

Unveiling the Triggers: Analyzing factors behind the Targeted Killings of the Hazara Community in Balochistan, Pakistan

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*Kishwar Munir¹ & Muhammad Ajmal²

Abstract

This article investigates the multifaceted factors contributing to the systematic and targeted killings of the Hazara community in Balochistan, Pakistan, a persistently vulnerable minority group in the country. The Hazara community has faced a relentless wave of violence and persecution for decades, often resulting in **tragic** loss of life. Through a comprehensive examination of historical, political, and social dynamics, this study seeks to shed light on the root causes and drivers of this ongoing crisis. A qualitative research method has been employed, with primary data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted via Zoom. Respondents included scholars, entrepreneurs, academics, activists from the Hazara community, as well as individuals from other communities residing in Balochistan. The analysis encompasses a range of critical aspects, including the social and historical context of the Hazara community in Balochistan, the influence of regional geopolitics, sectarian divisions, and the role of extremist elements. Furthermore, it explores the dynamics of state response, or the lack thereof, and its impact on the security and well-being of the Hazara community. The article also examines the broader implications of these targeted killings on human rights, social cohesion, and political stability in the region. By delving into these contributing factors, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the Hazara community in Balochistan and offers insights into potential strategies for mitigating violence and promoting greater tolerance and inclusivity in the region.

Keywords

Targeted Killings, Hazara Community, Balochistan, Islamization, Iranian Revolution

¹ *Corresponding Author: *Kishwar Munir* is an Associate Professor, and the Head of the Department, School of Integrated Social Sciences (SISS) University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan
E-mail: kishwarmunir786@gmail.com

² Muhammad Ajmal is a Senior Lecturer at School of Integrated Social Sciences (SISS) University of Lahore, Lahore Pakistan

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Introduction

Pakistan is a multicultural and multilingual society, with Islam being the predominant religion, followed by approximately 96% of the population (Mehfooz, 2021). Within Islam, there are various sects, with the majority of the population belonging to either the Sunni or Shia sects. The Hazara community in Pakistan predominantly adheres to the Shia sect. The inimitable facial features of the Hazaras and their attachment to the Shia community make them identifiable and vulnerable to attack (National Commission for Human Right Pakistan, 2018). The Hazaras comprise a smaller ethnic group within the Shia community, along with other ethnic groups who also adhere to Shia Islam (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023). Two key factors make them a prime target for sectarian extremist groups: their distinct physical features and the enclosed communities, or ghettos, they have established in various parts of the country (Jafree, Nadir, Mahmood, & Burhan, 2023).

The most widely accepted theory regarding the origins of the Hazara people is that they are of mixed racial heritage with Mongolian ancestry. Certain Mongol tribes migrated to eastern Persia, present-day Afghanistan, where they integrated with the local population. Over time, this group formed a distinct community that came to be known as the Hazara (Yusuf, 2011). Although Hazaras are one of the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan, they have long faced political and educational marginalization. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, followed by prolonged conflict and civil war, significantly altered the lives of the Hazara population (Ashrafian, 2023), eventually forcing many to migrate to neighboring countries.

Today, more than 900,000 Hazaras reside in Pakistan, with approximately 500,000 living in Quetta, Balochistan. The majority of them belong to the Shia sect. In rural areas, Hazaras typically speak Hazaragi, an eastern dialect of Persian (Farsi), while many urban Hazara also speak other languages, including standard Persian, Urdu, and English (European Asylum Support Office, 2015).

Balochistan, a mineral-laden region has been a target of social and physical abuse and is known for military operations against the estranged elements. But now something more powerful and more damaging to the government has emerged; the Hazara genocide and the conspiracy theories that surround it. The Hazaras have been targeted by militants at their workplace, markets, mosques, while traveling to Iran, participating in religious processions of Shias, and while commuting for daily work (Ijaz, 2018). Sometimes they were attacked by suicide bombers, and gunmen opened fire at them which forced them to confine into ghettoization in Quetta's neighborhood. The restricted movement due to the fear of killings has caused economic hardships for the community. These overbearing circumstances which have truncated access to education, and economic incentives have forced them to flee from Quetta to other parts of Pakistan and abroad.

Therefore, in this research paper, we sought to answer the following question(s):

1. What is the historical origin of the conflict in the Hazara community?
2. What are the underlying factors that contribute to the vulnerability and exacerbating violence of the Hazara community in Balochistan?

Ethnic Conflict and State Response

Violent ethnic conflicts and ongoing tensions in Balochistan stem from multiple factors, including political marginalization, economic deprivation, and an enduring identity crisis. These issues have persisted for years without a comprehensive or effective response to address them. The state policy is a security-centric approach that includes military operations, forced disappearances, and suppression of dissent, which has exacerbated grievances among Baloch nationalists. The lack of implementation of the NFC award and the 18th Constitutional Amendment has been considered a failure to address the core grievances of the Baloch people (Ejaz et al., 2023).

