



Pakistan

Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim

Allegations of up to 20 assassinations since 2020 follow Canada's accusation of Delhi role in murders of dissidents

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The Indian government assassinated individuals in **Pakistan** as part of a wider strategy to eliminate terrorists living on foreign soil, according to Indian and Pakistani intelligence operatives who spoke to the Guardian.

Interviews with intelligence officials in both countries, as well as documents shared by Pakistani investigators, shed new light on how India's foreign intelligence agency allegedly began to carry out assassinations abroad as part of an emboldened approach to national security after 2019. The agency, the Research & Analysis Wing (Raw), is directly controlled by the office of India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, who is running for a third term in office in elections later this month.

The accounts appear to give further weight to allegations that Delhi has implemented a policy of targeting those it considers hostile to India. While the new allegations refer to individuals charged with serious and violent terror offences, India has also been accused publicly by Washington and Ottawa of involvement in the murders of dissident figures including a Sikh activist in Canada and of a botched assassination attempt on another Sikh in the US last year.

The fresh claims relate to almost 20 killings since 2020, carried out by unknown gunmen in Pakistan. While India has previously been unofficially linked to the deaths, this is the first time Indian intelligence personnel have discussed the alleged operations in Pakistan, and detailed documentation has been seen alleging Raw's direct involvement in the assassinations.

The allegations also suggest that Sikh separatists in the Khalistan movement were targeted as part of these Indian foreign operations, both in Pakistan and the west.

According to Pakistani investigators, these deaths were orchestrated by Indian intelligence sleeper-cells mostly operating out of the United Arab Emirates. The rise in killings in 2023 was credited to the increased activity of these cells, which are accused of paying millions of rupees to local criminals or poor Pakistanis to carry out the assassinations. Indian agents also allegedly recruited jihadists to carry out the shootings, making them believe they were killing "infidels".



📷 Pakistani Sikhs hold a protest in Lahore last September over the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. Photograph: Bilawal Arbab/EPA

According to two Indian intelligence officers, the spy agency's shift to focusing on dissidents abroad was triggered by the [Pulwama attack in 2019](#), when a suicide bomber targeted a military convoy in Indian-administered Kashmir, killing 40 paramilitary personnel. The Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility.

Modi was running for a second term at the time and was brought [back to power](#) in the aftermath of the attack.

"After Pulwama, the approach changed to target the elements outside the country before they are able to launch an attack or create any disturbance," one Indian intelligence operative said. "We could not stop the attacks because ultimately their safe havens were in Pakistan, so we had to get to the source."

To conduct such operations "needed approval from the highest level of government", he added.

The officer said India had drawn inspiration from intelligence agencies such as Israel's the Mossad and Russia's KGB, which have been linked to extrajudicial killings on foreign soil. He also said the [killing of the Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi](#), who was murdered in 2018 in the Saudi embassy, had been directly cited by Raw officials.

"It was a few months after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi that there was a debate among the top brass of intelligence in the prime minister's office about how something can be learned from the case. One senior officer said in a meeting that if Saudis can do this, why not us?" he recounted.

"What the Saudis did was very effective. You not only get rid of your enemy but send a chilling message, a warning to the people working against you. Every intelligence agency has been doing this. Our country cannot be strong without exerting power over our enemies."

Senior officials from two separate Pakistani intelligence agencies said they suspected India's involvement in up to 20 killings since 2020. They pointed to evidence relating to previously undisclosed inquiries into seven of the cases - including witness testimonies, arrest records, financial statements, WhatsApp messages and passports - which investigators say showcase in detail the operations conducted by Indian spies to assassinate targets on Pakistani soil. The Guardian has seen the documents but they could not be independently verified.



📷 Analysts believe Pakistani authorities have been reluctant to publicly acknowledge the killings. Photograph: Bilawal Arbab/EPA

The intelligence sources claimed that targeted assassinations increased significantly in 2023, accusing India of involvement in the suspected deaths of about 15 people, most of whom were shot at close range by unknown gunmen.

In a response to the Guardian, India's ministry of external affairs denied all the allegations, reiterating an earlier statement that they were "false and malicious anti-India propaganda". The ministry emphasised a previous denial made by India's foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, that targeted killings in other countries were "not the government of India's policy".

In the [killing of Zahid Akhund](#), an alias for the convicted Kashmiri terrorist Zahoora Mistry who was involved in the deadly hijacking of an Air India flight, the Pakistani documents say a Raw handler allegedly paid for information on Akhund's movements and location over a period of months. She then allegedly contacted him directly, pretending to be a journalist who wanted to interview a terrorist, in order to confirm his identity.

"Are you Zahid? I am a journalist from the New York Post," read messages in the dossier shown to the Guardian. Zahid is said to have responded: "For what u r messaging me?"

Millions of rupees were then allegedly paid to Afghan nationals to carry out the shooting in Karachi in March 2022. They fled over the border but their handlers were later arrested by Pakistani security agencies.

