

Pakistan's Destabilization Playbook: Khalistan Separatist Activism Within the US

STUDY GROUP ON KASHMIR AND KHALISTAN MOVEMENTS:

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Cover: Members of Sikhs For Justice rally against Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in Lafayette Square across the street from the White House on February 18, 2020 in Washington, DC. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

For many years, a few members of the Sikh diaspora located in North America have supported the creation of a separate state for Sikhs—to be called Khalistan—in the Indian state of Punjab bordering Pakistan and the volatile Jammu and Kashmir region. While demands for a separate Sikh state were voiced prior to the dissolution of British India in 1947, Sikh militants did not begin employing violence to advance their demands until the late 1970s and continued to do so through the early 1990s.

In 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dispatched the Indian army to oust militants and their leaders from the holiest of Sikh shrines, the expansive Golden Temple, which they had occupied and then fortified with weapons brought from Pakistan. Gandhi's action served to galvanize Sikhs living abroad, as did the anti-Sikh pogroms that occurred following Sikh militants'

1984 assassination of Prime Minister Gandhi in retaliation for the Golden Temple military operation.

During the course of the fifteen-year campaign of violence that lasted until the early 1990s, some 25,000 were murdered, mostly Sikhs.¹ Despite the long period of dormancy that then followed, Khalistani militancy has increased in recent years,² and so curtailment of diaspora-based efforts to re-invigorate it may prevent a return to the violence of the 1980s.

Photo caption: A visitor touches the names of her brother and sister-in-law and their two children who died in the bombing of Air India Flight 182. The plane was flying on the Montreal-London-Delhi route on June 23, 1985, when a bomb destroyed the Boeing 747 over the Atlantic Ocean near Ireland. (Steve Russell/Toronto Star via Getty Images)

Such diaspora-based efforts are worrisome because Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), may be assisting pro-Khalistan groups financially and organizationally. Admittedly, Pakistan and India frequently accuse one another of fomenting separatist insurgencies within each other's territory. For instance, following India's documentation of Pakistan's widely acknowledged support of terrorism and violence in India, a Pakistani dossier circulated among the permanent members of the UN Security Council accused India of supporting militant resistance to Pakistani rule in Balochistan, which borders Iran and Afghanistan.³ However, unlike Pakistan's tit-for-tat accusations of India, its organized support of terrorist activities to pursue its claims on Jammu and Kashmir have attracted international attention since at least 1992.

For years, the United States and most of the international community have condemned Pakistan's tolerance of and support for terrorism.⁴ Moreover, the US Department of State's *Country Report on Terrorism 2019: Pakistan* states, "Pakistan continued to serve as a safe haven for certain regionally focused terrorist groups. It allowed groups targeting Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban and affiliated HQN [Haqqani Network], as well as groups targeting India, including LeT [Lashkar-e-Tayyaba] and its affiliated front organizations, and JeM [Jaish-e-Mohammed], to operate from its territory."⁵

In addition, the report continues, "Islamabad has yet to take decisive actions against Indian- and Afghanistan-focused militants who would undermine their operational capability." The Indian government and several independent scholars believe that militancy in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the Khalistan movement, are parts of Pakistan's plan for "bleeding India with a thousand cuts."⁶

According to data collected by Gallup, American public opinion regarding Pakistan has, in general, been strongly negative since 2000, with solid majorities expressing unfavorable views of it.⁷ After US Navy SEALs found and killed al-Qaeda leader Osama

bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011, a short distance from Pakistan's premier military academy, a plurality of Americans believed Pakistan undermined rather than aided American efforts to locate him.⁸

Despite the strength of public opposition to Pakistan, the United States government subsequently failed to develop policy measures to coerce that country into abandoning jihad as a foreign policy tool and, curiously, viewed Pakistan's support of terrorism as the problem of other countries in the region rather than of the United States. This stance, however, changed in the aftermath of the November 2008 Lashkar-e-Tayyaba attack on Indian port and megacity Mumbai, in which ten Lashkar-e-Tayyaba gunmen murdered at least 174 people and injured several hundred more.

While the vast majority of the attack's victims were Indian, it also claimed the lives of twenty-six foreign nationals, including several Americans.⁹ In the weeks and months following the attack, the extent of the support provided the attack team by Pakistan's ISI became increasingly obvious, and US policymakers increased their level of attention on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, including holding somewhat regular Congressional hearings on these activities.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the United States government has shown no interest in violence committed by Khalistan activists, even though the Khalistan campaign's most ardent supporters are located in western countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Despite urgent Indian requests to these countries to curb Khalistan separatist groups within their borders, their governments have remained unresponsive to India's appeals.¹¹ Making these demurrals all the more puzzling is the increasing involvement over the last decade of Khalistani groups with Pakistan's so-called¹² Kashmiri groups, who have also become the focus of American intelligence and policy communities.¹³

Cooperation between Khalistani and Kashmiri groups has become increasingly apparent in North America, the United

Kingdom, and Europe, with Kashmiri and Khalistani activists often operating in tandem. For example, in August 2020, Khalistani and Kashmiri activists staged a demonstration in New York against India,¹⁴ and, in September 2019, activists appropriated imagery and slogans from the Black Lives Matter movement, whose aim is to redress systemic and structural white supremacy in the United States.¹⁵ Joint protests of Khalistani and Kashmiri separatists have occurred in Washington DC,¹⁶ Houston,¹⁷ Ottawa,¹⁸ London,¹⁹ Brussels,²⁰ Geneva,²¹ and other European capitals.

Anticipation constitutes a crucial part of national security planning, and, therefore, investigating, within the limits prescribed by law, the activities of Khalistani groups located in North America is important to preventing a reoccurrence of the violence orchestrated by the Khalistan movement in the 1980s. During that period, along with numerous attacks on civilians, the Khalistan movement was linked to the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182 from Toronto to Mumbai that left 329 dead and the failed bombing of an Air India jet in Tokyo on the same day.²²

Importantly, the recent increase in Khalistan-related anti-India activism within the US is occurring as the United States and India are collaborating to confront the rise of China, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Pakistan is a critical Chinese ally and therefore has a vested interest in weakening this India-US collaboration. Campaigns such as the one for Khalistan could also serve to

distract Washington and New Delhi from strengthening the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, US) partnership. Acknowledging the strategic objective of mobilizing the peer rivals of the US and their primary South Asian ally against India, one of the most active Khalistan separatist groups in the US recently published open letters to the leaders of Russia, China, and Pakistan requesting their support.

A report by Terry Milewski for the MacDonald Laurier Institute provides details of recent Khalistani group activities in Canada.²³ To produce a similar report for the US, Hudson Institute's South and Central Asia Program assembled a group of South Asia experts to evaluate the fifty-five interlinked Kashmiri and Khalistani groups currently operating within the United States. Connecting several of these groups to one another are shared political interests and a common *modus operandi*. Some, for instance, organize joint events and share lawyers, donors, and accountants. Note, however, that none of these groups has been accused of a crime in the United States, and implying or offering evidence of unlawful conduct does not fall within the purview of a research project such as this.

Rather, the following report simply examines the conduct of Khalistan and Kashmir separatist groups within the United States to investigate their support by Pakistan, their ties to militant and terrorist groups in India, and the possible detrimental effects of their activities on US foreign policy in South Asia.



CHAPTER 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KHALISTAN CAMPAIGN

The history of the Khalistan movement precedes the partition of the British Indian Empire, the Raj, in 1947. Several issues motivated the desire of some Sikhs for an independent Sikh state, variously referred to as Sikhistan or Khalistan (Land of the Khalsa [Pure]). In the late nineteenth century, many Sikhs, discomfited by Hindu reformist groups' efforts to claim them as Hindus, sought to erect religious boundaries, with some going so far as to argue for the foundation of a separate state. Because Sikhs disproportionately served in the Empire's police and military ranks, particularly during the two world wars, they expected some territorial recompense for their service.

Finally, as partition neared, it became ever more apparent that partition of the Punjab would require a significant number of

families to be uprooted and would divide Sikh sacred geography between the two new Dominions. By 1944, some Sikh leaders were calling for the formation of a Sikhistan or even an "Azad Punjab" (i.e., Free Punjab).²⁴

Demographics did not support Sikh demands for a separate country. The 1941 census of the undivided Punjab showed that Muslims comprised 53 percent of its population, Hindus 29 percent, and Sikhs only 15 percent. While the Radcliff

Photo caption: Rapid Action Force personnel along with Punjab Police personnel deployed near the Golden Temple on the eve of the 33rd Operation Blue Star anniversary at Akal Takht Sahib on June 6, 2017 in Amritsar, India. (Gurpreet Singh/Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Commission, which was tasked with partitioning British India's Punjab and Bengal provinces, generally divided territory according to communal composition, there is evidence that it also considered proportions of Sikhs living in given areas. Notably, for instance, some Muslim-majority areas were given to India because a large minority of Sikhs resided in them.²⁵

Following independence, Sikhs demanded a state in which they were a majority, a call that the Indian government rejected, as it was an explicitly communal demand. In 1962, following a significant change in Sikh political leadership, Sikhs sought a Punjab state on the basis of language and culture, regardless of the percentage of Sikhs residing there, a secular strategy that successfully mitigated the central government's concerns regarding a communal appeal. Consequently, the Punjab Subah was created in 1966 from the larger East Punjab state, with Sikhs constituting the majority of its population.²⁶

Those wanting an independent Sikh state were not mollified by the creation of India's new Sikh-majority state,²⁷ leading to an armed insurrection by militants seeking such an independent state. Many explanations have been advanced for what precipitated this insurrection, and a discussion of these is beyond the purview of this effort.²⁸ While the domestic roots of Punjabi militancy are subject to debate, the ISI's role in sustaining the insurgency is widely accepted within the scholarly community. Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 war is one popularly held explanation for Pakistan's interest in prolonging the Sikh insurrection even while simultaneously supporting a vast army of mujahideen to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan.

