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EXPLORING CAUSES OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE TARGETING HAZARA SHIA COMMUNITY IN QUETTA, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Sectarian violence in Pakistan has become increasingly frequent and violent, posing a danger to national security. The objective of this study was to explore the perspective of the Hazara Shia Muslim community regarding sectarian violence in the city of Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan. This study focused on religious, political, economic, and social causes. Using social identity theory as a theoretical foundation and a purposive sampling technique, primary data was collected from a sample of 50 Hazara Shia Muslim community members residing in Quetta who had directly experienced sectarian violence. This study found that the Hazara community is targeted due to their recognisable facial features. It identifies factors contributing to sectarian violence, including ethnic, religious, and economic tensions, alongside external influences from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. The study highlights the need for government intervention at both provincial and federal levels to promote harmony. This research not only highlights the specific vulnerabilities of the Hazara community but also calls for comprehensive strategies aimed at promoting peace and stability in the region. Furthermore, it advocates for further research involving larger samples to develop effective approaches to conflict resolution and community building.

Keywords: *Balochistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba (SeS), social identity theory (SIT)*

INTRODUCTION

Majority of Muslims, between 85% and 90%, are Sunnis, while Shia Muslims constitute approximately 10% of the global Muslim population, numbering between 154 and 200 million worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2009). In Pakistan, 97% of the population are Muslims, with Sunnis comprising 77% and Shias 20% (Pakistan, 2017). Despite being founded in the name of religion, Pakistan has experienced significant sectarian violence, resulting in the loss of thousands of residents due to extremism over the past two decades (Ali, 2021).

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, has a population of 12,335,192 spread over 347,190 km^2, comprising 43% of Pakistan's total land area and is plagued by violence and instability (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Ali, 2021). The province's population is predominantly Baloch (54.76%) and Pashtun (29.64%), with smaller groups including Punjabis, Hazaras, Sindhis, Urdu speakers, and Brahuis. The Hazara Shia community in Quetta, the provincial capital, has been a frequent target of sectarian violence, particularly since the late 1990s (Qayyum, 2020; Majeed, 2020).

Sectarianism in Pakistan intensified during General Zia-ul-Haq's rule in the 1980s (Ali, 2021). Previously, Sunnis and Shias coexisted peacefully, but events such as the anti-Ahmadi revolution of 1974 and the subsequent declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims heightened sectarian tensions (Murphy, 2013). The Hazara Shia community in Quetta has faced escalating violence, with over 700 targeted killings between 1998 and 2009 (Yusuf, 2012). The 9/11 attacks further complicated the situation, as religious terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) intensified their activities in the region (Farhan, 2016).

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LeJ, a Sunni sectarian militant group founded in 1996, has been notorious for targeting Shia Muslims across Pakistan, including in Balochistan (Rafiq, 2014). LeJ collaborates with other militant groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) to perpetuate violence against Shias (Ahmed, 2018; Johnston et al., 2016). This ongoing violence has severely restricted the Hazara Shia community's ability to lead normal lives, impacting their freedom of movement, education, employment, and social opportunities (Majeed, 2021).

Given the profound impact of secretarian violence, this study aims to explore the perspective of the Hazara Shia Muslim community in Quetta, focusing on the religious, political, economic, ethnic, and social causes of the conflict. The research is centred on the Hazara Shia community living in Quetta's Marriabad and Hazara Town areas, providing insights into their experiences and challenges amid ongoing violence. While the vast majority of Hazaras are Shia muslims, there are also minorities of Sunni, Barelvi, and Ismaili Muslims among them. The Hazara Muslim minority in Pakistan has a higher literacy rate than Afghan Hazaras and has successfully adapted to life in Pakistan. Based on existing literature on sectarian violence and identified research gaps, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is sectarian violence, and how has it permeated the Hazara Shia Muslim community?
2. What are the causes of sectarian violence that led to its emergence against the Hazara Shia Muslim community in Quetta, Balochistan?

