

Action against sectarian terrorists

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National Action Plan talks about taking stern action against sectarian terrorists and elements spreading sectarianism. With regards to that, a review of actions taken by the federal and provincial governments thus far suggests that they have largely security or counter-terrorism orientation. However one should be hopeful that sooner or later scope of these actions will be expanded to address factors which promote sectarian extremist mindset and faith-based intolerance and persecution in Pakistani society.

Action

While sharing his views on NAP implementation with media, on August 24, Federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said his government's efforts had brought terrorism down by 70 percent. He stated that fighting and cracking down religious, sectarian terrorist groups is now a top priority of the government.¹ The interior minister also counted his government's actions against the misuse of loudspeakers and propagation of hate speech and literature.

Indeed action against hate speech and literature—which are main propagation tools employed by both violent and non-violent sectarian organizations—was launched immediately after NAP was announced. A media report in January said that Punjab was far ahead in taking such actions where 329 were arrested against hate speech—a number that surged to 4,000 until August. Furthermore, the report said, 1,471 people were arrested, until January, in Punjab and 14 in Islamabad over misuse of loudspeakers.² The Punjab government has also launched an extensive campaign of sealing shops selling hate material and confiscating such material. In recent weeks and months, other provinces have also stepped up efforts against hate speech and literature.

Some sectarian terrorists or those found involved in sectarian target killing were also among those executed after a moratorium on death penalty was lifted in December last year. According to media reports, more than 200 persons have been executed so far including the following who were convicted in different cases of sectarian targeted killing.

¹ "No terrorist network left capable of operating in Pakistan: Nisar," *Dawn*, August 25, 2015.

² Khawar Ghumman, "Punjab ahead of other provinces in anti-terror steps," *Dawn*, January 24, 2015.

- Attaullah Arif Qasim and Muhammed Azam Arif Sharif were hanged on February 3 for their role in the sectarian killing of a Shia physician in Karachi in 2001.³
- Convicted in 2004, Ikramul Haq alias Akram Lahori, a co-founder of Sunni sectarian group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), was executed in Lahore on January 17 for killing a guard at a Shia mosque.⁴
- Ghulam Shabbir and Ahmed Ali—who reportedly belonged to Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan—were hanged on January 7 in Multan.⁵ They were executed for a string of killings, including a police chief and his driver.
- Muhammad Saeed Awan, a member of the LeJ, was hanged at Karachi's Central Jail on January 15. Awan was convicted of shooting to death police officer Sadiq Hussain Shah and his son, Abid Hussain Shah, in 2001.⁶
- On September 2, an ISPR statement said “the COAS has confirmed death sentence of another five hardcore terrorists.” Reportedly two among the convicts were members of LeJ and involved in sectarian killings in Quetta.⁷

According to data compiled by Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) digital database unit, around 20 major search-and-hunt operations were launched between January and August 15 this year against sectarian groups across Pakistan. A total of 133 key members and affiliates of sectarian groups were arrested mainly those belonging to Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) (91) and LeJ (31).⁸ Those arrested also included ASWJ central president Maulana Aurangzeb Farooqi, who was detained on June 5 near Taxila.

³ Saroop Ejaz, “Dispatches: Pakistan’s misguided approach to extremism,” Human Rights Watch, February 4, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/04/dispatches-pakistans-misguided-approach-extremism>.

⁴ “Akram Lahori executed in Lahore,” *The Nation*, January 17, 2015.

⁵ Amjad Ali, “Pakistan hangs two militants from outlawed sectarian group,” Reuters, January 7, 2015.

⁶ “Two convicts executed in Lahore,” *Pakistan Today*, January 15, 2015.

⁷ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Army chief endorses 5 death sentences,” *Dawn*, September 3, 2015.

⁸ PIPS database on conflict and security, available at: <http://san-pips.com/index.php?action=db&id=1>.

Most of these arrests were made in Sindh, mainly in Karachi, and in Chakwal, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Jhang districts of Punjab on the main charges of detainees' involvement in sectarian violence; target killing; distribution of hate literature; and support and facilitation to sectarian outfits. Such arrests however remained minimal in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces.

Similarly some key commanders of violent sectarian groups have been killed by security forces and law enforcement agencies since the announcement of NAP. On February 15, a top commander of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Usman Saifullah Kurd, and his companion were killed in a clash with paramilitary troops of FC in Quetta.⁹ Kurd was reportedly the main man behind killing of Hazara Shias in Quetta. In July, LeJ chief Malik Ishaq, his two sons Usman and Haq Nawaz, and 11 other militants were killed in an alleged exchange of fire with police personnel in Muzaffargarh, Punjab.

