Sectarianism in Pakistan

Terrorism in Pakistan has two dimensions: international and domestic. The two are historically closely linked. However, elements of the Pakistani state apparatus have been slow to recognize the connection, attempting instead to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' terrorists.

By Prem Mahadevan

Pakistan is an important country in an unstable region. A multi-national state of approximately 200 million people with the world's fastest growing nuclear arsenal, it is in perpetual conflict with its neighboring nuclear power, India. It is densely populated with one of the highest birthrates worldwide, and experiences a scarcity of both water and energy supplies. Pakistan's democracy is weak and has been undermined by long periods of military rule. The many ethnolinguistic groups – Pashtun, Baloch, Punjabi, Sindhi, Seraiki and Muhajir – are united only by a common religion: Islam. The military is a Punjabi and Pashtun-dominated institution that concentrates power and resources in the northeastern part of the country. As a result, there is a strong separatist movement in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, which is energy-rich but remains the poorest region of Pakistan by all development indicators.

To win military and political support against India, Pakistan has entered into partnerships with China and Sunni-majority Arab countries. In the process, it has allowed Gulf states undue influence over disenfranchised groups in Pakistani society through the use of sectarian narratives and ideas. This CSS Analysis describes how successive Pakistani governments have weakened their own authority, and the integrity of the state, by being unable and sometimes unwilling to contain sectarian

Pakistan has tightened security after the massacre of more than 130 students at an army-run school in the northwestern city of Peshawar in December 2014. *Khuram Parvez / Reuters*

militancy. The analysis is divided into four sections. The first explains why sectarian militancy in Pakistan is important to international security and describes the linkages that were created between global jihadists and local militants. The second describes how official inaction has allowed sectarianism to become more virulent, mirroring similar political patterns in the Middle East. The third looks at the impact sectarianism has had on Pakistani society, and how Sunni-led violence that was once directed towards Shia Muslims is now turning inwards against moderate Sunnis as well. Finally, the fourth section will outline why the Pakistani government's ongoing efforts to combat terrorism have been met with limited success.

A Haven for Terrorism
During the 1980s, scattered groups of Arab jihadists found refuge in Pakistan and consolidated into networks. These webs later attempted to overthrow govern-

ments in the Middle East and conduct terrorist operations against the West. The most notorious such network was Al-Qaeda, whose founder and leader Osama bin Laden was killed by US commandos in 2011 in Abbottabad, close to the country's premier military academy. Pakistan's powerful army and intelligence services have been accused by international and domestic scholars of instrumentalizing jihadist groups as tools to project power against India and Afghanistan, and of converting Pakistan into a rentier state whose cooperation with Western counterterrorist efforts comes at a steep financial price for the latter. The country has a large underground economy which gives it some fiscal stability, but also provides space for the privatization of violence.

From the Pakistani viewpoint, responsibility for the country's role in hosting terrorist groups lies with extra-regional powers, who have historically used its territory as a geopolitical battleground. The Soviet-Afghan War was fought in part out of sanctuaries on Pakistani soil, which were created using Western and Arab money. The radicalization of Pashtun tribesmen along the disputed Afghan-Pakistan border was enabled by petrodollar donations to local mullahs, who eventually became the Taliban. The emergence of sectarianism in Pakistan was seen as primarily due to the wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which prompted countries such as Iraq to get involved and attempt to contain Iranian influence. The official narrative in Islamabad implies that Pakistan's own security establishment had little say in these developments.

A different line of thinking exists, however, among some Pakistani commentators primarily writing in English. They argue that

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the army and intelligence services played an important role in protecting domestic and international terrorists. This protection has been extended in part due to statecraft; ongoing counterterrorist efforts inside their borders ensures Pakistan will remain relevant to international security efforts, and has the added benefit of incentivizing cooperation with the West in return for monetary aid. In addition, the role of ideo-

logical sympathy towards terrorist aims should not be ignored. Pakistan is a majority Sunni Muslim state, with Muslims constituting approximately 97% of the total population and Sunnis anywhere between 85 and 90% of this demographic. The country's Shias were historically both influential and well-integrated, often coming from land-owning families. But increasing urbanization since the 1960s altered socioeconomic relations and created a largely Sunni middle class that sought to reverse the dominance of Shias in the rural economy in parts of Punjab, the most populous province.