Furthermore, this study intends to provide actionable policy recommendations to mitigate sectarian violence. It emphasises the need for government intervention, community engagement, and socioeconomic development to address the underlying issues contributing to violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Social identities profoundly influence adherence to the in-group and alienation from the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1982). Identity, linked to distinct groups, creates boundaries (Bauman, 1996; Paasi, 1999). Tajfel and his colleagues' "social identity theory (SIT)" (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1979) examines cognitive processes in inter-group interactions (Reicher et al., 2010). SIT asserts that an individual's personality is shaped by the dominant patterns of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

SIT explains how social affiliation shapes perspectives of one's own and other groups, leading to distinct behaviour patterns (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Internalising group ideology fosters affinity for one's group and hostility toward others (ibid.). SIT studies the impact of social structures on individual behaviours (Stets & Burke, 2000). The theory outlines three behavioural procedures: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner). McLeod's (2008) SIT Model describes these phenomena:

1. *Social Categorisation:* This first stage defines group membership based on shared interpretations, dividing people into "in-groups" and "out-groups." This process fosters a sense of belonging within one's group while increasing alienation from others.
2. *Social Identification*: In this step, individuals adopt the norms and membership of a group to which they feel allegiance. This promotes pride, belonging, and a superiority complex while reducing empathy for those outside the group.
3. *Social Comparison*: Individuals compare themselves to others to boost self-worth, leading to bias and hostility in intergroup interactions. Prejudice, bigotry, and violent acts stem from the need to secure a social identity.

The mass killings of the Shia Hazara community in Quetta demonstrated the widespread and ruthless sectarian violence directed towards this group. This study aims to identify the causes of this violence, including religious, ethnic, political, economic, and social factors, affecting the Shia Hazara community in Quetta (*see* Figure 1).

Sectarian Violence

Sectarian violence refers to conflicts between different groups within the same religion (Wilson, 1983). In Pakistan, sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias was initially sporadic but intensified in the 1980s due to conflicts between the Saudi-backed Sipah-e-Sahaba (SeS) and the Iran-supported Sipah-e-Muhammad.

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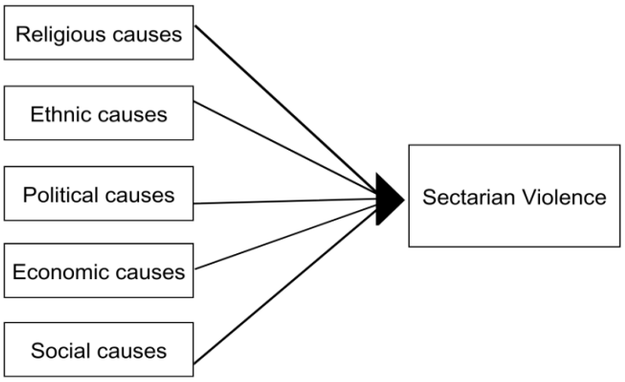


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

This violence spread to Punjab, Peshawar, Quetta, and Karachi and was further exacerbated by the assassination of Jhangvi in 1990 (Afzal et al., 2012; Abou-Zahab, 2017).

Since 2007, sectarian violence has worsened, partly due to the U.S.-led war on terrorism and the ongoing Baloch insurgency (Yusuf, 2012; Mahmudabad et al., 2014). The Hazara community in Balochistan has faced severe targeted attacks, including two major explosions in Quetta in early 2013 that killed at least 180 people (Bhattacharya, 2019; Human Rights Watch Report, 2014).

Causes of Sectarian Violence

The sectarian violence in Pakistan has persisted for the past 27 years, leading to social instability, disorder, and significant bloodshed and resulting in the deaths of thousands of individuals due to suicide bombings, bomb explosions, executions, and other terrorist activities (Ahmar, 2007; Bilal, Abbas, & Rashid, 2022). Thus, violent Sunni and Shia groups, such as SeS, LeJ, and Sipah-e-Muhammad, plunged Pakistan into a sectarian conflict during the 1990s (Ahmad, 2021; Akbarzadeh, Ahmed, & Ibrahimi, 2021). Furthermore, a futile war of containment between Saudi Arabia and Iran has contributed to the regional dynamics that have fuelled the sectarian conflict in Pakistan, making it crucial to understand this context (Mahmudabad et al., 2014).

