



THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF ISLAMIC REFORMATION: THE STATE AND THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The close association between state authorities and specific religious groups in Pakistan has long been a subject of concern. Extensive literature exists on Pakistan's connections with hardline jihadi organisations, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and the Afghan Taliban. However, no focused study has examined the state's relationship with the non-militant Islamic revivalist group, the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ). Drawing on a diverse body of primary and secondary sources, this article examines the motivations behind the Pakistani state's support for the Dawah (preaching) activities of TJ and analyses the specific political, social, and ideological objectives it seeks to advance through this patronage. The findings indicate that both military and civilian governments in Pakistan have adopted mechanisms of Islamisation since the country's independence from British rule in 1947. By supporting the activities of TJ, the state authorities seek to accomplish religious, political, social, cultural, and strategic objectives both domestically and internationally. This study finds that the main objective shared by both TJ and the state is the purification and Islamisation of modern Pakistani society. The study further argues that both see it as their core responsibility to cleanse the society of un-Islamic influences and practices. Both parties endeavour to influence the dress code, physical

appearance, and collective behaviour of Pakistani Muslims in accordance with Islamic teachings and Quranic principles. This study argues that this convergence of objectives has resulted in what can be described as a “holy alliance” between the two entities.

Keywords: Tablighi Jamaat, Pakistan, preachers, dawah, holy alliance

INTRODUCTION

The Tablighi Movement is a global Islamic missionary society committed to promoting a purified and refined interpretation of Islam worldwide, including in Pakistan. Tablighi activists operate in both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries, seeking to persuade Muslims to adopt and uphold Islamic values in their daily lives (Gugler 2020). The Tablighi Movement was founded during the British colonial period in India, where the decline of Muslims political power and the establishment of British rule significantly influenced the rise of various Islamic revivalist movements. These religious movements sought to protect Indian Muslims from their perceived “enemies” and the un-Islamic influences around them in the country (Robinson 1998).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following the decline of their political influence and authority in the Indian Subcontinent, Indian Muslims faced numerous political, religious, economic, and social challenges that threatened their distinct socio-religious identity in the country. Alongside these sociopolitical and economic challenges, Muslims also witnessed the emergence of various Hindu and Christian missionary movements aimed at converting them to Hinduism and Christianity, respectively (Pool 2021). In response to the influence of Arya Samaj and Christian missionaries, and to promote moral development among the local populace, Maulana Mohammad Ilyas (1885–1944), a Deobandi religious scholar, initiated a grassroots Islamic revivalist movement in colonial India. To guide Indian Muslims towards a more devout and practical practice of Islam and to convert them from nominal Muslims into “good” Muslims, Maulana Mohammad Ilyas established the Tablighi Movement in 1926 in the Mewat region of British India. Departing from traditional methods of safeguarding Muslims from secularisation, Maulana Mohammad Ilyas formulated an organic framework for Islamic revivalism. This model institutionalised grassroots religious mobilisation, enabling ordinary believers to enact bottom-up societal reformation in accordance with orthodox Islamic tenets. Departing from the prevailing trend of establishing new theological seminaries, he focused on re-engaging disconnected Muslims in a process of Islamic reformation aligned with his Islamic vision.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Tablighi Movement expanded beyond its place of origin, undertaking efforts to guide nominal Muslims towards becoming devout religious practitioners in other major urban centres of colonial India. To achieve this objective, Maulana Ilyas and his close associates initiated the dispatch of Tablighi missions to Muslim-majority regions, including Lahore, Peshawar, and Sindh, among others. In the 1940s, the Tablighi Movement rapidly extended its religious teachings to several major cities in British India and to territories that later became parts of Pakistan following the partition of the subcontinent in August 1947 (Razak 2021). During the 1960s and 1970s, Muslim immigrants from South Asia, particularly from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, played a significant role in the global dissemination of Tablighi ideology. Within this context, the organisation known as Tablighi Jamaat (hereafter referred to as TJ) emerged as an important revivalist movement on a global scale.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the popularity of TJ barely reached the larger urban areas of both East and West Pakistan. However, a significant shift occurred during General Zia-ul-Haq’s (1924–1988) military regime from 1977 to 1988 when he adopted the Islamisation policy in the country (Khan 2024). His regime openly supported the dawah efforts of TJ for political and other strategic objectives in the region. By the late 1980s, TJ had successfully expanded its membership among the business

classes, particularly in the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces of Pakistan. Throughout the 1990s, TJ began to attract prominent figures from Pakistan's affluent middle class, including pop musicians, TV actors, and cricketers. Despite the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict that plagued the country during the 1980s and 1990s, the TJ remained resilient in its ability to attract and recruit ordinary Pakistani Muslims (Paracha 2013). Today, this extensive religious and dawah-based revivalist movement operates in over 150 countries worldwide, with membership estimates ranging from 12 to 80 million (Pew Research Centre 2010). Pakistan stands among these few Muslim-majority countries where Islamic revivalist movements have profoundly shaped virtually all spheres of society. The city of Raiwind functions as a key global hub for TJ, serving as the operational base from which its proselytising missions are systematically deployed worldwide.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have explored the dynamics of Islamic revivalist movements across various regions, including Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. Existing literature has extensively examined the origins, development, and ideology of the Tablighi Movement in multiple countries around the world. For instance, Ali (2006) posits that the emergence of Islamic revivalism was a reaction to the social, political, and economic challenges confronted by Indian Muslims during the colonial period. Siddiqi's (2014) study offers significant insights into the activities and ideology of the Tablighis in Bangladesh and the United Kingdom. The research traces the origins of Islamic revivalism in Bengal during the British colonial period and examines the historical development of the Tablighi Movement in East Pakistan. Khan (2014) is also a significant academic work on TJ in Pakistan, providing valuable insights into its practices and ideological framework. Tablighis, along with other Islamist groups, have worked towards the establishment of an Islamic society. However, while TJ promotes its method of dawah as the primary means of fostering an Islamic society, proponents of political Islam have actively pursued the establishment of an Islamic governance system in Pakistan. Likewise, Rashid (2006) records that in the post-9/11 era, revivalist movements including TJ and Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) have witnessed substantial growth in female participation across Pakistan. Conservative women have not merely become active participants in religious congregations but also assumed leadership roles in mobilising fellow believers, framing such activism as a fundamental religious duty.

