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## Ethnicity, Islam, and Pakistani Public Opinion toward the Pakistani Taliban

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*This article argues that an Islamist militant group with a relatively homogenous ethnic make-up is more likely to be supported by those of the same ethnicity even if the group makes no reference to and even downplays the importance of ethnicity. Using survey data from an original survey carried out in Pakistan in 2013, with 7,656 respondents, this hypothesis is tested in a multiple regression analysis of support for the Pakistani Taliban. The results demonstrate that co-ethnicity between the respondent and the Islamist militant group is the most important predictor of support for the militant group.*

While Pakistan is most known for supporting Islamist militant groups in its struggles with India, since late 2001 Pakistan has increasingly become a victim of some of its erstwhile proxies. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—Taliban Movement of Pakistan—has emerged as the most lethal Islamist militant organization by far. The TTP has killed more than 3,520 (between 2007–2012) of their own citizens in scores of terror attacks. The TTP formally came into being in 2007 when numerous self-styled Pakistani Taliban coalesced under this banner and the leadership of then Baitullah Mehsood. Since then, the TTP has remained a shifting network of dozens of Deobandi Islamist militant groups, whose numbers may be in the tens of thousands, and whose various commanders seek to create an Islamic state in Pakistan, and call for a defensive *jihad* against the Pakistani Army.<sup>1</sup>

The commanders who later became the core of the TTP first sought to establish micro-emirates of *Sharia* in the tribal areas in the early 2000s. However, the networked

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TTP quickly expanded beyond the tribal belt and into the settled parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). At present, the TTP has logistical and operational reach through the breadth and width of Pakistan. While the TTP's constitutive groups present themselves as fighting for *Sharia* rather than representing particular ethnic, regional, class, or other such secular causes, the organization primarily draws from Pashtuns.

Despite the TTP's violent track record, it enjoys support from segments of Pakistani society. Without such support, it would be difficult to obtain recruits, funding, and sufficient safe havens to train, plan, and carry out its attacks in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Several studies of Pakistani public opinion toward Islamist violence in Pakistan consistently show that these groups enjoy important pockets of support, particularly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding which groups of Pakistanis support the TTP is a critical question for Pakistan's security officials but also for international security. Not only has the group slain thousands of Pakistanis, but some of its constitutive commanders also aid the Afghan Taliban as well as Al Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> The TTP has targeted state and non-state targets and has successfully assassinated many prominent Pakistani elites. Its violence has pushed Pakistani to the brink of chaos in particular places and at particular times.

This study contends that the existing literature on the sources of public support for *jihadi* violence has ignored a crucial explanatory factor for individual support for some Islamist militant groups: ethnicity. It is posited here that ethnic similarity between survey respondent and member of a given Islamist militant group will raise the likelihood of respondent support for that militant group. The study hypothesizes that the more an Islamist militant group has a distinct, salient, homogeneous ethnic composition, the more likely that group is to be supported by its own ethnic kinsmen relative to others. In other words, people are more likely to support a group that shares their ethnic identity than a group that is made up of a different ethnic identity or is substantially mixed in its composition. This will be particularly true in societies where ethnic identity is a very important organizing principle.

The reasoning behind this argument is based in social psychology. Individuals tend to trust and support those who are like them in important ways. They can identify with such people and more easily trust their motivations. Ethnicity is one of the most important identities that humans tend to have, and is very salient in Pakistan. Pakistan's state boundaries have been formed in considerable measure to accommodate ethnic sentiment. Pakistan's history has long demonstrated that intra-state conflict is likely when within-state migration undermines the ethnic identity of a locality (*inter alia* see the migration of non-Baloch into Balochistan and non-Sindhis into Karachi).<sup>5</sup> The TTP, which is comprised almost entirely of Pashtuns with some Punjabi allies, should receive disproportionate support from Pashtuns in Pakistan. In fact, we posit that ethnic identification will be a more important factor explaining support for the organization than the religious ideology that the groups espouses.

The study is organized in the following manner. The section to follow gives a brief description of the origins, motivations, and actions of the TTP since its inception. The next section discusses the nature of the extensive, national survey conducted by the authors in Pakistan that will be the basis of the analysis in this study. This is followed by an overview of the picture of public support this group enjoys in Pakistan that comes from data pulled from that survey. The next part of the study lays out theory that motivates this study, which is then followed by a discussion of a multiple regression model and analysis. Discussion of the results of this analysis form the subsequent portion of the study and the article concludes with an assessment of what the findings mean for our understanding of public support for *jihadi* organizations.

## The Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan

While Pakistan has many different militant *jihadi* organizations, the TTP is the most deadly and consequential out of the menagerie. Together, it accounts for the majority of deaths in Pakistan due to terrorist attacks in the last decade. According to the START Global Terrorism dataset, the TTP is responsible for 733 confirmed attacks and 3,520 deaths and 5,571 wounded from its foundation in 2007 up until 2012. Of the TTP's 733 attacks, 337 took place in KPK, 301 in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), 52 in Punjab, 31 in Sindh, and 10 in Balochistan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the vast majority of TTP attacks take place in the Pashtun belt of Pakistan. These numbers certainly undercount terrorist attacks by TTP militants because many of the attacks go unclaimed and the START counting protocols are quite strict.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 shows the number of Pakistanis killed by the TTP from 2007 to 2012.

