

Shrine Lal Shahbaz Attack

Background

A crisis between Pakistan and Afghanistan, related to longstanding issues of border security and border contestation, occurred from February to May in 2017.

This crisis is the result of long-standing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which reached another flashpoint in February 2017. (For more on the history of the Afghan-Pakistani conflict, and in particular on the disputed border known as the Durand Line, see Crisis #480.)

In July 2016, in the aftermath of the Torkham Border Incident in June 2016 (Crisis #480), Pakistan completed construction of a dividing gate in the border city of Torkham. The construction of the Torkham gate is one element of Pakistan's overarching aim to draw a line between what they judge to be Pakistani and Afghan territory, for both symbolic and security reasons. Physical dividers imposed by Pakistan in the form of gates and fences serve to legitimize the geographic location of the border, which Pakistan tends to favor and Afghanistan rejects. Moreover, Pakistan argues that such obstacles will make it more difficult for terrorists and insurgents who officials claim enjoy sanctuary in Afghanistan to cross the border. Nonetheless, Afghanistan regularly protests Pakistani efforts to physically demarcate the border, sometimes with violence.

Beginning in 2015 and into 2017, both Pakistan and Afghanistan experienced significant levels of violence conducted by a subsidiary group of the Islamic State, known as Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). IS-K's early membership consisted of an amalgamation of militants from other groups—primarily the Pakistani Taliban—who declared allegiance to the larger Islamic State umbrella group in January 2015. The group, which is principally based in Afghanistan and has received financial and materiel support from IS since its inception, aims to establish a Caliphate in South and Central Asia governed under Sharia law.

While overall levels of violence in the lead up to 2017 did not deviate significantly from standard levels (attacks by various militant groups occurred regularly), IS-K bombings of both civilian and state targets—some carried out by extremists with explosives strapped to their chests—became increasingly common.

In February 2017, the situation in Pakistan became especially dire. Over four days, militants attacked all four Pakistani provinces and three major urban areas. Pakistan had not witnessed an equivalent spate of violence since 2014 and, as one analyst summarizes, the bloodshed “may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.”

Crisis

A crisis for Pakistan was triggered on 16 February 2017. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive device in a crowd gathered at the Lal Shahbaz shrine in Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan, killing over 70 people. ISIS-K took immediate responsibility for the attack. This attack started a prolonged crisis between Pakistan and Afghanistan, centering around control over the border between the two nations.

Immediately following the shrine attack, a Pakistani military spokesperson blamed hostile powers, specifically Afghanistan, for directing and providing sanctuary for terrorists and allowing such events to occur. Afghanistan's crisis was triggered the following day, 17 February, when Pakistani artillery shelled what Pakistan claimed to be terrorist facilities in Afghanistan. In addition to the shelling, Pakistan closed

their border with Afghanistan at Torkham and Chaman. The closing of the border and the shelling constituted Pakistan's major response. Afghanistan's major response to the shelling was to deny any allegations that it was harboring or directing terrorists against Pakistan. Afghanistan did not respond to the shelling or border crossing with violence, instead preferring diplomatic dialogue with Pakistani ambassadors and foreign affairs officials. Pakistan reopened the borders towards the beginning of March.

On 27 March 2017, Pakistan announced that it had resumed building a border fence between the two nations, stating that they were focusing on "high threat zones." The construction of the fence increased tensions between the two nations as Afghanistan reacted with threats of violence should Pakistan continue the project. The tensions culminated in a clash in the Chaman region, near the villages of Killi Luqman and Killi Jahangi, when Afghani police confronted a Pakistani security team escorting a census team. At least 11 people were killed. The crisis came to an end on 27 May 2017, after the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement and agreed to keep the border opened between the two countries. No provision was made regarding Pakistan's construction of the border wall, which continued after the conclusion of the crisis.

The United States played a limited role in the crisis, first by condemning the attack on the shrine and then by requesting that Pakistan work with Afghanistan on fighting terrorism. Pakistan ignored the American requests, and no further action was taken by the U.S.

Afghanistan submitted complaints to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) during the crisis, first after Pakistan shelled Afghanistan, and then once Pakistan started building their border wall. There was no direct response from the UNSC on these matters. In April, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees resumed support for the repatriation of refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the UN migration agency sent out a team to assess border management capabilities in order to produce a comprehensive report and guidance for border maintenance.

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