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Original Article

Profile of Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi's (TNSM's) Combatants in Post-9/11 Afghanistan: A Socio-Demographic Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the profiles of combatants who participated in the post-9/11 Afghan 'jihad' from Dir, Pakistan and explores the associated psychological and economic conditions affecting their families. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through unstructured interviews and analyzed thematically. The research includes detailed tables profiling combatants based on age, education, sect affiliation, and family structure. Key findings reveal that a majority of combatants were illiterate, unemployed, and affiliated with the Deobandi sect. The study also highlights that most combatants' families remain uncertain about their loved ones' status, leading to unresolved grief and psychological distress. Additionally, the research provides insights into the economic hardships faced by the families, such as high unemployment rates and large family sizes. This comprehensive profiling of combatants, coupled with the examination of family conditions, offers valuable insights into the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of the post-9/11 Afghan Jihad's impact on the local population.

Keywords: US invasion, Afghan Jihad, TNSM, combatants, profiles, impact, Dir

Introduction:

The prolonged conflict and instability in Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in 2001 had significant regional implications, with particularly adverse effects on Pakistan. The war in neighboring Afghanistan led to

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widespread destruction in Pakistan by stunting economic growth, disrupting the social fabric, and exerting political pressures. Beyond the direct impacts of radicalization and religious extremism, the conflict and subsequent terrorist attacks on Pakistani civilians have caused extensive human suffering. The decades-long war has not only inflicted severe hardship and poverty on Afghans but also adversely affected the living conditions of people in Pakistan, especially those residing near the Pak-Afghan border (Rabi, 2012). Importantly, the war contributed to the reactivation of dormant Jihadi organizations such as Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), which mobilized thousands of combatants to fight alongside the Taliban against U.S.-led NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2001 (Dawn, October 28, 2001).

Following the U.S.-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the leadership of TNSM organized protests and staged demonstrations in Dir and various other parts of the Malakand Division. On these occasions, TNSM leader Sufi Muhammad delivered incendiary speeches to incite public sentiment in favor of 'Jihad.' He appealed to the tribesmen to fulfill what he framed as a religious duty by joining the Taliban in their fight against the USA (Chawla, 2019).

As a result, thousands of tribesmen from Dir and other districts of the Malakand Division were mobilized for 'Jihad' against U.S. forces (Burke, 2001). Although the exact number of TNSM fighters is unclear, estimates suggest that between 10,000 and 30,000 activists crossed into Afghanistan. According to the TNSM spokesperson, the number was closer to 30,000, while other sources place it around 10,000. On October 27, 2001, a convoy of TNSM volunteers, led by Sufi Muhammad and consisting of over 300 vehicles—including buses, pick-up trucks, and cars—departed from the TNSM headquarters in Maidan, Lower Dir, en route to Bajaur Agency to cross into Afghanistan. The volunteers were armed with a variety of weapons, including swords, Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, missiles, hand grenades, and anti-aircraft guns (Dawn, 2001). TNSM spokesman Qazi Ihsanullah warned, "We will resist if the authorities try to stop us. The Jihad (Holy war) will start here." Consequently, the government did not intervene and allowed the convoy to proceed to Bajaur. The caravan set up camp in Laghary, a village in Bajaur located only eight kilometers from the Afghan border, with plans to cross into Afghanistan the following day (Rahmanullah, 2012).

Given the lack of adequate resources such as weapons and food supplies, the Taliban leadership instructed TNSM activists to wait for a signal from Mullah Muhammad Omar before crossing into Afghanistan. However, the TNSM leadership decided to proceed independently, asserting that they would not rely on the Taliban as they possessed the necessary food and essential items.

They stated their intention to serve as a reserve force in Afghanistan (Toru, 2005).

On October 28, 2001, a convoy of combatants comprising 100 vehicles, led by Dr. Ismail, crossed into Afghanistan. Upon arrival, they were received by Taliban officials and escorted to Asadabad, the capital of Kunar province. The remaining combatants crossed the border in smaller groups. While the majority of the fighters entered Afghanistan through Bajaur, approximately 1,200 crossed via passes in Upper Dir (Dawn, 2001).