Consequently, the sectarian conflict in Pakistan has been further complicated by external factors, such as the Islamic Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia's promotion of the Wahabi sect of Islam, and the participation of radical religious groups from Afghanistan in Pakistan's internal politics (Ahmar, 2010). Since the mid-1980s, sectarian killings have become a common feature in Pakistan (ibid). Various religious, political, ethnic, economic, and social factors, as well as local external forces such as the estimated 4 million Afghan refugees population, affect how sectarian groups interact and frequently fight, resulting in injuries and deaths (Shaikh, 2011).

Religious

The recent surge in sectarian violence in Pakistan highlights the growing influence of sectarian groups and a shift in traditional sectarian discourse, now extending beyond Shia-Sunni conflicts to include various Sunni sects (Noor, 2012). Sectarian violence manifests in multiple forms, including retaliatory killings, armed attacks on schools and mosques, and bombings at religious sites and processions. Although often perpetrated by militant activists, this violence has the potential to involve large populations and spur radicalisation due to deep-seated sectarian ties (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014).

A study by Hackett, Stonawski, and McClendon (2017) found that over two-thirds of Pakistanis perceive Sunni-Shia disputes as a major problem. The primary conflict arises from Shia rejection of Sunni perspectives on the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. Shias regard Hazrat Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, as the Prophet's rightful successor (Asia Report, 2022). Religious affiliation is often seen as a source of both inner and societal peace. However, acts of violence committed by or against religious groups, including attacks on places of worship and religious symbols, typically involve religious motivations or exacerbate existing tensions (Shalakany, 2007).

Ethnic

Ethnic conflict is one of the greatest threats to world peace and stability. Such conflict arises when at least one party's objectives are framed in racial terms, and all parties involved perceive the dispute, its causes, and potential resolutions through an ethnic lens. Often, the root of the conflict is not racial or ethnic distinctions but rather disputes over territory, the economy, culture, or politics. Ketchley et al. (2020) argue that ethnic conflict should be deconstructed into its parts, as suggested

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by Brubaker and Latin (1998) and Horowitz (2001), to understand its complex logic better and identify common ground among seemingly contradictory results. Sectarian violence, considered a subgroup of ethnic violence, has particularly affected the Hazara community. Due to their ethnicity, the Hazara group has faced targeted persecution, discrimination, and killings. In recent years, Sunni terrorist organisations such as the LeJ and the Taliban have increasingly targeted the Hazara ethnic community due to their recognised ethnic identity (O'Connell, 2022).

Political

Pakistan is an Islamic country. However, different religious and political leaders exploit religion to promote their agendas, dividing society into many sects. Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist parties are also active in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Madrassas serve as educational institutions for activists, and these extremists supply weapons to Sunni militants operating in Pakistan, who then murder Shia (Afzal et al., 2012). According to Blair et al. (2020), political considerations influence the frequency of violent acts. In 2003, Balochistan witnessed two significant conflicts; (i) the insurgency of Baloch ethnic-nationalists, aimed at achieving either provincial autonomy through economic and political independence or complete independence from the Pakistani federation; and (ii) the targeted killings by LeJ against the Shia Hazara community, which fetched various critical implications for Shias of Hazara. This violence has forced many to abandon their business and homes and migrate to other regions and beyond (Ali, 2020).

Economic

Unemployment in Pakistan is exceptionally high, with even degree holders struggling to secure desired employment. Extremists exploit these individuals by recruiting them to fund their fight against the state. These problems pose a threat to national stability. Historically, religious leaders were the primary participants in religious wars. However, suicide bombings targeting mosques and religious processions have recently become a common form of organised violence. The level of sectarian violence in the country is deeply concerning (Afzal et al., 2012). Since 1947, the Shia Hazaras have been an oppressed group. Their main source of revenue is remittances from Iran, Europe, Australia, and the Gulf. A prevalent assumption in Pakistan is that the Shia Hazara group receives support from Iran, which is why the administration of General Zia allowed state actors to promote anti-Hazara groups (NHRC Report, 2018).

