

NOREF Report

Sectarian violence: Pakistan's greatest security threat?

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Executive summary

Pakistan is experiencing a sharp resurgence in sectarian violence. Most frequently, such violence involves clashes between members of the two main sects of Islam – Sunnis and Shias – but violent incidents between the Barelvi and Deobandi sub-sects of Sunni Islam are also on the rise. The heightened frequency and brutality of Sunni-Shia clashes threaten national security – Pakistan's is the second-largest Shia population in the world after Iran – as well as bilateral relations with Iran and the regional power dynamic vis-à-vis Saudi Arabian influence.

The current resurgence of sectarian violence can be traced to the rise of the Pakistani Taliban in the mid-2000s and this organisation's growing ties with

militant sectarian organisations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi; as such, sectarian violence is arguably the most dangerous fallout for Pakistan of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Sectarian violence has spread across the country and is increasingly directed at disenfranchised targets such as Balochistan's Hazaras (an ethnic minority) and worshippers at Sufi shrines. The government's continuing failure to dismantle militant groups, enforce bans on hate speech and sectarian propaganda, improve the criminal justice system, and reform the madrassas has allowed sectarianism to thrive. In the absence of a comprehensive state crackdown, sectarian violence threatens to worsen Pakistan's fragile security situation.

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Introduction

Violations of the universal right to practise religion are systematic and widespread in Pakistan. Religious minorities face political, social, and economic marginalisation, and are formally persecuted by the state through discriminatory legislation such as blasphemy laws. Prejudiced public school curricula describe minority beliefs and practices as heretical, while extremist organisations issue edicts against religious minorities and circulate pamphlets maligning their beliefs with impunity. These and similar practices foster an atmosphere of intolerance in which religiously motivated violence is endemic.

There are two categories of such violence in Pakistan: inter-faith and sectarian. The former involves attacks against members of non-Muslim faiths, particularly Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians, who along with Parsis, Sikhs and Buddhists account for fewer than 4% of the 180 million-strong population. Interfaith violence largely comprises vigilante attacks by individuals or mobs in the wake of unsubstantiated accusations against members of non-Muslim minorities of their blaspheming against Islam.

Sectarian violence, on the other hand, unfolds between members of different Islamic sects. Most frequently, such violence involves clashes between members of the two main sects of Islam, Sunnis and Shias. Pakistan is a Sunni majority country, but Shias account for between 15% and 20% of the population.¹ Violent incidents are also common between the Barelvi and Deobandi sub-sects of Sunni Islam. Approximately 50% of Pakistanis identify as Barelvis, but Deobandis – who account for approximately 20% of the population, follow a more orthodox version of Islam and consider certain Barelvi practices un-Islamic – exert a significant influence over Pakistan's security situation.² This is because most extremist militant organisations in Pakistan are Deobandi and more

than 65% of all madrassas (Islamic schools) are run by Deobandis. Sectarian violence in Pakistan manifests variously as tit-for-tat targeted killings of members of rival sects; suicide bombings or gun attacks against another sect's mosques, funerals or religious processions; and attacks against sectarian targets using explosives.

Since Pakistan's is the second-largest Shia community in the world after Iran, widespread sectarian violence threatens to destabilise the country and the region. Because sectarian affiliations are ubiquitous and deeply felt, this kind of violence has the potential to involve large swathes of the population and spur radicalisation. Sectarian strife is also likely to further fragment Pakistan's polity, already divided by language and ethnicity. Moreover, the growing power, networks and resources of sectarian organisations will lead to an overall deterioration of Pakistan's already fragile security situation. Given this destabilising potential, this report focuses on the resurgence of sectarian violence in Pakistan and interrogates whether this kind of violence poses one of the greatest threats to the stability of present-day Pakistan.

Background

Sectarian violence was rife in Pakistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. Former military dictator General Ziaul Haq's (governed 1977-1988) policies and legislation aimed at 'Islamising' Pakistan were formulated in accordance with an orthodox version of Sunni Islam, to the exclusion of Sunni Barelvis and Shia Muslims. For example, in 1980 Zia imposed a *zakat* (wealth tax) and *ushr* (farming tax) ordinance that contradicted Shia practice and mobilised Pakistan's Shia population for the first time: 100,000 Shias marched on the federal secretariat in Islamabad, forcing the general to repeal the ordinance as it pertained to Shias, but also provoking the ire of hard-line Sunni organisations. Concerned by the Shia show of force, Sunni groups used the Shia refusal to pay an Islamic tax as an opportunity to brand members of the minority grouping as heretics and apostates, a narrative that still persists among extremist Deobandi Sunni groups.

