

# A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

*September 2022*



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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** The rise of a local Islamic State franchise and the growing influence of a hard-line and violent protest movement known as “Labaik” that draws support mostly from Pakistan’s Bareilvi majority, open a new chapter in the country’s sectarian violence, which until recently was driven largely by Deobandi groups.

**Why does it matter?** These two groups, though very different, are responsible for some of the country’s worst intercommunal bloodshed. Sectarian militancy thus extends across the spectrum of Sunni Islamist groups. Muslim minorities, particularly Shias, are deeply vulnerable. Vigilantism is a danger as hardliners mobilise around allegations of blasphemy to gain political clout.

## *Executive Summary*

Sectarian strife remains a challenge to the Pakistani state and a danger to its citizenry. Large-scale sectarian attacks, which killed thousands in the 1980s and 1990s, are now less frequent, but evidence suggests sectarian animosity is spreading into larger parts of the Sunni Islamist milieu. In previous decades, Deobandi Sunni groups, particularly Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, instigated much of the violence. But two distinct new forces, the Salafi Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – the local Islamic State branch – and Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (Labaik, for short) – a hardline political party and violent protest movement whose followers come mostly from Pakistan’s Barelvi Sunni majority – have now taken the lead, reconfiguring the nature of the threat. The problem may well keep worsening if sectarian hardliners have space to promote their hatred and can attack – or spur others to attack – their fellow citizens with impunity.

Sunni militant groups sunk their roots in Pakistan during General Zia-ul-Haq’s military government (1977-1988). The anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, efforts to curb Shia militancy in response to Iran’s 1979 revolution, the regime’s Islamisation program – all these Zia-era policies prepared the ground for organisations with sectarian agendas to flourish. The SSP and, later, its ostensibly separate armed wing, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi – both of which draw their support from among Deobandis, an orthodox and often hardline Sunni sub-sect – waged a violent campaign aimed at excluding Shias from public life, including clashes with militant Shia groups. In the 1990s, the military-sponsored insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir allowed these groups to consolidate their presence. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi continued to target Shias until the mid-2010s, when police action decimated its leadership and sectarian attacks declined.

But a period of relative peace has yielded to a new era of sectarian conflict, one with different – and in some ways more pernicious – characteristics. Many former Lashkar-e-Jhangvi foot soldiers have turned to the Islamic State’s local franchise. ISKP’s original core in Afghanistan comprised many former Pakistani Taliban militants. Disgruntled with their leadership, often over succession disputes, these fighters, despite mostly being Deobandi, also joined the Salafi outfit. Together with other recruits, including from Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, they have helped the ultra-sectarian ISKP gain traction in Pakistan. ISKP competes for influence and recruits with the Pakistani Taliban, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, which share long borders with Afghanistan. It has claimed sectarian attacks in both. It was responsible for the 4 March 2022 bombing of a Shia mosque in Peshawar, which claimed more than 60 lives. The Salafi group is also reportedly making inroads in parts of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018).

Perhaps even more worrying is that sectarian militancy now runs across the range of Sunni Islamist groups, including adherents to what was once regarded as the more moderate Barelvi sub-sect, believed to constitute a thin majority of Pakistan’s population. Labaik, a movement operating openly in Pakistani society and drawing support mostly from the Barelvi, poses a very different threat to ISKP’s network of underground cells. But since its 2017 rise to prominence, Labaik has been

responsible for inciting or conducting some of the worst sectarian and vigilante violence. It mobilises supporters around opposition to perceived insults to the Prophet Muhammad. The most brutal outcome of Labaik's politics to date is the 3 December 2021 mob lynching of a Sri Lankan factory manager wrongly accused of blasphemy. Labaik has embraced an anti-Shia agenda, breaking with Bareilvis' history of shared ritual practice with Shias.

On the receiving end of this consolidated Sunni Islamist threat, the country's Shia minority feels increasing beleaguered and in danger. Shias often contend with the wrath of security agencies suspicious of their links to Iran. Blasphemy laws are also being increasingly used to target the community.

By using force against outfits such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the state has certainly achieved short-term successes – including the decline in sectarian bloodshed after Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's leadership was decimated – but it has not put hardline sectarian organisations out of business. As long as these groups have civic space to propagate sectarian hatred, they will thrive. Countering Labaik's influence is particularly challenging since its appeal is based on the emotive issue of blasphemy.

**September 2022**

# A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan\*

## I. Introduction

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Two incidents in the space of three months highlight the evolving threat of sectarian violence in Pakistan: the lynching of a Sri Lankan factory manager accused of blasphemy in Punjab's Sialkot district on 3 December 2021; and the bombing of a Shia mosque in Peshawar, which claimed more than 60 lives on 4 March 2022.<sup>1</sup> Both are disturbing signs that hardline Sunni Islamist groups are increasingly willing to shed blood to assert their deeply sectarian views.

Sectarianism is now common across much of the spectrum of Sunni Islamist groups in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Hatred of non-Sunni Muslims was once the métier of Deobandi militants, notably Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, but worryingly it has spread to elements of the Sufi-inspired Barelvi majority. Since 2017, a Barelvi group called Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (or Labaik), a hardline political party and violent protest movement that mobilises supporters by alleging blasphemy and other infringements upon religious sensitivities, has been responsible for inciting some of the most egregious acts of sectarian violence.<sup>3</sup> Labaik stirred up the mob behind the murder in Sialkot. Meanwhile, the Islamic State's local franchise, the Salafi Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), is gaining in strength. It claimed the Peshawar bombing, the first major anti-Shia attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in several years and one of the worst in the country's history.

This report examines trends in sectarianism among Sunni Islamists in Pakistan, focusing on the role of Deobandi, Barelvi and Salafi-inspired groups. Sectarian violence is a distinct phenomenon from separatist, anti-state violence, which Crisis Group has covered and will continue to analyse elsewhere. The report is based on in-person interviews in Islamabad, Peshawar and Lahore, and telephone interviews with sources in Karachi and Quetta. Interlocutors included intelligence, law enforcement and other officials; political representatives; Shia and human rights activists; and analysts and researchers. Given the delicacy of the subject, most chose to remain anonymous.

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\* Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralisme, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

<sup>1</sup> For earlier analysis of sectarianism in Pakistan, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°279, *Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab*, 30 May 2016; 271, *Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls*, 22 July 2015; 255, *Policing Urban Violence in Pakistan*, 23 January 2014; 242, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in PATA*, 15 January 2013; 178, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, 21 October 2009; 164, *Pakistan: The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, 13 March 2009; and 95, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, 18 April 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Pakistan's four Sunni sub-sects are the Barelvis, the Deobandis, the Ahle Hadith/Salafis and revivalist movements represented by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Shias are estimated at between 20-25 per cent of the population. Crisis Group Report, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977-1988) inserted discriminatory prohibitions of blasphemy in the penal code as part of its "Islamisation" campaign. For analysis, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°160, *Reforming the Judiciary in Pakistan*, 16 October 2008; and *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, op. cit.

