

Kite Fights

The Proxy Wars Behind the
Kabul Gurdwara Massacre



Pieter Friedrich & Bhajan Singh

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Kite Fights: The Proxy Wars Behind the Kabul Gurdwara Massacre.

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“India for some time has always used Afghanistan as a second front, and India has over the years financed problems for Pakistan on that side of the border.”

US Senator (later Defense Secretary) Chuck Hagel

– 2011 –

“Just as there is Hindu religion in Nepal, so there must be Hindu institutions in Afghanistan and the frontier territory; otherwise it is useless to win Swaraj.... If Hindus want to protect themselves, they must conquer Afghanistan and the frontiers and convert all the mountain tribes.”

Hindutva Ideologue Lala Har Dayal

– 1925 –

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Suspicion of the Powerful

- Introduction - Challenging Official Narratives

When militants in Kabul, Afghanistan stormed into Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib during morning prayers on 25 March 2020, spraying gunfire and tossing grenades, they were killed in a shootout with Afghan security forces only after slaughtering 25 Sikhs.

Within two weeks, Afghanistan arrested Aslam Farooqi as the alleged mastermind of the massacre. Farooqi, the head of Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), was soon accused of ties to the Taliban's militant Haqqani Network and named as a former commander of Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).

ISKP released a statement claiming the attack was revenge for India's actions in Kashmir — yet the stated motive (which is truly bizarre in context of the Sikh/Kashmiri relationship) is but one of many reasons that the official narrative demands scrutiny when the incident is examined from a broader, more nuanced perspective that takes into consideration similar historical incidents, recent regional developments, and current geo-political realities.¹

In the northern tip of the Indian subcontinent, the Kashmir region is the epicenter of the earth's most hostile and festering territorial dispute. Straddling the India/Pakistan border, the most militarized zone is also one of the most volatile. Unchecked rivalry between the two nuclear-armed countries is one of the greatest potential threats to world peace. Meanwhile, India's subjugation of Kashmiris remains one of the worst ongoing human rights atrocities.

Inhabitants of Indian-Administered Kashmir are not the only regional minorities who have faced systemic mistreatment by India's security forces apparatus.

Muslim-majority Kashmir shares a bloody history with neighboring Sikh-majority Punjab; both suffered armed insurgency and counter-insurgency violence throughout the 1990s. Justice still eludes tens of thousands of Kashmiris and Punjabis who were disappeared by Indian security forces. In the 1990s, internationally recognized human rights activists who exposed the disappearances were themselves murdered by state agents.

Although — after years of ruthless suppression — separatist movements in Punjab and Kashmir have evolved almost entirely into peaceful protests and general demands for freedom, India continues to accuse Pakistan of fomenting dissent and even sponsoring terrorism in both regions. After the Kabul massacre, India — instead of calling for an exhaustive investigation — immediately recycled the same narrative. Claiming that the massacre was part of a nefarious Pakistani plot to thwart Indian interests in Afghanistan, India wasted no time in announcing its allegations to the world. India was less forthcoming, however, about its view of Afghanistan as a key strategic zone — a “second front” and “new battleground” — from which to launch attacks intended to thwart Pakistan's regional interests. Nor did India care to note the similarities with the Chittisinghpura massacre.

On the evening of 20 March 2000, militants entered the Kashmiri village of Chittisinghpura,

rounded up 36 Sikh men, and killed all but one execution style. Twice now since the dawn of the 21st century, Sikhs have been caught in the crossfire of the Kashmir struggle, yet India's official narrative regarding *both* incidents falls under a thick cloud of suspicion. Twice now India has immediately directly blamed the attacks on Pakistan.

Yet, as Indian journalist Pankaj Mishra asked, why would Kashmiri militants kill Sikhs in Chittisinghpura considering it would “inevitably lead to international outrage and thus discredit their cause”?² That was certainly the result of the massacre in Kabul. Furthermore, accepting the massacre of Sikhs — led by a Keralite recruit who was allegedly known to India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) — at face value as “revenge for Kashmir” is patently absurd considering the global Sikh community has famously emerged as champions of the Kashmiris.

The Chittisinghpura massacre occurred on the eve of then US President Bill Clinton's official state visit to India during the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) first full-term administration. As the first American president to visit the country since 1978, American journalist Pamela Constable reports that “Clinton was expected to put polite pressure on his hosts to peaceably settle the Kashmir dispute.”³

“The trip began on a grim note,” notes then US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. After militants dressed in Indian Army uniforms conducted the massacre, Talbott writes, “The Indian government said the killers belonged to two militant groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizbul Mujahideen, that were supported by the government of Pakistan.” Clinton, however, “did not endorse the accusation that Pakistan was behind the violence since the United States had no independent confirmation.”⁴

On 25 March, the last day of Clinton's trip, Indian security forces announced they had killed five “foreign militants” responsible for the massacre. However, India's Central Bureau of Investigation later confirmed that the five were actually local Muslim youth who were disappeared, killed in a “fake encounter,” and posthumously blamed for the attack on the Sikhs.⁵

Many Sikhs have long harbored suspicions that the massacre itself was a false flag incident. According to Mishra, Sikhs suspected it “was organized by Indian intelligence agencies in order to influence Clinton, and the large contingent of influential American journalists accompanying him, into taking a much more sympathetic view of India as a helpless victim of Islamic terrorists in Pakistan and Afghanistan: a view of India that some very hectic Indian diplomacy in the West had previously failed to achieve.”⁶

The only survivor, Nanak Singh, called it a “premeditated massacre,” recounting how the killers called each other by Hindu names and raised Hindi slogans such as “Bharat Mata Ki Jai.”⁷ As reported by *The New York Times*, “He remembers that some of the gunmen had faces painted in the raucous fashion of Holi, a Hindu holiday being celebrated that day.”⁸ He appears to attribute the attack to state agents, saying, “On one side they are saying we are a democratic country and on the other they kill innocent people.”⁹ For his part, Clinton later wrote, “During my visit to India in 2000, some Hindu militants decided to vent their outrage by murdering thirty-[five] Sikhs in cold blood. If I hadn't made the trip, the victims would probably still be alive.”¹⁰

“Almost all the militant groups of Kashmir, including their political front APHC, and Sikh organizations world-wide have accused the Indian intelligence agencies and counter-insurgency force for the killings,” reported Punjab-based International Human Rights Organisation

(IHRO).¹¹ According to Amnesty International, APHC believed that India had perpetrated the attack “in an effort to discredit the ‘azadi’ [freedom] cause and to portray its supporters as ‘terrorists’ and religious fanatics prior to the Clinton visit.” Amnesty suggested the perpetrators, who “wore uniforms of the armed forces,” may have been renegades in league with the military, adding that local villagers believed “the nearby [Rashtriya Rifles] unit knew about the attack on the Sikhs in advance and had done nothing to stop it — which again, given the patronage of renegades exercised by some paramilitary forces, may speak for the renegades’ involvement in the massacre.”¹²

Such a situation would mirror India’s counter-insurgency efforts in Punjab in the 1990s, where police notoriously fielded renegade forces — often composed of captured or surrendered guerrillas whom police had turned and tasked as auxiliaries. Furthermore, explained former senior Indian Police Services officer Kirpal Singh Dhillon, “Police seemed to have successfully penetrated most militant groups, apart from setting up some of their own gangs and ‘armies’.” Many of the infiltrators of these groups “committed outrageous offenses in their names to defame them in the eyes of the community so as to undermine their support base.”¹³ These renegades and infiltrators operated as hired guns willing to do any job for cash. Meanwhile, the police themselves were often little more than thugs in uniforms whose only duty consisted of creating mayhem and spreading terror.

Whoever the culprits were, it seems almost certain they were not Pakistani or Kashmiri militants as declared by the official narrative. Thus, Kashmir-based All Party Sikh Coordination Committee continues to issue annual demands for a fresh probe. Meanwhile, IHRO said the massacre “aimed at breaking the Sikh-Muslim worldwide nexus to rundown the Kashmir movement for self-determination.”¹⁴

That goal has, thus far, failed. “We still live happily with our Muslim brothers,” says survivor Nanak Singh. “The criminals failed to break our bonds.”¹⁵

While the interests and goals of oppressed South Asian minorities — including Sikhs and Muslims — increasingly align as various historically oppressed communities struggle for freedom in the subcontinent, uncovering the truth about incidents like the massacres in Chittisinghpura or Kabul requires patient, full, and transparent investigation that treats official accounts with the greatest of skepticism and interrogates, with the utmost suspicion, those who stand to benefit the most.

Closer analysis suggests that Hindu nationalist regimes in India are the only beneficiaries of these massacres. One ulterior motive in the Kabul massacre appears to be justification of the recent dismantling of Kashmiri statehood which was vehemently by many Sikh groups. Another motive appears to be undermining strong Sikh support for Muslim-led protests in New Delhi.

