

COVID-19 IN PAKISTAN: The Politics of Scapegoating Zaireen

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SUMMARY

Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) started in Wuhan (China) in December 2019/January 2020 and rapidly spread to other countries. All countries sharing borders with Pakistan had reported the presence of the deadly infectious disease by the last week of February 2020.

The outbreak of the disease in Iran, which was first reported on February 19, 2020, and then spread aggressively, was of serious concern for Pakistan because of a large number of Pakistanis visiting Iran for religious tourism (Ziaraat). Around the time the epidemic unfolded in Iran, it is estimated that nearly 7,500 Pakistan pilgrims (locally called Zaireen) were visiting the country.

The first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Pakistan were reported on February 26, 2020, among two pilgrims, who had returned from Iran. This fueled worries in Pakistan about the import of the disease from its western neighbour.

Days before the confirmation of first cases, authorities had closed border crossings with Iran and later suspended flights. The closure of the border on February 23, 2020, was temporary and meant to build up capacity at Taftan to handle the expected deluge of pilgrims returning from Iran. The closure, however, added to anxiety among the pilgrims in Iran, because it accompanied the suspension of flights. Therefore, when the crossing was reopened on February 28, 2020 thousands of pilgrims rushed for the border exit. The numbers of returning pilgrims overwhelmed border facilities on both sides – Mirjaveh (Iran), the point of exit, and Taftan (Pakistan), the point of entry.

The problem was more acute for Taftan because people coming into the country had to be quarantined and there were no adequate arrangements for doing so at such a large scale.

On most occasions, crises degenerate quickly into mudslinging when things start going wrong and people then lose sight of the main issues. That's what happened at Taftan quarantine, which was massively mismanaged because of capacity issues and lack of experience in dealing with a large number of people returning from an epidemic stricken country.

Meanwhile, profound political polarization, deep sectarian schisms, and anti-Iran sentiments in the country made the controversy murkier. The government's messaging on the pilgrims' crisis was particularly found wanting. Instead of transparently explaining the issue and addressing misconceptions and tackling deliberately propagated disinformation, the government chose buck-passing because of political compulsions. Contradictions and discrepancies were also noticeable in the government's messaging.

The row undeniably had sectarian undertones. The government's faulty messaging unwittingly contributed to the narrative that blamed the Shia community in general and pilgrims in particular for the spread of the disease in the country. This caused stigmatization of the Shia community,

which was importantly reflected in steps taken by some of the provincial/local government agencies.

The misinformation about the role of pilgrims in the spread of Covid19 can potentially have long term implications – provoking tensions, hatred, and complicating public health responses.

BACKGROUND

Pakistan and Iran have a long history of bilateral relations. This relationship is based on shared values and strong people-to-people, cultural, and religious linkages. The geopolitical landscape of the region has influenced the political relations between the two countries. However, at the time there has been a strong desire, on both sides, to remain engaged in the developments affecting the neighbourhood. The trading relationship between the two countries is insignificant. The bilateral trade has been, among other reasons, restricted by US sanctions on Iran. The bilateral trade volume in 2019 was a mere \$392.08 million. In this situation, religious tourism has been the mainstay of people to people contact between the two countries.

Iran is one of the top destinations for religious tourism. Mashhad, Qom, Shiraz, and Tehran are home to the holy shrines of Imam Ali ibn Musa Al-Reza (AS), the eighth Imam of Shia Muslims; his sister Lady Fatimah Ma'asouma; his brothers Ahmad and Mohammad; as well as the late founder of the Islamic Revolution Imam Rouhollah Khomeini respectively. Iran hosted nearly 7.8 million tourists in 2018, 80 percent of whom were religious tourists. Iran is aiming at increasing the number of religious tourists to 20 million per year.¹

Nearly 0.35 million Pakistanis visited Iran for pilgrimage in 2018.² That number has significantly grown since then and it is estimated that 0.5 million Pakistani pilgrims – called Zaireen in Urdu - visited Iran in 2019. Pakistani pilgrims using the land route for the pilgrimage to holy sites in Iraq and Syria also travel through Iran. It is estimated that approximately 0.3 million Pakistani pilgrims visiting holy shrines in Iran, Iraq, and Syria travel through via the Taftan border in a year. Pakistani pilgrims travel to Iran throughout the year, but the flow is seasonal and

varies greatly from month to month. Large numbers travel to Iran, Iraq, and Syria for religious anniversaries in Muharram, Safar, Rajab, and Shaban.

Pakistan shares a 960 kilometer border with Iran. There are multiple border crossings, but the main crossing point for passenger traffic is Taftan- Mirjaveh border. The land route, besides the security issues, is arduous because of logistical difficulties. However, it remains the preferred route of those unable to afford air travel for pilgrimage trips to Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This land route is also used by other categories of travelers as well – tourists, businessmen, and economic migrants. Over the past few years, the authorities have taken a few measures to develop this route including improvement of 700-kilometer Quetta-Taftan highway, and facilities at the border crossing point.⁴

However, those improvements have been inadequate and issues at the Taftan border have persisted, often hitting headlines, especially whenever there is large scale movement – the peak season being Muharram – Safar – Rabi-ul-Awal. The state of affairs at Taftan aggravated after the emergence of security threats. The buses then had to be moved in convoys because of which pilgrims, especially on their return had to stay in Taftan for a longer period. Moreover, the capacity of immigration staff to process entries and exits remained low causing prolonged delays in the processing of arrivals and departures. A building named Pakistan House, which is currently jointly managed by Frontier Corps and a private committee, was constructed. It has an accommodation capacity of a maximum of 300 - 400 people, but on peak days thousands are made to stay there. The facility itself is modest and heavily mismanaged.

¹“Iran Emerging as One of Worlds Top Destinations for Religious Tourism,” PressTV, September 21, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/09/21/606743/Iran-religious-tourism-top-destinations-Mashhad-Qom>.

²“Tourism to Bring People of Iran, Pakistan Closer,” IRNA English, September 21, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83483843/Tourism-to-bring-people-of-Iran-Pakistan-closer>.

