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## **From Preaching Faith to Spreading the Virus: A Study of The Tablighi Jama'at in Pakistan**

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**Abstract.** With the outbreak of coronavirus disease or coronavirus pandemic, now popularly known as COVID-19, a new worldwide discussion started that religion and religious gatherings can play an active role in accelerating the spread of coronavirus in the world. If, on one hand, religious gatherings were banned or at least limited in some Muslim countries while on the other hand, such faith-based gatherings have proven to be the hotbeds for outbreaks. The purpose of this study is to investigate the connection between the *Tablighi Jama'at* (TJ) and the coronavirus in Pakistan. It is believed that the participants carried the virus into different parts of Pakistan. This study finds that the number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan increased after the annual congregation of *Tablighi Jamaat* in March. Shia pilgrims from Iran also brought the virus from Iran to Pakistan. The paper finds that this pandemic may once again raise the issue of sectarianism in the county. The present research finds that Islamists have always been supported by the state. Now, it has become very difficult for state policy-makers to resist them in the present fight against the coronavirus.

**Keywords.** Pakistan, Coronavirus, *Tablighi Jama'at*, Annual Ijtima, Political Islam, Shia Pilgrims

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 virus originated from the Wuhan city of China. This fatal disease soon spread not only across China but other countries of the world were also severely affected. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus as a 'Global Public Health Emergency'. The same organization declared it as the 'Global Pandemic' on 11 March 2020 (CNN, 2020).

With the outbreak of COVID-19, some observers and experts started believing that religion and religious gatherings can be a source for spreading the virus in some countries of the world. John Blevins, who is the director of the Interfaith Health Program at Emory University (U.S.A) expressed his opinion and said, "Religious gatherings have been key drivers of the spread of the disease... It has spread and will continue to spread the disease through continued religious gatherings that ignore public health advice" (Blevins, 2020). For example, it is believed that a Church in South Korea, known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus has spread the coronavirus in South Korea. Mr. Lee, head of the Church, said that the epidemic resulted from "the evil who got jealous of Shincheonji's rapid growth" (Rashid, 2020). Likewise, the *Tablighi Jama'at* (TJ) had also denied that it had played no role in spreading the virus in

Pakistan. The *Jama'at* termed it as a 'propaganda' of the 'enemies' of Islam who are jealous of the growth of TJ in Pakistan (Nagyana, 2020). This study suggests that a similarity can be found between the TJ Raiwind center and the Church in South Korea as both termed it as a conspiracy against their respective religious gatherings and centers.

The *Tablighi Jama'at* annual congregation in Malaysia was also blamed for the spread of the coronavirus in South East Asia. This annual gathering (Ijtima) was attended by more than 16000 people from different parts of Malaysia (Zia ur-Rehman, 2020). The Indian *Tablighi Ijtima* was held during 13-15<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and it raised the same issue. Some observers termed the congregation as the 'real' hotspot of the coronavirus (BBC, 2020). Powerful Hindu extremist organizations in the country named it 'Muslim virus' (Rana, 2020). Whether it is Malaysia, India or Pakistan, the TJ annual gathering amid the days of deadly coronavirus raised the same question of accelerating the spread of coronavirus in the above-mentioned countries.

The sudden and deadly spread of the virus alarmed state managers in the Muslim countries. As a result, *fatwas* (verdicts) were issued in Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Congregational prayers and public gatherings were banned in these Muslim countries in order to contain the spread of the dangerous disease. Even the sacred places in the two cities of Saudi Arabia were also closed down but the Pakistani clerics openly violated the state instructions by telling the people that everything is in the hand of Allah (Sattar, 2020). This study aims to critically analyze a brief history of *Tablighi Jamaat* in Pakistan with a focus on its role in the spread of coronavirus in the country.

The significance of this study includes

- A. Findings of this study may help state policy-makers and other readers to know about the overall understanding of the common people in general and Islamists in particular during the pandemic time.
- B. This study's findings may help interested people to know that the Pakistani state, establishment and political leaders have always been in good relations with these Islamists and do use them for their own political and other interests.
- C. This unique study has also found that the COVID-19 should not be linked to any particular religious sect in the country.

## 2. Literature Review

The *Tablighi Jama'at* is known as a non-political and non-violent world-wide Sunni missionary movement in the World. This preaching or missionary movement has its origin in the British-India in the 1920s. The religious and political conditions in the British Raj had given birth to several socio-religious movements in the Muslim as well as Hindu community of India. The society for spreading the faith or the *Tablighi Jama'at* was established by Maulana Ilyas Kandhalwi (1885-1944) in the year 1926 and according to some other sources in 1927. It is also said that the movement came as a reaction to the anti-Muslims activities of Shuddhi and Christian missionary's campaigns. Originated in India, the TJ is rightly called as one of the most famous religious movements in the twentieth century Islam (The Print, 2020).

In Pakistan, as it was expected, conspiracy theories spread more rapidly than the coronavirus. Social media was the best platform on which such things were being discussed and openly shared without any inquiry or research. Some people in Pakistan termed it as 'American secret game' against the spread of Islam. Some labeled it a war between *Kufr* (infidelity) and Islam. Owais Tohid, a political analyst told DW news, "The spread of the virus is fuelled by politics and religion. From the theory that the disease is more harmful in the West than the East, and that it kills white people more than the coloured and African American

people, and that people in Pakistan have immunity, the list goes on and on. People in Pakistan believe in conspiracy theories, thrive on them and remain in denial till the reality hits them right in their face.” The latest figures show that United states of America and several other European countries are the most effected states from the COVID-19. Can it still be termed an ‘American game’ against the Muslims? (Salim, 2020). Some people in Pakistan believed that people belong to other religious sects are being affected by the virus while some others termed it as a ‘conspiracy’ of Israeli government against the Muslims (Khan w. u., 2020).