The circumstances of the massacre at Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib are particularly confused by the geo-political complexities of Afghanistan — a land, known as the “graveyard of empires,” which imperial powers have struggled to conquer and control for eons. India, a key regional player which pulls many strings throughout South Asia, sees the US’s pending withdrawal as a vacuum that must be filled. Furthermore, as it enacts its Hindu nationalist agenda in the face of growing international criticism, New Delhi’s ruling BJP regime stands to benefit greatly from the deaths of those 25 Afghan Sikhs.

Afghanistan: India's Second Front

In February 2013, US Senator Chuck Hagel was appointed Secretary of Defense under then President Barack Obama. Hagel brought with him an interest in mapping an exit strategy to wind down the war in Afghanistan and withdraw US troops. His nomination disturbed certain American policy-influencers who considered his views an impediment to their foreign interference ambitions.

Two days before Hagel took office, some outlets went on the attack by releasing footage of remarks he made in 2011 about India's role in South Asia. "The tense, fragmented relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been there for many, many years," said Hagel. "India for some time has always used Afghanistan as a second front, and India has over the years financed problems for Pakistan on that side of the border."¹⁶ Thus, he seemed to suggest that India was guilty of doing the same thing in Afghanistan that it accused Pakistan of doing in Kashmir — waging a proxy war. His remarks stirred strong criticism from particular circles.

Calling Hagel "paranoid" and claiming that "democratic India" is a "stabilizing influence in Afghanistan and Asia more broadly," American Enterprise Institute Fellow Sadanand Dhume said, "It's also exactly the sort of statement that would have frayed ties with New Delhi, which has been watching the US withdrawal from Afghanistan with concern."¹⁷ Meanwhile, US Senator John Cornyn — co-founder of the Senate India Caucus — distributed the news to Indian-American communities alongside a pledge to help stop Hagel's nomination. "I am surprised and shocked," said Cornyn. "We did not know the story and background of Senator Hagel on India, Afghanistan and Pakistan."¹⁸

The Indian Embassy in Washington, DC registered official protest. Calling Hagel's remarks "contrary to the reality of India's unbounded dedication to the welfare of Afghan people," the embassy pointed to the country's "significant assistance to Afghanistan in developing its economy, infrastructure and institutional capacities."¹⁹ Indeed, India has taken a central role in providing development assistance to Afghanistan — even building the country's new parliament building for around \$220 million. As former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan Shaida Abdali noted in 2017, India is "the biggest regional donor to Afghanistan and fifth largest donor globally with over \$3 billion in assistance."²⁰ Most notably, this assistance includes training and arming thousands of officers in the Afghan civil, military, and intelligence services.

"India has built a sizable developmental and considerable intelligence footprint in Afghanistan," explain Harsh Pant, a director of New Delhi's Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and Avinash Paliwal of SOAS University of London's South Asia Institute. "India's Afghanistan policy is not driven by ideological or humanitarian concerns. It is driven by a desire to limit Islamabad's influence in Afghanistan."²¹ According to Paliwal, "The core driver of India's Afghanistan policy is to ensure a continuing strategic balance between Afghanistan and

Pakistan.” He adds, “One of the demands that Pakistan consistently makes from Kabul in return for cooperation is reduction in Indian diplomatic, intelligence and developmental presence in Afghanistan.”²²

Thus, aid to Afghanistan from either Pakistan or India always appears to come with strings attached. It is not altruistic. Afghanistan is used as a pawn by two nations locked in a never-ending struggle to thwart each other’s interests.

In 2013, while the US pursued a plan for withdrawal and Pakistan helped facilitate US-Taliban dialogue, former Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal claimed that it “shows that Pakistan’s interests would be looked after in any future dispensation in Afghanistan.” Former Indian Ambassador to the US Lalit Mansingh complained, “The peace plan seems to give primacy to Pakistan’s role and nothing to India despite the fact that India has invested a good deal of money for aid and reconstruction in Afghanistan.... India will need to rethink its strategy.”²³

Afghanistan has straddled the fence in relations with both India and Pakistan. In 2015, Afghan and Pakistani intelligence services inked a memorandum of understanding for “coordinated intel operations.”²⁴ The country also sent a handful of Afghan military cadets to Pakistan for training, which one defense analyst called an attempt to “remove doubts Pakistan had about the pro-India orientation of the Afghan forces.”²⁵ Yet, in 2016, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani rejected \$500 million in development aid from Pakistan, saying the money should be spent instead to “contain extremism” and suggesting terrorists were receiving “sanctuary” in Pakistan.²⁶ In 2017, Ghani accused Pakistan of waging an “undeclared war of aggression” in Afghanistan.²⁷

However, the situation grew murkier after the disputed results of the 2019 presidential election plunged Afghanistan into a political crisis. In late February 2020, when the US struck a peace accord with the Taliban, it seemed India’s influence had slipped.

“The peace deal could be a victory of sorts for Pakistan,” writes *Times of India* Diplomatic Editor Indrani Bagchi. She quotes retired senior RAW official Tilak Devasher, who claims, “We would be wary of ungoverned spaces in that country, which could become grounds for terror groups to flourish. Of particular concern would be the prospect that Pakistan could use any such spaces to move its anti-India terror structure.”²⁸ Senior US policy analyst Grady Means, while noting that “RAW is especially active in [the Pakistani province of] Balochistan,” explains that it “is also active in Afghanistan and has leverage that might be used to support peace in the region.”²⁹

Yet peace does not seem to be India’s agenda for Afghanistan. India is much more interested in using the country as a “second front” against Pakistan. For decades, India’s Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have waged an intelligence war against each other in Afghanistan.

“The ongoing dispute in Kashmir continues to fuel these clashes, but experts say Afghanistan may be emerging as the new battleground,” explained Jayshree Bajoria of the Council on Foreign Relations in 2008. “Islamabad sees India’s growing diplomatic initiatives in Afghanistan as a cover for RAW agents working to destabilize Pakistan. It accuses RAW of training and arming separatists in Pakistan’s Balochistan Province along the Afghan border. RAW denies these charges, and in turn accuses the ISI of the July 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul.”³⁰

Explaining his agency's perspective, former RAW special secretary Anand Arni (along with policy analyst Pranay Kotasthane) writes, "India's interests in Afghanistan haven't changed. India hopes to build up Afghanistan's state capacity so that Pakistan's desires of extending control can be thwarted."³¹ According to Pant and Paliwal, "The ultimate goal will be the same as it always has been — keeping Pakistan from running the show."³² Yet Pant believes India has failed at that goal. "India's reluctance to proactively shape the ground realities in Afghanistan has made it so marginal in the country that the only recourse it has is of asking other actors to keep its interests in mind," he wrote in February 2020. "For all of India's claims at being a major partner, it is nowhere in the picture when it comes to the final outcome."³³

Echoing that perspective in March 2020, Sankalp Gurjar of the Indian Council of World Affairs wrote, "India is worried about the growing influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the implications of the evolving political scenario within Afghanistan for India.... India's chief worry continues to be Afghanistan becoming a base for Pakistan-supported anti-India terrorists." India, said Gurjar, must play a "proactive role in Afghanistan for protecting its interests and support pro-India groups."³⁴

For Pant, "proactive" means boots on the ground. Claiming that the Afghan National Security Advisor had privately asked India to deploy "peacekeeping" troops, he argues, "Perhaps there is still time to reinvigorate the idea of India as regional security provider." Making the case for a military presence, he warns that Afghanistan could become a haven for "Pakistan-backed proxies," that Indian allies need military "protection and support," and that it is "important to protect India's significant investment in Afghanistan."³⁵

Hindutva's Hatred for Sikhs

The Kabul massacre could not have come at a more opportune time for New Delhi. While India's influence over Afghanistan is waning, the country's reputation — under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership — is growing increasingly tarnished in the global arena even while Pakistan charts a more moderate, humanitarian course. Modi has faced widespread censure and sparked sustained international protests after he began ramming through key BJP agenda items immediately following his re-election to a second term in May 2019.

As the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; Sangh) paramilitary, the BJP shares its parent organization's ideology of Hindutva — a supremacist belief that non-Hindus are foreign to the land and should be viewed as internal threats and even traitors. The original ideologues called for stripping non-Hindus of citizen's rights and emulating Nazi Germany's exclusionary racial policies. Hindutva's modern adherents pledge to wipe out all Indian Christians and Muslims. Politically, since 2019, Hindutva politicians have scrapped Muslim-majority Kashmir of its constitutionally-guaranteed semi-autonomy, passed a bill making religion the criteria for Indian citizenship, and planned to conduct a national register of citizens which Muslims fear could be used to strip them of citizenship. In February 2020, Modi's efforts to crush dissent against these measures culminated in an anti-Muslim pogrom that left over 50 dead in Delhi.

Meanwhile, while the RSS plans to eradicate Christians and Muslims, it hopes to assimilate Sikhs.