## II. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's Deobandi Militancy

### A. Origins and Development

The roots of Sunni militant groups in Pakistan can be traced back to the policies of General Zia-ul-Haq's military government (1977-1988). Sunni militants were major beneficiaries of the regime's anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, its bid to counter Shia revivalism inspired by Iran's 1979 revolution, and its pursuit of domestic legitimacy through a broad Islamisation program. The military-sponsored jihad in India-administered Kashmir in the 1990s also allowed these groups to widen their footprint in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Until the 1980s, sectarian violence was sporadic even in regions such as Punjab's Jhang district, where political and socio-economic tensions between majority Sunnis and minority Shias were high. In 1985, however, in an effort to promote Sunni orthodoxy, Zia's regime backed the creation in Jhang of a Deobandi group called Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) under Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi's leadership. The SSP attracted major donations from Saudi Arabia, as well as from wealthy conservatives among Pakistani traders.<sup>5</sup> Its rise kicked off a period of high Sunni-Shia violence in the 1980s and 1990s, as the SSP and Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan, an Iran-supported Shia militant group, engaged in tit-for-tat killings. Sectarian militancy migrated from Jhang to other parts of Punjab, as well as major cities in other provinces, such as Karachi, Quetta and Peshawar, with large or influential Shia populations.<sup>6</sup> Jhangvi's 1990 assassination, blamed by the SSP on Shias, heightened sectarian tensions. Hundreds of Shias and Sunnis were killed during the 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, the Sipah-e-Sahaba ostensibly distanced itself from this violence as it sought to parlay growing local influence into political clout. The creation of a separate militant wing in 1996, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, would provide SSP's leadership plausible deniability as it pursued electoral politics. Yet the relationship between the two factions remained close. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi operatives used SSP mosques and madrasas as hideouts, and SSP networks to plot and carry out attacks.<sup>7</sup>

Along with attacking Shias, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi also assassinated or threatened Punjab police investigating its crimes.<sup>8</sup> As the sectarian outfit challenged the

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Reports, *Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland*; *Policing Urban Violence in Pakistan*; *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, all op. cit.; and Crisis Group Asia Reports N°310, *Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, 5 August 2020; 224, *Pakistan's Relations with India: Beyond Kashmir?*, 3 May 2012; 79, *India/Pakistan Relations and Kashmir: Steps Towards Peace*, 24 June 2004; 70, *Kashmir: Learning from the Past*, 4 December 2003; 69, *Kashmir: The View from New Delhi*, 4 December 2003; 68, *Kashmir: The View from Islamabad*, 4 December 2003; 41, *Kashmir: The View from Srinagar*, 21 November 2002; and 35, *Kashmir: Confrontation and Miscalculation*, 11 July 2002. See also Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°106, *Steps Towards Peace: Putting Kashmiris First*, 3 June 2010; and 51, *India, Pakistan and Kashmir: Stabilising a Cold Peace*, 15 June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group Reports, *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*; *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*; and *Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland*, all op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, retired senior police officers who led counter-terrorism efforts in the 1990s, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Arif Jamal, "A profile of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Jhangvi", *CTC Sentinel*, September 2009.

state's writ in Punjab, the country's largest province and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's political base, his second government (1997-1999) took strong counter-measures, including extrajudicial killings. Those efforts picked up after Lashkar-e-Jhangvi tried to assassinate Sharif in January 1999. The group's violent activities subsided as a result, with its leadership forced to take refuge in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Yet General Pervez Musharraf's military government (1999-2007), despite purported crackdowns on some groups, ended up breathing new life into Deobandi sectarianism. Pressured by Washington to clamp down on jihadist outfits following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., Musharraf banned the SSP in January 2002. But the group soon re-emerged, first as Millat-e-Islamia, and after that incarnation, too, was outlawed in 2003, as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ).<sup>9</sup> Launching his election campaign from prison, ASWJ leader Azam Tariq won a National Assembly seat in the October 2002 elections. Released just before the election, Tariq cast the deciding vote for Zafarullah Khan Jamali, the Musharraf-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) candidate, to become prime minister.<sup>10</sup>

After an unidentified gunman killed Tariq in October 2003, security agencies got embroiled in the succession struggle, according to a former intelligence official involved in the effort. The contest pitted Tariq's brother Alam against another member, Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi. "Alam Tariq was a real terror", the official recalled. "Ludhianvi was the moderate alternative. He would issue *fatwas* [edicts] against sectarian violence. We worked hard to make him the leader".<sup>11</sup> Yet under Ludhianvi's leadership ASWJ continued to help Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. The former intelligence official admitted, "Ludhianvi's people would intimidate Shia witnesses in terrorism trials against Lashkar-e-Jhangvi operatives. The SSP would say, 'We're doing this, not because we support terrorism, but to maintain social harmony and healing'".<sup>12</sup>

Lethal action by the Punjab police against Lashkar-e-Jhangvi continued during this time, most prominently in a May 2002 operation that killed Riaz Basra, the group's chief. His successor was Lashkar-e-Jhangvi co-founder Malik Ishaq. Though Ishaq was imprisoned in 1997 on charges related to dozens of murders, the prosecution failed to convict him when witnesses refused to testify. The state nevertheless kept him in confinement for fourteen years. In July 2011, given the insufficient evidence at his trial, the Supreme Court ruled that his continued detention was unconstitutional and ordered his release, leading to escalated sectarian violence. By this time, the Pakistan Peoples Party was leading a coalition government that had come into power after the 2008 elections ended Musharraf's military rule.

In early August 2011, soon after his release, Ishaq made inflammatory anti-Shia speeches in various cities, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi issued a statement declaring all Shias *wajib-ul-qatal* (fit to be killed). Later that month, the murder of a judge in Quetta marked the start of a new wave of sectarian violence, especially

<sup>9</sup> Many security officials still refer to ASWJ by its original name, Sipah-e-Sahaba. Crisis Group interviews, Islamabad, Lahore, April 2022. See also, "List of banned organisations in Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, 24 October 2012.

<sup>10</sup> "The other armies: A president's unfulfilled promises", *The Economist*, 16 January 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



against the Hazaras, the Shia ethnic group to which the judge belonged. Twin suicide bombings in Quetta in February 2013 claimed some 200 Hazara lives among the 680 people killed in sectarian incidents that year.<sup>13</sup> Ishaq was rearrested and released several times before Punjab police killed him in mid-2015. It was one of several such lethal operations mounted by the Punjab and Sindh counter-terrorism departments.