Although Pakistan's breakup in 1971 resulted from the civil war in which East Pakistan's majority Bengali population took up arms against the oppressive state, India's intervention in this conflict was pivotal. Throughout the summer of 1971, India supported the Bengali resistance politically, diplomatically, and militarily, and, in December of that year, formally entered the war. Within two weeks, Pakistan's military

surrendered, and East Pakistan became Bangladesh.²⁹ Since then, Pakistan has sought revenge by "bleeding India with a thousand cuts."³⁰

Pakistan's strategy thereafter has been to damage India by exploiting its religious, political, and ethnic fault lines and by supporting violent, extremist, and separatist movements across various parts of India. Internal politics in the Indian state of Punjab and Pakistan's ambitions coincided to create the milieu from which the Khalistan movement later emerged.

Having failed to win seats in 1972's Punjab state assembly elections, the Shiromani Akali Dal (also referred to as Akali Dal), a center-right Sikh-centric political party founded in 1920, demanded increased autonomy for Punjab in 1973 with the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, whose twelve parts covered political, economic, socio-cultural, and religious issues. Its key demands included devolution of power to state governments and integration of all Punjabi-speaking areas that were then part of other states with Punjab. The Indian government viewed these demands as secessionist in nature and refused to accept the Resolution.³¹

From 1978 and over the next decade, a violent secessionist movement to create Khalistan paralyzed the state of Punjab. Complex, local reasons underlay this period of unrest including an attempt at manipulation of state politics by the Indian government that spun out of control. By the early 1980s, this movement was receiving support from groups of puritanical Sikh fundamentalists including Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who recreated the historic Damdami Taksal—a traveling Sikh seminary founded in 1706 that was often at loggerheads with the Indian government.³²

In 1981, the Akali Dal put forth a list of forty-five policies, fourteen of which were purely religious in nature. Bhindranwale joined the Akali Dal and, in 1982, launched the Dharam Yuddh Morcha (Righteous Campaign) to implement the Anandpur

Sahib Resolution and, subsequently, the Ludhiana Resolution of 1978. A combination of religious zeal and political demands calling for increased devolution of power to the Punjab state by the Indian government, which other states within India have also sometimes sought, led to the violent Khalistan insurgency lasting from 1981 through 1995, in which thousands were attacked and killed. Bhindranwale and his supporters used violent rhetoric against people they described as “enemies of Sikhs,” thereby sanctioning extrajudicial, targeted, and terrorist killings.³³

In 1983, to escape arrest, extremists occupied and fortified the Sikh shrine Akal Takht inside the revered Golden Temple and other areas of the Temple’s extensive complex. These militants included Bhindranwale and two supporters—Amrik Singh Khalsa, head of the All India Sikh Students Federation, and Major General Shabeg Singh, a retired Indian military officer who had joined the Khalistan religious-political campaign. In response to the Temple’s occupation, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Blue Star, a military operation, on June 1, 1984, to clear the Temple complex.

Operation Blue Star resulted in bloodshed and destruction within one of the holiest of Sikh shrines. While many Sikhs viewed Operation Blue Star as a desecration of the Golden Temple, few knew of the considerable damage done to the Akal Takht shrine itself and to other parts of the Temple complex by Bhindranwale and his followers during their occupation of it, including fortification with armaments, or of the murders of opponents they committed within the sacred Temple grounds.³⁴

A few months later, on October 31, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Indira Gandhi, and large parts of the country, including the capital city of Delhi, then experienced horrific anti-Sikh riots.³⁵ The physical damage to and desecration of the Akal Takht shrine, for some of which Bhindranwale and his followers were responsible; Bhindranwale’s death and the assassination of India’s prime minister in revenge; and anti-Sikh violence gained

the Khalistan movement some momentum. In particular, although the anti-Sikh riots preceding the 1984 election helped elect Rajiv Gandhi prime minister with overwhelming support across India, they also strengthened the Punjab insurgency, against which the Indian government then brought an iron fist to subdue.

When the insurgency ended in 1995, the official number of deaths attributed to it was 21,000, the majority of whom were Punjabi civilians. Fourteen hundred police officers in Punjab were killed by terrorists, along with many of their family members. Insurgents also killed farmers, judges, teachers, journalists, and civil society activists who refused to support the secessionists.³⁶ By the end of the insurrection, most identified terrorists had either been killed, were imprisoned, or had escaped to Pakistan.

In the succeeding decades, the Khalistan movement was unable to regain sympathy or support inside India. However, throughout and following the insurrection, Pakistan viewed support of this separatist movement within India as an ideal opportunity to cause trouble for its neighbor.

Pakistan’s Support of the Khalistan Movement

Ethnic cleansing, forced conversion, attacks on *gurdwaras*, and migration have ensured that Sikhs, like Hindus and Christians, are currently a minuscule, endangered minority within Pakistan. Nonetheless, Pakistan has long championed the Khalistan struggle, both inside India and among the Sikh diaspora, and covertly supported both the Khalistan insurgency in Punjab and its anti-India recruitment and propaganda campaign around the world.

In his 2016 book *Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate: Covert Action and Internal Operations*, Owen Sirrs provides background and details concerning Pakistani intelligence services and military’s support of the Khalistan insurgency and the role this support played in the unconventional warfare the Pakistani deep state employed to weaken India.³⁷

Even in the 1950s, according to Sirrs, “Pakistanis were re-evaluating their UW (unconventional warfare) program” because “the strategy was not achieving its objectives, namely weakening India, forcing a referendum on Kashmir’s future, and eventually incorporating all of 1947 Kashmir into Pakistan.”³⁸

Consequently, an elite military unit specializing in unconventional warfare, the Special Services Group (SSG), was created in 1957. The new unit, which received training from both the CIA and US Army, was commanded by Lt. Colonel Abubakar Osman Mitha. According to Sirrs, “SSG’s creation reflected a broad trend in Pakistani army thinking regarding insurgent warfare.”³⁹ In 1965, the SSG executed Operation Gibraltar, during which Pakistani infiltrators entered the Indian union territory of Jammu and Kashmir for the purpose of igniting a mass uprising among the Muslim population there. Kashmir’s Muslims did not support Pakistani guerrillas at the time and the Pakistani effort led to full-fledged war along the entire India-Pakistan border. That war ended in a stalemate, damaging the US-Pakistan relationship because of a US embargo on arms. It eroded trust between India and Pakistan, as it came only a few months after the two countries had initiated dialogue to resolve their dispute over Kashmir.

The targets of the Pakistan army’s unconventional warfare strategies were India’s border states and union territories, whether Kashmir and Punjab or the states comprising the northeast region—all areas where insurgencies already existed, giving the Pakistan army opportunities to provide support. In India’s northeast regions, China and Pakistan worked together, with China also providing arms and training to insurgents.⁴⁰

After the 1965 war, the ISI assumed the role of principal supporter of insurgencies within India, adopting a bifurcated approach, with “West Pakistan provid[ing] access to Kashmir and Punjab while East Pakistan enabled ISI and SSG to tap into active insurgencies in India’s remote Assam province.”⁴¹

With respect to the Khalistan insurgency, by the late 1970s Pakistan had firmly entrenched itself among the separatists. In addition, during 1978-1980, Indian officials noticed that “Pakistan ... entertained unusually large numbers of Sikh pilgrims to Sikh shrines in Pakistan.”⁴² Pakistan’s military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, had restored Sikh holy places and opened them for religious pilgrimage, hosting Sikh leaders from England and North America who visited Pakistan as pilgrims and were strong voices for the foundation of Khalistan.⁴³

According to Sirrs, General ul-Haq recognized the Khalistan movement as “an opportunity to weaken and distract the Indian government by miring it in yet another insurgent war ‘of a thousand cuts.’” Future Director General of the ISI Hamid Gul argued that “keeping Punjab destabilized is equivalent to the Pakistan Army having an extra division at no cost to the taxpayers.”⁴⁴ As violence flared in Punjab, the Indian government accused Pakistan of arming and training the Sikh insurgents.

Then-Director General of ISI General Akhtar Abdul Rahman created a position in his agency for a brigadier whose job it was to deal with “the situation in East Punjab where Sikhs had started their freedom struggle against India.”⁴⁵ Abdul Rahman’s colleagues took pride in the fact that, despite India’s having deployed large numbers of security personnel, “the Sikhs were able to set the whole province on fire. They knew who to kill, where to plant a bomb and which office to target.”⁴⁶

According to Sirrs, the ISI believed that “New Delhi had burned most of its bridges to the Sikh community” with Operation Blue Star, and thereafter its role in Punjab became readily apparent. Although some Sikh militants opposed ISI assuming any role in their fight, “ISI’s position improved partly due to Sikh factionalism, which the Pakistanis deliberately aggravated in order to gain control.” A major militant group, the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF), “broke up in the mid-1980s mainly over internal squabbles but also because ISI aggravated leadership rivalries in the way it distributed arms.” In addition,

Sirrs notes that one KCF leader, Bhai Wassan Singh Zaffarwal, provided “overall guidance and leadership to his faction from his ISI-provided safe haven in Pakistan.”⁴⁷

Most analyses of ISI’s role in promoting and supporting terrorism focus on Pakistan’s Islamist clients. However, Sirrs points out, ISI operations in India’s East Punjab “demonstrated a certain pragmatism” that was not based on shared ideology. “From the Pakistan army’s perspective,” he writes, “a weakened, divided, and distracted India was most certainly a desirable objective even if this required alliances with otherwise unlikely parties such as the Khalistan extremists. As an instrument of state policy, it was ISI’s mission to exploit the Sikh extremists for Pakistan’s national interests.”⁴⁸

Over the years, while Pakistan’s own Sikhs have suffered,⁴⁹ Pakistan’s support has enabled Sikhs in England, the United States, and Canada to mobilize a strong lobby critical of India’s human rights violations.⁵⁰ Pakistan-backed terrorism in Punjab has been subject to little discussion, however. The United States, unwilling to embarrass its Cold War ally Pakistan during the 1980s, ignored proof offered by India of Pakistan’s role in the Khalistan insurgency. Only after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the termination of covert US assistance to Afghan mujahideen did the US acknowledge Pakistani support for Khalistan terrorists.

