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Women and Support for Terrorism in Pakistan

C. Christine Fair^a and Ali Hamza^b

^aSecurity Studies Program, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA; ^bMcCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

While there have been many scholarly inquiries about the sources of support for terrorism among Muslim publics, to date, scholars have generally not asked whether or not gender predicts support for Islamist militancy. Instead, most scholars and officials assume that “men of military age” are the most important segment of interest. Instead, gender is usually treated as a “control variable” rather than a “study variable,” reflecting the paucity of interest in this subject. This is likely an important scholarly and policy-analytic oversight. Many terrorist groups have women’s wings and women-oriented publications and other outreach programs because they understand the important role that mothers, wives, and sisters play in a male family member’s decision to take up arms with a terrorist group. In some conflicts, women also join as combatants. In this paper, we seek to address these scholarly lacunae by examining gender-wise support for two militant groups based in and operating from Pakistan: the Afghan Taliban, which has no female outreach program, and the sectarian Sipha-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan, which does. We leverage a dataset drawn from a relatively large national survey of Pakistanis collected in 2011 to model support for these groups using gender as an independent variable along with other demographic and control variables. We find that females are significantly more likely to support the sectarian group with a women’s outreach-wing. In contrast, there is no significant gender effect on support for the Afghan Taliban. We argue, from these results, that gender deserves more attention in understanding who supports and participates in Islamist militancy.

KEYWORDS

Afghan Taliban; gender; Pakistan; public opinion; Sipha-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan

Introduction

Public support for Islamist terrorism shapes the tactics that terrorist groups use, their decision to end or continue the use of terrorism, as well as the market for potential recruits even though the mechanisms by which public support exerts these impacts remain poorly characterized in the literature.¹ For this and other reasons, researchers have sought to identify respondent-level factors that predict support for political violence perpetrated by Islamist militant groups using both country-specific and multi-national survey samples as well as innovative survey designs.² Scholars have identified correlations between support for political violence and an array of respondent-level factors, including: ethnicity;³ perceived and actual socioeconomic status, dimensions of education and human capital;⁴ facets of belief and practice such as piety;⁵ knowledge of Islam;⁶ and exposure to violence;⁷ among other individual-level factors such as attitudes towards American culture and U.S.

foreign policy,⁸ as well as political dissatisfaction.⁹ Others have tried to characterize the association between political preferences such as support for democratic politics and Islamist militancy,¹⁰ as well as the relationship between support for Islamist politics and support for Islamist militancy.¹¹ Other kinds of studies have evaluated economic socio-tropic considerations, which covary with community- or nation-wide characteristics such as income or inequality.¹²

Curiously, gender has been both under-theorized and under-studied as a potential explanatory factor. If scholars include gender in their empirical studies at all, they do so as a control variable rather than a study variable. This is puzzling because some Islamist terrorist groups have specific strategies to recruit women either as participants or enablers of the execution of violence or as influencers who can persuade those in their orbit to participate in violent organizations. Lashar-e-Taiba (LeT), South Asia's most capable and competent terrorist group, has long had a women's wing, dedicated publications specifically for women, and an annual meeting which draws women from across the country. For LeT, being the mother of a martyr is the highest status available for women and LeT understands that the support of women is a critical part of their recruiting mission.¹³ Conversely, the Afghan Taliban have very little use for women and make little effort to cultivate them as supporters or activists.¹⁴ Not only have scholars failed to adequately consider gender, international and domestic efforts to combat violent extremism overwhelmingly focus upon males of fighting age even though terrorist organizations vary in their interest and determination to recruit women.

In this paper, we seek to address this scholarly lacuna using the specific case of Pakistan, which hosts both domestic and international Islamist terrorists with varying degrees of explicit state support. To do so, we leverage a dataset drawn from a large national survey of Pakistanis fielded in 2011. We use these data to investigate empirically the gender differences in support for two Islamist militant groups that have different appeals to women. The first group is the Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP), which is also known as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) or the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ). It is a sectarian group, rooted in the Deobandi interpretative tradition, that targets Shia, Ahmedis, Barelvis (sometimes referred to as "Sufis") as well as Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. The second group is the Afghan Taliban, which is a collective of militant commanders operating under the command of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Afghan Taliban have long enjoyed a full range of support from the Pakistani state and aim to topple the current Afghan government and drive out the international forces supporting it. Moreover, the Taliban is reputed for its brutal abuse of women and excessive punishments, inclusive of brutal public stoning of women. Like SSP, the Taliban are also rooted in the Deobandi interpretive traditions. While the organizations share mosques and religious seminaries and are allied politically and militarily, the two organizations have had a distinctly different approach to women. Whereas LeJ was the first organization to use women as suicide bombers in South Asia and has gone to great lengths to cultivate women to support the organization, the Taliban have generally disregarded female contributions and have made few efforts to develop women as organizational assets. Given the different approaches to women espoused by these two organizations—despite other similarities—we anticipate gender differences in support for the two organizations.

Consistent with our expectations, we do find significant gender effects. Specifically, we find that females are significantly more likely to support the sectarian group, SSP; however, there is no significant gender effect upon support for the Afghan Taliban. While these gender effects are statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, the magnitude of these gender effects is smaller than several of the control variables. Nonetheless our findings suggest that more focus should be given to gender as an explanatory variable in support for such groups.