The TTP militants are avowedly Deobandi in their sectarian orientation. Deobandism, which is a reform movement within South Asian Islam that started in the nineteenth century, originally focused on moving Islam in India back toward the original principles of the religion, and away from corruption by Western or other foreign influences. In contrast to Deobandism in India, which has abjured violence and is decidedly pro-state, the Pakistani state has long instrumentalized Deobandis to cultivate militants to prosecute its foreign policies in Afghanistan as well as in India. For this reason, Deobandism in Pakistan has diverged starkly from its counterpart in India. The Pakistani state has cultivated Deoband militant groups for use in Afghanistan (the Afghan Taliban), in India—particularly Indian Kashmir (Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islam among others) as well as sectarian groups that target Shi'a (Sipha-e-Sahahba-e-Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi). While Zia ul Haq is frequently associated with this process, Pakistan's use of Islamism long pre-dated him.<sup>8</sup> The Pakistani military has used Islamist militants as proxy fighters from the earliest days of the state's independence. They were used in Indian-controlled Kashmir shortly after partition, in the 1965 war with India, and in the war over East Pakistan, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> The TTP constituent groups represent organizations that are outgrowths of these varied Deobandi Islamist militant groups that Pakistan had long sponsored. It is also important to note that the ideology of Deobandi *jihadi* groups such as the TTP and others has been deeply influenced by the Salafism of donors from the Gulf States as well as interactions with groups such as Al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba.<sup>10</sup>

The word Taliban is Persian for students, although this word is common in several languages used in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The term "Taliban" emphasizes that

**Table 1**  
TTP attacks and killed (2007–2012)

Year	Attacks	Number killed
2007	26	125
2008	110	317
2009	156	657
2010	158	832
2011	118	638
2012	165	951
Total	733	3,520

movement originated with students in Pakistan's *madaris* (plural of *madrassahs* in Urdu or religious seminaries). While Pashtun religious militancy has a long tradition,<sup>11</sup> large-scale, organized Pashtun religious-based militancy started in the early 1970s at the behest of the Pakistani security establishment, under the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.<sup>12</sup> Pakistani military figures encouraged the growth of Islamist Pashtun organizations in Afghanistan so as to dampen the appeal of Pashtun nationalist organizations. The logic behind this was that by encouraging an Islamist orientation among the Pashtuns, this would make ethno-nationalist organizations less of a draw. Pakistani elites were concerned that a growth in Pashtun ethno-nationalism would be a potential threat to the integrity of Pakistan, because it could lead to Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border pulling away from their respective countries and creating a separate Pashtun state, Pashtunistan.<sup>13</sup> Students in some of the Deobandi *madaris*, which are the most prevalent type of *madaris* in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, were encouraged to engage in militancy to counter Pashtun nationalists. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, many of these same students fought the Soviets. While they were a small minority of Afghans and Pakistanis fighting the Soviets, these Pashtun *madrassah* students became an important nucleus of what would later become the Afghan Taliban movement.

After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989 and the country eventually descended into civil war and lawlessness, a small group of Pashtun religious figures, many who had attended *madaris* in Pakistan and Afghanistan, began an effort to end the lawlessness and violence and establish an Islamic state in 1994. They came to be known as the Taliban because of their backgrounds in *madaris*.<sup>14</sup> Led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, the group soon grew as it scored military successes against warlords and bandits and began to establish order in the Pashtun areas of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban were viewed by the Pakistani military as valuable assets for stabilizing Afghanistan, quelling Pashtun nationalism, creating a pro-Pakistani regime in Afghanistan, and creating “strategic depth” for Pakistan in case of a war with India. Pakistani security officials’ concern with strategic depth for their military centers on the narrow land mass of Pakistan and the potential need for Pakistani military forces to retreat into Afghanistan to re-group and counter Indian ground incursions into Pakistani territory. Pakistani advisors went into Afghanistan to aid the Taliban with training, weapons, and new recruits. While local Pashtuns were recruited into the ranks, most of the Taliban came from the Deobandi *madaris* in the Pashtun parts of Pakistan, where many young Afghan Pashtun refugees were educated. These students, Taliban, became the fighting force for the Afghan Taliban movement.<sup>15</sup>

By 1996, the Afghan Taliban had conquered most of the country. They were opposed by a coalition of forces known as the Northern Alliance, which was made up of Tajik, Uzbek, and other ethnic groups. These ethnic groups opposed the Taliban because they viewed it as a force for Pashtun domination of the country and because they did not share the harsh interpretation of *Sharia* that the radicalized Deobandis had come to espouse. The most important divide between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban was not over religious principles but over ethnic politics. The Taliban was not very successful at all in encouraging non-Pashtuns into the movement. While it was not a Pashtun nationalist movement, and did not espouse Pashtun chauvinist rhetoric, it was viewed as a movement by and for Pashtun Sunnis (Deobandis). This is because ethnic and sectarian identities in Afghanistan trump any sense of national identity.<sup>16</sup>

The Pakistani Taliban is not a Pakistani chapter of the Afghan Taliban. It is primarily a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power. When U.S. forces aided the Northern Alliance in crushing the Taliban's

regime in 2001, Al Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban were no longer safe in Afghanistan. Thus, many of them crossed the border into FATA in Pakistan, which is part of the Pashtun belt and not part of the constitutional order of the Pakistani state, but is under Pakistani sovereignty. It is an area under nominal Pakistani control, where local tribal laws and customs hold sway and power is exercised primarily by tribal authorities. Some of the tribal leaders and Pakistani veterans of the Afghan *jihād* were willing to welcome their fellow Pashtuns from Afghanistan and also foreign militants such as those from Al Qaeda, who they saw as fighting infidel invaders. Because of this foreign fighter presence in FATA, mainly because of Al Qaeda, the United States put significant pressure on Pakistan to enter FATA and destroy Al Qaeda elements hiding there.<sup>17</sup>