The US Department of State’s *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1991* reports, “There were continuing credible reports throughout 1991 of official Pakistani support for Kashmiri militant groups engaged in terrorism in Indian-controlled Kashmir, as well as support to Sikh militant groups engaged in terrorism in Indian Punjab. This support allegedly includes provision of weapons and training.”⁵¹ Reports for subsequent years also mention Pakistani support of Khalistan. Since Americans did not view the Khalistan movement as a direct threat to US security or interests, little effort was made to independently corroborate “credible reports” of Pakistani support or to act decisively against the Khalistan groups.

The Khalistan insurgency lost momentum when India fenced off part of the Punjab border with Pakistan, and the civilian Pakistani government headed by Benazir Bhutto agreed to joint patrols of the border by Indian and Pakistani troops. As a consequence of Bhutto’s agreeing to these patrols, former ISI head Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul accused Benazir Bhutto of “revealing to India the identities of Sikh insurgents with links to Pakistani intelligence.”⁵² As Husain Haqqani observes, “This charge was unusual as Pakistan had always denied any role in the Sikh insurgency.”⁵³

Pakistan’s policy regarding Sikh shrines within that country demonstrates the relationship between Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, and the Khalistan movement. The Pakistani organization that manages these shrines, the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), is often headed by recently retired military or intelligence officers. For example, Lt. General Javed Nasir, who was removed as director general of the ISI in May 1993 because of US pressure over his role in supporting terrorist networks worldwide,⁵⁴ was appointed head of ETPB after retiring and was involved in several scandals thereafter.⁵⁵ The former intelligence chief, a self-professed Islamist fundamentalist, was subsequently appointed chair of the Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Pakistan’s official organization for promoting the Sikh religion.⁵⁶

Pakistan refused to hand General Nasir over to The Hague International Tribunal for his role in the Bosnian War in 2011,⁵⁷ acknowledging that his role in supporting Islamist and Khalistan terrorists had official sanction. In 2019, when the civilian government appointed a civilian to be ETPB chair, former ISI officer Major Gen. Muhammad Saad Khattak went to court to have himself appointed instead, claiming that he was better suited to fill the position, as his profile better matched those of others who had held it previously.⁵⁸ To this day, the organization supervising the Sikh shrines in Pakistan continues to include recently retired military officers.

The Pakistan Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (PSGPC) once headed by General Nasir is also maintaining close relations

with Pakistan's secret service, and its secretary, Gopal Singh Chawla, considered a key recruiter for the Khalistan insurgency, is tied to the ISI.⁵⁹ Chawla has close ties with Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, founder of the banned jihadi terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which was responsible for the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, among other atrocities.

Chawla has often been photographed with Saeed, whom he has described as his "ideal person,"⁶⁰ and some of their photographs have appeared in Pakistani media. In 2018, India demanded that Chawla be removed from his PSGPC position because he interfered with Indian officials attempting to meet Indian pilgrims following the opening of the Kartarpur corridor.⁶¹

Still, India cooperated in the opening of the Kartarpur corridor between Indian and Pakistani Punjab to allow Sikh pilgrims to visit some of their holiest shrines located across the border. Nonetheless, India's security establishment harbors concerns that the Pakistani deep state will use this corridor to send terrorists into Indian Punjab disguised as pilgrims. Pakistan's desire to revive the Khalistan insurgency and its alleged support of illicit drug trafficking and cross-border money laundering, constitute major security concerns for India.⁶²

In addition, Pakistan makes little effort to distance itself from the Khalistan movement. An official video released by the government of Pakistan celebrating the opening of the Kartarpur

corridor featured pictures of three Khalistani separatist leaders, deemed terrorists by India, who were killed by Indian forces during Operation Blue Star: Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Amrik Singh Khalsa, and Shabeg Singh.⁶³

Despite India's objections, Gopal Singh Chawla attended the Kartarpur opening ceremony. In the speech he gave for the occasion, he declared that the "Khalistan movement was never suppressed, will never be suppressed. Inshallah, Khalistan will be free, and Kashmir will be free too."⁶⁴ Use of the term "Inshallah" (God willing) by Chawla, ostensibly a devout Sikh, and his connection of the "freedom" movements of Khalistan and Kashmir were obvious plays on sentiment in predominantly Muslim Pakistan.

Chawla's rhetoric on an occasion that CNN termed a "historic moment" of India-Pakistan reconciliation⁶⁵ underscored the primary reason for India's continuing concern regarding Khalistan. "If you don't understand then you will be destroyed, you Indians," Chawla roared. "Your stories won't be told in history. If India dares to attack Pakistan, the entire Sikh community will join the Pakistan Army." Continuing his threats, he stated, "The Sikh community will fight you and we will throw this pen down and pick up the gun. After that, we will teach you such a lesson that you will be wiped out. If you dare to look at Pakistan with a twisted eye, we will gouge your eyes out. Pakistan zindabad, Pakistan zindabad ["victory for Pakistan, victory for Pakistan"]."⁶⁶



CHAPTER 3. KHALISTAN ORGANIZATIONS CULTIVATING PAKISTANI STATE SUPPORT

In July 2020 under provisions of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs banned the organization Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) and designated nine individuals linked to separatist Khalistani organizations as terrorists, including four based in Pakistan.⁶⁷

Several of these individuals belong to known terrorist organizations: Wadhawa Singh Babbar, chief of Babbar Khalsa International; Lakhbir Singh, who heads the International Sikh Youth Federation; Ranjeet Singh, chief of the Khalistan Zindabad Force; and Paramjit Singh, leader of the Khalistan Commando Force. Each of these four groups has been implicated in specific acts of terror in India while their designated leaders are reportedly based in Pakistan.⁶⁸

Six months later, India's National Investigation Agency filed terrorism-related charges against ten people, including SFJ leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, before a special court in Mohali, Punjab. Pannun and others were alleged to have been involved in a series of acts of violence, including arson in Punjab, during the year 2017–18. They were also charged with “carrying out of propaganda activities both online and on ground” in support of Sikhs for Justice and Referendum 2020, an unofficial poll of Sikhs living outside India that Khalistan

Photo caption: Khalistan flag seen as Canadian Pro-Khalistan Sikhs protest against the Indian government and call for a separate Sikh state called Khalistan in Malton, Ontario, Canada, on May 05, 2013. (Creative Touch Imaging Ltd./NurPhoto via Getty Images)

advocates were planning to conduct in 2020 to show support for Khalistan's independence.⁶⁹ Referendum 2020 was thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic but would have been nothing more than a propaganda exercise even if it had gone through on time. In response to the Indian government's actions, Sikhs for Justice argued that India's charges relating to propaganda were an attempt by the Indian government to deny Pannun and his associates freedom of speech.

But Indian authorities insisted that several acts of violence had been committed by "a gang of radicalized Sikh youth under the direction [of] and [with] financial assistance from SFJ handlers located abroad as part of an organized conspiracy by the accused for launching a concerted secessionist campaign for creation of Khalistan."⁷⁰

The National Investigation Agency's action against Pannun and others connected to Sikhs for Justice came soon after Pannun made public a letter he had written to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan.⁷¹ The letter was titled "December 16 'Fall of Dhaka' is the past, 'Fall of Delhi' is inevitable," a reference to the December 16, 1971, surrender of the Pakistan army in Dhaka that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in erstwhile East Pakistan. The Pakistani surrender was preceded by civil war in East Pakistan, during which India supported the resistance of Pakistan's Bengali population to atrocities committed by Pakistan's military that independent scholars have described as attempted genocide.

Pannun's letter to Imran Khan stated that "Pakistan should be prepared to recognize new neighbor Khalistan."⁷² The language of the letter, including phrases such as "fall of Dhaka" and "fall of Delhi," seemed to have been taken straight out of Pakistan's textbooks and the rhetoric used by Pakistani military and intelligence personnel in propaganda directed against India.

Moreover, as the letter made it clear, supporters of Khalistan sought to create circumstances similar to those faced by

Pakistan in that country's then-eastern wing following the 1970 elections, in which the population of East Bengal had voted overwhelmingly for autonomy. However, the party for which they had voted was banned following the election, and its supporters subjected to repression. Although the Khalistanis have neither contested nor won an election in Indian Punjab, they want Pakistan's military to provide them support similar to that the Indian military provided the people of Bangladesh in their struggle for freedom.

The letter makes for interesting reading and sheds light on the Khalistan movement's strategy. "Today, the growing discontent of the Sikhs living under Indian occupation is clearly demonstrated in the ongoing protests against Modi government's anti-farmer bills," it states. "More than ever before in the 70 years of India, Sikh people are ready to liberate Punjab from Indian occupation through democratic means of referendum."⁷³

Although Pannun's letter claims that the referendum to which he alludes would "give the Sikhs living anywhere in the world and indigenous people of all faiths living in Punjab [the opportunity] to express their will on the question of future association of Punjab with India," it had no legal standing. Still, he insists, "Voting in the non-governmental Punjab independence referendum" is "well grounded in international laws, treaties, and [the] UN Charter and principles of democracy."

According to the plan outlined in the letter, the referendum was to be the catalyst for the secession of India's Punjab state just as the 1970 general election, which had been legally conducted by Pakistan's Election Commission, was for the separation of East Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In this letter, Pannun makes SFJ's support for increased Pakistani hostility toward India clear, suggesting that the time for an assault on Delhi was "fast approaching." He continues, "Pakistan should be prepared to recognize Khalistan—compris[ed] of the areas of Punjab currently occupied by

India—as a new neighbor.”⁷⁴ Repeating a fantasy often found in the publications of Pakistan’s extremist jihadi groups, he states, “For the people of Pakistan, it is important to realize the establishment of Khalistan will be the harbinger to the liberation of Jammu and Kashmir from India’s illegal occupation.”

It is important to note that some maps of Khalistan used by its advocates include not just areas of present-day India but also large parts of present-day Pakistan that are religiously important to Sikhs. The most capacious territorial claims are based upon the geographical expanse of the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-1839). At its peak, his empire extended into the Khyber Pass in the west and up to western Tibet in the east, and from Mithankot (in Pakistan’s southern Punjab) in the south to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the north.⁷⁵

While Sikhism recognizes five sacred seats of authority (panj takht), all located in today’s India, a more expansive map of Sikh sacred geography includes numerous historical *gurdwaras* in Pakistan, the most notable of which include Nankana Sahab, the birthplace of Sikh founder Guru Nanak, and Dera Sahib in Lahore, the seat of Singh’s kingdom.⁷⁶

Curiously, Khalistan groups seeking to curry favor with and funding from Pakistan limit their territorial demands to India’s state of Punjab. For example, while speaking of referendum for the creation of Khalistan, Sikhs for Justice limits its ambition only to Indian territory, a clear indication of its desire for continued Pakistan backing. This is akin to those who champion the cause of Kashmir internationally, and demand a plebiscite in Indian Kashmir but say nothing about the parts of Kashmir currently controlled by Pakistan.

