

Who's Killing Pakistan's Shia and Why?

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According to the [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#), in 2013 nearly 700 Shia were killed and more than 1,000 were injured in more than 200 sectarian terrorist attacks. Over 90 percent of those attacks occurred in Quetta, Karachi, Kangu, Parachinar, Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Since the beginning of 2000, nearly 4,000 persons have been killed and 6,800 injured (see figure below). Who is hunting Pakistan's Shia and, most importantly, why?

The explanation for Pakistan's deadly sectarian present lies in the communal politics of Pakistan's pre-history and the subsequent decisions that Pakistani elites made in the early years about nation building in the new state. The current path of violence and intolerance may have been paved well before Pakistan became independent in 1947.

Pakistan: Born to Other

As the British appetite for maintaining the Raj declined after World Wars I and II, it became increasingly clear that the declining imperial power would accede to mounting Indian nationalist demands to quit the subcontinent. However, it was not clear what political order would rise from the detritus of the erstwhile Raj. Some Muslims associated with the [All India Muslim League](#) feared that, in a Hindu-majority state, Muslims would be subjected to separate and unequal status. The [Congress Party](#), which claimed to represent all groups in India and which enjoyed a pan-Indian presence, challenged these claims. However, some within the Congress Party increasingly began to evidence communal sentiments which further discomfited some Muslims in India.

[Muhammad Ali Jinnah](#), who is widely considered to be the founder of Pakistan, propounded a minoritarian and communal discourse called the "[Two Nation Theory](#)." Jinnah's dual claims that he was the "[sole spokesman](#)" for India's Muslims and that his Muslim League best aggregated their interests [were contested](#). In the [1937 elections](#), the League suffered a thrashing. The Muslim-majority areas that are now a part of today's Pakistan either voted for the Congress or provincial parties. By the 1940s, Jinnah and the League gained traction and in the [1946 provincial elections](#), the Muslim League redeemed itself by winning 425 out of 496 seats reserved for Muslims.

However, the idea that the Two Nation Theory ineluctably meant partition is flawed. Jinnah explained the lineaments of the Two Nation Theory in a March 23, 1940 [speech](#) in Lahore. He argued that Muslims and Hindus comprised equal nations. That Muslims were a numerical minority was immaterial because they were [a nation on par with the nation of Hindus](#). Jinnah explained that "If the British Government are [sic] really in earnest and sincere to secure [the] peace and happiness of the people of this sub-continent, the only course open to us all is to allow the major nations separate homelands by dividing India into 'autonomous national states.'" Historians note that this expression is ambiguous and left open the possibility of a federal solution. Nowhere did the address mention the word Pakistan or partition. (Despite these facts, Pakistanis refer to this speech as the "Pakistan Resolution" and celebrate March 23 as a national holiday to commemorate its passage.)

In fact, the Two Nation Theory was a rhetorical and political argument through which Jinnah sought first to receive equal representation in the national parliament of an independent India. In the end, the Congress party refused to acquiesce to this demand, insisting upon a one-person, one-vote scheme. Congress feared that a failure to reach an agreement with the League would delay Britain's departure. In the end, Congress and the League decided that it would be best if an independent Pakistan was carved from the Raj. And that is what happened. Jinnah was not prepared for the creation of a new state in large part because for so many years,

this was never the goal of his negotiations.

The Objectives Resolution

Pakistan came into being through the bloody process of partition. The Punjab, which became the western wing of Pakistan, bore the brunt of this bloodshed in which Hindus and Sikhs engaged in barbaric communal savagery in an effort to cleanse Muslims from Muslim minority areas, and Muslims slaughtered Sikhs and Hindus in areas where those groups were a minority for the same goal of communal cleansing. The butchers won. Violence also happened in Bengal, which became the eastern wing of Pakistan, but on a lesser scale.

