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Article:	Religion, Conflict and Identity: Islam, Pakistani identity and the conflict in Swat
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Abstract

Other than an identity in itself, religion plays a central role in other forms of collective identities, like ethnic and national. Moreover, as the constructivist theoretical position argues that identities are fluid and can be impacted by different factors, we propose that conflict and violence have repercussions for religion and the associated identities. Extending the constructivist theoretical position, we contend that conflicts do not ‘soften’ or ‘harden’ identities, rather its impacts are complex, multiple and significant. In the backdrop of recent conflict and violence in Pukhtun region of Swat, Islam is substantial due to its centrality to Pakistani national identity (represented and promoted by the Pakistani state) and Pukhtun ethnic identity (represented by the Pukhtuns in Swat) and militant discourse in the region. This study argues that, amidst the conflict in Swat, three forms and positions of Islam have emerged, including the Islam adopted by Pukhtuns as marker of their identity, Islam used by Pakistan for framing a national identity and the one promoted, rather imposed, by the militants. Pukhtuns in Swat try to detach and distance their ‘form’ of Islam (having both symbolic and practical aspects) from that of the Pakistani state and the militants. Moreover, Pukhtun’s form of Islam is considered closer to that of the state with a sharp distance from that of the militants. Pakistani state, religious clergy and militants are blamed and criticized for using Islam for their interests. Militant’s Islam is termed ‘violent’ and only based on their form of justice and is thus rejected. Pakistani state’s Islam is considered least practiced and more symbolic and thus disowned. Islam adopted and practiced by Pukhtuns, majority, in Swat is considered as peaceful and in practice and thus assumed to be better than the other contesting forms of Islam. Thus, the conflict in Swat, involving militants and Pakistani state, has complicated the divisive role of Islam in relation to its unifying role as a component and marker of Pakistani national identity. This has repercussions for Pakistani national identity. The study is based on 45 open-ended in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions in diverse parts of Swat, coupled with ethnographic observation.

Keywords: Islam, conflict, national identity, Swat, Pakistan

Introduction and background: Theoretical and methodological premise

Being a multi-ethnic state, Pakistan has been facing problem with its nation making project since 1947. The formation of Bangladesh in 1971 made Pakistan the first state in post-world war-2 era that saw disintegration on ethnic lines. Carving a national identity has been at the heart of this nation making project. This national identity has different markers and aspects from which the most debated in the literature is 'Islam' (Alavi, 1986). This literature discusses the problematic role and contested nature of Islam in the nation and national identity making in Pakistan. This problematic and contested role of Islam has been more problematized by the recent conflict in Pukhtun region of Swat (Rome, 2008). This recent conflict in Swat is a violent conflict between Muslim militants of the 'Swati Taliban' (headed by Mullah Fazlullah from Swat) and the Pakistani state which started in 2006-2007 (Mehsud & Malik, 2018). Initially a peace deal was signed between government and the militants, which broke down soon and led to a series of military operations. The conflict also caused internal displacement of about 2 million people. It is considered one of the greatest internal displacements in the history of Pakistan (Din, 2010).

There are multiple reasons which makes this conflict a significant case study to be explored in this context. The conflict has been waged by Muslim militants who base their discourse on Islam and its *shariah*. Moreover, the other actor of the conflict, that is Pakistani state, has Islam as a central marker of national identity and official nationalism. Additionally, Islam is central to Pukhtun identity. Likewise, Muhammad Ayub Jan argues that, Pukhtuns differentiate between their Muslimness and that of ethnic others and perceive Muslims of other ethnic groups as lesser Muslims. Additionally, Pukhtuns find it difficult to accommodate to a Pakistani identity that is exclusively constituted of Islamic identity and rather propound an identity that allows ethnic expression and Muslimness (Jan, 2010).