The extrajudicial execution forced Lashkar-e-Jhangvi underground, but sectarian killings continued. In 2018, 50 people died in sectarian attacks, 25 of them in the November bombing of a market in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Orakzai tribal district. The casualties took place mainly in the province's Dera Ismail Khan and Peshawar districts and in Balochistan's capital Quetta.<sup>14</sup>

### B. *Sectarian Proxies*

Even as the Punjab and Sindh counter-terrorism departments took action against Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the military allegedly continued to use the group as a proxy to counter Baloch separatist militants.<sup>15</sup> Referring to one of the most prominent Lashkar-e-Jhangvi commanders in Balochistan, Rafique Mengal, a counter-terrorism official with extensive experience in that province said, "Mengal was the biggest financier of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, yet the [military] establishment supported him" against Baloch nationalists. He cautioned, "We have to change this mindset. A criminal is a criminal. We can't say, 'This one is an ally against traitors'".<sup>16</sup> Security agencies, moreover, reportedly released Lashkar-e-Jhangvi commanders who pledged to fight in Afghanistan alongside the Afghan Taliban, most prominently Asmatullah Muawiya, who was detained and soon after released in 2014.<sup>17</sup>

Security agencies also kept engaging with ASWJ, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's parent organisation, seemingly seeking its help in dissuading other militants from attacking the state and its imprimatur for counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>18</sup> In May 2017, ASWJ chief Ludhianvi and some other 180 religious leaders ratified a state *fatwa* condemning "insurrectionary acts against the government and armed forces of Pakistan" as un-Islamic. The *fatwa* was part of a military-led endeavour labelled Paigham-e-Pakistan (Pakistan's Message), which formally aimed to create a "national narrative in order to curb extremism in keeping with the golden principles of Islam" – without noting that a generation of militants, many nurtured by the state, posed an internal security threat.<sup>19</sup> Apparently to reward his support for the

<sup>13</sup> "We are the Walking Dead: Killings of Shia Hazara in Balochistan, Pakistan", Human Rights Watch, 29 June 2014.

<sup>14</sup> "Pakistan Security Report 2018", Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, Spring 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Balochistan-based intelligence official and former senior Balochistan police official, April 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Mengal was also accused of orchestrating attacks on Quetta's Shia Hazaras. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2022. See also Hassan Abbas, "Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges", *CTC Sentinel*, February 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Aside from his links with the Pakistani Taliban, Muawiya has also maintained ties with Jaish-e-Mohammed, an anti-India militant group headquartered in Punjab province. "Punjabi Taliban give up 'armed struggle'", *Dawn*, 14 September 2014; "Punjabi Taliban shift focus to Afghanistan", Agence France-Presse, 5 September 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former counter-terrorism official, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Islamic Republic of Pakistan, *Paigham-e-Pakistan*, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, n.d.

initiative, in June 2018, a month before elections, Punjab's caretaker government took Ludhianvi off the Fourth Schedule, a list of individuals suspected of belonging to banned organisations and subject to sanctions, and the National Counter-terrorism Authority directed the State Bank to unfreeze his assets.<sup>20</sup>

The pattern has persisted. In late December 2018, Ludhianvi and Fazlur Rehman Khalil, leader of the anti-India jihadist group Harkatul Mujahideen, joined a delegation of religious scholars to North Waziristan in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. An army major general also went along. The intention was to co-opt militant leaders who did not target the state and who could also help dissuade fellow militants from joining the Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) insurgency. Some observers supported the tactic as preferable to the alternative of "killing every baddie", in the words of a prominent analyst.<sup>21</sup> But whether it has achieved the desired result is questionable as the TTP's resurgence today demonstrates.<sup>22</sup> More concerning is the legitimacy such high-profile engagement confers on hardliners like Khalil. Commenting on the militant leaders' inclusion in the delegation, a security analyst wrote, "The visit left many wondering about how those who nurtured a militant mindset were now being called for help in countering it".<sup>23</sup>

Officials disagree as to whether the state's engagement has done much to change ASWJ itself. Some believe the approach has yielded security dividends, citing ASWJ's public denunciations of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and terrorism. A former Punjab police inspector general, who has engaged extensively with ASWJ, believes its rejection of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's violence to be genuine. Yet he admits that ASWJ still has the same hardline sectarian ideology that drives Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.<sup>24</sup> Other serving and retired police officials and security analysts are more sceptical, citing ASWJ's continued links with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. A former head of the National Counter-terrorism Authority, who oversaw dialogue with the outfit aimed at convincing it to renounce violence, commented, "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants could hide in any SSP madrasa or mosque. The teachers at those madrasas were Lashkar-e-Jhangvi".<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The Fourth Schedule requires that the persons listed be closely observed, including through regular appearances at police stations, and prohibits them from bearing arms, obtaining bank loans and travelling outside their home provinces without authorisation.

<sup>21</sup> Ejaz Haider, "Ludhianvi in North Waziristan", *Newsweek Pakistan*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>22</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Reports N°326, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, 12 August 2022; and 320, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, 4 February 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "Rights outside faith's domain", *Dawn*, 10 February 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

### III. Pakistan's New Sectarian Jihadists

With the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi leadership decimated by security operations, many of the rank and file are searching for alternative organisations. Many have joined like-minded Deobandi groups, such as the TTP, while others, Pakistani intelligence and counter-terrorism officials say, have turned to ISKP, most likely because of the latter's high-profile links to transnational jihad.<sup>26</sup> A senior intelligence official in Balochistan noted that the vast majority of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi operatives in his province now identify with ISKP. Aware of the danger of the Salafi outfit expanding its presence in a volatile region prone to anti-Shia violence, and also the international implications of its former affiliates aligning with ISKP, the defence establishment is now much warier of using them against Baloch separatists.<sup>27</sup> Many former Lashkar-e-Jhangvi foot soldiers have also reportedly become guns for hire, whether for ISKP or other groups. They number in the hundreds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, according to officials and lawyers there.<sup>28</sup>

In both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ISKP lacks the more centralised command and control that Lashkar-e-Jhangvi once had. Hence counter-terrorism officials believe that small, dispersed cells likely orchestrate attacks such as the Shia mosque bombing in Peshawar.<sup>29</sup>

The Afghan Taliban's August 2021 takeover had also provoked concerns within police and intelligence circles that the change of power in Afghanistan would reinvigorate the Afghan group's Deobandi Pakistani Taliban allies.<sup>30</sup> Yet, like their Afghan brethren, the Pakistani Taliban, too, faces a new competitor in ISKP. According to a senior intelligence official who closely monitors jihadist groups, the TTP is fast losing recruits to ISKP cells in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>31</sup>

Although the mainline TTP – like the Afghan Taliban – is not overtly sectarian, focused as it is on state targets, some Pakistani Taliban factions, estranged from the leadership, maintain an explicit anti-Shia bent.<sup>32</sup> Inspired by ISKP's attacks on Shias in Afghanistan, and notwithstanding their Deobandi background, they now form the core of the Salafi outfit.<sup>33</sup> Former TTP militants now affiliated with ISKP

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior police and intelligence officials, Lahore and Islamabad, April 2022; and telephone interviews, Quetta-based senior police and intelligence officials, April 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Quetta-based senior intelligence official, April 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police inspector general; former Khyber Pakhtunkhwa home secretary; criminal lawyers, Peshawar, Islamabad, May 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior police and intelligence officials, Islamabad, Lahore and by telephone, April-May 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islamabad, Lahore and by telephone, April 2022. See also Crisis Group Reports, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*; and *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, both op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group Reports, *Countering Militancy in FATA*; and *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, both op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> According to a July 2020 UN Security Council report, "Many former TTP members have already joined ISIL-K [Islamic State's Afghanistan branch] and Member States expect that the group and its various splinter groups will align themselves with ISIL-K". The report estimated that 6,000 to 6,500 Pakistani fighters were present in Afghanistan. "Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities", UN Security Council, 23 July 2020. See also Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat

have their attention focused homeward, often planning operations from the jihadist group's bases in Afghanistan. Following a string of killings of police and others, including religious minorities, attributed to ISKP in late 2021, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's police inspector general said the jihadist group posed "a bigger threat to peace and security in the province compared to TTP in the near future".<sup>34</sup>