Once Pakistan had its bloodied borders, the long process of state and nation-building began. One of the most contentious issues was the nature of the state itself. Was it to be an Islamic state or was it to be a state for South Asia's Muslims? If it were to be an Islamic state, what Islamic tradition would comprise the foundations of the fledgling state? This was a non-trivial question because the territory was home to numerous [Sunni as well as Shia interpretative traditions](#). What would be the political standing of Pakistan's substantial non-Muslim minority? At the time of Partition, about one fourth of Pakistan's citizens were non-Muslim. While most of these were Hindus concentrated in East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh), the west also had substantial Hindu, Christian, [Parsee](#) and even Sikh populations. To garner the most support possible for the notion of Pakistan, Jinnah [said contradictory things to different people](#). This enabled proponents of one vision or another to use and arrange his various speeches selectively like pieces of plastic in a kaleidoscope. In any event, Jinnah died shortly after partition, taking whatever vision of the state he had with him.

Pakistan took the first and irreversible step towards an Islamist state with the [Objectives Resolution](#) of March 1949, which declared that sovereignty belonged to Allah alone and that "[the Muslims of Pakistan shall be enabled individually and collectively to order their lives in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and Sunnah](#)." The resolution was passed over the objections of Pakistani secularist and minorities. The Objectives Resolution was, in turn, incorporated into Pakistan's constitution and has since become a fixed feature of Pakistani constitutional law.

However, the Objectives Resolution opened a sluice gate for Islamists who vied to define who qualified as a Muslim and whose interpretation of Sharia was superior. Naturally, Pakistan's religious minorities became the first casualty of the emerging constitutional disposition. (Pakistan's constitution stipulates that the [president](#) and [prime minister](#) must be Muslims. Moreover, all senior officials—including members of parliament—are required to take an oath to "[protect](#) the country's Islamic identity.")

Islamists next targeted Pakistan's [Ahmedi community](#) and mobilized to have them declared non-Muslim. Islamists in Pakistan and elsewhere do not accept the Ahmedis as Muslims because they do not accept Muhammad as the final prophet. This was ironic: many of the key leaders of the Muslim League were Ahmedi, as were many of Pakistan's high-profile civilian and military personnel. After decades of agitation by anti-Ahmedi Islamists, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto acquiesced and declared them to be constitutionally non-Muslim in 1974. The effects of this legislation have been profound for the Ahmedis. Because Ahmedis consider themselves to be Muslim, offer Muslim prayers, recognize the Quran as their holy book and congregate in facilities they call masjids (mosques), Pakistan's extremists view them as apostates and even blasphemers. With this law, the state of Pakistan now permitted and even encouraged persecution as well as prosecution of Ahmedis. They were no longer allowed to call their places of worship "masjids" or even recite the Quran, among other practices Ahmedis view as fundamental to their faith. Persecution of Ahmedis even continues beyond death: Pakistan's [police](#) have been involved in defacing Ahmedi graves buried in Muslim cemeteries ostensibly to "prevent clashes." Pakistan's only Nobel Prize winner, Abdul Salaam, had his grave defaced. Where it previously read that Salaam became "the first Muslim Nobel Laureate," it now reads that he became "[the first Nobel Laureate](#)."

With this victory under their belts, Islamists—particularly led by those associated with

the [Deobandi](#) interpretative tradition—aimed to have Pakistan's Shia declared non-Muslim.

Shia: Caught in the Regional Cross Hairs

In 1974, under Zulfikar ali Bhutto, Pakistan [set up a cell](#) within Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) to undertake covert operations. Mohammed Daoud Khan had just ousted King Zahir Shah in Afghanistan and begun a liberalization program under Soviet patronage. Afghan Islamists opposed this, and Daoud violently repressed them. Many of these Islamists fled to Pakistan, where the ISI developed them for covert operations in Afghanistan. Once Zia ul Haq seized the Pakistani government in a coup in 1977, he began to shape Pakistan into a Sunni Islamist state. Some of his efforts, such as imposing the payment of [zakat](#), were specifically antagonistic to Pakistan's Shia who do not accept Sunni interpretations of zakat. As Shia came under pressure, they began to mobilize.

