

# ISAS Brief

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## **Killings in Lahore: Will Condemnation Suffice?**

*The terrorist attack in Lahore raises some vital questions for the state and society in Pakistan. Beyond the denunciation of suicide-bombings as “cowardly” acts, one must look at the ‘grand’ designs of using the human body as a weapon.*

**Shahid Javed Burki<sup>1</sup>**

A suicide bomber exploded a deadly device in a children’s park not far from the centre of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province in Pakistan, on Easter Sunday. The suicide bomber had not only blown himself up and but also taken the lives of at least 70 people, mostly children and women, who were at the playground at the time. This was the worst terrorist attack in Lahore’s history.

The Western media carried the news, covering it as thoroughly as the media in Pakistan. Some in the West reported it as an attack on the country’s Christian community. The CNN story written by Sophia Saifi was headlined: “In Pakistan, Taliban’s attack on Easter targets

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Christians; 67 killed”.<sup>2</sup> This was disputed by the authorities but it appears that the bomber and his sponsors had done their homework. They knew that on Christian holidays the park was an important destination for Christian women and their children. The poor communities to which they belonged did not have the recreational facilities the park offered.

The bomber struck at a site popular with children. According to a press report “some of the children sustained head injuries and bone fractures when a merry-go-round swing collapsed after the bomber struck”.<sup>3</sup> The bomber was identified as a young man in his late-twenties who belonged to the district of Muzaffargarh in the southern part of the province of Punjab. In a report published by the Burki Institute in 2012, we pointed out that while the central and northern parts of the province have developed well, the south had fallen behind.<sup>4</sup> This was a problem that needed to be addressed. It was not surprising that some of the terrorists who were active in the country belonged to southern Punjab. Analysts who have studied the rise of extremism and the use of terrorism as an instrument to pursue well-defined objectives have pointed to relative deprivation as an important driving force. Many in southern Punjab have felt relatively deprived.

While a section of the Pakistan Taliban claimed responsibility for the act, the authorities in Pakistan did not think that it was aimed at the Christians. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi was quick to condemn the attack. He called his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, to condole the deaths. In his reported remarks, he strongly condemned the attack, calling it cowardly.

The United States also issued a statement condemning in the “strongest terms today’s appalling attack in Lahore, Pakistan”. US National Security Council spokesman Ned Price was reported to have said: “The cowardly act in what has been a scenic and placid park has

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<sup>2</sup> Sophia Saifi, “In Pakistan, Taliban’s attack on Easter targets Christians; 67 killed,” CNN updated 0120 GMT, March 28, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Asif Chaudhry, “Terror strikes families in Lahore park; at least 70 killed,” *Dawn*, March 28, 2016, pp. 1 and 5.

<sup>4</sup> The Burki Institute of Public Policy, *The State of the Economy: The Punjab Story*, Lahore, 2012.

killed dozens of innocent civilians and left scores injured”. I have always been puzzled by the use of the adjective “cowardly” to describe acts of suicide-bombings, especially when in the words of Professor Riaz Hassan of ISAS, a person and the group to which he or she belongs decides to use the human body as a weapon.<sup>5</sup> Calling these acts “cowardly” hides the important fact that they are committed to a ‘grand’ design, either on their own volition or at the behest of other persons. They have to be understood as such.

The Lahore attack occurred on the day two other incidents took place. More than a hundred-thousand persons had gathered in Rawalpindi’s Liaqat Bagh, a popular and spacious ground for holding public meetings. This was the occasion for observing the “*chelum*” (a form of mourning) of the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who was executed after having been sentenced to death for assassinating Salman Taseer, Governor of Punjab. The governor had spoken of the need to rewrite Pakistan’s notorious blasphemy law that could result in death sentences being awarded to any individual who was critical of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad. After the prayers for Qadri, thousands of protestors marched on to Islamabad, leaving behind a trail of destruction. A weak police presence did little to prevent the march. Finally, the government called in the army to restore order.

On the same day, a protest by the supporters and admirers of Qadri attacked a television station in Karachi claiming that the owners of the media company had failed to provide adequate coverage to the protests mounted against Qadri’s execution. *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most widely-read English-language paper, expressed well the sentiment that is often heard in the country’s sitting rooms. In an editorial written a day after Qadri’s execution, the paper had said: “Today, as Qadri is buried, the country has a question to ask itself: what creates the monsters in our midst and how they can be stopped? In truth, the answer is not yet known. There are ideas mooted – deradicalisation, counter-terrorism, etc. – but none have been flashed out as yet. Qadri is gone, but what of the thousands who... have felt confident enough to spill out in the streets and threaten violence against the state...How

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<sup>5</sup> Riaz Hassan, *Life as a Weapon: The Global Rise of Suicide Bombings*, London, Routledge, 2014.

are these minds to be saved and the rest of society protected from them? Some deep, urgent thinking is needed”.<sup>6</sup>

But Pakistan is not the only country with a large Muslim population where “deep and urgent thinking” is needed. The country’s political, social and economic elite and its large and growing middle class cannot draw comfort from the fact that the extremists who were behind the bombing of women and children in Lahore and behind the continuing agitation against the execution of the assassin of a senior political figure belong to a small fringe of society. Even if the fringe makes up one percent of the population, that means two million people who are prepared to seriously damage the system in which they have no faith. Also, while it is true that Islamic political parties only draw no more than 5 to 7 percent of the total electoral support, it must be understood that many extremists stay away from the polls. Elections are part of the Western political system which the extremists abhor and are determined to overthrow. Their answer to Western liberal democracy is the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS. For them as claimed by the sociologist Francis Fukuyama, history did not end; it is starting again with the rise of the Islamic State.

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<sup>6</sup> *Dawn* (editorial), “Qadri’s execution; the deeper malaise,” March 1, 2016