The relationship between the state and militant organisations has been a central focus for both national and international scholars in the post-9/11 era. Despite extensive research on clergy organisations and Islamic revivalist movements in Pakistan, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the underlying causes and factors that drive state managers and elites to support and protect the Islamisation efforts of the Tablighi Movement. Most scholars argue that both military dictators and civilian rulers have endorsed the dawah efforts of the Tablighi Movement for political and personal reasons (Mukherjee 2010). From the 1980s onward, Pakistan has experienced a notable proliferation of TJ's religious discourse, characterised by its fundamental premise that contemporary Muslims have neglected their spiritual obligations in favour of temporal ambitions—a worldview that has achieved significant cultural penetration within Pakistani society (Khan 2024).

In summary, existing scholarship on religious revivalism in Pakistan has primarily examined either the historical-ideological foundations of Islamic revivalist movements or the phenomenon through lenses of individual religiosity and state political agendas. This article aims to address the research gap by examining the motivations of state managers that go beyond the commonly cited “political” and “personal” reasons. There are various multifaceted factors driving state managers to support the revivalism of TJ. As such, the dawah of TJ within the framework of its sacred relationship and holy alliance with state apparatuses needs to be examined critically. Besides, this analysis will show how their collaboration has helped advance Islamic ideals and promote social transformation within Islamic communities. The analysis of the “sacred alliance”

also offers invaluable insights into how and why the state facilitates the Tablighi Movement's dawah while promoting its own political and social ambitions to convert nominal Muslims into devout practitioners in order to bring stability in destabilised regions of the country. In doing so, it sheds light on the impact of the Islamic revivalist movement on contemporary Pakistani culture and society, revealing the convergence of religion, politics, and social transformation in a country that identifies Islam as its core identity.

METHODS

This study employs a diverse array of research methods to thoroughly address the research question. An exploratory and analytical approach was utilised, drawing on both primary and secondary data from multiple sources. The methodology is grounded in an extensive review of existing literature from reputable international and national journals on Islamic revivalism. A number of Urdu books authored by ideological supporters of TJ were consulted to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. To examine the relationship between Tablighi Islamists and the state apparatus, the researchers employed an ethnographic research method. One author actively participated in various Tablighi tours from June to July 2023, followed by an ethnographic study conducted from January to March 2024. The Mardan Tablighi Markaz, a prominent TJ headquarters in the country, served as the primary location for gathering extensive sources on the subject. In addition to the Mardan Tablighi Markaz, one of the researchers also conducted visits to several mosques located in various parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where TJ activists regularly took part in religious gatherings.

Participants in the Tablighi study who voluntarily took part were fully informed of its objectives throughout. These participants, aged between 25 years old and 40 years old, came from various cities and villages in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Each interview session lasted approximately 15 minutes to 25 minutes. Due to the prevailing social norms in the country, it is challenging for a male researcher to interview female Tablighi activists, as such interactions are often deemed un-Islamic in TJ religious circles. Consequently, all research participants in this study were male members of the Tablighi Movement. A total of 11 TJ activists were interviewed for this study. These individuals came from various regions across the country. Additionally, involvement in local mosque-based activities, known as *gasht* (patrolling around) and *mashwara* (consultation), was also incorporated. This firsthand engagement provided deeper insights into the practices and dynamics of TJ in Pakistan. At the participants' request, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STATE AND TABLIGHI JAMAAT

This section examines the collaborative dynamics between TJ and the Pakistani state in promoting Islamic revivalism, specifically their joint efforts to reorient Muslim citizens towards religious orthodoxy while discouraging secular lifestyles. The analysis identifies several structural factors underpinning state patronage of the revivalist movement.

The Shared Ideology of Converting Lapsed Muslims into Good Muslims: Tablighi Jamaat and the State

Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has sought to Islamise its population by creating a religious environment where its citizens could live according to Islamic principles. This indicates that, much like the Tablighi Movement, the state is also engaged in a form of "state-sponsored dawah".

After the establishment of Pakistan, the leadership of Muslim League, the leading political party of the time, aimed to Islamise the state to counter ethnic nationalism, regionalism, and other sociopolitical challenges confronting the state and its institutions at the time. For example, to Islamise the state structure, the Constituent Assembly passed the Objectives Resolution in 1949 (Cohen 2004). According to one clause of this resolution, “Wherein the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah” (Ali and Huang 2021: 53–54). Non-Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly proposed amendments to the Objectives Resolution, but Muslim members did not accept the proposal, believing that a “sufficient guarantee” had already been provided to the non-Muslims (Khan 2005).

The Objectives Resolution was later incorporated into all three Constitutions enacted in 1956, 1962, and 1973. To appease the Islamists and enable Pakistani Muslims to lead a more conservative lifestyle, the state apparatus under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1973–1977) implemented new Islamic laws and incorporated new Islamic provisions in the Constitution. For example, Islam was declared the official religion of the state, and the Ahmadi community was designated as non-Muslims in the 1973 Constitution. Additionally, the Objectives Resolution was also adopted as the preamble to the Constitution (Ispahani 2017a). During the long military rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, he enacted additional Islamic laws as part of a so-called Islamisation process aimed at enabling its Muslim citizens to live in accordance with Islamic and Quranic principles. It is said that much of the Pakistani policy makers in the post-1971 war period believed that East Pakistani Muslims were not “ideal” or “true” Muslims, which they viewed as a reason for their perceived betrayal. According to Cohen (2004: 169):

What shocked many West Pakistanis was not the behaviour of the Indians or even the Americans, but the betrayal of Pakistan by East Pakistanis themselves. In trying to explain this, many concluded that the Bengalis were not “truly” Pakistanis. That is, they were not truly Islamic or Muslims—theirs was a moral and religious failure, not a political one.