Next door, Iran was convulsing into its Shia Islamic Revolution. Not only did Iran seek to export its revolution, it also saw itself as the key protector of Shia across the world. Iran began supporting Shia militant groups fighting Zia's efforts to render Pakistan a Sunni Islamic state. When Iran and Iraq fell into war, Iraq involved itself in Pakistan's emerging sectarian conflict. As rival Sunni militant groups—most of which were Deobandi—began to mobilize against Shia in Pakistan, Iraq began resourcing anti-Shia militant organizations. Soon the Arab Gulf states joined in to help marginalize Pakistan's Shia, who were seen as Iran's pawn in the region. Thus Pakistan soon became the site of an elaborate sectarian proxy war between Shia Iran and its Sunni strategic competitors.

The Christmas day Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further catalyzed events that cultivated Pakistan's sectarian killing fields. Zia's efforts to make Pakistan a Sunni Islamist state dovetailed with the growing need for (mostly) Sunni militants in Afghanistan. (Zia preferred Sunni Islamist militants to fight a "jihad" in Afghanistan rather than an ethno-national insurgency against Soviet occupation. He feared that the latter would precipitate renewed ethnic conflict in Pakistan, principally among its restive Pashtun populations who lived on the border with Afghanistan.) Once President Carter left office, U.S. and Pakistani policy aligned. President Reagan threw the weight of his government behind the Zia regime. The Saudis also funded the manufacturing of jihadis by matching the U.S. contribution dollar for dollar.

When the Soviets finally left Afghanistan in 1989, the United States withdrew from the region. However, Pakistan continued to use its well-developed stock of Sunni militants to help forge a pro-Pakistan disposition in Afghanistan. At the same time, Indian mismanagement and malfeasance in Kashmir gave rise to an indigenous insurgency there. Pakistan deployed the battle-hardened militants from the Afghan theatre to Kashmir. By the early 1990s, Pakistani militants had overtaken the local insurgency and transformed the conflict from a local insurgent movement into one of international terror.

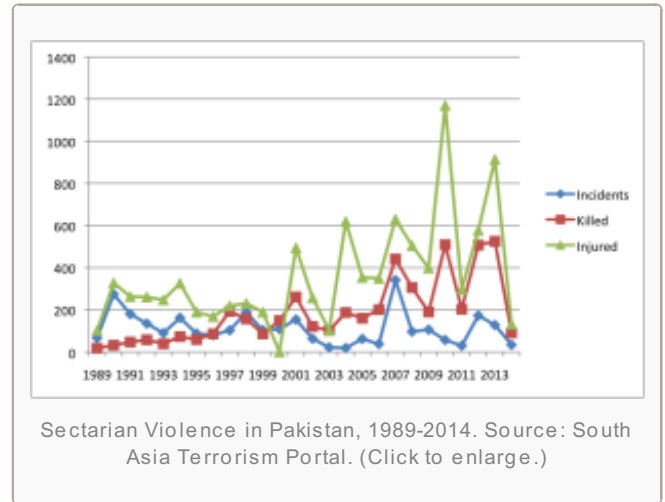
9/11: Disorientation of the Mullah, Militant and Military Alliance

Throughout the 1990s and up until 2001, Pakistan's military and intelligence agency supported, armed, and trained numerous Islamist militants for operations in Afghanistan and India.

The largest cluster of militant groups was Deobandi in orientation. Deobandi groups included the Afghan Taliban, anti-Shia groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)/Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan (SSP) (which now go by the name of Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ)), and several that were ostensibly fighting the Indians (e.g. Jaish-e-Mohammad). These Deobandi groups share a vast infrastructure of madrassahs and mosques and have overlapping membership with each other and with the Deobandi Islamist political groups, most notably the factions of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam (JUI).

Throughout the 1990s, sectarian attacks continued. However, by the 1990s, the Pakistani state crushed the anti-Sunni militias, leaving the anti-Shia Sunni militants intact. During the mid-1990s, groups such as LeJ/SSP also fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, illustrating their utility to the state.