The first of a series of Pakistani military incursions into FATA began in 2002. While none of the Pakistani Army operations were very successful in ridding FATA of foreign militants, they did stir deep resentment among the local Pashtun tribes. The military operations were viewed as an invasion and many local Pashtuns resisted the Pakistani Army. Local militants, many of whom had fought in Afghanistan with their Pashtun Taliban brethren, and shared their Deobandi radicalism, began to organize to fight the Pakistani Army. Many local militant groups formed around prominent local militant leaders. Out of these groups, the TTP, was formed in 2007. Originally comprised of some 15 groups, it now has as many as 30 groups.<sup>18</sup> It was an agreement among several militant organizations to come together as an umbrella group, made up and led primarily by students from Deobandi *madaris* in the Pashtun belt in Pakistan to fight the Pakistani Army. It took the name Taliban, not because it is an extension of the Afghan Taliban, but because it is made up largely of religious students, as the Afghan Taliban is. The TTP has its own command structure and does not take orders from the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban's goal is to topple the current Afghan state and create an Islamic state ruled according to its radicalized Deobandi principles. The TTP's goal is to topple the secular Pakistani state and establish an Islamic state in Pakistan along its radicalized Deobandi principles. The TTP is at war with the Pakistani state while the Afghan Taliban is allied with the Pakistani military.<sup>19</sup>

The TTP militants share the radicalized Deobandi religious outlook of the Afghan Taliban, plus their predominately Pashtun ethnicity. The TTP has recruited in FATA and KPK among Pashtuns who live there and also among the Pashtun community in other parts of Pakistan, such as in Karachi, which has a large Pashtun diaspora. In fact, Karachi is the city with the second largest Pashtun population of any in Pakistan, even though it is in Sindh province and not close to the Pashtun belt.<sup>20</sup>

Since 2007, the TTP has committed a host of attacks against targets throughout Pakistan, although most of the attacks have taken place in FATA and KPK. It has become the deadliest militant group in Pakistan by many magnitudes. In 2012 alone, the TTP killed at least 1,000 Pakistanis. The TTP has also developed close ties with other militant groups in Pakistan, including elements of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, as well as other Punjab-based Deobandi militants, which have come to be known as the "Punjabi Taliban."<sup>21</sup> The TTP is also a close ally of Al Qaeda as well as a number of other foreign militant groups hiding in FATA and elsewhere in Pakistan. The TTP is considered a significant threat to the security of Pakistan, even though the coalition has fractured recently and inter-Pakistani Taliban fighting has become serious. Also, the Pakistani armed forces are now involved in a major counterinsurgency operation in North Waziristan in FATA, which is the primary locus of the portion of the TTP considered most threatening to the Pakistani state.<sup>22</sup>

## The Survey

A 7,656-person survey was fielded by the research team in the fall of 2013 to achieve several goals. First, the team wanted a representative sample of the rural and urban areas of each of Pakistan's four main provinces. Second, it wanted to ascertain the level of Pakistanis's political awareness. To this end, a series of basic knowledge questions asking about Pakistani governance were included. Third, the team sought to collect data on Pakistanis's views about the TTP. Questions were designed to ascertain this. The questionnaire also included standard socioeconomic and demographic survey items.

The team drew a random sample of 7,656 adult Pakistani men and women from the four "normal" provinces of the country using the Pakistan Federal Bureau of Statistics sample frame. The respondents were selected randomly within 479 primary sampling units (PSUs), 285 in rural areas and 194 in urban ones (following the rural-urban breakdown in the Pakistan census). Balochistan and KPK were oversampled to ensure that valid estimates could be generated in these provinces, which have small populations in spatially concentrated ethnic enclaves owing to their rugged terrains. The team calculated post-stratification survey weights based on population figures from the 1998 census, the most recent available.

The face-to-face questionnaire was fielded by seven mixed-gender teams between 28 August 2013 and 30 October 2013. Females surveyed females and males surveyed males, consistent with Pakistani social and cultural norms. The overall response rate for the survey was 64 percent (67 percent in Balochistan, 63 percent in KPK, 65 percent in Punjab, 61 percent in Sindh province), which is lower than the 70 percent obtained in the General Social Survey in recent years but higher than the 59.5 percent achieved by the American National Election Survey and other high-quality academic studies (General Social Survey, n.d.).<sup>23</sup> On average, enumerators spent 44 minutes per survey. The interviewers were, on average, better educated than ordinary Pakistanis with 46 percent having undergraduate degrees and 22 percent having masters along with 4.25 years of relevant job experience.

## Attitudes toward the TTP in Pakistan

Accurately determining public support for a militant group can be quite challenging. Survey respondents may be reluctant to express their true feelings about militants to an interviewer because they want to appear socially acceptable or not potentially incur problems with police or security forces. Scholars have begun to use endorsement effects procedures in surveys to try to more accurately capture public opinion toward militancy or other sensitive topics.<sup>24</sup> Using endorsement effect questions in a survey helps to increase the sincerity in responses, increase the response rate, and decrease the danger to enumerators.<sup>25</sup>

In an endorsement protocol in the survey, respondents are given a list of policies or actions and asked if they have a positive or negative assessment of those policies or actions. There is no name of individuals or groups mentioned in the question about the policies or actions. Ideally, the list of policies or actions would elicit positive assessments from the respondents. This set of responses acts a baseline assessment of what the respondent believes are good policies or actions. The respondent is then asked, in another part of the survey, whether she believes that a particular sensitive group or individual supports those policies or engages in those behaviors. The more the respondent believes that the group or individual engages in the policies or

actions that she deems are positive, the more support the respondent is indirectly showing for the group or individual in question.

We employ this technique to ascertain support for the TTP. We first ask the question: Now we are going to ask you to discuss some potential political goals you may have. *Please tell us how much you support these goals, a great deal (1), a lot (2), somewhat (3), a little (4), not at all (5)?* The respondent is then given the goals of: try to liberate Kashmiri Muslims from Indian rule; provide social services, like clinics and schools; try to oust foreigners from Afghanistan; try to make Pakistan *Sharia*-compliant; rid Pakistan of apostates and *munafiqin* (false Muslims); *Dawa* (preaching) to spread correct Islam. Table 2 shows the responses to this question at the national level.