Following the breakup of Pakistan in 1971, state officials grew increasingly concerned about the stability of the country’s remaining parts. This concern intensified the process of what can be termed as “state-sponsored dawah”. During this period, the military junta Islamised the army, the education system, and media institutions. Like TJ, General Zia’s military regime also aimed to transform ordinary Pakistani Muslims into “good” and “true” Muslims. According to Cohen (2004: 112), “if the Pakistan movement was a struggle to turn Indian Muslims into Pakistanis, Zia’s question was: How can Pakistanis be turned into good Muslims?”. However, the so-called civilian rulers also continued the project of converting ordinary Pakistanis into “good” Muslims through “state-sponsored dawah” in the 1990s and beyond. For instance, the Nawaz Sharif-led government in 1998 introduced a new Bill, also known as the Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment Bill. According to this proposed Islamic amendment, the federal government would be responsible for promoting *amr bi’l mar’uf wa nahi an al-munka’r* (to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong) (Khan 2005). It should be noted that *amr bi’l mar’uf wa nahi an al-munka’r* has been one of the core ideologies of TJ since its inception.

To further advance the project of “state-sponsored dawah” and transform nominal Pakistani Muslims into good and ideal Muslims, Pakistan Television (PTV) initiated an Islamic programme called *Roshni Ka Safar (Journey of Light)* in the 2010s. This TV programme provided a significant platform for Maulana Tariq Jameel, a well-known leader of TJ, to disseminate Tablighi ideology within the country. In one of his religious talks delivered to a large gathering in 2014, Maulana Tariq Jameel urged ordinary Pakistanis to repent before God and live a purified Islamic life (PTV Home YouTube 2014). The Imran Khan-led government took a further step by establishing the *Rehmatul-Lil-Aalameen* (Mercy for Mankind) authority in 2021. The purpose of this new

authority was to promote the teachings of Islam and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the country (Dawn 2021a). Thus, from Bhutto's apparent Islamic socialism in the 1970s to Imran Khan's *Riyasat-I-Madina* (the Islamic State of Madina), the state has consistently pursued a policy of creating an Islamic environment for its citizens where they could live an Islamic way of life. Through these Islamic principles and institutions, the state seeks to guide its citizens away from irreligious lifestyles and towards embracing a more Islamic way of life. As an ideological state, Pakistan continually strives to enhance the religiosity of its citizens to ensure its legitimacy, achieve nation-building, unify diverse segments of society and address governance-related issues.

Similar to official "state-sponsored dawah" initiatives, TJ also promotes Islamic revival by encouraging strict adherence to foundational religious texts—a mission it actively spreads across Pakistan and beyond. Maulana Mohammad Zakriya (d. 1982), argued that inviting others to the Islamic way of life has always been a fundamental duty of all Muslims. The Quran states, "And there must be a group of people who call others towards *kha'ir* (good) and prohibit them from committing *gun'a* (wrongdoings), and such people will be successful" (Zakriya 1982: 7). For Tablighis, the duty of dawah is neither a novel form of Islam nor a new introducing innovation (*bida'th*) into contemporary society. It is regarded as the continuation of the work of past prophets (*nabiyo'n ka kam*) (Ahmad n.d.). Sikand (1998) argues that Tablighi preachers encourage ordinary Muslims to take time off from worldly affairs to spread the message of Allah and His beloved prophet throughout the world.

To purify contemporary society from un-Islamic influences and immorality, the founders of the Tablighi Movement developed a specific mechanism. To Islamise nominal Muslims and guide them on the path to salvation, small groups of advocates are formed under the leadership of a person known as an *ameer* (group or mission leader), typically consisting of ten to twelve people. These missionary groups are then dispatched to distant areas for a designated period, where they engage in mosque-based activities for three days. Thus, mosques play a central role in the revivalist mechanism of the Tablighi Movement. To convert nominal Muslims into good Muslims, Tablighi activists deliver religious speeches, known as *bayanat* (Kandhalvi 1938). One of the primary goals of the dawah of Tablighi Movement is the spiritual development of all Muslims around the world (Ali 2006). According to a Tablighi, one of the principal aims of the Tablighi Movement is to disseminate the teachings of Allah and His esteemed Prophet in contemporary society. In response to inquiries regarding the government's endeavours to legislate for an Islamic environment, the activist stated that while state authorities may undertake their own legislative initiatives, the Tablighi Movement operates "independently" of the state's actions and legal framework. According to the preacher, the spread of Islam can be effectively achieved only through the authentic method of dawah, and not by any other means (Saleem, *pers. comm.*, 23 January 2024).

Despite numerous Tablighi activists explicitly disavowing any connection with the state apparatus, an examination of the Islamic legislations enacted by the state since its establishment, alongside the fundamental objectives of TJ in Pakistan, uncovers a common objective between the two entities. Both the Pakistani state and TJ are engaged in a shared religio-political effort to cultivate disciplined Islamic piety among citizens as a pathway to societal transformation. This indicates that, in the context of Pakistan, both TJ and the state are aligned in their efforts to transform ordinary Pakistani Muslims into "good" and "purified" followers of Islam. To accomplish this, the state has created a religious atmosphere by establishing designated religious institutions and enacting various religiously motivated laws through parliament. At the same time, TJ also seeks to reform ordinary Muslims it perceives as "irreligious" by urging them to adopt its prescribed practices of Islam and revivalism.