The role of geopolitical rivalries (India, Iran, and the US) and external interventions, exploiting the grievances of the people in an already volatile region, fuels the conflict further, complicating the conflict resolution in Balochistan. Despite the abundance of natural resources in Balochistan and their continuous extraction, the region remains underdeveloped due to insecurity and the mismanagement of these resources (Mushtaq & Khan, 2023).

Historical perspective, Dual Focus on Religious and Ethnic Conflict

The historic, political, socio-economic factors shaped the current political and security landscape of Balochistan. Siddiqi (2012) traces the history of Balochistan from the colonial era to the post-9/11 period to explain how external interventions, including those by the US, Iranian concerns, and Pakistani state policies, have escalated tensions in the region. The study is notable for its balanced approach to religious militancy e.g., Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jundullah and ethnic nationalism e.g., Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and other nationalist groups. It explains how these distinct, yet mutually reinforcing forces interact in ways that complicate Pakistan's security landscape. The historical challenges of Balochistan and its dual, intertwined dynamics of jihadist militancy and ethnic insurgency contribute to a broader societal security dilemma.

In their article, *Sectarian Violence in Balochistan and the Theory of Othering* Muhammad, Wan Ali, Furuoka, and Yusoff (2024) analyzed sectarian violence in Quetta, Balochistan, through the lens of the theory of Othering, a sociological concept that explains how dominant groups marginalize or dehumanize those perceived as different. The article focuses on the marginalization of the Shia Hazara community in Quetta and explores how they have been excluded and targeted by Sunni majority groups. It argues that the sectarian divide has been intensified by political, economic, and historical factors, which have led to the Hazara community's political marginalization, violence, discrimination, and socio-political exclusion.

The ethnic nationalist movements, separatist, and religiously motivated militant groups are actively involved in the destabilization of Balochistan. The lack of education, lack of infrastructure, and political marginalization of Baloch people are the factors contributing to the recruitment of militants by militant groups including BLA, Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), TTP, and Ansarul Rehmat-ul-Islam (ARE) (Azam, 2020).

Mental Health of Hazara Community

There is alarming level of PTSD, depression and anxiety among Hazara Shias and the community's daily struggle and fear of violence discrimination, economic hardship and

social isolation due to systemic violence, discrimination, and systemic neglect (Jafree, Hasnain Nadir, Mahmood, & Burhan, 2023).

Identity Politics against Baloch in Iran and Pakistan: Trapped between Religion and Ethnicity. It examines how the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and regional dynamics has led to targeted violence and discrimination against Hazara Shias in the province (Siddiqi, 2012). Pakistan and Iran contextualize the current grievances within colonial and post-colonial power dynamics.

The interplay between British and Persian expansionist policies is traced to uncover the root causes of Baloch fragmentation, offering a compelling analysis of the Baloch people's plight in both Iran and Pakistan. This analysis is framed within the broader dynamics of identity politics, structural violence, and state fragility. Khan and Laoutides (2024) apply Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, providing a strong analytical foundation for the study. They argue that institutionalized discrimination and systematic economic deprivation have fueled conflict and resistance to state policies among the Baloch population. Identity markers such as ethnicity and sectarian affiliation shape the nature of Baloch resistance differently in Pakistan and Iran. This unique status of the Baloch people contributes to a deeper understanding of state-minority conflicts in both countries.

Hussain, Ali, and David (2022) trace the roots of violence against the Hazara Shia community from the colonial era to contemporary times, examining various socio-political factors that have contributed to their marginalization and persecution. The study explores the role of identity politics in fueling sectarian conflict against the Hazara Shias in Balochistan.

Meanwhile, Shah (2019) investigates how sectarian violence against the Hazara Shia community is portrayed in Pakistani media. The study analyzes the framing techniques used by mainstream media outlets in reporting Hazara Shia killings and examines how such media representations influence public opinion and governmental responses.

Kamruzzaman, Williams, Wardak, Cowley, Ayobi, Zadrán, and Kabir (2022) examine the socioeconomic effects of sectarian violence on the Hazara Shia population in Quetta, Pakistan. The study focuses on the impact of continuous targeted attacks, including psychological trauma, economic marginalization, and displacement, as well as the long-term consequences for the community's livelihoods and overall well-being.

Methodology

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the Hazara community, including leaders, activists, scholars, entrepreneurs, academics, and other relevant stakeholders via Zoom. The interviews were scheduled based on participant preferences and feasibility, with detailed notes taken to capture important insights and nuances. Open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data on participants' perspectives, experiences, and views related to the targeted killings and the broader sociopolitical context.

All interview materials were transcribed and carefully reviewed. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, particularly concerning the persecution of the Hazara community, the anonymity of respondents has been strictly maintained. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and divergent viewpoints. To incorporate a broad spectrum of perspectives, secondary data from credible sources was also gathered and analyzed. These sources include reports, news articles, academic research papers, government documents, and publications by

human rights organizations. This secondary data serves to contextualize and reinforce the findings from the interviews.

Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants with firsthand knowledge of the Hazara community's experiences, ensuring diverse backgrounds and viewpoints to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Thematic Breakdown of Local Voices

The following themes have been extracted from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with respondents from the Hazara community residing in various parts of Balochistan. These themes highlight the underlying reasons behind the targeted killings of Hazaras in the region. The identified factors have been categorized and are elaborated in the table below:

Table 1. Thematic Analysis

<i>Theme I</i>	The Continuation of Ethnic Rancor: This theme highlights the persistent tensions between different ethnic groups.
<i>Theme II</i>	Communal Factor: This theme examines how communal relationships and societal dynamics within the community influence the groups. Social cohesion, local culture, and community engagement play significant roles in shaping attitudes and behaviours.
<i>Theme III</i>	Targeted Sectarian Violence: This theme addresses the ongoing issue of sectarian violence faced by the Hazara community, particularly targeted attacks carried out by extremist groups. This violence is driven by deep-rooted ethnic and sectarian tensions and has resulted in significant loss of life and community trauma.
<i>Theme IV</i>	Involvement of the Hazara Community in Intra-Community Killings This theme explores the troubling phenomenon of intra-community violence within the Hazara community
<i>Theme V</i>	Land Mafia: This theme examines the influence of land mafia activities on the Hazara community, where illegal land grabs and conflicts over property rights have exacerbated socio-economic challenges. The land mafia often targets vulnerable communities, exploiting their situation for profit and creating an environment of fear and instability.
<i>Theme VI</i>	Terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan: This theme addresses the issue of terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan into the Hazara regions, where extremist groups exploit the porous borders to launch attacks, recruit members, and instigate violence. This phenomenon poses a significant threat to the safety and stability of the Hazara community.
<i>Theme VII</i>	Geo-Strategic Significance of Balochistan and the Role of External Actors: This theme explores the geo-strategic importance of Balochistan, a region rich in natural resources and

vital for regional connectivity, and how external powers influence local dynamics. The interests of various countries in the area can exacerbate tension and conflict, impacting the Hazara community and other local groups

Theme VIII **The Role of Iran:** This theme examines the complex role of Iran in relation to the Hazara community, particularly considering historical, cultural, and political ties. Iran's influence can have both supportive and destabilizing effects on the Hazara population, shaped by its geopolitical interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Determinants of Ethnic Cleansing of Hazaras

The Continuation of Ethnic Rancor

The ethnic cleansing of the Hazara community is not a new phenomenon. They have been the target of ethnic cleansing, persecution, massacre, and target killings in Afghanistan (Amin & Muhammad, 2023). The massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif, the Robatak Pass, the Yakawlang, and the Afshar operation by the Taliban is the manifestation of the ethnic rancor against the community. The Afghan Taliban leaders have threatened them to leave the country or to convert to the Sunni school of thought. In the mid-19th century, their brutal history of persecution began when more than half their population was killed or forced into exile (Yusuf, 2011). The extremist outfits i.e. Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) and LeJ fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan and were involved in the ethnic cleansing of Hazaras. These outfits have strong links with Afghan-based terrorist factions who consider Hazaras infidels. The Afghan Hazaras fled to Balochistan which gave rise to the persecution of Hazaras in the province.

The fall of the Taliban and the installation of the new political government in Afghanistan in 2001 ended the existing threats and chauvinism that they were experiencing earlier (Amin & Muhammad, 2023). However, the attacks against Hazaras by the Taliban forces have been documented even during President Karzai's regime. The fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan and later their settlement in Quetta has made the situation more perilous for the Hazaras in Quetta (Khan, 2008). The Presence of LeJ, SSP, and the groups that had the support of the Taliban in Pakistan has increased the security risks for Hazaras living in Balochistan. Different factors are contributing to the killings of Hazaras in Balochistan, but the continuation of these fanatical sentiments is one of the factors.

Communal factors

The majority of migrated Hazaras settled in Quetta and its outskirts. Quetta is one of the most polarized and ethnically divided cities in Pakistan. The fact that major ethnic factions, Baloch, Pashtun, and Hazaras, are geographically concentrated and segregated has played a huge role in facilitating and reinforcing the ethnic divide (Kakar, 2019). Ethnic identity has deeply permeated the socio-political fabric of Quetta, to the extent that nearly all political parties are organized along ethnic lines, regardless of whether their agendas are explicitly ethnically motivated. The Hazara community holds some political representation in the Balochistan Provincial Assembly. The Hazara Democratic Party (HDP) currently has two seats in the assembly. In addition, the community has established the Tehreek-e-Suba Hazara (TSH), a party that advocates

for the creation of a separate province to safeguard Hazara interests and ensure political and social protection. Hazaras have distinct facial features that make them easily identifiable, distinguishing them not only from other ethnic groups but also from other Shia communities in Balochistan and across Pakistan. Because of this visibility, many Hazaras have been forced to conceal their ethnic identity, particularly when traveling outside their community enclaves. In recent years, due to rising societal discrimination and persistent security threats, many Hazaras have relocated to areas predominantly inhabited by members of their own community. As a result, for their own safety, they often avoid interactions with outsiders and take precautions to hide their identity in public spaces.