Apart from that, ongoing military operation in Karachi has also considerably weakened Sunni and Shia sectarian groups operating there.

Madrassas are described by many as breeding ground of sectarianism. Little efforts were made under NAP to reform madrasa curricula, faculties and environment, which as a whole, make these institutions of religious education sectarian-oriented. Minister for Religious Affairs and Inter-Faith Harmony Sardar Mohammad Yousaf recently stated that no progress was made on the front of madrasa reforms since 2000 – the era of Gen Parvez Musharraf.¹⁰

In recent weeks, law enforcers have raided different madrassas across Pakistan on the suspicion of their links to support for militants. Similarly, Punjab and Balochistan have completed geo-tagging of madrassas while KP and Sindh are engaged in the process.¹¹

In a significant move, the top civilian and military leadership including army chief and prime minister held a meeting with representatives of religious seminaries on August 7, which indicated that the issue of

⁹*Express Tribune*, February 16, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/839045/top-lej-commander-killed-in-quetta-gunfight>.

¹⁰ Khawar Ghumman, "30 seminaries closed, says minister," *Dawn*, August 10, 2015.

¹¹Zahid Gishkori, "Sindh, G-B try to geo-tag religious seminaries," *Express Tribune*, July 5, 2015.

madrassa reforms will now be taken seriously.¹² One day before this meeting, interior minister had said that seminaries will not be allowed to spread sectarian hatred and issue fatwas declaring others infidels.

At the same time, Pakistan's decision of staying away from Yemen crisis was also partly meant to preempt any sectarian backlash of the conflict in Pakistan. While denying Saudi request to join combat forces against Shia Houthis in Yemen, Pakistani parliamentarians also took into consideration the ongoing counter-terrorism campaign in the country. At the same time, after the announcement of NAP, criticism of Saudi Arabia's alleged funding to madrassas and violent sectarian groups in Pakistan has also increased. According to media reports, a group of experts had recommended to a NAP committee that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates should be asked to stop funding the banned religious, sectarian groups in Pakistan.¹³

Impact

Search-and-hunt and operational strikes by security forces and law enforcement agencies and other measures taken by the state as part of NAP, as cited earlier, have put the militants, including sectarian, under tremendous pressure. Killing of some main leaders of sectarian outfits and arrests of their members and leaders have certainly weakened their infrastructure. Secondly, due to mounting pressure following the Peshawar school attack last year, supporters and facilitators of sectarian terrorists have also become very cautious in their attitude.

The number of sectarian-related terrorist attacks and clashes has also significantly decreased following January 2015. (See Chart 1) Between January 1 and August 15 this year, a total of 46 sectarian-related terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan, which were 53 percent less than such attacks recorded during the corresponding period of 2014.¹⁴ Out of a total 46 reported sectarian-related attacks in 2015, 25 targeted Shia and 17 Sunni religious scholars and members of respective religious organizations; two

¹² Khawar Ghumman, "Govt won't space errant seminaries, ulema told," *Dawn*, August 8, 2015.

¹³ Zahid Gishkori, "National Action Plan: Pakistan in fresh push to choke terror funding," *Express Tribune*, January 10, 2015.

¹⁴ Statistics are based on PIPS database on conflict and security, available at: <http://san-pips.com/index.php?action=db&id=1>.

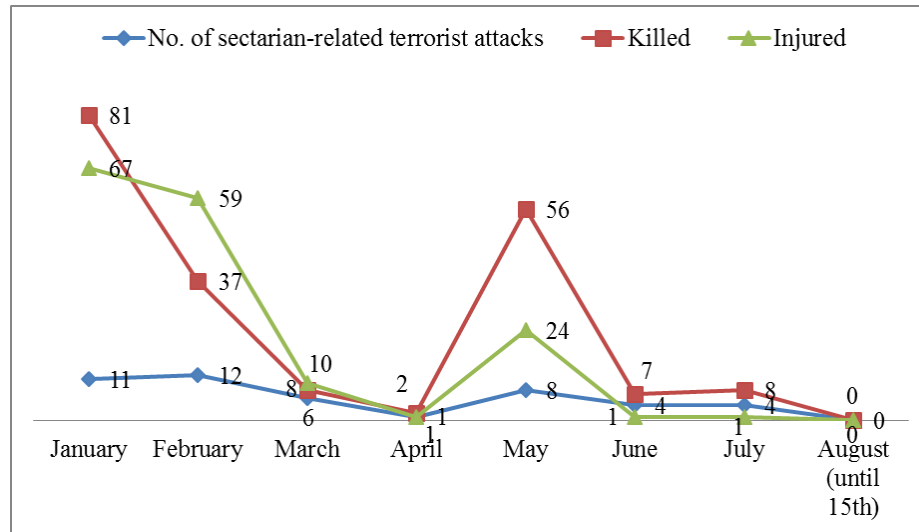
<http://pakpips.com/downloads/292.pdf>

attacks hit worship places and shrines and one attack each targeted members of Bohra and Ismaili communities.¹⁵



¹⁵ Ibid.

