


# Unknown Gunmen

## Attribution, deniability and the contested record of targeted killings in Pakistan, 2020–2026

An open-source assessment of reported killings of militants, the allegation of Indian state involvement, and the limits of proof: 19 graded cases, 26 source entries, 8 figures.

DELTA DOCTRINES

October 2026 | Open-source analysis. Allegations are attributed to their sources, not asserted as fact.
Not intelligence reporting. Contains no classified material.

CONTENTS

# Contents and reader's note


| Section | Page |
|---|---|
| Executive summary | 3 |
| Methodology and evidence standard | 4 |
| Background and timeline | 5 |
| 1 Scale of the phenomenon: what the counts do and do not show | 6 |
| 2 The ten most prominent reported cases, with case notes | 8 |
| 3 The documented pattern of attacks | 11 |
| 4 The alleged operating model: strategy, financing, logistics and hiring | 12 |
| 5 Deniability: mechanisms, stress tests and erosion | 15 |
| 6 Pakistani media and the information environment | 17 |
| 7 Pakistan's diplomatic record and why it has not travelled | 19 |
| 8 Legal analysis | 21 |
| 9 Strategic effects and escalation risk | 22 |
| 10 Scenarios and indicators to watch | 23 |
| 11 Recommendations and limitations | 24 |
| Appendix A Incident dataset; Appendix B Source register | 25 |


## How to read this paper

**Attribution language.** Almost every statement about who ordered, paid for or carried out these killings is an allegation by someone. This paper therefore writes "alleged", "reported" or "according to" and names the source. Where a fact is established (a person was shot dead in a named city on a named date), it says so and cites the grade of source.

**Confidence terms. High**: confirmed by several independent, reliable sources. **Moderate**: supported by reliable sources but with gaps or some conflict. **Low**: plausible, but rests on anonymous or interested sources. **Unverified**: asserted publicly with no way for us to test it.

**"Unknown gunmen".** In Pakistani police practice a first information report (FIR) is registered against "unknown" suspects until someone is identified. Indian media use the phrase for any unclaimed killing of a militant or associate in Pakistan. The two usages are not the same thing, and the gap between them is part of the story.

**"High-value target".** This is the vocabulary of Indian media and officials. We use "high-profile target" and list who was described that way, without adopting the label as a finding.

## What this paper is not

It is not intelligence reporting. It contains no classified material and does not estimate classified quantities such as an agency's budget or headcount; none has been published, and any figure we gave would be invented. It does not describe tradecraft beyond what officials or courts have publicly alleged, and it offers no guidance that would help anyone plan or conceal such an act. A machine-readable copy of the incident dataset (CSV) accompanies this paper.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Unknown gunmen: what is established, what is alleged

BOTTOM LINE

Open sources document a pattern of unclaimed shootings of militants and their associates in Pakistan between 2020 and mid-2026, concentrated in 2023. That India's external intelligence agency, R&AW, organised them is **credibly alleged but not publicly proven**. The best-evidenced claims are Pakistan's official account of two cases and an investigative report that rests on unnamed officials. India denies the allegations. No court has tested the Pakistani claims, and no independent party has verified them.

## Key findings

1. **The count is contested.** Published tallies range from 2 (Pakistan's formally briefed cases) to 32 (an Indian advocacy list). Our graded dataset holds **19 cases**, of which only **9** are confirmed by Pakistani police, wire services or major outlets with official sourcing. Two-thirds of those nine fall in 2023.
2. **The documented method is consistent.** In the eight best-documented cases, killings were close-range shootings, usually by two or more attackers, often on motorcycles, at routine places: home, a prayer hall, a shop, a road. Similarity of method is not proof of common authorship.
3. **The operating model comes almost entirely from Pakistan.** It alleges handlers abroad, intermediaries recruited in a third country, locally hired shooters and mobile-money payments. Pakistan says most hirelings in two cases were arrested. None of this has been independently verified.
4. **Funding and logistics are unknowable from open sources.** R&AW's budget and staffing are not public. The only price points on record are "millions of rupees" (Pakistani officials, via the Guardian) and the US$100,000 offered in the separate US-based Pannun plot (US Justice Department allegation).
5. **Deniability is structural and eroding.** It rests on local proxies, third-country handlers, a crowded field of alternative culprits and formal denials. It has weakened since the Guardian's April 2024 report, a conditional statement by India's defence minister, and US prosecutions in the Pannun case.
6. **Pakistan has not converted allegation into action.** Its media sit at 153rd of 180 in the 2026 RSF index; its victims were linked to UN-listed groups; the ICJ route is closed by India's Commonwealth reservation; and earlier dossiers drew no Security Council action that we could find.
7. **The risks are escalation, misattribution and precedent.** After the May 2025 conflict, a covert campaign sits on an already narrow escalation ladder.