Targeted Sectarian Violence by Extremist Groups

Sectarian tensions in Quetta date back to colonial-era policies and were further intensified in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, due to the rise of religious militancy, the influence of the Taliban, and ongoing geopolitical proxy conflicts. The persecution of Hazaras in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime negatively impacted the inter-religious harmony that had existed in Pakistan prior to the 1980s. Historically, Sunni-Shia conflict was rare in Pakistan, and especially in Balochistan.

Many Hazaras migrated from Afghanistan and settled in Quetta, where they established distinct enclaves within the provincial capital. The first notable instance of sectarian violence occurred in 1999, when a member of the Hazara community was attacked. This incident laid the groundwork for future grievances and rising tensions between the two sects (Grare, 2007).

Instability in Afghanistan, coupled with the U.S.-led War on Terror, prompted religious extremists to flee into Pakistan through its porous border, thereby undermining the region's peace and social cohesion (Tellis, 2008).

Before the 1980s, sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shia was rare and usually transpired during the Muharram processions (Gonzalez, 2013). However, several major regional and domestic developments served as catalysts for the rise of sectarian politics and subsequent violence. These included the 1979 Iranian Revolution, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in Pakistan, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the same year. Together, these events significantly altered the religious and political landscape of the region, fuelling sectarian tensions across Pakistan. The Shia community harboured resentment toward Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies, which favoured the Deobandi Sunni school of thought and were closely aligned with Saudi interests. The growing influence of the Deobandi tradition contributed to the radicalization of both Sunni and Shia communities in Pakistan (Fatima, 2018). The Sunni community consider Hazaras as 'others' that serves to justify their dehumanization, exclusion, violence and to deny them their basic human rights which includes healthcare, right to education, and the right to freedom of movement (Muhammad et al., 2024).

Following the Iranian Revolution, the new Iranian government began supporting the Shia community in Pakistan, while the Sunni community received backing from Saudi Arabia. Shias perceived the growing influence of the Deobandi school under Zia-ul-Haq's regime as a direct threat to their existence. In response, they established the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria (TNF) in 1979 to defend their religious and political rights. In reaction, the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) supported the formation of SSP, aimed at countering Shia influence in Pakistani society (Abbas, 2010).

The Shia-Sunni conflict escalated over time, with both sides engaging in targeted assassinations of military and government officials, as well as civilians. These sectarian tensions persisted even after the death of Zia-ul-Haq. In subsequent years, both TNF (later known as TJP) and SSP attempted to enter mainstream politics by aligning with major political parties such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), though these alliances were short-lived.

Eventually, both organizations splintered into more radical offshoots, Sipah-e-Muhammad (SM) on the Shia side and LeJ on the Sunni side. Since 2003, the Hazara community has been systematically targeted by groups like LeJ, illustrating how sectarian violence against Hazaras has been perpetuated under ideological and political patronage.

Following the War on Terror, Pakistan experienced a surge in terrorist activities. Extremist groups operating in and across the Afghan border, often with external support, carried out targeted attacks throughout the country. Their objective was to destabilize Pakistan by striking strategically sensitive areas to create widespread impact. These religiously motivated groups also deliberately targeted the country's ethnic and sectarian fabric, exacerbating existing divisions within society (Abbasi, 2013). Pakistan is a country with diverse ethnic, and cultural communities. These groups target the Baloch, Pashtun, and Hazaras to create fault lines in it. With this regard, the Hazaras are the most vulnerable and easily identifiable due to their distinctive features.