Terrorism in Pakistan, which began on a large scale during the 1980s, was initially attributed to Soviet and Afghan efforts to deter Islamabad from supporting Afghan insurgents. Terrorist activity in Pakistan slowed during the 1990s, and interethnic violence was the primary cause of political violence during this time period. However, the 2000s saw an increase in terrorist activity in Pakistan, and sectarian violence became responsible for the most politically-driven deaths. This violence often consists of Sunni supremacists targeting members of the minority Shia community. However, Sunni sectarian groups have also attacked Christians, viewing them as synonymous with Westerners. On rare occasions, these groups have directly attacked Western nationals working in Pakistan.

The justification for the broadened potential target base is as follows: After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, many Al-Qaeda operatives fled to Pakistan, where they took refuge with Sunni sectarian groups. The latter began to develop a more global perspective, whereby targets beyond local Shias became strategically valuable. The 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq accelerated this trend, as it spawned a metanarrative that the West, in collusion with Shia Iran, had toppled a Sunni regime and provoked an intra-Muslim civil war. Thus, the discord between the respective targeting priorities of global jihadists and sectarian militants in Pakistan harmonized swiftly. What did not change with comparable speed was the Pakistani state's response towards militancy based on its soil. Since the Soviet-Afghan War, a section of the security establishment perceived 'jihad' as both an inherently virtuous deed and a useful tool for advancing the military's corporate interests, in reference to both politi-

cal dominance domestically and covert operations overseas. This worldview hampered counterterrorist efforts.
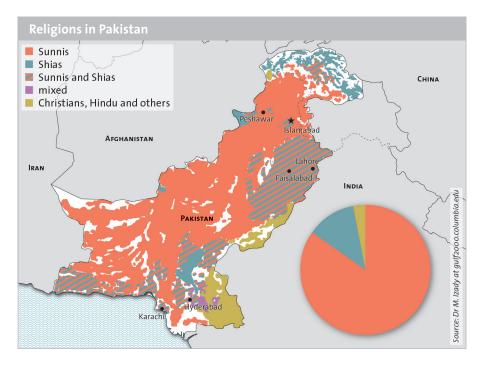
Influence of the Middle East

Several Pakistani commentators and some Western analysts have noted that sectarian groups have served the interests of the Pakistani military remarkably well. For power projection against Pakistan's neighbors, Afghanistan and India, these groups are a source of easily replaced manpower. By diverting them towards foreign targets, the army leadership also seeks to maintain domestic security within the country, an increasingly difficult task due to worsening governance deficiencies. Support for the Afghan Taliban in the mid 1990s, for instance, was rationalized as a means to externalize Pashtun rebelliousness within Pakistan's weakly-administered border areas.

It has further been suggested that the military tacitly shielded sectarian groups from counterterrorism efforts in order to destabilize civilian governments and prepare the public mood for 'constitutional' coups. The fact that the transfer of power from military to civilian rulers in 1988 was preceded by mysterious massacres in the provinces of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, lends credibility to this argument. Best-remembered are the killings in Kashmir, which saw Sunni jihadists, including members of what later would become Al-Qaeda, embarking on an eight-day rampage, killing up to 700 Shia villagers and razing 14 settlements. The local administration did not intervene and later seemed indifferent to the raid by building a prominent Sunni mosque in the devastated region. Throughout the following decade, elements of the country's intelligentsia and even some sections of the law enforcement community remained suspicious that the sectarian militants acted as protégés of the army.