The Pakistani state allowed the *Tablighi* gathering despite the fact that research had already made it clear that public gathering can easily spread the virus from one person to another. Some observers are of the opinion that the state did not want to force the organizers of the *Tablighi Jama’at* to cancel its annual congregation because it could endanger law and order situation in the country. The *Jama’at* and state establishment had been enjoying very cordial relations since the 1990s, when former ISI Chief, Gen. Javed Nasir became an active *Tablighi*. Many serving and retired military generals are active *Jama’at* members and they attend such annual *Ijtima* each year. So, it becomes difficult for the state managers to challenge the *Jama’at* (Ahmad, 2020). According to Ayesha Siddiqa, “I think it’s partly appeasement and partly the fact that Pakistan’s governments and politics are locked permanently in an electoral framework in which they don’t want to lose the support of the religious elite and religious proletariat” (Siddiqa, 2020). This study is going to explain a brief history of the Da’wa movement and also aims to investigate the role of *Tablighi Jamaat* during the present pandemic in Pakistan.

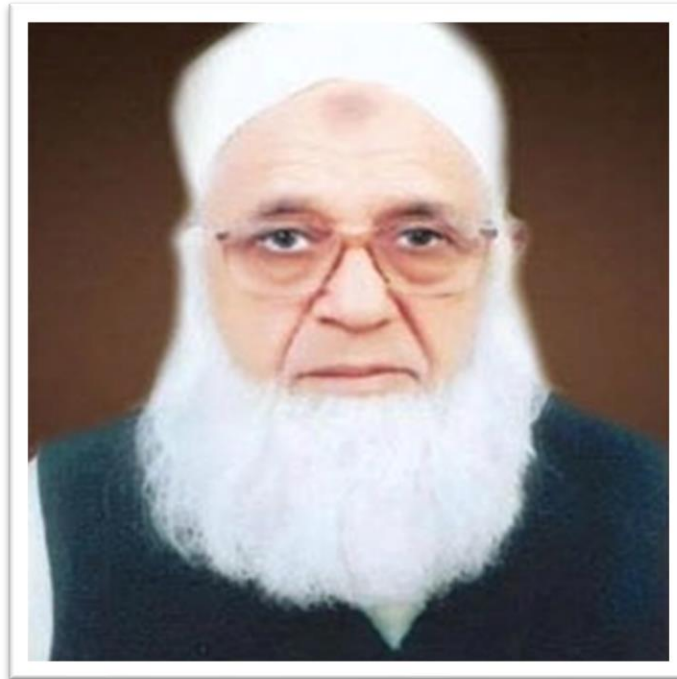
### **3. Methods and Materials**

This research study is a descriptive work and different materials and sources have been collected from various secondary sources, including books, articles, newspapers, reports and statements of experts, etc. Primary sources are collected from official websites of the state institutions. After narrating a brief history of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in Pakistan, the paper’s main focus lies on the *Jamaat* role in the fight against the present disease in the country.

### **4. Discussion and Findings**

#### **4.1 Tablighi Jama’at: Origin and Work in Pakistan**

Pakistan came into being in August 1947. Abdul Wahab (1923-2018) and his other *Tablighi* friends had come to Pakistan and soon they started searching for a specific area to be made the center (*Markaz*) of the missionary movement in Pakistan. All of them were Muslim refugees who had come to Pakistan. Ghulam Muhammad (d. 1956), the third Governor General of Pakistan (1951-1955), allotted the present land to the TJ. Thus, Raiwind became the *Jamaat*’s headquarters (Jameel, 2018). It is yet to be researched in order to find out whether this huge piece of land was given free of cost or not. Maulana Haji Shafi Qureshi (1903-1971) became the first head of the *Tablighi Jama’at* of Pakistan. Haji Babu Bashir Ahmad (1919-1992) became its second head after the death of Shafi Qureshi. Haji Abdul Wahab became the third Amir of the *Tablighi Jama’at* in the year 1992 after the death of its second head (The News, 2018).



**Figure 1:** Haji Abdul Wahab (d, 2018), played a leading role in making the TJ popular in Pakistan. Source. (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1446357>)

The *Tablighi Jama'at* became very popular in Pakistan during the military rule of General Zia-Ul-Haq (1977-1988). It was in the March of 1976 when Gen. Zia assumed the command of Pakistan's army. It was also during this period when the new commander changed the army's motto into '*Iman*' (faith), '*Taqwa*' (piety) and '*Jihad-fi-sibilillah*' (a holy war in the name of Islam). The army chief had dismissed the legal government of Z.A. Bhutto (d, 1979). The new ruler of Pakistan wanted to use and encourage all the religious groups in the country and in the state military in order to legitimize his illegal and un-constitutional act. The TJ was 'apolitical' movement focusing on the lives of Muslims. Indeed, *Tablighi Jama'at* was making Muslims 'good Muslims'. General Zia did not see TJ as a threat for himself, rather it was considered as a source of strength for him in the military as well as in the country's political environment. Zia was the first head of the state who participated in the annual gathering of the TJ. He also allowed other military officers to become preachers of Islam. Encouraged and supported by Zia, soldiers and officers in the Pakistani military became active *Tablighis* (Rizvi, 2003).