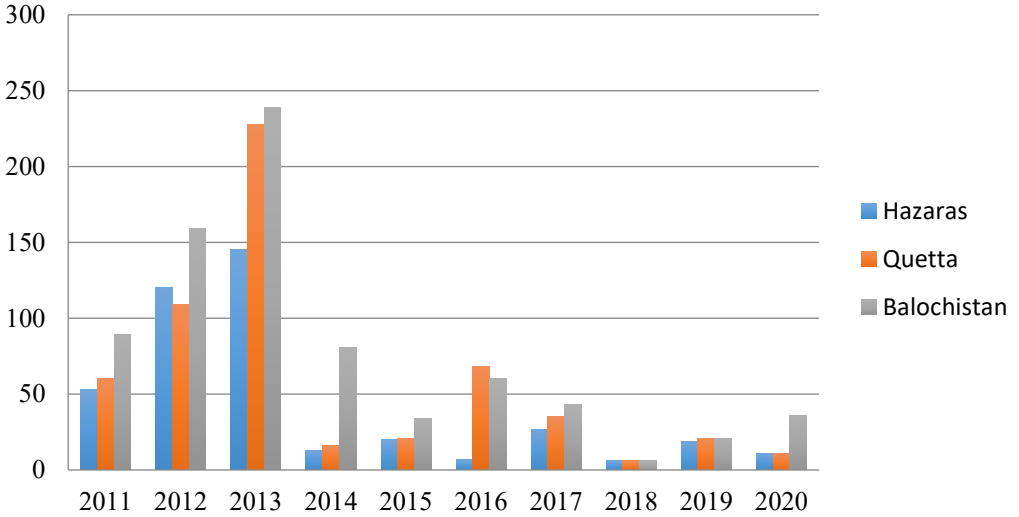
Most recently, in December 2020, eleven coal miners were brutally killed by an extremist group. The miners were abducted, and after an identity parade confirmed their affiliation with the Hazara community, they were executed at close range by the terrorists. The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack (Yousafzai, 2021, January 3). This is not the first targeted attack on the Hazara community; it's a continuation of targeted attacks on the community by extremist groups. Members of the Hazara community have been targeted by extremist outfits through various violent means, including suicide bombings, planted explosives, and abductions. Both the IS and LeJ claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at a market in Hazara Town, where 21 people were killed, including nine Hazaras and two security personnel. One of the deadliest attacks on the community occurred in 2013 at a snooker club, where an initial explosion was followed by a car bomb ten minutes later, resulting in 96 deaths and injuring nearly 150 people (Ahmad, 2019).

In 2014, a bus carrying Hazara pilgrims returning from Iran was attacked in Mastung. Militant groups such as TTP and its splinter factions have claimed responsibility for 467 attacks across Pakistan. In 2016, another bus transporting Hazaras was ambushed by a gunman, killing four women and injuring one other passenger. In a separate incident in 2017, four members of the Hazara community were killed in a targeted shooting by an unidentified sniper (Ahmad, 2019).

LeJ is the radical offshoot of SSP that has had little bearing on ties was created in 1996 by Riaz Basra, Malik Ishaq, and Akram Lahori. The group conducted attacks against the Shia community to marginalize them and in 2001 President Musharraf banned the group to curb the sectarian violence. The group has been implicated by security in the two incidences of bombing Shia mosques in 2000 and 2004. They have also targeted government officials, security personnel, and Christians throughout Pakistan (Abou, 2020).

In 2011, the LeJ issued a written threat against the Shia community which was circulated in Quetta. The letter was written both in English and Urdu addressing the Shia population that they are worthy of killings and Pakistan is a country where they have no right to live. In the letter, they referred to the killings of Hazaras in Afghanistan as a successful *Jihad* and urged them to continue this in Pakistan until they completely wipe out the Hazaras from every nick and corner of Pakistan. Furthermore, they mentioned that they would make Quetta the graveyard of Shi'ite Hazaras and would destroy their businesses and houses by bombing them (Human Rights Watch.,2014).

Figure 1. Fatalities from Sectarian Violence in Province (2011 – 2018)

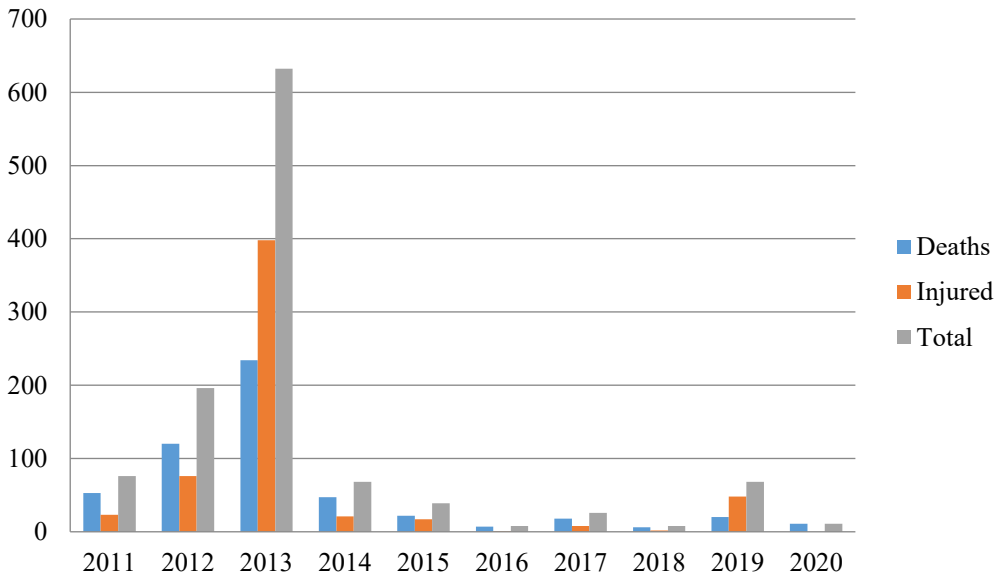


Source: Author

The figure above clearly illustrates how sectarian violence in Balochistan has disproportionately targeted members of the Hazara community. Between 2013 and 2018, LeJ and its affiliated groups, along with the Islamic State (IS), claimed responsibility for 399 and 271 attacks across Pakistan, respectively. LeJ and its offshoots, whose stated objective is to transform Pakistan into a Sunni-only state through violent means, saw a decline in activity in 2018 due to intensified military operations.

