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Sikhs in Afghanistan a neglected, vanishing minority

The most recent attack has been linked to ISIS extremists, but mainstream persecution is the norm

By Sunil Kukreja

Asia Times (01.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2XiVfa4> – The terrorist attack that killed 27 Sikhs in a centuries-old *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) last week highlighted yet again the continued and systematic decimation of Sikhs and other religious minorities in Afghanistan.

This most recent attack, for which Islamic State (ISIS) has claimed responsibility, represents yet another poignant chapter in a larger narrative of the persistent persecution of Sikhs in Afghanistan. Then the bomb attack on the mourners of those killed in the Sikh temple that followed was but another painful postscript to the brutal reality of the devastation that has been inflicted on Sikhs in that country.

Once a thriving religious minority, the Sikh population in Afghanistan has over the last couple of decades declined significantly, with current estimates putting the number remaining at between 3,000 and 8,000. Indeed, so desperate has the situation become that there is little doubt that Afghan Sikhs will become little more than another historical footnote to the international community – one that has been conveniently and persistently ignored by governments and international organizations that purport to champion the cause of religious freedom and minority rights.

While some international news outlets did report last week's attacks, it's quite telling that even with the understandable attention of the international community on the Covid-19 pandemic, the persistent persecution of Sikhs in countries like Afghanistan (and in neighboring Pakistan) in essence continues to be ignored by entities such as the United Nations.

To be sure, decades of war and devastation have taken a toll on the persistence of minorities such as Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, but there is no question that systematic targeting, harassment, intimidation, and violence perpetrated

against these minorities has been routinely tolerated, reflecting how a discernible set of practices have been tacitly or otherwise ignored over an extended period in many parts of the country.

While extreme violence of the kind undertaken by ISIS jihadists provides fodder for the narrative that it's extremists who are the source of this persecution of minorities, it also conveniently enables this mainstream misinterpretation to persist unchallenged and unexamined.

Of course, there is the school of thought that the violent attacks by extremists on Sikhs (and Hindus) are a way to exert pressure indirectly on any Indian government entanglement in Afghanistan as well as retaliate against the mistreatment of Muslims in Kashmir or elsewhere in India. But this convenient interpretation doesn't adequately and meaningfully account for the society-wide practices of discrimination, intimidation, mistreatment, and targeting of Sikhs that persists as an embedded aspect of daily life in Afghanistan.

According to one US government report, for example, "only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of discrimination and the lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs from individuals who lived near cremation sites." Other forms of systematic and even state-sanctioned discrimination include the illegal appropriation of property owned by Sikhs.

Frankly, it appears that the relative lack of international attention to situations like the systematic targeting of Sikhs and other religious minorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan reflects an apparent political indifference of the establishment international community. Despite repeated reports of attacks and systematic targeting of Sikhs, the UN, for example, continues to show – despite its predictable condemnation – what can only be described as a puzzling disregard for their plight.

On cue, the UN Secretary General's Office issued the following statement on the recent attack in Kabul:

“The Secretary General condemns the attack today in Kabul on a Sikh-Hindu temple in which dozens of civilians were killed and injured. He expresses his deepest sympathies to the families of the victims and wishes a speedy recovery to those injured.

“The Secretary General reiterates that attacks against civilians are unacceptable and those who carry out such crimes must be held accountable.

“The United Nations stands in solidarity with the people and the government of Afghanistan and will continue supporting efforts to bring peace to their country.”

The office of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief within the UN Human Rights Council, for example, is apparently charged with promoting, among other things, “the adoption of measures at the national, regional and

international levels to ensure the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.” However, any close scrutiny of its efforts in this regard reveal a shocking neglect particularly with respect to the plight of Sikhs in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Indeed, the unambiguous, vivid, and steady stream of independent media and other reports of the destruction of *gurdwaras*, or attacks on Sikhs in Afghanistan and Pakistan seem to disappear – curiously and, arguably, conveniently – into the proverbial pile of insignificance.

It seems reasonable to pose the rather obvious question: Under what circumstances exactly might the United Nations, for instance, find it suitable to make its presence and influence felt in such matters, if not in a devastating and oppressive scenario marked by persistent and unyielding persecution of Sikhs in Afghanistan or Pakistan?

Amid the years of indifference to the plight of the Sikhs in Afghanistan, it now is increasingly evident, if it wasn't already before the latest attack, that to continue living in the country is no longer tenable. This latest attack on Afghan Sikhs has underscored their systematic displacement through a wider, long-standing institutional and societal context marked by hostility toward them.

When it comes to tackling the mistreatment of Sikhs in Afghanistan, it is clear the UN and the wider international community have failed spectacularly.

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