#### 4.2. What is an Ijtima?

*Ijtima* is a three days annual congregation of the *Tablighi Jama'at*. The TJ *Ijtima* has become one of the biggest Muslims gatherings in the world after the pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. Though, hajj is a compulsory religious activity for those Muslims who have financial resources. It is a volunteer gathering where Muslims are free to participate or otherwise. This annual gathering has become a good platform for the Muslims to become 'good Muslims' (Siddiqi, 2010).

#### 4.3. Tablighi Ijtima in Pakistan: A Hotspot of Virus or Faith Purification?

*Tablighi Ijtima* has always been the most important annual gathering of the *da'wa* movement since its inception in the 1920s in British-India. The First *Tablighi Ijtima* in Pakistan was held in the year 1953 at Sukkur, Sindh. The *Ijtima* was attended by many adherents from both parts of Pakistan. The elders of TJ decided to set up different headquarters for the *Jama'at* in the newly-born country. As a result, three *Tablighi* headquarters were established in East Pakistan. East Pakistan's headquarters were established in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna. West Pakistan headquarters were set up in Rawalpindi, Karachi, Multan, Hyderabad, Lahore, Quetta and Peshawar (Björkman, 2010).

But the March *Ijtima* of 2020 was the annual gathering of those old Tablighis who have already spent four months or one year in the *Tablighi Jama'at*. In the context of TJ this type of annual congregation is called '*salana Jor* (annual meeting or gathering) (Sahu, 2020). This annual congregation was very important in a sense that it began at a time when the whole world was fighting against the fatal disease of coronavirus. According to some sources more than two million Muslims from across the country and abroad participated in the annual *Ijtima* and according to other sources more than 100,000 people attended the annual congregation of the *Tablighi Jama'at*. A good number of foreigners also participated in this congregation (Gandhara, 2020). State authorities in the provincial government of Punjab requested the organizers of the *Jama'at* to postpone this *Ijtima* owing to the possible spread of the deadly disease amongst the participants but their plea for postponing the *Ijtima* was rejected by the organizers (Dawn, 2020).

Syed Ghazanfar, who is serving as Superintendent of Police (SP) in the Police Department said that authorities held talks with the organizers of TJ but failed to convince them to postpone its annual *Ijtima* (Chaudhry, 2020). Fawad Chaudhary who is the science and technology minister in the current government termed it as the 'stubbornness of the clergy' (aljazeera, 2020).

It is also important to note that World Health Organization (WHO) in a statement issued on 11<sup>th</sup> march had declared the COVID-19 as the 'global pandemic' and clear instructions were issued to all the countries of the world to take aggressive and urgent steps in order to defeat the deadly virus (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The gathering of such a huge number of people at one particular place proved very dangerous in a poor country like Pakistan. The research conducted on the subject had already made it clear that the disease can easily be spread from person to person. Lisa Maragakis, a senior director of infection prevention at Johns Hopkins requested all the people to keep a distance of at least six feet from others. She said, "Along with those essential steps, practices such as social and physical distancing, and self-quarantine and isolation when appropriate can slow the rate of infection in a city, town or community" (Maragakis, 2020). Thus, it was proved that gatherings of people for religious, social, or any other purpose may accelerate the spread of coronavirus in a community, society or state.



**Figure 2:** People performing *namaz* (prayer) at the Raiwind *Salana Jor* (annual *Ijtima*), 2020. Source. (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1547354>)

Some people in the country do believe that the *Ijtima* ended because of state request but it seems not true because various preaching groups (*Jamaats*) were formed and sent to other parts of the country. The elders of the *Tablighi Jama'at* do request the participants to go out in the way of Allah in every *Ijtima*. As a result, small groups of people are made with a leader called the *Ameer* (chief) of the *Jamaat*. Interested People write their names for forty days, four months, seven months and one year (Mohammadi, n.d). This study suggests that the *Ijtima* was not ended at the authority's request. Had it been so then no preaching group would have been formed and sent across the country. The making of preaching groups in the *Ijtima* shows that *Ijtima* ended because of heavy rain and not at authority's request. It should be remembered that there was a heavy rain during this annual congregation.

A *Tablighi Jamaat* was quarantined in the Hyderabad Noor Masjid. A *Tablighi* told Dawn News that he had attended the Raiwind *Ijtima*. The organizers of *Ijtima* instructed his *Jamaat* members to reach the *Noor masjid*, which is the largest *Tablighi* center (*markaz*) in Sindh. Fida Mastoi, who is serving as Deputy Inspector General (DIG) in Sukkar (Sindh) said, "We are trying to stop them from coming to our area. They can't move amongst the population now." No preaching groups would have been sent had the Raiwind *Ijtima* been ended at the state's request (Khan M. H., 2020). Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar, governor of the Punjab province revealed that the TJ *Ijtima* ended because he requested the elders of the *Da'wa* movement to do so (The Nation, 2020).