1 ICG (International Crisis Group), *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, Asia Report no. 95, April 18th 2005, <http://www.crisis-group.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/pakistan/095-the-state-of-sectarianism-in-pakistan.aspx>.

2 GlobalSecurity.org, "Barelvi Islam", n.d., accessed June 19th 2012, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-barelvi.htm>.

These emerging sectarian tensions within Pakistan were exacerbated by geopolitical trends. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shia Muslims, including those in Pakistan, felt empowered. At the same time, Pakistan-based Deobandi Sunni organisations and madrassas began to receive weapons and funding from Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in order to provide support and training for Sunni Afghan fighters in the context of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, these fighters formed anti-Shia militant groups based in the southern districts of Pakistan's Punjab province. The region's poverty and chronic underdevelopment, political marginalisation, and stark contrast between wealthy Shia landlords and landless Sunni peasants made it the perfect recruiting ground for extremist sectarian groups.

Owing to these parallel developments, Pakistan witnessed soaring Sunni-Shia sectarian clashes between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, when up to 4,000 people are estimated to have died in sectarian fighting.³ The country became a battleground in a proxy sectarian war between Saudi Arabia and Iran as the two countries offered financial and logistical support to Sunni and Shia groups, respectively, as part of a wider tussle for influence in the Muslim world. Tough policing in the late-1990s, especially in the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore, led to the collapse of many sectarian organisations. President Pervez Musharraf's decision in 2001-2002 to ban both Sunni and Shia militant groups also temporarily curtailed sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Resurgence of sectarian violence

Since 2007 there has been a sharp resurgence of sectarian violence in Pakistan. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, an online database, there were 631 sectarian incidents in Pakistan between 2007 and 2011 that led to the deaths of over 1,649 people. In 2010, 509 people were

killed and 1,170 injured in 57 incidents of sectarian violence. In 2011 the incidence of sectarian violence decreased (203 killed and 297 injured in 30 incidents), only to soar in the first five months of 2012: between January and May 177 people were killed in 51 incidents.⁴ In keeping with historical trends, the majority of recent violence has occurred between Sunnis and Shias (Shias accounted for 70% of all sectarian deaths between 1985 and 2005).⁵ That said, intra-sectarian violence between Deobandi and Barelvi Sunnis is also on the rise: hundreds of Barelvi (Sufi) worshippers were killed in more than 70 suicide attacks at shrines between 2005 and 2010. Moreover, two prominent Barelvi leaders were targeted by Deobandi militants in 2009: in June, Mufti Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi, a senior Barelvi cleric who had repeatedly spoken against the Pakistani Taliban, was killed in a suicide bombing in Lahore; in September, Hamid Saeed Kazmi, then Pakistan's minister for religious affairs, was shot by two gunmen. In Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and commercial capital, clashes between extremist Sunni organisations are common – one exchange of fire in the city's Godhra area in September 2011 left eight people dead.

The current resurgence of sectarian violence – particularly Sunni-Shia clashes – can be traced back to the mid-2000s and is arguably the most dangerous fallout for Pakistan of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in neighbouring Afghanistan. In 2006 Taliban fighters seeking sanctuary in Pakistan's north-western tribal belt exploited decades-old sectarian tensions in the Kurram tribal region and launched attacks

3 David Montero, "Shiite-Sunni conflict rises in Pakistan", *Christian Science Monitor*, February 2nd 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0202/p01s02-wosc.html>.

4 South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Sectarian violence in Pakistan: 1989-2012", n.d., accessed June 2nd 2012, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm>. There are significant discrepancies in the records of sectarian violence maintained by different institutions owing to varying methodologies and definitions of sectarianism. For example, the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan documents 389 killings in incidents of violence against various Muslim sects in 2011 and 420 killings in 2010 (see Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "Freedom of thought, conscience and religion", n.d., accessed May 28th 2012, <http://www.hrcp-web.org/pdf/AR2011/Freedom%20of%20thought.pdf>). For its part, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, an Islamabad-based think tank, documents 397 killings in 139 incidents of sectarian violence in 2011 and 662 killings in 152 incidents in 2010 (see PIPS (Pak Institute for Peace Studies), *Pakistan Security Report 2011*, Islamabad, January 2012).