Social

Sectarianism draws attention to religious distinctions and investigates "otherness," yet it is inextricably related to issues of resources, territory, and power (Chandran, 2003). Due to poverty and severe repression, millions of Hazaras became refugees or migratory labourers in the last century. In the 1980s, during a campaign led by the Emir of Kabul, Abdul Rahman, two-thirds of the Hazara community were either killed or driven from their homes. Thousands were also enslaved, and their heads were used to construct towers that served as symbols of victory. The majority of Quetta's Hazara population is now Pakistani citizens (Olszewska, 2013).

The LeJ militant group claimed responsibility for both bombings in 2013 was founded in 1996 as a local movement against the supremacy of rich and powerful Shia landlords in Punjab. This group is a more radical offshoot of the anti-Shia and anti-American political party "SeS" (Olszewska, 2013). The Hazaras, who have established their own neighbourhoods and enclaves, are significant targets for sectarian extremist organisations that attack Shia Muslims (O'Connell, 2022).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. According to Galletta (2013), semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their narrative experiences. This approach proved particularly insightful when participants discussed their experiences with sectarian violence in Quetta. The semi-structured interview comprised of two sections: Section A gathered demographic information, while Section B comprised statements regarding the causes of sectarian violence targeting the Hazara Shia Muslim community in Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan.

A semi-structured interview was initially developed in English and then translated into the local language to accommodate participants who could not understand

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or speak English fluently. For the pilot phase, 10 participants from the study population, not included in the actual sample, were selected. Based on the pilot study results, statements were modified, particularly regarding grammar. A few statements were deleted in the finalisation of the study instrument. The interview transcripts, originally in the local language, were subsequently translated into English without altering the meaning of sentences.

The secondary data were collected from various sources, including books, journals, dissertations, website content, reports, conference proceedings, etc. The sample comprised 50 Hazara Shia Muslim community members living in Quetta city. A sample is a set of items, objects, or individuals chosen for data collection from a larger population (Mujere, 2016). The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, a strategy employed by qualitative researchers to select participants who can provide specific and in-depth information on the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020). Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Themes were identified for this study through manual notes and the computer program NVivo. The data were read many times to identify and extract themes. Focused reading was conducted for the semi-structured interviews, while selective reading was used for the secondary data. Finally, the data were interpreted to produce results and draw conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sectarian Violence and Its Origin

Sectarian violence in Pakistan has tarnished its international image, deterred investors and affected the economy. Sectarianism, which involves adherence to specific sects in a prejudiced manner, poses a serious threat to national security (Afzal et al., 2012). According to Ali (2021), sectarianism became a significant issue during General Zia's rule in the 1980s. One respondent noted, "Sectarian wars have always been for the rule, but in the 17th century, the British Raj began studying the Muslim world and exploiting their weaknesses, promoting Wahabism and dividing Muslims into sects."

Another respondent pointed out the influence of the 1970s Iranian revolution: "The revolution was initially against the pro-US Shah and was manipulated by Khomeini and Mullah groups, creating a clear Sunni-Shia divide. They promoted Wahabism in the Arab world and established a Shia state in Iran." In contrast, one of the respondents observed, "Violence in Pakistan is not sectarian; it's targeted. In Quetta, the Hazara Shia community is specifically targeted, not other sects. Sectarian violence in Balochistan appears to be state-backed, with a specific sect being targeted."

Militant Groups and Sectarian Violence

In recent years, sectarian violence has increasingly targeted Pakistan's Shia population, with groups like Jaish-ul-Islam and LeJ. Balochistan, near Afghanistan, has seen a rise in local Sunni extremist organisations, with LeJ establishing training camps in Iraq and collaborating with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Johnston et al., 2016). Respondents widely agree that LeJ is responsible for the violence, with one noting, "Militant groups are 100% responsible. They had links with ISIS as well." Another pointed out that militant groups often claim responsibility for attacks, stating, "Aurangzeb Faroqi from a banned outfit claimed that he will take Shias to a point where no one will even shake hands with them." This respondent explained that security measures in targeted areas might help banned outfits escape.