Upon reaching Afghanistan, the TNSM combatants received some training in Asadabad and Jalalabad before being deployed by the Taliban leadership to various battlefronts. Approximately 1,000 TNSM fighters were sent to Mazar-i-Sharif to join the Taliban in combat against the Northern Alliance (NA). Additionally, hundreds of TNSM combatants were deployed in southern Afghanistan, particularly in Kandahar, while the remaining forces were positioned as reinforcements on various fronts, including the northern province of Kunduz (Thomas, 2013).

Despite the ground efforts by the Taliban and their allies, including TNSM, they were unable to withstand the heavy air strikes from U.S. aircraft, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Taliban regime on December 7, 2001. After the fall of their government, the Taliban, well-acquainted with warfare and harsh conditions, swiftly retreated along shorter routes to the border areas with Pakistan, where they sought refuge with sympathetic local tribes (Thomas, 2013).

The TNSM combatants faced significant challenges due to their lack of experience, insufficient geographical knowledge, and inadequate ammunition. In several instances, combatants attempted to surrender but were either killed in U.S. air strikes or captured by NA forces. Among the 1,000 TNSM fighters deployed in Mazar-i-Sharif, only a few survived; the majority perished in air strikes on an abandoned school building known as Sultan Razia Girls' School, where they had taken shelter (Struck, 2001). According to a senior ethnic Pashtun commander, approximately 160 TNSM combatants were executed in southern Afghanistan on November 28, 2001. Many others were killed in Kunduz while fighting against NA forces. Subsequently, on November 16, 2001, the NA forces admitted to killing more than 600 TNSM fighters across various parts of Afghanistan. Those combatants captured alive were imprisoned in private sub-jails, and a few were handed over to their families in Pakistan in exchange for large ransom payments (Ayaz, 2003). Additionally, some TNSM fighters were handed over to U.S. forces and sent to Guantanamo Bay prison. Many others have been detained in various jails in Afghanistan,

and about 3,000 have gone missing, with no information available about their location or status (dead or alive) in Afghanistan (ICRC, 2002).

For the past two decades, the families of these combatants have made relentless efforts to locate their missing relatives, repeatedly appealing to relevant authorities but with little success. Despite their persistent attempts, including petitions to the government of Pakistan and other concerned bodies, their efforts have largely been in vain, leaving them without answers about the fate of their loved ones. For a long time, these families remained hopeful that their loved ones would eventually return from Afghanistan and rejoin them (Izharullah, 2015).

The following tables provide profiles of the combatants and detail the psychological issues their close family members have been enduring for an extended period.

General Profile and Analyses of the Combatants' Lives Before Going to Afghanistan:

The following tables provide an overview of the combatants' backgrounds, with a particular focus on variables such as age, profession, education, political affiliation, religious beliefs, and family size. This data facilitates the identification of shared characteristics and underlying factors that influenced these individuals to engage in 'Jihad' in Afghanistan. The analysis of these variables aims to shed light on the socio-economic and ideological contexts that contributed to their participation in the conflict.

0.1 Age					
Age group		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	18-30 years	6	24.0	24.0	24.0
	31-40 Years	5	20.0	20.0	44.0
	41-50 Years	3	12.0	12.0	56.0
	Above 50 Years	11	44.0	44.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

This table indicates that the largest proportion (44%) of combatants were over the age of fifty. This high prevalence of Jihad participation among older individuals can be attributed to their perception of Jihad as a religious obligation, which aligns with the broader phenomenon of heightened religious commitment observed among elderly individuals due to increasing existential

insecurity with age (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Additionally, this trend may be linked to the combatants' previous experiences of Jihad during the 1980s against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, as suggested by interviews with some respondents (fathers of the combatants), who referenced their past involvement in the conflict against the Soviet forces.

Another contributing factor was the leadership of Sufi Muhammad, a veteran of the Afghan Jihad who had previously led numerous contingents of Jihadis from Dir. Despite the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR in 1991, which brought about significant changes in global politics—such as the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, and a major shift in international relations—Sufi Muhammad disregarded these altered geopolitical realities (Friedman, 2013). He once again personally visited various parts of the Malakand Division, urging tribesmen to participate in Jihad against U.S.-led NATO forces in Afghanistan. Due to their prior trust and confidence in Sufi Muhammad, many tribesmen from the area responded positively and accompanied him to Afghanistan.