We organize the remainder of this paper as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the extant literature on support for Islamist violence in Pakistan and elsewhere. Third, we discuss the data and methods used herein. Fourth, we discuss our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study, specifically that gender should be an explicit focus of such efforts to exposit the determinants of support for Islamist militancy in Pakistan.

Explaining support for Islamist violent actors

Here we briefly review the prominent arguments and empirical frameworks that scholars have used to explain support for Islamist violence and its purveyors generally and in Pakistan particularly.

Economic arguments for respondent support for Islamist violence

While the body of literature examining support for violent groups has traditionally focused on grievances,¹⁵ ethnic conflicts,¹⁶ and state repression,¹⁷ the decision to support political violence is fundamentally deeply personal and must be understood at the individual level.¹⁸ One sort of personal motivation derives from poverty or perceived poverty. Scholars have studied these two dimensions of the interaction between poverty and support for violent politics and come to varying conclusions.

One cluster of studies examines actual poverty and support for violent politics. Some of these studies have focused upon factors that influence the determinants of the supply of militant labor.¹⁹ For example, Benmelech and Klor focus on expositing the determinants of expatriate militant labor and conclude that adverse aggregate economic conditions are not significant explanatory factors.²⁰ They note that many foreign fighters come from countries “with high levels of economic development, low income inequality, and highly developed political institutions.”²¹ Other scholars suggest that low-income individuals are more likely to support militant organizations due to feelings of powerlessness and general dissatisfaction with the current political system.²² These ideas rest on the underlying logic that if the existing governance paradigm is not meeting the needs of those in poverty, then they will turn to violent groups who offer the prospect of changing the status quo.

Another proposed mechanism for the relationship between poverty and support for violence focuses on opportunity costs. Individuals living in poverty have lower opportunity costs associated with supporting political violence than their wealthier counterparts, making them more likely to do so *ceteris paribus*.²³ However, the empirical evidence on the relationship between poverty and support for political violence is mixed.²⁴ Less well-studied is the interaction between perceived poverty and support for militant violence. One empirical study of perceived poverty and support for Islamist militant groups in

Pakistan finds that “feelings of relative poverty decreased support for militant political organizations.” Not only was the direction of the relationship the opposite of what is commonly assumed, but the critical variable was relative, not actual, poverty.²⁵

Do piety and Islamism explain support for Islamist violence?

Another framework that some scholars have used is the “clash of civilizations” thesis outlined by Huntington,²⁶ which asserts that there is a fundamental conflict between the Christian West and the so-called Islamic World. As a result of this dynamic, several scholars posit that support for terrorism and/or militancy may derive from adherence to Islam itself.²⁷ Some anecdotal evidence supports the narrative that there is a link between Islamic piety and political violence.²⁸ While one analysis of a 2003–2004 survey of Palestinian Muslims found a link between attendance at religious services and support for suicide attacks,²⁹ the majority of analytic studies find little association between simply believing in Islam and supporting violent politics.³⁰ When a correlation between embracing Islam and violence does exist, the linkage is limited to a specific and narrow understanding of Islam, for example beliefs about the efficacy or compulsory nature of individual militarized jihad.³¹

Perhaps the most discussed contributing factor in determining support for militancy in the Muslim world is support for political Islam or Islamism, terms which are often used interchangeably. Scholars exploring this angle posit that support for political violence may derive from an affinity with political positions self-identified as Islamist. Analysts typically understand such positions as those which privilege the role of Islamic law (sharia) in political life or in the functioning of the state. Islamist politics have been extremely important in Pakistan (and elsewhere) because major Islamist parties have frequently and publicly backed violent action.³² For example, the political group Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) supports militant groups such as Hizbol Mujahideen and al Badr.³³ Another Islamist political party, the Jamiat ul Ulema (JUI), has long supported Deobandi groups such as the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban organizations and sectarian militant groups, as well as Deobandi organizations operating in India.³⁴ Support for these political parties is commonly used as a proxy for measuring support for militancy, the rationale behind this being that if an individual supports a group that supports militancy, they themselves must support militancy as well. While transitive logic may suggest that support for Islamist parties (especially those that espouse and even organize violence) should co-vary with support for Islamist violence, the data do not consistently bear this out.³⁵

Understanding the link between Islamist politics and militancy is further clouded by a tendency of scholars to measure support for political Islam only partially, largely because scholars generally rely upon extant datasets and the less-than-ideal questions they include on support for political Islam and related concepts. For example, scholars often operationalize support for “Islamism” as support for the implementation of sharia.³⁶ This has yielded contradictory results in the literature. Recently, some scholars contend that these divergent results likely stem from the twinned facts that there is no universally held understanding of what the application of sharia looks like and that few surveys query respondents about what they believe sharia to be. Some individuals may conceptualize an Islamic government as a transparent regime that provides services while others may understand sharia in the context of *hudood* punishments and restrictions on female

participation in public life.³⁷ In other words, the imperfect questions that analysts use to instrument support for “political Islam” drive the results in their quantitative studies, in part because the questions were never intended to comprehensively assess support for “political Islam” in the first instance. Recently scholars have found that liberal understandings of sharia, such as a government that provides security and public services, are correlated with opposition to jihadi organizations while conceptualizing sharia as hudood punishments and restricting women’s roles was correlated with positive support for jihadi organizations.³⁸ Therefore, it is important to note that there is no generalization to be made about the interaction of support for Islamist politics and support for political violence, as the definition of Islamist politics is context dependent.