Sikhs for Justice is not alone in limiting their territorial demands to India only. Kanwarpal Singh, spokesperson of the Amritsar-based Dal Khalsa, also demurs from including in Khalistan such historically important *gurdwaras* located in Pakistan as Nankana Sahab and Dera Sahab. “We can’t change what has happened

in the past; it’s not practical to demand the inclusion of those areas outside the current state boundaries,”⁷⁷ he stated.

Were Khalistani proponents such as Pannun and Sikhs for Justice championing a Sikh state based upon Sikh theology and religio-political history, they would presumably not be so easily able to exclude historically important shrines located in Pakistan. Some scholars therefore postulate that they are intended not only to avoid antagonizing the Pakistani state but also to cultivate its political, diplomatic, and financial support.⁷⁸

Lacking Support in Punjab, Looking for Support from China and Russia

The Khalistan campaign has little support in the Indian state of Punjab, whose citizens voted the Indian National Congress party into power in the 2017 state elections with a 77 percent voter turnout.⁷⁹ In 2012, an alliance of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Punjab-based Shiromani Akali Dal won the state’s elections, whereas the Indian National Congress did so in 2007. In none of these state elections were separatist sentiments voiced or even acknowledged, and there is little evidence of present-day support for Sikhs for Justice, Pannun, or the Khalistan movement within India.

According to an investigative report by *The Caravan*, “The only support that Pannun enjoyed was from the youth who left Punjab after [violence in] 1984 and took asylum in UK, USA, Canada or Europe.”⁸⁰ Moreover, what little support Sikhs for Justice has manifested in Punjab seems to be attributable to “the organization’s financial incentives.”

In August 2020, Sikhs for Justice began circulating messages and posters offering US \$2,500 for raising the Khalistani flag and \$5,000 for performing the *ardas* [Sikh daily prayer] for Khalistan at the Akal Takht (in Amritsar’s Golden Temple). The SFJ’s offers found a few takers, with two persons arrested in Morga for raising the Khalistani flag and one in Amritsar for performing an *ardas* for Khalistan at the Golden Temple.⁸¹

Pannun, however, seems unfazed by his lack of support among Sikhs in Punjab and continues to seek external support, focusing on countries that possibly have an issue with India. On June 17, 2020, he sent a letter to Chinese President Xi Jinping titled “Pro Khalistan Sikhs condemn Modi government’s violent aggression against China.”⁸² This letter not only attempted to identify China as “the enemy of my enemy” and so as “my friend” but was part of a concerted effort to secure assistance in mobilizing an insurgency against India. These same motivations led to Pannun’s sending similar letters to Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan and Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁸³

“We are writing to condemn India’s violent aggression causing death of several soldiers of China at the Ladakh border,” the letter to Xi states. “We empathize with the people of China as we are a people whose land and resources are under Indian occupation and who have faced genocide at the hands of the Indian state since 1947.”⁸⁴ In addition, the letter acknowledged possibly covert Chinese support for Khalistan propagandists.

“We also want to take this opportunity to thank the people of China for [the] over whelming [sic] encouraging and supporting response they have given to SFJ’s recent call for non-Governmental Referendum 2020 for the secession of Punjab from India,” Pannun writes in his letter to Xi, adding that he and his colleagues “look forward” to being “in Beijing in August of this year during our tour of several countries of Europe and Asia in connection with Voter Registration for [the] Punjab Independence Referendum.”

There is no indication that China supported SFJ’s unofficial referendum, particularly given that China’s communist autocratic system does not countenance even fake expressions of democracy. Moreover, Pannun and his US-based colleagues could not have travelled to China in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a similar letter dated July 6, 2020, Pannun wrote to Russian President Vladimir Putin seeking support for the Khalistan

Referendum 2020. Before seeking Russia’s backing, it congratulated Putin for winning the right to run for president for two additional six-year terms due to the July 1 referendum on constitutional amendments.

“Since Russia has demonstrated unprecedented adherence to the process of Referendum in Crimea,” Pannun wrote, “we urge the Government of Russia to take up the issue of [the] Punjab Independence Referendum before the UN Security Council to impress upon India that expressing an opinion through referendum is the fundamental right of the people of Punjab.”⁸⁵

Given that Pannun is an American citizen, his seeking support from Xi Jinping and Putin, both of whom are viewed as hostile to the United States, is surprising. These actions can be understood only in the context of the Khalistani-Pakistan nexus. China is Pakistan’s closest ally, and the relationship between Russia and Pakistan has strengthened in recent years, with the two conducting joint military exercises and counter-terrorism training, which never occurred during the Cold War.⁸⁶

The Pakistan Nexus

According to an investigation conducted by the *Economic Times* in 2018, the Sikhs for Justice website was being managed out of Karachi, Pakistan. The report claims that www.sikhsforjustice.org and www.2020referendum.org (now defunct) were then linked to Karachi-based <https://snip.pk> (also apparently no longer in use). In addition, the *Times* investigation found websites of the movement’s leaders, including Pannun, to also be linked to this Pakistan-based site.⁸⁷ The almost sixty additional web domains then being leased by Pannun and his law firm included sikhssoldiers4khalistan.com and, interestingly, freebengal.us.⁸⁸

Apparently, while “leaders demanding Khalistan have always denied their Pakistan-links, they failed to cover these links online,” the *Economic Times* report continues. In addition, the article reports that the Sikhs for Justice websites were then being

managed not only from Pakistan but were also being hosted on the same virtual private server, “with their domains being hosted through the same Florida-based website, Mechanicslien.org.” Also according to the *Times* article, Pakistani national Amir Siddique, “who claim[ed] to be a Karachi-based freelance web developer,” was involved with the SFJ websites. Reportedly, he was also “chief technical officer at Android Web Productions, a company with offices in Florida and Karachi,” and was the developer of the snip.pk website.⁸⁹

Denials notwithstanding, the Sikhs for Justice leadership has made little effort to conceal its other ties with Pakistan. For instance, in 2018, Pannun announced the establishment of a “permanent office of SFJ” in Lahore, Pakistan, “to coordinate the registration of referendum votes,” which would be an “information center for the Sikhs.”⁹⁰ This statement, made on a day when 3,000 Indian devotees reached Sikh holy sites in Pakistan through the Kartarpur corridor, increased Indian suspicions regarding Pakistan’s intentions in opening the corridor. Although Pakistan publicized this as a gesture of goodwill toward India, it more likely represented an effort to recruit uncommitted Sikhs to support Khalistan secessionism.

In 2019, Islamist and Pakistani activists—including Pakistani agent⁹¹ Ghulam Nabi Fai, activists of Jamaat-e-Islami and officials belonging to Imran Khan’s political party—organized a series of protests in Houston during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁹² One demonstration featured a “Go Back Modi truck rally” organized by Sikhs for Justice’s Pannun; the otherwise mostly defunct Sikh Association of America and its head, Hardam Singh Azad; and Ghazala Habib, representative of the terror-linked Kashmiri Hurriyat political alliance and head of Friends of Kashmir, an international anti-Indian organization openly backed by Islamabad. The truck rally advertised itself as a “call by Pro Khalistan Sikhs & Organizations Supporting People of Kashmir.”⁹³

Subsequently, in August 2020, Friends of Kashmir organized a series of webinars in cooperation with the Pakistani embassy in

Washington, DC, and its consulate in Houston. One such webinar advertised a variety of radical Islamist and Pakistani speakers, including Ghazala Habib and Otar Singh Pannu, another Sikhs for Justice representative. They were joined by the president of Pakistan’s Azad Kashmir, the Pakistani ambassador, and an array of Pakistani and American politicians.⁹⁴

Other American Kashmiri organizations have also apparently formed Khalistani partnerships. Stand With Kashmir (SWK), for instance, counts dozens of prominent academics among its staff and speakers, and has been deemed “one of the most influential voices in America on the subject of Kashmir.”⁹⁵ SWK is an open supporter of a number of jihadist activists,⁹⁶ including Islamist activist Asiya Andrabi, founder of the Pakistan-aligned, Kashmiri jihadist outfit, Dukhtaran-e-Millat.⁹⁷ Stand With Kashmir appears to be supported by Sikh progressivist groups such as Ruthless Collective,⁹⁸ a British-Canadian Sikh organization that also fundraises for Khalsa Aid,⁹⁹ a prominent Khalistani charity accused by Indian law enforcement of ties with violent groups.¹⁰⁰

In December 2019, SWK worked with the radical Sikh group Organization for Minorities of India (OFMI) and the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC) to organize a protest against India’s controversial Citizenship Amendment Act.¹⁰¹ According to an investigative article published in the *East Bay Express*, OFMI’s founder is the prominent Khalistani activist Bhajan Singh Bhinder, who was once the subject of a federal investigation after allegedly attempting to “negotiate the purchase of assault weapons and shoulder-fired missiles for the Free Khalistan movement.”¹⁰² The IAMC is openly tied to the South Asian Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islami and has been widely accused by counter-extremism analysts of links to the Students Islamic Movement of India, which India designates a terrorist organization.¹⁰³

Evidence of Pakistan’s links to US-based Khalistan activities has sometimes emerged in US courts. In December 2006, a federal jury in Brooklyn, New York, convicted Khalid Awan, a

Pakistani national, of providing money and financial services to the Khalistan Commando Force, “a terrorist organization responsible for thousands of deaths in India since its founding in 1986.”¹⁰⁴

According to the US Department of Justice, “KCF was formed in 1986 and is comprised of Sikh militants who seek to establish a separate Sikh state in the Punjab region of India. The organization has engaged in numerous assassinations of prominent Indian government officials—including the murder of Chief Minister Beant Singh of Punjab in 1995—and hundreds of bombings, acts of sabotage, and kidnappings.”¹⁰⁵