The RSS's guru, MS Golwalkar, denied that Sikhism is a distinct religion. He described the Sikh religion as a "sect" of Hinduism that "came into being to stop the spread of Islam" and "for the protection of Hindu society." Calling it the "sword arm" of Hinduism, he argued that Sikhs who insist that their religion is separate are guilty of destroying the Hindu religion.³⁶

Not only does the Sangh hope to swallow up Sikhism by denying its distinct identity, but it has been accused of outright violence against Sikhs. Aside from speculation that the BJP regime in 2000 may have overseen the Chittisinghpura massacre, the RSS allegedly partnered with the Indian National Congress Party in 1984 during the Sikh Genocide.

The Sangh further works to infiltrate the community by creating pseudo-Sikh groups. In 1985, it floated a Sikh wing — Rashtriya Sikh Sangat — to expand its assimilationist goals. Top Sikh leadership have repeatedly disavowed that group as well as called for a ban on the RSS itself.

The Sangh thrives on a "divide and conquer" strategy of creating discord among minorities. One of its worst nightmares is any kind of trusting, intimate bond between minority groups — including between Muslims and Sikhs. It seeks to pit oppressed groups against one another. Thus, while the RSS praises Sikh Gurus as Hindu heroes and wants to assimilate the community,

its ideologues claimed that Muslims are incapable of assimilating into Indian society and threatened that they may have to “play the part of German Jews.”³⁷ Today, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah calls Muslim immigrants “termites”³⁸ while Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath calls even native-born Muslims a “green virus.”³⁹

Looking to the teachings of their Gurus, however, the Sikhs have stepped forward in courage to take an ethical stand alongside all those in distress throughout South Asia. Time and again, they have come to the aid of the Rohingyas, the Kashmiris, and the Muslims of mainland India whenever they have faced supremacist or state-sponsored violence. Sikh support for persecuted Kashmiris, in particular, is widely known and celebrated in South Asia and throughout the greater Muslim world. Notable occasions when Sikhs have stood in solidarity with Indian and Kashmiri Muslims include:

Pulwama Attack: In February 2019, a radicalized Kashmiri youth bombed a military convoy in Pulwama, Kashmir. In retaliation, mobs throughout India targeted common Kashmiris. Sikhs rushed to their defense. “Alongside accounts of mob violence, which are often associated with Hindu right-wing groups, are stories of ordinary Indians coming to the aid of Kashmiris caught up in the violence,” reported *Al Jazeera*. “At the forefront were Sikh groups, such as the UK-based non-profit organization, Khalsa Aid, which helped fleeing Kashmiri students by putting them up in temples and providing them food and accommodation.” Khalsa Aid reported it helped to evacuate more than 300 Kashmiri students from the Indian mainland.⁴⁰

“Social media in Kashmir was flooded with offers of free snow-bike rides and hotel stays for Sikh tourists, free medical check-ups and discounts on medicine for Sikh patients, free admission to educational institutes and English-speaking courses for Sikh kids,” reported [scroll.in](#). “There were offers of free blood donation and even kidneys.”⁴¹ In Srinagar, Kashmir, Deputy Mayor Sheikh Mohammed Imran visited Gurdwara Chatti Patshahi to distribute sweets.⁴² Sikh assistance to Kashmiris was so extensive that it infuriated pro-Hindutva elements, some of whom accused Sikhs of “harboring jihadis in their gurdwaras,” threatened that they “will have to pay a price,” and said gurdwaras “should be identified, surrounded and set on fire.”⁴³

Article 370: In August 2019, Modi’s government scrapped the Indian Constitution’s Article 370, which granted semi-autonomy to Kashmir. Sikhs of various political backgrounds widely criticized the move. Kanwar Sandhu, a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Punjab, said his state’s Aam Aadmi Party disagreed with the action. “What is required is not greater centralization but autonomy for States as per the constitutional framework,” said Sandhu. Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh of the Indian National Congress protested that “no stakeholders were consulted before this decision,” adding, “It violates the spirit of the constitution.”⁴⁴ Akal Takht Jathedar Harpreet Singh denounced offensive comments made towards Kashmiri women by BJP politicians, called it “our religious duty to defend their honor,” and warned that Sikh women were targeted “in the same way” during the 1984 Sikh Genocide.⁴⁵

Later, when Modi visited Houston, TX and New York, NY in September 2019, thousands of Sikhs were at the forefront of mass protests focused on his action in Kashmir.

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): In December 2019, Modi’s government passed the CAA, which essentially makes religion the basis for becoming an Indian citizen by fast-tracking citizenship for immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as long as they are not Muslims. “The state of Punjab in India has seen some of the most vocal objections to the

government's new Citizenship Amendment Act, which has drawn the anger of millions of people across the country," reported *Al Jazeera*.⁴⁶ Sikhs repeatedly held joint protests with Muslims in India and other parts of the world. When Muslim women led a months-long, 24x7, sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh, Sikhs made headlines for supplying them with *langar* (a free community kitchen).

Facing extreme repression under the Modi regime, Indian Muslims desperately need friends and advocates. They have often found both in the Sikhs, whose religious ethics instruct them to befriend and assist the oppressed everywhere they are found. The Sangh hopes, however, that the Kabul massacre will drive a wedge between the two communities.

Hence, after the massacre, BJP leader Kapil Mishra asked, "What would those who were distributing *langar* in Shaheen Bagh be thinking today?"⁴⁷ The remark, which came across as a veiled threat, was an overt attempt to smear Indian Muslim protestors as terrorists akin to the Kabul killers. Yet, just as survivor Nanak Singh did after Chittisinghpura massacre, Sikhs rejected the divisiveness. Responding to Mishra, for instance, journalist Gurpreet Singh Sahota wrote, "Sikhs will continue to stand for victims and will continue providing *langar*... Doesn't matter [if] it's [ISIS] or someone else behind this attack. For us, Hindus and Muslims are human first. Killing us is easy but no one can kill principles given to us by our Gurus."⁴⁸

Those principles inspired Sikhs to come to the aid of Muslims during the Delhi pogrom — which was instigated by Mishra himself. Sikhs have constantly emerged at the forefront of humanitarian relief efforts for victims of natural disasters in India such as cyclones, floods, and tsunamis. It is only when they align themselves with other vulnerable minorities, however, that their efforts are greeted with the focused anger and hatred of Hindutva.

Others have offered more explicit commentary linking CAA — a law which, when combined with the proposed National Register of Citizens, is intended to provide a legal route for cleansing India of Muslims — to the Kabul massacre. Various pro-BJP social media influencers described the attack as "karma" and "ironic" considering that Indian Sikhs are prominently anti-CAA.⁴⁹ Delhi University Professor Abhinav Prakash remarked, "All those opposing CAA are supporters and cheerleaders of such routine massacres."⁵⁰ KN Pandita, a former director of Kashmir University's Centre of Central Asian Studies, argued that Afghan Sikh should "repatriate" to India, writing, "The CAA was enacted keeping in mind these realities."⁵¹

Not only are Sikhs labeled by such elements as nothing more than a sect of Hinduism, but they are viewed as the rightful property of India. For instance, when Gurdwara Nankana Sahib (the site of Guru Nanak's birthplace) in Pakistan was pelted with stones in January 2020, Amit Shah asked, "Where will our Sikh brothers go if not India?"⁵² The idea that Sikhs in Afghanistan should "repatriate" — that is, return to their original country of India — is, however, contradicted by the fact that they are not actually Indian.

"There are about 800-850 Sikhs in Afghanistan and they are ethnically Afghan," says Inderjeet Singh, author of the first English book about Afghan Sikhs.⁵³ The community has lived in that region since the 1600s. For much of the 20th century, they lived peaceably alongside their fellow Afghans. Their position grew untenable only after the 1980s. With India's sanction, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and occupied it from 1979 to 1989. That sparked an initial wave of Sikh emigration. When the Soviets withdrew, they installed Najibullah Ahmadzai — who enjoyed India's strong backing — as a puppet dictator. By 1992, civil war resulted in the fall

of Najibullah's regime. That sparked a mass exodus of Afghan Sikhs.

