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**PAK200384.E**

4 December 2020

**Pakistan: Differences between Shia [Shi'a, Shi'i] and Sunni Muslims; procedure to convert to Shi'ism; the situation and treatment of Shia Muslims by society and authorities, particularly in major cities (Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, Hyderabad); state response (2018–November 2020)**

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

**1. Differences Between Shia and Sunni Muslims**

According to sources, there is no official figure on the number of Shia Muslims in Pakistan (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020; Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a lecturer in Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Freiburg in Germany, who specializes in modern Islam with a focus on Shi'ism in South Asia and the Middle East, stated that "there is widespread agreement that Shia Muslims make up about 15 to 20 percent of Pakistan's population" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) [1] who has written on Sunni-Shia relations in Pakistan indicated that according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, between 10 and 15 percent of Muslims in Pakistan are Shia (Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, a February 2019 country
report by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) indicates that according to the provisional results of the 2017 national census, 10 to 15 percent of Muslims in Pakistan are Shia (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 3.72).

1.1 Religious Differences


According to the Senior Fellow, the Sunni-Shia divide is nearly 1,400 years old, dating back to a dispute over the succession of leadership in the Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammed in 632 [CE]. These identities first formed soon after Prophet Muhammad's death, arising out of a dispute over who would succeed him as leader of the community. The majority supported the succession of Abu Bakr, one of the Prophet's most loyal companions and [his] father-in-law, while a significant group supported Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. Ali's supporters were known as Shia’at Ali (roughly translated as the party of Ali). (Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020)

The Lecturer in Islamic and Middle East studies stated that initially, the difference between Sunni and Shia was merely a difference concerning who should lead the Muslim community. According to the Shia, it was not up to the early Muslim community to decide about leadership themselves. [Rather,] God had singled out a line of male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams. This also means that the Shia draw on different forms of scripture. While they read the same Quran as the Sunnis, they also have reports on the Prophet and the Imams that differ from the Sunnis (a body of literature known as the hadith). (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020)

The same source further noted that "especially in Pakistan, there is a vast diversity among the Shia" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). Australia's DFAT notes that "[m]ost Shi'a in Pakistan follow the Twelver (atha ashariya) school, with smaller numbers of Nizari Ismailis, Daudi Bohras and Sulemani Bohras. Most of Pakistan's ethnic, linguistic and tribal groups include followers of Shi'a Islam" (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 3.74, italics in original).

The Senior Fellow noted that, over time, the divide between Shias and Sunnis has widened to include distinctions in theology and religious practices (Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of Islamic studies at Clemson University in South Carolina noted that Sunnis and Shias have religious and theological differences as well as different rituals and practices (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020).
In an interview with the Research Directorate, a representative of Jinnah Institute, a policy research and public advocacy think tank in Pakistan (Jinnah Institute n.d.), indicated that Shias have different mosques and different places of worship, and that individuals who frequent Shia mosques will be identified as Shia (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The same source also noted that Shias have "large commemorations" (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, in an interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of Islam and politics in the religion department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, stated that one of the differences between Shias and Sunnis is the ceremonies that they attend (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that Shias have public street ceremonies, particularly during the ten days of Muharram [2], and that, in mixed neighborhoods, Sunnis will attend Shia ceremonies (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The Lecturer in Islamic and Middle East studies indicated that participation in mourning ceremonies is "very important" for Shias, "especially related to the battle of Karbala in 680 when Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, was killed" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that "public processions are extremely crucial as a way to build community, to demonstrate Shia presence in Pakistan and beyond and to fulfil the obligation to mourn for Husayn" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020).

According to sources, Shias and Sunnis pray differently (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020; Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020; Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islam and politics indicated that "Shias keep their hands at their side rather than folding them during prayer" (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, the Lecturer stated that "the Shia when standing up during prayer place their hands to the sides of their body, as opposed to raising them and folding them at their chest as Sunni Muslims do. After the prayer, Shia raise their hands up from their knees three times and recite 'Allahu Akhar' three times" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that, while Shias pray five times a day like Sunnis, they combine these five prayers into three prayer times (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). A May 2017 article published in The Conversation [3], written by a Ph.D. candidate studying religion in the Americas and global Islam at the University of Florida, states that "Shias and Sunnis differ over prayer," explaining that "[a]ll Sunni Muslims believe they are required to pray five times a day, but Shias can condense those into three" (Chitwood 23 May 2017). The website of the Centre for Islamic Shi'a Studies (CISS), a research center that "aims to offer an informed and scholarly Shi'a perspective on traditional and contemporary issues that affect Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (CISS n.d.a), states that Shias "believe that Islam allows one to combine the prayers of Dhuhr and Asr and the prayers of Maghrib and Isha" (CISS n.d.b). The Lecturer also indicated that Shia believers "often" use a piece of clay during prayer "which is normally made from the soil of Karbala in Iraq" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). The CISS website indicates that according to Shia jurisprudence, prayers should not be performed on anything other than "natural elements from the earth which can neither be eaten nor worn"
and that "[t]his interpretation has prompted many Shi'a to adopt the convenience of praying on clay tablets" (CISS n.d.b). The same source notes that "Shi'a prefer to prostrate upon clay from Karbala, due to the numerous traditions regarding the sacred and spiritual value of the soil" (CISS n.d.c).