As can be seen in the table, these are quite popular goals. Even the least popular goal, ousting foreigners from Afghanistan, has support from 77 percent of respondents. The other response categories average around 90 percent endorsement. The next step in the endorsement question protocol is to ask the respondent if he or she believes that the TTP does what is listed in the question about endorsement of goals. Thus, we asked: *What do you think the following group does? Tell us all that apply to the group.* The respondent is then shown or told the list: try to liberate Kashmiri Muslims from Indian rule; provide social services, like clinics and schools; try to oust foreigners from Afghanistan; try to make Pakistan sharia-compliant; rid Pakistan of apostates and *munafiqin* (false Muslims); *Dawa* (preaching) to spread correct Islam. Table 2 shows the responses for the TTP. The percentages indicate the percentage of respondents who replied that the TTP did those things listed. The results in Table 3 are for the national level.

The results at the national level show about a third of Pakistanis have a positive assessment of the TTP. Only 21 percent believe that the TTP delivers social services to Muslims, but 41 percent think that it is trying to oust foreigners from Afghanistan. The rest of the responses are in the 32–38 percent range. Based on the logic of the endorsement question technique, this would indicate that about one third of the respondents show positive predispositions toward the TTP.

**Table 2**  
Endorsement of goals

<b>Question:</b> Now we are going to discuss some potential political goals you may have. Please tell me how much you support these goals, a great deal (1), a lot (2), somewhat (3), a little (4), not at all (5)?	
Goal	Percent who agree with these goals
Try to liberate Kashmiri Muslims from Indian rule	94
Provide social services to Muslims, like clinics, schools	93
Try to oust foreigners from Afghanistan	77
Try to make Pakistan sharia-compliant	87
Rid Pakistan of apostates and munafiqin	87
Dawa to spread correct Islam	93

**Table 3**  
Perceptions of the TTP

<b>Question:</b> What do you think the following group does? Tell us all that apply to the group.	
Goal	Percent who think TTP does the following
Try to liberate Kashmiri Muslims from Indian rule	34
Provide social services to Muslims, like clinics, schools	21
Try to oust foreigners from Afghanistan	41
Try to make Pakistan <i>Sharia</i> -compliant	32
Rid Pakistan of apostates and <i>munafiqin</i>	36
<i>Dawa</i> to spread correct Islam	38

So, what accounts for the variation we see among Pakistanis on this question of support for militant Islamist violence? How can we explain why some Pakistanis oppose the TTP's actions, whereas others support their attacks? The next section of this article develops an explanation based on the social psychology of how individuals perceive others in terms of difference and similarities and how that affects the level of trust the individuals have with each other.

### **The Role of Ethnicity in Explaining Public Support for Islamist Militant Violence**

Three strands of argument stand out in the literature on public opinion toward Islamist militancy. One strand of that literature explores the role that education plays in shaping attitudes toward Islamist violence. Another part of the literature focuses on the wealth of individuals and how that affects their propensities to support or oppose Islamist violence. The third major strand, which is the lesser developed of the three, examines the role that Islamic values play in determining how Muslims view militancy committed in the name of their religion. There is no theoretical consensus among scholars as to what accounts for some Muslims supporting Islamist militant violence and others opposing it. The findings from empirical studies also do not create a very clear picture of what predicts support for Islamist militancy.

### **Income**

Esposito and Voll argue that poverty makes people less satisfied with the status quo and more susceptible to the arguments of extremist groups.<sup>26</sup> They do not test this argument empirically though. This type of logic is popular among many pundits who discuss the sources of popular support for militancy in the Muslim World.

In contrast, Shafiq and Sinno argue higher incomes should produce more support for suicide terrorism because those with higher incomes should be more dissatisfied with the dismal political status quo in many Muslim countries and would want to disrupt it.<sup>27</sup> Their results are not robust across countries. Income does not consistently predict support or opposition to Islamist terrorism. Several other scholars have found similar results about

the role of income and poverty. Krueger and Maleckova argue that income should not be a robust predictor of support for terrorism and their results confirm this.<sup>28</sup> They argue that support for Islamist terrorism is born more out of feelings of frustration and indignation that are not related to one's income level but have more to do with political conditions in the country. Krueger, in an important book on the sources of Islamist militancy, also shows income does not predict support or opposition to terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Fair and Shepherd, in a multicountry study of public opinion toward suicide terrorism, find that the poor are less likely to support terrorism in some countries, but this is not a consistent finding.<sup>30</sup> In a study of support for Islamist militancy in Pakistan, Shapiro and Fair find that poverty does not predict support for terrorism, as many have argued about Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Blair et al. find that poorer Pakistanis are *less* supportive of some militant groups than middle-class citizens.<sup>32</sup> This is because the urban poor in Pakistan suffer disproportionately from terrorist attacks. Tessler and Robbins, in a much-cited study using survey data from Algeria and Jordan, find that perceived personal economic hardship does not predict support for terrorism.<sup>33</sup>

Thus taking the evidence from these studies together, the income of an individual seems a poor predictor of her or his likelihood to support Islamist militancy.

### *Education*

The second strand of theorizing about public support for Islamist militancy centers on the role that an individual's education may play. Some have argued that more educated Muslims are more likely to be more tolerant and liberal in their orientation and would thus abhor religiously inspired violence.<sup>34</sup> Shafiq and Sinno argue that the more educated should, in fact, be more supportive of Islamist violence in Muslim countries because the more educated have greater expectations than the less educated and find those expectations dashed on the realities of unjust political systems in which they live.<sup>35</sup> But Shafiq and Sinno do not find that their argument is consistently supported by their analytical results.<sup>36</sup> Education predicts support and opposition to Islamist terrorism, but often is not a significant predictor of attitudes toward Islamist militancy at all. Krueger and Maleckova and Krueger do not find that education consistently predicts support or opposition to terrorism.<sup>37</sup> As with income, they argue that all levels of education may find dissatisfaction with the status quo in their country. Fair and Shepherd find that level of education does not consistently predict support for terrorism, but the results vary across countries.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Role of Religious Values*

Huntington argued that the nature of Islam itself is aggressive and therefore breeds support for violence and terrorism.<sup>39</sup> It is not just fundamentalism that breeds support for violence. His argument is about why Muslims have conflict with other "civilizations" in the world and does not explore public opinion.

