and hatred against each other, the result was the upsurge of sectarian violence in the country. In case of Northern Ireland, breakthrough in managing the sectarian conflict was not possible till the time the hard line Protestant and Catholic groups lacked basic tolerance to accept each other.

Second, with the coordination of state and civil society, it is possible to corner parochial and extremist groups who propagate sectarian hatred among common people. For that matter, enlightenment, education and development should be the priority of both the government and civil society in Pakistan and the country cannot afford perpetual conflict in the name of ethnicity of sectarian beliefs. When the process of development with its focus on human development is the priority of state and society, ethnic or sectarian issues could be properly managed. If people have basic necessities of life and are optimistic about their future, they cannot be exploited by ethnic or sectarian groups. In Northern Ireland, the intensity of sectarian conflict remained high because of different positions taken by UK, the controlling authority in Northern Ireland, and the society. The "conflict fatigue" in the Irish sectarian conflict made it possible to marginalize those groups who pursued a retrogressive approach on the issue of political reconciliation

and favored the sustenance of conflict. Things however changed when moderate elements from the Protestant and Catholic groups decided to follow a moderate approach.

Third, the role of media is pivotal in managing sectarian conflict because in an era of information technology, it is possible to unleash a chain reaction to a particular event. Mature and responsible reporting by the print and electronic media on different societal conflicts, including sectarian, can make things easier for those who want a viable mechanism of conflict management to deal with the sectarian issue. The Irish case study also proves the fact that along with the civil society the media also supported peace process which ultimately led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

Finally, political parties in Pakistan must have a democratic set-up and formulate a comprehensive policy for ethnic and religious tolerance. The escalation of sectarian violence in Pakistan, particularly the launching of scores of suicide attacks depicted the failure of political parties to curb fanaticism. In case of Northern Ireland, till the time the mainstream political parties were not pursuing a responsible approach on periodic sectarian killings, it was difficult to move forward in the peace process. No doubt, the democratic political culture in the West also helped the parochial sectarian groups of Northern Ireland to change their approach on things which provoked sectarian violence. The absence of a viable democratic culture in Pakistan promoted sectarian groups to take law into their own hands. The mafias also are responsible for making things difficult for the vast majority of Shi'as and Sunnis who are against violence and want to live in harmony and peace.

The Irish Conflict and its Management

After decades of bloodshed and violence, the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland has entered the phase of crucial management. Following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, the parties involved in the Irish conflict, are able to create plausible conditions for transforming the centuries old sectarian conflict. The road to conflict management and peace in Northern Ireland was however not smooth as for years, the people of that part of the world suffered enormously from periodic outbreak of violence. The historical dimension of the Irish conflict cannot be overlooked for analyzing the present and the future dynamics of the conflict.

The origins of the Irish sectarian conflict have been examined by *Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia* in the following words:

> The origins of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the north of Ireland lie in the British settler-colonial plantation of Ulster in 1609, which confiscated native-owned land and settled Ulster with (mainly Protestant) English and Scottish "planters." At the same time, there was considerable Protestant immigration to "unplanted" areas of Ulster, especially Antrim and down. Conflict between native Catholics and the "planters" led to two bloody ethno-religious conflicts between them in 1641-1653 and 1689-1691. British Protestant political dominance in Ireland was ensured by victory in these wars and by the Penal Laws, which curtailed the religious legal and political rights of any one including both Catholic and Protestant Dissenters such as Presbyterians, who did not conform to the state church, the Anglican Church of Ireland.[27]

As a legacy of religious schism in Europe of 16th and 17th centuries, the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland was considered as a major destabilizing factor and an irritant for peace in Ireland and England. Surprisingly, when the Western parts of Europe were settling down after bloody sectarian wars of 16th and 17th centuries and were entering into a phase of enlightenment, industrial revolution and modernization, things in Ireland were still marred by sectarian schism with United Kingdom as a saviour of Protestant population of Northern Ireland and determined to prevent the unification of Ireland dominated by the Catholic majority.

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[27] For a background of the Irish Sectarian Conflict see, "Troubles," *Wikipedia Free Encyclopaedia*, www://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The-Trouble.