³“Pakistan-Iran Relations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed May 1, 2020, <http://mofa.gov.pk/news-items/>.

⁴Mian Abrar, “Pak-Iran Religious Tourism Witnesses Unprecedented Surge,” Pakistan Today, January 1, 2019, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2019/01/01/pak-iran-religious-tourism-witnesses-unprecedented-surge/>.

UNREGULATED ZIARAT TOURS

Ziarat (Pilgrimage) tours are an unregulated sector in Pakistan. It is operated by private tour operators without any government controls. There are hardly any requirements concerning the capacity of the operators to manage the tours. There has, therefore, been a proliferation of tour operators with questionable credentials. The absence of regulation has also resulted in varying services standards in the sector and has often posed administrative problems. The only check on the operators is the growing competition in the business, which has served to keep

the financial cost of the pilgrimage trips relatively under control, otherwise, there has been little improvement in services. The federal government had in Nov 2019 indicated that a policy was being framed to regulate pilgrimage trips to Iran, Iraq, and Syria on the lines of Hajj policy.⁵

⁵“Pakistan to Facilitate Pilgrimage Tour to Iran,” IRNA English, July 27, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83412747/Pakistan-to-facilitate-pilgrimage-tour-to-Iran>.

EPIDEMIC OUTBREAK IN IRAN

Iran reported its first case of novel Corona Virus disease (Covid-19) on February 19, 2020. The case was first detected in Qom. Many believe that the disease had existed in Iran weeks before it was first detected in Qom. One of the first victims was a war veteran with no previous travel history, while the other was a merchant, who had visited China on a business trip. Both died because of the disease.

The disease in Iran is thought to have reached there from China.⁶ Iran and China have vast trade, which continued even after the breakout of the epidemic in Wuhan. People kept flying on indirect routes even after the direct flights were belatedly halted. Soon after the confirmation of the disease in Iran, the numbers began to grow rapidly and the holy city of Qom became the second epicenter of the virus after Wuhan. Just eight days after the confirmation of the first cases in Qom, the disease was reported from twenty-four of the country's thirty-one provinces.

At the early stages of the pandemic in Iran, the mortality rate was around 9% – much over China's 3%.⁷ This was possible because of a flaw in reporting the tally of infected cases in Iran at time. Similarly, a disproportionately higher number of Iranian politicians and officials were infected by the disease. Iran was by far the country most affected by the pandemic in West Asia/Middle East.

Iran was slow to implement lockdown for containing the spread of virus possibly because of political compulsions. The outbreak could not have happened at a more inopportune time as it occurred close to Iran's parliamentary elections.⁸ Friday congregations, visitations to shrines, and inter-state/district travel

were restricted in stages. The Iranian government, moreover, struggled to implement social distancing measures. Given the situation, President Hassan Rouhani at one stage had to warn people of consequences if containment guidelines were not followed.

Tehran's fight against the disease was particularly constrained by US sanctions, which prevented the Iranian government from using its national resources from procuring critical supplies to deal with growing patient load.⁹

Covid-19 cases and deaths in Iran peaked towards the end of March and beginning of April. Around the peak time, Iranian health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour tweeted on March 23, 2020, that that 50 people on average were contracting the virus every hour and one person was dying every 10 minutes. This reflected the enormity of the Covid-19 problem in Iran.¹⁰

However, subsequent stricter enforcement of social distancing helped to lower the number of cases by the end of the first week of April 2020.¹¹ "Due to the intensification of the social distancing policy, we have seen a gradual and slow decline in the number of new cases in recent days," Jahanpour said at a press conference on April 6. By April 18, 2020, Iran had 80,868 confirmed Covid-19 cases and 5031 deaths because of the disease. The spread of the disease in Iran posed a serious threat to several countries worldwide especially those in the neighborhood because of a large number of pilgrims visiting it every year.

⁶"Benoit Faucon, Sune Engel Rasmussen, and Jeremy Page, "Strategic Partnership With China Lies at Root of Iran's Coronavirus Outbreak," Wall Street Journal, March 11, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-strategic-partnership-with-china-lies-at-root-of-its-coronavirus-outbreak-11583940683>.

⁷"Dan De Luce, "Why Is Iran's Reported Mortality Rate for Coronavirus Higher than in Other Countries?," NBC News, February 26, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/why-iran-s-reported-mortality-rate-coronavirus-higher-other-countries-n1142646>.

⁸Mohammed Almezal, "Coronavirus: Why Iran Downplayed COVID-19 Crisis," Gulf News, March 25, 2020, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/coronavirus-why-iran-downplayed-covid-19-crisis-1.70619491>.

⁹"US: Ease Sanctions on Iran in COVID-19 Crisis," Human Rights Watch, April 6, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/06/us-ease-sanctions-iran-covid-19-crisis>.

¹⁰Zehra Nur Duz, "COVID-19 Kills 1 Iranian Every 10 Minutes," Anadolu Agency, March 19, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/-covid-19-kills-1-iranian-every-10-minutes/1771682>.

¹¹Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Drop in COVID-19 Cases in Iran No Excuse to Lower Guard," Anadolu Agency, April 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/drop-in-covid-19-cases-in-iran-no-excuse-to-lower-guard/1811166>.

PAKISTANI PILGRIMS & THE IRAN OUTBREAK

At the time of the Covid-19 outbreak in Iran, about 7,500 Pakistani pilgrims were visiting the country. Most of them were either in Mashad or Qom. Additionally, nearly 26,000 Pakistanis live in Iran. This includes about 16,000 Pakistani students at Iranian universities and various religious higher learning institutions (called Hawzahs).

There was hardly any pressure from the Iran based Pakistani community to return home following the start of the epidemic. However, the situation of the pilgrims was much different. They were there on short-term pilgrimage visas and many did not have enough resources to sustain themselves for long on foreign land. Moreover, uncertainty and fear of the spread of disease topped their minds. Family pressure to return as soon as possible was in addition to that.