Working for the Cause of the State-owned Religion

Islamic political movements and apolitical revivalist movements take different approaches and have distinct ways of reaching out to ordinary Muslims. Despite these differences, they all share a common goal: promoting the cause of Islam and supporting Muslims around the world. In countries where religion is largely regarded as a private matter, these revivalist movements often lack direct affiliation with state authorities. However, in countries where Islam is not considered a private matter and is explicitly declared the official religion, these revivalist movements should be examined in the context of their relationship with the state apparatus. Similar to other religious groups in Pakistan, members of TJ have consistently asserted that they are working for the cause of Islam and Muslims globally. In addition to their shared *Dawah-i-Tablighi* activism, a significant factor that strengthens the alliance between the Tablighi Movement and the state is the official religion of the state. Pakistan's constitutional Islamisation was formally institutionalised during the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through two key provisions in the 1973 Constitution: first, the declaration of Islam as the state religion; and second, the requirement that all legislation be aligned with the principles of Islam as derived from the Quran and Sunnah (Ispahani 2017b). A Tablighi activist at the Mardan Tablighi Markaz explained that Tablighis have one primary goal in their lives: the establishment of a just Islamic society and the purification of Muslims around the world. According to him:

We work for the sake of Islam and Muslims and for this purpose, we do not accept money from others. We invest our own time, energy, and financial resources to propagate the religion of Allah and to purify the lifestyle of ordinary Muslims in accordance with the teachings of His beloved Prophet. (Ikram, *pers. comm.*, 12 January 2024)

Defending a religion that has long been recognised as the official faith of the state further reinforces the deep-rooted sacred bond between the Tablighi Movement and the state. Unlike other Islamic revivalist movements in the country, TJ has never pressured the state to declare Islam as the official religion or to implement Islamic law in the country. However, the state's declaration of Islam as the official religion has provided an opportunity for TJ to expand its sphere of influence and recruit more individuals without restrictions or constraints from state authorities.

Kniss and Burns (2004) argue that the relationship between religion and the state influences religious and social movements. This relationship offers a safe sanctuary to religious groups and with the support of state apparatus, these religious organisations are afforded a free hand to expand their doctrines and increase their number of ideological supporters in broader society. Supporting the cause of the official religion further strengthens the foundation of the "sacred alliance" with the state apparatus. Whenever members of the Tablighi Movement hold their annual gathering, state authorities provide essential services to support participants coming from different parts of the country. For instance, during the November 2023 *Tablighi Ijtima* (Annual Gathering), the Punjab Emergency Service (Rescue 1122) offered medical services to the participants. Shahid Waheed, District Emergency Officer in Lahore, stated that the state provided several emergency vehicles and ambulances to ensure the safety of Tablighi participants during their gathering (*Pakistan Today* 2023).

Patronising the Tablighi Islamists to Counter Political Activists

Most religious political parties in colonial India opposed the creation of Pakistan. However, in the post-partition period, they began pressuring the state to declare Pakistan an Islamic state in line with the vision of its founding fathers. Islamic political parties have consistently posed a challenge

to the state due to their significant street power and ability to mobilise the general populace against the ruling elite. Since Pakistan's inception, successive political and military regimes have had to concede to the religious demands of political Islamists. For instance, the ostensibly secular regimes of Ayub Khan (1958–1969) and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1973–1977) encountered significant pressure from political Islamist forces, ultimately leading to the Islamisation of the state and its institutions (Ahmad 2023). In response to the growing street power and ideological influence of political Islamists, state authorities have consistently supported ostensibly apolitical Islamic actors, viewing them as more effective counterweights due to their distinct religious principles and non-political methods of engagement.

Although the founding fathers of the TJ deliberately distanced the movement from the political developments of the British Raj. Maulana Ilyas and his like-minded associates focused on the inner spiritual development of the Muslim community without engaging in direct political affairs. For instance, once Maulana Ilyas remarked, "Political power can never be the objective of a true Muslim" (Sikand 2006: 180). Tablighi activists widely believe that true faith can be sustained without the need to capture political power from the hands of politicians. They also maintain that politicians from various parties are deceitful, and they are working for their own worldly interests rather than for the cause of religion and the well-being of the Muslim ummah (Ahmad 1991). Members of TJ have developed a clear ideological stance against politicians who use religion for political gain and self-interest. Tablighi activists hold that true Islamic revolution begins with the personal transformation of individual Muslims, a goal they believe can only be accomplished through grassroots efforts and bottom-up engagement. However, the partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan signalled a new phase in TJ's dawah mission around the world (Sikand 2006).

In the post-independence era, Pakistani state officials started promoting TJ's seemingly "apolitical" and dawah message to pursue specific political goals, a strategy that continues today. The state backed the Tablighi Movement as a way to depoliticise its people, especially the members of religious political parties, with whom the Tablighi Movement disagreed on issues related to politics and Islamic revivalism. Khan (2014) argues that Tablighis firmly believe their method of dawah is a direct gift from Allah and is therefore the only approach capable of establishing a true Islamic society in the modern world. This belief has led Tablighi activists to reject all other forms of Islamic revivalism, especially those linked to religious political parties in Pakistan. While Islamic political parties aim to change the system from above, the TJ seeks to implement similar changes from the bottom. It is in this approach that the TJ has fundamental difference with religious political parties around the world.

In 1958, Pakistan experienced its first military coup under General Mohammad Ayub Khan. Ayub Khan is widely considered to have held a secular mindset. However, his military regime chose to support non-political Islamic organisations such as TJ to diminish the influence of political Islamists in the 1960s. The military rule aimed to undermine and counter the influence of prominent politically oriented Islamic movements, including the Islami Jamiat Tuleba (IJT), the student wing of JI, and the Communist Party of Pakistan. To achieve this objective, the military administration openly supported the Islamisation efforts of TJ. Furthermore, directives were issued to the State Bank of Pakistan in the 1960s to facilitate foreign currency requests for TJ members travelling abroad (Nelson 2011).