Awan’s conviction resulted from a joint investigation by the United States Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York and the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force that began in 2003. An inmate

at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, where Awan was imprisoned on federal credit card fraud charges, reported that Awan had boasted of his relationship with Paramjit Singh Panjwar, the leader of KCF. Panjwar was, at that time, one of India’s ten most wanted fugitives. According to a US Department of Justice statement, the US government’s evidence during the trial included recordings of Awan’s prison telephone calls to Panjwar in Pakistan during which he introduced the inmate to Panjwar as a potential recruit for the KCF. The US government also shared with the court “statements by Awan admitting that he sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to KCF, testimony by two New York-area fundraisers for the KCF who stated that they delivered money to Awan’s residence in Garden City, and testimony by the assistant inspector general of the [Indian] Punjab Police Intelligence Division that the KCF was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent victims in India.”¹⁰⁶



CHAPTER 4. KHALISTAN ACTIVISM IN THE US AND THE KASHMIR PRECEDENT

Sikhs have been living in the United States for well over 125 years. Although the US Census included Sikhs in the 2020 census, those results have not been released. Absent official census results, estimates of the American Sikh population vary widely, ranging between 200,000 and 700,000.¹⁰⁷

According to the only national survey of Sikhs living in the United States, over half (58.5 percent) are immigrants, 35.9 percent are first generation, and 5.7 percent are second generation or more. Most Sikhs living in the US are Asian, but, given Sikhism's long-term presence here, it has gained many converts from a variety of racial backgrounds. A solid majority regularly attend *gurdwaras* at least once a month. The vast majority of Sikhs in the United States are not registered to vote in US elections;

however, those who were registered voted overwhelmingly in the 2016 and 2020 US elections.¹⁰⁸

Sikhs located in the United States remain engaged with political matters in the Punjab, with much of their engagement occurring through *gurdwaras* and through the myriad of Sikh social and political organizations that enable them to maintain contact with each other as well as with others elsewhere in the diaspora and in the Punjab itself.¹⁰⁹ After the Indian army's

Photo caption: Members of various hardline Sikh organizations raised pro-Khalistan slogans during the 37th anniversary of Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple, on June 6, 2021 in Amritsar, India. (Sameer Sehgal/Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Golden Temple operation and in light of the Sikh militants' campaign of violence, many Sikhs emigrated to obtain increased security.

Many Sikhs in the United States are politically aware of and, to some degree, remain engaged in events occurring in India. The numbers of Sikhs in the United States who support the notion of Khalistan or who support the use of violence to attain it are unknown,¹¹⁰ but groups agitating for Khalistan have the potential to cause problems, including the following:

- disrupt or damage India-US relations
- become a vehicle for recruitment of terrorists and extremist agitators
- violate American laws by acting on behalf of Pakistan while pretending to act independently

Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of US-based Khalistan agitation is the likelihood that Pakistan's intelligence agency is responsible to a considerable degree. In 2011, the FBI identified the Kashmir American Council and its head, Ghulam Nabi Fai, as tied to "a decades-long scheme to conceal the transfer of at least \$3.5 million from the government of Pakistan to fund his lobbying efforts in America related to Kashmir."¹¹¹ Fai had long partnered with Khalistani organizations and Sikh activists. In 1992, for example, he and a number of Khalistani supporters attended the Democratic Party convention to lobby for Kashmiri and Sikh secessionism.¹¹² In 2000 Indian media reported that Fai and Paramjit Singh Ajrawat, founder of the Anti-Defamation Sikh Council for Khalistan, together visited a *gurdwara* in Silver Spring, Maryland, where they called for the US and the UN to increase their efforts to obtain a peaceful solution to the "liberation of the Sikh homeland, Khalistan and the 52-year-old Kashmir conflict."¹¹³

The involvement of Fai and Kashmir-related groups in the US-based Khalistan milieu should be taken seriously. Syed Ghulam Nabi Fai, a US citizen and director of the Kashmiri American Council (KAC), was arrested and pleaded guilty to criminal

counts of conspiracy to conceal material facts, impede the IRS in the collection of revenue, and impede the administration of tax laws.¹¹⁴

For years, the KAC "held itself out to be run by Kashmiris, financed by Americans and dedicated to raising the level of knowledge in the United States about the struggle of the Kashmiri people for self-determination. But according to court documents, the KAC was secretly funded by officials employed by the government of Pakistan, including the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate."¹¹⁵

The Kashmir American Council presented itself as an advocate for Kashmiris' human rights, working to create awareness of and support for the Kashmiri people's struggles to attain these rights. To further these efforts over the years, KAC and Fai employed a major Washington-area lobbyist, contributed to the campaigns of certain Congress members, organized rallies and conferences against India, and attempted to influence US policy on South Asia, all without acknowledging that Pakistan and its intelligence service were funding their efforts.¹¹⁶

According to the US Department of Justice, Fai "repeatedly submitted annual KAC strategy reports and budgetary requirements to Pakistani government officials for approval. For instance, in 2009, Fai sent the ISI a document entitled 'Plan of Action of KAC/Kashmir Centre, Washington, DC, for the Fiscal Year 2010,' which itemized KAC's 2010 budget request of \$658,000 and listed Fai's plans to secure US congressional support for US action in support of Kashmiri self-determination."¹¹⁷

The Department of Justice stated that Fai also "accepted the transfer of such money to the KAC from the ISI and the government of Pakistan through his co-defendant Zaheer Ahmad and middlemen (straw donors), who received reimbursement from Ahmad for their purported 'donations' to the KAC." Fai failed to inform the IRS that these straw donors were being reimbursed by Ahmad "using funds received

from officials employed by the ISI and the government of Pakistan.”¹¹⁸

Although Fai had most likely been receiving funding from Pakistan’s ISI since KAC’s 1992 inception, he was investigated and indicted only after the deterioration in US-Pakistan relations in the aftermath of the 2011 raid in which Osama bin Laden was killed.

Kashmiri and Khalistani activists have benefited from having the same friends in high places. In 2011 following the discovery that Pakistan’s ISI was bankrolling Fai’s KAC, the *New York Times* reported that three members of the US House—Joe Pitts, Dan Burton, and Dennis J. Kucinich—had been working closely with Fai and his group. Rep. Burton, the *Times* reported, had taken a particularly “aggressive role in promoting the agenda pushed by Mr. Fai.”¹¹⁹ In 1997, the *Washington Post* noted that “nearly a quarter of the individual donations to Burton’s 1996 campaign came from the Sikh and Kashmiri communities in the United States.”¹²⁰ Following Fai’s arrest in 2011, it emerged that Burton, who retired in 2013, had received significant sums of money from Fai himself.¹²¹ Burton has consistently denied any knowledge that Fai’s group was “linked to any foreign intelligence operation.”¹²²

However, particularly interesting but scarcely discussed, Burton also appeared to be a leading Congressional advocate for the Khalistani cause, sponsoring “many resolutions in Congress and [castigating] India for its ‘profound lack of respect for Sikh life and culture.’”¹²³ In 2004, Burton invited Fai and Gurmit Singh Aulakh, president of the Council of Khalistan, to address the Committee on Government Reform on the issue of alleged Indian brutality.¹²⁴

Burton is not the only member of the US Congress to openly advocate for both the Khalistani and Kashmiri causes. In 1998, Rep. Edolphus Towns, who represented New York from 1983 to 2013, openly advocated for Aulakh’s nomination for the Nobel

Peace Prize, lauding his efforts to “expose the oppression of Sikhs.” Describing Aulakh, Towns stated, “Recently he brought to the attention of the Congress the rapes of four nuns in Madhya Pradesh. He has helped to expose the Indian government’s extrajudicial killings of Christians, Muslims, Dalits, Assamese, Manipuris, and others. Wherever in South Asia oppression rears its ugly head, Dr. Aulakh has been there to expose it.”¹²⁵

During the same speech, Towns argued that the US Congress should “also support the same right for all other people, notably the people of Kashmir.” Prior to his departure in 2013, Rep. Towns made several such appeals on behalf of Sikhs and Kashmiris, even arguing that India should be declared a terrorist state.¹²⁶ Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican who represented California in the House of Representatives from 1989–2019, reportedly stated on the floor of Congress on August 2, 1999, “For the people in Kashmir and Punjab and Jammu, India might as well be Nazi Germany.”¹²⁷

Other members of the US Congress who have jointly called for the liberation of Sikhs and Kashmiris include Rep. Philip M. Crane (Republican from Illinois, 1969–2005);¹²⁸ Rep. John T. Doolittle (Republican from California, 1991–2009);¹²⁹ Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (Republican from Maryland, 1993–2013);¹³⁰ Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Republican from Florida, 1986–2011);¹³¹ Rep. Wally Herger (Republican from California, 1987–2013);¹³² and Rep. Cynthia McKinney (Democrat from Georgia, 1993–2003).¹³³ Many others in Congress regularly promote the Khalistani cause while not also advancing the agenda of Kashmiri separatists.¹³⁴

Following Fai’s release from jail, he has remained an active partner of radical fellow travellers, including Sikh activists, and continues to write regularly about the ostensible persecution of Sikhs in India, publishing across a variety of Pakistani media.¹³⁵ In addition, since at least 2016, Fai has led annual protests made up of Sikh, Islamist, and Kashmiri activists outside the United Nations building in New York.¹³⁶

At the 2017 protest, Fai and his new organization, the World Kashmiri Awareness Forum, were supported by Sikh activists, Pakistani regime officials, and such Kashmiri separatists as Syed Ali Geelani, who once served as “head of jihad” for the Kashmiri branch of South Asia’s violent Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islami.¹³⁷ At the 2019 protest, one newspaper reported that joining Fai was “a prominent Sikh leader, Sardar Amarjit Singh,” who “also voiced support for the cause of Kashmir and reaffirmed his call for the establishment of Khalistan.”¹³⁸

In July 2021, Singh and other Khalistani activists joined Fai again—filmed by a camera crew from television channel TV84 (a project of various Khalistani activists, including activists from the Khalistan Affairs Center and Sikhs for Justice)¹³⁹—to honor “Kashmir Martyrs Day.” Following a rabble-rousing speech, Singh led the crowd in chants of “India out of Kashmir. India out of Khalistan.”¹⁴⁰

Ten years ago, Fai had the support of a plethora of Khalistani activist organizations located across the United States, including the Anti-Defamation Sikh Council for Khalistan, or Council of Khalistan, based in Washington, DC.¹⁴¹ However, many of the organizations who supported him now are defunct,¹⁴² and in their place in the US has risen an array of funded organizations dedicated solely and overtly to the Khalistani cause. Based upon the number of its active registered corporations,¹⁴³ its social media activity, the almost sixty registered website domains it has leased,¹⁴⁴ and multiple registered 501(c)s for its various subsidiaries,¹⁴⁵ New York-based Sikhs for Justice is one of the most prominent and active of these.