The *Tablighi Jama'at* members usually stay in the local mosques and perform different religious activities daily. Some of them visit Muslim families in the neighborhoods and they are invited to the local mosque for prayers. This activity in the context of *Tablighi Jama'at* is called *gasht*. After the evening prayer one of the preachers give a speech. The attendees are requested to say prayers regularly and also to go out in the way of Allah for *Seh-roza* (three

days), *Chilla* (forty days) and *Char Mahinay* (four months) (Gugler, 2010). Thus, this study suggests that the TJ activities in the locality of a mosque may be a reason for the spread of the virus in that particular area because the TJ believe in face-to-face preaching. As a result, a whole area nearby a mosque or a *Mohalla* (a small locality in a village) may be infected just because of one or two preachers-turned virus-infected people.

#### 4.4. Cases Linked to Tablighi Ijtima

According to the Punjab health authorities the terrible disease spread very rapidly in the Punjab province and it was because of the *Tablighi Jama'at* carelessness which continued their preaching activities after they left the Raiwind *Ijtima*. About 10,263 preachers were quarantined by the Punjab provincial government in different parts of the province. About 404 out of 539 cases were confirmed at the Raiwind center of the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the early days of pandemic. (Chaudhry, 2020). It means that Raiwind had become the very center of the COVID-19 keeping in view the number of confirmed cases in the early days.

According to the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, Danish Afzal, “the Raiwind markaz of the missionary movement has been sealed off in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus” (Imran Gabol, 2020). This study suggests that the authorities feared that more cases of the coronavirus would come out and the number of infected people may rise further. Raiwind, Headquarters of the TJ is also the home of about 0.2 million people. The whole area was locked down by the Punjab government. The authorities were perturbed when 101 cases were linked to the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the first week of April. Other preachers were kept in complete isolation in the main markaz (center) of the TJ. The Punjab administration established isolation centers in the province for the infected people. Most of the infected people belonged to the TJ (Dawn, 2020).

Kot Hathial, a union council in Islamabad was quarantined by the local administration after some *Tablighi* members were tested positive. A preaching group of about thirteen members *Tablighi Jama'at* was residing in a local mosque and it was believed that these preachers brought coronavirus to the area. Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Bhara Kahu, Hamza Amanullah reported that six *Tablighi* activists were tested positive and then the whole area was locked down. The local *masjid* was converted into a quarantine center for the infected people (Qarar, 2020). It was later revealed that 62 more cases were confirmed in the capital city. The local people believed that TJ members spread the coronavirus in the capital (Daily Qudrat, 2020).

Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, Chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC) claimed that Israel's government was involved in the ‘propaganda’ against the *Tablighi Jama'at* but on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March the Gaza government confirmed that two Palestinians were tested positive of coronavirus. The health ministry further confirmed that both were active members of the *da'wa* movement and had also participated in the Lahore *Tablighi Ijtima* (Daily Express, 2020). The confirmation of these cases makes it clear that there was no propaganda on the part of Israel against the *Da'wa* movement.

Two preachers lost their lives in the swat valley. Khalid Khan and Fazal Rabi had participated in the Raiwind *Tablighi Ijtima* (Mashriq, 2020). They were the early infected patients who belonged to the local area. In the city of Peshawar, a man was killed at the Hayatabad Medical Complex (HMC) due to the infection of coronavirus. He was also an active preacher who had attended the Raiwind *Tablighi Ijtima* in March (Mashriq, 2020).

According to the Deputy Commissioner of Swabi, Shahid Mehmood, Five *Tablighi Jama'at* members were diagnosed with COVID-19. All of them were foreigners. Four *Tablighi* were from Iran and one belonged to Yemen (The Express Tribune, 2020). Maj (retd) Sardar

Ilyas was an active *Tablighi* member in Abbottabad who lost his life due to the coronavirus (Dawar, 2020).

The *Tablighi Jama'at* very structure is based on the gathering of people from within and around world. The *Tablighi Jama'at* members do not spend their time at one particular village or city, rather they migrate from one *masjid* and village to another one and so on. (Siddiq, 2020).

The *da'wa* movement has always been considered a peaceful and non-violent missionary movement but a *Tablighi* attacked a police officer in the Layyah district of Punjab. Ashraf Maalki who is serving as a Station Head Officer (SHO), was severely wounded with a sharp knife (Imran Gabol, 2020). This incident elucidates the existence of violent notion among some of the *Jamaat* members.

Maulana Suhaib Rumi, who was the head of the *Tablighi Jama'at* in Faisalabad also lost his life due to the coronavirus disease. Suhaib Rumi had participated in the March *Ijtima*. Five other members of his family were also tested positive (The New Indian Express, 2020). If Maulana could transfer the disease into his other family members then it shows other infected *Tablighi* preachers would have also played the same role in spreading the virus across the country. The annual congregation was attended by several thousand adherents who had come from different parts of the country.

As nearly as 72 *Tablighis* escaped from a preaching center in the Khalid bin Waleed mosque which is located in hafizabad. Though, it was not confirmed how many *Tablighis* had caught the virus but their escape from isolation center created fear that they may further spread the virus into some other places. Ziafat Bath who was serving as a Station Head Officer (SHO) in the local police Station was suspended (Waheed, 2020).

On 15<sup>th</sup> April, two members of the *Tablighi Jama'at* were tested positive in the Bahawalpur district of Punjab. Some other *Tablighis* were also put in complete isolation in the *masajids* in Dhoore Kote near Khairpur Daha. The first ever case of the terrible disease in the Ahmadpur East tehsil was also linked to the *Tablighi Jama'at*. Nine cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Sahiwal and Pakpattan districts. Seven cases out of nine were linked to the TJ (Dawn, 2020). Here this study suggests that the TJ preaching groups played a leading role in the spread of coronavirus in the districts of Sahiwal and Pakpattan because most of the cases in the concerned districts were because of preachers.

