



Pakistan's Sectarian Mire & The Way Forward







PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)

Pakistan's Sectarian Mire & The Way Forward

Findings of one-day dialogue in Islamabad

December 19th, 2018

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Executive summary

Sectarianism, which is eating into the vitals of Pakistani state and society, needs to be eradicated. That is imperative not only to achieve social harmony but also to achieve security and stability, which will help in attracting foreign investment in the country. While differences among people may continue to persist, the way forward is linked to learning to live with those differences. Above all, the state should unpack how sectarian identity has been institutionalized through a range of administrative measures, such as compulsion of seminaries to affiliate to sect-based boards.

These are some of the findings of this report, which is the outcome of a daylong closed roundtable PIPS held on sectarian harmony, on 19th of December 2018, in collaboration with the German Embassy in Islamabad. Renowned and credible religious scholars of all Islamic schools of thoughts as well as experts on the subjects participated.

The dialogue noted that sectarian violence has been on decline in Pakistan: in 2018, only 12 incidents of sectarian violence were reported from across the country, most of which were of minor nature. This was in contrast with 2013, when 220 such incidences were reported.

But the problem is deep. Apart from violent sectarian groups, most of other militant groups are also deeply sectarian in nature, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), its splinter groups as well as the Islamic State (IS) group, also known as Daesh. However what compounds the problem is the fact that faith-based discrimination and violence has gradually been penetrating in individual behaviours as well; group thinking is reported in professional bodies like media and state institutions. Even political spectrum of the country is getting a sectarian colour. Veteran religious-political parties and their leaders are considered 'traditional' compared to the recent ones with a clear-cut sectarian agenda.

Achieving sectarian harmony is a pre-requisite for achieving socio-economic development. More immediately, the country needs to ensure sectarian harmony to capitalize upon the socioeconomic projects of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, which are the entry and exit points of CPEC, respectively, inside Pakistan, and which often see attacks on Shia populace, cannot afford disruptions.

Any discussion on sectarianism often asks for overcoming the differences. This is a conventional approach, which fails to make any impact. In reality, sectarian harmony is about learning to live with each other, *with* those differences in existence. "Tolerance, one participant noted, is not indifference. It is something you do not agree with, but you accept." Differences have been there and, in their positive connotation, have been part of intellectual debates.

It is the negative connection of sectarianism that creates problem. In Urdu, the term “sect” is often translated into both *firqa* and *maslak*. While *maslak* is more positive and points to an intellectual effort behind, the word *firqa*, with its political motives, invites division and negativities. One threshold of the differences turning from positives to negative is clearly the resort to violence. This should not be allowed.

Sectarianism is often better understood with the politics playing around. In Pakistan's case, it emerged as a result of state policies dealing with myriad of challenges on external and internal fronts. It is also linked to external environment especially rivalries in the Middle East. The advancement in media technology has further magnified the differences.

It is heartening that the state is gradually realizing the need to overcome those sectarian differences that feed into violent extremism. That realisation is clearly charted in the country's counter-terror plan, National Action Plan (NAP) as well as Paigham-e-Pakistan, a violence-denouncing document signed by leading Islamic scholars. However, questions are raised about implementation of these two.

In Pakistan, it is often said that the Islamization policies of the 1980s did the damage. What is required is exploration of those policies, so as to review them to curb sectarianism. It is to be seen how the state reinforced sectarian identity. For one, the role madrassahs in shaping sect-based identities is less contested, in part because they are bound to be affiliated with one of the five boards, which are purely sect-based. Above all, civil society should be supported for promoting social harmony, rather than seen as having some ulterior motive.

Background

On 19th of December 2018, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) convened a special dialogue among leading religious scholars to understand sectarian dynamics in Pakistan and how to overcome sectarian persecution and violence.

This dialogue was a continuity of the deliberations PIPS has been engaged in, in particular since 2011, to deconstruct various aspects of extremism in the country and their remedies. The purpose was to understand what undermines sectarian tolerance and harmony in Pakistan and how these can be improved.

Earlier, a 2014 survey-based study by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) found that, among other factors, clergy was instrumental in forging sectarian and faith-based discord and conflicts, and thus could also become a key part of the solution. While some respondents of that PIPS study had called for focusing more on societal elements, others also called for taking care of the state, which ultimately decides the way forward.