5 ICG, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, 2005.

against the Parachinar-based Shia tribes. The hardline Deobandi Taliban were ideologically anti-Shia, but their sectarianism had a pragmatic element as well: they needed to access routes into Afghanistan via Kurram that were under the control of local Shias. The Taliban's sustained anti-Shia campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) led to the reconsolidation in north-western Pakistan of Shia extremist groups seeking to defend their community. The resurgence of Shia groups in turn remobilised extremist Sunni organisations that, with support from the Taliban, revived their sectarian mandate across the country.

Main actors

Unlike inter-faith violence, where ordinary members of congregations have been known to mobilise against religious minorities on the prompting of extremist clerics or groups, sectarian violence is largely carried out by members of extremist militant organisations. The following are the main actors currently engaging in sectarian violence in Pakistan:

- *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ)*: The ASWJ is the new name of the banned sectarian group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The SSP is an extremist Sunni (Deobandi) militant organisation and has carried out attacks against Shias, whom it believes to be infidels, since 1985. In recent years the SSP has also clashed with Barelvi groups. The group has also developed strong ties with the Pakistani Taliban and sends its recruits to Pakistan's tribal belt for training. The SSP also operates as a political party and its members have been elected to the Pakistani parliament or offered key support to politicians from mainstream political parties, especially in the Punjab province. Responding to the recent rise in sectarian violence, the Pakistan government banned the ASWJ in March 2012, although the group remains operational.
- *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)*: LeJ, an offshoot of the SSP, is an extremist Sunni group that regards Shia Muslims as infidels and is active

in sectarian warfare in Karachi, Balochistan and southern Punjab. In 2012 LeJ has focused its sectarian attacks against the ethnically distinct Shia Hazaras of Balochistan. In recent years it has also diversified from its original anti-Shia focus and allied itself with other militant groups in attacks against the Pakistani state and Western interests in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The outlawed group has developed close linkages with the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, and provides them with weapons, finances and recruits. Intelligence reports have linked LeJ to the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007. The group is also accused of a previous assassination attempt against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, in 1999.

- *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban)*: The Pakistani Taliban is a coalition of FATA-based militant groups that seeks to overthrow the Pakistani state and impose Islamic law. The grouping has been waging a campaign of suicide bombings against state security and civilian targets since 2007. In recent years it has provided funding, logistical support, training and sanctuary to militants involved with Deobandi sectarian organisations such as LeJ and the ASWJ, and can thus be credited with the current resurgence in sectarian violence.
- *Sipah-e-Mohamadi Pakistan (SMP)*: The SMP was founded in 1993 in an effort to protect Pakistan's Shia community from extremist Sunni militant groups. The group resurfaced in 2008-2009 and is most active in the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore. In addition to engaging in tit-for-tat sectarian killings of LeJ and ASWJ members, the SMP has been recently accused of killing prominent Sunni doctors. Reportedly, the group has previously received support and funding from Iran. Last year, four militants affiliated with the SMP were arrested in connection with a grenade attack against the Saudi Arabian consulate in Karachi in May 2011.

- *Tehrik-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP)*: The TJP is an offshoot of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqah Jafria, a Shia political party founded in 1979 with the aim of protecting Pakistan's Shia community from General Ziaul Haq's Sunni-oriented interpretations of Islamic law and widespread discrimination within army ranks and government departments. The TJP has been banned twice, but continues to operate under different names. Its members primarily organise Shia resistance to Sunni extremism, but have also been involved in sectarian violence.
- *Sunni Tehrik (ST)*: The ST sees itself as a political organisation working to defend Barelvi Sunnis against sectarian attacks by Deobandi groups. It is one of the largest and best organised among 4,000 Sunni Barelvi organisations in Karachi, many of which operate within a single neighbourhood. The ST's militant wing retaliates against sectarian attacks launched primarily by the ASWJ and engages in turf wars to gain control of the mosques of rival sects through land acquisition.
- *Jundullah*: This is a newly formed anti-Shia militant group with ties to the Pakistani Taliban, LeJ and the ASWJ. Jundullah militants have been arrested in connection with a blast at a Shia procession in Karachi in December 2009 that killed 40 people. Because of its ties with the Pakistani Taliban, Jundullah has also launched attacks against state security forces.