Most of the pilgrim groups, whether they had travelled by air or by road, therefore, immediately started working on their return plans. Meanwhile, temporary closure of the border by Pakistani authorities in Balochistan province¹² on February 23, 2020 and subsequent suspension of flights added to their anxiety.¹³ Similar closures were also announced by Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Taftan border closure (on February 23) was meant for building emergency quarantine arrangements at the crossing point and as soon as the pilgrims heard from Pakistani authorities on February 28, 2020, that the entry point was being reopened, many groups, including those already held up at the border crossing because of sudden closure, rushed for the exit. In addition to pilgrims, other travelers including businessmen, those transiting through Iran, and tourists were also among the returnees.¹⁴

The reopening of the border crossing sparked off a

bitter political debate in the country about who authorized it after the initial closure. Prime Minister's Special Assistant for Overseas Pakistanis Syed Zulfiqar Abbas Bokhari (Zulfi Bokhari) was accused of influencing government agencies to reopen the border. Mr. Bokhari denied the allegations.¹⁵ The accusations and vicious media debate resulted in an acrimonious narrative about the pilgrims, some of whom carried the infection.

The return of the pilgrims put enormous strain on scant Pakistani resources at the border, which was barely equipped to handle a deluge of returnees from an epidemic-hit country. The largest group to enter Pakistan via the Taftan border was on March 1, 2020, when 1300 pilgrims returned. The other large-sized group to return was on March 3, 2020, when 400 pilgrims entered from Taftan. Others came back in smaller groups of 50 – 100 pilgrims on the average.

As per official figures, as many as 6834 pilgrims had returned through Taftan between February 29, 2020, and April 15, 2020. Around 320 pilgrims were left behind, who did not want to travel by road and were awaiting repatriation by air. Additionally, there was another group of about 200 Pakistani students from various Iranian universities, who wanted to go back to Pakistan because of extended spring holidays and cancellation of examinations. A small group of dual-nationals of Pakistani origin too had been wanting to return to Pakistan because of the closure of flights to their adopted countries.

At the initial stages of the crisis, the pilgrim groups moved to Mirjaveh border crossing in Iran on their own without coordinating with Pakistan Embassy in Tehran or Pakistani Consulates in Mashad and Zahedan, as had been their routine practice in the past. The Embassy realizing that the situation was

¹²Pakistan Shuts Border with Iran after Coronavirus Spread," 24News, February 23, 2020, <https://www.24newsd.tv/23-Feb-2020/pakistan-shuts-border-with-iran-after-coronavirus-spread>.

¹³Aamir Latif, "Pakistan Suspends Flights to Iran amid Coronavirus Fear," Anadolu Agency, February 27, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-suspends-flights-to-iran-amid-coronavirus-fear/1747087>.

¹⁴Pakistan Reopens Iran Border amid Coronavirus Fears," The Nation, February 28, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/28-Feb-2020/pakistan-reopens-iran-border-amid-coronavirus-fears>.

¹⁵Zulfi Denies Role in Cross-Border Movement of Pilgrims at Taftan," Associated Press Of Pakistan (blog), March 17, 2020, <https://www.app.com.pk/zulfi-denies-role-in-cross-border-movement-of-pilgrims-at-taftan/>.

worsening swung into action on February 26, 2020. In the first instance, helpline numbers for the Embassy were publicized in Qom and Mashad.¹⁶ Meanwhile, on February 27, 2020, Iran government was reached for suspending visa service for Pakistanis to prevent more people from Pakistan coming into Iran. Iranian authorities immediately halted the issuance of visas. At that time hundreds were on the way to Iran, many of whom had reached Taftan, while others were waiting for the convoys to leave from Quetta.¹⁷

The return of Pakistani pilgrims, in the meantime, slowed down, especially after people came to know about the squalid conditions at Taftan border crossing and massive mismanagement of quarantine. The leftover pilgrims were lodged in hotels in Mashad, which were arranged by Pakistan Embassy with the cooperation of administration of the shrine of Imam Ali ibn Musa Raza (AS), whereas the arrangements for the food were taken over by a Pakistani political party Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen

(MWM). Iran's government, meanwhile, extended visas of all who stayed back.

Coordination issues, however, arose between Pakistani and Iranian authorities over the timing of the stamping of exit on the passports of Pakistani pilgrims. There were instances when Iranians stamped exit on the passports while the gates on the Pakistani side were closed leaving the pilgrims stranded in between waiting for the opening of gates at Taftan.

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi spoke to his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif on March 22, 2020. The two foreign ministers discussed “coordination at the border” during their conversation in addition to other matters.¹⁸

¹⁶“Embassy of Pakistan Takes Measures on the Outbreak of Coronavirus in Iran,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 26, 2020, <http://mofa.gov.pk/embassy-of-pakistan-takes-measures-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-in-iran/>.

¹⁷Saleem Shahid, “Pakistan Closes Border with Iran over Virus Fears,” DAWN, February 24, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1536327>.

¹⁸“Foreign Minister Holds Telephonic Conversation with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif of Iran on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 22, 2020, <http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-holds-telephonic-conversation-with-foreign-minister-javad-zarif-of-iran-on-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

CROSS-BORDER TRANSMISSION

Infectious diseases can quickly cross the borders because of trade and travel in today's highly interconnected world where people and goods move swiftly and with great frequency. Infectious diseases can within hours spread from one country to another. Historically cross border transmissions happened during the Plague in the 14th century and Smallpox in the 16th century. The same was witnessed during the 2003 SARS outbreak, 2009 flu pandemic, the 2011 E. coli outbreak, the 2013–2016 Ebola spread, and now the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19).¹⁹

The best protection for any country against cross-border outbreaks is maintaining high-level preparedness and effective vigilance. National cross-border outbreak response systems, therefore, ought to be quick, precise, and effective. The importance of this is underscored by the fact that diseases imported from other countries do not only impact the health of people of the country that receives the disease from another but also affects its economy. Moreover, these diseases can affect relations between countries, trade, and tourism.