According to the evidence gathered by Pakistan, the killings were regularly coordinated out of the UAE, where Raw established sleeper cells that would separately arrange different parts of the operation and recruit the killers.

Investigators alleged that millions of rupees would often be paid to criminals or impoverished locals to carry out the murders, with documents claiming that payments were mostly done via Dubai. Meetings of Raw handlers overseeing the killings are also said to have taken also place in Nepal, the Maldives and Mauritius.

"This policy of Indian agents organising killings in Pakistan hasn't been developed overnight," said a Pakistani official. "We believe they have worked for around two years to establish these sleeper cells in the UAE who are mostly organising the executions. After that, we began witnessing many killings."



📷 Aftermath of a protest in Jammu, India, after the Pulwama terror attack in 2019. The atrocity prompted fears Pakistani militants were planning a repeat of attacks such as the 2008 Mumbai bombings, according to one Indian intelligence officer. Photograph: Jaipal Singh/EPA

In the case of **Shahid Latif**, the commander of Jaish-e-Mohammed and one of India's most notorious militants, several attempts were allegedly made to kill him. In the end, the documents claim, it was an illiterate 20-year-old Pakistani who carried out the assassination in Pakistan in October, allegedly recruited by Raw in the UAE, where he was working for a minimal salary in an Amazon packing warehouse.

Pakistani investigators found that the man had allegedly been paid 1.5m Pakistani rupees (£4,000) by an undercover Indian agent to track down Latif and later was promised 15m Pakistani rupees and his own catering company in the UAE if he carried out the killing. The young man shot Latif dead in a mosque in Sialkot but was arrested soon after, along with accomplices.

The killings of **Bashir Ahmad Peer**, commander of the militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen, and Saleem Rehmani, who was on India's most-wanted list, were also allegedly planned out of the UAE, with transaction receipts from Dubai appearing to show payments of millions of rupees to the killers. Rehmani's death had previously been reported [as the result of a suspected armed robbery](#).

Analysts believe Pakistani authorities have been reluctant to publicly acknowledge the killings as most of the targets are known terrorists and associates of outlawed militant groups that Islamabad has long denied sheltering.

In most cases, public information about their deaths has been scant. However, Pakistani agencies showed evidence they had conducted investigations and arrests behind closed doors.

The figures given to the Guardian match up with those collated by analysts who have been tracking unclaimed militant killings in Pakistan. Ajay Sahni, the executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management in Delhi, said his organisation had documented 20 suspicious fatalities in Pakistan by unknown attackers since 2020, though two had been claimed by local militant groups. He emphasised that because of Pakistan's refusal to publicly investigate the cases – or even acknowledge that these individuals had been living in their jurisdiction – “we have no way of knowing the cause”.

“If you look at the numbers, there is clearly a shift in intent by someone or other,” said Sahni. “It would be in Pakistan's interest to say this has been done by India. Equally, one of the legitimate lines of inquiry would be possible involvement of the Indian agencies.”

Pakistan's foreign secretary, Muhammad Syrus Sajjad Qazi, publicly acknowledged two of the killings in a press conference in January, where [he accused India of carrying out a “sophisticated and sinister”](#) campaign of “extraterritorial and extrajudicial killings” in Pakistan.

Islamabad's accusations were met with scepticism by others, due to the longstanding animosity between the two neighbouring countries who have gone to war four times and have often made unsubstantiated accusations against the other.

For decades India has accused Pakistan of bankrolling a violent militant insurgency in the disputed region of Indian-administered Kashmir and of giving a safe haven to terrorists. In the early 2000s, India was hit by successive terrorist attacks orchestrated by Pakistan-based Islamist militant groups, including the [2006 Mumbai train blasts](#), which killed more than 160 people, and [the 2008 Mumbai bombings](#), which killed 172 people.

Both countries are known to have carried out cross-border intelligence operations, including small bomb blasts. However, analysts and Pakistani officials described the alleged systematic targeted killings of dissidents by Indian agents on Pakistani soil since 2020 as “new and unprecedented”.

The majority of those allegedly killed by Raw in Pakistan in the past three years have been individuals associated with militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, and in several cases have convictions or proven links to some of India’s deadliest terrorist incidents, which have killed hundreds of people. Others were seen to be “handlers” of Kashmiri militants who helped coordinate attacks and spread information from afar.

According to one of the Indian intelligence officers, the Pulwama attack in 2019 prompted fears that militant groups in Pakistan were planning a repeat of attacks such as the 2008 Mumbai bombings.

“The previous approach had been to foil terrorist attacks,” he said. “But while we were able to make significant progress in bringing the terrorist numbers down in Kashmir, the problem was the handlers in Pakistan. We could not just wait for another Mumbai or an attack on parliament when we are aware that the planners were still operating in Pakistan.”

In September, the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, **told parliament** there were “credible allegations” that Indian agents had orchestrated the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Sikh activist who was gunned down in Vancouver. Weeks later, **the US Department of Justice released an indictment** vividly detailing how an Indian agent had attempted to recruit a hitman in New York to kill another Sikh activist, later named as Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.