Esposito, on the other hand, argues that mainstream Islam has nothing to do with support for terrorism.<sup>40</sup> It is very narrowly supported extremist movements within Islam that support terrorism. Esposito was able to show that the vast majority of Muslims reject Islamist violence but he did not do an empirical analysis of those who do support such violence.

Shapiro and Fair find that personal religiosity does not predict support for terrorism.<sup>41</sup> There is nothing inherent in the religious values of Muslims that would draw a Muslim to support terrorism. Tessler and Robbins, in a study using survey data from

Algeria and Jordan, find that those who are more religious or have greater levels of religious involvement are not more likely to support terrorist attacks against American targets.<sup>42</sup> Being favorable toward Islamism also does not drive respondent support for terrorism.

But studies that focus on particular strands of thought within Islam tend to find that more fundamentalist or radical ideas held by Muslims help to predict support for Islamist violence. Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro find that neither religious practice nor support for political Islam predicts support for militant groups in Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> But they do find certain types of doctrinal beliefs, such as beliefs that *jihad* is a military struggle and can be waged by an individual, are predictive of support for Islamist violence. Kaltenthaler et al. find that support for radical Islamist religious movements predicts support for terrorism in Pakistan. Specifically, supporting the “Talibanization” of Pakistan predicts support for Islamist militant attacks in the country.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, if we consider these three strands of the literature on support for Islamist militancy, income and education hold little promise as robust predictors of support for violence committed in the name of Islam. Islamic religious practice would seem to offer little promise of being the key to understanding varied support in Pakistan for Islamist violence. Doctrinal views held by Pakistani Muslims may prove predictive. But as shall be argued next, ethnic identification with the militant groups is a likely very strong predictor of support for some Islamist militant groups.

### ***The Role of Ethnicity***

Studies of public support for Islamist militancy have, until now, ignored the role that ethnic identity may play in support for groups that carry out violence in the name of Islam. In some ways, this is understandable because Islamist groups, whether they commit violence or not, avoid their primary identification as being ethnically based. Islam is meant to be the universal identity. From independence in 1947 onward, for example, Pakistan’s political elites (both civilian and uniformed) have insisted that Pakistanis’s identities as Muslims should trump their ethnic identities.

But the social psychology of individuals may make this religious ideal difficult to achieve. We know from several studies in economics, sociology, political science, and psychology that ethnic identity is often a very important factor in how people come to trust others.<sup>45</sup> People tend to trust other people who share similar characteristics.<sup>46</sup> This may be shared language, shared religion, shared values, or any number of shared characteristics. But in an environment where ethnic identity is salient, people will tend to trust others with the same ethnic identity.

There are some general factors that will raise the likelihood of ethnic identity becoming a major factor in an individual trusting political or social actors from his or her own ethnic community. When people decide to trust political or social figures they look for cues to help them make that decision. Finding cues to help one decide is easier the more information one has about groups or individuals. In environments where people have low levels of information, they make use of the most basic cues to decide, such as obvious similarities between the person making the decision to trust/support and the object of that decision.<sup>47</sup> People tend to trust others who seem similar to them more than people who seem different than them.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in societies where individuals tend to have lower levels of education and political information, these basic similarities play a larger role than in a society where people have relatively more information to make more informed decisions about trust and support of individuals or groups. In societies with low levels of political

knowledge and distinct ethnic cleavages in society, ethnicity will become an important factor in political identity and how people organize themselves. This is certainly the case in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Myanmar, and several other countries in Asia.<sup>49</sup> It is also a very common pattern in Africa, where ethnic cleavages define politics in many countries.<sup>50</sup> Ethnic identities are also organizing principles in several countries in the developed world, where ethnicity seems to trump national identity. Witness the importance of ethnic cleavages to politics in Belgium, Spain, and the United Kingdom over the last several years.<sup>51</sup> Ethnic politics can play a large role in societies where ethnic identities are salient and individuals view a zero-sum competition for power and resources based on one's ethnicity.<sup>52</sup> People may decide on political candidates and parties simply based on shared ethnicity, if they do not have much more information to go on that. Ethnic identity becomes a short-cut in political choice.

This logic should hold for how people decide to support Islamist militant organizations. Clearly, if one has fundamentally different characteristics than the organization, such as being from a different religion or a perceived opposing sect of Islam, it drastically lowers the probability that one would support such a group. But if an individual shares the same general religious orientation (e.g., a Deobandi) and ethnic identity (Pashtun), the person is more likely to trust and support the organization than those who share neither the sectarian orientation nor ethnic background. Trust means the individual believes the group's motives are benign to him or her and support refers to agreeing that the group's actions are generally correct. When an individual has low information, trust often creates nearly automatic support. The individual does not have much information about what the group is really doing, but since he or she trusts the group's motives, he or she assumes it is not doing objectionable things.

Because Pakistan is a society where there are relatively low levels of education, relatively high rates of illiteracy, and limited access to electronic media because of very limited power supplies, we would expect that a large portion of the population has very limited political information and knowledge. Also, Pakistan is a society where ethnic differences are very salient and obvious and are a very important part of political, social, and economic life.<sup>53</sup> Ethnic groups in Pakistan tend to speak their own languages and have their own, distinct cultures. Thus, Pakistanis tend to identify strongly with their ethnicity, which is one of the reasons why there are several ethnically based political parties. Even the parties that are not expressly ethnically based, have fairly clear regional bases of support that line up, to a certain extent, along ethnic lines.<sup>54</sup>

Pakistan's Islamist militant organizations often have a territorial base and recruit from that region.<sup>55</sup> Because of this, these organizations often have a distinct regional, and/or ethnic identity. For example, the TTP is based primarily in FATA and recruits mostly from FATA, and to a lesser extent Khyber Paktunkwa province.<sup>56</sup> It also recruits from the large Pashtun community in Karachi. What is a constant among all of these areas of Pakistan is that the recruits are largely Pashtuns.