This indicates that General Zia-ul-Haq was not the only military ruler who supported the dawah of TJ in the 1980s. It was the ostensibly secular government of Ayub Khan that, on the one hand, discouraged leftists and political Islamists from holding rallies in the country, while on the other hand, encouraged and supported the Tablighi Islamists in disseminating their ideology throughout the country. In the 1980s, the General Zia-ul-Haq regime continued this support and

further enabled the Tablighi Islamists to deepen their influence in Pakistani society. With the encouragement and support of the government, a significant number of serving and retired military officers and soldiers became active members of TJ (Shah 2014).

State managers support the ostensibly apolitical revivalism of the TJ not only to depoliticise the members of the religious political parties but also to garner sympathy among the ideological supporters of the revivalist movement. For instance, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia banned TJ activities in the country in 2021, labelling it as a gateway to “religious extremism”, the Punjab Provincial Assembly unanimously passed a resolution in support of TJ. According to the resolution, TJ is a peaceful Islamic organisation with no ties to extremist and other militant groups (*Dawn* 2021b). To review arrangements for the annual Tablighi meetings in November 2023, Mohsen Naqvi, the Chief Minister of Punjab, visited the Raiwind Tablighi centre and met with Maulana Ahmad Laat, Maulvi Amer, Mian Ihsan, and Imtiaz Ghani, prominent leaders of TJ. The Chief Minister assured them of his full support, acknowledging that Tablighi Islamists are working for a noble cause worldwide (*Business Recorder* 2023). Thus, from General Zia’s Islamic state to Imran Khan’s *Riyasat-I-Madina*, most political leaders have sought to maintain a cordial relationship with the Raiwind Markaz for explicit political objectives and causes.

In their religious discourses and sermons, Tablighi activists refrain from encouraging individuals to support or vote for any specific political party in the country. One participant highlighted that the religious philosophy of the TJ is rooted in its six fundamental principles, none of which Islamise political activism. Tablighi participants commonly hold the belief that the designation of Islam as a state-sponsored religion is of secondary importance. For them, the primary significance lies in the divine origin of Islam, as it is revealed by God and conveyed through His beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Furthermore, some senior Tablighi activists regard politics as a corrupt endeavour, characterised by the pursuits of those who prioritise worldly gains over the eternal life of the hereafter (Asad, *pers. comm.*, 12 March 2024).

However, this ethnographic study on the Islamisation of TJ discovered that many younger supporters are politically connected to different Islamic political parties. Thus, state managers patronise TJ not only to counter the influence of Islamic political parties but also to leverage them for specific political objectives. The official narrative and ideological structure of TJ assist the state apparatus by keeping its members away from political developments in the country. However, despite strict ideological stance on political engagement, young Tablighi activists are drawn to the calls of different religious political parties. The state supports the dawah of TJ to reduce political engagement and limit the influence of Islamic political parties. While it is true that the state supports Tablighi activists for strategic political purposes, this ethnographic study reveals that the state apparatus faces challenges in fully realising this objective, as a growing number of new Tablighi adherents are increasingly gravitating towards various religion-oriented political parties in Pakistan.

Most Tablighi participants in this study acknowledged that they regularly vote in the general elections in Pakistan. This study found that the ultimate outcome of Islamic revivalism significantly influences some of its activists to align with religious political parties. During discussions on this topic at the Mardan Tablighi Markaz, a Tablighi activist explained that he and many of his Tablighi associates always prefer to vote for Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam–Fazl (JUI-F) over other *dunyawi siyasi partiya’n* (worldly political parties). When asked whether all Tablighi adherents would vote for JUI-F, the participant emphasised that individuals within TJ are free to support any political party, as voting is regarded as a personal matter. However, he explicitly noted that TJ is not a political entity and should not be equated with other religious political parties in the country (Ahmad, *pers. comm.*, 13 January 2024).

This study finds that while the TJ maintains an apolitical stance—eschewing electoral participation and formal political alliances—its religious activism inadvertently shapes sociopolitical dynamics. By redirecting followers from *dunyawi siyosat* (worldly politics) towards *mazhabi siyosat* (religious politics), the dawah cultivates a pious Muslim subjectivity that complements the broader Islamisation project of the Pakistani state. Though non-partisan, its emphasis on religious discipline indirectly reinforces the agendas of Islamist political parties within Pakistan’s sociopolitical landscape.

Creating an Islam-oriented National Identity in the Country: State and Tablighi Jamaat

Another key factor behind the un-official endorsement of the Islamic movement stems from its contribution to promoting a cohesive national identity grounded in Islamic values. This approach aligns with the policies of state authorities, which have prioritised the promotion of religious-motivated national unity since its inception. Following the creation of Pakistan, state authorities undertook efforts to formulate policies aimed at unifying a highly diverse population characterised by a multiplicity of languages, ethnicities, and cultural traditions. The stark sociocultural and linguistic disparities between the people of East and West Pakistan, combined with the complexities of Pakistan’s initial relations with its neighbouring countries, posed considerable challenges for state-building in the immediate post-partition period (Shaikh 2008).