Pakistan's current sectarian landscape

Owing to sectarian and class divides among the population, Sunni and Shia extremist groups have traditionally been active in the southern regions of Pakistan's largest province, Punjab. In the mid-2000s many sectarian organisations regrouped with Taliban help in the tribal region along the Pakistani-Afghan border. But resurgent Sunni-Shia violence has a broader geographic base: in recent years, fighting has spread beyond the FATA to include the urban centres of Karachi and Lahore, the south-western Balochistan province (particularly the city of Quetta and Mastung district)

and the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region. Owing to the social, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Pakistan's Shia population, sectarian violence has varying dynamics in different parts of the country. The following examples of sectarian violence should be seen as illustrative of the scope, variety and intensity of sectarian dynamics rather than as a comprehensive listing of sectarian incidents.

Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial hub, was the worst hit by sectarian violence in 2011, with 36 attacks – roughly 32% of all sectarian incidents recorded in Pakistan – claiming 58 lives.⁶ According to a report by the Criminal Investigation Department, an anti-terrorist police unit, more than half of the 246 terrorists arrested in Karachi between 2001 and 2010 were affiliated with sectarian groups.⁷ The growing presence of sectarian militants in the city led to attacks against Shia religious processions on December 28th 2009 and February 5th 2010 that killed 40 and 25 people, respectively. Tit-for-tat sectarian killings continue on an ongoing basis between extremist Sunni organisations, including the ASWJ, LeJ and Jundullah, and Shia groups such as the SMP. In 2012 militant groups targeted lawyers representing activists of rival sectarian groups – in January alone three Shia lawyers and four lawyers representing members of the ASWJ were assassinated in different shooting incidents.

In Balochistan sectarian attacks are directed against the minority Hazara community, whose members are Shia. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the targeting of Hazaras, starting with the killing of the chairman of the Hazara Democratic Party in January 2009 (in the prior decade, from 1998 onwards up to 700 Hazaras were killed in Balochistan for sectarian reasons).⁸ Last year LeJ claimed responsibility for several brutal attacks against Hazaras: on October 4th, 13 Shia Hazara were dragged off a bus and shot dead; on September 23rd, three Hazara men working at a coalmine outside Quetta were killed; on September 20th, 26 Shia pilgrims travelling to Iran were forced off

⁶ PIPS, *Pakistan Security Report 2011, 2012*.

⁷ *Express Tribune*, "Changing face of militancy in Karachi", May 8th 2010, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/11626/changing-face-of-militancy-in-karachi/>.

⁸ World Socialist, "Pakistan's Hazaras targeted by campaign of ethnic-communal killings", May 22nd 2012, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/paki-m22.shtml>.

a bus in Mastung and shot dead in front of their families. The trend of targeting Shia Hazaras has continued unabated in 2012 and 46 people have fallen victim to sectarian killings in the provincial capital of Quetta, primarily in the months of April and May.⁹ On June 28th a bomb attack near Quetta on a bus transporting Shia pilgrims killed 15 people.

The surge in LeJ violence against Hazaras is related to the growing presence of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban militants in Balochistan: the extremist Sunni Taliban have historically been anti-Shia and anti-Hazara, and their financial and operational links with LeJ have bolstered sectarian violence in the province. Unlike in other parts of Pakistan, sectarian killings in Balochistan rarely target prominent individuals such as doctors, lawyers or leaders of religio-political organisations. Instead, the Hazara victims, who have Asian features and are thus easier to identify and target as Shias, hail from lower socioeconomic strata and are primarily targeted while in transit when gunmen open fire on their vehicles. As such, the sectarian violence in Balochistan has an ethnic dimension.

In the north of the country the semi-autonomous Gilgit-Baltistan region is also plagued by soaring sectarian violence – nine people died in 21 sectarian incidents in 2011. Sectarian clashes flared there on February 28th 2012 after Jundullah militants forced 18 Shia residents of Gilgit-Baltistan returning from pilgrimage in Iran off their bus and shot them to death. The attack sparked riots in which 22 people were killed, forcing authorities to enforce a three-week curfew. Weeks later, on April 2nd 2012, 14 more people were killed when a grenade attack against an ASWJ protest rally in Chilas sparked sectarian clashes, including the murder of ten Shia bus passengers. The authorities once again responded by imposing a curfew, closing schools and offices, jamming mobile phones, and barring entry to the two main mosques in the area. Gilgit-Baltistan is notable for the fact that sectarian violence is continuing to spread in the region despite strong and prompt responses from local law enforcers, government officials and religious leaders.