However, the discussion of recent conflict and its impacts for Pakistani national identity is missing from the literature. The debates of such central markers as 'Islam' needs to be debated amidst the conflict in Pukhtun region such as Swat. This present study attempts to explore the linkage of and repercussions for Islam as a marker of Pakistani national identity with the recent conflict and violence in Swat. Theoretically, extending the constructivist position, it contends that national identity or its markers are neither lost nor reaffirmed and that identity neither softens nor hardens but is impacted and problematized in multiple forms. The argument is explored in a theoretical and methodological framework discussed below.

The Framework

There are different theories and scholarly positions with disagreements on the nature and formation of nation, national identity and nationalism. Modernist theories assert the recent, invented and constructed nature of nations, national identities and nationalisms (Anderson, 1983), Perennialists theories emphasizes the permanence of nations (Van den Berghe, 1978), while the ethno-symbolic framework places ethnic identity, with the role of myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols, at the heart of its analysis of nation, national identity and nationalism (Smith, 1986a & 1991b). Moreover, a stock of literature suggests for an inconclusive list of the 'fundamental' attributes, aspects and markers of this national identity. It may include supposed national symbols, language, birthplace, history, blood ties, religion, institutions, music, media, common origin, ethnicity, historic territory/homeland, common myths, historical memories and a common mass public culture (Laszlo, 2013). Moreover, national identity, Smith argues, has external (territorial, economic and political) and internal (socialization of the members as 'nationals' and 'citizens' through media and education) functions (Smith, 1991b). These markers are not fixed but fluid and are contextual and subject to change (Kiely et al., 2017).

Scholars propose that national identity includes both self-categorization and affect. The former refers to identification and the later to the emotions of a member like 'sense of

belonging' (Reicher, Spears, and Haslam, 2010). A distinctive feature of national identity, according to Smith, is continuity, which refers to the ability to transmit and persist through generations (Smith, 1991b). Additionally, national identities co-exist with other identities, and the salience of national identities may depend upon a specific context (Hutchinson, 2005). Moreover, national identity and its markers are impacted by different factors. Conflict and violence can be one such significant factor that impacts national identity. As is national identity complex, the impacts of conflict and violence on national identity are also complex and multiple. The case of Pukhtuns in Pakistan and the recent conflict in the region are utilized in this study to explore this aspect.

Recent literature reports that Pukhtuns have multiple identities like ethnic, religious and national, where ethnic identity is primary (Jan, 2010). The official Pakistani national identity, along with carving a nation and nationalism, is constructed and promoted by the state of Pakistan in the face of ethnic heterogeneity in Pakistan (Anderson, 1983). 'Rational Choice' with a factor of 'Elite Manipulation' is one of the most debated argument in this regard. Scholars of this position argue that Pakistani nationalism, nation and national identity construction, before and after the partition of 1947, has been influenced and driven by the elites of Pakistan. Language (Urdu), religion (Islam) and culture ('Pakistani culture') as markers of Pakistani identity have been promoted by the elites of Pakistan through the use of education and media (Samad, Yunis, 1995a & 1995b).

On the other hand, the 'discursive group' of scholars argue for the significance of discursive production of nationalism, nation and national identity in the Pakistani context. This group of scholars argue that more significant are ideational and normative factors and the role of Islam with a focus on historical contexts. However, this group of scholars does not exclusively reject the role of elites, as elites are important in nurturing specific ideas, norms and forms of Islam. Moreover, the official discourse of Pakistani state has also been argued by scholars and has been termed as 'essentialist' (Verkaaik, 2004).

Thus, Pakistani nation, nationalism and national identity is a continues process of socio-political construction and reconstruction by the ethnic groups and state elites of Pakistan. A persuasive voice among the Pukhtuns both historically and recently has been arguing that the national identity of Pakistan is imagined significantly in the state of Pakistan, dominated by the military (Azim, 2018). This national identity has material as well as imagined markers, aspects and factors. Significant and central markers of this national identity are Islam, national symbols such as national holidays (Jan, 2010), discourses such as that of pride, sacrifice and complains about the state and nation of Pakistan (Jalal, 1995) and state institutions especially the military in the Pakistani context (Powell and Dimaggio, 1991). As a limitation, Islam, as a marker of Pakistani national identity, is the focus of this present study.