The next age group with a significant number of combatants (24%) was between 18 and 30 years old. The participation of youth in Jihad can be attributed to their susceptibility to the influence of religious clerics who used Jihadi sermons and militant rhetoric to incite them. This exploitation of their emotional vulnerabilities is evident in instances where many combatants in this age group joined the TNSM caravan impulsively, often without informing their elders. Conversely, the number of combatants in the 30-50 age group was lower, likely due to their greater emotional stability and resistance to being easily persuaded to join the conflict.

0.2 Education					
Qualification		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Under Matric	7	28.0	28.0	28.0
	Intermediate	1	4.0	4.0	32.0
	Illiterate	17	68.0	68.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

This table presents the educational qualifications of the combatants, revealing that the majority (68%) were illiterate, while only 28% had education below the matriculation level. The data demonstrates an inverse relationship between educational attainment and participation in Afghan Jihad; as educational qualifications increase, the proportion of individuals joining the conflict

decreases, and vice versa. This trend underscores the influence of education on cognitive processes, highlighting how illiterate individuals, lacking the ability to critically assess the arguments of religious leaders, are more susceptible to their rhetoric.

Furthermore, the data points to illiteracy as a significant contributing factor to terrorism and militancy, not only in Dir but across Pakistan (Anwar, 2017). Unfortunately, illiteracy has been exploited by various factions within society for their vested interests. Individuals lacking education are more likely to accept and believe, without question, what is presented to them in the guise of religion by their religious leaders. This exploitation underscores the broader societal implications of illiteracy in providing environments conducive to extremism and radicalization.

1.2 Political Affiliation					
Political Affiliation		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	JI	20	80. 0	80.0	80.0
	ANP	3	12.0	12.0	92.0
	PPP	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The table illustrates that the majority of combatants (80%) were affiliated with Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (JIP), while only 12% and 8% were associated with the Awami National Party (ANP) and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), respectively. The high prevalence of Jihad participation among combatants affiliated with JIP can be linked to the party's prominent role in supporting the Afghan Jihad during the 1980s. Jamaat-e-Islami, aligned ideologically with General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq—a military dictator and President of Pakistan from 1977 until his death in 1988—actively supported his Afghan policy. The party employed various methods to promote the Afghan Jihad within Pakistan, particularly in the tribal regions (Ahmad, 2012).

To galvanize support for Jihad, JIP's religious clerics delivered pro-Jihad sermons in mosques, trained individuals across the country, and consistently published and distributed Jihadi literature to attract the masses. Additionally, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan was framed as an act of aggression by 'infidels' against Islam, thereby urging people, in the name of Islam, to participate in Jihad against the Soviet forces (Ahmad, 2012).

Maulana Sufi Muhammad, the founder of TNSM, had previously served as the district *Amir* of JIP in Dir on two occasions. Like Sufi Muhammad, who eventually left JIP by denouncing the democratic and electoral processes in Pakistan as contrary to Sharia, many of his followers followed suit. The

consistent electoral successes of JIP in Dir over the decades can be attributed to the groundwork laid by the party throughout those years (Sultan-i-Rome, 2012).

0.9 Religious Education					
Religious Education		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	No	25	100.0	100.0	100.0

Surprisingly, all combatants (100%) had never attended any religious seminary and lacked a clear understanding of the religion for which they were purportedly fighting. This superficial grasp of religious tenets was subsequently exploited by religious clerics. As a result, these individuals were initially mobilized to Afghanistan under the guise of religious duty and later persuaded to combat Pakistani security forces during Operation Black Thunder Storm in 2009 (Afridi, 2016).

The table underscores that the lack of education was a primary factor leading many individuals from the area to join militant organizations. Furthermore, it highlights how religious and political leaders in the region have long exploited this illiteracy to further their own agendas.

1.1 Religious Sect					
Religious Sect		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Deoband	22	88.0	88.0	88.0
	Ahli-Hadees	3	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The table reveals that the majority of combatants (88%) adhered to the Deobandi sect, while only 12% were affiliated with the Ahli-Hadees sect of Islam. The Deobandi movement originated in the late 19th century as a response to British colonial rule in India. Its popularity and expansion in the region can be traced to the involvement of leaders from the then North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in the Ulema's struggle against British rule. The sect gained further prominence with the establishment of numerous Madrasas across the erstwhile NWFP, including Dir, during the Afghan Jihad in the 1980s (Roy, 2002).