Yet, when the Taliban came to power in 1996, they reportedly encouraged Sikhs to return, treated them with a degree of tolerance, and practiced a "smooth coexistence."⁵⁴ That changed radically after the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and installed a new government. "The Taliban were far better than this government," said Awtar Singh Khalsa, an Afghan gurdwara president, in 2013.⁵⁵

Today, after a 20-year war in which at least 100,000 — civilians, Afghan troops, foreign troops, and insurgents of all stripes — have died, Afghan Sikhs face what Inderjeet Singh calls a "very bleak" future. "Sikhs are but a small pawn in this whole scenario," he says. "In fact, Sikhs are not even a player in this whole thing. They are too small, too insignificant."⁵⁶

It is certainly true that Sikhs who are caught in the crossfire of the ongoing Afghanistan war — as well as the crossfire of the proxy war between India and Pakistan — are being played like pawns, but their significance should not be understated. They are of immense value as unwitting participants in the struggle for a Hindu Rashtra. As pawns, Afghan Sikhs are key pieces in the great game of Hindutva. Playing them as pawns empowers violent Hindu nationalists (despite murdering minorities in India) to portray themselves as compassionately running to the aid of persecuted minorities in broader South Asia. It empowers them to perpetuate their narrative that Pakistan is a rogue, terror-sponsoring state — a narrative that also helps them justify crushing Muslim dissent within India. It further empowers them to expand their footprint in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and Akhand Bharat

Anand Arni and Pranay Kotasthane note that a major obstacle to an Indian military presence in Afghanistan is that “India’s neutral credentials have suffered as a consequence of the recent steps taken by the government on the Citizenship Amendment Act which are viewed as anti-Muslim (and, to some extent, as anti-Afghanistan).”⁵⁷ Why, though, is the current regime in New Delhi so determined to pull the strings in Kabul? The answer lies beyond geo-political interests.

In February 2020, India’s Ministry of External Affairs described Afghanistan as a “contiguous neighbor,” meaning the two countries share a common border. They do not share a common border, of course, as they are separated by Pakistan. However, as journalist Jyoti Malhotra asks, “By making itself a ‘contiguous’ neighbor of Afghanistan today, is India giving the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s concept of ‘Akhand Bharat,’ which incorporates both Pakistan and Bangladesh, a new lease of life?”⁵⁸

Aside from its perceived usefulness as a second front and new battleground in India’s perpetual conflict with Pakistan, there appears to be an ideological reason underlying the Modi regime’s obsession with Afghanistan.

The fundamental tenet of Hindutva is that non-Hindus are foreign to the country. Yet Hindutva also insists the whole of South Asia (and even beyond) should be a single, unified empire — which, its ideologues claim, it once was.

VD Savarkar, the man who first articulated “Hindutva” as a religious nationalist political ideology in the 1920s, claimed that the Hindu deity Ram once ruled over an empire that stretched from the Himalayan mountain range in the north to the island of Sri Lanka in the south. This region, Savarkar wrote, represented the original “geographical limit” of what he considered to be “not only a fatherland but a holy land” for Hindus.⁵⁹

In the modern day, however, Savarkar insisted that those Hindus living elsewhere must continue looking to India as their fatherland and therefore “continue unabated their labors of founding a Greater India, a Mahabharat.” Assuring them that “nothing can stand in the way of your desire to expand,” he declared, “The only geographical limits of Hindutva are the limits of our earth.”⁶⁰

Restoration of this mythical empire remains as central to the Hindu nationalist agenda today as transformation of India itself into a formal “Hindu Rashtra” (or nation). “Akhand Bharat is one of the mainstays of Hindu nationalism,” writes French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot.⁶¹ While the specific tactics for achieving that goal may only be discussed behind closed doors, the Sangh has made no secret about its continued desire for Akhand Bharat — an undivided India.

In February 2020, BJP spokesperson Ram Madhav (formerly of the RSS) declared that scrapping Article 370 in Kashmir was a first step towards establishing Akhand Bharat. “Our next

objective is to take back the Indian land which is under illegal occupation of Pakistan,” he said, referring to Pakistan-Administered Kashmir.⁶² In January 2020, a BJP Member of Parliament claimed the “time is not far” when Akhand Bharat will be achieved, arguing, “The Hindutva ideology will spread among the public in Pakistan and Bangladesh and they would be motivated to be included with us.”⁶³ Earlier, in 2019, RSS executive Indresh Kumar said that Pakistan “will become Hindustan again after 2025,” adding, “You can start looking to settle or start business in say Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, or Sialkot after 2025.”⁶⁴

LK Advani, who was the BJP’s Deputy Prime Minister during the Chittisinghpura massacre, envisioned Akhand Bharat as an even broader territory. Strobe Talbott, who interacted closely with Advani during US-India dialogues, writes, “He mused aloud about the happy day when India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) would be reunited in a single south Asian ‘confederation.’ Given India’s advantage in size and strength, this construct, especially coming from India’s highest-ranking hard-line Hindu nationalist, would have been truly frightening to all its neighbors, most of all Pakistan.”⁶⁵

The Sangh’s devotion to territorial expansion traces back to its origins. RSS guru Golwalkar, for instance, called for “the hoisting of our flag in Lahore and other parts of Pakistan.” He argued, “Our fight for independence can be deemed to have come to a successful close only when we liberate all those areas now under enemy occupation.”⁶⁶ He presented an image of an allegedly historical Akhand Bharat which once stretched from Iran to Singapore and as far south as Sri Lanka — a region he says “was never considered as anything different from the mainland.”⁶⁷

Golwalkar claimed his “expansive image of our motherland” included Afghanistan. Savarkar claimed the same. Lala Har Dayal, however, most explicitly articulated Hindutva’s specific agenda for Afghanistan.

Har Dayal (1884-1939) was a devotee of Savarkar and a “Sangh Parivar luminary”⁶⁸ described as one of the “eminent revolutionaries of the Punjab.”⁶⁹ Eventually banned from British-occupied India, he traveled in Europe and the US lecturing and, at times, advocating armed revolution against the British occupation of the Indian subcontinent. Like Golwalkar, however, he believed that “true” independence required establishing Akhand Bharat — of which Afghanistan was the linchpin. Writing for a Punjabi newspaper in the mid-1920s, he declared:

“I declare that the future of the Hindu race, of Hindustan and of the Punjab, rests on these four pillars: (1) Hindu Sangathan [Unity], (2) Hindu Raj [Rule], (3) Shuddhi [Reconversion to Hinduism] of Moslems, and (4) Conquest and Shuddhi of Afghanistan and the Frontiers. So long as the Hindu nation does not accomplish these four things, the safety of our children and great-grand children will be ever in danger, and the safety of the Hindu race will be impossible. The Hindu race has but one history, and its institutions are homogeneous. But the Musalmans and Christians are far removed from the confines of Hindustan, for their religions are alien and they love Persian, Arab and European institutions. Thus, just as one removes foreign matter from the eye, Shuddhi must be made of these two religions. Afghanistan and the hilly regions of the frontier were formerly part of India, but are at present under the domination of Islam.... Just as there is Hindu religion in Nepal, so there must be Hindu institutions in Afghanistan and the

frontier territory; otherwise it is useless to win Swaraj [Independence]... If Hindus want to protect themselves, they must conquer Afghanistan and the frontiers and convert all the mountain tribes.”⁷⁰

Har Dayal’s “four pillars” are already being progressively implemented in modern India. The RSS is intended to provide Hindu unity. With the BJP as its political front, the RSS has ruled India since 2014 and achieved a level of Hindu rule. Reconversion of Indian Muslims to Hinduism has already occurred in some localities and appears likely to continue as long as the RSS holds power. So what of Har Dayal’s fourth pillar?

If the Sangh truly believes that the fight for independence can not come to a “successful close” until Pakistan is absorbed or that independence is “useless” unless Afghanistan is conquered and converted, what kind of foreign policy — overt *or* covert — can be expected from the Hindu nationalist regime in New Delhi?

Pakistan Plots a New Course

As Modi leads India deeper into extremism and destroys the country's secular democratic reputation, Prime Minister Imran Khan is working fiercely to rescue Pakistan's own besmirched reputation, disavow and uproot terrorism, and swing towards a pluralistic, enlightened society.

"We have decided to play [the] role of a mediator between warring nations and not become a party or engage in conflicts," said Imran Khan in 2019.⁷¹ For decades, Pakistan has been accused of providing a safe haven to and even sponsoring Islamist militants who engage in cross-border terrorism. Many of the accusations are true, yet after taking office in 2018, Khan has not only admitted to Pakistan's past role but repeatedly promised to reverse course entirely.

Sponsorship of cross-border militancy by both Pakistan and India — implicitly, at least — traces back to Kashmir in 1947. Before the independent kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India, the RSS joined hands with then Maharaja Hari Singh Dogra to massacre Muslims.⁷² While the killings were ongoing, thousands of armed Pashtun tribesmen invaded from Pakistan.

Formal state-sponsorship of militants, however, began with the 1971 Bangladesh War. When Pakistan worked to crush dissent and growing secessionist sentiment in then East Pakistan, India's newly-formed RAW stepped in to sponsor the Mukti Bahini insurgency. "India supplied them with arms, ammunition, and logistical support, and permitted them to recruit and train volunteers, most of them refugees, on Indian soil," reports legal expert Eyal Benvenisti.⁷³

India's regime change war mirrored America's own foreign policy. Since the 1950s, the US had sponsored coups all around the world to install regimes favorable to its interests. America's foreign interference — today conducted under auspices of the War on Terrorism but previously in the name of the Cold War — often resulted in dictatorships, as in Brazil, Chile, Congo, Ghana, Greece, Iran, and elsewhere.