Since its post-2021 resurgence, the TTP has focused its attacks on security and law enforcement personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By contrast, ISKP militants have targeted civilians from religious minorities in the province, including the Sikhs they killed in Peshawar in October 2021 and May 2022.<sup>35</sup> ISKP has claimed responsibility for the largest and most brutal sectarian attack in the country's history, the March 2022 bombing in Peshawar, in which at least 67 were killed and over 190 injured.<sup>36</sup> It has also asserted authorship of attacks on security forces, including the 8 March 2022 roadside bombing of a convoy in Balochistan's Sibi district, which killed six paramilitaries.<sup>37</sup>

Counter-terrorism and intelligence officials are closely monitoring the growing ISKP threat in places in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with sizeable Shia populations, including Peshawar, the western districts of Dera Ismail Khan and Kohat, and the tribal districts of Kurram and Orakzai. According to these officials, militant groups claiming affiliation with ISKP are making inroads in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. They believe that ISKP is moving in both directions across the border between Bajaur, a district in those areas, and Afghanistan's Kunar and Nangarhar provinces.<sup>38</sup> In Bajaur, calls to extort victims often come from Afghan telephone numbers, with callers claiming affiliation with ISKP.<sup>39</sup> A Peshawar-based lawyer with deep local knowledge asserted that "organised extortion in Bajaur and nearby tribal districts is now commonplace".<sup>40</sup>

The ISKP threat extends beyond Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Serving and retired Punjab police officials who monitor sectarian outfits identified several northern and western Punjab districts, including Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Faisalabad and Dera Ghazi Khan, where ISKP is present and low-level sectarian clashes now occur regularly.<sup>41</sup>

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in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan", *CTC Sentinel*, January 2022; and "Backgrounder: Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 9 November 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "KP police chief calls IS-K bigger threat than TTP", *Dawn*, 21 January 2022.

<sup>35</sup> "IS claims responsibility for killing Sikh in Peshawar", Associated Press, 3 October 2021; "A new wave of terror", *The News*, 22 May 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "Terror strikes Peshawar", *The News*, 13 March 2022; "Pakistan identifies Peshawar suicide bombing and network", *The New York Times*, 5 March 2022.

<sup>37</sup> "Six Pakistani soldiers killed in a suicide bombing", Reuters, 8 March 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, April-May 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior intelligence and counter-terrorism officials, April-May 2022. On Pakistani Taliban extortion, see "To preserve its own stability, Pakistan must stabilise Afghanistan first", *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, May 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lahore, April 2022.

#### IV. Barelvi Sectarian Violence

Another development in contemporary Pakistan is the rise of organised and violent Barelvi political groups, most notably Labaik, whose appeal rests on exploiting the emotive issue of blasphemy. Labaik is now responsible for some of the most egregious acts of sectarian violence.

##### A. *Barelvi Sectarianism*

While statistics regarding Pakistan's sects and sub-sects are tenuous, Sunni Barelvis are believed to constitute a thin majority of the population. They are often associated with devotion to Sufi saints (or spiritual guides) and rituals at shrines. Historically, Barelvi practice was syncretic and drawn from oral tradition more than written jurisprudence. For some, it even included participation in Shia ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> Today, such comity is rare and in any case challenged by the rise of intolerant Barelvi organisations, particularly Labaik.

Whatever the practices of ordinary Barelvi Sunnis, Barelvi political organisations have long displayed sectarian animus. Historically represented by such groups as the Majlis-e-Tahaffuz-e-Khatme Nabuwwat and the Karachi-based political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, Barelvi political identity has been shaped by two issues: first, the need to protect the Prophet's honour and hence oppose any reform of the blasphemy laws; and secondly, rejection of the Ahmadi sect's claim to a Muslim identity. A 1974 constitutional amendment had categorised Ahmadis as non-Muslims; penal code amendments by Zia's regime virtually criminalised them for claiming adherence to Islam.<sup>43</sup> Labaik has taken up these causes today.

Intra-Sunni conflict has also featured prominently in Pakistan's sectarian landscape. Orthodox Deobandis in particular perceive the Barelvi shrine culture as idolatrous. In the 1990s, this conflict intensified as a Karachi-based Barelvi group, Sunni Tehreek, was set up to counter its Deobandi rival Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. In 2006, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi killed Sunni Tehreek's top leadership in a suicide bombing targeting a religious congregation at Karachi's Nishtar Park.<sup>44</sup> Deobandi militants also targeted major Barelvi shrines, including the May 2005 suicide bombing of Islamabad's Bari Imam, which killed twenty people; the October 2010 bombing of Lahore's Data Darbar, which killed 37; and the November 2017 suicide attack at Sehwan's Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, which killed more than 80 people.<sup>45</sup>

After the 2001 U.S. terror attacks, foreign donors often saw Barelvi and Sufi groups as an antidote to their harder-line Deobandi and Wahhabi counterparts, though they were more concerned about anti-Western than sectarian sentiment. Back then, Western governments pushed Musharraf's government to counter Deobandi militants, like the Afghan Taliban, while also worrying that Wahhabi ideas were spreading into South Asia through workers returning from stints in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf monarchies. (These ideas can have a strong anti-Shia as well as anti-

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> Ahmadis follow the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). Segments of the community regard him as a divinely appointed messiah. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°160, *Reforming the Judiciary in Pakistan*, 16 October 2008.

<sup>44</sup> At least 50 persons were killed and over a hundred injured in the attack. Crisis Group Report, *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> "Timeline of attacks on shrines in Pakistan", *Dawn*, 17 February 2019.

Western bent.) Along with Musharraf, they supported Barelvi and Sufi groups, taking at face value their embrace of peaceful Sufism.<sup>46</sup> This approach continued after the Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) came to power in 2008. A new Barelvi group, the Sunni Ittehad Council, attracted donor attention – the U.S., for instance, provided funding to renovate Sufi shrines.<sup>47</sup> Referring to the subsequent growth of Barelvi militancy, a former official in the U.S. consulate in Lahore, who worked on that program, commented: “We’re now reaping the results”.<sup>48</sup>

The notion of mobilising Barelvi organisations as bulwarks against Deobandi or Wahhabi influence overlooked their own exclusionary ideology. This mindset became apparent when the Sunni Ittehad Council opposed Punjab governor Salman Taseer’s bid to obtain a presidential pardon for Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death on blasphemy charges in November 2010 after Muslim fellow farm workers accused her of insulting Islam during an argument.<sup>49</sup> The group also protested the PPP government’s intent to amend the blasphemy laws, prompted by uproar about the Bibi case. In January 2011, Taseer’s police bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri, a Barelvi, assassinated him for criticising these laws and supporting Bibi. The Council glorified Qadri as an Islamic hero.