The proliferation of madrassas over the past three decades has contributed to ideological support for militant groups, influencing some attackers. One respondent observed, "Some groups accept responsibility for attacks solely for fame," citing the TTP's claim for an attack in Hazara Town in 2011, despite unclear connections to Osama Bin Laden. Concerns about the Taliban's impact on the Hazara community have been raised, particularly following recent violence. As one respondent noted, "The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan is worrisome for Hazaras, and the situation is expected to worsen." This concern was highlighted by a recent suicide attack on a Kabul school that killed 19 and wounded 27, predominantly affecting Hazara students (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Involvement of State or State Institutions

The Taftan assaults and the Pakistani government's failure to protect Shia Muslims or apprehend their attackers highlight a troubling trend of sectarian violence, resulting in numerous deaths since 2008

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(Kine, 2014). Many respondents believe state involvement is central to this violence. One respondent remarked, "Sectarian violence in Pakistan is not possible without state support. The state creates a 'Frankenstein' to harm others and then suffers from it." They further explained, "The state's extrajudicial killings, like that of Malik Ishaq, and the escape of figures like Ehsan Ullah Ehsan and Usman Saifullah Kurd, suggest state complicity. The state may support conflicts to please foreign allies and perpetuate sectarian divisions."

Another respondent suggested, "The killing of Hazara Shias may be a tactic to distract from other state issues and divert attention from the media and international community." They added, "The state benefits from and supports these violent acts, manipulating sectarian violence for its own gain." Additionally, another respondent claimed, "Militant groups in Pakistan are creations of the Establishment, used for specific tasks and not acting independently."

The Involvement of Other States (Iran and Saudi Arabia)

Iran and Saudi Arabia significantly influence sectarian violence in Balochistan as they compete for regional dominance, each supporting different factions in Pakistan (Mahmudabad et al., 2014). The Iranian revolution aimed to expand Shia influence, prompting Iran to ally with Pakistani groups and target Sunnis. Respondents noted Iran's support includes organising travel from Quetta to Iran and Iraq, impacting local Shia communities (Rieck, 2015). One respondent remarked, "Every Shia who wants to visit Iran first comes to Quetta, stays here, and then travels in groups towards Iran."

Saudi Arabia fears a Shia revolution in Pakistan, viewing it as a threat to its stability (Rieck, 2015). As one respondent explained, "Saudi Arabia and Iran fight their wars in other countries like Pakistan because they do not want to destabilise their own nations." Both countries indirectly fuel sectarian violence; Iran's involvement includes establishing madrasas and supporting Shia pilgrims, negatively impacting the Hazara community (Rieck, 2015). One respondent stated, "Iran's involvement is one reason for sectarian violence, with their investment in Shia religious activities affecting the Hazara community."

Saudi Arabia counters this by funding madrasas promoting its version of Islam and supporting militant groups (Rieck, 2015). Another respondent noted, "Saudi Arabia invested in rural Balochistan to promote its version of Islam." The geopolitical interests of both nations complicate the situation, with Iran being linked to Baloch independence movements and Saudi Arabia's focus shifting due to U.S. alignment (Rieck, 2015). A respondent concluded, "Saudi Arabia has achieved its goals in Balochistan and now follows U.S. commands, with no direct ties remaining."

People Support to Sectarian Violence

The people of Quetta, despite some differences with the Hazara community, generally do not support militant groups targeting them (Majeed & Hashmi, 2014). In Pakistan, charity is widespread, but there is no regulatory body tracking where donations go or how they are used. Donations are often collected under the guise of Khidmat e Khalq (Helping the People) rather than for terrorist groups. Most respondents believe that people do not support organisations that are hostile to the Hazara community. One respondent noted, "People do not support militant groups. They might be misled by charities using different names." Another added, "Neither Shia nor Sunni in Quetta supports sectarianism. Donations are often made under various names, and donors are unaware of the organisations' activities. People donate with good intentions and lack information about these groups."

Religious

Islamic authorities, especially Shia clerics, have a significant influence on the beliefs of their followers. In Pakistan, sectarian violence extends beyond Shia-Sunni conflicts to include various Sunni Muslim sects (Noor, 2012). This violence often manifests as retaliatory attacks between sects (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014). Respondents noted that religious authorities play a crucial role in sectarian violence, using religion to further their agendas.