As a standard practice, the travelers are screened at the border crossings, and the suspected ones and their contacts are quarantined. The purpose of this exercise is to detect the potentially infected travelers, who may not be yet symptomatic, both at the exit and entry so that they can be separated from others and prevented from spreading the disease. This is more important in diseases where there is pre-symptomatic shedding of the virus. Isolation, meanwhile, is required for separating those who have symptoms from others till they fully recover.

SARS outbreak in 2003 revealed that countries across the world were not adequately prepared to check the cross-border spread of diseases. Therefore, the World Health Organization introduced the new International Health Regulations (IHR). But, subsequent outbreaks have shown that countries despite agreeing to adopt the new regulations, practically did very little to implement them. It happened so because border screening and quarantining are both capital intensive and require the deployment of medical resources especially human resources. This was particularly difficult for poorer countries and those with inadequate public health systems.

Therefore, countries must develop strong disease surveillance systems; improve diagnostic capacity; and keep emergency response updated.

Pakistan is a signatory to the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005 and has, therefore, committed to developing health systems, which can adapt and respond to the challenges posed by outbreaks and emergencies of national and international concern. Joint External Evaluation (JEE) of Pakistan's IHR core capacities by the World Health Organization in 2016 revealed that it was not fully prepared to prevent, detect and respond to health threats and protect its population.²⁰ Some of the key findings with regards to the readiness of Pakistan's ports/points of entry were:

- Quarantine area and ambulances for the transport of ill travellers to appropriate medical facilities were either absent or inadequate.
- There was a shortage of appropriate personal

¹⁹Jacklien H. J. Maessen et al., "How Prepared Are We for Cross-Border Outbreaks? An Exploratory Analysis of Cross-Border Response Networks for Outbreaks of Multidrug Resistant Microorganisms in the Netherlands and Germany," PLOS ONE 14, no. 7 (July 10, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219548>.

²⁰Joint External Evaluation of IHR Core Capacities of the Joint External Evaluation of IHR Core Capacities Islamic Republic of Pakistan," Mission Report 27 April–6 May 2016 (Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, September 2017), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/254614/WHO-WHE-CPI-2017.9-eng.pdf?jsessionid=97CE18BDE6BE6974F5B8155731747092?sequence=1>.

and protective equipment.

- Clear SoPs were lacking regarding the entry or exit controls for arriving and departing travelers including the existence of isolation rooms and referral to designated health facilities.
- Need to enhance cross-border collaboration with neighbouring countries under the framework of IHR was also identified.

At the time of the Covid-19 outbreak in Iran, neither was Iran prepared to maintain effective screening and quarantining at the land borders and other ports of exit nor had Pakistan enough arrangements to deal with the eventuality of large numbers of pilgrims coming back.²¹

²¹Sabir Imani, "Tehran to Taftan Notes from an Arduous Journey," DAWN, March 26, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543680>.

SQUALID REALITY OF TAFTAN QUARANTINE

Taftan is a remote border town in Chagai district of Balochistan province – about 630 km south-west of provincial capital Quetta. The town with a population of nearly 14000 is under-developed. It is the designated border crossing point with Iran for those travelling by road. The border post, despite handling heavy passenger traffic every year, is in an extremely poor state. As noted earlier, reports have over the years regularly emerged from Taftan about mismanagement of pilgrim traffic for Muharram and Arbaeen. But, somehow little has been done for improving the border facility.

The town once again hit headlines because of the pilgrims returning amidst Coronavirus outbreak in Iran. Many likened it to Pakistan's Wuhan for the suspected link between the pilgrims and the spread of Covid-19 in the country.²²

The real trouble began when the border crossing was reopened on Feb 28, 2020, under unclear circumstances. The initial closure on February 23, 2020, was temporary for making 'necessary arrangements' for the expected influx. The capacity was reportedly increased during the five-day closure to quarantine up to 3500 people at a time in Taftan. PM's Special Assistant for Health Dr. Zafar Mirza's visited Taftan on Feb 28 for inspecting the new arrangements. In a tweet on his visit, he said the point of entry was being strengthened and the government had a plan in its hand. He also indicated the reopening of the border.²³

However, when the controversy on the reopening of the border erupted and prime minister's aide on Overseas Pakistanis Mr. Zulfi Bokhari was targeted,

the government's flip flop began. Varying explanations were given by government functionaries about the reason behind the reopening of the border. The most commonly cited reason was that threw Pakistani pilgrims at the border and pushed them into Pakistani territory.

Amid this hostile debate in political circles and the media, the pilgrims on their return to the country found themselves stuck up at the Taftan quarantine. The quarantine lacked even the most modest facilities. There were very few toilets with no arrangement for their cleaning. Protocols for general hygiene and quarantining were hardly observed. People were crammed into small spaces in Pakistan House and temporarily set up tents. Hundreds were put in small halls, while tents housed up to five people each.²⁴

At the peak of the crisis about 4600 people were 'quarantined' at Taftan.²⁵ Things got bad to a point that protests broke out at the quarantine. Some of those quarantined claimed that they were meted treatment worse than animals.²⁶ Till March 16, 2020, no arrangements for Coronavirus tests were made at the quarantine.²⁷ The few medical personnel at the camp would daily check the temperature of people lodged there. Those showing symptoms, like high temperature, were not even then separated from the healthy ones or those who had no symptoms.

Many pilgrims fear that the mismanaged quarantine at Taftan caused the spread of Coronavirus infection among other pilgrims. Although, they do not have any medical evidence to back their claim because no one was tested on arrival, they base it on reports that a

²²"Mohammad Zafar, "Taftan Isnt Sukkur, Balochistan CM Hits Back at Critics," The Express Tribune, March 20, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2179880/1-taftan-isnt-sukkur-balochistan-cm-hits-back-critics/>.

²³"Pakistani Pilgrims to Return from Iran Soon : Dr Zafar Mirza," Aaj News, February 28, 2020, <https://www.aaj.tv/english/latest/pakistani-pilgrims-to-return-from-iran-soon-dr-zafar-mirza/>.