With the terror attacks of 9/11, Pakistan was forced to cooperate with the United States in its war in Afghanistan. The militant groups that were most aggrieved by this were the Deobandi groups, as they had the closest relations with the Afghan Taliban. Moreover, because they often fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan and shared militant training infrastructure with al-Qaeda, they were also most loyal to Osama bin Laden. By late 2001, some Deobandi militants, under a break-away faction of Jaish-e-Mohammad named Jamaat ul Furqan, began targeting the Pakistani state. They believed the Musharraf government had joined the infidel forces in ousting the Taliban and threatening al Qaeda. They began a series of suicide attacks against the Pakistan military.



As the Pakistan military began moving in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where numerous local, regional and international militants are ensconced, Pakistan's internal militant situation continued to change. Local militant commanders in the FATA began targeting the Pakistani military, paramilitary and intelligence agency. By 2007, a suite of anti-state militias coalesced under the banner of the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP, also known as the Pakistan Taliban). While many viewed the TTP as a largely Pashtun phenomenon because it emerged in the tribal areas, in fact, the movement had a very strong backbone of Punjab-based Deobandi militants. The most vicious TTP activists were those associated with the anti-Shia terror groups (LeJ/SSP/ASWJ).

No One Is Safe Now

When Hakimullah Mehsood assumed command of the TTP, Pakistan's sectarian killings became more frequent. Hakimullah had a long history of association with the ASWJ. Under him, the TTP began targeting any sect of Islam that these Deobandi militants considered to be "munafaqeen" (those who spread discord). Not only were Pakistan's Shia under attack (in addition to Ahmedi and Pakistan's religious minorities), so were Pakistan's massive Sufi population, frequently referred to as Barelvis. The TTP began openly attacking Sufi shrines.

Pakistan's military and civilian leaders have yet to come to any consensus on a political strategy to contend with these militants who have claimed tens of thousands of Pakistani lives since 2001. The military, for its part, is reluctant to take them on for several reasons. First, parts of the military still see Islamist militants as important tools of foreign policy in India and Afghanistan. In fact, for some, the loyal Islamist militants will become even more important as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and as Pakistan needs militants that are loyal to the Pakistani project. Second, because these Deobandi militant groups share overlapping membership with each other and with the JUI, the JUI provide their militant allies with political cover. Third, the military is unwilling to eliminate them in entirety because it believes that some of them can be rehabilitated and persuaded to aim their guns, suicide vests, and vehicle-borne IEDs away from the Pakistani state and towards Afghanistan or India. (Yes. This does mean the Pakistan army—which has received some \$27 billion from Washington for being a "partner in the Global War on Terrorism"—is encouraging its militants to kill Americans and their allies in Afghanistan.) Fourth, the army's will is no doubt conditioned by its ability. While the army could certainly do more, its record at combating Pakistan's domestic enemies is mixed at best and has come at a high human cost in terms of civilian casualties and massive internal displacement. This is why Pakistan's security and intelligence agencies rely upon the U.S. drone program to take out the terrorists it cannot. Finally, for national counter-terrorism efforts, Pakistan's police should take the lead. But it is well-known that Pakistan's police are not up to that task.

As for the civilian government, it is likely amenable to some sort of a political compromise with the TTP. Even if

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who is himself a right-of-center politician, prefers more coercive solutions, he fears the TTP. He also relies upon those voters in the Punjab who support the agenda of the TTP and their anti-Shia sectarian allies. Sharif fears that, should he muster the testicularity to support military actions against the militants, his chief rival, Imran Khan, would strip away some of his electoral base. Like Sharif, Khan contested the 2013 general election under the banner of reconciling with the TTP, opposing military actions against them, and denouncing the drone program which has killed many TTP leaders.