On April 18, about 429 members of the missionary movement were diagnosed with the deadly coronavirus in the Sind province only. This was confirmed by Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah. All the infected people were kept in isolation camps for treatment (Hindustan Times, 2020).

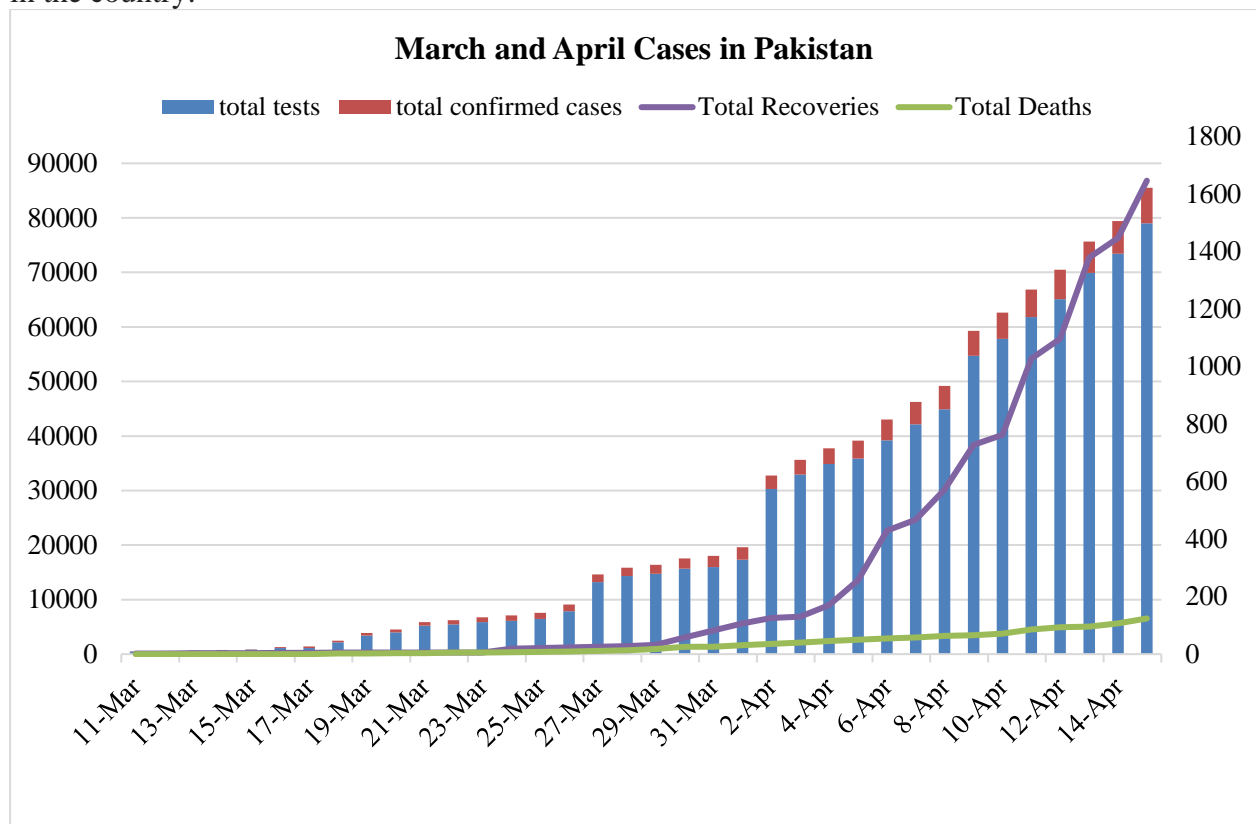
According to a report issued on April 21, about 2,258 *Tablighis* were tested positive of the coronavirus. It was revealed that 27% of total coronavirus in Pakistan were because of the Lahore *Tablighi Ijtima*. The total cases of coronavirus in Pakistan on April 21, were 9,565, Dr. Zafar Mirza, PM aide on health said that the *Shiite* pilgrims and *Tablighi Jama'at* were the two important factors that spread the virus in the country. He said that 78% cases in the country can be linked to both the religious groups (The Express Tribune, 2020).

Sitting Speaker of the national assembly, Mr. Asad Qaiser formed a Committee under the supervision of Shehryar Afridi. The Committee was tasked to solve the issues of the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the country (Irfan, 2020).

It was on 15<sup>th</sup> of April that the State and Frontier ministry (SAFRON) announced that the *Tablighi Jama'at* has suspended all its preaching activities across the country and in the world. Minister Shehryar Afridi told the journalists that the *Tablighi Shura* (a consultative body) members have decided to cooperate with the state in its fight against the deadly virus.

Afridi said, “The state is like a mother and all are equal in its eye and it is facilitating all Pakistani preachers, home or abroad, to return to their homes” (The Nation, 2020). But it was too late now because enough time was wasted by the TJ and the state authorities in realizing the gravity of the situation. The statement mentioned above shows that TJ did not end its preaching activities until 15<sup>th</sup> April and also it did not cooperate with the authorities until mid-April.