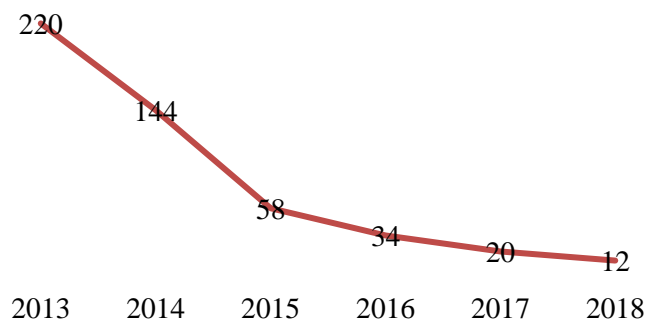
A need was thus felt of exploring the issue of sectarian harmony, with a view to understand what plagues sectarian tolerance and harmony; what are the existing measures in place to improve them, including what has worked and what not; as well as what can be done further in that regard. As the issue is largely religious and sectarian and religious scholars and faith leaders are directly linked to it, the best way was to do so engaging those scholars and leaders.

Key considerations

- Sectarianism is eating into the vitals of Pakistani state and society. The menace from it comes not only as violent groups, but also as divisions in the society, in the ideologies of parties, in the group thinking of people, and in general attitude of people towards each other.

One indicator of sectarianism in Pakistan has been **sectarian violence**. Luckily, sectarian violence – which usually means a terrorist attack by some violent sectarian or other militant group with similar motive on members of another sect, as well as violent clashes between members of different sectarian communities – has been on the decline: in 2018, only 12 incidents of sectarian violence were reported from across the country, most of which were of minor nature. This was in contrast with 2013, when 220 such incidences were reported, and there has been a gradual decline in sectarian violence since then.

Incidences of sectarian violence



While sectarian violence is treated separately, it has a flesh-and-blood relation with faith-based **militancy** in general. Religiously inspired militant groups are deeply sectarian in nature, whether it is the anti-Pakistan Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or the recently emerging Daesh.

Part of this is because, according to one participant, sectarianism of the 1980s paved way for contemporary terrorism in Pakistan. This is contrary to a popular notion that terrorism in the country evolved following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan post-9/11. The exact reference point for the genesis of terrorism in Pakistan is therefore the 1980s' wave of sectarian violence, which needs to be worked upon.

One of the immediate casualties of sectarianism in Pakistan has been its **diversity**. Unlike many other countries in the Muslim world, in particular the Middle East, Pakistan has a diverse sectarian population. Resultantly, sectarian communities, which are smaller in number such as the Shias, are the first to face the brunt of sectarianism. It then spirals in an unending quest of providing other wrongs. **Competition among these groups**, especially

as between Sunnis and Shias, or Deobandi and Barelvi, further narrows their worldviews, putting pressure on society, politics and state in general.

Resultantly, sectarian and faith-based **discrimination** have gradually been penetrating in individual attitudes and behaviours. Many complain of sect-based group thinking in various sectors of the society, including professional bodies like media and state institutions.

Colleagues align with each other on sectarian lines; even if they don't do, others perceive so.

Even **political spectrum** of the country is getting sectarian colour. Old religious parties and their leaders are considered "traditional" compared to the recent ones with a clear-cut sectarian agenda. As a result, the traditional parties are also pushed to take sides to stay relevant in the political arena.

The impact can also be felt on the broader political discourse. The world is witnessing rise of populist politics, which thrives on division. Sectarianism is one such division in Pakistan.

Sectarian discourse can be peddled by populist leaders. One such example in recent years has been the emergence of Barelvi group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).

The flames of sectarianism spread beyond the borders. Sectarianism is a regional or **global problem**, given the natural tendency of forming alliances with members of the same sectarian group.

- Achieving harmony among different faith groups is a **pre-requisite for achieving socio-economic development** too. No society can flourish if its best minds are living under the shadows of violence and hatred.

More immediately, the country needs to ensure sectarian harmony to achieve the dividends of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, which are respectively the entry and exit points of CPEC inside Pakistan, and which often see attacks on Shia populace, could not afford disharmony, has the corridor to be executed smoothly. In addition to the provincial divide or "provincialism", which is often discussed, sectarian vulnerabilities of the provinces have to be overcome, too.

- Any discussion on sectarianism often asks for overcoming the differences. If all set aside their differences, there will be no problem, many would argue. Some go to the extent of saying that the "true path" be followed and there will be no problems.