Support democratic politics and support Islamist violence?

Another area of academic inquiry probes the relationship between support for democratic values on the one hand and support for militant politics on the other. Presumably, support for democratic values such as free speech, civilian control of the military, and rule by elected representatives leads to the opposition of violent forms of political expression. There is a considerable scholarly literature that outlines the ostensible relationships between supporting ideas associated with liberal democracy and resistance to autocracy,³⁹ more durable democratic institutions,⁴⁰ effective governance,⁴¹ and economic expansion.⁴² Belief in the ability of democracy to reduce support for political violence, especially terrorism, remains a key tenet of U.S. foreign policy and the underlying logic behind international democracy promotion.⁴³

A more nuanced examination of the topic provides varied examples of political movements that have advocated violence in hopes of achieving democratic outcomes. Especially in the Muslim world, there exist multitudes of violent political groups that claim to fight for freedom and political representation against oppressive governments. In Pakistan in particular, Islamist militant groups often espouse the concept of *azadi*, an Urdu word that means freedom and self-determination, as their *casus belli*. Recent scholarship on Pakistan in fact found that support for a set of core democratic values is correlated with increased support for militant organizations that espouse such notions.⁴⁴

Sectarian orientation

Sectarianism may promote political violence by entrenching ethnic and religious identities presented as inherently opposed to one another. Within Pakistan, four interpretative traditions of Sunni Islam exist. These *masalik* (pl. of *maslak*) are Ahl-e-Hadith, Deobandi, Bareilvi, and Jamaat-e-Islami. All of the Pakistani *masalik* are part of the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with the exception of Ahl-e-Hadith adherents, who do not follow any *fiqh*. A fifth *maslak* encompasses Shia Islam. All *masalik*, *madaris*, and religious scholars affiliated with an interpretive tradition espouse the supremacy of their particular orientation. Although only a small percentage of children in Pakistan are enrolled in a *madrasah* full-time, many attend religious schools in addition to other educational institutions.⁴⁵ As a result, many young people in Pakistan are exposed to potentially divisive rhetoric. Additionally, *madaris* train *ulema* (pl. of *alim*, scholar) and other religious figures who preach and deliver sermons, further spreading the ideas of each

maslak. Due to their influence on Pakistani society, these madaris are often accused of promoting sectarianism by fostering the belief in the primacy of a particular maslak.⁴⁶ However, madaris are not the only pathway by which sectarian identities can be spread. Existing literature points to the role of family and social networks,⁴⁷ public schools,⁴⁸ Islamist-influenced civil society groups,⁴⁹ and religious television, radio, Internet, and print content⁵⁰ in this process as well. These pathways, especially madaris, are resistant to change pushed by outside actors, making it difficult to envision a scenario in which their role in spreading sectarianism changes in the near future. One recent study concluded that “a person’s maslak is a far more stable predictor of support for various aspects of sharia or evidenced piety . . . even those who simply identify as ‘Sunni’—in contrast to ‘Deobandi’ or ‘Ahl-e-Hadith’—are more inclined to support sectarian militancy.”⁵¹

Does respondent ethnicity explain support for Islamist violence?

Less studied is the role of ethnicity in explaining support for militancy. One study team, employing data derived from a nationally represented survey of 7,656 Pakistani respondents fielded in late 2013, examined putative connections between respondent ethnicity and support for the Pakistani Taliban, which is a network of Pashtun and Punjabi militant groups operating in Pakistan against the Pakistani state.⁵² Citing the historically important role that ethnic identity has played in intra-state conflict in the country, they hypothesized that ethnicity should have greatest importance in low-information environments, like Pakistan, because persons may have little else on which to base their political support.⁵³ They find evidence that ethnicity is indeed an important predictor for popular support of the Pakistani Taliban.

Knowledge of Islam and support for Islamist violence

There is limited work suggesting that those who are more knowledgeable about Islam may be less resistant to the appeals of militant groups. This work draws upon Wiktorowicz’s⁵⁴ insights from his work on al-Muhajiroun in the United Kingdom that the “vast majority of Muslims are not trained in the complexities” of Islamic jurisprudence and are thus ill-equipped to evaluate the claims offered by recruiters and/or ideologues and the evidence they employ to buttress their arguments in defense of non-state actors perpetrating violence in the name of Islam.⁵⁵ He observed that religious seekers drawn to organizations such as al-Muhajiroun generally “are not in a position to objectively evaluate whether al-Muhajiroun represents an accurate understanding of Islam.”⁵⁶ Implicit in this argument is the possibility that persons who are more knowledgeable about Islam will be less reliant upon these heuristics in assessing the credibility of the leader and their arguments about foundational questions such as: who can wage jihad and under what circumstances, and for whom is jihad obligatory, and what kind of obligation is it? In 2017, scholars tested this hypothesis using survey data for Pakistan and found important, albeit limited, evidence to support this hypothesis.

Gender: An overlooked variable?