Figure No. 3 below shows that the first cases of the COVID-19 in Pakistan were reported in the month of February. It means the virus did not start because of TJ but from the mid-march onwards the situation in Pakistan went from bad to worse. The author has prepared a graph from March 11 to April 15 because the TJ suspended its religious activities on April 15. This data was collected from Government of Pakistan official website dealing with COVID-19 cases in the country.



**Figure 3:** This clearly shows that coronavirus cases in Pakistan jumped from mid-March onwards. (<http://covid.gov.pk/>).

#### 4.5. The Maulana Tariq Jamil’s Contradictory Statements.

Maulana Tariq Jamil, a well-known *Tablighi* activist in Pakistan had also given contradictory statements that encouraged people to violate state instructions in the prevention of COVID-19. For example, in a video statement on March 6, he said “everything is in the Hand of Allah and we have strong belief on the Holy *kalima* (there is no God but Allah and Muhammad Peace Be Upon Him is His last Prophet)”. He said “Allah will save us” (Jamil, 2020). Though, the cleric did not say anything clearly about violation of state instructions but the statement gives an indirect message to the people in this regard. In another video message to the public, the same cleric talked about preventive measures to be taken in order to avoid the

terrible disease. This video message was given on 16<sup>th</sup> March after the end of TJ *Ijtima* at Raiwind. Jamil said, “our Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) took shelter in the cave of *thawr* (the name of a mountain in Saudi Arabia) when he was going to the city of Medina.” This time the same cleric was now requesting his supporters to cooperate with state (Jamel, 2020). The later statement would have been proved very advantageous had it been given earlier before the TJ annual congregation. Maulana Jamil is a known Tablighi activist and could convince the elders of TJ to cancel annual congregation but he did not.

In a fund-raising campaign to combat coronavirus the religious cleric blamed the ‘immodest women’ for the spread of the deadly virus in the country. His remarks about women were criticized in different circles but his supporters and some other religious-minded people supported the cleric. Blaming the women for the outbreak was totally a baseless and poor allegation (Sirmed, 2020). The *Tablighi Jama’at* elders do not like the preaching method of Maulana Tariq Jameel because the TJ does not believe in charismatic leaders. The state military, bureaucracy, showbiz and the elite class always seek his ‘spiritual guidance’. The media in the state has made the cleric a famous celebrity (Rana M. A., 2020). According to Mohammed Hanif, a known writer in Pakistan, “Maulana Tariq Jamel is the strategic asset of the Pakistani state and sometime guide Pakistan on its national security and other related issues” (Hanif, 2020). The Maulana did not say anything about his TJ which held a huge *Ijtima* in march, and according to some experts the Raiwind *Ijtima* could be blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 in the country.

Linking natural disasters with religion is not a new trend in Pakistan. Back in 1967, when a dangerous monsoon rain hit the city of Karachi it was reported in the Dawn newspaper that some *Tablighi* preachers explained the reasons behind that natural calamity as the ‘secular policies’ of Ayub Khan’s government. Later, it was General. Zia, who encouraged preachers to explain the reasons behind such natural disasters. According to Paracha, “The practice of inviting clerics on TV and asking them to explain the cause of a natural calamity was first introduced in the 1980s during the Gen. Zia dictatorship.” Same religious reasons were put forward by some preachers when in October 2005, a fatal earthquake hit the country during the days of Gen. Musharraf regime (1999-2008). Again, the preachers targeted the secular policies of Gen. Musharraf (Paracha, 2020). This Paper suggests that the criticism of these preachers on the ‘secular’ policies of Ayub Khan and General Pervez Musharraf show political inclination of preachers in the country. It also put a question mark on the ‘apolitical’ slogan of the *Tablighi Jama’at* in Pakistan.

A *Tablighi Jamaat*, which was preaching Islam in the Duryal village of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), was contacted by local residents and requested them to stop their preaching activities. They replied by saying, “*Ye sab dollar ka chakkar Hai...drama Hai.* (this is all about the dollar rate...it is staged).” They refused to stop their activities and continued their work in the local area (Ahmed, 2020). Here a similarity can be found between the TJ and the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea. The Church had not cooperated with the state in the initial days of coronavirus in the country. Rather, it termed it a ‘conspiracy’ against the Church. But later, the head of the Church apologized in a press conference (Dawn, 2020). The TJ also did not cooperate with the state to postpone its annual congregation and thus continued its *Ijtima*. Thus, most of the cases in the Punjab province of Pakistan were linked with the TJ *Ijtima*. It was reported in the Dawn newspaper that most cases of COVID-19 happened because of the “carelessness of the TJ” (Indiatimes, 2020). But the only difference is that the Church in South Korea apologized to the Public while the TJ did not and may never.

#### 4.6. A Conspiracy Against the Tablighi Jama'at?

As expected, some religious clerics and particularly those who are associated with the *Jamaat's* ideology, criticized the action of state authorities and declared that a pre-planned program against the TJ was launched by some anti-*Tablighi* elements in the country. They claimed that their members were arrested and beaten up by the policemen and there may be some reality in this claim. Pakistan's Ulama Council Chairman Allama Tahir Ashrafi said in an interview that a pre-planned strategy was launched against the *Tablighi* movement. He explained that the government did not announce lock down at the time when the gathering began. He explained that PSL (Pakistan Super League) cricket matches were also being played in the country (Nagyana, 2020). On March 13, Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) announced that the remaining scheduled matches will be played behind closed doors in the absence of spectators. So, there were enough safety measures taken by the Cricket Board. The international players were given the option to leave Pakistan and as a result, 14 international players left the country (Dawn, 2020). But on the other side, according to one source two million people attended the annual gathering. Other sources claimed that more than 100,000 people from across the country participated in the annual *Ijtima* and there were no safety measures taken by the organization.