It is pertinent to mention that state shifts, influences and processes for nation and national identity formation, construction or reconstruction has been compelling different ethnic groups in Pakistan to redefine and readjust themselves and their identities and Pukhtuns are no exception in this regard. In such a context, the recent conflict and violence is one such process and phenomena that impacts Pukhtun identities, both ethnic and national (Azim, 2018). Though there is theoretical and empirical literature on the linkage of war and nationalism (Conversi, 2015), there is scarcity of literature on the impacts of conflict and violence on national identities. Some studies have argued that conflict, violence and insurgent wars can also affect the national/state level sense of belonging among populations, as individuals have multiple identities and have national affiliations too. These studies argue that the consequences are not easy to be predicted (Kalyvas, 2008). Syed Wasif Azim has elaborated these multiple impacts in the Pakistani context in his PhD dissertation (Azim, 2018).

To elaborate these consequences for national identity and its markers, in this article, we argue that the conflict-national identity relationship is complex, in the case of Pukhtuns in Swat, Pakistan. There are different and multiple impacts on different markers and aspects of national identity. Islam, being central, is a significant case study. It is also significant aspect in this discussion, because of its use by militants and the fact that Islam is part of Pukhtun ethnic and Pakistani national identity. We will subsequently argue that Pukhtuns in Swat try to distance themselves and their form Islam from the one promoted by militants as well as the Pakistani state, both symbolically and practically. Here, Pukhtuns take pride in practicing the best version of Islam in comparison to militants and Pakistani state and military. They also complain of the use of Islam by Pakistani state for her interests, more recently after 2001. These arguments have been shaped by the empirical data collected from Swat.