Cohen (2004) contends that speakers of different languages often perceive themselves as separate nations. While some pursue the creation of an independent state, others aim for increased autonomy within the existing political framework. To address these challenges and build a unified national identity based on Islam, the state initiated a project to promote Islam, a common identity that had previously united them in colonial India (Zubair et al. 2022). In the post-partition era, TJ emerged as one of the key conservative religious movements that aligned with the state’s project of constructing a religious-based national identity in the country. This congruence led to favourable perceptions among Pakistan’s ruling elite, including General Zia-ul-Haq and subsequent civilian leaders, who viewed the revivalist movement as instrumental in promoting Islamic unity. Seeking to cultivate an Islam-centric national identity and bolster their political legitimacy, these military and civilian regimes actively endorsed the Islamisation initiatives (Rizvi 2003). Importantly, General Zia was not the sole architect of this policy. The project of institutionalising a religious national identity continued unabated even after his sudden demise in 1988, reflecting its entrenched role in Pakistan’s state ideology. According to a participant:

Alhamdulillah, we are all Muslims and there is no difference among the Pakhtun, the people of Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan, Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan. We all belong to one Muslim ummah and must uphold unity within our ranks. It was the ethnic and nationalist identities prevalent among the past generation of Muslims that ultimately destroyed their political authority. These dangerous divisions not only weakened the entire Muslim ummah but also allowed non-Muslims to penetrate the Muslim world and overthrow its established states around the world. We reject such irreligious ideologies and un-Islamic traditions. We are working tirelessly to eradicate these social and religious ills and to maintain unity among Muslims who speak different languages. Contemporary Muslims should look to the practices and examples of the early generations of Muslims as a guide for their own lives. (Ali, *pers. comm.*, 7 February 2024)

In light of Pakistan’s diverse socio-ethnic culture, Tablighi missionaries contribute to fostering social cohesion, religious solidarity, and harmony. Razak (2021) argues that the ethnic violence that erupted in Sindh during the late 1980s profoundly shocked Haji Abdul Wahab (d. 2018). According to Razak (2021), Haji Abdul Wahab prayed to Allah for a solution to the ethnic unrest

in Sindh and requested divine protection to ensure the safety and stability of Pakistan. At the Sibi *Tablighi Ijtima* in 2017, Qari Habib-Ur-Rehman informed the audience that one of the aims of TJ is to establish a unified Muslim ummah based on the teachings of Islam and the Holy Quran. At the conclusion of his speech, the speaker urged the audience to pray for the safety, progress and prosperity of the state (*The Nation* 2017). According to Maulana Tayyeb Mohammed, the Tablighi mission is working to create what he termed as *bhai chara* (Muslim brotherhood). To further elaborate on this specific issue, a senior Tablighi activist at the Mardan Tablighi Markaz explained:

The Muslim ummah is a distinct group of people. There is no room for ethnic or territorial nationalism. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) and His Sahaba (RA) eradicated these divisive forces and successfully unified the Muslim ummah in the past. This strong unification enabled them to rule over much of the world for centuries to come. However, the current situation of the entire Muslim ummah is markedly different. Muslims are now facing oppression from their enemies across the globe and this turmoil is largely attributed to internal divisions based on colour, language, ethnicity, family, and blood. One of the primary objectives of sending Tablighi missions to remote areas and countries is to reunite the Muslim ummah under the principles of Islam and the Holy Quran. (Ahmad, *pers. comm.*, 20 February 2024)

Tablighi participants strive to eliminate signs of un-Islamic society and culture and to Islamise the culture, behaviours, and outlook of the entire Muslim ummah. The TJ plays a significant role in constructing Islamic identity and fostering an environment of Muslim brotherhood. Embracing Tablighi principles often leads individuals to alter their physical appearance and dress code. Once they become Tablighis, they make efforts to distance themselves from the social and cultural aspects of Pakistani society that they perceive as conflicting with Islamic norms and traditions. Tablighi members encourage ordinary Muslims to treat each other as equals, regardless of ethnicity, language, or social and cultural differences. Through their dawah missions, Tablighis advocate for a unified Muslim brotherhood based on Islamic teachings and the Holy Quran. These shared ideological foundations substantially advantage the state, which similarly pursues the cultivation of a religion-based national identity. Consequently, both the Pakistani state and TJ collaboratively endeavour to inculcate among Pakistani Muslims a unified national consciousness rooted in Islamic principles.

Countering the Baloch Separatists and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan Militants

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province by territory. The region is rich in natural resources and holds significant geo-strategic importance for the country. The Baloch people have a long history of resistance against the Pakistani state, which they view as a new coloniser following the British withdrawal from India. To weaken their ethnic identity, Islamise the Baloch people, and neutralise their secular culture, the state has long endeavoured to Islamise the Balochistan province. To achieve this objective, the military regime under Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008) began providing financial support to various madrasas (religious schools) operating in the province. In addition to supporting madrasas, the state also backed the Islamisation efforts of Tablighis in the war-devastated areas of Balochistan. There are over 10,000 madrasas in Balochistan, meaning there is one madrassa for every 1,200 to 1,300 people in the province. In contrast, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has a total of 1,389 madrasas, meaning there is one madrassa for about 45,000 to 50,000 people (Rana 2019). These measures were intended to weaken and diminish the street power and influence of the Baloch people and to defuse their nationalist movement (Khan 2019).

To prevent Islamist preachers from entering the province, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which seeks the independence of Balochistan, warned these preachers not to enter the area. In December 2014, three Tablighi activists—Saleem Kashmiri, Nasir Kashmiri, and Suhail Ahmad Kashmiri, all from Pakistan-administered Kashmir—were kidnapped by armed men in Chattar town, an area bordering the militancy-affected Bugti Tribal Areas (*The Express Tribune* 2014). For Baloch separatists, Tablighi Islamists are perceived as being supported by the state to undermine their nationalism and alter the region’s demographic composition in favour of the state (Sarmachar 2010). Nevertheless, the process of Islamising the Baloch people continued even after Tablighis were warned not to enter the province.