Maulana Ashrafi claimed that Israel was involved in the propaganda against the *Tablighi Jama'at* in Pakistan and India. He claimed that it was the objective of Israel to destroy the missionary movement. He said that Israel established contacts with those people in Pakistan, who, according to Maulana, 'are the enemies of Islam in the country' (Ashrafi, 2020). This research study suggests that Pakistani state did not issue any official statement that Israel was involved in the anti-*Tablighi* propaganda in the country. It is interesting to note that neither the Malaysian nor the *Tablighi Jama'at* in that country blamed the Israeli state. The Indian *Tablighi markaz* also did not declare that Israel was involved in the anti-*Tablighi* propaganda in India.

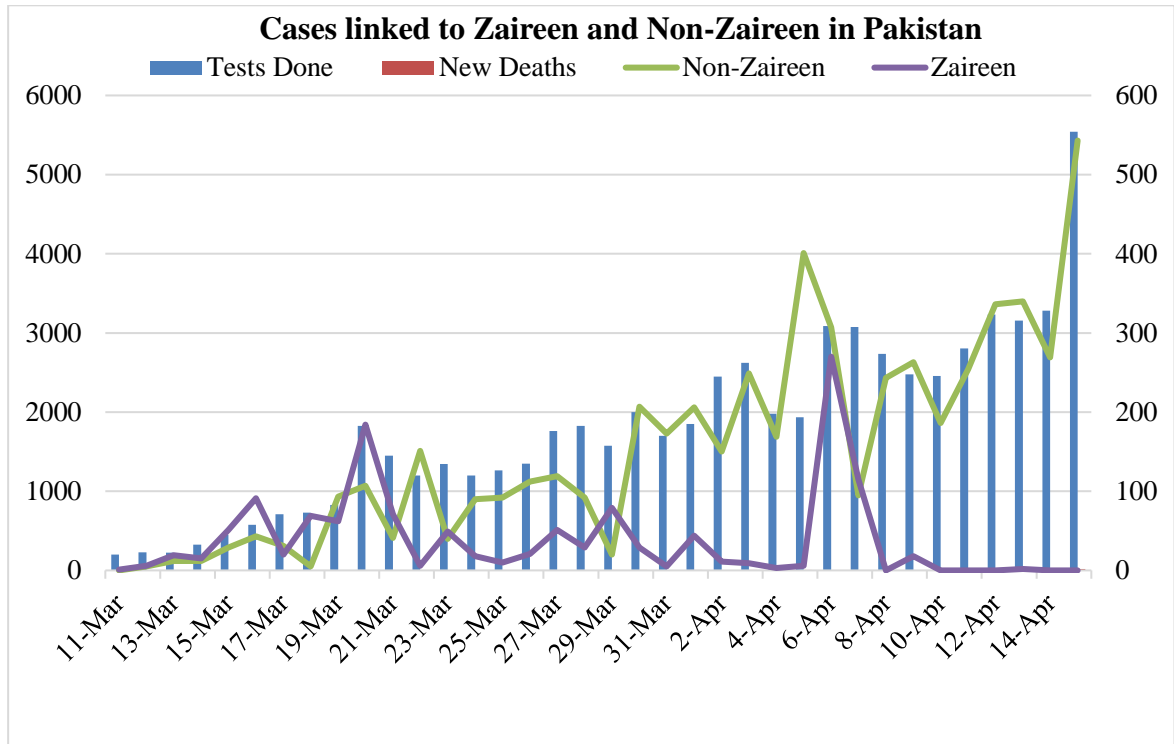
An Ultra-Orthodox group of people, known as 'Haredim' which means God-fearers, caused the same panic in Israel by spreading the virus. Most cases in Israel have been linked to this religious group. (Halbfinger, 2020). If it were Israel's secret program against the Muslims in Pakistan, then they would have never killed their own people. Whenever Muslims in Pakistan have a problem, they often link it to Israel, United States of America, or India.

Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi of Pakistan Muslim League (Q) in an interview with the Capital TV on first April said that a proper propaganda against the TJ has been launched in the country. Interestingly, he did not name Israel. He said, TJ is a peaceful missionary movement and not a cause for the spread of coronavirus in Pakistan (Elahi, 2020). Dr. Mubarak Ali has rightly said that in an Islamic society the ruling class always use the religious card for the achievement of their political power (Ali, 1998). But it should be remembered that Elahi is a politician in the most populated province of Pakistan where TJ supporters have always been in great numbers and even Raiwind, the headquarters of the TJ is also located there. All the politicians in Pakistan support the *Tablighi Jama'at* because its supporters can help them in the general elections.

#### 5. The Shia Pilgrims

To blame the *Tablighi Jama'at* for the rapid spread of the coronavirus in the country is half-truth. The role of the missionary movement cannot be ignored, but it was in the month of February 2020, when *Shiite Zaireen* (pilgrims) entered Pakistan from Iran. It should be remembered that Iran had already been hit by the virus. The initial cases proved that the virus was brought by these pilgrims from Iran. Some people in Pakistan even termed the COVID-19 as the 'Shia-virus' (opindia, 2020).