The operating strategy of activist organizations such as Sikhs for Justice is similar to that of the KAC and, although there is currently no evidence of Pakistani funding of US-based Khalistan groups, examination of their activities and funding sources by US law enforcement would be prudent.

Among US pro-Khalistan groups, Sikhs for Justice stands out for its brazenness in openly seeking the support of China,

Russia, and Pakistan for its separatist cause. Founded in 2007 by Pannun, a US citizen and immigration attorney, the group was banned in 2019 by the Indian government, which accused SFJ of having terrorist connections.

The group has attracted media attention by filing lawsuits against Indian politicians from various political parties in courts throughout the United States. Although American judges have, so far, dismissed these suits, they nonetheless garner media coverage for Sikhs for Justice, thereby causing it to appear relevant within the American mainstream. For example, in 2011, SFJ filed a class-action lawsuit in a US court against the Indian National Congress and one of its leaders, former Minister Kamal Nath, for “conspiring [in], aiding, and abetting” the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi.¹⁴⁶ The United States District Court for the Southern District of New York issued summonses in March 2011, but three years later the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit dismissed the case.¹⁴⁷

In 2013, Sikhs for Justice filed a petition against President of the Indian National Congress Sonia Gandhi in connection with the 1984 riots, but the case was dismissed in 2014.¹⁴⁸ In 2015, SFJ petitioned a New York court to challenge the US government’s issuance of a diplomatic visa to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but the court rejected this petition.

In 2020, Sikhs for Justice supported a class-action lawsuit filed by a Houston group called the Kashmir Khalistan Referendum Front (KKRF) against Prime Minister Modi and several top Indian officials. Founded in September 2019, KKRF, whose directors are Ghazala Khan, Pannun, and Muhammad Yunus, ran a social media campaign via its website, Twitter account, Facebook page, and Instagram profile championing “Greater Khalistan.” Its lawsuit claimed damages for alleged extrajudicial killings, wrongful death, battery, emotional distress, and crimes against humanity in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁴⁹

Although all of these lawsuits were dismissed, each of the court filings generated negative news stories and diverted American

and Indian officials from other matters, possibly one of SFJ's objectives in pursuing these cases.

For several years, Sikhs for Justice spearheaded the Referendum 2020 campaign, as supporters of the Sri Lankan terrorist group, Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), had earlier orchestrated referenda on an independent state of Tamil Eelam. The purpose of the pro-Tamil Eelam referenda conducted in Norway, France, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2010¹⁵⁰ was to show support by the Tamil diaspora for LTTE's plan for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka, Tamil Eelam. In carrying out these referenda, LTTE supporters enrolled "independent" NGOs to conduct votes among Tamils living in the various European countries, and the results of these referenda showed more than 99 percent of "voters" supporting Tamil independence.¹⁵¹

The Sikhs for Justice referendum emulated the LTTE model, defining the Punjab Referendum 2020 as a campaign to "liberate" Punjab, which was currently being "occupied" by India. The stated aim of the exercise was to "gauge what the 'Punjabi people' [thought] about re-establishing Punjab as a nation state" and to "give the people of Punjab the privilege to decide their future political status." Sikhs for Justice stated, "Once the consensus around the question of independence is established, we will present its case to the United Nation and other international bodies."¹⁵²

In December 2020, India's National Investigation Agency filed a charge sheet against Sikhs for Justice for "hatching an organized conspiracy to further its Khalistan cause" by instigating Sikh personnel enlisted in the Indian army to mutiny. As part of this attempt, Sikhs for Justice launched a social media and internet campaign including videos and flyers that stated, "Sikh Soldiers: Leave Indian Army, Save your Families."¹⁵³

Khalistan Groups in the United States

The busiest time for the Khalistani movement in the United States was the decades following the 1984 violence in India,

during which dozens of organizations were established across Europe and North America. Most notably, in July 1984, a conference of Sikh diaspora from Europe and North America was held in New York's Madison Square Garden; its attendees demanded Khalistan independence and founded an entity called the World Sikh Organization (WSO). To lobby the US government and media and so further demands related to Khalistan, still another entity, the International Sikh Organization, was founded by Dr. Gurmeet Singh Aulakh, who claimed to be the appointed president of Khalistan. Aulakh also established the Council of Khalistan, which works to champion the cause of Khalistan across the Western world.¹⁵⁴

Branches of Indian Sikh nationalist organizations—including SADA USA, the overseas branch of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) political party—were also established in the United States. The SADA USA's website refers to the party as a key part of the Khalistan movement, stating that it is "involved in lobbying with US House of Representatives, US Senate, US Department of State and the United Nations to bring the vision of an Independent Sikh nation, in the form of Khalistan, into reality."¹⁵⁵

Some Sikh radical groups are still active in the New York area and in California. In addition to disseminating anti-India propaganda, the focus of these organizations is advocating the Khalistan cause, and to secure support they target local politicians, US think tanks, and human rights activists. Khalistan activists also use Sikh places of worship, *gurdwaras*, to attract followers, organizing special events to commemorate the "martyrdom" of terrorists in Punjab. They also commemorate Operation Blue Star and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots to proselytize younger Sikhs into believing that there is a religious conflict between Sikhs and other Indians.

A number of pro-Khalistan groups have operated in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and most have neither advocated violence nor been found to have any relationship with the violent insurgents in Punjab. But, given the history of terrorism in the

name of Khalistan, examining the activities of all Khalistan advocates is important. A number of ostensibly peaceful organizations operating in the West, including charities, have been found to be funnelling money and support to terrorist groups (e.g., the Irish Republican Army in its heyday; Hamas; Hezbollah; and Lashkar-e-Taiba, in recent years).

Sikhs for Justice is far from the only Khalistani group present in the United States, and Sikhs for Justice itself operates a number of spin-off groups and media outlets, including US Media International,¹⁵⁶ Khabardar Punjab TV,¹⁵⁷ and new campaign organizations such as the Kashmir Khalistan Referendum Front (KKRF).¹⁵⁸ Along with the Khalistan Affairs Center (KAC), Sikhs for Justice is also closely involved¹⁵⁹ with Global Sikh Affairs Media, which is controlled by the Center's head, Amarjit Singh,¹⁶⁰ and runs the radical Khalistani news channel, TV84.¹⁶¹ TV84 runs almost weekly programming in support of the Pakistani position on Kashmir and India, with Khalistani speakers warning of a secret Indian "agenda" to "provoke Sikhs against Muslims and Pakistan."¹⁶² The station also broadcasts overt propaganda for Kashmiri jihadists, referring to Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists as "martyrs" dedicated to the "people's fight for democracy."¹⁶³

The Sikhs for Justice network also operates a so-called Embassy of Khalistan, which has the address of an ashram in California as its website registrant address¹⁶⁴ but which lists its address as the main Sikh *gurdwara* within the US, which is located on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC, down the road from the US capital's famed Embassy Row.¹⁶⁵

Pannun and his Sikhs for Justice movement have even established an international humanitarian aid charity named Khalistan Food For All (KFFA), which is currently awaiting certification as a 501(c)(3) and claims to be assisting with United Nations efforts in the Congo.¹⁶⁶ Using international aid charities as fronts for extremist movements has long been a practice of Pakistani Islamist movements, which use them to

fundraise, accrue legitimacy, and, overall, shroud political efforts in a humanitarian guise.¹⁶⁷

Indeed, KFFA is not the first Khalistani aid organization to operate within the United States. For instance, also doing so is the international aid group Khalsa Aid,¹⁶⁸ whose global network, according to India's National Investigation Agency, serves as a front for Babbar Khalsa International, a leading Pakistani-supported Sikh terrorist group.¹⁶⁹

In addition to operating aid organizations that front for terrorist organizations, attempted takeovers of *gurdwaras* has long been a practice of Khalistani-linked groups. One such example is the Fremont *gurdwara*, the San Francisco Bay Area's largest and most politically influential Sikh temple, having an estimated six thousand congregants. In 1996, as head of Sikh Youth of America, Jaswinder Singh Jhandi forcefully assumed control of the Fremont *gurdwara*. According to an investigative article published in the *East Bay Express*, "Local members characterize it [the *gurdwara*] as an organization committed to the Khalistan movement."¹⁷⁰ Sikh Youth of America's Facebook page, which claims to "promote idea of Sovereign Sikh State Khalistan and justice for all," has photographs of slain Sikh terrorists that it calls martyrs.¹⁷¹ But underneath the garb of advocacy for Khalistan nationalism was, according to the article, a "cocktail of alleged violence, immigration fraud, international drug trafficking, and bare-knuckled power grabs."¹⁷²

According to law enforcement documents provided by the Fremont Police Department, the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and the FBI, Jhandi was part of what was called the East Indian Drug Ring during the 1990s—a transnational drug-trafficking and DVD-piracy network.¹⁷³ He and his associates were also accused of assaulting other Sikhs. Other prominent individuals from Sikh Youth of America were tried for DVD piracy, strong-arming of local shopkeepers to force them to sell their wares, and immigration fraud,¹⁷⁴ and the US government charged former secretary of the

Fremont *gurdwara*, Harminder Singh Samana, with preparing fraudulent political asylum requests.¹⁷⁵