Why does the TTP recruit primarily among Pashtuns and not reach out much to other ethnic groups in Pakistan? The Pashtun ethnic identity is one of the most distinctive and comprehensive identities among the ethnic groups in Pakistan. Pashtun culture is a very old culture that has developed in a distinct way because the Pashtuns have never been conquered as a people in modern times and have developed in a relatively isolated way. They have also been fairly cut off by geography, living in a largely mountainous terrain in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their culture is more all-encompassing than some in the sense that Pashtuns have a behavioral code, known as Pashtunwali, that predates Islam, and is central to Pashtun identity. This code, which sets out what is correct

and unacceptable behavior, is the guide, along with Islam, by which most Pashtuns live. It controls most aspects of life, along with Islam. For most Pashtuns, Pashtunwali—which literally means doing as a Pashtun—and Islam are such central parts of their socialization that they do not know where one begins and the other stops. No other major ethnic group in Pakistan has such a developed ethnic persona as the Pashtuns.<sup>57</sup> Deviating from the norms of Pashtunwali is a source of significant social stigma and sanction in Pashtun society. The more rural the Pashtuns, the more important is the role of Pashtunwali for them. As the vast majority of Pashtuns live in rural areas, this code is very important to understanding a great deal of Pashtun behavior.<sup>58</sup> Pashtun identity and living by Pashtunwali is much more pronounced among the Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa than the Pashtuns of Balochistan. The Pashtuns of Balochistan are either dispersed in the very sparsely populated countryside of Balochistan or concentrated in the city of Quetta and are less tied to the norms of rural Pashtun society. Within Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the Pashtun heartland. It is where most of the Pashtuns live and is also strongly connected to the Pashtuns who live in FATA and in Afghanistan by tribe and clan.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the KPK Pashtuns would feel more connected to their fellow Pashtuns who are beset by war. This would create a greater sense of threat to Pashtuns among those who live in KPK than those who live in other parts of Pakistan and are less tied to the Pashtuns fighting in FATA and Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> This would make the KPK Pashtuns more likely to support a group, like the TTP, which they may see as defending Pashtuns who are under attack.

This extremely strong sense of Pashtun identity creates a sense of community among Pashtuns when faced with non-Pashtuns.<sup>61</sup> While Pashtuns are divided by tribe, clan, and sub-clan, when it comes to facing non-Pashtuns, Pashtun identity creates solidarity within the ethnic group. Thus, it is easier for the TTP to recruit among fellow Pashtuns, whom they trust, because of their common culture, relative to reaching out to different ethnic groups. The TTP cooperates with other militant groups in Pakistan, most of which are based in Punjab. These groups, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Mohammed, are sometimes referred to as the “Punjabi Taliban.”<sup>62</sup> Because of this “Punjabi Taliban” cooperation with the TTP, there will likely be positive Punjabi support for the TTP as well, although not to the extent that would exist among the Pashtuns.

Because of the TTP’s clear Pashtun ethnic identity, some scholars have raised the question of whether the TTP is more of an expression of Pashtun ethno-nationalism cloaked in radical Deobandi rhetoric than an extremist Islamist militant group.<sup>63</sup> These scholars argue that while the theology of the [Afghan] Taliban is important to it, the Pashtun culture and a perceived threat to the ethnic group is more a motivation for its militants. Other scholars disagree and argue that the Taliban movement is much more an expression of extremist Deobandism than it is Pashtun culture.<sup>64</sup>

While this is an interesting and important debate, what is important about Pashtun identity for this study’s purposes is not if it motivates the leadership of the TTP more than their radical Deobandi ideology, but whether it motivates the Pakistani public to support the TTP more than Deobandi ideology or some other factor. It is argued here that ethnic identification will trump religious ideology among those Pakistanis who support the TTP and its actions. This is because the TTP has such a clear Pashtun persona, it operates predominately in Pashtun areas, and is well known among Pashtuns. Also, because of the low levels of education and information in Pakistan, the ideology of the TTP is probably not well known or understood. In other words, most Pakistanis who express support for the TTP will do so primarily because they are fellow Pashtuns and not because they support or understand their Deobandi ideology. When Pakistanis look for cues as to whether

to support or oppose the TTP, ethnicity is the primary cue that they will use. Based on this logic, it is hypothesized that:

H1: *When an Islamist militant organization has a clear ethnic profile, the greater is the likelihood that individuals of the same ethnicity will support that organization.*

The next section of the article sets up the means to test this hypothesis.

## Model and Methods

The dependent variable in this study is general outlook toward the TTP. The operationalization of this variable comes from the survey question: *What do you think the following group does? Tell us all that apply to the group.* The respondent is then shown or told the list: try to liberate Kashmiri Muslims from Indian rule; provide social services, like clinics and schools; try to oust foreigners from Afghanistan; try to make Pakistan *Sharia*-compliant; rid Pakistan of apostates and *munafiqin* (false Muslims); *Dawa* (preaching) to spread correct Islam. We created an additive index of support for the TTP, where the more a respondent said that the TTP did the things listed, the more the respondent was coded as supportive of the TTP. The range could be from 0 to 6 for each respondent. A 0 would indicate a very negative stance toward the TTP and a 6 would indicate a very positive outlook toward the TTP.

The model also includes demographic control variables that are typically included in such analyses: education, age, gender, and income. Income and education are used as controls rather than as explanatory variables because there are no theoretical priors for these variables. We believe they are generally poor predictors of support for Islamist militancy. An ordered probit regression analysis statistical technique is used to test the hypothesis listed above because probit is most suitable when the dependent variable is categorical with more than two response options.