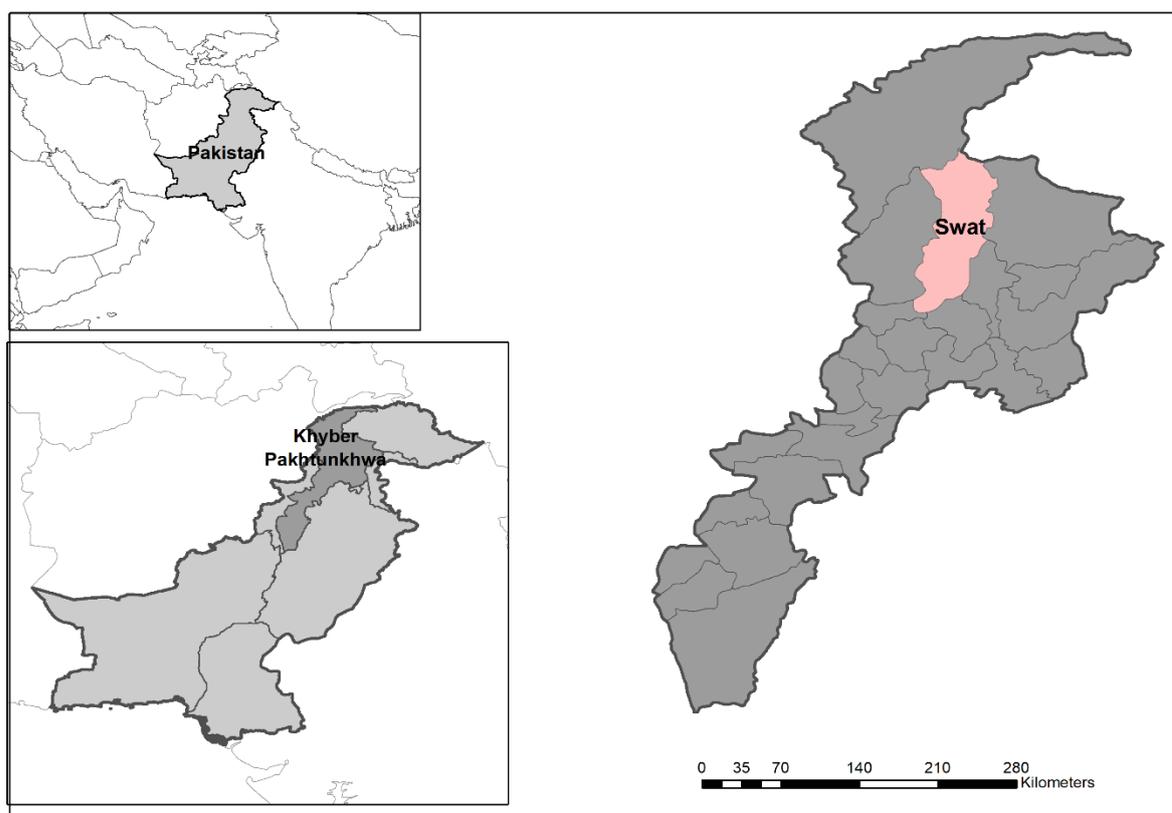


Figure 1: Map showing Pakistani state in a global context and KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) province in Pakistan. On the right side is Swat district in KP¹.

The empirical data for this study, which comes from 45 in-depth open-ended interviews, five focus group discussions and ethnographic observations, was collected from November 2016 to May 2017 for a PhD research. Data collection was conducted in diverse parts of Swat. Participants were elders, university students, professionals and political workers, both men and women. As the interviews and discussions were largely semi-structured, they were appropriate to delve into broader themes of this study. All the interviews and discussions were conducted in the participant's native language, Pukhtu. All the interviews and discussions were recorded as field notes, as audio recordings were not appropriate for many reasons. Moreover, throughout the study pseudonyms have been used. The naming structure used in this study is specific. Name ending with the word 'Khor' (sister

¹ Map by Matthew Dunbar, Spatial Research Scientist, CSDE, University of Washington.

in Pukhtu language) is a female participant, otherwise it is a male participant. Likewise, name ending with 'dada' is a male participant with age above 50, considered as elder. Name ending with 'lala' is a male participant with age between 40 and 50 and the rest are younger than 40. Limited information regarding the participants is provided to avoid any potential identification of the participants. The collected data is utilized, in the theoretical premise, discussed above, to explore the impacts of conflict and violence in Swat for Islam as a factor and component of Pakistani national identity. The discussion follows below.

Conflict and violence in Swat: Islam and Pakistani National Identity

Being central in Pakistani national identity and consciousness, before and after 1947, Islam is none the less a central aspect amidst the conflict in Pukhtun region of Swat. The reason is not only that it occupies a central position in Pakistani identity but is also used by militants to lay claim to their activities. The traditional literature discusses both the unifying and divisive role of Islam. However, the discussion of recent conflict, Islam and national identity is missing from the literature. In this study, we argue that Islam, as a Pakistani national identity marker has witnessed multiple and significant impacts due to the recent conflict and violence in Swat. We postulate that the recent conflict in Swat, involving Pakistani state (with Islam as a central marker of her national identity) and militants (who use Islam to justify their violence) has repercussions for Islam as a central aspect of Pakistani identity. In the present context, there are three identifiable forms of Islam including 'Islam imposed by the militants', 'Islam promoted by the Pakistani nation state' and 'Islam perceived to be practiced by majority Pukhtuns in Swat'. We contend that Pukhtuns try to distance their form of Islam (linking symbolic and practical aspects of it) from that of Pakistani state and militants. Moreover, Pukhtun's form of Islam is considered closer to that of the state with a sharp distance from that of the militants.