There is no established empirical literature from which we can draw hypotheses about the ways in which gender will influence support for terrorism in Pakistan.⁵⁷ In fact, there is very little scholarly information about how these two groups regard women. We do know that many of Pakistan's militant groups explicitly target women to cultivate their support for their so-called jihadi missions.⁵⁸ Lashkar-e-Taiba places a premium upon mothers offering their blessing to their sons before they are deployed upon a mission.⁵⁹ We also know that LeT has a vast infrastructure to specifically recruit women. They hold annual women's congregations and they have an extensive publications line which explicitly targets women.⁶⁰ LeT also has a famed female propagandist named Umm-e-Hammad who has authored several books intended to recruit women to LeT's cause with the aim of encouraging them to dispatch their sons to Kashmir. While LeT has the most developed effort to cultivate women, Pakistan's other militant groups also cultivate mothers as well.⁶¹ However, the particular survey employed here did not query respondents about support for LeT; rather it inquired about support for the Sipha-e-Sahiba-e-Pakistan (SSP), which engages in sectarian and communal violence and is an important collaborator in violence perpetrated by the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, and even al-Qaeda.⁶² In recent years, its cadres have also left to fight in Syria and Iraq abroad and, domestically, have thrown support to the Islamic State. Notably, the TTP as well as the Islamic State in Pakistan has aggressively used women as facilitators, fund-raisers, recruiters, as well as attackers.⁶³

While literature on the SSP's recruitment of women is scant, information that does exist suggests that the SSP believes that women are important to its bloody mission. Of particular note is that the first suicide attack to be perpetrated by a woman in South Asia occurred in 2010 and was associated with an SSP affiliate. By November 2013, the organization had recruited a total of eight suicide bombers. It turns out that SSP, operating under the name of LeJ, was recruiting female suicide bombers well before 2004 as a wider deliberate strategy of employing female suicide attackers.⁶⁴ LeJ has also been a major contributor to the Islamic State, which several Pakistani women have also joined.⁶⁵

In contrast to the SSP, the Afghan Taliban has conscientiously excluded women. As is well-known, when the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan (1996–2001), they promulgated an extremely harsh regime with respect to women which included draconian restrictions that had sweeping impacts upon their social rights, education, ability to work and purchase goods for their family, and other aspects of their mobility.⁶⁶ The Taliban's treatment of women became a global spectacle even in Pakistan. (In contrast, while SSP is known for its brutality towards religious communities they regard as non-Muslim or the wrong kind of Muslim and have slaughtered women and children as well as men, they have no reputation for being brutal to women in particular.)

Moreover, unlike the SSP, there is no evidence of women voluntarily joining the Afghan Taliban; rather, their association with the organization is simply a result of their inclusion in a household with male members in the organization or a wider tribal affiliation with ties to the organization. In contrast to the SSP and its increasing ties to the Islamic State which has focused upon women, the Taliban has rarely employed women for operations.⁶⁷ The Taliban has used male attackers disguised as women, often dressing them in a burqa worn by Afghan women, exploiting the twinned facts that there are very

few Afghan female security guards who would be allowed to check them and that few Afghan women are involved in these attacks.⁶⁸ Other analysts have observed that, unlike other jihadi groups in Afghanistan, the Taliban have no women in their martyrdom mythologies. This is somewhat peculiar given that “women have always played a significant role in Afghanistan as poets espousing the heroics of their men in combat and as defenders of a family honour.”⁶⁹ There is even a tradition of female combatants in the history and folklore of Pashtuns, the ethnic group from which the Taliban primarily draw. These facts make the complete absence of women in Taliban martyrdom and other mythology all the more striking. Not only do the Taliban appear to have no interest in generating support among women in Afghanistan, they also generate hostility when they come to Pakistan. Ladbury reports that women resent the extra work they must do with respect to cooking, cleaning, and laundry—among other tasks—when Taliban come to Pakistan for sanctuary.⁷⁰

In light of the very different relationship that these two organizations have with women and the different reputations that they have with respect to women, it is reasonable to expect gender differences in support for these two organizations. This gives rise to our hypothesis that gender should have different impacts when we model support for SSP and the Afghan Taliban respectively.

The differences in how these two organizations reach out to women give rise to the two hypotheses that we wish to evaluate here:

H1 = All else equal, women should be more supportive of the SSP.

H2 = All else equal, women should be no more supportive of the Taliban.

Data and analytical methods

To assess whether gender is salient for predicting support for the SSP or Afghan Taliban, we employ a dataset collected in 2011 and 2012.⁷¹ This survey effort featured the first large-scale, nationally-representative survey with extended interviews on the topics of support for militancy and knowledge of Islam in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), as well as within the four normal provinces of Pakistan (Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The FATA is afflicted by multiple active militant groups, providing an especially relevant region to study individuals’ views of violent political groups. In conjunction with SEDCO, a major survey firm in Pakistan, the research team administered a face-to-face survey with a sample of 16,279 individuals. Pakistanis from the four main provinces accounted for 13,282 of the interviews, while 2,997 interviews were conducted in six of the seven agencies in the FATA (Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, Orakzai, and South Waziristan). Fieldwork in the four main provinces was done in January and February 2012, and in the FATA in April 2012.

The data drawn from Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa include district-representative samples of between 155 and 675 households in 61 districts. SEDCO sampled the two largest districts within each province and then proceeded to select a random sample of additional districts. In the FATA, the data consists of agency-representative samples of 270–675 people in each of the six agencies where the survey could be

administered. The total response rate for the survey was 71%. Of the households that were not interviewed, 14.5% refused to take the survey, and 14.5% had no one home when contacted. Here we employ data for Muslim respondents only, yielding a final sample size of 14,508.

