

Pakistan's Shia genocide

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This year's Ashura in Pakistan signified a continuation of the country's spiral into self-destructive communal violence.

Once a respected and well-integrated minority in a country where they comprise roughly 20 per cent of the population and count the nation's founder as one of their own, Shia Muslims within Pakistan have become a community under siege in recent years and are facing a situation which is increasingly being described by many Pakistanis as a slow-motion genocide.

Several hundred Pakistani Shias have been killed this year alone in increasingly high-profile attacks by extremist militants, including one incident caught on video in August in which passengers were forced off a bus in the Gilgit region and executed by armed militants who checked their victims' ID cards before killing whomsoever they could identify as being Shia.

It is believed that since the early 1990s, nearly 4,000 Pakistani Shias have been murdered in sectarian attacks, and at a pace which has rapidly accelerated in recent years. The tragic irony of this increasingly violent sectarianism is that Muhammad Ali Jinnah, widely known and revered as the "Father of the Nation" of Pakistan was himself a Shia Muslim though he maintained a secular public religious identity and preached the same for the country which he created.

His famous speech to Pakistanis in which he said: "You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed...", signifies how far modern-Pakistan has departed from its founding ideals and become a place where the country's founder himself would likely be threatened and unwelcome.

Ahmadis, Barelvis, Christians and Hindus have all become subject to persecution within an increasingly religiously-chauvinistic Pakistani society, but it is Shias who have suffered the highest toll of bloodshed and whose fate is most tied to external forces intent on using Pakistan as a battleground for broader regional conflicts.

Pakistan as sectarian battleground

In an interview given to Reuters, Malik Ishaq, the leader of one of Pakistan's most notorious anti-Shia extremist groups Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) declared Shia Muslims "the greatest infidels on earth" and demanded that the Pakistani state "declare Shia non-Muslims on the basis of their beliefs".

Ishaq's demagoguery is not idle talk, LeJ death squads are believed to have been responsible for the killings of thousands of Shias throughout the country, including a campaign of targeted murders in 2011 which killed dozens of Shia doctors, lawyers and politicians residing in the major port-city of Karachi.

One lower-level LeJ operative now in police custody, Mahmoud Baber, reportedly choked with pride and emotion while describing to reporters his "great satisfaction" at being involved in 14 murders over his militant career, saying of the organisations purpose: "Get rid of Shias. That is our goal. May God help us".

Despite his unrepentant advocacy and propagation of violence, Ishaq himself has been acquitted over 30 times on homicide and terrorism charges - an incredible run of judicial fortune which many have attributed to covert support from elements within Pakistan's national security establishment which have long cultivated such groups as potential weapons against regional rival such as India.

Indeed, while organisations like the LeJ, Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba and offshoots such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) focus their violence on Pakistani Shias, they are representative of a broader regional narrative to which the Shia community is largely a victim of geopolitical circumstance and manipulation by external parties.

Pakistan has long been a front in the battle for regional influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the patronage of violent extremist groups primarily by the latter has been utilised as a tool to counter potential Iranian influence within the country.

The Pakistani Shia population, as well as the Pakistan's social cohesion as a whole, have been the collateral damage in this battle as wealthy Gulf donors have armed and funded sectarian death squads to wreak havoc against Pakistani Shias and other religious minorities within the country.

WikiLeaks cables released in 2009 described the extent of which this support has been facilitated: "Donors in Saudi Arabia as the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide... for groups aligned with Al-Qaida and focused on undermining stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan".

The leaked report describes in detail the extent to which wealthy, conservative Gulf donors have sought to use Pakistan as a battlefield for their war against Iran - a war in which they see all Shias across the world as being legitimate targets for violence.

An estimated \$100m per year has flowed from donors from the Gulf to fund extremist groups in Pakistan and spread sectarian ideology - a massive sum especially for a developing country such as Pakistan and one which has been increasingly successful in subverting the heterodox and tolerant Islamic tradition which has historically been prevalent in the subcontinent.

Children in particular, often pliable candidates for suicide bombings, have been specifically recruited for indoctrination with those "between the ages of 8 to 12" and whose families are "suffering extreme financial difficulties" being the most favoured targets of recruitment by sectarian extremist groups.

Extremist religious sentiments

While Shia militant groups such as Sipah-e-Muhammad also do exist, these are widely considered by analysts to be marginal and largely reactionary - the Shia community has overwhelmingly been the recipient of violence as opposed to its purveyor and has become the target of external parties using Pakistan as a field upon which to settle regional scores, as well as seeking to give violent expression to their own extremist religious sentiments.

As described in an editorial by the Karachi-based Express Tribune: "A fact recognised by all in Pakistan is that the people of the country are not sectarian-minded. Before jihad took hold of Pakistan and extremist clerics became threatening, there was considerable harmony between the sects. Muharram was not the season of sectarian violence and mayhem. Today, the world understands that the intensification of the sectarian feeling among the clerics is actually a result of a war relocated from Pakistan's neighbourhood in the Gulf."

Tragically, it has become Pakistani Shias, a community which has little if anything to do with the increasingly heated conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, that has today become among its biggest victims of that escalating conflict.

There is growing realisation within Pakistan that the cynical manipulation of the country by regional actors is leading to a potential existential crisis for the state. Shias make up a large percentage of the country's population of 180 million and account for a significant proportion of the professional class which is vital to the nation's continued viability.

In recent months, high-profile religious leaders from across the country convened in the capital of Islamabad for a conference intended to promote intra-communal unity and "put the genie of sectarianism back in the bottle", while secular political leaders have also made forceful denunciations of the increasingly violent sectarian chauvinism within the country.

Despite these encouraging pronouncements, the horrifying scenes of murder which played out on Pakistani streets during this year's Ashura commemorations are a stark reminder of how deeply embedded violently extremist religious attitudes have become within segments of Pakistani society in recent years.

Many analysts have warned that Pakistani Shias increasingly face "sectarian cleansing" from the country if violence against them continues to accelerate, a fate which would be a tragic end to a community which for most of the Pakistan's history has lived in communal harmony with majority Sunnis and others within Pakistan's once-inclusive ethnic and religious tapestry.

If the measure of a society is how it treats its minorities, the slow-motion genocide being perpetrated against the Shia community in Pakistan is indicative of a country which has acquiesced to being devoured from the inside-out and which has sacrificed for itself any vision of a tolerant and progressive future.

Opportunistic Gulf ideologues have turned Pakistan into a charnel-house in pursuit of their own sectarian and political agendas; until Pakistanis forcefully reject the purpose towards which their country is being cynically utilised, the downward spiral of communal violence will proceed and the fate of Pakistan's Shia community will continue to be marked by increasingly wanton massacres and bloodshed.

Where Sunnis and Shias within Pakistan once commemorated their holidays together in relative harmony, there has grown an increasingly stark divide - unless it is bridged and unless imported extremist ideologies are stifled, the future of Pakistan as a unified and cohesive state will continue to be threatened.

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