

## **PAKISTAN: THE CHALLENGES POSED BY BOMB ATTACKS AGAINST SHIITES**

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Pakistan has been facing a series of attacks against Shiites which threaten to spark sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites on the eve of the general elections. Around 250 Shiite Muslims, who make up about 20 percent of Pakistan's population of 180 million people, have been killed since the beginning of the year in only three bomb attacks.

On Sunday a car bomb exploded outside a mosque as worshippers were coming out, in the mainly Shiite neighborhood of Abbas Town in Karachi. At least 45 people were killed and 149 were wounded. On Sunday night, Shiites in Karachi fired their weapons into the air to protest the slaughter. On Monday, some Shiites attending the funeral set fire to several vehicles after gunmen shot dead 2 mourners as they were returning back from the funeral procession. 13 people were injured in the following clashes.

The incidents that occurred in Karachi highlight the risks of violence the country could face if prompt and decisive action against the Sunni terrorist groups targeting Shiites is not taken by the government. No group claimed responsibility for the Sunday attack but the Sunni terrorist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is suspected of having carried it out, as they have been leading a violent campaign against Shiites.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi has claimed responsibility for other two bomb attacks that killed nearly 200 people, mainly Shiites from the ethnic Hazara community in the city of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, on January 10 and February 16. Human Rights Watch denounced that more than 400 Shiites were killed in 2012 in targeted attacks across the country. 125 were killed in Balochistan and most of them belonged to the Hazara community. The provincial government was dismissed by the President and a governor was sent to run the province. However security forces didn't launch any operation against the terrorist group until another bombing on February 16 killed 89 people. After the bombing, Hazara protesters refused to bury their dead for several days demanding a crackdown against the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi terrorist group.

In an attempt to please them, the co-founder of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Malik Ishaq, was arrested on February 22. Ishaq had been released from prison in July 2011 after 14 years in jail on charges of the murder of hundreds of Shiites but was never successfully prosecuted. He continued prior to his latest detention to make speeches inciting violence against Shiites. However his arrest seems more an attempt made by security forces to prevent a retaliatory attack against him, an incident that could provoke further sectarian violence.

It is important to highlight that Pakistan is the second largest Shiite community in the world after Iran and widespread sectarian violence could not only destabilize the country but the whole region. Shiite protests against the violence have been largely peaceful so far but the situation may change if the terrorist attacks continue.

Around 4,000 people were killed between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s in the country amid Sunni-Shiite clashes. The country was considered a battleground in a proxy sectarian war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact the two countries offered logistical and financial support to Sunni and Shiite groups until President Pervez Musharraf banned most of them in 2001-2002.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is believed to be supported even now by Saudi donors. Furthermore, human rights groups accused the Pakistani intelligence, the Directorate for Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), to have used this and other Sunni terrorist groups to quell an ethnic Baloch nationalist insurgency in Balochistan. As a matter of fact, while the army has carried out military operations against the Pakistani Taliban since 2009, security forces have avoided clashes with other terrorist organizations.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which publicly declared that Hazara Shiites are “worthy of killing” because of their beliefs, is an offshoot of an earlier anti-Shiite group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, which was backed, according to a U.S. Department of State cable released by Wikileaks, by Pakistani intelligence “in a move to counter Iran’s influence in Pakistan”. However the terrorist group joined forces with jihadi groups including Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani government officially banned it in August 2001 but, as said earlier, there are allegations that it enjoys the protection of ISI because Lashkar-e-Jhangvi may be aiding in the military operations against Baloch nationalists.

The latest bomb attacks raised fears that the country could delay the elections, destabilizing the already fragile Pakistani democracy. The Parliament is set to be dissolved on March 16 and the central government will appoint a caretaker government in preparation for mid-May elections. However instability in Karachi, a city plagued by sectarian, ethnic and political violence that last year killed more than 2,200 people, could delay the elections as the recent attacks have raised serious questions about security.

The government’s failures to dismantle terrorist groups and enforce bans on hate speeches and sectarian propaganda could lead to another outbreak of sectarian violence, as in the 1990s, when Sunni and Shiites groups fought against each other in

the streets of Karachi in a spiral of tit-for-tat sectarian killings. It is worth mentioning that 75% of alleged terrorists are acquitted by the anti-terrorism courts. Another problem is posed by the lack of state control over the Islamic schools, the madrassas. Many of them disseminate sectarian propaganda and collect funds on behalf of terrorist groups under the guise of charitable donations.

If the state will not be able to guarantee security to the Shiite population cracking down on terrorist sectarian groups, tensions between Sunnis and Shiites will escalate across the country prompting Shiites to organize armed resistance to protect their communities. In addition to sectarian violence, terrorist groups could launch more attacks against the Pakistani government, security forces and Western targets.

Continued attacks against the Shiite population could also spark tensions between Pakistan and Iran which considers itself the guide and the protector of the Shiites across the world.

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