The Bibi case gave groups like Sunni Tehreek the powerful message they had previously lacked for mobilising popular support: *hurat-e-Rasool* (homage to the Prophet). A former Federal Investigation Agency director general and the National Counter-terrorism Authority’s founding head said the group also found a compelling new protagonist in Qadri.<sup>50</sup> Labaik, for its part, began propagating its own emotive phrase, *namoos-e-risalat* (sanctity of the prophethood), after Taseer’s assassination.

## B. Labaik’s Rise

Labaik’s rise to prominence was a response to civilian attempts – halting as they have been – to temper the ill effects of Zia’s Islamisation program upon Pakistani politics and society. In mid-2017, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz, or PML-N) government (2013-2018) amended a declaration required of candidates for office in which they proclaimed their faith in the “absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophet Muhammad” (known as the “seal of the prophets” oath). The government replaced the words “I solemnly swear” (that the Prophet has that status) with “I believe” (that he does). Contending that the change weakened the affirmation and conceded ground to Ahmadis, Labaik demanded that the government sack the law minister, whom it blamed for the amendment.

The movement soon upped the ante with street action. Some 3,000 Labaik protesters occupied a major road in the Faizabad neighbourhood linking Islamabad and Rawalpindi from 26 October to 27 November 2017. As activists attacked

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Suleman, “Institutionalisation of Sufi Islam after 9/11 and the Rise of Barelvi Extremism in Pakistan”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°227, *Aid and Conflict in Pakistan*, 27 June 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>49</sup> “Pakistan’s Aasia Bibi finally gets justice”, Human Rights Watch, 27 August 2018. Bibi has consistently denied the allegation. “Aasia Bibi, Pakistani accused of blasphemy, yearns to return home”, *The Guardian*, 25 February 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

police and damaged property, the sit-in evolved into a major crisis, weakening Nawaz Sharif's government and forcing the law minister's resignation.

The Faizabad sit-in ended under circumstances that led some to wonder if the PML-N government's opponents were using Labaik for their own purposes. The participants went home after the military guaranteed an agreement with them, giving those responsible for inciting and using violence immunity from arrest; a major general even gave the protesters cash handouts.<sup>51</sup> Many suspected the army as an institution of supporting the Labaik demonstrators in order to weaken the PML-N government at a time of high military-civilian tensions.<sup>52</sup> The Supreme Court would later raise questions about the role of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the military's premier intelligence agency, in the sit-in.<sup>53</sup>

Although Labaik espoused a hardline sectarian agenda, inciting violence against religious minorities and Sunni opponents, the electoral commission allowed it to contest the July 2018 national elections. During the campaign, a Labaik youth leader shot and wounded Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal. Labaik leader Pir Afzal Qadri justified the attack on the grounds that the PML-N had committed blasphemy by weakening the "seal of the prophets" oath, adding that Iqbal had authorised the use of force against the Faizabad protesters.<sup>54</sup> Some banned and re-named sectarian outfits were also allowed to participate in the polls, such as the military-backed anti-India Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the former Lashkar-e-Tayyaba) through a political front, the Milli Muslim League.<sup>55</sup> Unlike candidates from other sectarian parties, who fared badly in the polls, by using the language of protecting the Prophet's honour, Labaik managed to win two Sindh provincial assembly seats from Karachi, though none in the federal parliament.

### C. *Upping the Ante*

Allowing sectarian groups to contest elections appeared to embolden rather than moderate them. Certainly, Labaik was ebullient after parlaying its street power into assembly seats. It threatened Supreme Court judges with a "horrible end" if they quashed Bibi's 2010 blasphemy sentence, for instance, and called for mutiny against army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa, who it said was a non-Muslim.<sup>56</sup> In

<sup>51</sup> "Faizabad sit-in ends as army brokers deal", *Dawn*, 28 November 2017. A video clip circulated of the major general's interaction with the protesters. "DG Ranger Punjab at Faizabad, Islamabad dharna – latest video", video, YouTube, 27 November 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Abbas Nasir, "Happy augury but just", *Dawn*, 23 December 2017; M. Ilyas Khan, "Why was Pakistani general giving money to protesters?", BBC, 29 November 2017.

<sup>53</sup> "SC issues hard-hitting detailed verdict in TLP's sit-in case," *Dawn*, 7 February 2019; "10 major takeaways from SC's Faizabad sit-in judgement", *Dawn*, 8 February 2019.

<sup>54</sup> "Islamist group youth leader accused of shooting Pakistani minister – police", Reuters, 8 May 2018.

<sup>55</sup> The Musharraf regime banned Lashkar-e-Tayyaba in January 2002, after it had been designated a terrorist organisation under UN Security Council Resolution 1267. The group soon re-emerged as Jamaat-ud-Dawa. It was responsible for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, a series of bombings and mass shootings that killed 175 people and wounded 300. Commenting that the Milli Muslim League's formation had "the blessings of the military establishment", a security analyst wrote, it was "a move to baptise" Jamaat-ud-Dawa as a mainstream political force. Zahid Hussain, "Mainstreaming the militants", *Dawn*, 20 October 2018.

<sup>56</sup> There were rumours following Bajwa's 2016 appointment that he was an Ahmadi. Babar Sattar, "Writ in tatters", *The News*, 3 November 2018; "Hardliners threaten judges as Pakistan awaits blasphemy ruling", Associated Press, 10 October 2018.

October 2018, after the Supreme Court overturned Bibi's conviction, Labaik launched demonstrations countrywide demanding that she be hanged. The protests ended on 2 November after the government agreed to unconditionally release Labaik activists who had incited or used violence. It also agreed not to contest a petition seeking to reinstate Bibi's death sentence and to bar her from leaving the country until a court decision.<sup>57</sup> Buoyed by the concessions, Labaik readied for another protest on 24 November to observe "martyrs' day" in Islamabad. The government pre-empted it by detaining hundreds of activists and subsequently charged leaders Khadim Hussain Rizvi and Pir Afzal Qadri with sedition and terrorism.

In late 2020, Labaik was given a fresh opportunity to rally its base by the controversy over cartoons in a French magazine depicting the Prophet and statements by French President Emanuel Macron that were perceived as Islamophobic. Holding massive protests in Karachi, Rawalpindi and elsewhere, Labaik demanded that Islamabad cut diplomatic ties with Paris and called on Pakistanis to boycott French goods. Following clashes with police over several days, Labaik called off the protests after the government agreed on 16 November to hold a parliamentary vote on a decision to expel the French ambassador, to refrain from appointing a new envoy to Paris and to release all detained Labaik activists.<sup>58</sup>

Labaik founder and chief Khadim Rizvi died of illness on 19 November; he was succeeded by his son Saad who in early January 2021 warned the government to abide by the previous November's agreement. As the government delayed holding the parliamentary vote on severing ties with Paris, it faced more Labaik protests, particularly after Saad Rizvi was detained in mid-April for inciting violence. The demonstrations led to the deaths of at least four police constables, the abduction of eleven other police personnel and the reported torture of a police deputy superintendent in Lahore.<sup>59</sup> The government's refusal to immediately act on a 1 October Supreme Court order to release Rizvi, along with its refusal to expel the French ambassador and its failure to hold the promised parliamentary vote led to another wave of violent unrest.