In 1979, the US (with Pakistani facilitation) began sponsoring Afghan insurgents to fight the Soviet invasion. That birthed the region's radical Islamist movement which Pakistan is now criticized for having supported. In 1989, as the Soviet-Afghan War ended, the Kashmir Insurgency began and many of these mujahideen — with Pakistani-backing — turned their attention from west to east.

Pakistan is still suffering blowback — in terms of its reputation as well as terrorist attacks on its interests — as a consequence of its past policy of foreign interference. "The Pakistani Army, ISI, trained al-Qaeda and all these troops to fight in Afghanistan and then maintained links with the militants afterwards," said Khan in 2019.⁷⁴ "We had first trained these guys to fight jihad and it was a great idea, and now we are telling the same groups it's terrorism. So we should at least have stayed neutral."⁷⁵ Earlier, claiming Pakistan was used as a "gun for hire," he said, "We became a U.S. proxy for a war against the Soviet Union when it entered Afghanistan and we

allowed the CIA to create, train, and arm Jihadi groups on our soil and a decade later we tried to eliminate them as terrorists on U.S. orders.”⁷⁶

Fighting terrorism is the right thing for Pakistan to do. However, the country is in a hard place as it appears hypocritical when it now fights as terrorists the groups it once sponsored as freedom fighters. Yet Khan has stood firm, saying, “We did a 180 degree turn and went after those groups.”⁷⁷ Announcing that “it is for the first time in Pakistan that we have decided that there will be no armed militias in our country,” he explained, “Until we came into power, the governments did not have the political will, because when you talk about militant groups, we still have about 30,000-40,000 armed people who have been trained and fought in some part of Afghanistan or Kashmir.”⁷⁸

On countless occasions, Khan has unambiguously pledged to uproot terrorism. “I can tell you that there are no safe havens here,” he says.⁷⁹ “This government will not allow Pakistan’s land to be used for any kind of outside terrorism.... We will not allow any militant group to function in our country now.”⁸⁰ Explaining that Pakistani-sponsored militancy in Kashmir gives India “an excuse to cover its human rights violations,” he declared, “Anyone who thinks that he will cross the border to join the Kashmiris (fighting for their right) is a big enemy of them and Pakistan.”⁸¹

In 2019, Pakistan even arrested LeT co-founder Hafiz Saeed — whose group, focused on waging jihad in Kashmir, once enjoyed Pakistani support — and subsequently sentenced him to five years in prison for financing terrorism.

Khan is plotting a similar course in Afghanistan. “Whatever the situation might have been in the past, right now, I can tell you... there is one thing we want: peace in Afghanistan,” says Khan.⁸² “Apart from Afghanistan, the country that wants peace in Afghanistan more than any other country is Pakistan because we get directly affected by it.” Noting that “Pakistan needs stability,” he explained, “We have had 15 years of fighting this war on terror. Over 70,000 Pakistani casualties. Over \$150 billion lost to the economy. So we desperately want peace.”⁸³

“Pakistan appears to be genuinely invested in helping see through a successful peace process in Afghanistan,” says Michael Kugelman, a deputy director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “One leg of [India’s] foreign policy — hostility to Pakistan — has become shakier,” says ORF fellow Manoj Joshi. However, Joshi warns, “If there is another incident which is traceable to Pakistan-based groups, it will undermine Imran Khan’s credibility.”⁸⁴

The risk of “another incident” rises precipitously as Khan’s credibility with the US has been soaring.

“We hope that in the coming days we will be able to urge the Taliban to speak to the Afghan government and come to a settlement — a political solution,” said Khan while speaking alongside US President Donald Trump during a July 2019 state visit.⁸⁵ “Washington’s aim was to pull out all the stops and showcase its appreciation to Pakistan for the help that Islamabad has provided in Afghanistan over the last year,” explained Michael Kugelman. “Washington hopes that the goodwill generated during Khan’s visit will prompt Pakistan to do even more on the Afghanistan front.”⁸⁶

Since 2018, Pakistan has facilitated US-Taliban dialogue. After the 2020 peace accord, Khan announced, “My prayers [are] for peace for the Afghan people who have suffered for decades of bloodshed. Pakistan is committed to playing its role in ensuring the agreement holds and succeeds in bringing peace to Afghanistan.”⁸⁷ The deal, wrote Pakistani journalist Umair Jamal,

“offers Pakistan everything that the country could have hoped from its Afghan policy.”⁸⁸ Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, however, warned that there are “spoilers” both “in Afghanistan and outside” who are interested in derailing the peace process.⁸⁹

While Indian commentators described the peace accord as a “victory” for Pakistan, one of the biggest losers was ISKP. “The US-Taliban deal includes a proviso for coordinated counter-terror operations against the Khorasan governorate of the ISIL (ISIS) group, ISIL-K, established in eastern Afghanistan in early 2015 by dissident commanders of the Taliban and Pakistan Taliban... fleeing a decisive military operation in North Waziristan,” says Pakistani journalist Tom Hussain. “Since then, they have waged a cross-border hit-and-run campaign against Pakistan’s security forces parallel to a campaign of deadly bombings in Jalalabad and Kabul.”⁹⁰

From that perspective, the ISKP’s massacre of Sikhs was a godsend for Modi’s regime in New Delhi. In 2019, Khan said, “Why would we ever want to disrupt peace? But it’s because there is no other narrative left for India.”⁹¹ Thus, the March 2020 massacre reinforced the failing Indian narrative after the successful Pakistan-backed February 2020 peace accord. It reawakened demands that, as Indian professor of international studies Nalin Mohapatra argues, Pakistan should be “isolated by the international community for patronizing terrorist forces.”⁹²

“The strike was ordered by Quetta Shura of Taliban at the behest of [the] Pakistani deep state with the larger motive of driving out India from Afghanistan,” wrote *Hindustan Times* Executive Editor Shishir Gupta just one day after the Kabul massacre. “The entire operation was code-named Blackstar by the Pakistan intelligence, which used the Haqqani network led by [the] Taliban’s deputy commander Sirajuddin Haqqani and elements of LeT.... The play is much deeper with Pakistan setting [its] sights on forcing India out of Afghanistan post withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan.”⁹³ Gupta, who claimed India was “the real target” of the massacre, later insisted that ISKP Chief Aslam Farooqi has “direct links to the ISI” and the group’s “assertion that the strike was revenge for Muslims in Kashmir was a dead giveaway for Pakistani deep state.”⁹⁴

Gupta’s assertion — which has not apparently been echoed by Afghanistan — conflicts with legitimate research on ISKP’s origins and activities.

Pakistan requested Farooqi’s extradition, accusing him of “anti-Pakistan activities in Afghanistan.”⁹⁵ According to US-based Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), a think tank, ISKP is responsible for “roughly 250 clashes with the US, Afghan, and Pakistani security forces since January 2017.”⁹⁶ The group has no record of attacks against Indian targets. Rather, to date, the only major connection it has with India consists of its membership. “The ISKP has had a direct impact on India, so to speak, as pro-Islamic State Muslims from Kerala and others such as former Indian Mujahideen leader Shafi Armar also found space in the ISKP ranks,” report Harsh Pant and ORF associate fellow Kabir Taneja.⁹⁷

ISKP’s earliest membership was composed of militants “who had fled Pakistan to escape pressure from security forces.” CSIS reports that ISKP “continues to plot and carry out high-level attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” including “attacks targeting electoral and sectarian institutions” in Pakistan.⁹⁸ ISKP also frequently targets the Taliban in retaliation for that group’s association with Pakistan. “ISKP condemned the Afghan government for its persecution of Pakistani militants, its cooperation with the Pakistan Army and ISI, and its support of local, Taliban-backed uprisings against ISKP,” reports Stanford University. “Despite [ISKP]’s declared

hostility against the Afghan government, most of its resources were directed at combatting the Taliban.” The group has claimed it is “focused on opposing the Taliban and its link to the ISI.”⁹⁹ Thus all evidence suggests ISKP is at odds with Pakistan.

Meanwhile, while India’s regime is ideologically focused on eradication or assimilation of non-Hindus, Pakistan is trying to improve its treatment of non-Muslims. The country certainly does have a troubled relationship with human rights. Its laws often infringe on the rights to freedom of religion and expression. In particular, its blasphemy law impacts all non-Muslims. Meanwhile, the government routinely engages in many of the same atrocities seen in India: indefinite detention, torture, enforced disappearances, staged encounters, extrajudicial execution, and more.

Since 2019, however, Pakistan has made notable steps towards protecting its religious minority populations. Khan has promised to make social justice a focus of his administration. Speaking to the UN General Assembly, Khan called it “a sacred duty to protect the places of worship of all religions,” adding, “When a Muslim society is unjust to its minorities, it is going against the religion of Islam and our Prophet.”¹⁰⁰ His administration has pledged to restore 400 historical temples and hand them over to the Pakistani Hindu community.