One of the two militant groups for which this survey enumerates support is Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), which is also known as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and, more recently, as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ). SSP is rooted in Pakistan's Deobandi interpretive tradition. While it is most known for its attacks against Ahmedis and Shias, it has also launched a sanguinary war against Pakistan's Barelvis and has long attacked Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslims in the country. It is tightly allied with other Deobandi militant groups operating against India as well as the Afghan Taliban and even al Qaeda.⁷² The second group for which we estimate support is the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban also draws from Pakistan's Deobandi tradition. Formed in the early 1990s, the Afghan Taliban uses its base in Pakistan to engage in insurgency against the Afghan government and international backers.⁷³ Both the SSP and the Afghan Taliban have ties to the Pakistani Taliban through overlapping networks and a shared infrastructure of Deobandi institutions and religious scholars.⁷⁴

We therefore derive two dependent variables which measure respondent support for both of these organizations taken from answers to two survey items. One asked respondents "How much do you support Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP) and their actions?" while the other queried "How much do you support the Afghan Taliban and their actions?" Respondents answered both questions on a five-point scale ("not at all," "a little," "a moderate amount," "a lot," or a "great deal"), with higher numeric values indicating higher support for these groups.

Our principal study variable is gender.⁷⁵ In addition, we included several control variables building upon the relevant scholarly literature discussed above.⁷⁶ These control variables included the respondent's *maslak*, ethnicity, marital status, level of education, age group, and income. We also included an additive knowledge index that measured the respondents' basic knowledge of Islam per Fair, Goldstein, and Hamza using five questions for which there are no ambiguous responses. This index was scaled from zero to one with higher values indicating greater knowledge.⁷⁷ We provide descriptive statistics for the dependent, independent, and control variables in Table 1.⁷⁸

To conduct the analysis, we ran ordinary least squares regression using the above-mentioned dependent, independent, and control variables using the entire sample of Muslim respondents. To run the regression, we converted categorical variables (e.g., ethnicity, *maslak*, etc.) into dummy variables. We denote the reference group for each categorical variable by "*" in Table 1. We clustered standard errors at the Primary Sampling Unit (PSU) as the survey sample was drawn at the PSU level. To capture district level characteristics, we ran regressions for both militant groups with district fixed effects. We provide regression results in Tables 2 and 3.

As a robustness check, we also estimated the same models as noted above using only those respondents who self-identified as Sunni Muslims. In this model we dropped the *maslak* control. This is a reasonable model to estimate given the SSP's mission to murder

Table 1. Summary statistics of dependent and independent variables (All Muslims).

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Dependent variable			
How much do you support Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP) and their actions?	Not at all	5,621	38.74%
	A little	2,105	14.51%
	A moderate amount	2,338	16.12%
	A lot	1,146	7.9%
	A great deal	1,062	7.32%
	No answer	2,236	15.41%
Total		14,508	100%
(q1012)How much do you support Afghan Taliban and their actions?	Not at all	7,129	49.1%
	A little	1,840	12.7%
	A moderate amount	2,024	14%
	A lot	934	6.4%
	A great deal	897	6.2%
	No answer	1,684	11.6%
Total		14,508	100%
Independent variables			
Gender	Female*	5,994	41.32%
	Male	8,514	58.68%
Total		14,508	100%
Control variables			
knowledge Index (0.00–1.00)	0.00	312	2.15%
	0.04	55	0.38%
	0.08	220	1.52%
	0.12	298	2.05%
	0.16	152	1.05%
	0.2	737	5.08%
	0.24	98	0.68%
	0.28	296	2.04%
	0.32	717	4.94%
	0.36	525	3.62%
	0.4	1,342	9.26%
	0.44	93	0.64%
	0.48	211	1.45%
	0.52	588	4.05%
	0.56	580	4%
	0.6	2,089	14.4%
	0.64	66	0.45%
	0.68	134	0.92%
	0.72	470	3.24%
	0.76	500	3.45%
0.8	3,404	23.46%	
0.84	17	0.12%	
0.88	31	0.21%	
0.92	80	0.55%	
0.96	154	1.06%	
1.00	1,338	9.22%	
Total		14,508	100%
Maslak: Type of Madrassah	Shia*	601	4.14%
	Sunni	7,394	50.96%
	Deobandi	5,928	40.86%
	Ahl-hadith	585	4.03%
Total		14,508	100%
Ethnicity	Other*	662	4.56%
	Punjabi	4,767	32.86%
	Muhajjiir	1,024	7.06%
	Pashtun	5,051	34.82%
	Sindhi	1,401	9.66%
	Baloch	1,519	10.47%
	No response/don't know	84	0.58%
Total		14,508	100%

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Marital Status	Married	11,301	77.89%
	Divorced	30	0.21%
	Widowed	337	2.32%
	Single/never married*	2,806	19.34%
	Don't know/no answer	34	0.23%
Total		14,508	100%
Level of Education	Less than Primary*	5,612	38.68%
	Primary	1,734	11.95%
	Middle	1,935	13.34%
	Matriculate	2,607	17.97%
	Higher Education	2,493	17.18%
	Don't know/no response	127	0.88%
Total		14,508	100%
Age Group	18–29*	5,199	35.84%
	30–49	7,212	49.71%
	50+	2,076	14.31%
	Don't know/no response	21	0.14%
Total		14,508	100%
Income Quartiles	First quartile*	5,185	35.74%
	Second quartile	3,940	27.16%
	Third quartile	1,804	12.43%
	Fourth quartile	2,766	19.07%
	Don't know/no response	813	5.6%
Total		14,508	100%

Note: * denotes regression reference group

Shia and the episodic anti-Shia attacks perpetrated by the Taliban. These results are available in [Tables 4](#) and [5](#).