LeJ has maintained strong links with al-Qaeda and has claimed responsibility for the majority of attacks against the Hazara community. The group’s first major assault on Hazaras occurred during Friday prayers in 2003 in Quetta, Balochistan, resulting in 53 deaths and 57 injuries. The deadliest episode of sectarian violence in Pakistan since independence took place in January and February 2013, when coordinated bombings in Quetta killed at least 180 Hazaras. LeJ claimed responsibility for both of these devastating attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Figure 2. Hazaras Casualties (2013 – 2020)



Source: Author

When asked about the involvement of LeJ in the killings, the majority of respondents from the Hazara community believed that while LeJ had been active in the past, its name is now being used by other destabilizing forces. In reference to the recent attack on coal miners, which was claimed by the IS, the community was also asked about IS’s role in the targeted killings of Hazaras. Most respondents believed that IS was indeed involved, while a few disagreed, and the rest were uncertain about attributing the violence to ISIS as a sole actor.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), in its 2018 report, noted that “sectarian terrorism in Balochistan has disproportionately targeted the Hazara community” (National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan, 2018). This pattern is clearly reflected in the data presented in the graph above (figure 2), which shows a sharp spike in casualties in 2013, over 600 deaths and injuries combined, marking it as the deadliest year in the decade for the Hazara community. However, after 2014, the frequency and intensity of such attacks significantly declined, suggesting a shift in the nature of the violence. However, this alone cannot be considered the primary factor behind the persecution. Shia Muslims living in other parts of Balochistan, outside of Quetta, have not been similarly targeted, which supports the argument that these killings are not solely based on religious identity, as only Hazaras appear to be systematically targeted (National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan, 2018).

When asked whether a sectarian element was involved in the killings of Hazaras, the majority of respondents agreed that sectarianism is indeed a factor. However, a significant number emphasized that it should not be seen as the only factor behind the violence.

Not a Sectarian Issue

The majority of respondents expressed the view that the persecution of Hazaras is not merely a sectarian issue. They noted that Hazaras and other communities had been living together peacefully in Pakistan before this wave of violence began. Even today, Shias in other parts of Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan, continue to live in relative harmony. An analysis of sectarian attacks in Balochistan reveals that in many cases, Hazaras were specifically targeted and killed following an identification process.

When asked whether the killings of Hazaras a religious or political phenomenon are, most respondents believed that both religion and politics play a role. One interviewee suggested that the widespread belief in sectarian motives is a constructed narrative, stating that it is “a conceived notion inculcated in the minds of people.” A Hazara student, currently studying at a private university in Lahore, echoed this sentiment. He remarked that this narrative has been deliberately injected into the community, fostering mistrust and intolerance between Sunni and Shia Hazaras. He further described the violence as a proxy war imposed on the Hazara community in the name of ethnicity and religion.

Many members of the Hazara community asserted that their persecution is not primarily religious in nature but rather exploited by religious groups to justify the violence. To support their argument, they pointed out that Hazaras have been attacked even in areas where extremist groups like LeJ have no established presence. Sajjad Ali, a painter, remarked, “These killings are not sectarian, but sectarianism is used as a justification. We have been living here peacefully for over 100 years. This is a recent phenomenon, deliberately introduced to create discord between Sunni and Shia communities.” The peaceful coexistence of Shias in other parts of Balochistan, such as Jafarabad and Muradabad, further supports the argument that the persecution of Hazaras is not purely sectarian.

Involvement of the Hazara Community in Intra-Community Killings

The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), in its 2018 report, documented responses from members of the Hazara community who speculated that some individuals from within their own community might be involved in the targeted killings (National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan, 2018). In the present study, participants were also asked about this possibility. The majority of respondents firmly denied any such involvement by their community members. They emphasized that the Hazara community is largely educated and actively contributes to its own socio-economic upliftment. However, a minority of respondents acknowledged the possibility that a few individuals might be complicit in the violence.

One respondent, himself a direct victim of targeted attacks, categorically rejected the claim of internal involvement. He stated:

Our community is very peace-loving. It is a part of our religious belief that if you kill one innocent person, it is as if you have killed all of humanity. We are followers of Hazrat Hussain, who sacrificed his life for the sake of peace and justice.

This perspective underscores the collective belief within the community that their values and identity are fundamentally opposed to violence and sectarian hatred.