Khan also opened the Kartarpur Corridor, allowing Indian Sikh pilgrims visa-free access to Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, the site in present-day Pakistan where Guru Nanak settled, became a farmer, and established a commune. The opening won global applause. “Anything that increases people-to-people ties between India and Pakistan is something that we’re incredibly supportive of,” said a US State Department spokesperson.¹⁰¹ In February 2020, UN Secretary General António Guterres visited. Calling it a “corridor of hope” and a “welcome symbol of interfaith harmony,” he said, “This is the best symbol that we can give for a world in peace and for a world in which there is mutual respect and there is the acceptance of what is different.”¹⁰²

With such bold initiatives for interfaith harmony earning Pakistan praise and trust, why would the country want to risk destroying its credibility globally by sponsoring an attack like the Kabul massacre — especially considering the stated motive completely contradicts the ground realities? Pakistan stands to gain nothing but lose everything by sanctioning such violence. Other elements, however, have much to gain and little to lose. The massacre, for instance, benefits the Hindutva agenda for India and the broader South Asian region. Even while Khan denounces cross-border militants as the enemies of both Pakistan and Kashmir, the Modi regime is facing unprecedented pressure for its human rights violations in both Kashmir and mainland India.

As Hindutva forces outside of India work to normalize their agenda in the eyes of Western powers and Hindutva forces within India are working furiously to revive the goal of Akhand Bharat, Modi’s regime is actively attempting to exert hegemonic sway throughout South Asia. From Bangladesh to Sri Lanka and Myanmar to the Maldives, Indian influence dominates. The regime has particularly encouraged and emboldened administrations in neighboring countries which are backed by Buddhist nationalists who engage in anti-minority violence.

The Hindu supremacist movement in India was engineered on the blood of the innocent. Following a policy of “the ends justifies the means,” it welcomes any tactic that helps it to win and keep power. Modi, for instance, became a political star only after he orchestrated the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. The movement has also not shied away from employing terrorist tactics. This has even manifested — as in the case of the 2007 Samjhauta Express

bombing as well as a string of other bombings — in false flag attacks conducted by Sangh elements and yet blamed on Muslims.

South Asia's ascendant Buddhist nationalist movements appear to take their signals from India's Hindu nationalists. Myanmar — with backing of the supremacist 969 Movement — has been committing genocide against the Rohingya Muslims since 2017. In Sri Lanka, the supremacist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) — an official partner of the 969 Movement — has been instigating violence against Christians and Muslims for years.

The theory that powerful vested interests in South Asia may be using renegade forces to achieve their own political goals was most recently illustrated in Sri Lanka.

BBS backs the ruthless Rajapaksa family, who returned to power months after a follower of ISIS with ties to the Rajapaksas perpetrated the gruesome Easter bombings in 2019. As in the case of the Kabul gurdwara massacre, the official account of the Sri Lanka bombings makes little sense in context of ground realities and geo-political circumstances. After the dust settled, however, enough damning information emerged about the bombings — which occurred a year before the Kabul massacre — to suggest that they may have either been staged or at least permitted to happen by vested interests who stood to gain political advantage from the violence.

“Enabled to Happen”: Sri Lanka’s Easter Bombings

On 21 April 2019, in the morning of Easter Sunday, suicide bombers conducted coordinated attacks on churches and hotels in three Sri Lankan cities. The bombings, which killed 269 Christians and tourists, shocked the world. Revelations about the attackers, however, provoke even greater shock as they inspire deep skepticism of the official narrative and raise many questions about who was actually behind the attack.

The Easter bombings mastermind Zahran Hashim (who was allegedly one of the suicide bombers) had ties to ISKP, was possibly trained in Southern India, and was on the radar of India’s NIA for at least six months immediately preceding the attack. India had detailed advance knowledge of the attack and shared the intelligence with Sri Lankan authorities, but their repeated warnings went unheeded. Most shocking of all, Zahran was almost certainly on the payroll of military intelligence when it was led by Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the current president.

In 2005, as a teenager in eastern Sri Lanka, Zahran was banned from his mosque for preaching “radical Islam.” A few years later, he was ejected from another mosque.¹⁰³ In 2011, he founded National Thowheed Jama’ath (NTJ) and began issuing calls against fellow Muslims and Christians. He apparently freely traveled around the country to recruit members. In 2017, he hosted large, public gatherings where he pledged allegiance to ISIS and called for death to all non-Muslims. Meanwhile, the broader Muslim community not only continued to disavow Zahran but repeatedly reported him to the authorities, who took no action.

“It is astonishing just how early Zahran’s pro-Islamic State talks began, how swift and punishing the community response was, and how little law enforcement agencies had paid attention to what the community was telling them,” writes Dr. Amarnath Amarsingam of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.¹⁰⁴

After a violent clash with Sufi Muslims in 2017, Zahran vanished. Sri Lankan military sources later claimed that “Zahran and a few of the Easter Sunday plotters traveled to Kochi (Kerala) and Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu) in southern India” — and had even gone on to visit Kashmir.¹⁰⁵ Amarsingam notes that 16 Muslim youth from Kerala who had left to join ISIS were “not only heading to Iraq and Syria, but were also being encouraged to join the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province.” In 2018, when the NIA raided an ISIS cell in Tamil Nadu, they found “copies of Zahran’s speeches” as well as phone records showing that “Zahran had been in contact with Islamic State fighters in Bangladesh and Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁶

By December 2018, Indian intelligence was fully aware of Zahran. On 4 April 2019, over two weeks before the Easter bombing, they issued the first of three warnings to the Sri Lankan government. “They knew the group, they knew the targets, they knew the time, they knew the whereabouts of the suicide bombers, and all of this was communicated to the Sri Lankan

government,” reports Ajai Sahni of the New Delhi Institute for Conflict Management.¹⁰⁷ No action was taken by the Sri Lankan authorities — nor did the Indian authorities demand action — and the terrorists were left alone to kill without obstacle.

“Information was there, but the top brass security officials did not take appropriate actions,” said Leader of the House Lakshman Kiriella in late April 2019. Speculating on the failure to act, he added, “Somebody is controlling these top intelligence officials. The security council is doing politics. We need to investigate into this.”¹⁰⁸

Allegations soon surfaced that Zahran was previously nurtured by a Rajapaksa-led government.

In early May 2019, Cabinet Minister Rajitha Senarathne claimed that “both Buddhist and Islamist extremist groups had been bankrolled by Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government in an operation controlled by Gotabaya Rajapaksa.”¹⁰⁹ In June 2019, House Leader Kiriella claimed that the former Rajapaksa administration had “paid salaries” to Zahran and others. Rather than denying the charge, Mahinda Rajapaksa — who is now prime minister — protested that it was “wrong to disclose” such matters.¹¹⁰ Around the same time, a Muslim provincial governor told a parliamentary committee that the government had “worked closely with” and “funded” the NTJ.¹¹¹

The most startling admission came in September 2019. In an interview with state-run Hiru TV, Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s spokesperson admitted his boss had previously financed Zahran for “intelligence gathering.” Zahran “stood safe,” he said, “because of our intelligence units.”

“You have created this terrorist in the first place,” said the outraged interviewer. “Zahran Hashim was harbored, financed by their government. You paid them because you needed intelligence information. Okay, very well. But mind you, you gave birth to Zahran... You cannot escape from the crime of creating Zahran in the first place. That was where it all started. It was you who created Muslim extremism to cause communal struggles in this country.”¹¹²

“The Easter Tragedy, although not necessarily a conspiracy, was enabled to happen,” argues Sri Lankan human rights activist Rajan Hoole.

Whether it was planned at worst or enabled at best, there is no question that the attack could have been prevented but was not. Why? There were vested interests involved who clearly stood to benefit immensely — particularly by embracing a “divide and conquer” strategy that pitted one minority group against another. Whether or not Zahran acted as an agent under orders from the Rajapaksas or as a radicalized free agent is irrelevant. “It doesn’t follow that Zahran and his associates had no agency or were not inspired by ISIS; rather, that the goals of the Islamists dovetailed neatly with those of the Rajapaksas,” explains author Rohini Hensman.¹¹³

The attack not only dovetailed with the goals of the Rajapaksas but also with the goals of the BBS as well as, outside Sri Lanka, the Modi regime.