At a 31 October 2021 press conference, the government's negotiation team announced another accord with Labaik but withheld its contents. According to leaked details, which were later confirmed, it agreed to release Saad Rizvi and several other Labaik members charged with terrorism and other crimes, and to remove the organisation from the Fourth Schedule. In early November, Senator Ejaz Chaudhry, announcing a partnership between Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party and Labaik, said the two parties' mission "with regard to *namoos-e-risalat* ... is the same". Later that month, he met Saad Rizvi to congratulate him on his release from prison after the government withdrew an appeal to the Supreme Court seeking to keep him incarcerated and removed his name from the Fourth Schedule.<sup>60</sup> Only in December, after the mob lynching of a Sri

<sup>57</sup> In January 2019, the Supreme Court upheld Bibi's acquittal. In May, she moved to Canada, where she and her family were granted asylum.

<sup>58</sup> "TLP calls off protest after govt agree to remove French ambassador from country", *Daily Times*, 17 November 2020.

<sup>59</sup> For a timeline and description of these events, see "Banned: what does TLP want?" *Dawn*, 20 April 2021.

<sup>60</sup> "Goodwill gesture: PTI's Ejaz Chaudhry meets TLP chief Saad Rizvi to congratulate on jail release", *Dawn*, 20 November 2021.



Lankan citizen inspired by Labaik, did Fawad Chaudhry, then information minister, condemn his party colleague's overture to the Barelvi group as "absurd".<sup>61</sup>

#### D. *Labaik's Impact*

Labaik's most pernicious influence lies in using the blasphemy issue to raise its profile, expand its support base and incite sectarian violence. Perceived insults of the Prophet are punishable by death in Pakistan. Death sentences are seldom carried out and convictions often overturned on appeal, but blasphemy accusations can stigmatise the alleged culprit and lead to vigilante killings before cases even conclude. Those acquitted are often forced to leave the country, the most prominent recent example being Bibi, who found asylum in Canada after her release.<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to establish a causal link between the steep rise in blasphemy cases and Labaik's politics, but the group's mobilisation to defend the Prophet's honour has created an environment where judges, police and private citizens are likely to see rewards rather than repercussions for making blasphemy accusations.<sup>63</sup> A former top counter-terrorism official said Labaik's politicisation of blasphemy "is turning so many people into extremists".<sup>64</sup>

Previously, it was Islamist hardliners who lodged blasphemy charges, but today judges in Pakistan's state courts are increasingly raising the issue themselves. In March 2017, for example, an Islamabad high court bench directed the government to block alleged blasphemous content on social media and put offenders on the no-fly list. The following month, a mob lynched a student, Mashal Khan, at a university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Mardan city for posting allegedly blasphemous material online. In March 2021, a Peshawar judge ordered police to open an investigation into the organisers of a march marking International Women's Day over blasphemy allegations; the police had refused to do so on the grounds that the accusations were based on doctored images.<sup>65</sup> Police have even filed first information reports against individuals who receive allegedly blasphemous content on their cell phones.<sup>66</sup>

Labaik supporters often use blasphemy cases to flex their local muscle by, for example, congregating at the trials to intimidate judges and witnesses.<sup>67</sup> Judges'

<sup>61</sup> "PTI lawmaker Ejaz Chaudhry meeting TLP chief was an 'absurd' move: Chaudhry", *Dawn*, 5 December 2021.

<sup>62</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Reforming the Judiciary*, op. cit. See also "Pakistan called her a blasphemer. Canada became her refuge. On the prairies, fear and grief haunt her", *The Globe and Mail*, 18 July 2021.

<sup>63</sup> According to one count, in 2020 police registered 200 new blasphemy cases, mostly against Muslims, followed by Ahmadis, by far the highest number of any year (in fact, more than double the previous high of 60, in 2011). "Blasphemy cases have inflated in 2020, says CSJ", *Dawn*, 5 February 2021; "Blasphemy cases in Pakistan: 1947-2021", Centre for Research and Security Studies, January 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>65</sup> "Pakistani judge orders blasphemy probe against organisers of a Women's Day march", Reuters, 26 March 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan staff, human rights activists, and lawyers, Lahore and Karachi, April 2022. A first information report is a document prepared by the police on receiving information that someone has committed a crime.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyers and rights activists who have attended such trials in Karachi, April-May 2022.

fears in blasphemy cases are understandable. In October 1997, for instance, a Lahore high court justice was murdered in his chambers for acquitting, along with another judge, two Christians accused of blasphemy. The killer was acquitted due to lack of witness testimony.<sup>68</sup>

Convictions did take place in the high-profile December 2021 lynching of Sri Lankan citizen Priyantha Kumara, accused by a mob of blasphemy, in Punjab's Sialkot city. Kumara's alleged offense was to take down and discard Labaik posters praising the Prophet from the walls of his factory, which he planned to repaint. The perpetrators chanted Labaik slogans during the attack.<sup>69</sup> On 18 April 2022, an anti-terrorism court imposed the death penalty on six of the accused. Nine were sentenced to life imprisonment and more than 70 were given two-year prison terms.

So sensitive has the blasphemy issue become that counter-terrorism officials worry Labaik could praise the condemned men in the lynching case as martyrs, like Salman Taseer's assassin Mumtaz Qadri, if the state carries out the death sentences. One official said, "Where will you keep the 70-plus people who have been convicted to two-year terms? In the same prison? If you do that, they will become a powerful bloc there. And if you put ten here and ten there, then you have influential smaller blocs in several places where they could radicalise other inmates". Upon their release, he went on, these individuals could be "hailed as heroes in the community".<sup>70</sup> The concern seems justified: Qadri has a shrine built in his name.

Yet, while prosecution of such potential "martyrs" might carry risks, a climate of impunity creates its own dangers, not least that it will likely further embolden the likes of Labaik supporters to incite or commit acts of violence in the name of religion. The solution lies in enforcing, not evading, the law against those who do so. The Supreme Court's decision upholding the Qadri conviction and sentence is one example. The ruling stated that religious vigilantism could "deal a mortal blow to the rule of law in this country, where divergent religious interpretations abound, and tolerance stands depleted to an alarming level". It emphasised, "the law of the land does not permit an individual to arrogate unto himself the role of complainant, prosecutor, judge and executioner".<sup>71</sup> Labaik organised a protest of the ruling but the authorities contained it.

For the most part, the Pakistani establishment has done little to rein in Labaik. The group's most significant impact on mainstream politics is visible in Khan's PTI, which supported its demands at the 2017 Faizabad sit-in, including for the law minister's ouster. Khan's 2018 electoral campaign included "full-throated" defence of the blasphemy laws.<sup>72</sup> When his own government faced a Labaik threat, and relations between the PTI and Labaik soured as a result, Khan made exporting Pakistan's blasphemy provisions part of his foreign policy. In an April 2021 televised address, while his government was negotiating an end to Labaik's anti-France protests, Khan called on Muslim countries to pressure Western governments to make insulting the Prophet a crime, likening this measure to laws

<sup>68</sup> "1990 blasphemy acquittal: Judge's murder case put in 'hibernation'", *The Express Tribune*, 28 November 2012.