The explanatory variables that are included in the model are ethnicity and school (*fiqh*) of Islam to which the respondent likely adheres. Based on the hypothesis that Pashtuns should be more supportive of the TTP than other ethnic groups in Pakistan, a question in the survey is used that asks: *What is your ethnicity?* The research team included Punjabi, Pashtun from Khyber Paktunkwa, Pashtun from anywhere else in Pakistan, Sindhi, Muhajir, and Balochi, as categories in the analysis. The Pashtuns of KPK are analyzed separately from the Pashtuns in the other areas of Pakistan because of the belief that the Pashtun identity in other areas of Pakistan differs somewhat from those who live in KPK. The Pashtuns of KPK are likely much stronger in their Pashtun identity because of the dominant Pashtun culture there, the large concentrations of Pashtuns who live together in this province as opposed to the Pashtuns who live in places like Balochistan, which has widely dispersed and thinly populated clusters of residents—except for Quetta. Many other categories were possible but these are very small ethnic categories or are disputable as to whether they constitute ethnic groups (such as the Siraiiki).

In order to determine if ethnicity is the key variable driving support for the TTP, one must control for the primary logical alternative explanation: that adherence to Deobandi ideology is what is really driving support for the TTP. Deobandism is not a school of Islam particular to Pashtun areas and actually has a following throughout Pakistan. Deobandis make up 15 percent of all Pakistani Muslims.<sup>65</sup> But it is also possible that other schools of Sunni Islam could possibly account for TTP support. Radicalization is not a

process that is unique to Deobandism in Pakistan. Even some Barelvis have turned to a type of violent fundamentalism. Asking a Pakistani directly about his or her adherence to a particular school of Islam can be a sensitive and sometimes confusing question. Thus, to operationalize the school of Islam with which the respondent identifies, the following was asked: *If a child in your house were to study hafz-e-Quran or nazira, what kind of madrassa or school would you like them to attend?*<sup>66</sup> The choices are: Jammāt-e-Islami; Ahl-e-Hadith; Deobandi; Barelvi; Ahl-e-Sunnat. A few words are in order about these choices. Jammāt-e-Islami (JI) is a non-sectarian Islamist political party that is the ideological kin of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not a school of Islam itself, but a religious-political movement. There is no militant organization that targets individuals in Pakistan that is tied to the JI. The Ahl-e-Hadith is a Sunni, Salafi movement, that draws its inspiration from Saudi Wahhabism. Only 4 percent of Pakistanis adhere to this school of Islam. It considers all the other schools of Islam in Pakistan to be deviations from correct Islam. It is the ideology of one of the most potent Pakistani militant Islamist organizations, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (Militia of the Pure). Lashkar-e-Taiba does not attack within Pakistan. Deobandism, which has Islamist political parties tied to it, the various versions of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and several militant Islamist organizations, chief among them the TTP, is a broad movement. It ranges from the moderate to the radical. The Barelvis are Sufi in tradition, and count 60 percent of the Pakistani population among their adherents.<sup>67</sup> As noted above, they range from moderates to those who are quite intolerant. Ahl-e-Sunnat, the last category, simply means Sunni Muslim. It is a default category for those Pakistani Sunnis who do not ascribe to any particular school or do not know, which school to which they belong. Shi'as are excluded because they are a category of Muslims that is targeted in Pakistan today. Groups like the TTP and some of the other Deobandi groups routinely slaughter Shi'a. Thus, it would not be logical to include them as a group that would support the TTP.

## Results

It has been argued here that the primary causal variable in explaining the relative degree of support for the TTP will be ethnicity, particularly the shared Pashtun ethnicity between the vast majority of the TTP and the Pakistani Pashtun population. Specifically, it has been argued that being Pashtun, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated KPK province, and identifying with the TTP because of ethnic commonalities would be the most important factor for most Pakistanis who have a positive assessment of the TTP. The results of the ordered probit analysis are presented in Table 4.

When we examine the ethnicity category variable, many of them are significant predictors of support for the TTP. All of the signs on the coefficients show that being part of the various named ethnic groups was predictive of support for the TTP except for Punjabis not residing in Punjab and Balochis, who were not statistically significant in either direction.

Of the variables that measure the preferences of respondents for one sect of Islam over another (operationalized by where they would send a child to get a religious education), one proved to be a significant predictor of support for the TTP; respondents who would want to send children to Ahl-e-Hadith *madaris* are more likely to be positive about the TTP. Of the control variables, age did not prove to be a significant predictor, being female proved to be a significant predictor of support for the TTP, being more educated predicted more support, and income and was not a significant predictor.

**Table 4**  
Support for TTP ordered Probit model

Dependent variable—Support TTP Index			
Independent variables	Coef.	S.E.	First difference
Pashtuns in KPK	.871***	.062	.197
Pashtuns not in KPK	.355***	.077	.060
Punjabi in Punjab	.348***	.038	.058
Punjabi not in Punjab	.041	.105	
Balcohi	-.080	.068	
Sindh	.120**	.046	.017
Jamat Madrassa	-.029	.061	
Ahl e Hadees Madrassa	.326***	.078	.054
Deo Bandi Madrassa	.082	.046	
Age Quartile	.007	.014	
Male	-.448***	.032	.079
Education	.032***	.010	.026
Income Quartile	-.011	.014	
Cut 1	-.777		
N	4,922		
LR $X^2(13)$	503.87		
Prob > chi2	.000		

Figures are unstandardized coefficients shown alongside standard errors.

\* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

Cut 1 refers to a “cut-point” on a standardized normal distribution. Cut points are used to calculate the predicted probabilities for each category of the dependent variable. The constant of the model would be interpreted as the inverse of Cut 1 (.777).