Such messaging however invites criticism implying if overcoming sectarianism is meant to challenging or changing one's belief system. Sectarianism cannot be overcome by assuming that all think alike.

Sectarian harmony is about **learning to live with each other, with those differences in existence**. That is why one participant clearly said that tolerance may hurt too.

"Tolerance, one said, is not indifference. It is something you do not agree with, but you accept." After all, one is giving other the right to live as he or she deems fit, but others may object to.

Therefore, those acting on promoting sectarian harmony should clearly understand that accepting and keeping differences does not undermine people's beliefs; nor should it counteract efforts to promote tolerance and harmony. Even the word "sect" is derived from Latin word "*secta*", which means to follow, and implies a positive connotation.

Islam stresses on change, diversity or disagreement, one participant said. It invites us to ponder, think and travel around the world. In retrospect, it was shared that the initial Islamic jurisprudence not only accepted difference of opinion, but also stressed on the need of this diversity. It was when differences of opinion increased that the idea of *taqlid* (that is conforming to the teaching of another person's views) came in, which still retained the tradition of differences in opinions. Even now, much of the intellectual debate on the differences have positive connotation.

Part of the problem comes from expecting people to define which identity they want to become associated with: National? Ethnic? Religious? This is wrong approach, it was noted. Expecting someone to have singular identity is not conducive for harmony. Instead, it was argued, every person has multiple identities, which could be gender, faith, sect, domicile, and so on. All these have their significance at different points, but all stay with that one person. Such thinking promotes harmony, and should be taught to the younger generation.

- The problem from sectarianism comes from its **negative connotation**. In Urdu, the term "sect" is often translated into both *firqa* and *maslak*. One participant said the *maslak* is more positive in nature, given intellectual efforts behind it, the word *firqa*, with its political motives, invites negativities.

As to what exactly are those differences, that need to be explored. But clearly, one threshold is the resort to violence. As long as violence is not used, the differences are meant to be accepted. One participant even argued that while sect-based differences had been in

existence for long, they hardly led to mass scale violence, which has occurred with the advent of new weapons.

Although intellectual debates had positive connotations largely, yet they could not escape negativities. That is, differences over interpretation also resulted into leading to negatively manifesting sectarian differences. On this, a range of solutions was proposed in the dialogue: an academic compilation of a comprehensive book of the *Hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet [PBUH]) owned by Islamic schools of thoughts; a review *Usul-e-Tafseer* (Principles of Exegesis) by focusing on understanding contemporary context in interpretation of religious texts; and introducing common content in the books taught at madrassahs.

On the negative side, sectarianism is fueled by the thinking that “I am right, and others are not.” It is this thinking that led to horrible crimes of exterminating those who one deems are wrong. This thinking is in play when it comes to sectarian violence or even mass-scale murder.

- The manifestation of sectarianism can be better understood with the **politics playing around**. One asserted that sectarianism started when politics and religion were inter-mixed. When the Ottoman Empire ended, some religious scholars desired of creating Islamic state; the concept of state was interestingly borrowed from the west. Thus politics and religion were brewed together.

Once those Muslim-majority states were created, there were calls for Islamization, shaping lives more and more according to Islam. Ultimately, it paved way to sectarianism. Their relations with other countries were viewed this way too: even Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry has political aspects, it was noted.

In daily lives, too, political reasons behind sectarianism cannot be denied. Sectarian speakers know for sure the political environment in which they play. Thus while the focus is often on religious aspects, politics should not be ignored. This is especially true today, as populist leaders who in their attempt to seek power, magnify differences; one such difference in Pakistan is sect-based.

- The most glaring example of how politics fanned sectarianism in Pakistan is **state's policies over the years**. Sectarianism is a result of state's policies of dealing with myriad challenges it faced on external and internal fronts.

At the birth of this country, none of the problems pertained to religion or sect; these were largely about national harmony and governance. The solution was sought in Islam. With

time, many conflicts transformed into religious ones, and further snowballed into sectarian violence.

There is thus a recorded history of how state bodies exploited religious forces to their end. It was very well evident in the run up to the 2018 elections. One transformative decade was the 1980s, when sect-based mobilization was pursued. This was consequence of state policy, it was said.