During the same period, Saudi Arabia funded several Ahli-Hadees mosques and Madrasas in the area, yet the number of Deobandi followers remained significantly higher than their Ahli-Hadees counterparts in the region. Sufi Muhammad, the leader of TNSM, also belonged to the Deobandi sect (Haroon, 2008).

0.3 Profession					
Employment		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Unemployed	15	60.0	60.0	60.0
	Foreign Employment	4	16.0	16.0	76.0
	Labourer	4	16.0	16.0	92.0
	Others	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Education is a critical determinant of both individual and national economic stability (Ozturk, 2008). The table indicates a high correlation between illiteracy and unemployment, with both metrics showing similar percentages (68% illiteracy and 60% unemployment). The high rate of unemployment among combatants, standing at 60%, created a fertile environment for recruitment into terrorism and militancy. This significant pool of unemployed individuals in Dir provided militant groups with a substantial reservoir of potential recruits for their operations.

0.4 Marital Status					
Marital Status		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Married	23	92.0	92.0	92.0
	Unmarried	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The table shows that a significant majority of combatants (92%) were married. This high rate of marriage is intertwined with the previously discussed factors, including illiteracy and economic hardship. Despite the purported motivation for fighting against the U.S.-led NATO forces in Afghanistan being framed as Jihad, many of these individuals, upon returning to their home country, subsequently took up arms against their fellow Muslims under the guise of religion. Consequently, it can be concluded that the primary drivers for joining TNSM and similar groups in Dir were a combination of illiteracy, poor economic conditions, and religious fervor.

0.5 No. of Spouse					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	One	20	80.0	80.0	80.0
	Two	3	12.0	12.0	92.0
	Un-married	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The table indicates that the majority of combatants (80%) were monogamous, whereas only 12% were bigamous. Despite polygamy being a prevalent practice in tribal areas, the high proportion of combatants with only one wife can be attributed to their poor financial status. The economic constraints faced by these individuals likely limited their ability to support multiple spouses, thereby influencing their marital practices.

0.6 Total Children					
Number of Children		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	1-3 Children	3	12.0	12.0	12.0
	4-6 Children	10	40.0	40.0	52.0
	Above 6 Children	9	36.0	36.0	88.0
	Married but No children	1	4.0	4.0	92.0
	Unmarried	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Education plays a crucial role in reducing birth rates by raising awareness among the populace. Research indicates that both lack of education and unemployment contribute to overpopulation, as unemployed individuals often spend more time with their families. Furthermore, low educational attainment is a significant driver of overpopulation, as uneducated individuals may believe that having more children will enhance family income through increased labor (Murray, 2015). This perspective overlooks the potential benefits of investing in the education and well-being of fewer children, who may become more professionally successful and contribute more to the family's economic prosperity.

The table reflects the impact of inadequate education and unemployment on family size, showing that 40% of combatants had between 4 and 6 children, while 36% had more than 6 children (Khan, 2013). These factors—combined with a mindset favoring larger families—rendered combatants particularly susceptible to recruitment by militant organizations. The involvement of these individuals in militant activities might have been mitigated if the government had provided better educational and economic opportunities (Terwase, 2018).

0.7 No. of Male Children					
No. of Male Child		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	1-3 Sons	10	40.0	40.0	40.0
	4-6 sons	10	40.0	40.0	80.0
	Above 6 sons	2	8.0	8.0	88.0
	Married but no Children	1	4.0	4.0	92.0
	Unmarried	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The table reveals that a significant proportion of combatants (40%) had 1 to 3 male children, while an equal percentage (40%) had 4 to 6 male children. Many of these surviving children are now young men in their twenties who face a range of social and economic challenges. This demographic of young men requires targeted intervention and support from the government to address their needs and integrate them as responsible citizens. Without such support, there is a risk that these individuals may become vulnerable to recruitment by militant organizations, similar to their parents.