²⁴"Squalid Taftan Quarantine Camps Present a Sorry State of Affairs," DAWN, March 19, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1542153>.

²⁵"Pakistani Pilgrims Decry Squalid Coronavirus Quarantine Camp," France 24, March 18, 2020, 24, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200318-pakistani-pilgrims-decry-squalid-coronavirus-quarantine-camp>.

²⁶Sameer Mandhro, "Zaireen Protest against Inadequate Facilities at Taftan Tent City," The Express Tribune, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2177536/1-zaireen-protest-inadequate-facilities-taftan-tent-city/>.

²⁷"Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "Pakistan Coronavirus Camp: No Facilities, No Humanity," The Guardian, March 19, 2020, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/pakistan-coronavirus-camp-no-facilities-no-humanity>.

number of those who had been quarantined at Taftan tested positive after completing their quarantine period and returning to their respective provinces, where they were again quarantined.²⁸ The National Security Committee in its meeting on March 13, 2020, decided to close all border crossings including Taftan from March 16, 2020.²⁹

However, returns from Iran continued afterward and border authorities kept admitting them into the country. It happened because legally a national, with valid proof of nationality and travel documents, cannot be refused entry at the border. This also explains why the government could not have refused entry to returning pilgrims earlier either despite a brief pause for building capacity.

The right to return is most clearly enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)(1) under its provisions on the right to freedom of movement (Article 12). Freedom of movement has two main components: an internal aspect, relating to freedom of movement within a

country (Article 12 (1)); and an external aspect comprising freedom of movement between States. The latter includes the right to leave one's country (Article 12 (2)), and the right to enter one's "own country" (Article 12 (4)).³⁰

Moreover, the right to return has a solid foundation in international law. Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states, "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country".³¹ The situation for air travel is slightly different because in that case, it is the discretion of the airline about whether or not to take a passenger.

²⁸ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "COVID-19 in Balochistan and Underlying Sectarian Tensions," South Asian Voices, March 30, 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/covid-19-in-balochistan/>.

²⁹ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Top Security Body Unveils Plan for Fight against Virus," DAWN.COM, March 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1540775>.

³⁰ "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Right to Return)," accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/israel/return/iccpr-rtr.htm>.

³¹ "Article 13 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 13, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.humanrights.com/course/lesson/articles-12-18/read-article-13.html>.

TRANSFER TO PROVINCES

Once protests broke out at Taftan over bad conditions in the quarantine centers, pressure grew on Balochistan and federal governments to urgently look for solutions.³² In the meantime, fake news was also spread through social media that hundreds, and according to one account thousands of pilgrims, had been quietly shifted across the country without completing the quarantine period under political pressure and on sectarian grounds. The purpose of this fake news was to create panic within the country about the likely spread of the disease due to the returning pilgrims.

The federal government and the provincial governments through consultations then decided to transfer the pilgrims from Taftan to their respective provinces. Although the decision was formalized at the National Security Committee meeting on March 13, 2020, it had been taken a couple of days earlier and the shifting effectively began from March 13 when around two thousand left Taftan in convoys escorted by law enforcement agencies.³³ It was almost the time when the pilgrims had completed 14-day quarantine at Taftan. However, until the transfer of pilgrims from Taftan, they had not undergone any tests because there was no arrangement for that in the quarantine. The pilgrims had by then only undergone thermal scanning. Nearly 5000 pilgrims were transferred to provinces, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan in 4 batches.³⁴

The provinces were to put the pilgrims again in quarantine for another 14 days, test them and isolate the infected ones. A detailed strategy was devised in this regard by all stakeholders under which quarantine centers were set up in all provinces, Azad Kashmir and GB. Problems with regards to

arrangements persisted at the quarantine centers in provinces and occasionally there were protests. Frustration was evident among the pilgrims, who had been held up for a much longer period than the standard quarantine duration of 14 days because of the government's failure to properly quarantine and isolate. However, the conditions in the provinces were relatively better than Taftan, and Shia philanthropic organizations were also involved in meeting the needs of the pilgrims.

Tests conducted at the provincial quarantines showed that of the 6834 pilgrims, who had returned from Iran about 1331 were found to be infected. This included 701 in Punjab, 280 in Sindh, 141 in Balochistan, 68 in KPK, 139 in GB, and 02 in AJK. The incidence rate in returning pilgrims was 19.5%, which was much higher than the national figures in terms of percentage of people testing positive, which is 8.8%. Meanwhile, for those in quarantine, it's 15%.³⁵ Pilgrims believe that a higher incidence of the disease among the pilgrims was because infected persons being kept together with others in Taftan, which lacked testing and isolation, and travelling together for long distances in convoys.³⁶ Pilgrims were subsequently allowed to return to their homes after completing the quarantine in their provinces.

³²“Zaireen Stage Protest; Demand Release from Quarantine in Taftan,” DAWN.COM, March 2, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1537840>.

³³Mohammad Zafar, “2,000 Pilgrims Leave Taftan after 14-Day Quarantine,” The Express Tribune, March 14, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2175716/1-2000-pilgrims-leave-taftan-14-day-quarantine/>.

³⁴Durrani, “Curious Case of 252 Zaireen Who Left Taftan without Completing Quarantine Period,” The News, April 13, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/643767-curious-case-of-252-zaireen-who-left-taftan-without-completing-quarantine-period>.

³⁵Shahina Maqbool, “Corona to Persist till June in Pakistan,” The News, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/650292-corona-to-persist-till-june-in-pakistan>.

³⁶Madiha Afzal, “Pakistan Teeters on the Edge of Potential Disaster with the Coronavirus,” Brookings (blog), March 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/27/pakistan-teeters-on-the-edge-of-potential-disaster-with-the-coronavirus/>.

POLITICAL/MEDIA NARRATIVE

Pandemics bring out both the best and the worst in societies. It also brings to the fore problems and strains that exist within a society. The same was true for Pakistan when Covid-19 made inroads here. The arrival of Shia pilgrims from pandemic-stricken Iran set-off a bitter controversy both in the mainstream and social media, which had an apparent tinge of sectarian hatred. The row was driven by multiple factors, but mainly due to intense political polarization in the country, the undercurrents of sectarian bias, and anti-Iran sentiments.