<sup>69</sup> "Sialkot lynching: New footage shows colleague trying to save Sri Lankan man; police arrest scores", *Dawn*, 4 December 2021. The webpage for this article includes video footage in which the slogans can be heard.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamabad, April 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in "Punishing religious vigilantism", *The Express Tribune*, 13 November 2015.

<sup>72</sup> "Imran Khan criticised for defence of Pakistan blasphemy laws", *The Guardian*, 9 July 2018.

against Holocaust denial.<sup>73</sup> If Labaik leaders were prohibited from contesting the next election, it is conceivable that many of their constituents would support the PTI given its position on blasphemy.

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<sup>73</sup> “Pakistan PM calls for West to criminalise blasphemy against Islam”, Al Jazeera, 19 April 2021.

## V. Targeting Shias

### A. Anti-Shia Politics

If they had their way, ultra-orthodox Sunni groups in Pakistan would extend blasphemy provisions to cover Shia expressions of faith and interpretations of Islamic history. At issue is orthodox Shias' depiction of the first three Muslim caliphs as usurpers.<sup>74</sup> Until recently, the country's sectarian divide mainly pitted some Deobandis against Shias, with hardliners among the former denigrating the latter with the slogan *Shia kafir* (Shias are non-believers). Among the Sipah-e-Sahaba's foundational tenets were calls to exclude Shias from government jobs; proscribe Shia religious programs, processions and rituals; intimidate prominent Shias into fleeing the country; and spread fear in the Shia community as a whole.<sup>75</sup> Labaik has now embraced the Deobandi antipathy for Shias as its own.

Though Barelvis and Shias share many observances, particularly rituals at shrines, divisions have grown more pronounced according to rights activists and analysts who follow such trends closely. "Barelvis used to be the buffer between Shias and Deobandis", said an activist. "Now, thanks to the state's interference [by which he meant its support for Labaik], that buffer has been dismantled".<sup>76</sup> Many Labaik members and supporters apply the Sunni concept of *takfir* – in effect, excommunicating Muslims whose practices they deem improper – to Shias.<sup>77</sup>

During Muharram, the Shia month of mourning, in cities such as Karachi and Islamabad, Labaik supporters and other Barelvis chant anti-Shia slogans outside *majalis* (plural of *majlis*, or gatherings to commemorate the killings of the Prophet's family) venues. Anti-Shia mobilisation among Sunni militants reached a new pitch during Muharram of 2020, particularly in Karachi, which has a large Shia population. In late August of that year, ASWJ activists reportedly pressured police to file a first information report for blasphemy against a Shia orator in Islamabad who criticised the first caliph, Abu Bakr, at a private *majlis*. On 30 August, Deobandis reportedly pressured Karachi police to arrest an elderly Shia man for reciting a prayer that Sunni hardliners deem blasphemous.<sup>78</sup> Large anti-Shia demonstrations were held in the city the following month, with Sunni militants demanding that the state declare Shias heretics. Labaik's Karachi chief reportedly urged his followers to behead people who "blasphemed" against historical figures revered among Sunnis.<sup>79</sup>

Anti-Shia wall chalking, a common sight during the worst of Karachi's sectarian violence in the 1980s and 1990s, reappeared in many city neighbourhoods, alongside depictions of Sunni sectarian organisations' flags. Hashtags pronouncing

<sup>74</sup> Sunnis regard the first three caliphs as "rightly guided", that is, legitimate successors to the Prophet as both religious and political leader of the Muslim community. Shias reject that idea, saying Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was his rightful bloodline successor. Sunnis view Ali as the fourth rightly guided caliph.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group Reports, *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*; and *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, both op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lahore and by telephone, April 2022.

<sup>78</sup> "Pakistan: Shia Muslims", Home Office, UK Government, July 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Shias infidels and blasphemers trended on social media.<sup>80</sup> The independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported, based on anecdotal evidence, that some 40 blasphemy cases, mainly against Shias, were registered in September 2020, and warned of the potential for intercommunal bloodshed.<sup>81</sup>

Most previous high-profile blasphemy cases are based on section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, inserted by the Zia regime, which punishes insults to Islam and the Prophet. This clause has been used widely against Sunni Muslims and Christians.<sup>82</sup> Recent cases against Shias are, however, based on section 295-A of the blasphemy law in effect in the colonial era, before Pakistani independence, which punishes “[d]eliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs”.<sup>83</sup> Alleged offences included display of a common Shia incantation, *Ya Ali*, on the front of a Shia family’s house, in honour of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law whom Shias venerate as the Prophet’s rightful direct successor. Authorities said this sign offended the religious sentiments of Sunni neighbours.<sup>84</sup>

Police continue to file first information reports against the organisers of Shia processions.<sup>85</sup> They have also stopped *majalis* at residences for lack of an official permit, even though no such authorisation is required for events held in private homes. In one case in October 2020, captured on video, Punjab police raided a home in Narowal district, accusing the organisers of holding an unlicensed women’s *majlis*, and manhandling women and children.<sup>86</sup>

## B. State Repression

Misapprehensions of a Shia militant threat have also led security agencies to crack down on Shias. There is considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting that Tehran encouraged Pakistani Shias to sign up for Iran-backed militias fighting in Syria and Yemen.<sup>87</sup> Expecting these young men to return to Pakistan as hardened Shia fighters ready to retaliate against jihadist attacks, security officials anticipated a new wave of sectarian violence.<sup>88</sup> Yet many such fighters said they had joined the battles abroad solely to safeguard revered Shia sites from the Islamic State and had no intention of pursuing a war at home.<sup>89</sup> Rashid Rizvi, a human rights lawyer and chair of the Shia Democratic Party, said, “Where is the Shia threat? Were Shia militants involved in attacks on GHQ [army general headquarters, in October 2009]?”

<sup>80</sup> “The changing landscape of anti-Shia politics in Pakistan”, *The Diplomat*, 28 September 2020.

<sup>81</sup> “HRCP alarmed by surge in blasphemy cases against Shia community”, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 5 September 2020.

<sup>82</sup> A separate clause – section 298 – applies specifically to the Ahmadis.

<sup>83</sup> Pakistan Penal Code (ACT XLV of 1860).

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Rashid Rizvi, May 2022. Rizvi is a Karachi-based lawyer who has defended Shias accused of blasphemy. He is also chair of the Shia Democratic Party.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior counter-terrorism official, Islamabad, May 2022.

<sup>86</sup> “Narowal police manhandles, arrests multiple women for conducting religious gathering”, *The Daily Times*, 10 October 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Some 1,000 Pakistan Shias are believed to have joined the Iran-backed Zainabiyoun Brigade in Syria. Secunder Kermani, “The story of Pakistan’s ‘disappeared’ Shias”, BBC, 31 May 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islamabad and Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Karachi-based Shia activists and lawyers, April-May 2022.