| Statement | Confidence |
|---|---|
| Militants and associates were shot dead in Pakistan by unidentified attackers, 2020–2026 | High |
| The killings clustered in 2023 | Moderate |
| Documented cases share a close-range, small-team method | Moderate |
| Locally hired shooters were coordinated from abroad | Low (Pakistan's claim; some arrests) |
| Indian state direction (R&AW) | Low (credible allegation, unproven) |
| Funding amounts, R&AW budget, hiring pipeline | Unverified (no public data) |
| Pakistan has not obtained international action on these claims | High |

METHODOLOGY

# Evidence standard and source grading

The question is narrow: *what can be shown, to what standard, about unclaimed killings of militants in Pakistan and the allegation that India's R&AW is behind them?* We searched wire services, Pakistani and Indian press, official statements by both governments, and US and Canadian court reporting on 11 October 2026. We reviewed English-language sources only and had no access to classified or non-public material. Where we relied on a secondary report of a primary source (notably the Guardian's April 2024 investigation, which we read through Dawn, Al Jazeera, Deccan Herald and The Week), we say so.

## Grading the fact of a killing

| Grade | Definition | Cases |
|---|---|---|
| **A** | Confirmed by Pakistani police, an FIR or a wire service (Reuters, AP) or Dawn/Express Tribune reporting from the scene | 5 |
| **B** | Reported by major outlets with Pakistani or Indian official sourcing; some details conflict | 4 |
| **C** | Reported only by Indian media citing unnamed "sources" | 3 |
| **D** | Appears only in aggregator lists or social-media claims | 7 |

## Grading attribution claims

| Tier | Definition | Where the Pakistan record sits |
|---|---|---|
| **T1** | Judicial finding or sworn evidence tested in court | None found for any case in Pakistan. (A US guilty plea exists in the separate Pannun plot.) |
| **T2** | Government allegation with evidence released to the public | Pakistan's 25 January 2024 briefing on two cases (passport copies, alleged confessions, financial links, arrests claimed) |
| **T3** | Investigative journalism citing named or unnamed officials | The Guardian, April 2024 (about 20 killings since 2020; Indian and Pakistani officials quoted anonymously) |
| **T4** | Advocacy, aggregator or viral claim | Indian "lists" of 16 to 32 killings; Lashkar commander video; social-media posts |

## Known data problems

- **Aggregator errors.** An Indian advocacy list dates Bashir Ahmad Peer's killing to February 2022; Reuters and Dawn place it on 20 February 2023. Another list counts a road-accident death.
- **Early reports that were wrong.** PTI reported Amir Sarfaraz Tamba dead within hours of the attack; Dawn then reported him alive and critically wounded; he later died (April 2024).
- **Identity confusion.** Abu Qatal is reported under two different real names; a viral post turned one IC-814 hijacker into two dead hijackers (fact-checked by Newschecker).
- **Search limits.** We cannot rule out cases missing from English-language sources. The dataset is a floor of what we could source, not a census.

BACKGROUND

# How the dispute reached this point

India has accused Pakistan for decades of sheltering and supporting militant groups that attack India; Pakistan denies this and accuses India of backing separatists and militants inside Pakistan [S11]. Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, whose members and associates feature in the incident list, are UN-listed entities under the Security Council's 1267 regime and are proscribed in Pakistan, though India alleges they continue to operate with state tolerance.