1.2 Distinguishing Features

For information on distinguishing features of Shia Muslims, see Response to Information PAK106393 of January 2020. The Professor of Islam and politics noted that "on the everyday level, there are not a lot of differences" between Sunnis and Shias in Pakistan, nor any "real physical differences" between them (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, the Australian DFAT report notes that "[m]ost Pakistani Shi'a are not physically or linguistically distinguishable from Pakistani Sunnis" (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 3.92). The Professor of Islamic studies indicated that if Shias do not belong to a distinct ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group, they are less identifiable (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). According to the Jinnah Institute representative, Hazara Shias and people from the North are easily recognizable and there is an assumption that people coming from these regions are Shia; however, "it is not as obvious" for people in Punjab province and other regions (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The same source added that "[e]ven in mainstream cities, people can tell Shia from other people," noting that Shias wear their beards differently and wear a ring on their right hand (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). According to the Professor of Islam and politics, some Shias wear turquoise rings; however, wearing one is fashionable "nowadays," so it does not necessarily mean the wearer is Shia (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The same source indicated that some Shias engage in "more than light flagellation (hitting themselves with big knives)," which creates scar tissue (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). An August 2020 Al Jazeera article reports that, during Ashura [Ashoura], a Shia religious event that commemorates the death of Imam al-Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, "some" Shias engage in self-flagellation with chains and the blunt ends of swords to "exemplify the suffering Imam-al-Hussein experienced" before his death (Al Jazeera 28 Aug. 2020). According to the Australian DFAT report, "[s]elf-harm, such as flagellation performed during Ashura processions, can leave permanent marks" (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 3.93).

According to sources, there are certain names that are markers of being Shia (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020; Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020; Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islamic studies noted that certain names, such as Ali and Jaffar, are common among Shias (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The Jinnah Institute representative noted that the prefix Syed is used with Shia names and
that certain surnames, such as Saah, Zaidi, and Rizi, are typical Shia names (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Australian DFAT report indicates that "[s]ome Shi’a may be identifiable by common Shi’a names such as Naqvi, Zaidi and Jafri" (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para 3.92).

2. Procedure to Convert to Shi'ism

According to sources, there is no ritual (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020; Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020; Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020) or formal process to convert to Shi’ism (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020; Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islam and politics noted that "it is not uncommon for people to convert from Sunnism to Shi’ism" and that in order to convert you begin attending Shia mosques and ceremonies (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The same source indicated that conversion "is a lot less common nowadays because of the levels of hostility [towards Shias]” (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The Jinnah Institute representative stated that conversion is "a matter of conviction" (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Lecturer noted that "[i]n most instances" the Shia convert "would simply publicly pronounce the Shia declaration of faith" (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020). The same source stated that "becoming Shi'i" would mean … starting to pray differently from the Sunnis [and] participating in mourning sessions (majalis) and processions. It would most likely (but not necessarily) mean [choosing] a leading Grand Ayatollah for ritual and legal guidance as a "source of emulation" (marji’ al-taqlid) and [starting to pay] 20 percent of one's income to him or rather his representative in Pakistan (khums). (Lecturer 23 Nov. 2020)

According to the Jinnah Institute representative, individuals can obtain a legal certification that they are Shia, in order to get an exemption certificate from charity imposed by the state (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that many Shias get this exemption certificate, but not all have it (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islamic studies indicated that a person could go to a Shia seminary and get their conversion certified, but this is not a common practice (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The same source stated that Pakistan does not require individuals to declare their sect, adding that in passports, religion is identified but not sect (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020).