Regression results

As the regression results in [Table 2](#) through [5](#) demonstrate, we find significant gender effects, although gender operates differently for the two militant groups. Males are consistently less likely than females to support the SSP as predicted by H1 and these findings are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. These results obtain whether we include all Muslims ([Table 2](#)) or only Sunni Muslims ([Table 4](#)). While these results are statistically robust, the magnitude of the gender coefficients is somewhat smaller than that observed for some of the other control variables. The most important variables in terms of magnitude are variables for maslak. However, the gender variable is on the same order of magnitude as the ethnicity variable and notably larger than the estimates for the statistically significant knowledge, age, and income variables. As the results in [Table 4](#) demonstrate, this result also persists when we estimate the model only for Sunni respondents. (Presumably few Shia Muslims would support an organization that is principally dedicated to murdering them.)

In contrast, we find no gender statistical difference in support for the Afghan Taliban as predicted in H2. This is true in almost all models, with one exception. When we only include Sunni respondents, males are more supportive of the Taliban (at the 0.05 level) when

Table 2. Regression results: How much do you support Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP) and its actions?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
male	-0.339*** (0.060)	-0.325*** (0.058)	-0.410*** (0.058)	-0.386*** (0.057)	-0.404*** (0.061)	-0.446*** (0.061)
Sunni		0.746*** (0.058)		0.770*** (0.080)		0.764*** (0.081)
Deobandi		1.080*** (0.069)		0.938*** (0.085)		0.943*** (0.086)
Ahl-hadis		0.758*** (0.122)		0.838*** (0.129)		0.815*** (0.134)
Punjabi			-0.316** (0.124)	-0.248** (0.120)		-0.275** (0.118)
Muhajir			-0.685*** (0.134)	-0.629*** (0.131)		-0.591*** (0.135)
Pashtun			0.037 (0.130)	0.035 (0.126)		-0.040 (0.123)
Sindhi			-0.844*** (0.132)	-0.702*** (0.128)		-0.722*** (0.126)
Baloch			-0.438*** (0.150)	-0.466*** (0.145)		-0.506*** (0.145)
Primary (Education)					-0.024 (0.048)	0.004 (0.047)
Middle (Education)					0.082 (0.050)	0.060 (0.048)
Matriculate (Education)					0.080 (0.050)	0.057 (0.049)
Higher Education ^a					-0.070 (0.054)	-0.006 (0.052)
30–49 (Age Group)					-0.014 (0.033)	-0.023 (0.037)
50 + (Age Group)					-0.140*** (0.047)	-0.133*** (0.051)
Income—Second quartile					0.142*** (0.038)	0.091** (0.036)
Income Third quartile					0.151*** (0.053)	0.101** (0.051)
Income Fourth quartile					0.249*** (0.054)	0.195*** (0.051)
Urban						-0.081 (0.066)
Married						0.027 (0.045)
Divorced						0.002 (0.350)
Widowed						0.042 (0.109)
Constant	2.388*** (0.047)	1.523*** (0.070)	2.700*** (0.122)	1.840*** (0.141)	2.336*** (0.061)	1.862*** (0.152)
N	12,272	12,272	12,199	12,199	11,686	11,601
R-squared	.0154	.0493	.0639	.083	.0254	.0882

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$ ^a

including only the study variable without any of the control variables. This effect goes away when we include the other control and independent variables. Thus, we find, all else equal, no significant gender differences in support for the Taliban. We attribute this result to the fact that the Taliban has made no explicit overtures to cultivate women as supporters or activists. It is somewhat surprising that we did not find women to be more hostile to the Afghan Taliban given its reputed anti-women activities and the excessive domestic burdens they place on women the Afghan Taliban reside with in Pakistani homes.

Table 3. Regression results: How much do you support the Afghan Taliban and its actions? (All Muslims).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
male	0.027 (0.057)	0.035 (0.056)	-0.056 (0.055)	-0.038 (0.054)	-0.001 (0.061)	-0.079 (0.059)
Sunni		0.624*** (0.063)		0.659*** (0.087)		0.663*** (0.091)
Deobandi		0.934*** (0.070)		0.756*** (0.092)		0.766*** (0.096)
Ahl-hadis		0.625*** (0.122)		0.732*** (0.134)		0.740*** (0.139)
Punjabi			-0.094 (0.106)	-0.054 (0.104)		-0.062 (0.104)
Muhajjir			-0.250** (0.120)	-0.218* (0.120)		-0.114 (0.125)
Pashtun			0.341*** (0.112)	0.346*** (0.110)		0.282** (0.110)
Sindhi			-0.577*** (0.108)	-0.477*** (0.106)		-0.508*** (0.107)
Baloch			-0.016 (0.126)	-0.035 (0.123)		-0.077 (0.126)
Primary (Education)					-0.054 (0.048)	-0.008 (0.046)
Middle (Education)					-0.046 (0.051)	-0.038 (0.049)
Matriculate (Education)					-0.118** (0.048)	-0.102** (0.048)
Higher Education*					-0.166*** (0.052)	-0.073 (0.051)
30–49 (Age Group)					-0.037 (0.033)	-0.070* (0.037)
50 + (Age Group)					-0.152*** (0.045)	-0.171*** (0.050)
Income—Second quartile					0.170*** (0.038)	0.130*** (0.036)
Income Third quartile					0.153*** (0.051)	0.128** (0.050)
Income Fourth quartile					0.210*** (0.053)	0.164*** (0.050)
Urban						-0.150** (0.063)
Married						0.072 (0.044)
Divorced						0.048 (0.288)
Widowed						0.228** (0.116)
Constant	1.941*** (0.042)	1.206*** (0.070)	1.972*** (0.101)	1.263*** (0.130)	1.957*** (0.055)	1.313*** (0.140)
	12,824 .0001	12,824 .0287	12,745 .0495	12,745 .0627	12,150 .0063	12,057 .0675