Presently, the state has shown some desire of overcoming those differences, and that is why there are talks of harmony. Today, while the state deserves appreciation for releasing *Paigham-e-Pakistan* document which denounces violence in the name of religion, the way it was done merely reiterates state's so tight embrace of religion. There are even reports that some scholars signed, without looking at it, merely because the state wanted to.

- Whether or not society can be transformed is another matter that is completely ignored. Unlike states, human societies cannot necessarily take a volte face all of a sudden. That is where the problems are also coming from. A whole generation has grown up living in an environment rife with faith-based differences; expecting them to shed that thinking overnight is unrealistic.

Similarly, the dialogue noted that sectarian identity has become a safety valve for many people. They think they are being discriminated on sectarian lines, and therefore unless they associated with any collective sect-based identity, they will continue facing problems.

- Today, as remedies of sectarianism are discussed, it is being said that social contract may be reviewed too, so that the differences are properly accommodated. After all, sectarianism may have emanated from not paying attention to those differences.

But in reality, in Pakistan, the issue is not about contract, but on abiding by it. The social contract in the shape of the Constitution saw historic consensus. Respect to it was missing. Coincidentally, sectarianism was often fanned by those who did not treat social cohesion with much seriousness.

- Sectarianism has its own **political economy**. Hate speakers are able to mesmerize audience with their emotion-laden speeches. People listen to them too. Ultimately, clerics have to get funds, which moderate scholars may not generate much. Similarly, young people are lured into sectarian outfits by giving them funds.

- Part of sectarianism is also linked to **external environment** in which Pakistan is located. Conflict in the Middle East affects situation in Pakistan too, as has happened with Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and Yemen crisis.
- Sectarianism cannot be divorced from what's happening in the **society** in general. People are tending to think narrowly in different aspects. Other than sectarian grouping, people tend to associate with each other on ethnic lines. Students from one province do not intermingle with those of others, for instance. Working on sectarian harmony requires working on society as a whole.
- Sectarianism deepened with the evolution of **media technology**. Much of the sectarianism is spread on social media, it was said. People take shelter under the garb of freedom of expression, but they end up aggravating tensions and widening differences.
- Given that sectarianism made inroads at a larger level in the 1980s, it is important the policies undertaken then be reviewed. It is often said that Zia took Islamization, but which **policies of the 1980s** deepened sectarianism require scrutiny, so as to review them to undo sectarianism. One guess is that much of our sectarian identity was legalized during Zia regime; it was then that seminaries' registration with boards, which are purely sect-based, got more institutionalized. If the present is to be corrected for the sake of future, past mistakes need to be understood thoroughly. It was said that the legalization of sectarian identity, should be stopped.
- One of the institutions that repeatedly came under discussion was the madrassahs (seminaries). While not all agree with the extent to which **seminaries** are involved in fanning extremism, their **role in shaping sect-based identities** is less contested. This is partly owed to how seminaries function: a seminary in Pakistan is supposed to be affiliated with one of the five *wafaq* (board), which are sect-based. Thus, even if the broader curriculum of the boards is same, its trickle-down varies, reflecting sectarian outlooks.

Some teaching methods in the seminaries are criticized for inculcating narcissist values, as if students are the chosen ones. Similarly, one mode of communication imparted to students is *manazira*, which is essentially a debate aimed at proving the other wrong. Seminary students of one school of thought do not intermingle with other's students. Such values do not produce self-critical mind.

Key individuals who can be sensitized in the seminaries are the administrators and muftis, or individuals authorized to issue fatwas. One participant even suggested that fatwas should not be given in individual capacity, but every madrassah should have a committee of moderate clerics who can issue fatwa. Similarly, students should be given opportunity to interact with each other, so as to overcome their biases.

- The dialogue noted that attempts to overcome should involve women too – their experiences are often missing; and youth – they are the majority of this country. Both women and youth have to bear the brunt of sectarian divides.
- The dialogue lauded **civil society measures** for promoting social harmony, such as bringing together scholars and leaders of different sects, to promote intellectual dialogue and co-existence.

The dialogue called for **promoting values** that are negated by sectarianism; these include arts, literature, and aesthetics, among others. Similarly, moderates in every sect should be encouraged to write books, and those books should be made part of their seminaries.

Yet, civil society is facing pressure to close down activities. They are suspected of having ulterior agenda. The dialogue noted such forums should be encouraged.