Meanwhile, intra-sectarian violence between Sunni Deobandis and Barelvis is also geographically scattered. Attacks by Deobandi Taliban militants against Barelvi (Sufi) shrines have been prevalent in – but not limited to – the north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province: in July 2010 suicide bombers attacked Lahore's famous Data Darbar shrine, killing 42 people; in October of the same year suicide bombers also attacked Abdullah Shah Ghazi's shrine in Karachi. Deobandis and Barelvis also engage in gun battles and tit-for-tat targeted killings in Karachi and Lahore.

Why sectarian violence thrives

Although Pakistan's sectarian landscape is growing and linkages among extremist organisations continue to evolve, the main causes underlying sectarian violence have remained consistent since the 1980s:

- *Continuing support for sectarian organisations:* Previously, militant sectarian groups enjoyed financial and operational support from Pakistan's security establishment in the context of asymmetric warfare against India. They also received funding from foreign governments – primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia – as proxies in a regional tussle for political and ideological dominance. In recent years the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda have provided extremist Sunni organisations such as LeJ and the ASWJ with funding, sanctuary, logistical support and training. The current resurgence of sectarian violence can be largely attributed to the growing nexus between the Taliban and sectarian militants.
- *Failings of the criminal justice system:* Sectarian violence thrives owing to the persistent failure to arrest and prosecute militants involved with sectarian organisations. Pakistan's criminal justice system has dismal conviction rates: 75% of alleged terrorists are acquitted by the anti-terrorism courts.¹⁰ There are many reasons for this low conviction rate:

⁹ Bari Baloch, "Four Hazaras among 6 dead", *The Nation*, June 4th 2012, <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/national/04-Jun-2012/four-hazaras-among-6-dead>.

¹⁰ Jason Overdorf, "Dismal conviction rate for Pakistan terrorists", *Global Post*, August 31st 2011, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/the-rice-bowl/dismal-conviction-rate-pakistan-terrorists>.

the politicisation of Pakistan's police force; poor evidence-gathering and investigation techniques, especially pertaining to forensic evidence; and a chronic backlog of cases in the criminal justice system, which delays trials and leads to the mismanagement of police investigations. Poor security provisions for judges, public prosecutors and eyewitnesses also lead to acquittals, because people are intimidated by militant organisations into delivering favourable verdicts on behalf of these organisations' activists. In a particularly egregious case, the Supreme Court failed to find evidence of LeJ leader Malik Ishaq's involvement in the murders of dozens of Shias. He was released from jail in July 2011 and has since participated in several public rallies, where he has incited violence against Shias.

- *Lack of madrasa reform:* According to Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs, there are over 18,000 registered madrassas in the country, although the actual number of Islamic schools could be as high as 40,000. Madrassas are run on a strictly sectarian basis and, thanks to the inflow of Saudi funding in the 1980s, the network of Deobandi madrassas has expanded most rapidly: in 2002, out of a registered total of 10,000 madrassas, 7,000 were Deobandi, 1,585 Barelvi and 419 Shia.¹¹ In 2002 the government launched a voluntary madrasa registration programme that sought to improve the state's oversight of madrasa curricula and activities, but according to the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy, only 10% of previously unregistered madrassas have complied.¹² Mushrooming madrassas intensify sectarian divisions by highlighting theological differences, denouncing the beliefs and practices of rival sects, and disseminating propaganda materials that fuel cycles of sectarian violence. Beyond the state's purview, madrassas also collect funds on behalf of militant sectarian groups under the guise of charitable donations and provide key venues for sectarian militants to network and coordinate attacks.