Land Mafia

The Hazara community in Quetta enjoys relative socio-economic prosperity compared to other ethnic groups in Balochistan. With a higher level of education, Hazaras have secured a considerable number of positions in the public sector. Hazara women, in particular, are known for their entrepreneurial spirit; many have established small businesses in central parts of the city. Families that have lost their male breadwinners due to targeted violence often rely on women who now work in various fields to support their households. Despite living in a strictly traditional society, the Hazaras are notably progressive, and their women are socially active and independent.

The community has made notable strides in areas such as education, sports, and trade, surpassing many other native groups in the region. According to respondents from within the Hazara community, their socio-economic advancement may be one of the underlying reasons for their persecution. Many Hazaras are involved in the construction industry, having built markets, shopping malls, and commercial buildings across Quetta.

By 2009, the pattern of violence shifted. Terrorist groups began targeting professionals, businessmen, and influential individuals within the Hazara community. Prior to this, the primary focus of extremist violence had been on Shia religious processions and gatherings. In 2009, a Hazara cardiologist was assassinated by LeJ while parking his car at his clinic. In 2010, Dr. Nadir, another prominent Hazara figure, was shot along with his driver. These targeted killings of high-profile individuals marked a turning point; thereafter, all segments of the Hazara population became targets, whether through bombings or targeted shootings by extremist groups. The details of some of the killings are illustrated in the table below

Table 2. Hazara Killings (2000 – 2012)

Year	Name	Profession
1. <i>August 2001</i>	Ali Madad Changezai	Senior employee of the State Bank
2. <i>August, 2001</i>	Abid Abbas Naqvi	Professor
3. <i>September, 2001</i>	Attiq Hassan Naqvi	Professor of sociology
4. <i>March 2002</i>	Haji Muhammad Jan	Senior customs officer
5. <i>August, 2009</i>	Dr. Abid Iqbal	Cardiologist
6. <i>January 2010</i>	Dr. Nadir Khan	
7. <i>April, 2010</i>	Syed Ayub Shah	Community leader
8. <i>April, 2010</i>	Ashraf Zaidi	Bank manager
9. <i>May, 2010</i>	Dr. Qamber Hussain	Physician
10. <i>June, 2011</i>	Syed Abrar Hussain	Deputy Director Sports Board and Boxing Olympian
11. <i>August, 2011</i>	Zulfiqar Naqvi	Judge
12. <i>January, 2012</i>	Walyat Hussain	Federal Investigation Inspector
13. <i>January 2012</i>	Abid Hussain Nazish	Television Actor
14. <i>April, 2012</i>	Mohammad Ali Ariz	Medical Doctor
15. <i>October, 2012</i>	Sikandar Ali	Worked at the Finance Ministry of Balochistan’s Government

Source: Author

Terrorist groups have targeted a wide range of individuals in Balochistan, including academics, businessmen, students, vendors, public sector employees, and artists. In 2010, nearly 80 Shias, mostly from the Hazara community, were killed in a series of attacks, with both the brutality and frequency of these incidents escalating in 2011. By 2012, terrorists began targeting individuals or groups with prominent social status. That year, six Hazara shopkeepers were killed by gunmen in Quetta. Another tragic incident involved an attack on a university bus, in which four Hazara students were killed and 28 others injured. These incidents pointed toward the possible involvement of the land mafia, as the victims were often economically stable individuals.

In April 2012, gunmen carried out a targeted attack on Prince Road, killing six Hazara shopkeepers. The motive appeared to be not just sectarian hatred but also the strategic displacement of Hazaras from economically valuable areas. These attacks forced affected families to flee, abandoning their businesses and homes, thereby enabling the land mafia to seize their properties. When respondents were asked about this issue, the majority agreed that the land mafia was likely involved in the killings. According to members of the Hazara community, one of the key motivations behind their persecution is their economic success. Hazaras owned many shops and markets in Quetta and enjoyed socio-economic prosperity. The land mafia would often pressure them to sell their properties, and if they refused, hired assassins to eliminate them.

Popular commercial areas such as Sunheri and Shabnam Markets on Jinnah Road were predominantly Hazara-owned and attracted more customers than those run by other communities. Additionally, the Hazara community's literacy rate surpasses that of neighboring Pashtun and Baloch populations. As one community member told the researcher, if there are two or three Hazara students in a class, they will surely be the top three students. This combination of educational achievement and economic success has made the Hazaras a target for both ideological and material motives.

Terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan

Pakistan has a long border with Afghanistan from where the terrorists intruded in Pakistan during the war on terror. According to the National Commission Human Rights report (2018), the terrorists infiltrating Pakistan from Afghanistan are responsible for the killings. These terrorists have established links with the local community and hired them to conduct terrorist attacks. They were not only involved in the killings of Hazaras but also targeted the Balochis and Pashtuns. The question was asked by the members of the Hazara community about the involvement of terrorists who have infiltrated Afghanistan in Pakistan. The majority were of the view that terrorists who intruded in Pakistan during the '80s and later during the war on terror were carrying out these attacks. Terrorists from Afghanistan have been involved in the killings of not only Hazaras but also Balochis, Pashtuns, and Punjabis who have been residing there for years. They have been forced to migrate to other areas of Pakistan.