According to the *East Bay Express* investigative article, Bhajan Singh Bhinder, president of the Fremont Gurdwara in the 1990s, publicly spoke of his group's charity work and support for political causes, but federal agents accused him of trying to procure assault weapons and shoulder-fired missiles for the Free Khalistan movement. Bhinder and associates "were evidently looking for something with more firepower, namely M-16s, AK-47s, detonators, night-vision goggles, mobile communications equipment, remote-control equipment, grenade and rocket launchers and ... Stinger missiles." A federal agent alleged that Bhinder travelled to Pakistan soon after the aborted arms deal and returned to the Bay Area six months later.¹⁷⁶

Investigators also contended privately that the Sikh Youth of America was associated with the International Sikh Youth Federation, which the US State Department has designated a global terrorist organization.¹⁷⁷ That group, active primarily in Canada, was suspected of instigating bloodshed in Vancouver's large Sikh community, and local police worried that similar violence could erupt in California's Bay Area were Khalistan extremists not stopped.¹⁷⁸

Today, Sikh Youth of America's most prominent public activity is through its Facebook page,¹⁷⁹ which has a few thousand followers. The group has also been involved in organizing several demonstrations, including that held outside the Indian Consulate in San Francisco in June 2015 to mark the thirty-first anniversary of Operation Blue Star. For this, the protestors carried the Khalistan flag and black flags, and the speakers included Jaswinder Singh Jhandi of Sikh Youth of America and Jaswant Singh Hothi, president of the American Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. The speakers all demanded the formation of Khalistan.¹⁸⁰

The Khalistan activists have established a strong presence in ethnic electronic and print media. Their seminars, conferences,

and online campaigns eulogizing former Sikh militants have helped to advance a hardline ideology and the notion of revenge for "atrocities" committed against Sikhs. Indian law enforcement has identified several prominent Khalistan activists who have coordinated with Pakistan-based militants and leaders. The activities of Khalistan activists converge with those of ISI-backed Kashmiri separatists and of other anti-India groups.

Associated social media accounts of organizations within the Sikhs for Justice network feature hundreds of thousands of followers,¹⁸¹ and social media is apparently where the most strident of Khalistani activists organize. Across the board, once prominent, hard-line Sikh activist groups appear to have little physical presence these days but remain plugged into a large global network of activists and militants that organize and converse online.

In 2013, the American Sikh Congressional Caucus was formed. While this constituted a milestone for Sikh Americans, many in the Sikh community, who wished to remain unidentified because they feared for their safety, raised concerns over the organization's and its advocates' inclusion of "pro-Khalistani elements," which, they feared, would eventually result in "blowback that would negate the very utility of the Caucus as an advocate for the civil rights of Sikh Americans."¹⁸²

According to one prominent Sikh American, many who championed the Caucus had "close relationships or they themselves [were] the strong advocates of Khalistan." These included Yadvinder Singh, former president of the American Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, a coalition of about forty *gurdwaras* in North America, and former president of Sikh Youth of America.¹⁸³ Others who attended the press event declaring the caucus's formation were Avtar Singh Pannu and Gurpatwant Singh Pannun of Sikhs for Justice, Pritpal Singh the founder and convener of the AGPC, and Amarjit Singh, head of the Khalistan Affairs Center.¹⁸⁴

In January 2017, a “liberation rally” held outside UN headquarters in New York on the day India celebrated “its 68th Republic Day” was organized by the Gurudwara Sikh Cultural Society of Richmond Hill, Queens, New York, with the support of management committees of *gurdwaras* in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area. The Khalistan protestors carried placards that read “Wake up UN” and “Sikh Referendum 2020,” while shouting slogans demanding freedom for Punjab.¹⁸⁵ In the past, Kashmiri groups had organized similar protests, which prominent Pakistani community leaders frequently attended.

The next year, in 2018, pro-Khalistan groups sought to ban Indian officials from *gurdwaras* in the United States, emulating a similar ban in some parts of Canada and the United Kingdom. At the instigation of the Sikh Coordination Committee East Coast and American Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, ninety-six *gurdwaras* in the United States therefore reportedly banned entry of Indian officials.¹⁸⁶ In July 2020, these two ostensibly religious organizations announced a boycott of Indian politicians and a ban of Indian diplomats, political leaders, and consular staff from speaking engagements held in American *gurdwaras*. The boycott and ban were said to be related to “alleged recent arrests of Sikh youth in Punjab under [the] Unlawful Activities Prevention Act.”¹⁸⁷

Other organizations that enjoy tax-free status in the US as religious institutions but that engage in pro-Khalistan activities include the Sikh Cultural Society, Richmond Hill, New York; the Gurudwara Sikh Center, Flushing, New York; and the Glen Rock Gurudwara, Glen Rock, New Jersey. Since 2017, these groups have joined others in raising pro-Khalistan banners in front of the United Nations headquarters,¹⁸⁸ and, on the anniversary of Operation Blue Star in October 2020, they organized special prayer sessions to commemorate the thirty-sixth anniversary of the death of Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, the assassins of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.¹⁸⁹ In April 2021, the Sikh Cultural Society of Richmond Hill organized “Khalistan Declaration Day.”¹⁹⁰

The World Sikh Parliament is yet another Khalistan group that observed Khalistan Declaration Day, in its case by hoisting the Sikh flag along with the American flag in the city hall of Holyoke, Massachusetts, in April 2020.¹⁹¹ In July 2020, the Sikh Coordination Committee East Coast and American Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (AGPC) hosted an emergency teleconference with 162 *gurdwara* representatives from the US and Canada calling in. The meeting adopted several resolutions, including extending the ban against “Indian diplomats, political leaders and consular staff from speaking engagements in US *gurdwaras*,” referred to India as a “Terrorist Nation,” and appealed to the “global Sikh community to unite to fight the biased and unfair policies of Indian establishment.”¹⁹²

Although some of these activities fall within the Constitutional definition of exercising free speech, it must be noted that pro-Khalistan activists in the US continue to draw parallels between their struggle and the militant struggles in Palestine and Kashmir, both of which combined legitimate free-speech activities with support of and funding for violence. Thus, in several instances, US freedom of was exploited to orchestrate violence thousands of miles away.

A New Generation of Khalistani Activists in the United States

Over the past decade, in contrast to the apparently boundless energy of the newer Sikhs for Justice nexus, many of the original Khalistani groups have become defunct, with many of their founders passing away and their financing drying up. Groups such as World Sikh Organization have removed themselves entirely to Canada, while groups such as the International Sikh Organization have failed to raise sufficient funds to file a public tax return since 2013.¹⁹³ The Council of Khalistan no longer has an active website, so that its only public statements are made via the Twitter account run by a few of its remaining volunteers.¹⁹⁴

In addition, the violence of groups such as Sikh Youth of America and the extremism of groups such as Sikhs for Justice,

including their overt ties to Islamabad and militancy in India, appear to cause measured Sikh nationalists discomfort, and a number of calmer Khalistani efforts have thus been established in recent years. The World Sikh Parliament is a particularly prominent example. Founded in response to a “resolution of the Sarbat Khalsa (national gathering) held in the Sikh homeland Punjab in November 2015,” the World Sikh Parliament appears to be a serious attempt to advance a Sikh “nation.” It operates a number of “councils” that seek to restore “the lost Khalsa Raj,” cast light on the plight of “martyrs” and “political prisoners languishing in various jails based on fabricated charges,” and establish such new institutions as a “Sikh World Bank.”¹⁹⁵

Sikh nationalism is also found in growing calls for increased Sikh revivalism. For example, Harinder Singh, founder of the prominent Sikh Research Institute in New Jersey, is a prominent advocate for reforms in Sikh governance and is a member of the Free Akal Takht movement,¹⁹⁶ which seeks to supplant the authority of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee over Sikhs worldwide.¹⁹⁷ There are other Sikh nationalist groups, such as the Revive Sarbat Khalsa movement, that back such campaigns.¹⁹⁸

A newer generation of politically strident Sikh groups, including the Sikh Coalition, has also expressed concern over the behavior of Sikh governance bodies such as the Akal Takht.¹⁹⁹ It is telling that most of these groups do not overtly advocate for the foundation of Khalistan but focus instead on the theological underpinnings of the Khalistani movement—and so pursue opportunities for advancing Sikh nationalism that are more readily attainable.

Whether this broadening of focus will ultimately serve to buttress or weaken the Khalistani movement remains to be seen. Some concerned Sikh activists believe a dilution of the movement has already taken place. In California, for example, groups such as the Jakara Movement, United Sikh Mission, and the Sikh Coalition back farmers’ protests in India²⁰⁰ and embrace non-

Sikh issues such as Black Lives Matter. These groups’ general progressivism is accompanied by occasional references to discrimination against Sikhs in Punjab, to Khalistan, and to the 1984 violence.

Indeed, other radical Sikh-run groups in the United States, such as Organization for Minorities in India, a leading voice in anti-Hindutva activities in America, also no longer discuss Khalistan or purported anti-Sikh atrocities in India only but disseminate information about all manner of progressivist causes.²⁰¹

Such changes have apparently evoked the ire of some younger American Sikhs, who consider such an approach weak²⁰²—perhaps a harbinger of a return to more strident Khalistani nationalism in the next generation or at least an explanation for the enduring popularity of truly extreme networks such as Sikhs for Justice.

The fight for the foundation of Khalistan is simply not as determined or explicit as it once was. One study of Sikh sentiments reported, “Khalistan was still a simmering issue within the Sikh American community, although not a focus of many Sikh American organizations in the post–September 11 period.”²⁰³ And indeed, a closer look at politically minded Sikh community and activist groups across the United States does eventually, in most cases, turn up a commitment to Khalistan somewhere, but it is hardly the most prominent part of each group’s agenda.

