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# The New Face of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan

Pakistan has recently experienced a dramatic upsurge in sectarian violence against its Shia Muslim minority. According to Gohar Abbas, many observers attribute this spike in violence to top-level personnel changes in the Pakistani wing of al Qaeda.

By Gohar Abbas for ISN

The recent upsurge of sectarian violence in Pakistan not only poses a renewed and serious threat to this most fragile of states, it also suggests that the domestic leadership of al-Qaeda is undergoing a paradigm and ideological shift. As the Arab leadership of al-Qaeda gradually relocates to Yemen, vacant positions in the organization are increasingly being filled by local Islamist militants.

## The latest wave of sectarian attacks

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), at least 320 members of the Shia community were killed in Pakistan between January and September of this year, with this number increasing every day. For instance, at least five people were killed and several others injured after a [bomb attack](#) on a Shia Imambargah (Mosque) in Karachi on November 21 during the holy Shia month of Muharam. Later that day, a suicide bomber blew himself up near a [Shia procession](#) in the city of Rawalpindi - home to the General Headquarters of the Pakistani army - killing 23 people and injuring many more.

In response, the government subsequently [suspended mobile phone services](#) across Pakistan for two days in a bid to avert further terror attacks on Shia commemorations. However, terrorists still succeeded in attacking a Muharam procession in Dera Ismael Khan, leaving five people dead and dozens injured. The [Tehreek Taliban Pakistan](#) (TTP) an al-Qaeda offshoot, claimed responsibility for all the attacks.

Large, well-organized attacks on Shias now also take place in regions that have previously been considered more stable such as Gilgit-Baltistan. In August, over a dozen gunmen wearing Pakistani Army uniforms stopped a number of buses between Gilgit and Rawalpindi. After identifying the Shias among the travelers, the gunmen forced 19 these [passengers](#) off the buses and shot them at point blank range. This was the third such incident in six months on the Karakorum Highway. Similar execution-style attacks by Islamist militants had previously taken place in February of this year. The TTP and [Jandullah](#), another militant group affiliated with al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility for these attacks.

## State-sponsored sectarian conflict

Sectarian conflict in Pakistan has blighted the country since independence. It was partly embedded by the state in its attempts to forge a national identity based on a rigid form of Islam, replacing the Sufi tradition and teachings with the Salafi school of thought. During the dictatorial regime of Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), Pakistan's sectarian divide reached a new height, when Haq introduced his controversial Islamization policies. The Iran-Iraq war further heightened sectarian tensions as both Iran and Saudi Arabia started financing armed groups from their respective sects inside Pakistan to counter each other's influence.

State support for Mujahideen fighters engaged in conflict with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan further impeded mutual coexistence in Pakistan. Sectarian conflict and the targeted killing of Shias in Pakistan also continued throughout the 1990s with impunity. Yet after the US invasion of Afghanistan the number of incidences of sectarian killing inside of Pakistan declined, as new fronts opened for militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, over the past two years sectarian violence has returned to Pakistan, most notably in Baluchistan, where targeted attacks on Shias have now become a daily phenomenon.

The latest upsurge in sectarian violence is primarily attributed to members of anti-Shia sectarian outfits like Sipah Sahaba (SSP) and Lashkar Jhangvi (LeJ) joining the ranks of al-Qaeda. These organizations now dominate the higher ranks of the terrorist group in Pakistan, while the Arab leadership of al-Qaeda has [largely relocated](#) to Yemen. SSP and LeJ are among the groups that Pakistan once provided moral and material support. These outfits have also been sponsored by Saudi Arabia to counter a possible spillover of Iran's Islamic revolution into Pakistan.

### **The new leaders**

Multiple sources with access to al-Qaeda and its offshoots confirm that leadership has been transferred to local fighters at the operational level. An al-Qaeda member based in Miranshah, North Waziristan, said Moulana Asmat Ulla Maviya, a Punjabi fighter, has been appointed head of the operational command of al-Qaeda in Pakistan. Maviya had previously been associated with Jaishe Muhammad (JeM), a jihadi organization based in Kashmir. In 2010, when the Punjabi Taliban was formed he became the main recruiter for the group in South Punjab. Maviya is also suspected of the kidnapping of three Western aid workers and the abduction of Shahbaz Taseer, the son of late Salman Taseer, a Pakistani businessman and former Governor of Punjab.

Unlike his peers, Maviya is more interested in strengthening different militant groups cooperating with al-Qaeda in Pakistan's urban areas than recruiting fighters for the organization's global agenda. An al-Qaeda commander based in Miranshah who fights under the command of Asmat Ulla Maviya (and who wished to remain anonymous) said: "There is no difference between SSP and us. We both are fighting for the same cause, and it's easier and more effective to have people in their native areas than having all of them in the tribal areas."

The commander went on to explain that for the Punjabi speaking people belonging to SSP and LeJ it was naturally easier to operate in their hometowns rather than other areas.

"The cause should be the same, it never matters what name or organization you choose as a label," he told the commander.

The growing influence of sectarian outfits in the metropolitan areas of the country has also been recognized in various segments of the [Pakistani press](#). An official from the leading civilian intelligence agency also confirmed that sectarian outfits like SSP and LeJ were becoming stronger in the cities.

Sources also report that Ustad Ahmed Farooq, who was previously responsible for al-Qaeda's

operations in Pakistan, has been placed in charge of the group's media wing, Al Sahab. Farooq previously headed Harkat-e-Jihad ul Islami, also known as 313 Brigade. This group was the most feared wing of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and behind some of its biggest attacks, including the [attack](#) on Pakistan Navy's Mehran air base in Karachi in May 2011.

### **From asset to liability**

After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan's jihadists shifted focus from Kashmir to Pakistan's tribal areas. However, the wider movement seems to be going through another phase of transition and is establishing itself in the urban areas of the country with the aim of waging a war against the minority Shia population. These changes will inevitably pose a major challenge to the state, which had itself sponsored the militants for decades.

Once used to pursue Pakistan's "strategic depth" in Afghanistan and Kashmir, the jihadists are now weakening the very roots of the state by undermining the already fragile co-existence between different Muslim sects. After the scheduled withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014, Pakistan will be especially vulnerable to the returning militants.

"The Shias and other Muslim minorities are more prone to violence in the months ahead", says Mohammad Raashid, an expert on al-Qaeda and the Taliban. "The transition of al-Qaeda from...a terrorist organization with a global agenda to becoming a sectarian organization is due to the new mindset...at the operational level in Pakistan." The new breed of al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan is taking the sectarian divide to new heights, thereby pushing the country closer to the brink of being a failed state.

With a weak government in power, an increasing deterioration of law and order and a fast collapsing economy, the new trend of sectarian violence might be a final step to the complete disintegration of Pakistan.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:  
[Sectarian Violence: Pakistan's Greatest Security Threat?](#)  
[Analyzing Failure: Pakistan and the Failed States Index](#)  
[Sectarian Strife in Gilgit Baltistan](#)

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