Pakistan's Shia: Caught in Strategic Crosshairs

With the U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein and the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan, Iran's position in the region has improved since 2001. Both Saudis and Pakistanis fear a rising Iran in Afghanistan. For Pakistan's part, Iran has partnered with India for its work in Afghanistan. For Saudi Arabia's part, a rising Shia Iran threatens to undermine the status that Saudi Arabia has arrogated to itself: leader of the Muslim world in general and protector of Sunni interests in particular. Some Pakistanis in and out of government have often suspected that Iran can manipulate Pakistan's Shia to achieve Tehran's varied national and ideological interests, many of which are at odds with those of Pakistan. Because of fears that Iran can work through these Shia to undermine Pakistan's interests, no Pakistani government has seriously sought to completely extirpate those Deobandi groups that slaughter Shia. In contrast, Pakistan's government vigorously worked to eliminate Shia militias that targeted Sunnis.

Iran and Pakistan share a sensitive border in Balochistan. In Iran's Sistan-o-Balochistan province, many residents are Sunni Baloch. Iran has suffered ethno-sectarian violence there because the residents believe they are second-class citizens owing to their ethnicity and their sectarian beliefs. Iran has often looked apprehensively towards Pakistan, suspecting that it is a source of support for these Sunni Baloch militants. Pakistan, for its part, has problems with its own Baloch, some of whom have waged an ethnic separatist struggle against the Pakistan state. The Baloch nationalist insurgents have enjoyed support from India and Afghanistan. This brings to the fore the most vulnerable of all Shia in Pakistan right now: the [Hazaras of Quetta](#).

The Hazaras, who live in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, are easily recognized by their "Mongolian" facial features. Hazaras of Balochistan are in danger due to a toxic mix of domestic developments, which have resulted in rising ethnic and sectarian intolerance, as well as regional political factors pertaining to fraught Iran-Pakistan relations. While Pakistanis tend to view Shia generally with suspicion because of their presumed ties with Iran, Hazaras are viewed with even greater dubiety. Unlike other Shia in Pakistan who speak Urdu and other vernacular languages, Hazaras speak Farsi and its variants. This fosters suspicion that they are Iranian spies or even that they are trying to foment a Shia revolution in Pakistan. (The Hazaras in Afghanistan receive support from Iran, and they were frequently the victims of violence in Afghanistan when the Taliban ruled uncontested.) The Hazaras draw the ire of Deobandis and Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies because they oppose the Afghan Taliban, whose allies include the sectarian killers of the SSP/LeJ/ASWJ, and because they refuse to fight the ethnic Baloch separatists in the province. The Hazaras and ethnic Baloch separatists may indeed be allies of sorts because both reject the multi-pronged efforts of the state and militants to make Pakistan a Sunni Islamist state.

Sadly, at some point it becomes difficult to discern whether persons are killed by the state or by the terrorists, because in some cases the state outsources its domestic violence to terrorists such as LeJ/SSP/ASWJ.

Should the United States Care and Why?

While it may be tempting to dismiss the senseless slaughter of Shia in Pakistan as an internal Pakistani matter, this is short-sighted for several reasons apart from humanitarian concerns.

First, these anti-Shia Deobandi groups have been the organizations to which al-Qaeda has outsourced its

attacks in Pakistan, whether against Pakistani or international targets.

Second, these groups have long had a presence in Afghanistan where they have helped erect a Sunni Islamist regime in Afghanistan with Pakistani overt and covert support.

Third, Pakistan's sectarian terrorists share overlapping membership with those groups that ostensibly focus upon India (e.g. Jaish-e-Mohammad). It is very likely that Rawalpindi would like to woo some of these sectarian killers to battlefields in Afghanistan or India. A terrorist attack in India or against Indian assets in Afghanistan may well be the precipitant of the next Indo-Pakistan crisis. India's recent general elections hoisted up the notorious Hindu nationalist, Narendra Modi, as India's prime minister. Modi may be more assertive in dealing with Pakistan-based terrorism aggressive than was the previous prime minister, Manmohan Singh.

Finally, it is inherently in the U.S. interest that Pakistan retains some modicum of stability. The anti-sectarian groups, with their Punjab base, and their track record of successfully hitting high value military and civilian targets and even infiltrating the military, may well be a bigger concern to Washington than they are to either the civilian government in Islamabad or the army headquartered in Rawalpindi.

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