Have Hazaras ever retaliated violently against attacks on them? Have Turis carried out attacks against the state?”<sup>90</sup>

Though the anticipated rise in sectarian attacks never came to pass, security agencies detained scores of Shias returning from pilgrimages, study or other travels to Iran and Iraq, on allegations that they posed a security threat. Shia social activists were also the victims of enforced disappearances. An HRCP representative said, “Two years ago, virtually every [reported enforced] disappearance in Sindh was of a Shia”.<sup>91</sup> The disappearances provoked demonstrations by Shia activists, including a large one in Karachi in 2019 that succeeded in pressuring the state to release many. Consequently, according to a Shia political leader, the number of people missing has decreased to fewer than 50 from a high of several hundred; some are believed to have died in detention.<sup>92</sup> Activists who have engaged with and lawyers representing those released described instances of physical, but especially psychological, torture. One such lawyer said, “Some were detained for over two years in dark cells. They didn’t know if it was day or night. Some didn’t know that their mothers or fathers had died during their period of captivity”.<sup>93</sup>

The targeting of Shias by state and non-state actors has left a deep mark on the community. An HRCP official said, “The most profound impact is on Shia children. They have to lie in school about who they are. Their mothers tell them not to disclose that their *kalima* (declaration of faith) is different and not to acknowledge that their history is different from Sunnis”.<sup>94</sup> Rizvi, the Shia Democratic Party leader, said many conceal typically Shia surnames on curriculum vitae or in other documents to avoid discrimination.<sup>95</sup> Others, such as the Hazaras of Quetta, hundreds of whom have lost their lives in sectarian violence, are under siege, living in fear of the next attack.

## VI. Conclusion

Pakistan’s counter-terrorism approach has achieved short-term successes but neglected long-term strategies to deny civic space to violent sectarian outfits. In many instances, government policy has amplified rather than tamped down sectarian rhetoric. Several senior serving and retired counter-terrorism, intelligence and regular law enforcement officials rightly contend that, in the past, the state has prematurely declared victory over such groups.<sup>96</sup> The primary problem is that, when the state does resolve to take action, it tends to rely on lethal force, including extrajudicial killings, to the neglect of an intelligence and investigation-led strategy. As importantly, the state has also failed to address the political and civic platforms

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2022. Turis are a Shia tribe concentrated in the Kurram tribal district, a site of violent Sunni-Shia conflict for years. See Crisis Group Report, *The Militant Jihadi Challenge*, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Karachi-based human rights lawyer, May 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lahore, April 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interviews, counter-terrorism, intelligence and other law enforcement officials, Islamabad, Lahore and by telephone, April 2022.

from which those who espouse radical interpretations of Sunni Islam spread their message.

Labaik's rise to prominence, the spread of sectarian militancy outside Deobandis and ISKP's increasing potency open a new chapter in Pakistan's sectarian conflicts, which could well spin out of control.

**September 2022**



## Appendix A: Map of Pakistan



Based on UN Map No. 4181 Rev. 1 (January 2004), "North-West Frontier" has been changed to "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa".



## Appendix B: Pakistan's Sectarian Landscape

### Sunni Sects in Pakistan

*Deobandis:* Pakistan's second largest Sunni sub-sect traces its origins in the Deobandi school, which was established in 1867 in Indian Uttar Pradesh's Deoband town, where a *Darul Uloom* (house of knowledge) was set up to counter the "polluting" influence of Western ideas and Hindu culture, through madrasa education. Representing Sunni orthodoxy and strict adherence to classic Islamic texts, the Deobandi school rejects Barelvi and Shia beliefs and devotional practices around shrines as a form of idolatry. The most prominent Deobandi militant groups include the anti-Shia Sipah-e-Sahaba (renamed Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat) and its offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi; and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), composed of an umbrella group of tribal militant factions. Though anti-Shia, the Pakistani Taliban primarily target the state and its security agencies, and, much like their Afghan counterparts, are largely the products of the Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam's Deobandi madrasas.

*Barelvis:* The Sunni sub-sect, believed to be Pakistan's largest, was founded in 1897 by Ahmed Raza Khan, who established a madrasa in his hometown of Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, India, to counter the puritanism of Deobandism. Adherents to the Sufi orders prevalent in South Asia at the time, the Barelvi school strives to preserve and promote an Islam of hereditary saints and its shrine culture; shrines of saints are the centres of cultural and religious activity. Today, Barelvi political identity is shaped by two issues: protection of the Prophet's honour and hence opposition to any reform of the blasphemy laws; and rejection of the Ahmadi sect's claim to a Muslim identity. Various groups have embodied Barelvi politics in the past, including the political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan and the militant Sunni Tehreek. Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan is the most powerful Barelvi organisation today. A hardline political party and violent protest movement, which incites violence against religious minorities and Sunni opponents, it mobilises supporters by alleging blasphemy and other infringements upon religious sensitivities.

*Ahle Hadith/Salafi:* The South Asia Salafi movement, originating in the nineteenth century and inspired by Wahhabism (though followers do not subscribe to the title), is an ultra-orthodox, puritanical sect. Like Deobandism, the Ahle Hadith/Salafi school represents strict adherence to beliefs they ascribe to early Muslims, and rejects Barelvi and Shia beliefs and devotional practices around shrines as idolatrous. Though adherents have a relatively limited presence in Pakistan, the Islamic State's local franchise, the Salafi Islamic State Khorasan Province is gaining in strength as disgruntled Pakistani Taliban and leaderless Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants, notwithstanding their Deobandi identity, join its ranks.

### Shias in Pakistan

Pakistan's largest sectarian minority (estimated around 20-25 per cent of the Muslim population), Shias reject Sunnis' view of the first three Muslim caliphs as "rightly guided", that is legitimate successors to the Prophet as both religious and political leader of the Muslim community. Instead Shias regard Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law (who Sunnis regards as the fourth rightly guided caliph) as his rightful direct bloodline successor. Shias share a devotion to shrines and saints with Barelvis and other adherents of Sufi Islam. A vast majority of Shias follow the first twelve Imams, who were the progeny of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and are thus called Twelver Shias. Smaller variations of the Shia school include the Ismailis (followers of the Aga Khan), Daudi Bohras (followers of Syedna Burhanuddin) and their rivals Sulemani Bohras (followers of Masood Salehbahi).

**Ahmadis**

Ahmadis form a Sunni minority sect that follows the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1805-1906). Ahmadis are set apart from other Muslims by the fact that some inscribe attributes of prophethood to Ahmad and consider him a messiah. A small community, the Ahmadis are divided into two groups: the Qadiani and Lahori. While the Qadiani Ahmadi sect believes that Ghulam Ahmad was a prophet and *Mehdi* (messiah), designating his descendants as caliphs, the Lahori group believes Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a reformer, not a prophet. The Zia regime criminalised Ahmadi religious practices and claims to Muslim identity. A 1994 constitutional amendment, passed during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule after anti-Ahmadi riots, declared that all Ahmadis were non-Muslims for denying or challenging the finality of Muhammad's prophethood.