TABLE 2

MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE SECTARIAN CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND BEFORE THE SIGNING OF GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

S.No	Name of Player	Type	Role
1	United Kingdom	Partisan	Support the Protestant community in Northern Ireland
2	Republic of Ireland	Partisan	Support the Catholic community in Northern Ireland
3	United States	Neutral	Mediation
4	Sinn Fein	Moderate	Political wing of IRA
5	Irish Republican Army	Hard line	Unification of Ireland
6	Democratic Unionist Party	Hard line	Union with United Kingdom
7	Protestant Ulster Unionist Party	Hard line but transformed its position as a moderate	Supportive of the peace process

One needs to point out that the April 1998 Good Friday Agreement covered the important aspects of both conflict management and conflict resolution. According to Jonathan Tonge, "the management section of GFA was one in which republican constitutional ambitions were put in abeyance pending demographic change in a bid to neuter violence. Republicans were required not to abandon their objective of dissolving Northern Ireland into a unitary state, but merely to put the project on hold and await demographic and internal change. Conflict Resolution elements were those which addressed the main reasons why republicans had resorted to violence. These sections dealt with the remnants of 'second class citizenry' and inequality with which many

Catholics had associated with Northern Ireland polity. Sinn Fein indicated that the Agreement contained the potential to remove the causes of conflict."[28] What has happened after the signing of GFA is the unleashing of a process of conflict management as both the Unionists and the Republicans have realized the futility of sustaining the cycle of violence. The Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, which still has control over Northern Ireland, acted in a prudent manner, first by signing the Anglo-Irish accord in 1985 and then, pursuing their supported groups in Northern Ireland to join the process of dialogue. The turning point in conflict management in Northern Ireland came when the United States offered its mediation under Senator George Mitchell which resulted into the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

For sometime after the signing of the GFA there were problems and complications in the implementation process. The Unionists demanded the decommissioning of the Irish Republican Army, whereas, the IRA wanted more guarantees for the protection of the Catholic minority before going for disarming itself. Periodic acts of violence in Northern Ireland also exposed the vulnerability of GFA to sustain peace between the Catholic and Protestant communities.

Lessons from the Irish Experience?

As mentioned earlier, there are several variations when one tries to do a comparative study of sectarian conflict in Ireland and in Pakistan. Yet, regardless of contradictions in the two case studies, there are various points of convergence. A brief account of the Irish sectarian conflict will help clear how some lessons can be learned from the Irish case study for the management and resolution of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. While examining the lessons learned from the Irish conflict, the sectarian stake holders in Pakistan must realize that without substantial political will and determination there cannot be a viable constituency of peace. After decades of sufferings, the people of Northern Ireland divided between majority Protestant and minority Catholic communities had no option than to support the peace process and reach a comprehensive settlement for the management of their conflict.

Some of the similarities and differences in the Sectarian conflicts in Pakistan and Northern Ireland are depicted in the following table.

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[28] Jonathan Tonge, 189.

TABLE 3

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Both conflicts are the outcome of sectarian intolerance rooted in historical cleavages.	The sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland was primarily the outcome of British occupation and their patronage of Protestant settlement whereas, the sectarian conflict in Pakistan despite subtle Iranian and Saudi involvement has no direct external role.
In both conflicts, splinter groups emerged who refused to accept dialogue and giving up of armed struggle.	The sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland was managed because of American mediation. No such foreign mediation to manage sectarian conflict exists in case of Pakistan.
The Irish conflict had an economic dimension as Catholic minority in Northern Ireland complained of economic deprivation at the hands of the British-backed Protestant majority. The Sunni population living in the Punjab's district of Jhang which became a hub of sectarian conflict complained of economic exploitation and injustices by the Shi'a feudal lords.	Sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland led to its transformation from violent to terrorist acts but suicide attacks were not launched. In case of Pakistan, the sectarian conflict has taken a dangerous turn with the induction of suicide bombers.
The sectarian conflict in Pakistan got escalated because of the Saudi and Iranian discord. In case of Northern Ireland, the sectarian conflict also got external support particularly from the European and American backers of Catholic and Protestants.	The sectarian conflict in Pakistan has led to attacks over mosques and religious schools of both Shi'a and Sunni communities. In case of Northern Ireland, church and religious seminaries were not attacked.
Sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and in Pakistan also got intensified because of the attack on	Sectarian violence has taken place in all the four provinces of Pakistan whereas, in case of

religious processions and other religious festivals	Ireland, the Protestant-Catholic conflict is restricted to the northern part of Ireland.
In both conflicts parochial approach and lack of accommodation led to the rise of extremist groups.	Conflict management mechanism in Northern Ireland was established through the Good Friday Agreement, whereas, beyond rhetoric and superficial pledges, no concrete step has been taken by those involved in the sectarian conflict and the state authorities to establish some sort of mechanism for the management of Shi'a-Sunni and inter-Sunni sectarian conflicts. **Except efforts for intra-faith dialogue and taking on board religious leaders from both sects to maintain harmony, official conflict management is marginal.**

As pointed out earlier, the two conflicts are different in terms of their backgrounds and structures, yet the above chart clearly indicates that some parallels could be drawn from the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and in Pakistan. For instance, both conflicts reflected a parochial mindset of sectarian parties and their leadership to reject any form of reconciliation. Some of the lessons which could be learned from the Irish experience are as follows:-

1. Transformation of the Irish conflict from violent to a manageable shape because of pursuing a tolerant, prudent and visionary approach by the majority of the leaders from the Protestant and Catholic sects. Consequently, a plausible condition for launching the Irish peace process was created which marginalized extremist sectarian groups. On the issue of decommissioning of weapons, the IRA was not receptive which threatened the rupture of GFA but because of wise policy pursued by Sein Fein and the Unionist Party it was possible to salvage the peace process. It took sectarian groups in Northern Ireland several decades to reach the stage

of conflict transformation. From violent to manageable conflict in Northern Ireland, the warring sectarian groups in Northern Ireland were able to proceed step by step. The sectarian groups in Pakistan can thus learn a fundamental lesson from the Irish sectarian conflict by abandoning the road to violence and pursuing the option of dialogue so that a mechanism of conflict management could be created. The task may be difficult because there is no proper methodology which is used at the state and society level in Pakistan as far as conflict management is concerned. Lack of awareness among the major stakeholders about the process of conflict management and resolution made things difficult in Pakistan for professionally dealing with not only sectarian but also other types of intra-state conflicts. **Furthermore, conceptually, the sectarian issue in Northern Ireland and Pakistan is similar in terms of deep rooted cleavages, intolerance and paranoia of sectarian groups against each other. Pakistan can thus learn a fundamental lesson from the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland in terms of change in the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of Catholic and Protestant sectarian parties. The transformation of Irish conflict is another major lesson which the sectarian groups in Pakistan may take into account. If the Irish sectarian conflict has transformed for the better, no such possibility exists in Pakistan because the major stake holders in the sectarian conflict are unable to delink violence from peaceful struggle. The abandonment of armed struggle by IRA in favour of peace greatly contributed to strengthen the pro-peace forces.**

2. Renunciation of the use of force and weapons by the warring sectarian groups in Northern Ireland is another lesson which can be learned from those who are still involved in the cycle of sectarian intolerance and violence in Pakistan. The GFA, which was reached after months of hectic negotiations mediated by the United States merely created conditions for a fragile peace culminating in the peace deal between the IRA and the Unionist Party on power sharing. In case of Pakistan, the sectarian conflict has not reached a

comprehensive settlement because unlike Northern Ireland none of the sectarian combatants have renounced violence nor like the Irish, the sectarian issue in Pakistan is close to external mediation. **In this scenario, the role of State actors in Pakistan is crucial because unless there is a firm policy on the part of those who wield power in Pakistan on forcing sectarian groups to renounce violence and follow a peaceful path, it will be difficult to ensure sectarian harmony in the country. During the regime of General Musharraf, some efforts were made to neutralize sectarianism by banning militant sectarian groups and arresting their leaders. General Musharraf in 2001 also took steps to reform madaris where to a large extent sectarian hatred and intolerance is promoted. In case of Northern Ireland, major stakeholders were able to reach GFA only by renouncing militancy and the use of force.**

Conclusion

A comparative study of sectarian conflict in Pakistan and Northern Ireland brings into focus the role of extremist groups in the two case studies which exploited religious feelings of people for the pursuance of their vested interests. The Irish conflict was managed because of the readiness of local stakeholders, primarily the IRA and the Unionists, and the external players namely Britain and the United States to reach a format suspending exacerbation of conflict factors. Whereas, in case of the case study of sectarian conflict in Pakistan, the external players, primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia, seem to have no role for the peaceful resolution of that conflict. Domestic players, primarily the banned sectarian parties and groups belonging to both Shi'a and Sunni sects, show no inclination to move towards the de-escalation process which in fact is not on ground or on offer by any internal or external agency. State actors, including the intelligence agencies, are more concerned with blaming foreign elements in sectarian polarization than looking into the fault lines which since the last 30 years seem to have destabilized the very fabric of Pakistani society.

The lessons learned from the management of the Irish conflict can be of great help to those who are involved in seeking a better understanding of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. Some of the lessons learned from the Irish model are: first, political will of the conflicting

parties to unleash the process of dialogue, second, pursuing a moderate approach by the conflicting parties and third, the role played by outside players to seek peaceful management and resolution of conflict. As pointed out the sectarian conflict may have descended to a lower level of intensity for various reasons but unless the root causes of Shi'a-Sunni discord are addressed, one can expect resurgence in intensity of violence in Pakistan.■