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

We concede that these results most likely constitute a “plausibility probe,” rather than a robust set of conclusions about the complex interactions of gender and public support for militant groups. However, we do believe that these results bolster our case that gender should be moved from the category of “control variable” to “study variable” with attendant efforts to specifically identify the ways in which militant groups differentially seek to recruit women; they view women as passive supporters who encourage male kinfolk to

Table 4. Support for SSP (Sunni Muslims only).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
male	-0.272*** (0.068)	-0.404*** (0.066)	-0.404*** (0.066)	-0.349*** (0.070)	-0.483*** (0.072)
Punjabi		0.090 (0.141)	0.090 (0.141)		0.056 (0.146)
Muhajir		-0.360** (0.149)	-0.360** (0.149)		-0.313* (0.160)
Pashtun		0.587*** (0.167)	0.587*** (0.167)		0.494*** (0.174)
Sindhi		-0.354** (0.149)	-0.354** (0.149)		-0.360** (0.154)
Baloch		-0.322* (0.169)	-0.322* (0.169)		-0.343* (0.175)
Primary (Education)				0.057 (0.056)	0.068 (0.057)
Middle (Education)				0.148** (0.061)	0.145** (0.061)
Matriculate (Education)				0.147** (0.064)	0.152** (0.062)
Higher Education ^a				0.011 (0.068)	0.039 (0.065)
30–49 (Age Group)				-0.004 (0.044)	0.046 (0.048)
50 + (Age Group)				0.037 (0.062)	0.080 (0.065)
Income—Second quartile				0.163*** (0.047)	0.107** (0.047)
Income Third quartile				0.239*** (0.064)	0.127** (0.064)
Income Fourth quartile				0.278*** (0.068)	0.143** (0.064)
Urban					-0.121 (0.074)
Married					-0.067 (0.057)
Divorced					-0.230 (0.298)
Widowed					-0.036 (0.136)
Constant	2.238*** (0.051)	2.284*** (0.139)	2.284*** (0.139)	2.098*** (0.071)	2.294*** (0.162)
N	6070	6031	6031	5781	5734
R-squared	.0109	.0683	.0683	.0229	.0728

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

join the organizations, employ women for support and logistical roles, or even recruit them for militant operations. These and other data provide further evidence that efforts to counter violent extremism that do not include women are literally missing half of the market for these efforts.

Implications and conclusions

Our findings that gender is an important predictor of support for some types of Islamist violence but not others is perhaps new in some sense: previously, scholars have included gender in their models merely as a control variable—if at all—and gender rarely merited exposition in the text of the papers. Oddly, there has been no previous such empirical

Table 5. Support for Taliban (Sunni Muslims only).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
male	0.146** (0.068)	-0.053 (0.064)	-0.053 (0.064)	0.087 (0.072)	-0.108 (0.071)
Punjabi		0.165 (0.106)	0.165 (0.106)		0.125 (0.114)
Muhajir		-0.057 (0.115)	-0.057 (0.115)		0.000 (0.129)
Pashtun		1.042*** (0.136)	1.042*** (0.136)		0.962*** (0.145)
Sindhi		-0.251** (0.108)	-0.251** (0.108)		-0.301*** (0.116)
Baloch		0.091 (0.140)	0.091 (0.140)		0.033 (0.152)
Primary (Education)				-0.072 (0.057)	-0.025 (0.055)
Middle (Education)				-0.064 (0.062)	-0.027 (0.062)
Matriculate (Education)				-0.058 (0.061)	-0.009 (0.058)
Higher Education ^a				-0.117* (0.063)	-0.069 (0.059)
30–49 (Age Group)				-0.030 (0.043)	0.008 (0.045)
50 + (Age Group)				-0.016 (0.056)	-0.005 (0.060)
Income—Second quartile				0.222*** (0.047)	0.161*** (0.046)
Income Third quartile				0.193*** (0.061)	0.078 (0.061)
Income Fourth quartile				0.275*** (0.066)	0.097* (0.058)
Urban					-0.126* (0.073)
Married					-0.021 (0.053)
Divorced					-0.187 (0.216)
Widowed					0.195 (0.131)
Constant	1.765*** (0.049)	1.648*** (0.105)	1.648*** (0.105)	1.734*** (0.065)	1.733*** (0.127)
N	6302	6259	6259	5984	5932
R-squared	.00341	.105	.105	.0106	.107

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

initiative to understand gender as a study variable as well as the mechanisms by which gender would exert this influence. As we have discussed previously, militant groups in South Asia have long adopted different strategies towards women which should naturally be reflected in the support that women and men espouse for these groups. Given that some militant groups exert specific efforts to recruit women in various capacities, it would be foolish for scholars and practitioners to disregard these groups' gender-specific initiatives when developing empirical studies or programming aimed to counter violent extremism.