3. Situation and Treatment of Shia Muslims

For additional information on the situation and treatment of Shia Muslims, including Hazaras and Turi, and state response to violence against Shias, see Response to Information PAK106393 of January 2020.
A 2020 Amnesty International report on human rights in the Asia-Pacific region in 2019 indicates that Shi'a Muslims are "victims of enforced disappearances" in Pakistan, "particularly in Sindh and Balochistan provinces" (Amnesty International 29 Jan. 2020, 49). The Jinnah Institute representative stated that there have been targeted killings and attacks on mosques and shrines in southern Punjab province, the North, Balochistan province, and Karachi (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The same source indicated that there has been renewed violence by militant groups and that sectarian groups that were previously quiet have become violent again (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islamic studies noted that while "there is undeniably persecution of Shias on the ground in Pakistan," it is not the same everywhere and that "persecution does not exist in all regions of Pakistan" (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The same source stated that "the experience of Shias varies from one individual to another" (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The Senior Fellow stated that "there is no city-specific violence that you can isolate, other than recent surge in attacks on Hazara Shias in Balochistan, mostly around the city of Quetta" (Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that incidents of violence "can happen at any place in any province" and that "there have been incidents [in Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, and Hyderabad] with Karachi topping the list for incidents of violence against the Shias" (Senior Fellow 19 Nov. 2020).

### 3.1 Situation and Treatment of Shia Muslims in Lahore

Information on the treatment of Shia Muslims in Lahore was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Professor of Islamic studies indicated that the situation in certain cities, including Lahore, is "not as bad" as in other regions and cities (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The Professor of Islam and politics noted that while groups tend to cluster together in neighbourhoods, which "could speak to discrimination," the situation regarding discrimination in Lahore is relatively minor (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). In contrast, the Jinnah Institute representative stated that although it has dense communities of Shias, Lahore is one of the "worst" cities for Shias because militant groups are also present (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020).

### 3.2 Situation and Treatment of Shia Muslims in Islamabad

Information on the treatment of Shia Muslims in Islamabad was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Professor of Islamic studies indicated that the situation in certain cities, including Islamabad, is "not as bad" (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, the Professor of Islam and politics noted that, in Islamabad, "almost nothing happens because it is very well policed" (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020).
3.3 Situation and Treatment of Shia Muslims in Karachi

The Professor of Islamic studies indicated that Karachi is one of the cities with the "worst persecution" of Shia Muslims (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). The same source noted that "Shias in Karachi come from all ethnic groups; this has been a hotbed for Sunni Islam, and some groups have become focused on anti-Shia violence. Karachi has more crime as well" (Professor of Islamic studies 19 Nov. 2020). Similarly, the Australian DFAT report states that "Karachi has historically experienced high levels of violence due to rival ethnic, sectarian, political, business and criminal interests" (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 3.105). The same source reports that the government's 2014 National Action Plan (NAP) and the visible presence of the paramilitary rangers "have led to a significant decrease in violence, including sectarian violence" in Karachi (Australia 20 Feb. 2019, para. 2.36, 3.105). In contrast, the Professor of Islam and politics indicated that Karachi has "been worse" in the past two to three years (Professor of Islam and politics 19 Nov. 2020). The Jinnah Institute representative stated that although it has dense communities of Shias, Karachi is among the "worst" cities for Shias because of the presence of militant groups (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). Sources report that in Karachi, over 30,000 anti-Shia protesters held rallies over two days in September 2020 (AFP 12 Sept. 2020; The Guardian 21 Oct. 2020).

3.4 Situation and Treatment of Shia Muslims in Hyderabad

Information on the treatment of Shia Muslims in Hyderabad was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Jinnah Institute representative noted that Hyderabad has a Sufi culture and "is very accepting of minorities" (Jinnah Institute 19 Nov. 2020). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. State Response in Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, and Hyderabad

Information on state response in Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, and Hyderabad could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.
Notes

[1] The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) is "a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security" (MP-IDSA n.d.).

[2] According to an August 2020 Al Jazeera article, "Ashoura [Ashura] is marked on the 10th day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, by all Muslims" (Al Jazeera 28 Aug. 2020). The same source notes that for Shia, Ashura is a significant religious event commemorating "the martyrdom of Husayn Ibn Ali al-Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who died at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD" (Al Jazeera 28 Aug. 2020). For further information on the commemoration of Ashura and Ashura processions, see Response to Information Request PAK106393 of January 2020.

[3] The Conversation is "an independent source of news and views, from the academic and research community, delivered direct to the public" (The Conversation n.d.).

References


Lecturer, University of Freiburg. 23 November 2020. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.


Professor of Islamic studies, Clemson University. 19 November 2020. Telephone interview with the Research Directorate.


**Additional Sources Consulted**

**Oral sources:** Asia Human Rights Commission; The Centre for Academic Shi’a Studies; Centre for Islamic Shi’a Studies; lecturer in religion at a university in Wales who has written on Shi’ism.

**Internet sites, including:** Asia Times; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Dawn; The Diplomat; ecoi.net; The Express Tribune; Factiva; Freedom House; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; Minority Rights Group International; The Nation; The News International; Pak Institute for Peace Studies; Pakistan – National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics; Pakistan Today; Pew Research Center; South Asia Terrorism Portal; UK – Home Office; UN – Refworld; US – Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress; The Washington Post.
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