At the Mardan Tablighi Markaz, many Tablighis mentioned that they had visited Balochistan province in the 2010s. Mohammad Yaseen, a 42-year-old Tablighi activist, revealed that he undertook a Tablighi mission to Balochistan in 2019. Yaseen highlighted the serious lack of religious practices in Balochistan. He noted that some Baloch individuals were unfamiliar with how to perform their daily prayers and many other religious rituals. Despite this, Yaseen shared that through his Tablighi mission, he was able to guide many Pakhtuns and Balochs to become more devout and practising Muslims (Yaseen, 12 June 2023).

Considering the ethnic and linguistic challenges in Balochistan, Tablighi missions provide significant relief to state managers. Many lay preachers might not fully understand the complex challenges faced by the Baloch people in the region. For instance, a Tablighi participant who preached Islam in Balochistan in 2016 observed that many Baloch people in remote areas were not well-versed in basic Islamic teachings. He believed that once they adopted a practising Muslim lifestyle, they would realise their previous mistakes and end their conflicts with Pakistani security forces (Haroon, *pers. comm.*, 22 January 2024). Most of the Tablighi participants believed that if the Baloch people became devout and practising Muslims, then Allah Almighty would help resolve their various societal problems and challenges. The Tablighi discourse in Pakistan consistently frames social problems as the result of widespread religious negligence and a decline in ethical standards among the population. Thus, the Islamisation efforts by Tablighis, especially in the conflict-affected areas of Balochistan, play a crucial role in advancing the strategic interests of the state elite.

In addition to the factors mentioned, the state also supports the dawah efforts of TJ because its adherents view their religious activism as a significant form of jihad (holy war), which they term *Jihad-i-Akbar*, or the greatest jihad. In contrast to radical Islamic groups that advocate violent jihad, TJ promotes Islamic revival through peaceful preaching, presenting a more moderate and non-confrontational approach. This non-violent approach to Islamic revival implicitly challenges the legitimacy of armed jihadist activism. The TJ explicitly condemns the so-called jihad conducted by Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants. The TTP, a militant Islamic group founded by Baitullah Mehsud in 2007, aims to impose an Islamic system of government in Pakistan. The TTP fighters are deeply committed to their version of militant jihad against the security forces of Pakistan. This is where TJ differs ideologically from the TTP and its militants. According to Haji Abdul Wahab, “Sharia cannot be enforced at gunpoint” (*Dawn News* 2009). According to a Tablighi activist, “They must avoid imposing their creed or faith by force because Islam is a religion of peace and promotes tranquillity” (*Dawn* 2009). According to another Tablighi activist, “We believe in *ikram-i-Muslim* (respecting the Muslims) not in *qital-i-Muslim* (killing of Muslims)” (Hamza, *pers. comm.*, 15 August 2023).

The state could strategically leverage TJ’s non-violent, faith-based approach as a counterweight to the militant jihadist ideology propagated by TTP and other Islamist extremist groups in the country. Tablighis assert that targeting and killing Pakistani security forces is an act of barbarity with no justification in Islam. It is important to clarify that the dawah movement is neither a

state-created nor a state-controlled religious initiative designed explicitly to counter Baloch separatist or TTP militancy. The origins of the revivalist movement predate the formation of the Pakistani state itself. Nonetheless, it remains equally true that the revivalist movement diverges fundamentally—both ideologically and in its objectives—from the agendas of Baloch separatist groups and TTP militants. In this regard, their emphasis on personal piety, non-violence, and religious revivalism aligns closely with the ideological and strategic interests of the Pakistani state.

Protecting the Ideological Frontiers of the State

The notion of Pakistan’s “ideological frontiers” encompasses its perceived responsibility to safeguard religious interests and Muslim communities beyond its territorial boundaries. Since the country’s emergence from British colonial rule, successive Pakistani leaderships and policymakers have framed national security in both geopolitical and religio-ideological domains. This dual orientation has manifested in a strategic posture that seeks to protect not only the physical sovereignty but also to position itself as a custodian of global Muslim welfare and religious integrity. According to Haqqani (2005), the initiative to protect these ideological frontiers commenced during the military rule of Yahya Khan (1969–1971). Khan (2008) contends that this perceived “religious duty” of safeguarding the ideological frontiers was first institutionalised under Ayub Khan’s regime (1958–1969), then perpetuated successively by Yahya Khan (1969–1971), General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), and Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008).

If the defence of ideological frontiers entails the protection of Islam and Muslim identity, then TJ similarly serves a critical function in safeguarding the ideological parameters of the Pakistani state. This represents a key convergence between state and TJ’s objectives, wherein both actors demonstrate shared conceptual and operational alignment in their religio-political visions. TJ has long maintained that its mission is to support the entire Muslim ummah. It widely believes that Muslims worldwide are part of the global Muslim ummah and guiding them to become devout Muslims is the purpose of their lives, referred to as *Maqsad-i-Zindagi* (Qasmi n.d.). To protect Muslims from irreligious and secular lifestyles, regular Tablighi missions are dispatched from the Raiwind Tablighi Markaz to various parts of the country as well as other countries of the world. The primary aim of these Tablighi missions is to encourage ordinary Muslims to adhere to the teachings of Islam and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). A 45-year-old Tablighi activist named Mohammad Zakir has travelled to various countries to spread the teachings and tenants of Islam worldwide. According to him, “The earth belongs to Allah, not to nation-states, and the TJ has the right to travel to the farthest corners of the world” (Mohammad Zakir, *pers. comm.*, 4 February 2024). In 2016, Mohammad Zakir and his fellow Tablighi members travelled to South Africa to spread the message of Islam and invite non-Muslims to embrace the faith.