Chart 1: Sectarian violence in Pakistan (January 1 to August 15, 2015)

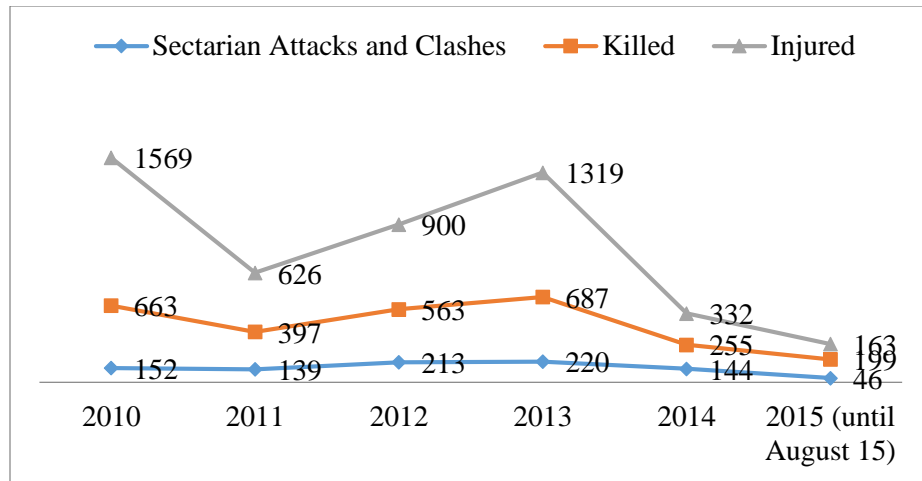


Although frequency of sectarian-related attacks has decreased in 2015, yet sectarian militants and their allies such as Pakistani Taliban and Jundullah were successful in launching some major attacks during the year. A lethal suicide blast in Shikarpur in January targeted an *imambargah* and killed 63 people. A suicide attack in an *imambargah* in Hayatabad area of Peshawar on February 13 killed 23 civilian and left 48 injured. Later in May, over 43 people lost their lives in a sectarian-related attack on Ismaili community in Karachi.

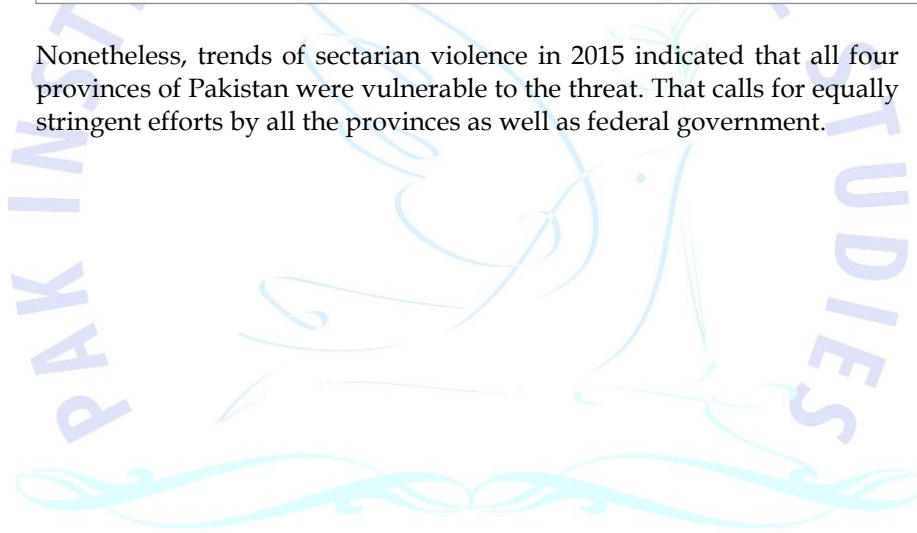
However, on the whole, incidents of sectarian violence, including attacks and clashes, have posted a considerable decline in 2015 when compared to previous years. (See Chart 2)

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Chart 2: Trends of sectarian violence in Pakistan (2010-2015)