Chief of banned sectarian outfit Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) Ahmad Ludhianvi and several other leaders of his organization played up the sectarian dimension through statements on different occasions. Ludhianvi on March 17, 2020, tweeted: "This is a very sensitive issue and it is on record that the spread of the Coronavirus in Pakistan has been caused only by pilgrims from Iran and Zainabiyon terrorists. The virus came to Iran through Syria and spread from Iran to Pakistan".

In another tweet, he said: "Instead of helping the government control the coronavirus, Ali Zaidi and Zulfi Bukhari spread the deadly virus. Action must be taken against them and it is imperative that those who fled at their behest be arrested and declared."

The targeting of Shia ministers of the government in this campaign proved that the controversy had sectarian underpinning besides the political goals of those pushing it.³⁷

Media, a large part of which thrives on sensationalism and gives more weightage to opinions than facts, recklessly promoted the narrative blaming the pilgrims for Coronavirus outbreak in Pakistan. Just to quote a few instances: Geo TV Anchor Shahzeb

Khanzada in his show 'Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada Kay Sath' on March 26, 2020, said Ayatollah Khamenei's representatives encouraged people to come to Qom, which was described as the center of healing for the spiritual and physical cure, amidst Coronavirus outbreak. Shahzeb contended that when numbers of infected persons in Iran grew, large numbers from Iran gathered at the Taftan border, and from there this virus spread to all parts of Pakistan.

Analyst Zafar Hilaly, appearing in a talk show, claimed Pakistani pilgrims were thrown at the border by 'Iranian Mullahs' and their Army against their (pilgrims') wishes. They were pushed through the borders, he said. Resident Editor of The News in Peshawar Rahimullah Yusufzai in his Op-Ed in The News on March 29, 2020, titled 'Society in the Time of Corona' wrote: "First, were the Zaireen (pilgrims) who were in coronavirus-hit Iran on a pilgrimage to visit holy in Mashhad and Qom and were returning to Pakistan. They brought the virus from Iran, weren't properly quarantined and treated, and spread it to other people and places on the way home to Gilgit-Baltistan and the Kurram tribal district, etc. They became the biggest source of spreading the virus in Pakistan".³⁸

Indeed some of the returning pilgrims were infected with the disease, but the media selectively focused on them instead of holistically discussing the shortcomings in screening and quarantining at the borders and ports of entry. The debate was neither objective nor constructive. There was hardly any discussion on travelers coming back from other countries experiencing Coronavirus outbreaks even though they inter-mingled in society, while all pilgrims were held at Taftan and other quarantines in the provinces. Complications among the patients, furthermore, emerged first among those returning

³⁷"Who Brought Coronavirus to Pakistan from Iran?," The News, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/633183-who-brought-coronavirus-to-pakistan-from-iran>.

³⁸Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Society in the Time of Corona," The News, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/635200-society-in-the-time-of-corona>.

from other countries and so did the deaths because of the disease happen. Even the cluster/s responsible for most of the local transmission did not get the same level of media focus.³⁹ There was a regular trickle of fake news suggesting that pilgrims in large numbers had fled from the quarantines. Such reports came from everywhere Taftan, Sukkur, D.I.Khan.

Although some of the government functionaries were blamed for the opening of the Taftan border to allow pilgrims to enter the country allegedly on sectarian grounds, the government also benefitted from the row as it took the public attention away from the real issue of lax controls at the borders/ports of entry. Therefore, the government instead of taking a strong position and clarifying the matter adopted an ambivalent stance blaming Iran for “pushing pilgrims into Pakistan” and at the same time holding US sanctions against Iran responsible for what was presented as a “collapse of the health system in Iran”.

PML-N leader and former Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif's tweets, which came amidst an intense political blame game on the issue between the government and opposition, played a major role in forcing the government to go on the defensive and pass the buck. He had on March 22 tweeted. “Pakistan would've slowed the growth of Coronavirus for a month if IK hadn't been negligent in Taftan. They should have tested people, let go healthy, and quarantined the sick. Instead, no testing, mixing the two, and letting everyone go. Criminal negligence.” In another tweet, he said: “Government inaction is causing faster spreading of Coronavirus in Pak than even Italy. IK, Zafar Mirza, Zulfi Bukhari and Buzdar are directly responsible for the deaths that will result. Their hands are soaked in blood.”

Defending his government's response Prime Minister

Imran Khan in his televised remarks during an interaction with a group of journalists on March 24, 2020, said: “We did not get a single infected person from China. What happened in Iran? When people reached Taftan, it was unfortunate we were also in touch with Iran, but the problem was that the way it spread in Iran, it (Iran) could not deal with it as China controlled it. Probably because of sanctions. Whatever the reason. Iran neither had those controls nor resources. They (pilgrims) came and sat at the Taftan border. They were Pakistanis. We wanted to keep them in quarantine. Iran was itself in trouble. We too were caught in a difficult situation. Shouldn't we have allowed them in?”

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi on March 25, 2020, told a conference of parliamentary leaders: “Iran is facing the biggest challenge in the region. It had highest number of deaths. Highest number of cases were reported from there. Iran is also under sanctions because of which they could not fully use their own resources. There is lot of pressure on them. They wanted to reduce pressure. These people were Pakistanis. We could not have refused them. I spoke to Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (March 22, 2020) and told him that we are cognizant of your problems, but please help us. Don't send the pilgrims together, stagger their numbers so that we can develop facilities. We don't have required facilities. But they had their own issues and what happened is before you.”

Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal in a video statement released on Youtube said: “When 2000 – 2500 turn up at your gates and your neighbor refuses to accept them and affixes exit on their passports. And the town in which they were coming had no facility, no medical facility, nothing.

³⁹“Zia ur Rehman, “God Will Protect Us: Coronavirus Spreads Through an Already Struggling Pakistan,” The New York Times, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/world/asia/pakistan-coronavirus-tablighi-jamaat.html>.