Along with that, Islam promoted by militants is considered as one lacking a complete essence and relying only on justice system and is thus sharply disowned. Likewise, this Islam of the militants is also out rightly rejected because of its perceived violent nature. On the other hand, Islam promoted by Pakistani state is blamed of being an Islam just by name (symbolic), with no or minimum practice. Pukhtun's Islam, imagined to be practiced by majority in Swat, is one that is practical, complete and peaceful and thus better than both militants and Pakistani state. Moreover, the comparison between Islam of Pukhtuns and ethnic others has been somehow dominated by the discussion of Islam promoted by the militants and that of Pakistani state. We argue that this discourse informs us of the impacts, conflict have, for the Pakistani national identity, with Islam as a central marker.

Likewise, Islam is still one of the most significant markers of Pakistani national identity. The recent conflict in Pukhtun region has added to the significance of Islam. The role of Islam has become more significant yet problematic, because of its use by militants for their interests. It is suggested that, though Islam form a web that attempt to connect Pakistanis from different ethnicities and the state of Pakistan assume its unifying role, the role of Islam is marred with a problematic contestation. Elites and leaders in Pakistan (mostly the religious clergy) are blamed of using Islam as a dividing factor by promoting 'sectarianism' in the country by participants in Swat. Likewise, Pukhtuns in Swat are somehow critical of the claimed use of Islam as a unifying factor by Pakistani state, amidst this conflict. The debate that Islam is used by Pakistani state and the religious clergy for their interests, has been more sharpened, which corelates with the argument that Islam somehow plays a divisive role (Shaikh, 1989). This has consequences for Pakistani national identity, anchored in Islam.

Field data from Swat suggests that Islam is a significant marker of Pakistani national identity among the Pukhtuns. An overwhelming majority of the research participants attested that Islam is a significant marker of Pakistani national identity in Pukhtun's imagination.

Moreover, it was also substantiated that Islam attempts to connect Pukhtuns with the nation state of Pakistan and other ethnic groups in Pakistan. Among many other participants, Shah Alam Lala, a Politician from Dherai, commented that, *“Islam is the most important factor of national identity”* (Lala, 2017).

Many reasons are presented in the support of this claim by participants in Swat, of which significant ones are ‘the historical context of Pakistan movement’, ‘the Islamic constitution of Pakistan’ and ‘the fact that majority in Pakistan are Muslims’. Fazal Yusufzai, a local business holder in Kabal emphasized, *“Islam is central in Pakistani identity because it was the main factor in 1947. Independence of Pakistan was based on Islam”* (Yusufzai, 2017).

However, it is also pertinent to mention that the role of Islam to unite Pakistanis as a ‘nation’ is inherent with a contestation and opposed opinions. For majority Pukhtuns in Swat, Islam can play a role to unite all Pakistanis, while for others it may not be so significant, as the cultures and social systems of ethnic groups in Pakistan are different. Muhammad Rehman Dada, an elder, added Urdu language, along with Islam, as main factors that can unite all Pakistanis. He told me, *“Islam and Urdu are important and significant factors for the unity of Pakistanis”* (Dada, 2017).

Along with this, a significant debate informs of the least unifying and even divisive role of Islam. However, this role is not considered as an inherent problem with Islam but is due to the lack of proper use of it by the Pakistani state and religious clergy. It is a ‘strong’ perception that Islam has not been used properly by the state of Pakistan and its religious clergy for this purpose. Pakistani state and religious clergy have used Islam, instead, to divide the society. Sectarianism and factionalism are blamed, which hurts the unifying role of Islam in Pakistan. Yusuf Khan is a traditional Khan in Dherai. He elaborated,

“Islam is powerful as it can play a positive role to unify Pakistanis. However, Islam has up to now divided Pakistanis and the role of state is involved in this. Deobandi vs Barelvis and others are common. Unity among people of Pakistan is out of sight” (Khan, 2016).

Beside the argument that Islam has been marred with sectarianism or intra-sectarianism even, the role of Pakistani state is blamed in another form as well. This is because of the perception that Islam has been adopted by Pakistani state only in its symbolic form and not practical. Shah Alam Lala, a politician from Dherai, commented that,

“Islam can unite us all Pakistanis, if adopted by the state in a practical way. As the practice and interpretation of Islam is different for different people, Pakistani State shall adopt best practices of Islam and people shall then follow the state. However, I think that it is still far from reality” (Lala, 2017).