One respondent remarked, "People become emotional from speeches during Ashura or other religious gatherings. Shia clerics in Quetta, mostly educated in Iran, often promote Iranian Shiism." Another added, "Within the Hazara community, the Hazara Democratic

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Party is considered infidel for not respecting all Caliphs of Islam, which can incite violence against Shias."

Another respondent shared an example of LeJ's manipulation: "In 2013, LeJ distributed a pamphlet citing a Quranic verse to justify violence against non-Muslims, using it out of context to legitimise their attacks." The respondent explained, "LeJ and Shia Ulema both exploit Quranic verses for their own ends, manipulating followers who lack context and understanding of the verses."

Ethnic

In Balochistan, while a sense of apathy is rising, there is also a heightened awareness of ethnic identity among different groups. The Hazaras, now a minority in Balochistan, face sectarian violence that often intersects with ethnic tensions (Siddiqi & Mukhtar, 2015). Many respondents see ethnicity as a factor in the violence in Quetta. One respondent noted, "From the time of Amir Abdur Rehman, King of Afghanistan, Pashtuns and Hazaras have had historical rivalries. The Baloch, who are fighting for their land and independence, are often at odds with the Shia Hazara community. Hazaras simply seek safety."

Another respondent observed, "Hazaras are seen as outsiders, while Pashtuns and Balochs are also viewed as foreigners in Marriabad and Hazara Town." One of the respondents highlighted, "Imported influences have exacerbated ethnic divisions in Quetta that did not exist before."

Political

According to Blair et al. (2020), political thought determines the frequency of which violent acts occur. Majority of respondents believe that no political party plays the sectarian or ethnic card to win elections. When asked about the political causes of sectarian violence, one respondent stated: "Political parties have never, to my knowledge, used the sectarian card to succeed in elections. BSO, HDP, JUI, PkMap, and recently, BAP parties have never used sectarian cards." The respondent extends the point: "Individuals, on the other hand, like Shafique Mengal, have been using sectarian identity for their political benefits." Another respondent explained the reason behind this: "Politically, sectarian violence is not beneficial for any ethnicity. A political leader from any party cannot easily travel and blend in with the population of either ethnicity."

This aligns with Abbas et al. (2022), who note that while mainstream political parties in Pakistan typically avoid sectarian rhetoric, local influencers exploit sectarian identity for personal gain. These actors use sectarian divides as political capital, creating community tensions that differ from official party stances. Abbas and Syed (2021) highlight a "dual approach," where formal institutions refrain from sectarian appeals, yet individuals within political networks leverage these tensions. This dynamic shows how political actors manipulate sectarian identities, indirectly perpetuating conflict without institutional endorsement.

Economic

In Pakistan, there is a belief that the Shia Hazara community receives Iranian support and that General Zia's regime facilitated anti-Hazara sentiments (NHRC Report, 2018). High unemployment rates enable extremists to recruit and fund their activities through impoverished individuals (Afzal et al., 2012). Many respondents linked poverty to terrorism, noting that financial desperation drives people to militant groups. One respondent said, "Giving money to charities that support militant groups is an Iranian practice, where Shias collect charity for vulnerable families."

Another added, "Poverty in Balochistan, often ignored by the state, leads people to join militant organisations. Children from poor families are sent to madrasas, where LeJ recruits them." As one respondent noted, "Balochistan's economic decline over the past fifteen years indirectly supports extremist violence." The findings align with Bashir et al. (2024) and Saif et al. (2024), who assert that poverty and economic disenfranchisement in Balochistan heighten vulnerability to militant recruitment. Economic hardship creates a fertile ground for extremist groups, making individuals susceptible to sectarian narratives that provide purpose and identity. This interplay allows organisations like LeJ to exploit vulnerable populations (Nawaz, 2020). Additionally, Majeed (2021) notes that young Hazaras returning from Iran or Iraq often adopt extremist views, highlighting the complex link between transnational influences and local economic conditions. Thus, sectarian violence is fuelled not only by ideology but also by economic incentives that reinforce sectarian

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divides as individuals seek security within extremist networks.