For example, the primary activities of today’s Sikh Youth Alliance of North America include offering summer camps, organizing literature study circles, and running food pantries. While it overtly promotes Sikh political organization, the only apparent public reference to Khalistan within its recent publications, events, and documents was hidden in a document explaining the rules of an elocution competition organized for 16- to 22-year-olds, in which contestants were asked to discuss the long history of attacks by the “Indian government” on Sikhs and answer the

question “What should we do to move forward to get our birth right as an independent sovereign nation of Khalsa Panth?”²⁰⁴

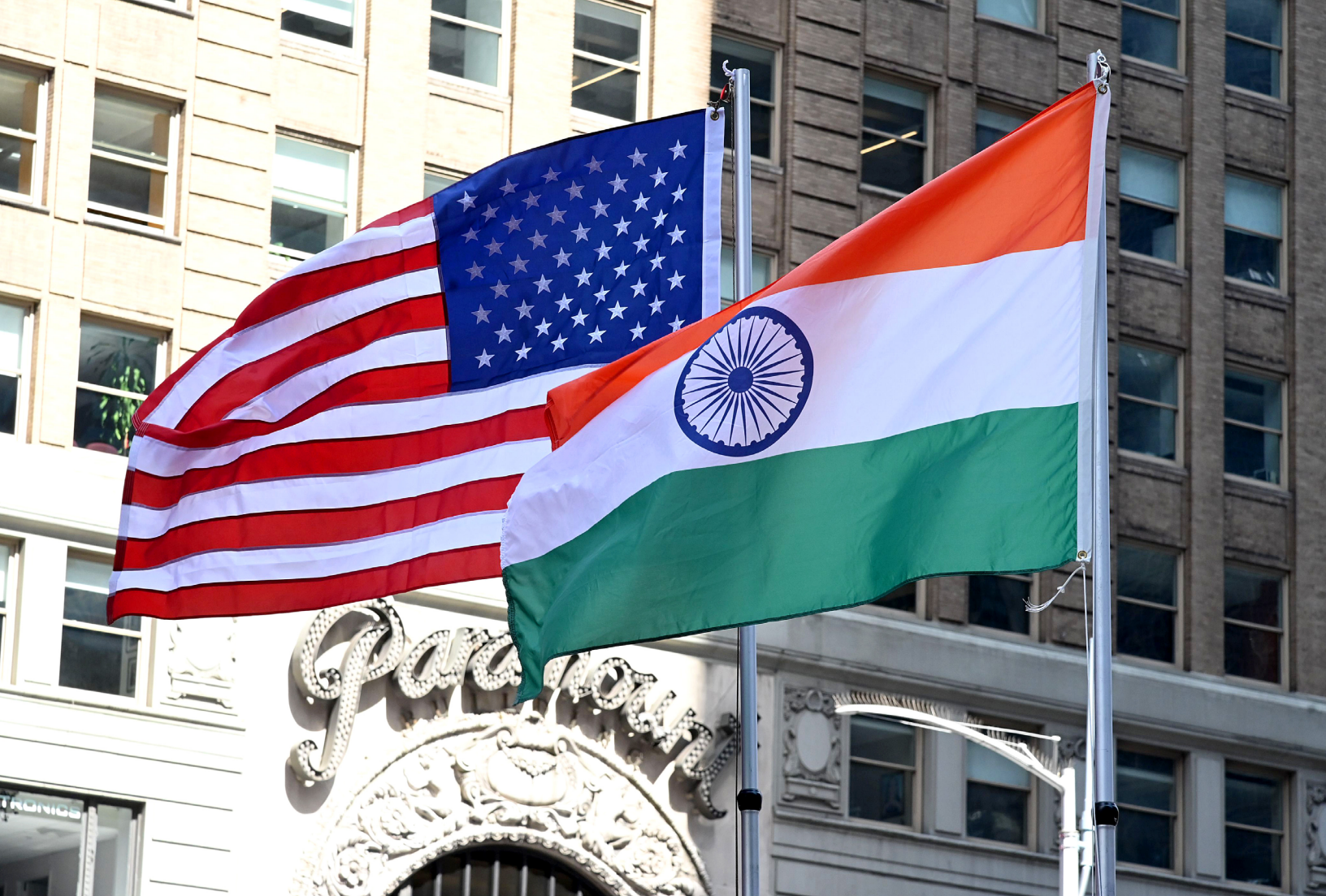
The finances and declared public grants of Sikh charities somewhat bear out the apparent changes in focus of Sikh American nationalist politics. Most of the Khalistani organizations founded in the 1980s and 1990s do not raise sufficient annual revenue to have to file non-profit tax returns, and charities such as Khalsa Aid raised only half a million dollars in 2019. Meanwhile, the newer generation of politicized Sikh organizations such as United Sikhs, the Sikh Coalition, the Jakara Movement, the Sikh Research Institute, and the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund report are much more affluent, raising \$5 million between them in just 2019.

Sikhs for Justice’s finances in the United States are something of a puzzle, and its circumstances opaque. A dearth of filed tax returns, along with a bewildering array of new 501(c)(3) registrations and multiple newly incorporated companies linked to Pannun across multiple jurisdictions give little clue as to its true financial status. One of the few tax returns available is for Amarjit Singh’s Global Sikh Affairs Media organization, the parent organization of the Sikhs for Justice-aligned television station TV84. In 2019, it reported a somewhat paltry revenue of just over \$220,000.²⁰⁵

The Sikhs for Justice network certainly has significant funds at its disposal. It has adequate resources to operate branches in

three countries, manage multiple television stations, and employ lobbying firms in Washington, DC, to advance its interests. In addition, in recent months, Sikhs for Justice has claimed it would provide an astonishing \$10 million in support to Punjab farmers protesting in India. Perhaps an idle boast, Sikhs for Justice’s apparent ability to effect such rigorous, global activity could also be the result of third-party funders, whether hidden private individuals or a foreign state.

Among the 900 grants totaling \$23 million that Sikh organizations in the United States declared incoming and outgoing in tax returns during this period (and that this report’s authors reviewed), over \$10 million was donated to the new generation of political Sikh organizations established within the last decade or so. As discussed above, these groups’ primary focus is not advancing the Khalistani cause, although they certainly display some level of support for Sikh nationalism within a broader progressivist agenda. A significant number and diverse mix of private Sikh charitable foundations, employee-giving schemes, and progressivist fundraising bodies provide these donations. There is little sign, however, of overt charitable funding for the more hardline Khalistani advocates. In contrast to the funding given to recently formed Sikh political entities, Sikh 501(c)(3) organizations reportedly donated less than \$100,000 to the allegedly terror-tied charity²⁰⁶ Khalsa Aid, and a single gurdwara disclosed financial support for the Sikhs for Justice network, although it failed to state the exact amount.²⁰⁷



CHAPTER 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Indian government has provided the US government considerable evidence of links between US-based Khalistan groups and militants and terrorists operating in India. The likelihood of Khalistan groups receiving funding, support, and military training from Pakistan is also substantive. The US should therefore take India's concerns seriously and dedicate the requisite intelligence and law enforcement resources to help India address these concerns.

Thus, the US government should take the following actions with respect to Khalistan groups:

1. Include all groups responsible for terrorist attacks in India in its list of designated global terrorist groups.
2. Designate as terrorists the various individuals that India and US intelligence and law enforcement have established as being connected to designated terrorist entities.
3. Apply terror financing laws and regulations to the various groups espousing Kashmiri and Khalistan separatism.
4. Investigate US-based groups espousing Kashmiri and Khalistan separatism for possible violations of US laws related to foreign funding.

Photo caption: Photo: The national flag of India is hoisted at Times Square to mark Indian Independence Day on August 15, 2020 in New York City. (Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images)

5. Use legal means established specifically to combat terrorism, including FISA warrants, to monitor suspected Kashmiri and Khalistan terrorism sympathizers and advocates.

The US government cannot afford to allow separatist movements from India, including those with ties to militant and terrorist groups, to grow unchecked among its otherwise law-abiding Sikh community. Its experience with Islamist extremist groups must serve as a template for dealing with Khalistan extremists, and so recruitment or fundraising for militancy or “martyrdom” must not be allowed on US soil, even if the actual acts of violence are to take place far away, in India. US authorities must not let ostensibly peaceful pro-Khalistan activism become the precursor of a new wave of violence in India’s Punjab state. Similarly, the likelihood of unlawful foreign funding of the Khalistan movement should be investigated in a timely manner rather than being allowed to fester, as was the case with the Kashmir American Council.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the US Departments of State and Treasury began designating individuals and groups that engaged in or supported global terrorism as such. Instead of basing terrorist designations on actual acts or advocacy of terrorism, this designation process remains heavily politicized with few Khalistan-related groups or individuals having been so designated at this point in time. Since Executive Order 13224, issued on June 27, 2002,²⁰⁸ designated the International Sikh Youth Foundation and Babbar Khalsa International as terrorist entities, no other Khalistan-related group has been added.

Like Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, the Khalistan groups can emerge under new names. Moreover, unless the US government prioritizes oversight of Khalistan-related militancy and terrorism, it is unlikely to identify groups that are currently

engaged in violence in Indian Punjab or are preparing to do so. One seldom finds what one is not looking for.

The complicated US relationship with Pakistan has probably been the cause of the US government’s reluctance to act on intelligence from India concerning Khalistan activism. In the years following 9/11, Pakistan’s role as the artery providing logistical support to the US military mission in Afghanistan took priority over its role of host to various terrorist groups. Moreover, within the United Nations Security Council, China blocked the designation of Pakistan-based terrorists under the US’s terrorist-designation process. Only large-scale terrorist attacks, such as those that Pakistan-based jihadi groups carried out on the Indian Parliament (2001) and in Mumbai (2008), finally motivated the US Department of State and the UN Security Council to take the threat these groups pose with sufficient seriousness. A similar large-scale attack involving Khalistan terrorists has, thankfully, not taken place.

However, the *raison d’être* behind designating groups, individuals, or financiers as terrorists is to preempt terrorist attacks, not just react to them. The Khalistan movement’s history and recent mobilization should serve as a reminder that, unless the threat it poses is somehow preempted, it could expand to a level where action might be too late to prevent large-scale loss of life.

India is now a critical US ally in the Indo-Pacific. As a member of the US-Australia-Japan-India Quad and a major defense partner, India deserves to be heard, understood, and supported by the US on a wide range of issues, including its concerns regarding violent and potentially violent secessionist movements covertly supported by China and Pakistan. Ignoring India’s concerns about threats to its integrity could undermine its resolve to act as America’s ally in confronting the aggressive intentions of Communist-led China, and this would constitute a significant and dangerous loss to the US.

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