

# **Pakistan: Brutal sectarian violence against Shias continues unabated**

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It is a recognized fact that a state's police and law enforcement agencies play a critical role as the first line of defense against the threats of terrorism and insurgencies.

Police is often failing to protect the members of religious minorities including Ahmadias, Shias, Christians and Hindus. Militant groups are carrying out suicide bombings and targeted killings across the country. The Taliban and affiliated groups are increasingly targeting civilians and public spaces, including marketplaces, hospitals, and religious processions.

Although Shias are a minority in the country, Pakistan holds the second largest Shia community after Iran in terms of numbers. The total Shia population in Pakistan is approximately 50 million and may be as high as 60 million. Globally, Shia Islam represents 10-20% of the total Muslims population, while the remaining 90% or nine-tenths practice Sunni Islam.

The increase in the number of suicide bombings and militancy has added to the sectarian tension that is played out in Muharram (the month of mourning for the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet PBUH) every year. A series of bomb blasts and shootings, mostly targeting Pakistan's minority Shia community in recent years shows that sectarian violence in the country can be every bit as deadly as that instigated by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Attacks in Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta and the north-west seem to be manifestations of the bitter split between Sunnis and Shias. In most cases, no-one claims responsibility for such attacks.

But Pakistan's fateful involvement in the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s, General Zia-ul-Haq's controversial 'Islamisation' policies, and a sense of Shia empowerment in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 had the combined effect of limiting the freedom of the Shia's to practice their religion and challenging their loyalty to Pakistan.

Among those blamed for the sectarian violence in the country are mainly Sunni militants such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and members of Shia militant groups such as Tehrik-e-Jafria and others. However, predominant Sunni terrorist groups are often blamed for frequent attacks on minority Shiites and their religious gatherings resulting in reprisal attacks by them.

Pakistan's ISI-backed Punjabi judiciary once again demonstrated its institutional hatred of Shia Muslims today by releasing the notorious leader of the Jihadi-sectarian organization Malik Ishaq, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (also known as the Punjabi Taliban or Sipah-e-Sahaba). Punjabi judges, backed by

Punjabi generals, released a Punjabi terrorist to enable further massacres of Shias, Ahmadis, Christians and other targeted communities.

Malik Ishaq was released less than a week after his followers killed at least 20 Shia Muslims in his home town of Rahim Yar Khan. On the last occasion he was released from jail, he killed many Shia Muslims in various parts of the country, and the news items were either ignored or misrepresented in Pakistan's mainstream media. He has now embarked on his next bloody mission.

While right-wing proxies of Pakistan's military establishment are legitimately celebrating Malik Ishaq's release, the ISI's liberal proxies in the English speaking class are busy in blaming the prosecution, ignoring the important links between ISI and LeJ and ISI and the judiciary. For example, Pakistan's English media routinely presents Malik Ishaq as the "Sri Lankan team attack suspect". Therefore, the murder of 70 Shias does not mean much to this class. [\[1\]](#)

Over the past three decades, violence between Sunnis and Shias has ebbed and flowed, but two things are clear. First, despite spawning banned violent sectarian outfits of their own, the Shias have largely been on the receiving end of the violence. In recent years, the violence has spread from southern Punjab and (sporadically) Karachi to Quetta in Balochistan, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas on Pakistan's troubled border with Afghanistan.

Hundreds of Shias have been murdered by militants in Quetta in the past few months. In the last couple of weeks, Shias have been taken off buses, lined up and shot dead. Quetta, however, is not an exception. Shias are not safe in any major town in Pakistan. Their places of worship, religious processions, and civilian and religious leadership has come under relentless attacks while the State's machinery has either refused or failed to protect Shias and other religious minorities in Pakistan.

The organized systematic genocide of Shiite Muslims in Pakistan has claimed 58 lives and injured 67 during the month of January 2012 in 32 attacks.

Based on January 2012 statistics, the projected number of deaths per year could be somewhere in the vicinity of 500 to 800 Shia Muslims killed per year and the number of those injured could be estimated to be between 700 and 1000.

In terms of the total number of attacks in January 2012, Sindh, Karachi in particular, was most problematic (15 attacks out of total 32), however, in terms of total deaths, Punjab proved to be most deadly province (36 out of 58 deaths).

The list of recent sectarian attacks makes for grim reading:

September 2011: Gunmen open fire on a bus carry pilgrims at Mastung in Balochistan province. At least 26 Shia Muslims are killed

January 2011: At least 10 people killed after twin blasts targeted Shia Muslim processions in Lahore and Karachi.

September 2010: At least 35 Shias were killed and 160 people were injured in a blast during a procession in Lahore.

September 2010: At least 50 people killed in a suicide bombing at a Shia rally in Quetta, south-western Pakistan

July 2010: Sixteen Shias killed in an attack on Shias in north-western tribal areas

February 2010: Two bombs in Karachi kill at least 25 Shias and injured more than 50 people.

December 2009: At least 40 people killed and dozens injured in a suicide bombing on a Shia procession in Karachi

Feb 2009: Bomb attack on a Shia procession in Punjab leaves 35 dead

It is a sad fact that the scores of deaths in the last few months is particularly alarming all over Pakistan. Due to paucity of resources and lack of communication networks there are still incidents of Jihadi sectarian attacks on Shia Muslims which are not recorded. This means that no exact statistics is available about Shia killings in Parachinar and other areas in Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA).

The Punjab government for having a soft spot for terrorist outfits, especially The Jamat- ud- Dawah (JUD) and Lashkar - e- Jhangvi (LEJ). Granted that the Punjab government must be held accountable for allowing these organisations and other extremist groups to hold public rallies full of hate speech all over Punjab.

The Pakistani government claims that it has taken measures to suppress the violence. The Pakistani Interior Chief Rehman Malik said the Shia population was in need of greater protection. Therefore, Islamabad ordered security forces to carry out this task, yet the violence has continued.

Our voices should no longer remain muted. We must convince the Pakistani government and its affiliates that it is crucial to take greater action against the violence perpetrated by these terrorists.

Officials must target the sources and support for the sectarian violence by apprehending known leaders and members of Taliban-associated militant groups across the country. Their influence has reached major cities as well and must be stopped.

Saudi-funded madressas (Islamic schools), which are used to target impressionable children and youth and preach the mentality that Shias are infidels, should be closely regulated and, in some cases, shut down.

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## **P.S.**

\* About AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation that monitors human rights in Asia, documents violations and advocates for justice and institutional reform to ensure the protection and promotion of these rights. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Reference <http://criticalppp.com/archives/69517>