It is evident that both the Pakistani state and TJ are committed to advancing the cause of Islam and Muslims globally. Both entities share the common objective of protecting Islam and its adherents from secular influences and fostering their transformation into devout Muslims. The TJ regards itself as a leading and divinely approved religious movement advocating for Islam and its followers worldwide. Conversely, the Pakistani state also perceives itself as a key player in the Muslim world, supporting various political causes of Muslims globally. For example, the state supports the political aspirations of the people in Kashmir, the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and the Afghan jihad against foreign occupiers. The state provides political, moral, and, in some instances, logistic support to these political movements in their opposition to their perceived “enemies” around the world. Pakistan’s involvement in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference reflects its broader foreign policy, showing that Islamabad is strongly focused on

fostering unity among the Muslim ummah. Tablighi participants strongly assert that all Muslims globally constitute a unique community and possess a unified belief in Allah and His Prophet. Therefore, they saw it as their divine duty to steer Muslims away from un-Islamic behaviours and promote a return to the practice of their religion as faithful adherents. The delineations of nation-states do not hinder their outreach to Muslims globally. As a result, a profound relationship has emerged between Pakistan and TJ in this setting.

Empirical evidence suggests that segments of TJ have, in certain instances, aligned with militant jihadist groups to confront actors perceived as adversaries of Islam—particularly in conflict zones such as Kashmir and Afghanistan. Certain Islamic militant groups have exploited its decentralised and loosely organised structure, with documented cases of such organisations using Tablighi gatherings as a platform to disseminate their militant ideologies among its members. Nevertheless, TJ has refrained from implementing significant structural reforms, as its leadership maintains that any alteration to its current framework would compromise its identity as a peaceful, non-political missionary movement (Rana 2019). Despite the allegations against it, the Tablighi Movement plays a role in safeguarding the ideological boundaries of the state by sending small Tablighi missions in different parts of the country as well as abroad to re-engage lapsed Muslims with their faith. This suggests that, despite employing different methods, both TJ and the Pakistani state ultimately seek to safeguard the ideological boundaries of the Pakistani nation. The TJ's apolitical orientation and commitment to non-violence have made it a strategically valuable Islamic revivalist movement for the state, enabling it to support key domestic policies as well as selective international interests around the world.

By the mid-twentieth century, most Muslim countries had gained independence from colonial rule. Many postcolonial countries, ruled by authoritarian regimes, failed to deliver the promised economic, political, and social reforms. In response, these governments increasingly turned to religious slogans and supported Islamic revivalist movements to legitimise their autocratic rule. In Pakistan, founded in 1947 with high hopes among Indian Muslims for socioeconomic uplift under Muslim self-rule, the postcolonial elite failed to address deep-rooted inequalities. This created a legitimacy crisis. Within this context, the state's support for movements like TJ can be seen as a strategic tool of political control—leveraging Islamic discourse and symbolism to reinforce elite authority and deflect attention from governance failures. These social, political, and economic challenges drove people to seek solace in the message of religious movements. According to a senior Tablighi:

Those who blame the state for various problems are making a grave mistake. These individuals seek to hide their own wrongdoings and place the blame on the state and its institutions. We observe numerous problems around us and all of these issues and challenges stem from the fact that contemporary Muslims are not living as ideal Muslims. If we strive to become good Muslims as did by the earlier generation of Muslims, then Allah Almighty will resolve our problems and challenges, just as He resolved the challenges faced by the Sahaba (companions of Prophet Muhammad) in the past (Muhsin, *pers. comm.*, 4 March 2024).

Tablighi activists widely argue that various problems and challenges arise because Muslims have neglected their religious duties. They do not criticise the state or its institutions for failing to address the social, political, and economic issues faced by the people. Instead of holding the state accountable, they place the responsibility on ordinary Muslims for their daily hardships and struggles. In this context, the state may promote its religious ideology or, at the very least, facilitate a conducive environment for the TJ to expand its influence. The rationale is evident: rather than attributing contemporary socioeconomic problems to the state and its institutional failures, the TJ places responsibility on individual Muslims. This deflection of blame provides considerable ideological relief to state authorities and the ruling elite.

CONCLUSION

Following its independence from British colonial rule, Pakistan's nascent state apparatus pursued a distinctive nation-building strategy that systematically integrated Islamic principles with political governance, democratic processes, and social cohesion. Confronted with multifaceted internal divisions and external pressures, the political leadership strategically positioned Islam as the central organising principle of national identity and state policy. This ideological framework, predicated on the concept of the Muslim ummah, was premised on the assumption that religious mobilisation could effectively address Pakistan's structural challenges. The institutionalisation of this vision manifested through several mechanisms: political parties incorporated Islamic rhetoric into their platforms, parliamentary debates increasingly centred on religious considerations, and legal reforms were implemented to align national legislation with Islamic jurisprudence. Concurrently, the state adopted a dual approach to religious mobilisation, providing tacit support to militant and religious political groups engaged in extraterritorial jihad while simultaneously endorsing TJ's pacifist dawah activities. This paradoxical policy reflected a calculated strategy wherein both violent and non-violent Islamic movements were instrumentalised to reinforce Pakistan's Islamic identity and promote pan-Islamic solidarity.

The TJ's widespread appeal in Pakistan can be attributed to its deliberate avoidance of political involvement, its commitment to non-violence, and its quietist religious philosophy. Although TJ is ideologically aligned with the state in many respects, it maintains institutional independence. Its members do not receive salaries or financial support from the government or state institutions. Instead, Tablighi participants voluntarily dedicate their own time, effort, and personal resources to promoting what they consider the "true" interpretation of Islam within Pakistani society. The practice of *khuruj* (going out for preaching) functions as a self-directed religious obligation, requiring neither state enforcement nor economic incentive. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that Tablighi activists and their personalised dawah practices contribute significantly to the realisation of certain core objectives of the Pakistani state apparatus. For example, the promotion of the state's official religious ideology and the transformation of nominal Muslims into devout practitioners closely align with the broader objectives of the state. This study demonstrates that, despite differences in methodology and operational style, TJ and the Pakistani state share significant areas of convergence, thereby establishing what can be regarded as a strategic and ideologically grounded alliance between the two.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

NOTES

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