Within two weeks of the Easter bombings, Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced his candidacy for president. His campaign centered around “national security,” which he claimed was suffering due to a misguided emphasis on “ethnic reconciliation,” “human rights issues,” and “individual freedom.” Upon winning, he pledged that “his immediate focus would be to tackle the threat from radical Islam and to rebuild the security set-up.”¹¹⁴

“Almost all the nationalist extremists have banded together behind Gotabaya Rajapaksa and, should he win, we fear they will come out in full force with their racist, anti-Muslim agenda and

attacks,” warned Hilmy Ahmed of the Sri Lanka Muslim Council. Explaining that the campaign left “the whole Muslim community of Sri Lanka very scared,” he added, “There might be nothing to stop a Myanmar-style genocide.”¹¹⁵

Gotabaya, who went on to win the presidency — appointing his brother, Mahinda, as prime minister — was backed by BBS. His association with the Buddhist nationalist group traces back for years. After he keynoted one of the group’s events in 2013, Sri Lankan journalist Tisarane Gunasekara wrote, “The BBS may or may not be a Rajapaksa-creation. But it is hard to believe that it could have become the behemoth it is, in just 10 months, without Rajapaksa patronage.”¹¹⁶

In 2018, BBS Chief Gnanasara Thero was sentenced to six years in prison after facing various charges, including intimidation. On 21 May 2019, while the country was still reeling from the Easter bombings, then President Maithripala Sirisena — without explanation — pardoned Thero. “The pardon comes just a week after anti-Muslim violence erupted in many parts of the country, resulting in serious damage to Muslim-owned homes, mosques and commercial establishments,” reported Sri Lankan journalist Mohammed Rasooldeen.¹¹⁷ Over the next months, Thero called for a boycott of Muslim businesses, saying, “Ordinary people now suspect all Muslims.”¹¹⁸

“Radical decisions of Narendra Modi are welcomed in India,” said Thero in July 2019. “He is against Islamic extremism and he also talks about building a Buddhist international platform. I think about the unity between the Hindus and the Buddhists to eradicate this global threat of terrorism.... The understanding of the leaders is important and the protection of Narendra Modi. We need his protection.”¹¹⁹

The BBS chief was pardoned and allowed to fan the flames of Islamophobia in the immediate wake of the Easter bombings. The BBS’s favored political candidate used the bombings as an excuse to target “radical Islam” despite his own past support for the perpetrator of the attack. The BBS says it is “inspired by what the RSS and BJP do in India,” hopes to develop “a party modeled on these Indian ventures to protect Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka,” and wishes for “a leader like Narendra Modi.”¹²⁰

Thus, it is no surprise that yet another beneficiary of the Easter bombings was Modi and his Hindutva agenda.

A centerpiece of Modi’s reelection campaign in 2019 was, as Indian journalist Hartosh Singh Bal noted, a “theme of a terrorism-Pakistan-Muslim threat.”¹²¹ Modi had already used the Pulwama attack in Kashmir to appeal for votes. It didn’t take long for him to also campaign on the Easter bombings. “In our neighboring Sri Lanka, terrorists have played a bloody game,” he said at campaign rallies days after — including on the *same day* as — the attack. “They killed innocent people.” He asked, “Should terrorism be finished or not? Who can do this? Can you think of any name aside from Modi? Can anybody else do this?”¹²²

“We needed a Modi after the Easter attacks,” one of Gotabaya’s supporters told *The New York Times*. “Gota is our Modi. He doesn’t think too much. He acts.”¹²³

One of Gotabaya’s first actions after winning office in November 2019 was a state visit to India.

“During my tenure as president, I want to bring the relationship between India and Sri Lanka to a very high level,” he announced in New Delhi.¹²⁴ Talks with Modi focused on economic cooperation as well as, in Modi’s words, “how to strengthen our mutual cooperation in dealing

with terrorism.”¹²⁵ Gotabaya walked away with a \$450 million line of credit — including \$50 million for counter-terrorism efforts. It was, reported Viraj Solanki of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the “first time that India has extended a credit line to another country for the express purpose of countering terrorism.”¹²⁶ Meanwhile, Modi’s Hindu nationalist regime walked away with increased influence over the Buddhist nationalist leaning Sri Lankan regime.

The Easter bombings produced no downside — on the contrary, they produced significant upside — for Gotabaya as well as Modi. The targets were primarily Christians and the perpetrators were Muslims. Both Rajapaksa’s BBS and Modi’s RSS desire to eradicate these groups and establish supremacist religious nationalist governments.

“The origin of the Easter bombing was the perception that a free Muslim vote would impede the return to power of the Rajapaksas,” writes Hoole. “Its purpose, as the unfolding drama suggested, was to use the anger of Christian communities affected to leverage a wider retaliation against Muslims.”¹²⁷ Intentionally or otherwise, the attack drove a wedge between two religious minority communities, justified repressive state policies as necessary for protection, and assisted the ascent of a government sympathetic to South Asia’s violent religious nationalist movements as well as to the hegemonic Modi regime.

The Kabul massacre appears to be having a similar impact. Was it also “enabled to happen”?

– Conclusion – Suspicion of the Powerful

On 19 November 1987, customs officials at the New Delhi airport discovered over 20 crates of munitions on a plane from Kabul. “Police and customs men were beginning to argue over credit for the haul, when a man in plain clothes arrived and identified himself as an officer of the Research and Analysis Wing,” wrote Canadian journalist Bryan Johnston. “He claimed the crates were government property, and reportedly whisked them away before they could be opened.”¹²⁸

The story was first broken by Indian investigative journalist Dhiren Bhagat. “It is reasonable to suppose that the arms — in a consignment out of Kabul — are of Russian manufacture,” wrote Bhagat. “But the Indian Army does not need to import rocket launchers by such clandestine means.”¹²⁹ According to Indian journalist Praveen Donthi, “Bhagat speculated that the smuggled arms had been destined for Punjab, where the Khalistan insurgency was at its peak. In March 1988, there had been several rocket attacks on police and paramilitary units in the state — though nobody was hit — and such weaponry hadn’t been used anywhere else in the country following the November shipment. Although Bhagat didn’t say as much, it seemed plausible that government forces had staged the assaults as a pretext for stepping up military intervention in Punjab (and discrediting Pakistan).”¹³⁰

Discrediting Pakistan was the intention of the Samjhauta Express bombing. The “friendship train” running between India and Pakistan was bombed the day before the Pakistani Foreign Minister was scheduled to arrive in New Delhi for peace talks. LeT was immediately blamed for the attack — and then it emerged that an Indian military intelligence officer in league with RSS elements had staged the violence as a false flag.¹³¹

A false flag meant to discredit Pakistan at a crucial time — in this case, when President Clinton was visiting to urge a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir conflict — is exactly what many speculate the intention was behind the mystery-clouded Chittisinghpura massacre.

What about the massacre at Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib on 25 March 2020 — which works to discredit Kashmiris, create an uncertainty about US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, and possibly open the door for Indian boots on the ground in Kabul?

Considering the evidence discounting the official narrative in so many other attacks on minority groups in South Asia, there is much reason to believe that some regional powers allow such violence to occur so they can use it for political purposes, especially considering everything Modi’s regime gains by the attack: derailing the growing Sikh-Muslim understanding, discrediting Pakistan, an excuse to demand increased influence over Kabul, and, ultimately, movement towards the “fourth pillar” goal of conquering and converting Afghanistan.

As Hoole noted about the Sri Lanka attack, it’s possible that the government “enabled” it to happen because “the goals of the Islamists dovetailed neatly with those of the Rajapaksas.” In other words, they may not have directly orchestrated or staged the violence but rather allowed it

to happen with the blessings of a hidden hand. Such may be the same with the Kabul massacre.

Indian intelligence agencies — especially considering their influence over Afghan intelligence — should be intensely interrogated about whether they had any prior knowledge of the pending attack. The possibility of interactions between the attackers and Indian agencies should also be examined. After all, the assertion that the strike was revenge for Muslims in Kashmir was a dead giveaway that not all is as it seems — and provides cause for suspicion that any possible involvement by Indian intelligence agencies may surpass mere prior knowledge. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the weapons smuggled into New Delhi from Kabul in 1987, India has often been granted much leeway to operate within Afghanistan. To what extent does India currently have a free hand to do as it wishes on Afghan soil?

The nature of ISIS — which did not originate as an entirely independent entity — also requires consideration. “ISIS is blowback from the US invasion and occupation of Iraq,” writes British journalist Mehdi Hasan.¹³² The group only arose as consequence of fallout from America’s policy of foreign interference and regime change. The destabilization of the region after the US toppled Saddam Hussein and backed the insurgency against Bashar al-Assad created a power vacuum that allowed the group to spring up unchallenged. The majority of its armory — including Humvees, machine guns, and rocket launchers — was poached from supplies the US originally sent to the Iraqi Army as well as Syrian insurgents.

By the end of 2017, ISIS had reportedly lost 98 percent of the territory it had acquired since early 2014.¹³³ The group was besieged and crippled. In 2019, when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed, it was considered a turning point in the international war against his group. With the figurehead gone, it is worth questioning to what extent ISIS — especially its far-flung branches such as ISKP — remains a consolidated group with a top-down operational approach. To what extent are these branches operating under orders from a central hub versus making independent decisions as decentralized units? Indeed, to what extent are these branches even “units” of a mother organization versus opportunists embracing a specific brand identity?