- The **government and religious scholars too have** taken some measures, but many of these await implementation. Some key ones are below:
 - *Agreement on sectarian harmony, GB:* This agreement was evolved by a board of religious scholars in Gilgit Baltistan. It was later endorsed by GB's Assembly. The agreement is implemented successfully.
 - *Milli Yakjehti Council:* A national-level representative body of all sects in Pakistan, MJC was pointed out for promoting harmony early on.
 - *National Action Plan, 2014:* The government's counter-terror plan, it has three points on sectarian harmony: (1) There will be a crackdown against hate speech and action will be taken against newspapers and magazines contributed to spread of such speech; (2) Measures will be taken to stop religious extremism and protect religious minorities; and (3) Madrassas will be regularized and reformed.
 - *Tanzeem-e-Ittehad Madaris Diniya:* A body which has representatives from all madrassah boards.

- *Paigham-e-Pakistan, 2018*: A document that reads more like fatwa, which is endorsed by leading scholars of all sects, *Paigham-e-Pakistan* denounces violence in the name of religion. It enjoys support of both civilian and military leadership. However, some complained that the state thrust the document on them. Many were asked to sign it even though they disagreed with some of its clauses. Although it is being disseminated widely, it is still not heard of by a sizeable section of society, which was not consulted in it through any forum. There is also controversy over the involvement of leaders of banned outfits in its dissemination and endorsement.
- National Counter Terrorism Authority's (NACTA) *collaboration* with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) on eradicating sectarianism from the campuses.

Participants

Inauguration and introduction

1. His Excellency Martin Coblentz, Ambassador of Germany to Pakistan
2. Muhammad Amir Rana, director PIPS
3. Safdar Sial, research analyst PIPS

Discussants

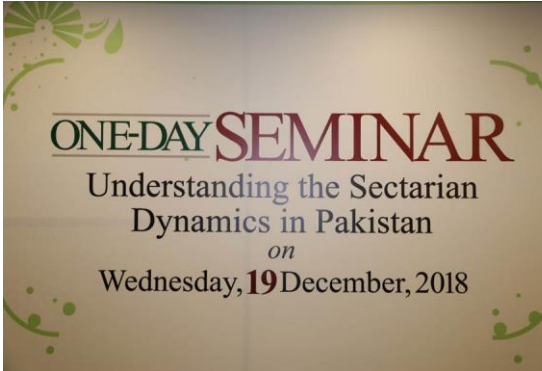
4. Dr. Qibla Ayaz, Chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology
5. Dr. Khalid Masud, Former Chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology
6. Saqib Akbar, Chairman, Al-Basira Trust
7. Khursheed Nadeem, Anchor and columnist
8. Amanat Rasool
9. Dr. Husn ul Ameen, Executive Director, Iqbal Institute for Research and Dialogue, IIUI
10. Akbar Hussain Zahidi, Vice Principal Jamia Sadiq, Quetta
11. Dr. Khadija Aziz, Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University Peshawar (SBBWUP)
12. Dr. Rashid Ahmed, Associate Professor, University of Peshawar
13. Abdul Haq Hashmi, Amir, Jamat Islami Balochistan Province
14. Dr. Abdul Muhaimin, Head, University of Haripur
15. Khursheed Nadeem, Chairman, Organization of Research and Education/
Anchor and columnist
16. M. Zia ul Haq Naqshbandi, Chairman TIU
17. Sahibzada Amanat Rasool, Founder Idara Fikre Jadeed
18. Maulana Attaullah Shahab, Religious Scholar, Gilgit Baltistan

19. Syed Ahmed Yousaf Banuri, Professor, Jamia Uloom Islamia Banuri Town
20. Maulana Amjad Abbas, Research Fellow, Al-Basirah
21. Mujtaba Rathore, Senior Manager, Peace and Education Foundation

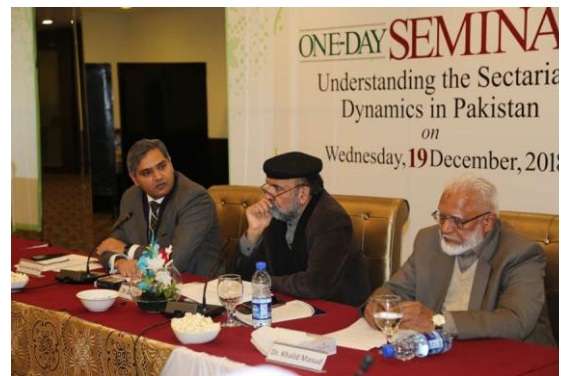
Attendees (PIPS staff)