📷 Justin Trudeau speaking to media after Canada expelled a top Indian diplomat as it investigated assassination allegations in September. Photograph: Sean Kilpatrick/AP

Both men had been major advocates of **the Khalistan movement**, which seeks to create an independent Sikh state and is illegal in India. India denied any involvement in the killing of Nijjar, while **according to a recent report**, India’s own investigation into the Pannun plot concluded that it had been carried out by a rogue agent who was no longer working for Raw.

According to one Indian intelligence official, Delhi recently ordered the suspension of targeted killings in Pakistan after Canada and the US went public with their allegations. No suspicious killings have taken place so far this year.

Two Indian operatives separately confirmed that diaspora Khalistani activists had become a focus of India’s foreign operations **after** hundreds of thousands of farmers, mostly Sikhs from Punjab, **descended on Delhi to protest** against new farm laws. The protest ultimately forced the government into **a rare policy U-turn, which was seen as an embarrassment**.

The suspicion in Delhi was that firebrand Sikh activists living abroad, particularly those in Canada, the US and the UK, were fuelling the farmers’ protests and stirring up international support through their strong global networks. It stoked fears that these activists could be a destabilising force and were capable of reviving Khalistani militancy in India.

“Places were raided and people were arrested in Punjab, but things were actually being controlled from places like Canada,” said one of the Indian intelligence operatives. “Like other intelligence agencies, we had to deal with it.”

In the UK, Sikhs in the West Midlands were issued “threat to life” warnings, amid growing concern about the safety of separatist campaigners who Sikhs claim are being targeted by the Indian government.



Paramjit Singh Panjwar.
Photograph:
Twitter

Before the US and Canadian cases, a high-profile Khalistani leader, [Paramjit Singh Panjwar](#), was shot dead in Lahore last May. Pakistani investigators claimed they had warned Panjwar that his life was in danger a month before he was killed and said another Khalistani activist living in Pakistan has also faced threats to his life.

Panjwar's assassination is among those alleged to have been carried out by Indian operatives using what Pakistani agencies described as the "religious method". According to the documents, Indian agents used social media to infiltrate networks of Islamic State (IS) and units connected to the Taliban, where they recruited and groomed Pakistani Islamist radicals to carry out hit jobs on Indian dissidents by telling them they were carrying out "sacred killings" of "infidels".

These agents allegedly sought help from former IS fighters from the Indian state of Kerala – who had travelled to Afghanistan to fight for IS but surrendered after 2019 and were brought back through diplomatic channels – to get access to these jihadist networks.

According to an investigation by the Pakistani agencies, Panjwar's killer, who was later caught, allegedly thought he was working on the instructions of the Pakistan Taliban affiliate Badri 313 Battalion and had to prove himself by killing an enemy of Islam.

The [killing of Riyaz Ahmed](#), a top Lashkar-e-Taiba commander, in September last year was allegedly carried out by Raw in a similar manner. His killer, Pakistan believes, was recruited through a Telegram channel for those who wanted to fight for IS, and which had been infiltrated by Raw agents.

They have claimed the assassin was Muhammad Abdullah, a 20-year-old from Lahore. He allegedly told Pakistani investigators he was promised he would be sent to Afghanistan to fight for IS if he passed the test of killing an "infidel" in Pakistan, with Ahmed presented as the target. Abdullah shot and killed Ahmed during early morning prayers at a mosque in Rawalkot, but was later arrested by Pakistani authorities.

Walter Ladwig, a political scientist at King's College London, said the alleged shift in strategy was in line with Modi's more aggressive approach to foreign policy and that just as western states have been accused of extrajudicial killings abroad in the name of national security, there were those in Delhi who felt "India reserves the right to do the same".

Daniel Markey, a senior adviser on south Asia at the United States Institute of Peace, said: "In terms of India's involvement, it all kind of adds up. It's utterly consistent with this framing of India having arrived on the world stage. Being willing to take this kind of action against perceived threats has been interpreted, at least by some Indians, as a marker of great power status."

The allegations of extrajudicial killings, which would violate international law, could raise difficult questions for western countries that have pursued an increasingly close strategic and economic relationship with Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) government, including pushing for intelligence-sharing agreements.

A former senior Raw official who served before Modi's premiership denied that extrajudicial killings were part of the agency's remit. He confirmed that nothing would be done without the knowledge of the national security adviser, who would then report it to the prime minister, and on occasion they would report directly to the prime minister. "I could not do anything without their approval," he said.

The former Raw official claimed that the killings were more likely to have been carried out by Pakistan themselves, a view that has been echoed by others in India.

Pakistani agencies denied this, pointing to a list of more than two dozen dissidents living in Pakistan to whom they had recently issued direct warnings of threats to their lives and instructed them to go into hiding. Three individuals in Pakistan said they had been given these warnings. They claimed others who had not heeded the threats and continued their normal routines were now dead.

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