The Guardian reported in April 2024 that Indian intelligence officials dated a change in approach to the February 2019 Pulwama bombing: *get to the source*, because the attackers' safe havens were in Pakistan [S1, S3]. Fighting between the two states in February 2019 and again in May 2025, after the Pahalgam massacre of 26 people, shows how short the distance is between a militant attack and open conflict [S24].

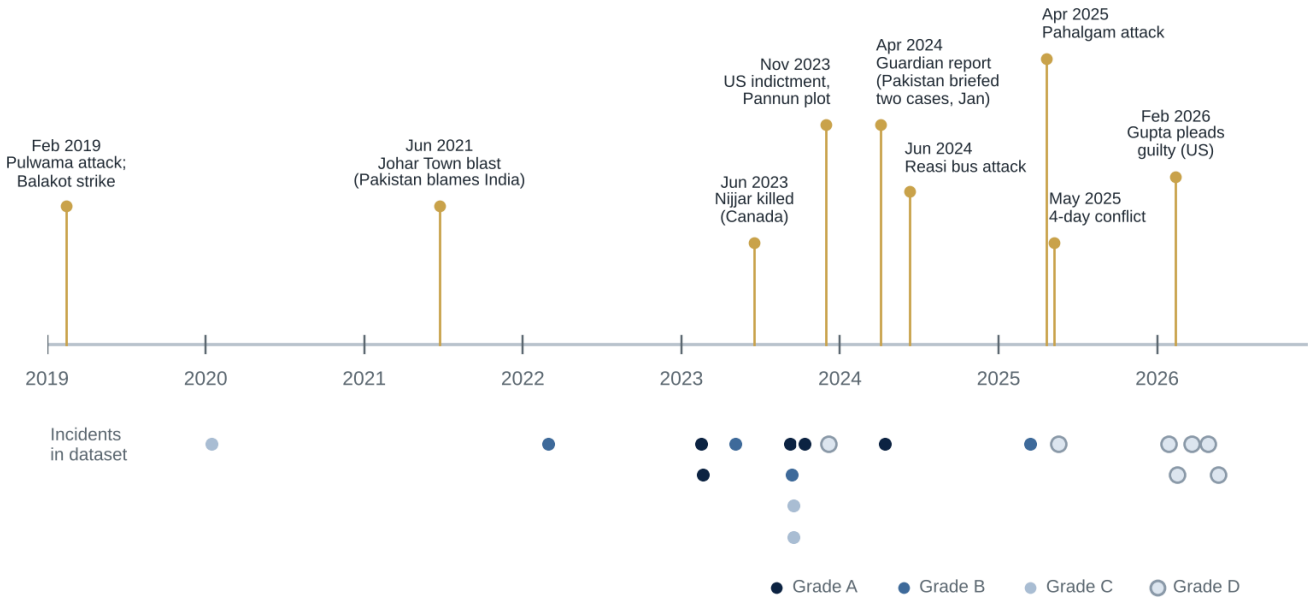



*Figure 1. Context events (gold, above the line) and incidents in this study's dataset (dots, below, shaded by source grade A to D). Sources: see Appendix B; dataset in Appendix A.*

## Three parallel stories

- **Unclaimed killings in Pakistan.** Beginning with a 2020 shooting near Lahore and peaking in 2023, according to our dataset.
- **Pakistani allegations.** A 2021 blast near Hafiz Saeed's Lahore home which Pakistan blamed on India; a 13 October 2023 police chief's press conference; a 25 January 2024 Foreign Secretary briefing on two killings; the 5 April 2024 Foreign Office response to the Guardian [S5, S9, S12].
- **Western prosecutions of a similar alleged model.** The June 2023 killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and the foiled plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York; Nikhil Gupta pleaded guilty in the US in February 2026 and is due to be sentenced on 20 November 2026 [S20]. India denies government involvement.

**WHY THE WESTERN CASES MATTER HERE**

They are the only instances in which a court has tested an allegation of Indian-linked murder-for-hire abroad. They give analysts a comparison for what proof looks like. Nothing equivalent exists, in public, for the killings in Pakistan.

SECTION 1

# Scale: what the counts do and do not show

There is no authoritative number of "unknown gunmen" killings. Six public tallies exist, and they differ by a factor of sixteen. