

Lal Masjid as a Case Study: Recommendations to Eradicate Extremism

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POLICY BRIEF

Executive Summary

Events that surrounded the Lal Masjid were a product of sustained inaction against hardliners that undermine the writ of the state. Hardliners defied the state by inciting armed rebellion and triggering a culture of violent vigilantism. They rallied for the public to support their extreme cause in the name of *jihad*, coercing many susceptible minds to follow their violent dictates. Years later, lessons of the Lal Masjid case study are still relevant. In order to counter extremism, it is important that neutral and law-abiding members of the society are not swayed towards violent courses of action through a weak law and order situation. Recommendations have been put forth to limit the actionable space for extremist elements in the society, neutralize the spread of vigilantism in the country, and most importantly, establish rule of law without indulging in the political expediency:

- Adopt legislative measures in order to strengthen the capability of judiciary and LEAs to provide them with freedom and training to persecute extremist elements.
- Improve public confidence in LEAs by increased liaison between LEAs and people through the introduction of police mobile applications and neighbourhood watch committees.
- Incorporate Paigham-e-Pakistan in the education curriculum of secondary and higher secondary schools as well as *madrassahs* by the Federal and Provincial Ministries of Education in order to correctly clarify the concept of jihad.

More specific recommendations to this can be found at the end of the document.

Issue to be analysed

Although the incident of Red mosque occurred several years ago, some lessons learnt are still relevant for policy-makers today. Firstly, no action has yet been taken against the Lal Masjid leadership and the mosque. Although the mosque is owned by the state, it is still being used in defiance of the government directives. Secondly, it was evident in the Lal Masjid crisis, that extremism can not only be exacerbated by active combatants but also by sympathizers.¹ The Lal Masjid clerics had attained sympathizers while they ran their campaign of vigilantism in the capital-city, legitimizing the use of violence and directly challenging the writ of the state. Such violent behaviour, from mob-justice attacks to public lynching, is still seen in the country, pointing towards the erosion of rule of law. In a semi-literate, religiously sensitive and polarized society like Pakistan, this is a worrying reality which may grow exponentially if not checked by the state.

Analysis

In 2007, the attention and focus of the country's security apparatus shifted towards Lal Masjid. Hardliners, in setting out to create their version of an Islamic state, found actionable space in the capital city to engage in vigilantism and propagate their own justice system. Here vigilantism is taken to mean 'the tendency some individuals have to assert their 'superior beliefs onto others to

¹ Sympathizers are those law-abiding members of society who would be able to justify violent courses of action through a weak law-and order situation.

correct others.² Such a phenomenon is most dangerous when the illegal use of violence is legitimized by the vigilantes. This constitutes as extremism.

The Hardliners' Acquisition of Actionable Space: An Effect of State Appeasement.

The hardliners were able to challenge government authority and achieve actionable space due to the state's continuous policy of appeasing clerics.³ There is a long history of the state's appeasement for Red Mosque clerics. Some of the recent examples of state appeasement in Lal Masjid episode include:

- After the Lal Masjid administration lodged a protest against the Capital Development Authority for demolishing mosques built on illegally encroached lands, the government reversed its decision and the Minister for Religious Affairs laid the foundation brick to signify the states' intent of rebuilding the recently demolished Amir Hamza Mosque⁴.
- In negotiations with the hardliners, the government appeared ready to compromise to the demands of the vigilantes, whereby the deputy commissioner and senior superintendent of police Islamabad, pledged all sorts of 'corrective action'⁵
- Maulana Abdul Aziz was acquitted in all the cases that were registered against him.⁶ 39 FIRs⁷ were filed against Lal Masjid's management and students, on grounds of various activities punishable under different provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code⁸, such as the illegal possession of weapons, the illegal intimidation and kidnapping of people, wrongful confinement, harbouring of offenders or attempted homicide, yet no decisive action (except the military operation) was ever taken. There was state inaction even when Maulana openly displayed vocal support for Daesh.
- Despite being a repeat offender, Maulana has again attempted to occupy the state-owned Lal Masjid and organize a congregation.⁹ This was in defiance of government directives and seminary boards regarding COVID-19.

Hardliners Campaign of Violent Vigilantism: Legitimate Means to Pursue Justice?

In order to establish their own version of Islamic order, the Lal Masjid hardliners launched an anti-vice campaign. Allowing such an anti vice campaign exacerbates extremism in the society. Putting themselves in direct confrontation with the government, hardliners engaged are in self-appointed moral policing and violent vigilantism, like the kidnappings of civilians and police officials, the

² Donald A. Saucier and Russell J. Webster, "Social Vigilantism: Measuring Individual Differences in Belief Superiority and Resistance to Persuasion," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2009).

³ Zahid Hussain, "How Lal Masjid Changed Militancy," *Dawn*, July 13, 2017.

⁴ News Desk, "Breakthrough in talks on Children's Library siege," *The News*, February 13, 2007

⁵ Adam Dolnik and Khuram Iqbal, *Negotiating the Siege of Lal Masjid* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2016).

⁶ Ziad Zafar, "The People vs Abdul Aziz," *Dawn*, July 9, 2017.

⁷ Ayesha Siddiqi, "The mystery of Lal Masjid," *Express Tribune*, January 9, 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Munawer Azeem, "Maulana Abdul Aziz, 6 others booked for violating govt order," *Dawn*, April 5, 2020.

establishment of a separate Sharia court to act as a de facto parallel judicial system, and the raiding of various DVD stores and massage parlours. Hundreds of armed students supported this cause in the name of jihad because they were incited by Abdul Aziz to claim the right to end immoral activity under Islamic law as it was ‘the responsibility of all believers to support the activities of the Taliban in the province against... obscenity.’¹⁰ Such moves could be seen as reinforcing the fact that violent vigilantism can achieve what a legitimate government cannot, which is why Ghazi proudly announced that his students took an action that should have been taken by the government.

Public Support for Violent Vigilantism in Pakistan

The Lal Masjid episode provided extremists the opportunity to make inroads into different segments of the Pakistani society and expand their public standing. This is troublesome because hardliners justified the use of violence as a legitimate and alternate means to dispel justice, in direct confrontation to the states’ authority by issuing threats of suicide blasts and bombs. This exacerbates the risk of having neutral members of society in being attracted or swayed by militancy and their legitimisation of violence. It simultaneously deprives the state of the much-needed public support to counter the alarming level of extremism in Pakistan. Even in the Lal Masjid case study, the hardliners manipulated the issues to gain public sympathy and support against the state, which is why the results of a poll taken in the aftermath of the Lal Masjid crisis reported more Pakistanis subscribing to the clerics point of view that Sharia should play greater role in Pakistan than those lending support to the Pakistan Army in pursuing insurgents.¹¹

Through a snap survey¹², this brief attempted to gauge the extent people in Pakistan support vigilantism and subscribe to the belief that violence may be justifiable to secure justice. The results of the survey suggested that the public is mindful that it is the duty of law enforcement agencies to punish criminal activity, however, their faith in state’s ability to dispense justice was low. In such a scenario, the respondents demonstrated a higher level of support of vigilantism, because when people begin to see the justice system as corrupt or ineffective, they feel unprotected from crime and support vigilantism as the next best option. The results of the survey also suggested that there was a greater propensity of respondents to turn towards violent options, as a means of securing justice and restoring order. This was the case in hardened criminal activities like murder and rape. A result like such is reflective of the dangerous trend being set in Pakistan, where the public often resorts to taking actions in its own hands. Pakistan is peppered with examples of the outbreak of vigilantism and the tendency of the public resorting to violence in such cases is often put into display. This shows erosion of rule of law and official apathy and neglect and at time, official patronage in the name of waging Jihad in Afghanistan. In a semi-literate, religiously sensitive and polarized society like Pakistan, this is a worrying reality which may grow exponentially if not checked by the state.

Recommendations:

¹⁰ News Desk, "Lal Masjid gears up for attack on CD, video shops: Taliban jihad in NWFP backed," *Dawn*, May 26, 2007.

¹¹ Adam Dolnik and Khuram Iqbal, *Negotiating the Siege of Lal Masjid* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2016).

¹² The survey presented close ended questions to the public in which respondents were presented with hypothetical scenarios of criminal activity. The answers were shaped to form a scale between non-violent, non-vigilante options to a violent, vigilante option. The survey sample is attached at Annex A.

- The Lal Masjid leadership that was culpable in defiance of state and the violent sequel resulting in loss of life on both sides, state and militant, should be prosecuted with full force of law.
- Federal and provincial law ministries should propose the addition of witness protection clauses in anti-terrorism legislation. This may be modelled after the Witness Security (WITSEC) program of the US.
- To overcome the reluctance of judiciary to pursue vigilantism and extremist elements, provisions should be made in the Anti-terrorism legislation to provide the option of special “faceless” courts. These are designed to protect the identity of the judges, allowing them to prosecute hardliners without fear.
- Secretary Interior, provincial IGs, secretaries’ home, Commandant FC and DG Rangers, should organize special de-radicalization seminars/workshops within the Police Headquarters that focus on building capability to identifying and arresting vigilantism and reduce the tendency of empathizing with any elements that take law into their own hands.
- To improve liaison between people and LEAs, expand the scope of police facilitation desks to the digital domain, making it more app-based, electronic and in line with the Citizens portal. Include a section of ‘vigilantism’ to encourage reports from the people and guarantee protection to whistle-blowers.
- To improve coordination between local districts and LEAs, the Chief Secretaries, Commissioners and Deputy Commissions in districts should establish community-based neighbourhood-watch committees to hold community meetings and observe trends of crime, with the condition they do not take action and instead, report instances of vigilantism to the local police station.
- The Federal and Provincial Ministries of Education should work towards incorporating Paigham-e-Pakistan into the education curriculum and syllabus, which is a comprehensive document that clarifies the concept of *jihad*. In addition to secondary and higher secondary schools, Paigham-e-Pakistan should also be introduced in *madrassahs*.
- The Ministry of Information should use media and social media to educate masses on the illegality of taking law in their hands.

ANNEX A – SURVEY SAMPLE

Thank you for participating in this survey which is about behaviour in society. This questionnaire will take up to 5 minutes of your time and confidentiality will be maintained. For each question, please choose one option.

I support the death penalty for rapists and murderers because:

- a) It is a punishment that fits the crime
- b) I do not want my taxpayer money to incarcerate a monster
- c) It plays the role of a deterrent in preventing such future crimes
- d) I do not support the death penalty

If a liquor shop opens in my neighbourhood, I will:

- a) Inform the local police and lodge an FIR
- b) I will confront the shop owner and demand that he closes the shop down
- c) Do nothing
- d) Organize a protest in front of the shop

Mr. X is accused of committing a murder. Even with all the evidence pointing to his involvement in the murder, the judge declares that he is innocent and sets him free. Mr. X is then killed outside the court by the relatives of the person murdered. Were the relatives justified in their actions?

- a) Yes, the legal system in Pakistan is corrupt
- b) Yes, the murderer deserved to die
- c) No, a legal system exists in Pakistan and law should be upheld
- d) No, two wrongs do not make a right

A young man is seen beating an elderly person after a traffic accident. Bystanders should:

- a) Protect the elderly person and assault the young man because he deserves it
- b) Make a call to 15 and report the situation to them
- c) Make a video and upload it to social media to shame the young man

- d) Do nothing because it is their matter and we do not know the backstory

Mr. X was attempting to kidnap a minor but the kidnapping was stopped by the people and the kidnapper is now in the custody of the people. Should the people:

- a) Beat the kidnapper because the police are inefficient at stopping such crimes
- b) Manhandle the kidnapper until the police comes
- c) Detain the kidnapper and protect him from the mob until the police comes
- d) Try to not get involved

People should try to resolve crimes on their own:

- a) Yes, because justice delayed is justice denied
- b) Yes, because otherwise criminals will get emboldened
- c) No, because law enforcement agencies should be responsible for this
- d) No, because that just creates more chaos in the society

- میں عصمت مری اور قاتلوں کے لئے سزائے موت کی حمایت کرتا ہوں کیونکہ:
- یہ ایسی سزا ہے جو جرم میں فٹ پینٹھی ہے
 - میں نہیں چاہتا ہوں کہ میرے ٹیکس دہندگان کی رقم کسی مجرم کو قید کرنے کے لئے استعمال ہو
 - اس طرح کے آئندہ جرائم کی روک تھام میں رکاوٹ کا کردار ادا کرتا ہے
 - میں سزائے موت کی حمایت نہیں کرتا ہوں
- اگر میرے پڑوس میں شراب کی دکان کھل جاتی ہے تو میں یہ کروں گا:
- مقامی پولیس کو آگاہ کروں گا اور ایف۔آئی۔آر درج کراؤں گا
 - میاں، کالہ، کرنا لک کا مقابلہ کروں گا اور مطالبہ کروں گا کہ وہ کچھ بھی نہیں کروں گا
 - کمیونٹی کے اجلاس میں اس مسئلے کو اٹھاؤں گا
 - دکان کے سامنے احتجاج کروں گا
- مسٹر "ل" پر ایک قتل کرنے کا الزام ہے، تمام شواہد کے باوجود جج نے اعلان کیا کہ وہ بے قصور ہے اور اسے آزاد کر دیتا ہے۔ اس کے بعد مسٹر "ل" کو قتل کرنے والے شخص کے لواحقین نے عدالت کے باہر قتل کر دیا۔ کیا رشتے دار کے اعمال جائز تھے؟
- ہاں، پاکستان میں قانونی نظام خراب ہے
 - ہاں، قاتل موت کا مستحق تھا
 - نہیں، پاکستان میں ایک قانونی نظام موجود ہے اور قانون کو نہیں، دو غلطیاں صحیح نہیں بنتیں
- نہیں، دو غلطیاں صحیح نہیں بنتیں
- ایک نوجوان ٹریفک حادثے کے بعد کسی بزرگ کو پینتا ہوا دیکھا جاتا ہے، راگیروں کو چاہے
- بزرگ شخص کی حفاظت کریں اور جوان پر حملہ کریں کیونکہ وہ اس کا مستحق ہے
 - 15 پر کال کریں اور انہیں صورتحال کی اطلاع دیں
 - ویڈیو بنائیں اور اس نوجوان کو شرمندہ کرنے کے لئے اسے سوشل میڈیا پر اپ لوڈ کریں
 - کچھ بھی نہ کریں کیونکہ یہ ان کا داخلی معاملہ ہے
- مسٹر "ل" نابالغ کو اغوا کرنے کی کوشش کر رہا تھا لیکن لوگوں نے اغوا نامہ بنادیا اور اغوا کار اب لوگوں کی تحویل میں ہے۔ کیا عوام
- اغوا کار کو ماریں کیونکہ پولیس ایسے جرائم کو روکنے میں ناکام ہے
 - پولیس آنے تک اغوا کار کو محکوم کریں
 - اغوا کار کو حراست میں لیں اور پولیس کے آنے تک ہجوم سے اس کی حفاظت کریں
 - شامل نہ ہونے کی کوشش کریں
- لوگوں کو خود ہی جرائم حل کرنے کی کوشش کریں چاہے:
- ہاں، کیونکہ انصاف میں تاخیر کرنا انصاف سے انکار ہے
 - ہاں، کیونکہ بصورت دیگر جرائم پیشہ افراد کی حاصلہ افزائی ہوگی
 - کیونکہ اس کے لئے قانون نافذ کرنے والے اداروں کو ذمہ دار ہونا چاہے
 - نہیں، کیونکہ اس سے معاشرے میں مزید انتشار پھیلتا ہے

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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