From that perspective, attacks such as in Kabul or Sri Lanka could be viewed as actions by rogue groups. Without any broader organizational oversight, their ideological dedication comes into question. How many of these young, impressionable, radicalized men can be nudged in a specific direction by self-interested parties? To what extent will their activities be in pursuit of the original goal of establishing an Islamic State — a revived Caliphate — versus directly or indirectly fulfilling the agenda of regional powers? Have they been infiltrated, as in the case of Zahran Hashim, by elements who have an incentive to harness their violence for alternative political purposes?

“In some ways, India would be the most obvious target for an Islamic State-backed attack,” write Harsh Pant and Kabir Taneja. “But so far, despite being the victim of terrorist attacks by other groups, the country has not been targeted in a major way by Islamic State affiliates.”¹³⁴ Indeed, the only victims targeted around the region — thus far — are members of groups the ruling regime in New Delhi desires to eradicate or assimilate.

While Hindutva terror groups operate with impunity within India as they terrorize minorities at an unprecedented level, ISIS’s South Asian recruits masquerade as knights of Islam. We are asked to believe that ISKP harbors the ambition of establishing a Caliphate even while the group targets everyone *except* its biggest competitors: those intent on establishing a Hindu Rashtra.

Modi built his power by massacring Muslims and his regime remains one of the most Islamophobic in the world today. Yet ISKP remains focused on killing non-Hindu religious minorities outside India. Whether unintentionally or otherwise, they have de facto become obedient stooges of Hindutva.

India's single-minded focus in Afghanistan is to "thwart" Pakistan. The billions in aid funneled to Kabul by New Delhi was given for the singular purpose of limiting Islamabad's influence. As Afghanistan has become a "new battleground" and "second front" for the proxy war between India and Pakistan, the rules of engagement are anybody's guess. India's slipping influence in Afghanistan, as Pant noted, means "that the only recourse it has is of asking other actors to keep its interests in mind." As Ambassador Lalit Mansingh said, "India will need to rethink its strategy." Meanwhile, India has over a 30-year history of employing renegades to do its dirty work — and the Delhi Pogrom, in which police partnered with the Sangh to murder Muslims, illustrates the degree to which Indian security forces are unconstrained by an ethical code.

Furthermore, for nearly 100 years, the Hindutva movement has worked towards restoring the mythical Akhand Bharat — which necessitates conquest and "reconversion" of Afghanistan.

India has a forty-year history of supporting foreign occupations of Afghanistan. While Indian policy influencers agitate for boots on the ground, India has long been delighted to stand back and support other nations who spill the blood of their soldiers on Afghan soil. India's support for these proxies weakens Afghanistan to the point where the country is hardly even a player in its own future. That serves the interests of Hindutva, which desires a chaotic state of affairs across the whole region. Destabilized neighbors are, after all, much easier to control.

Thus, as a Hindutva regime continues to dominate New Delhi, every claim they — and their mouthpieces in the media and various think-tanks — make must be scrutinized intensely. In the case of ISKP, we are told that many young Muslims have traveled from Kerala to Afghanistan. Yet we are also told many of these youths are already on the radar of Indian intelligence. Meanwhile, the use of torture as well as the "turning" of captured militants into assets is well-documented. If young, impressionable, radicalized men can be nudged in a particular direction, then what can men who have been tortured in custody — and whose families may be at risk — be incentivized to do on behalf of a third party?

India wants to beat out Pakistan in Afghanistan. The Sangh wants to drive a wedge between Sikhs and Muslims. It is also devoted to the goal of establishing Akhand Bharat. Pakistan appears to be sincerely seeking peace in Afghanistan as well as a total reversal of its past policy of supporting cross-border terrorism. Meanwhile, the pro-Modi and de facto religious nationalist regime in Sri Lanka is an admitted sponsor of Islamic State terrorists.

Sikhs — like Christians, Muslims, and many other minorities throughout the whole region — are caught in the crossfire between state powers as they jostle for influence. That jostling often results in smoldering, treacherous, proxy warfare. With Har Dayal's "four pillars" guiding the policies of South Asia's dominating superpower, the future facing regional minorities is to be abused as political fodder and consumed as collateral damage.

The RSS, the world's largest terrorist organization, controls India through the BJP. Sangh mobs collaborating with the police are murdering Muslims in the streets of India's capital — just as they did in 1984 to Sikhs — while RSS cells have sprouted up around the world. In such

times, all South Asian minorities — especially the expatriated diaspora — should insist upon a thorough introspection on the murkiness of the region, its geo-complexities, and the way in which significant events play into the hand of entrenched powers with vested interests.

The most pressing question is this: after the attack on Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib in Kabul, will Sikh institutions be targeted again?

It has already happened. On 25 May 2019, Guru Arjan Dev Gurdwara in Derby, England was vandalized when a man smashed glass doors during scheduled prayers. The culprit conveniently left behind a handwritten note stating his motive: “Try to help Kashmir people otherwise problem everyone try to understand.” That Sikhs have, indeed, extensively tried to help Kashmiri people failed to prevent the attack in Derby just as it did in Kabul. Later that same day, the vandal — a Pakistani — was arrested. What — or who — motivated him has yet to be revealed.

Pakistan has earned huge credibility with the global Sikh community since opening the Kartarpur Corridor. As New Delhi is under the grip of the Sangh, which has shown its openness to subterfuge, the regime remains obsessed with discrediting its neighbor as well as fostering enmity between Sikhs and Muslims. “Soft targets” like gurdwaras in Derby and Kabul are vulnerable to any unscrupulous regional elements. Sites which appear most at risk include Gurdwara Kartapur Sahib which, after the opening of the corridor, serves as an olive branch of peace between the warring nations of India and Pakistan.

After all, the region’s predominating Hindu nationalist movement does not want friendship with Pakistan, but rather the same thing it wants of Afghanistan: conquest and conversion.

Historically, Sikhs are just as much at risk in India as they are in Afghanistan. As a religion founded in the Punjab, they will of course always be linked to that land. Yet the Punjab is now split by the India-Pakistan border. Sikhs, however, are not the property of any single country and the community grows stronger as it spreads transnationally. The diaspora offers hope. Punjabi Sikhs have a thriving diaspora that has flourished without the authoritarian constraints of the South Asian governments. By putting down roots in free countries in the West, they have refused to be used as political pawns.

Of course, not all of South Asia’s persecuted minorities have the opportunity to emigrate. Nor, in a peaceful world, should circumstances warrant it. After all, the most tragic reason for a South Asian to migrate to the West is because they are forced to flee oppression.

The duty falls on those who have found lives of success and even luxury abroad to reach out and lift up those lowest of the low in South Asia. To plead their cause — and to extend egalitarian support to all South Asian communities struggling for liberty. The world has mostly stood by as a silent spectator while the largest democracy falls to fascist forces. Sikhs abroad must use their resources to bring accountability to India by organizing in the free world. They cannot look to outside forces to save them but must take personal responsibility to protect their own safety and interests — as well as those of the lowest of the low who are trodden down.

Raising a voice for the marginalized requires insight into their ground realities, however, as well as into the nature of the modern world. As oppression continues, the Information Age and the transformative power of social media have pushed us to a point where independent, critical, skeptical thinking is one of the most crucial tools of survival. The spirit of propaganda is stronger than ever. Official narratives, ideologies, and authorities must all pass interrogation to be deemed trustworthy and true. Suspicion of the powerful is a virtue of the age.

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Bhajan Singh, hailing from Southeast Asia, is a humanitarian and businessman living in California, USA. He has initiated historical preservation efforts within the Sikh-American community and actively works with the Indian diaspora to create awareness about how to uplift the downtrodden in India. A contributor to several reports about human rights in South Asia, he is also the co-author of Captivating the Simple-Hearted: A Struggle for Human Dignity in the Indian Subcontinent (2017).

The March 2020 massacre of Sikh worshippers at a gurdwara in Kabul, Afghanistan sent shockwaves through the global Sikh community. When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed credit, they said their motive was revenge for Hindu nationalist actions in the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's regime swiftly blamed the Kabul massacre on Pakistan. Yet is the official narrative to be trusted? As Hindu nationalism dominates New Delhi, all of India's minorities – including Sikhs – are caught in the cross-hairs of the violent religious nationalist movement. The movement seeks to swallow up all the nations of South Asia and spit out a Hindu supremacist super-state called “Akhand Bharat” (Undivided India). Guided by this desire, the movement has long viewed Afghanistan as a “second front” for its regional proxy wars.

Powerful nations have often manufactured reasons for wars that lead to catastrophic unintended consequences and decades of destructive blowback. The world is left to deal with mass displacement, flows of refugees, and untold human tragedy. The circumstances behind the Kabul massacre offer the global community a chance to witness the potential launch of a similar script as laboratories of terror are replicated and set loose by rogue actors.