0.8 No. of Female Children					
No. of Female Children		**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	1-4 Daughters	17	68.0	70.8	70.8
	4-6_Daughters	2	8.0	8.3	79.2
	Married but no children	1	4.0	4.2	83.3
	No female children	2	8.0	8.3	91.7
	Unmarried	2	8.0	8.3	100.0
	Total	24	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	4.0		
Total		**25**	**100.0**		

The table indicates that the majority of combatants (68%) had between 1 and 4 daughters. The number of female children is notably fewer compared to their male counterparts. Within these families, female children are particularly vulnerable. As daughters of combatants, they are often required to observe strict *parda* (veil) and remain largely confined to their homes. In adherence to family honor, early marriages for these daughters are frequently arranged.

1.3 Certainty Regarding the Death of the Relatives in Afghanistan					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Yes	7	28.0	28.0	28.0
	No	18	72.0	72.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The majority of respondents (72%) were uncertain about the fate of their family members in Afghanistan at the time of the interview. Only 28% reported having been informed of the death of their relatives by TNSM, though they remained skeptical about the accuracy of this information. Many families expressed continued hope for the return of their loved ones from Afghanistan, despite the passage of two decades.

This uncertainty about the combatants' deaths has impeded the closure of grief for their families. The persistent hope for their return underscores the ongoing rawness of their sorrow. For instance, some respondents described instances where female relatives, such as mothers and wives, would experience sudden feelings of suffocation at night and begin speaking about the missing combatants. The enduring social and economic hardships faced by these families have led to significant psychological distress (Menhas, 2019).

Several respondents recounted the plight of widows suffering from psychological disorders, who have been using anti-depressants to manage episodes of anxiety and depression brought on by prolonged mourning (Wakalat, 2019).

1.4 Source of News					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	TNSM	7	28.0	28.0	28.0
	Don't Know	18	72.0	72.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Linking the information from the table with the preceding details provides a deeper understanding of the emotional impact on the combatants' families. The table reveals that a significant majority (72%) of the families were uncertain about the fate of their relatives in Afghanistan. This uncertainty has profoundly affected their ability to achieve closure and has perpetuated a state of unresolved grief.

The lack of definitive information about the deaths of their family members has left many families in a state of suspended mourning, with ongoing hope for their return despite the passage of two decades. This continued uncertainty

exacerbates their psychological distress, contributing to issues such as anxiety and depression, as reported by respondents (Menhas, 2019; Wakalat, 2019). By correlating these findings with the previous data, it becomes evident that the persistent ambiguity surrounding the combatants' fates significantly influences the emotional and psychological well-being of their families.

1.5 Information Received About his Death					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Information received in Less than 1 Year	4	16.0	16.0	16.0
	Information received in 2-5 years	3	12.0	12.0	28.0
	No information received up-till now	18	72.0	72.0	100.0
	Total	**25**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

The last three tables are interconnected and provide a clear picture when analyzed together. They show that 72% of families still lack definitive information about their relatives who went to Afghanistan in 2001. This ongoing uncertainty has contributed to unresolved grief and significant psychological distress. The data highlights how the lack of clarity regarding the combatants' fates has exacerbated emotional suffering and psychological issues, as noted in respondents' experiences of anxiety and depression (Menhas, 2019; Wakalat, 2019).

Conclusion:

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the profiles of combatants from Dir who participated in the Afghan Jihad post-9/11 and the subsequent socio-economic and psychological impact on their families. The findings reveal that a significant proportion of combatants were older, illiterate, and unemployed, with a predominant affiliation to the Deobandi sect and connections to political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan. The lack of formal education and economic opportunities made these individuals highly susceptible to militant recruitment, as they were easily influenced by religious rhetoric and promises of fulfilling religious duties through Jihad.

The study also highlights the profound and ongoing psychological trauma experienced by the families of combatants, mainly due to the uncertainty surrounding the fate of their relatives who went missing in Afghanistan. Many families continue to grapple with the grief of loss without closure, leading to severe psychological issues such as anxiety and depression among the widows and other close relatives. The results underscore the need for targeted

interventions, including education, economic support, and mental health services, to prevent future generations from falling into similar paths and to support the families still coping with the long-term consequences of the conflict.

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