Social

The Hazara community faces discrimination in various sectors of society. This group is particularly susceptible since they encounter intersectional discrimination because of their religious and ethnic identity, which falls outside the popularly recognised concept of "minority" in the context of Pakistan (O'Connell, 2022). Majority of the respondents stated that the Hazara community is discriminated against in different sectors of society. One of the respondents stated, "The Hazara community is excluded from society. Since the bus of a local university, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women University (SBK), was attacked by a bomb blast in 2013, other communities have stopped travelling on buses with the students of the Hazara community. Parents have formally requested the university to change their daughters' buses." Another respondent highlighted discrimination during COVID-19, stating, "The Hazara community was categorically blamed for the spread of COVID-19.The Chief Secretary of Balochistan claimed to close Hazara Town and Alamdar Road due to COVID-19. Hazara community members were put on leave in different government departments, for example, the State Bank and WASA, with official notifications on record. People would shout at the Hazara as if they were witnessing the virus itself. This was attributed to the Muharram processions and other religious gatherings of the Hazara Shia Community. It was unjust to blame the Shia community for spreading the virus when people used to pray together in Mosques without observing social distancing. Their presence at Balochistan University is almost non-existence." The respondent explained further, "The Hazara community itself also wanted to be recognised as a different community and ethnicity. This has provided a smooth way for the state to exclude the Hazara community from society and show them as other or different communities." Another respondent stated that, "In hospitals, Hazara doctors face discrimination from other ethnic communities. Patients might not face the same problem because they are seen as customers in hospitals in Balochistan."

Effects of Sectarian Violence

Years of conflict and insecurity have hindered progress and created fear among the Hazara population. This bloodshed has destroyed peace and order in the region (Rumi, 2012; Siddiqi & Mukhtar, 2015). One respondent noted, "Hazaras are afraid of going to bazaars or markets, and the other ethnicities also refrain from going to the Hazara majority areas. The patients of psychologists are mostly Hazaras in Quetta." Another elaborated: "One of the psychiatrists has reportedly said that the Hazara patients increased after the sectarian violence in Quetta." Additionally, a respondent stated, "The local economy booms when people travel and buy goods from the local market that are locally manufactured. There were small industries in the Hazara community which are now closed. It is hard to manufacture hand-made goods at a low cost, and local people will not buy such goods at high prices."

This initiative to research sectarian violence against the Hazara Shia Muslim community in Quetta aimed to highlight its causes—religious, ethnic, political, economic, and social—and provide guidance for academics, researchers, and policymakers. Given the importance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, bringing peace to the region is critical for smooth operations at Gwadar Port.

Initiatives to foster harmony may include people-to-people contacts across provinces through cultural exchange programmes, involving locals in decision-making, institutional uplift, and trust reconciliation between province and the federation. Other strategies could involve peace initiatives among militants, nationalists, and locals, poverty alleviation, education and technical support for youth, provincial development projects, and economic incentives (e.g., National Finance Commission).

While this study contributes to the literature on sectarian violence in Pakistan, it was limited to a small sample of 50 Shia Muslims within the Hazara community in Quetta, specifically in Marriabad and Hazara Town. Future studies could benefit from larger samples and a mixed-methods research design, collecting data from Sunni and Shia sects to better understand the conflict's causes.

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CONCLUSION

This study investigated the complex sectarian violence affecting the Hazara Shia Muslim community in Quetta, Balochistan, focusing on religious, political, ethnic, economic, and social factors. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, it explores these dynamics. The Hazara community, targeted due to its smaller size and distinct features, faces economic and social discrimination. The discrimination was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were unfairly blamed for the virus. Local and international factors, including the influence of militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba (SeS) Pakistan, and external interventions by Saudi Arabia and Iran, exacerbate the violence. The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has further intensified militant activities in Pakistan, harming both Hazara community and adversely affects Pakistan's economy and security. The limitations of this study include a small sample size and focus on a specific geographic area, which may not capture the broader dynamics of sectarian violence in Pakistan. To address these issues, policymakers should implement comprehensive strategies, including enhancing law enforcement efforts to dismantle militant organisations, promoting economic development in marginalised communities, and fostering interfaith dialogues to encourage religious harmony. By adopting these actionable recommendations, the government can work towards ensuring a peaceful and stable nation.

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