

American Foreign Policy Council



SOUTH ASIA

COUNTRIES

Afghanistan
Pakistan
India
Bangladesh
Maldives

Regional Summary

With over one fifth of the world's population, South Asia is home to as many Muslims (350 million) as the entire Arab world. Of the four countries that have suffered most at the hands of Islamist terrorism over the past decade, three are in South Asia: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India.

India, the largest country in the region with 1.2 billion people, contains a sizable Muslim minority (13.4 percent), and has been a frequent target of Islamist terrorism. Despite local grievances among its indigenous Muslim population, however, the majority of Islamist-driven violence in India is conducted not by Indian Muslims, but by Islamists based in Pakistan.

India is host to the longest-running Islamist insurgency in the region, in the disputed territory of Kashmir, where Pakistani-backed insurgents have been waging a terrorist campaign since 1989, resulting in over 42,000 fatalities. Since 2001, however, improved Indian security measures and intermittent dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad have contributed to a relative diminution of violence.

But as the Kashmir insurgency has calmed, India has fallen victim to sensational attacks by Islamist insurgents in the Indian heartland, most notably the November 2008 Mumbai attack, in which Islamist militants trained in Pakistan and affiliated with Lashkar-e Taiba killed 164 people. India has been spared violence on such a grand scale since, but continues to face smaller-scale terrorist plots.

Pakistan, the world's only Muslim-majority nuclear power, is both one of the greatest victims of Islamist violence and, by many counts, one of its greatest supporters. In the decade since the September 11, 2001 attacks, Pakistan has formally supported the U.S.-led Coalition's campaign in Afghanistan, providing logistics and intelligence support, assisting the CIA predator drone campaign and periodically arresting or killing Islamist militants based in Pakistan. Nearly 3,000 Pakistani soldiers and 22,000 civilians have been killed in recent years battling extremists.

However, Pakistan faces persistent accusations that its military-intelligence agency, the ISI, provides direct support to Islamist militant groups. These include the Afghan Taliban and allies like the Haqqani network, as well anti-India *jihadist* outfits like Lashkar-e Taiba. The CIA has uncovered evidence of the ISI's direct involvement in terrorist plots, including the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul in 2008. Together with the discovery of Osama bin Laden residing in a wealthy Pakistani suburb, and the country's refusal to root out militants from their stronghold in North Waziristan, U.S.-Pakistani relations have reached a nadir. Domestically, meanwhile, polling and anecdotal data suggest considerable sympathy for Islamists, and their ideology continues to permeate Pakistani society, with liberal politicians, journalists, and public officials increasingly silenced by conservative Islamist forces.

In Afghanistan, the U.S.-led coalition's early victories in the swift overthrow of the Taliban regime have been dealt a serious blow by a resurgent Taliban, which has been waging an effective campaign from their safe havens in Pakistan to retake parts of the country since 2006. The temporary "surge" of military forces authorized by the Obama administration in December 2009 appears to have blunted Taliban advances, at least for the time being. However, the planned U.S. drawdown of military personnel could soon provide the ousted Islamist movement with far greater freedom of action in its campaign to retake the country and re-impose its strict, puritanical brand of Islamic law there.

Farther afield, Bangladesh—formerly East Pakistan—has a tradition of moderate, culturally-focused strains of Islam, but political Islamist groups such as Jama'at-i-Islami operate legally and enjoy some societal support, despite faring poorly in national elections. The country is also host to two large but nonviolent Islamist revivalist movements, the Tablighi Jamaat and the Ahl-e Hadith. The groups claim tens of millions of followers and seek to organize society around Islamic principles, but are strictly apolitical. Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups, such as Harakat ul Jihad al-Islam, have also made a home in Bangladesh.

The island chain that constitutes the Maldives has a similar history of religious moderation and tolerance, but under the reign of longtime president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978-2008), experienced an Islamic revival. The proliferation of conservative mosques and religious education on his watch is evident in increasingly conservative cultural norms that are prevalent today. A new constitution, drafted in 1997, declared Islam the state religion and forbade non-Muslims from proselytizing or conducting public worship. No known Islamist terrorist groups operate in or out of the Maldives, but groups such as Lashkar-e Taiba and al-Qaeda have converted Maldivian youth and several hundred have been recruited by Pakistani *jihadists*. Moreover, radical Islamist charities were able to gain a foothold in the country after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In 2008, the country made a successful transition to multi-party democracy, and since has reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel, is attempting to draft a new counterterrorism bill, and has worked to combat the activities of transnational Islamist organizations.