This argument has been, in one way or the other, expressed in many comments of the research participants. Pakistani state is suggested to adopt better practices of Islam so that others, in Pakistan, shall follow her as well. Moreover, state is blamed by a majority of participants in Swat for not using Islam properly as a unifying factor in Pakistan. In the words of Muhammad Ashfaq, an NGO employee,

“Islam can be used for unity in Pakistan. But up to now it has not been used or has not been successful due to the lack of state interest in the proper use of it. This leave space for the Islamic version of others like the militants”(Ashfaq, 2017).

As Pakistani state has left her work to religious clergy, this religious class uses it for personal interests. These ‘mullahs’ (religious clergy) are blamed of creating differences in the society. Laiq Dada, an elder and a political worker, told me, *“Islam of all of us is the same but there are still some issues, because mullahs have divided us”*(Dada, 2017). Thus, state

and religious clergy, are both blamed of not properly using Islam as a unifying factor in Pakistan.

Amidst this discussion, that Islam can serve as a marker of national identity to unite Pakistanis from different ethnic groups, the debate of recent conflict in Swat impacting this position of Islam is significant. It is substantial to explore Pukhtun's position and opinion of the Islam promoted and imposed by the militants and that of the Pakistani state.

Contesting Islam: Conflict, Militants, Pukhtuns and the state of Pakistan

Islam was used by militants to lay claim to their violent activities in Swat. There is a compelling perception among Pukhtuns in Swat that militants used Islam for their interests only and were least careful about 'true Islam'. Initially, militants were claiming to bring Islamic Shariah and a quick Justice system which was attractive for people in the region. Saira Naz Khor commented that, "*Militants Islam was mostly focused on Purdah and Justice System in Swat* (Khor, 2017)". This perception was elaborated further by arguing that Swatis were attracted to militants in initial days because of their quick justice system and not Islamic practice. Salman Habib told that "*Militant's setup was actually based on justice system, not Islam at all. Swatis accepted militants because of this aspect, as their decisions were quick and swift*" (Habib, 2017).

This argument was more substantiated by the fact that militants used force and violence. This use of force and violence created a perception in Swat that militants are not following Islam but are instead following their vested interests. Fazal Yusafzai, a local business holder in Kabal argued,

"Initially militants claimed to bring Islamic Shariah in Swat and Pakistan. That was attractive, and people thought it was good and right to have Shariah. But later, in practice it was different, and militants followed their own interests. They were imposing things by force which was disliked by people in Swat" (Yousafzai, F, 2017).

As militants used Islam and its symbols for their movement, they justified violence in the name of Islam. A sharp opposition to militants and their version of Islam grew due to this use of violence. Militant's form of Islam, based in violence and force, is thus rejected by an overwhelming number of research participants in Swat. Sadaqat Azim, a university student in Kabal, among many others, was of the opinion that "*Militants used force and violence, which is not acceptable*" (Azim, 2016).

Moreover, there is a strong perception in Swat that initially people were attracted to the militant's version of Islam however violence and force, to impose their brand of Shariah, changed attitude of the people. A university lecturer, Mudasir Swati, elaborated, "*Before militants started killing, Swatis liked their Islam and their message and considered this as a better Islam. However, violence changed people opinion. People then started disliking militant's version of Islam*" (Swati, 2017). Militant's Islam, based in violence, was thus rejected in Swat.