The infected *Shiite* pilgrims were allowed to cross the border. The Government of Pakistan opened the Taftan border with Iran on 28 February. Some of them escaped from the quarantined centers by raising the slogan that ‘it is an American conspiracy’. Thus, the virus was spread to other parts of the country as these pilgrims belonged to different places of Pakistan (Aamir, 2020).



**Figure 4:** This graph elucidates the cases of Shia Zaireen and non-Zaireen. Source. (<http://covid.gov.pk/>).

The COVID-19 created hatreds against *Shia* community and the TJ in Pakistan. Pakistan has already been hit by sectarian challenges since long. Faith-based and Sectarian hatred in Pakistan amid coronavirus increased. For example, some people in the country labeled it as ‘Shia virus’ while Others blamed the TJ. An already divided society on the basis of religion, sects and ethnic lines needs unification and cooperation to fight the deadly virus. (Mirza, 2020).

## 6. Non-Tablighi Islamists

It is a wrong perception that only Tablighi Islamists are responsible for the spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan. There were non-Tablighi Islamists who also did not cooperate with state authorities in the fight against the virus. **Fig. 4** clearly shows that Shia pilgrims has a role not only in Iran but in Pakistan too. Another important reason due to which the virus spread rapidly in Pakistan was the poor and non-cooperative attitude of the religious circles in the country. The powerful *Mullah* openly declared not to cooperate with the government. They disobeyed the orders of the government. People were informed through loudspeakers to come to the mosque for five-time prayers. According to them offering prayer was the only ‘solution’ of the disease. Others preached that recitation of the Holy *Qur’an* was also the only ‘remedy’ to the Covid-19. The Pakistani state could not take action against the country’s religious circles for it could have created, perhaps more fatal issue than the coronavirus (Hollie McKay, 2020).

Pakistan's President Arif Alvi in a meeting with known Sunni and Shia clerics requested them to close down their places of worship. However, the requested was turned down by the all-powerful *Mullahs* saying that they would not close down their Masjids just because of fear of a disease. It seemed religion was more important for them than their health. "The pandemic is spreading due of our sins and because we are not following the teachings of Islam". This was the statement of a cleric, named Ejaz Ashrafi who belonged to the *Tahreek-i-Labaik* (TLP) (Janjua, 2020). This study suggests that clerics who opposed and still do oppose the *Tablighi* ideology or its method of preaching Islam had also violated state instructions in this regard. Other religious sects or schools of thought also encouraged people to come to the mosque for congregational prayers.

The relation between Islam and Pakistan is very old. The All-India Muslim League (1906) was the party that struggled for an independent state for the Indian Muslims. Its leaders had used the slogan of religion for the making of Pakistan. The Objective Resolution of March 1949 provided chances to the Islamists to influence state policies. From Jinnah's struggle for Pakistan to the present Imran Khan's '*Riyasat-e-Medina*' (the state of Medina) religion has always played a significant role in the state. The state and its policy-makers have always tried to appease the Islamists on various occasion in the history of this country since its very inception in 1947. The state could not force the Islamists to cancel its religious gathering. The policy of confrontation with the Islamists would have proved even more dangerous (Naqvi, 2020). According to Hussain Haqqani, a former ambassador to the United States, "Religious sentiment is so dominant in Pakistan that the government prefers to invoke it in its favour rather than confronting it even when it threatens the country's security or the people's health" (Hussain, 2020).

The Federal government of Pakistan did not take timely actions to contain the virus from spreading. The policy-makers at the center were confused. They took it very light. The Imran-led Government wanted to save livelihood than saving the lives of the people. According to Rehman Malik, "Even our national slogan is, *Corona say darna nahee*, hence we are not afraid of corona. One must have seen no such slogan anywhere in the world where people are asked to not be afraid of this deadly pandemic which is rapidly multiplying" (Malik, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The data collected and analyzed by the researcher has revealed that almost all the Islamists including the *Tablighi Jama'at* has played a leading role in the spread of COVID-19 across Pakistan. Several research studies on the pandemic has made it clear that gathering of people whether for the performance of religious practices or otherwise, escalated the spread of the COVID-19 in some countries and Pakistan was not an exception in this regard. The first cases of the deadly virus were linked to the *Shiite* pilgrims who had visited Iran. But state mismanagement and lack of basic facilities at the Taftan border spread the virus in the country. The *salana Jor* of the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the mid-march was another factor due to which the virus was spread across the country as its members had come from different parts of the country. The very structure of the *Jama'at* was also very helpful because the *Jama'at* do believe in face-to-face preaching method. But the virus should not be named as *Shia* virus or *Tablighi* virus because the Pakistani state has long been suffering due to faith-based and sect-based discriminations. The non-serious response and lack of coordination between the Federal and provincial governments in Pakistan also contributed to the spread of virus in the country. This study finds that Pakistan, a country based on the idea of religion has always supported

the Islamists, whether militants or ‘silent’ preachers to get their objectives fulfilled in a state where an overwhelming majority of people belongs to the state’s official religion, Islam.

### Limitations and Recommendations

This research study is mainly based on the sources collected from different national and international newspapers. Furthermore, due to the strict laws of lock-down during the pandemic, it was completely impossible to visit different areas and cities to collect information for this study. This data was collected by the researcher and is based on his personal analysis. Further research is needed on the question. But it will only be possible when the pandemic is completely eradicated.

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