Perhaps the most surprising finding in this study is that gender is not statistically significant in predicting support for the Afghan Taliban. After all, Pakistani women know more than the global public about the Taliban's horrific treatment of women. The Taliban, like Pakistani

Pashtuns, are associated with the cumbersome “shuttle cock” burqa and significant constraints placed upon women’s movement. Moreover, given the association of the Afghan Taliban with the Pashtun ethnic group and the prevalent derogatory stereotypes that many Pakistanis embrace about Pashtuns and how they treat “their women,” this null finding is somewhat curious. However, this null finding is also robust across various specifications.

While the SSP has prioritized women unlike the Taliban, this alone is inadequate to explain why women would be more likely to support the SSP *ceteris paribus*. Unlike the LeT or even the Taliban, the SSP does not provide social services. In fact, the only “public good” SSP provides is a “public bad”: murdering Pakistanis because of their faith. Given that the SSP is an enormous contributor to insecurity in Pakistan both due to terrorist acts SSP commits but also because SSP contributes commanders and foot soldiers to the Pakistani Taliban as well as the Islamic State, understanding the sources of female support is incredibly important and merits much more research than currently exists.

The modest evidence that we proffer here strengthens our convictions that gender should be viewed as a study variable rather than a control. The extant—albeit scant—scholarship on both SSP and the Afghan Taliban provide some clues about the ways in which the organizations may appeal differentially to men and women. Suggested avenues for further research should focus upon this gender difference in support for the SSP. It may be useful for scholars to dedicate more efforts to collecting and analyzing SSP literature in an effort to identify potential clues that may help resolve this empirical riddle.

This paper is just the beginning of an important conversation about why some females support violent organizations that use murderous violence and do not treat women as equals. Moreover, given the failures of efforts to counter violent extremism which have historically focused upon the perspectives and motivations of males of military age, perhaps by expanding both scholarly and policy analytic work to focus explicitly upon the preferences and convictions of women, policy makers can construct more effective interventions to curb individual support for or even participation in violent extremist groups.

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Notes on contributors

C. Christine Fair is a Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor in the Security Studies Program within Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service in Washington DC. Her research focuses upon political and military affairs of South Asia.

Ali Hamza is a senior project associate at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy in Washington DC, USA. His research has focused upon an array of empirical issues in and beyond South Asia.

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75. We assessed whether there were gender differences in answering either of our dependent variables through two means and found that there are significant differences between men and women in non-response rates. To assess this we created two dummy variables named *Nr_at* and *Nr_ssp*, which received a value of "1" if a respondent did not answer the question about support for the Afghan Taliban or SSP respectively. First we conducted cross tabs and observed that women were more likely than men to not answer either question. Second, we regressed the no response dummy variables against gender. In both cases, men were significantly less likely to not respond to the question from which we created our dependent variables. See the table below for regression results:

	No Response	
	SSP b/se	Afghan Taliban b/se
male	-0.100*** (0.006)	-0.105*** (0.005)
Constant	0.213*** (0.005)	0.178*** (0.004)
N	14,508	14,508
R-squared	.0188	.0262

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

No Response Dummy Variable is 1 when respondent didn't answer, 0 otherwise.

76. C. Christine Fair, Jacob S. Goldstein, and Ali Hamza, "Research Note: Can Knowledge of Islam Explain Lack of Support for Terrorism? Evidence from Pakistan," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 4 (2017) and Shafiq and Sinno, "Education, Income and Support for Suicide Bombings" (see note 9).
77. The first survey item used to create this index asked respondents to "Name as many of the five pillars of Islam as you can," with score ranging from zero to 1, if the respondent could name all five. The second item we used asked respondents whether or not the way in which Muslims should pray namaz (salat or salah) is described in the Qu'ran. If they answered no (the correct answer), they received one point. Third, we used a question which asks respondents "What is the percentage amount required to be given as Zakat?" They received one point if they answered 2.5% percent, which is the correct answer. Fourth, we used a question that asked "How many months do you have to hold wealth for Zakat to be due on it?" If they answered "12 months," the correct answer, they received one point. The fifth and final question we used asked respondents "What is the first revealed verse in the Qu'ran?" If they indicated "al-Alaq," the correct answer, they received one point. If the respondent provided an incorrect answer or refused to answer a particular item, they received zero points on the item in question. To calculate the final index score for respondents, we summed the respondents' total score and divided it by five to produce an individual knowledge index that ranges from 0 to 1, with higher index value indicating greater knowledge of Islam.
78. It should be noted that respondents were indirectly asked about their maslak due to respondent social desirability bias. Following open-ended question was used to determine the maslak: If a child in your house were to study hifz-e-Quran or nazira, what kind of madrassah or school would you like them to attend?" (responses were "Sunni," "Shia," "Deobandi," "Ahl-e-Hadith," "Non-Muslim," and "don't know").