No one else was paying attention to this issue. It was the Balochistan government's initiative to close the border. If we had waited, these 10,000 people would have been everywhere. Provinces would not have been able to track them. All came from Iran. They could have infected 1 million others.” In one of his tweets, Mr. Kamal said: “Zaireen are from Iran...not Taftan.

We need to understand that. The virus was not produced in Taftan, but came from across the border.” Balochistan government's spokesman Liaquat Shiwani, meanwhile, explained: “We had requested Iran through the envoy in Pakistan to provide our pilgrims quarantine facilities and health certificates. But the Iranians were amid their own crisis and had their own cases to deal with. They started pushing the pilgrims across the border and stamping 'exit' on their passports so we had no choice. They are Pakistani citizens, we had to accept them with our limited facilities.”

Thus the official narrative that was formed on the situation was that Iran forcibly pushed the pilgrims into Pakistan. Foreign Office Spokesperson Aisha Farooqui, in an interview, while explaining the reason for high numbers of pilgrims returning, said: “There had been a great desire of our nationals to return”.⁴⁰ This was an acknowledgement that contrary to what was claimed by several Pakistani leaders and reported by multiple news channels in Pakistan, no Pakistani pilgrim was forced to return or forcibly expelled from Iran.

The few official explanations about the situation at Taftan revolved around SAPM Dr. Zafar Mirza's visit to the town and the shifting of a “huge mobile lab” there. PM Imran Khan told journalists at a media interaction: “From here Dr Zafar went to Taftan and

inspected facilities. We were regularly in touch with Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal. There was nothing there. It was desolated place 700 kms from Quetta. With great effort and with the help of Army we took a makeshift mobile testing lab there. Expecting the problem to be controlled at that remote place was unrealistic.”

Meanwhile, special columns were created in the government sitreps for pilgrims/zaireen strengthening the public perception that they were the main culprits for the spread of the disease. Misleading figures were, moreover, presented by the government. For instance, SAPM Dr. Zafar Mirza on March 24, 2020, said at a media briefing: “Eighty percent of the Covid-19-confirmed patients in Pakistan originated from Iran, which lacked the capacity to deal with an international public health emergency”.⁴¹

Statistically, that might be correct, but those figures presented an inaccurate picture because there was a sampling bias. At that time very few tests were being done in the country - nearly 400 per day - and most of those tested were pilgrims, so naturally, pilgrims would have accounted for a higher number of infected patients. These sloppy explanations helped strengthen the media's narrative that the entire Covid-19 caseload in the country was because of pilgrims.

Bigotry against Shia pilgrims was more pronounced on social media, which in turn was inspired by the news and discussion on the mainstream media. These were not only extremist groups that engaged in pilgrim bashing, but ordinary citizens too took part in it exposing the underlying sectarian tensions in the country. Allusions were made to coronavirus on social media as the Shia virus. Similarly, videos were

⁴⁰“7,000 Pilgrims Have Returned from Iran since February: FO,” DAWN, April 19, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1550415>.

⁴¹“Pakistan Blames Iran for 80% of Coronavirus Infections,” Pakistan Forward, accessed May 2, 2020, https://pakistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_pf/features/2020/03/25/feature-03.

made viral on social media suggesting that Shia rituals were beset by idiocy and superstition.

This dangerous narrative about Shia pilgrims set by some quarters contributed to the stigmatization of the returning pilgrims in particular and promoted ill feelings about the Shia community in general. This was reckless because it ignored the potential consequences, which include reluctance among the infected to test and/or seek care for fear of social exclusion, and promotion of prejudice against the entire group or community. In some instances that stigma continues even after the infected persons are cured.

The worse part of the stigmatization of the pilgrims was that some local government agencies took measures that were inherently discriminatory towards the Shia community. Water and Sanitation Authority Quetta issued a directive on March 13, 2020, that its employees belonging to the Hazara tribe be restricted in the areas where they live. Meanwhile, Balochistan police chief in his order dated March 12, 2020, also stopped police personnel from the Hazara community from reporting for duty. These were a couple of instances from Balochistan that showed how the entire community was stigmatized because some of its members contracted the infection. Hazara community is predominantly Shia and is one of the most persecuted ethnic communities in Pakistan.

These prejudiced actions drew international as well. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed its concern over reports that Balochistan government institutions

targeted Hazara Shias for the spread of Coronavirus.⁴² Meanwhile, in Punjab's Jhang district 'Corona notices' were put on the houses of pilgrims returning after completing the quarantine period.⁴³

Islamabad High Court was, meanwhile, moved on March 27, 2020, seeking constitution of a commission to investigate the shifting of pilgrims from Taftan to quarantines in provinces and fix responsibility. The petitioner had specifically alleged that Mr. Zulfi Bokhari used his influence to let pilgrims return without completing the 14-day quarantine period. However, a few days later the petition was dismissed by IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah with the remarks: "It is not a time to raise controversies or to doubt the intention of the state and its functionaries in meeting the challenges posed by the deadly Covid-19".⁴⁴

The petitioner later on April 27, 2020, moved the Supreme Court against the dismissal of his petition by IHC. Besides repeating the allegation about Mr. Zulfi Bokhari influencing the government policy on pilgrims, the petitioner once again contended that transfer of pilgrims from Taftan to different cities of Pakistan, including Multan, Sukkur, and Faisalabad, caused the spread of the disease in the country. He maintained that these areas were not affected by coronavirus pandemic before the shifting of the pilgrims. He, therefore, implied that the pilgrims' transfer to the provinces caused the spread of the disease in the country.⁴⁵

⁴²"USCIRF Troubled with Targeting of Hazara Shia in Pakistan amid Coronavirus Lockdown," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, March 31, 2020, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/press-releases-statements/uscifr-troubled-targeting-hazara-shi-in-pakistan-amid>.