It is also worth noting that large-scale economic migration to the Persian Gulf states not only exposed Pakistan's middle class (which populates the army's officer corps) to anti-Western and anti-Semitic discourse, but also anti-Shia ideologies. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, there was a growing sense of unease among both Sunni supremacists and the Pakistani military that Shias, backed by Iran, could become a tool of foreign subversion. During the 1990s, Shia professionals and Iranian diplomats and military personnel living in Pakistan as official guests were assassinated. Through all this, the state machinery

Religions in Pakistan

- Sunnis
- Shias
- Sunnis and Shias
- mixed
- Christians, Hindu and others

Source: Dr M. Izady at gulf2000.columbia.edu

remained mostly a mute spectator. The police in Punjab were even accused of informally collaborating with Sunni militants, as they would not interfere with the latter's activities unless serving policemen were targeted. It was only in 1997 – 99, as a result of deliberate attacks on police officials, that official restraint was abandoned and the Punjabi provincial government, supported by federal authorities, launched a limited offensive against Sunni groups.

The 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath – which saw Shias come to power in Iraq – prompted a Sunni insurgency which later morphed into an international terrorist movement calling itself the 'Islamic State' (IS). During the mid-2000s, Al-Qaeda, from its base in Pakistan, established a franchise in Iraq that cooperated and shared expertise with sectarian militant groups back in Pakistan, benefitting from connections established during the 1980s. Iraqi jihadists shared bomb-making techniques with the Taliban in 2005, a development which made Taliban attacks in Afghanistan deadlier than before. During the late 2000s, reports in Pakistani media spoke of Arab jihadists freely living in the country under assumed identities purchased through the local black market and even travelling abroad on Pakistani passports. Although these particular jihadists were focused on attacking Western targets, the host infrastructure that gave them physical protection in Pakistan was closely

linked to sectarian groups. So resilient has this infrastructure been that of late, even members of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a jihadist organization focused on attacking India and thought to be indifferent to Shia-Sunni conflict, have begun engaging in sectarian attacks. Since the rise of IS, LeT is also reported by Pakistani media to be assisting IS's expansion in South Asia. In this regard, the pronounced influence of Saudi Arabia on Pakistan's education system has markedly increased intolerance for other sects of Islam, as well as other religions more generally, and brought Arab and Pakistani jihadists closer.

Impact on Civil Society

Sectarian terrorism and official ambiguity towards combatting it are perhaps the most visible signs of state weakness in Pakistan. Since the 2000s, attacks on Shias have become bloodier and more indiscriminate. Meanwhile, the local non-English broadcast media, the main information source for the country's population, has avoided criticizing Sunni militants for fear of violent reprisals. The result is that official attempts to downplay the scale of the sectarian problem are not challenged by most Pakistani journalists, with only a handful expressing their dissent often at risk to their own lives. One of the most serious consequence of sectarianism has been the opportunistic self-radicalization of organized crime syndicates, which have adopted a sectarian hue to induce official toler-

ance for their profit-making activities. The nexus between radical mullahs and criminal gangs has partly reduced the Pakistani intelligence services' leverage over sectarian groups, which now have an independent source of funds and manpower if ever the state apparatus moves to shut down their above-ground infrastructure.

This above-ground support network consists of political parties that rhetorically endorse, even if they do not operationally facilitate, terrorist attacks. By casting such attacks in a nationalistic narrative built around the notion of a Sunni-dominant society, they have provided a mechanism for other political parties to strike tactical deals with sectarian militants. In exchange for votes canvassed among the militants' supporters, or sometimes merely as insurance for themselves, mainstream politicians allow sectarian groups to spread radical ideas via mosques, charities and privately published literature.