22. Muhammad Ismail Khan
23. Huzeiffa Masud
24. Talha Satti
25. Shagufta Hayat
26. Zarghouna Khattak
27. Anam Fatima
28. Hassan Sardar

Image Gallery



PAKISTAN'S SECTARIAN MIRE: THE WAY FORWARD

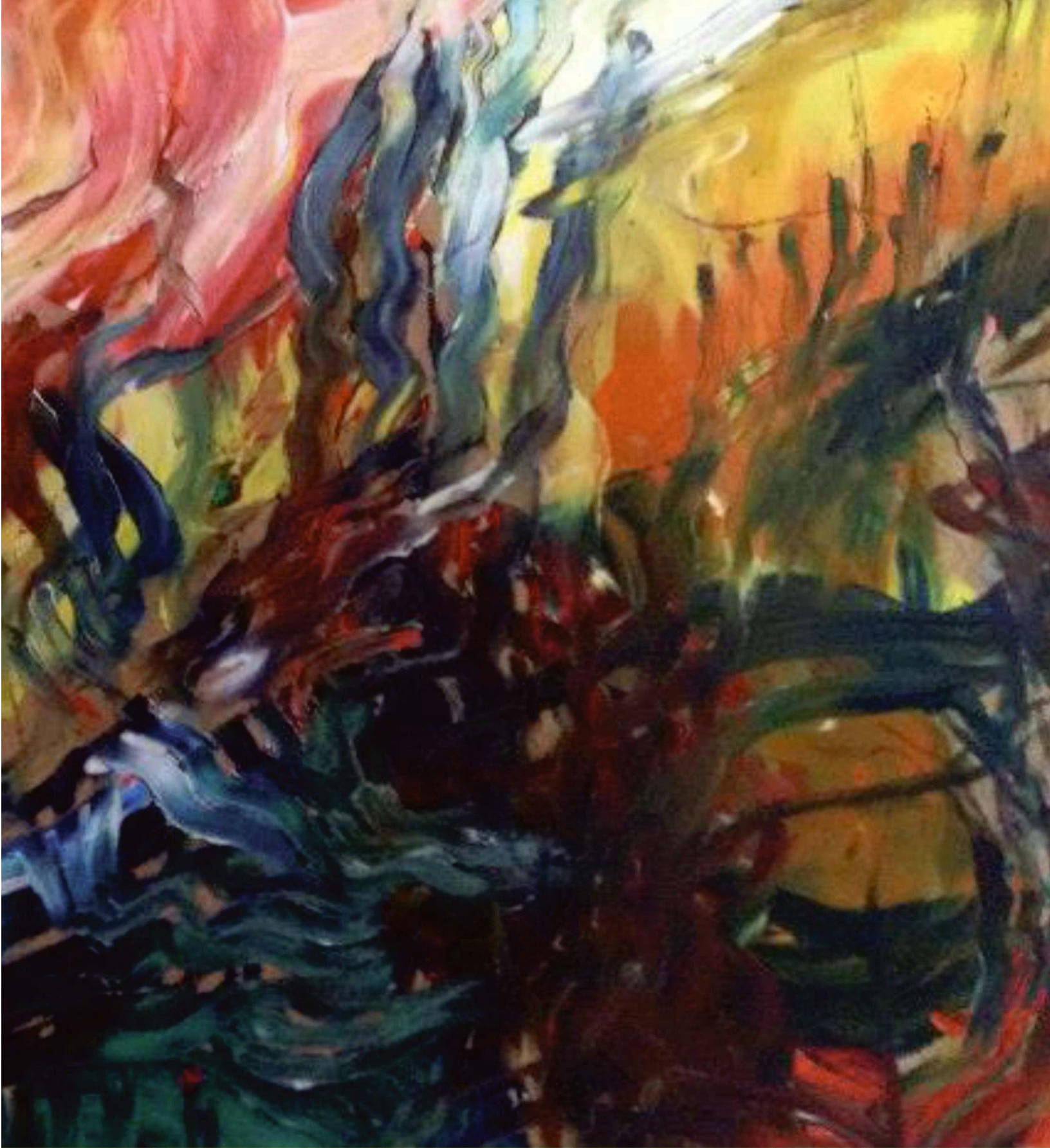


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