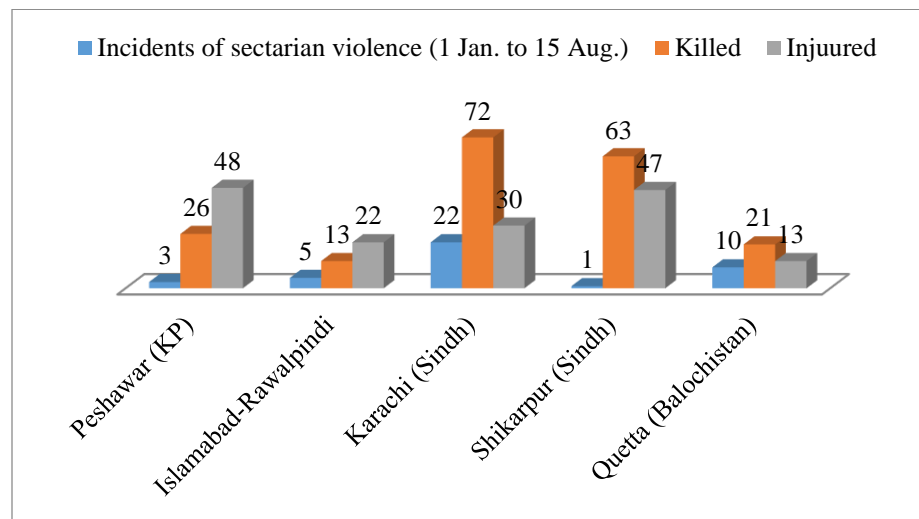


Nonetheless, trends of sectarian violence in 2015 indicated that all four provinces of Pakistan were vulnerable to the threat. That calls for equally stringent efforts by all the provinces as well as federal government.



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Chart 3: Sectarian flashpoints in Pakistan in 2015



Way forward

Experts believe that sectarianism is a structural problem attached to Pakistan's religious-ideological discourse. They argue that violent and non-violent sectarian actors will continue posing challenges in security and politico-ideological perspectives for a longer period of time. However, with concerted and comprehensive state efforts the threat can be reduced to a minimal level. Actions taken under NAP need to be strengthened and made broader in scope to include measures which stop madrassas and sectarian actors from promoting extremist narratives and causing ideological radicalization among respective sects.

The recent meetings of Pakistan's civilian and military leaders with prominent religious leaders and representatives of madrassa educational boards is perhaps first of its kind, which conveyed state's newfound resolve and message that religious extremism, including sectarian, will not be tolerated any more. That is evident from the fact that apart from prime minister and interior minister, army chief and DG ISI also participated in the meeting. There is a need for converting this 'message' into some institutional and functional mechanism of reform. Secondly, although government actions have weakened or deterred sectarian terrorist groups, they still pose threat of sectarian violence. Security forces and law enforcement agencies should enhance their efforts across Pakistan, in collaboration with intelligence agencies, to further weaken and dismantle sectarian terrorist infrastructure. As described earlier in the report, sectarian groups have managed to launch major attacks in 2015 in almost all parts of the country. Also, their nexus with local and international terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda needs to be broken. The Islamic State has also been inspiring Pakistan's militant groups including

LeJ and Jundullah having anti-Shia sectarian objectives. At the same time, there are little-known cells of violent sectarian groups which they form on a temporary basis for carrying out specific activities. For instance, the law enforcement agencies have discovered many of such cells including Al-Mukhtar group, the Punjabi Taliban and the Khurooj group in their crackdown on the LeJ in Karachi.¹⁶

Thirdly, sectarian groups have a history of using political umbrella to survive in the face of government's action. For instance ASWJ, which is reportedly reincarnation of the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, is currently trying to enhance its political credentials. The group, led by Ahmad Ludhianvi, showed insignificant reaction to the July 30 killing of LeJ chief Malik Ishaq in a reported police encounter in Punjab. The group claims that it does 'not support arson, terrorism and aggression'.¹⁷ Many believe that that is only a political statement because the ASWJ is engaged in fighting with Shia sectarian groups mainly in Karachi and Rawalpindi-Islamabad where many of its members have also been target killed in recent months and years.

Similarly, in the recently held PK-95 by-polls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party (PRHP) surfaced as the third political party, which was founded in February 2012 by Hakeem Muhammad Ibrahim Qasmi, a former provincial leader of banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP).¹⁸

Government needs to ensure that no violent sectarian group is able to use political cover to advance its sectarian agenda. Also, religious-political parties should be discouraged from using sectarian narratives for political gains.

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¹⁶ Zia Ur Rehman, "Vengeful LeJ, its affiliates may strike in Karachi," *The News*, July 30, 2015.

¹⁷ Kalbe Ali, "Malik Ishaq had serious differences with Ludhianvi: observers," *Dawn*, August 25, 2015.

¹⁸ Zia Ur Rehman, "Ominous signs: the rise of Pakistan Rah-e-Haq Party," *The News on Sunday*, May 31, 2015.