To determine the relative predictive power of the explanatory variables (ethnicity and support for a school of Islam), we calculate the marginal effects of those variables. We do so by calculating the first differences, that is the change in the probability of a respondent giving a positive assessment of the TTP when the variable of interest is changed from its minimum to its maximum value, while the other independent variables are held constant at their means. We do this for each of the predictive variables in our model. Calculating the marginal effects in this way allows us to determine the magnitude of the impacts of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The top five independent variables will be discussed in order of their predictive power.

The first differences estimation results reveal that being a Pashtun from KPK is, far and away, the most predictive variable of being positive toward the TTP. Thus, being a Pashtun in KPK is the most powerful category of explanatory variable in the model, with a first difference value of .20. This tells us that if we control all other variables at their appropriate measure of central tendency and move a respondent from minimum to maximum values on being a Pashtun in KPK, they are 20 percent more likely to score a 6 on the TTP Index. As predicted, being a Pashtun living in KPK is critical in how a Pakistani views the TTP.

Next are Pashtuns who do not reside in KP. The first difference is .06. At .06, as well, are Punjabis who reside in Punjab. Next is a respondent’s willingness to send a

child to an Ahl-e-Hadith *madrasah*. It has a first difference value of .05. Thus, religious doctrine does prove to be an important predictor of support for the TTP, although Ahl-e-Hadith supporters make up only some 5 percent of the Pakistani population.

The final predictive variable was being Sindhi, which had a small first difference estimation of .02. What is telling about the result for the Deobandi *madrasah* variable is that it is not significant in our model. Thus the religious doctrine of the TTP is much less of a pull for support compared to ethnic commonality with Pashtuns in Pakistan.

## Conclusions

This study was intended to develop a way to understand public support for the TTP, Pakistan's deadliest and most destructive Islamist militant organization. The study argued from the perspective of social and political psychology, that when individuals have relatively low levels of information about political actors, they will turn to informational cues in order to decide whether to trust and support them. In the case of the TTP, its clear profile as a group made up of Pashtun militants made it logical to hypothesize that Pashtun ethnicity would be the primary driver of support for the TTP. This would trump religion, as most Pakistanis, like most people around the world, have a somewhat thin grasp on details of religious doctrine. If ethnicity is a more salient cue than common religious identity, and in this case it is, ethnicity will be the cue that shapes attitudes toward the militant organization. The results of the analysis find this in a clear and convincing way.

This raises some important points to consider for trying to counter the support that the TTP has in Pakistan. First, the growth of the Ahl-e-Hadith sect in Pakistan is a force for religious intolerance in the country. The money that continues to flow into Pakistan from Saudi Arabia in order to fund Ahl-e-Hadith mosques, *ulema*, *madaris*, and religious literature is meant to convert Barelvīs and Deobandīs to the Ahl-e-Hadith *fiqh*. As it grows, the Ahl-e-Hadith school's adherents are putting more and more pressure on Barelvīs and Shi'as and sectarian violence is on the rise. Sectarian attacks in FATA, KPK, Punjab, and elsewhere in Pakistan have gone up and there seems to be little substantive response from the state to stop it. This violence is tearing at the fabric of Pakistani society.

But the Ahl-e-Hadith is hardly the only *fiqh* that has elements engaged in sectarian violence. The more radical elements of the Deobandi school, which are not insignificant in size, are also spreading sectarian hatred and promoting violence.<sup>68</sup> The TTP is but one example of this trend within Deobandism. A real danger is that young Pashtun males get drawn to TTP circles, whether in FATA, the KPK, Karachi, or somewhere else because they view the TTP as Pashtuns fighting for Pashtun culture and rights. The exposure to the TTP cadres means exposure to the radical Deobandism of the organization. This opens the way for a cognitive appeal by the group to accept its religious mission of using violence to achieve "God's will." Hearing these appeals from someone who you trust because they come from your culture is more persuasive than hearing it from someone who you need to learn to trust.

To help dampen the appeal and support enjoyed by the TTP, its links with the Pashtun community in Pakistan must be loosened. Pashtuns must be convinced that the TTP is not fighting to protect Pashtuns from harm and the infringement of their rights. In fact, the actions of the TTP have brought significant harm to Pashtuns in FATA, KPK, Karachi, and elsewhere. How has the TTP done this? The TTP has allied with myriad Pakistani and foreign *jihadi* groups, which are a security threat to Pakistan and the World.

They not only ally with them, they harbor and aid these fellow militants. This makes them a target. Thousands of innocent Pashtuns have died as a consequence of security operations aimed at rooting out the TTP and its allies in FATA, KPK, and Karachi. Pashtuns suffer the most, by far, because they are the community in which the TTP embeds itself.

The TTP militants are also the biggest perpetrators of violence against Pashtuns. As stated earlier, the vast majority of TTP attacks take place in KPK and FATA and the Pashtun areas of Karachi. In their attacks on the “enemies of God,” the TTP has killed thousands of their own ethnic kinsmen, be they police, soldiers, state officials, teachers, students, religious minorities, or simply anybody who disagrees with them.

One thing that could help to curb the appeal of the TTP for Pashtuns, and be clear, most Pashtuns oppose the TTP, is to create a sense among the Pashtuns that they are not second-class citizens in Pakistan. Something that could help in this endeavor would be to make FATA a regular part of Pakistan, and bring it into the constitutional mainstream of Pakistani politics. The Pakistani constitution does not hold in FATA and it is still governed by law codes that date from the British Raj. These law codes are not protective of the rights of residents of FATA and are a source of anger toward the Pakistani government. Also, KPK, while it is a province of Pakistan, it is a relatively poor and underdeveloped province. It has an above-average level of illiteracy and poverty. Putting more efforts into helping to educate Pashtuns and raise their standards of living may decrease their sense of discrimination and marginalization, which fuel their support for militant alternatives to the Pakistani state.

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