In an ominous trend, violence that originally was limited to Shias now extends to moderate Sunnis as well, if they are seen as not sufficiently orthodox. Over the last decade, 25 religious shrines have been attacked across Pakistan, several of them Sunni. These shrines are dedicated to the memory of local saints, and are anathema to sectarian militants because they represent an 'innovation' that dilutes the 'purity' of their Arab-centric perspective on Islam. Attacking these sites has become a method by which younger militants seek to outshine their predecessors. Since 2015, some bombings have been claimed by IS, or more accurately, Pakistani militants who pledged allegiance to IS. These recent attacks aim to break down the conventional norms of Pakistani society and polarize the country based upon not just sectarian, but also subsectarian lines. In February 2017 a Sufi shrine was bombed, killing almost 90 people. Sufis and Barelvis in Pakistan are often considered more moderate than Wahhabis or Deobandis, which are two of the more orthodox categories of Sunni Muslims. But in recent years, it appears as though even moderates feel compelled to demonstrate their doctrinal rigidity, lest they provoke militant attacks. Thus, in an episode which stunned the international community, after the provincial governor of Punjab was gunned down by a Barelvi, hundreds of Barelvi clerics endorsed the assassination and feted the gunman. The assailant was executed by Pakistani authorities in February 2016 and his grave has become a pilgrimage site.

The inability of the Pakistani state to enforce its own laws on combating extremism over two decades has led to a context wherein Arab sectarian groups like IS have a large space to maneuver. Over 90% of those arrested for sectarian murders in the 1990s and 2000s were released due to lack of evidence. Meanwhile, Sunni militants were courted by mainstream politicians to join power-sharing deals. As collateral, they were bribed by the dismissal of criminal charges against them. For instance, one militant, despite being implicated in the murders of over 100 Shias, was elected to parliament four times, allegedly due to his continuing usefulness to both military and civilian rulers. Examples such as this created a sense of impunity, which was only partly challenged by security operations.

National Action Plan (NAP)

After militants attacked an army-run school in December 2014, the Pakistani government announced a 20-point National Action Plan to defeat terrorism. So far, the only part of this plan which has been clearly implemented is the lifting of a moratorium on the death penalty. Over 430 people have been executed in Pakistan over the last two years. Upwards of 80% are believed to have been convicted for offenses that, although severe, had no connection to terrorism. Army-led counterterrorist operations in remote areas yield high body counts, thus making it difficult to establish the veracity of official claims that all the deceased were indeed 'terrorists'.

13 of the 20 Points of Pakistan's National Action Plan

- Implementation of death sentence of those convicted in cases of terrorism.
- Special trial courts under the supervision of Army.
- Militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country.
- Strict action against the literature, newspapers and magazines promoting hatred, decapitation, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance.
- All funding sources of terrorists and terrorist outfits will be frozen.
- The defunct outfits will not be allowed to operate under any other name.
- Protection of minorities will be ensured.
- Registration and regulation of religious seminaries.
- Ban on glorification of terrorists and terrorist organisations through print and electronic media.
- Communication network of terrorists will be dismantled completely.
- Concrete measures against promotion of terrorism through internet and social media.
- Action against elements spreading sectarianism.
- Formulation of a comprehensive policy to deal with the issue of Afghan refugees, beginning with registration of all refugees.

At more systemic levels, there has been little sign that the NAP's proposals on blocking the publication and distribution of inflammatory literature or preventing hate speech have been implemented. In October 2016, the Pakistani interior minister met a prominent sectarian leader for official talks. Upon being criticized for this, he insisted that sectarian militants were not terrorists, implicitly undermining his own government's pronouncements that it was committed to fighting terrorism in all forms.

Critics of the Pakistani military argue that it has long followed a policy of differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists, depending on whom it can covertly manipulate through intelligence handlers. Some of the most notorious militants of the 1990s are believed to have been agent provocateurs who were later eliminated in custodial deaths after they were supplanted by a younger generation of leaders. Irrespective of the accuracy of this claim, it is likely that Pakistan's capacity to handle terrorism as an internal challenge will be severely tested in the face of the growing presence of IS militants in South Asia.

Dr. Prem Mahadevan is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. Among other publications, he is the author of "Afghanistan: Back to the Brink" (2015).

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