⁴³"ناصر شیرازی کاشمیری افریدی سے رابطہ، جھنگ کے زائرین کے گھروں سے متنازع نوٹس اتار لئے گئے" (blog), April 15, 2020, <https://urdu.shiitenews.org/nasir-sherazi-shaharyar-afriidi-zaireen/>.

⁴⁴Malik Asad, "IHC Dismisses Petition Seeking Probe into Failure to Quarantine Pilgrims in Taftan," DAWN, March 31, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1545116>.

⁴⁵Nasir Iqbal, "SC Asked to Set aside IHC Order Rejecting Plea against Zulfi Bukhari," DAWN, April 28, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1552798>.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan has one of the weaker health systems in the region. The investment in the health sector has over the years been abysmally low. Approximately Rs 11 billion were allocated for health in the federal budget for FY 2019-20.⁴⁶ Health, as a subject, has been devolved to provinces after the 18th amendment, which decentralized decision-making. However, no significant improvement has been seen during the ten years since the devolution took place because of resource constraints and gaps in the governance capacity of provinces.

Pakistan's preparedness to deal with a public health emergency of international concern has never been up to mark. The health system can not adequately and timely deal with such emergencies. The focus on preparedness in this regard has always been sporadic - responding to occasional incidents whenever they occurred.

The country, moreover, had no real-time experience, in recent history, of dealing with public health emergency at the scale seen during Covid-19, when major outbreaks occurred in countries sharing borders with it. It was in remote and ill-equipped Taftan that Pakistan had to resort to mass quarantine for the first time when thousands of its citizens visiting Iran returned after the outbreak there.

It is also a well-known fact that politicians and policymakers seek to avoid and assign blame after crises. What was witnessed in Pakistan following the return of pilgrims in large numbers at the start of the Covid-19 epidemic is a prime example of that. The opposition parties blamed the federal government for failing to properly handle the influx of pilgrims returning from Iran. The federal government, other than raising questions about handling the epidemic by the Sindh government in the province, could do little to deflect the opposition criticism. It, therefore, blamed Iran for putting it in trouble by pushing the

pilgrims out of its borders.

The framing of the government's political narrative pushed it deeper into the controversy. One can argue if Balochistan government's initial decision to suddenly close borders on February 23 was correct or not because it caused panic among the pilgrims, who were in Iran at that time and they began looking for the first opportunity to exit, but more importantly federal and Balochistan governments failed in adequately explaining to the public that the border was closed temporarily for building up quarantine facilities at Taftan and that under international law they could not have refused the right of return to their citizens. Resultantly, when the border crossing was reopened on February 29, 2020 allegations were levelled against prime minister's aides for influencing the decision to allow the pilgrims in.

These "blame games" are, moreover, problematic because they are reactive and not aimed at finding practical solutions to real problems and they often lead to bad public policy decisions. They further affect citizens' attitudes towards an issue, which in turn influence the policy choices that the government makes.

The government in a bid to prove that it had properly handled the emergency drew the wrong comparison with its decision on not evacuating Pakistani students from Wuhan. This analogy instead of strengthening the government's position raised more questions about reopening the Taftan border. Pilgrims in Iran, it needs to be remembered, were on short term pilgrimage visa unlike Wuhan students, who had relatively longer-term visas. The right comparison could have been between Wuhan students and the 15,000 odd students in Iran – none of whom sought repatriation in the initial stages. It was only in April that some students studying in Iranian universities desired to return because of the extended holidays.

⁴⁶Sikandar, "Health Budget 2019- Pakistan," June 15, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/health-budget-2019-pakistan-anila-sikandar/>.

Furthermore, the decision against evacuating students from Wuhan involved political considerations in addition to the concern about the limitations of the health system to bear the load. China at that time was being stigmatized internationally because of the disease and the government took the policy decision to keep the students there as an expression of support for the Chinese government. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi at a media briefing in Islamabad later said Beijing reciprocated that gesture.

Moreover, the assertion that pilgrims were pushed across the border in Pakistan runs contrary to the facts on the ground. The shrines in Iran are not in any of the border towns. The distance between Qom and Mirjaveh, the border crossing on the Iranian side, is over 1400 km, meanwhile, the distance between Mashad and Mirjaveh is nearly 1100 km. It is not possible that thousands of Pakistani pilgrims were forcibly hauled across such long distances and no one got to know about it. Nothing even surfaced on the unregulated social media. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the pilgrims had moved to Mirjaveh on their own.


Hundreds of Pakistani pilgrims, meanwhile, remained back in Iran till as late as April. Not only their visas were extended, but the Pakistan embassy in collaboration with Iranian authorities provided free hotels to them. Similar was the case of pilgrims of other nationalities, who got stranded in Iran because of the disruption of flights.

There were, however, coordination issues at the borders with regards to the exit of pilgrims, who had reached the border crossing on the Iranian side on their own. That could have been better managed through coordination between border agencies. Similarly, the arrangements at the crossing point could have been below par, but the claim that pilgrims were pushed out does not seem plausible.

The government's failure to take a firm position on the issue subtly perpetuated the media narrative that blamed Shia pilgrims for importing the disease in the country. There was a regular stream of media stories suggesting that hundreds and in some cases thousands of pilgrims fled from quarantine centers and potentially posed threat to communities. Denials were issued by relevant authorities, but no strong assertion was made to contradict these reports.

The singular media focus on pilgrims was, moreover, unhelpful. Although this was an important issue for the media to follow, there was hardly a mention of thousands of other travelers returning from countries with outbreaks and were not even quarantined on arrival. Many of these travelers contributed to the local spread of the disease. The data about various clusters contributing to the local transmission was not made public by the government for unexplained reasons. This allowed certain quarters to keep alleging that the spread of the disease in the country was caused by the transfer of thousands of pilgrims from Taftan to provincial quarantine centers. The pilgrims remained in quarantine for on average 28 days and were allowed back home only after testing negative. In some instances pilgrims remained in quarantine for up to 50 days. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they were responsible for local transmission.

Pakistan has long suffered from sectarianism. The government's narrative on the pilgrims' crisis did not take that into account and resultantly accentuated sectarian hatred.



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