- *Political clout of sectarian organisations:* Since the 1980s the state's use of extremist organisations as proxies to execute foreign policy goals vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan has promoted aggressive competition among different Muslim sects for official patronage in the form of government handouts and political favours. To better position themselves to access state resources, sectarian leaders have strived to make inroads into political constituencies and cultivate political candidates. As a result, civilian politicians are held hostage by the political clout of sectarian organisations, which have become key to winning constituencies, particularly in the Punjab. Throughout the 1990s the ASWJ (then the SSP) supported candidates fielded by the mainstream Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN). In 1995 an SSP leader was appointed as a provincial minister in Punjab because the PPP needed SSP support to achieve a majority. More recently, in 2010 Punjab's provincial law minister and PMLN representative Rana Sanaullah campaigned for a local election in Punjab's Jhang district alongside Maulana Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi, the leader of the ASWJ. Politicians consistently fail to clamp down on militant sectarian organisations for fear of losing the essential political support such organisations guarantee.

Conclusion and future scenarios

Sectarian violence poses a grave threat to Pakistan's security and stability, primarily because conflict between mainstream religious communities threatens to involve and radicalise greater swathes of the Pakistani population than any other kind of militancy. This development would be in keeping with historical trends, whereby Shias and Barelvi Sunnis have responded to the attacks of extremist Deobandi groups by organising armed resistance. In the absence of a comprehensive state crackdown on militant sectarian groups, senior police officers in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar expect sectarian tensions to escalate across Pakistan. It is also likely that future sectarian violence, much like current violence

¹¹ Tariq Rahman, "Madrassas: the potential for violence in Pakistan?", Jamal Malik, ed., *Madrassas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2008.

¹² Nosheen Abbas, "Pakistan's madrasa reform stalls", *The Guardian*, October 11th 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/oct/11/pakistan-stalls-madrassa-reforms-english>.

in Balochistan, will increasingly be directed at ordinary citizens who are not members of militant groups – as cycles of violence escalate, tit-for-tat killings will be less discriminatory in their targets. Judges, lawyers and others in the criminal justice system who are in a position to prosecute sectarian militants will also remain at high risk.

In addition to the widening scope of sectarian violence, Pakistan is likely to see sectarian organisations embrace broader mandates and launch attacks against the Pakistani government, state security forces and Western targets. As described above, LeJ has already extended its anti-Shia mandate to participate in 'global jihad' as a result of its growing ties to the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda. Such a trend could seriously threaten Pakistan's overall security situation and destabilise the country to dangerous levels.

Sectarian violence in Pakistan could also affect regional stability. Closer cooperation between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani LeJ in an effort to target Shia Hazaras could facilitate militant cooperation across the Durand Line and, in turn, complicate Pakistani-Indian ties, which are already threatened by the prospect of proxy warfare in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops in 2014. Continued attacks against Pakistan's Shia population could stoke tensions between Pakistan and Iran, threatening bilateral cooperation on a gas pipeline project and various counter-terrorism initiatives. There is also a danger of Pakistan once again becoming the battleground in a proxy clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran, particularly if Tehran continues to pursue a nuclear weapons programme. There is already evidence of a regional dimension to Pakistan's sectarian crisis: the grenade attack against Karachi's Saudi Arabian consulate in May 2011 was seen as an attempt to spark Sunni-Shia strife across the Middle East.

Recommendations

Given the destabilising potential of sectarian violence, the Pakistani government should implement the following recommendations with immediate effect:

- strictly enforce existing bans on militant sectarian organisations;
- train and equip special police force units to track, investigate and arrest members of sectarian organisations;
- provide special security for judges and public prosecutors involved in the trials of suspected sectarian militants;
- track and eliminate sources of funding for sectarian organisations, especially those originating outside Pakistan;
- introduce specific legislation outlawing sectarianism, e.g. Gilgit-Baltistan's Code of Conduct (May 2012), which bans religious leaders from promoting sectarianism and supporting sectarian organisations, offers a sound model;¹³
- strictly enforce all laws against hate speech, prevent religious leaders from using mosque loudspeakers for any purpose other than to deliver the call to prayer, and suspend the licences of publications and pamphlets of sectarian organisations that promote sectarian agendas;
- pursue the policy of madrassa registration and curricula reform, including purging madrassas' curricula and public school textbooks of all sectarian material, especially content that maligns the beliefs and practices of specific sects; and
- investigate all government officials and politicians accused of maintaining links with sectarian organisations, and disqualify political parties and politicians found guilty of such associations from participating in elections.

¹³ Shabbir Mir, "Pakistan's first: GBLA passes law to curb sectarianism", *Express Tribune*, May 29th 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/385520/pakistans-first-gbla-passes-law-to-curb-sectarianism/>.

Further reading

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