Geo-Strategic Importance of Balochistan and Involvement of External Actors

Another important factor is the geo-strategic location of Balochistan and its significance for both regional and extra-regional players. Among these, India emerges as the most prominent actor. Balochistan is the centrepiece of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and any instability in the region can hinder the progress of this project, which is expected to bring prosperity and development to the province.

Pakistan has released a dossier detailing India's involvement in destabilizing Balochistan and its malign intentions against CPEC (Khan & Batool, 2025). India has been channelling funds to fuel unrest in Pakistan and is also investing heavily in Afghanistan, particularly in areas near Pakistan's border. The persecution of the Hazara community has the potential to spark sectarian conflict within Pakistan, especially given that the Shia community constitutes a significant portion of the population. This unrest could not only destabilize the country internally but also increase international pressure on Pakistan. Any instability within Pakistan ultimately serves India's broader strategic objective of undermining the country. Moreover, Balochistan's valuable resources such as the Reko Diq mines and Gwadar port which attract global interest from powers like China and India, further entangle local conflicts within the broader geopolitical rivalries of the region and beyond.

The role of Iran in Hazara Context

The geopolitical context of sectarian violence in Pakistan cannot be overlooked, particularly given the deeply rooted perception that the Shia community receives support from Iran. This narrative gained prominence during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, who favored Sunni religious parties, especially anti-Shia groups, while Pakistan's diplomatic relations with Iran reached their lowest point. Ejaz Haider, in one of his columns, observed that the perception of the Hazara community as a proxy of Iran still persists in Balochistan (Haider, 2011).

When respondents were asked about the involvement of Iran, India, and Saudi Arabia in the conflict in Balochistan, the majority expressed uncertainty regarding Iran's direct role in the killings. However, one artist from the Hazara community shared the view that their community is caught in a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He explained:

Within our own community, there are two types of groups, those who rigidly follow the directions of religious scholars, and those who are liberal and progressive. Some individuals in our community have studied in madrassas funded by Iran and Iraq. While the Iraqi-funded madrassas tend to avoid political involvement, the Iranian-funded ones interfere in political matters and often brainwash students. It's very difficult to challenge these religious fanatics. Liberal and secular Hazaras oppose their influence.

Similarly, a student from the Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS) remarked that although Tehran University offers degrees in disciplines like Musicology and Visual Arts, their proxies, particularly those backed by religious clerics, consider such fields forbidden in Pakistan. He emphasized that these groups exploit religious sentiments to advance their own agendas (personal communication, 2024).

Conclusion

This egregious violence against the Hazara community can only be curbed when both federal and provincial governments promote good governance by holding terrorists accountable and dismantling their capacity to act with impunity. The government, judiciary, and security agencies must uphold international human rights obligations by prosecuting those responsible for these killings. Although Pakistan's state institutions officially deny any ties with militant organizations, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and LeJ, as clearly stated by Major General Asim Bajwa, former Director General of

the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), in 2013, the state still bears the primary responsibility to protect its citizens from all forms of security threats.

The Pakistani government must take immediate action to investigate and address the root causes of sectarian killings across the country. Focus group interviews and surveys conducted by students, workers, academics, and civil society organizations, as well as reports from national and international bodies, indicate a range of factors contributing to the persecution of Hazaras. These include both internal and external variables. One key observation is that the killings are not purely sectarian in nature, as Shia communities in other parts of Balochistan live in relative peace. This supports the argument that Hazaras are specifically targeted, rather than Shias in general. Many respondents emphasized that these acts are not religiously motivated, noting that members of different sects previously coexisted peacefully in the region.

An analysis of killings from 2012 to 2020 reveals patterns of targeted violence against the Hazara community by extremist groups. The most significant surge in attacks occurred between 2010 and 2013, followed by a steady decline. Following the tragic Army Public School (APS) attack in Peshawar, the Government of Pakistan launched the National Action Plan (NAP) to combat terrorism. In its aftermath, both federal and provincial governments implemented preventive measures to contain the violence, particularly in Quetta. Enhanced security for Hazara neighborhoods and for pilgrims traveling to Iran contributed to the decline in attacks on the community.

Nonetheless, the government must continue to respond to the genuine concerns of the Hazara community and hold perpetrators accountable. The data collected in this study shows that violence is not driven by a single factor; instead, it results from a complex interplay of various influences, amounting to a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Although the government has disbanded and disarmed LeJ and other militant groups involved in sectarian violence, broader and deeper investigations are still needed. All internal and external forces behind the killings must be identified and brought to justice. There is an urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms to address the challenges faced by the Hazara community. These should include strengthened security arrangements, targeted economic support for marginalized groups, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, legal reforms, and inclusive development to help mitigate sectarian violence in Quetta and across Balochistan.

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