These comments and elaborations testify to the argument that Pukhtuns in Swat reject Islam imposed by militants and try to keep a distance from the form of Islam claimed by militants in Swat. The perception of Swat Pukhtuns about the form of Islam promoted by Pakistani state is significant too. There is an interesting debate regarding the Islam promoted by Pakistani state for her national identity in the context of present conflict of Swat. Significantly, Pukhtuns in Swat, try to distance from the form and are critical of Islam promoted by Pakistani state too. Moreover, the blames against Pakistani state, of using Islam for her interests, forms an important part of this discourse. Pakistani state (especially its 'establishment') is blamed, in Swat, of using Islam as a tool. Historically it has been used against ethnic nationalism (and nationalists) in Pakistan and that creates suspicions in minds

of Swatis, of Islam being used in Swat for specific interests by the state of Pakistan. Taimur Yusafzai, a university lecturer told me in Charbagh,

“Islam has only been used as a tool by establishment in Pakistan. It has been using Islam against ethnic nationalism and nationalists in Pakistan. The example of Baluchistan can be given. People here in Swat now do not trust Islam of either militants or state” (Yousafzai. T, 2017).

Moreover, state is also blamed of not taking up her responsibilities in this regard, besides using Islam for her interests. This dubious role of the Pakistani state is criticized of giving space to the promotion of any version of Islam by anyone, including militants. Such a perception creates a feeling of hostility towards the symbolic Islam promoted by Pakistani nation state.

Along with this, the Islam promoted by the nation state of Pakistan, is termed as Islam ‘by name only’ and symbolic by many of the research participants in Swat. The comment of Shabir Khan, a local khan from Charbagh, was that, “*Pakistan was formed in the name of Islam, however now a day, Islam is just by name in Pakistan*” (Khan, 2017). Thus, a criticism on the role of Pakistani nation state in this context is that Islam promoted by the state is not implemented in its essence and is mostly, thus, unpracticed. Moreover, as the state is perceived as ‘weak’, its practice of Islam is also considered as weak.

Conclusively, such an Islam promoted by the state of Pakistan is not liked by an overwhelming majority of Pukhtuns in Swat. Salman Habib, a Private school teacher, from Charbagh said that, “*State Islam is not liked in Swat*” (Habib, 2017). Thus, Pukhtuns in Swat try to distance from and criticize the form and version of Islam promoted by the nation state of Pakistan. In this context, while trying to distance from the form of Islam imposed by militants and promoted by Pakistani state, Pukhtuns in Swat consider their Islam as better due to many reasons.

Islam, in general, and that of Swatis in particular is viewed as a religion of practice and peace, while that of the state and militants are blamed of lacking these properties respectively. The comment of Shabir Khan, a local khan from Charbagh, was that, “*Islam of common Pukhtuns in Swat is better. Others are just by name*” (Khan, 2017). Pukhtun’s form of Islam is considered as ‘real’ in comparison to others. This Islam of common Pukhtuns (an attempt to distance from militants) which is perceived as ‘real’ in Swat is having many components that attempt to differentiate it from state version of Islam and that of the militants.

Conclusion

This study argues that conflict and violence impact national identities in multiple and complex forms. Such impacts are more significant and complex for particular conflicts involving the use of markers promoted by states and nations for national identity. Through the case study of conflict between Muslim militants and Pakistani state in Pukhtun majority district of Pakistan, that is Swat, and Pakistani national identity we contend that the conflict in the region has added to the significance and contested position of Islam as a marker and component of Pakistani national identity. Moreover, the conflict involving Islam, used by the militants for laying claim to their activities and Pakistani state for promoting a national identity adds more to the impacts in national identity and signifies this debate.

We argued that from the three ‘forms’ of Islam emerging in this context (which are militant’s Islam, Pakistani state’s Islam and Islam adopted by majority Pukhtuns in Swat) Pukhtuns try to distance their form of Islam, both symbolic and practical, from the Islam promoted by Pakistani state and militants, where Pukhtun’s form of Islam is considered closer to that of the state with a sharp distance from that of the militants. It is also contended that Pakistani state, religious clergy and militants are blamed of and criticized for using Islam for their interests. This discourse among the Pukhtuns have repercussions for Islam as a

marker of Pakistani national identity and thus affects the national identity formation of Pakistani state. Moreover, conclusively the national identity is not lost or reaffirmed and neither softens nor hardens but its contested and complex nature has been amplified.

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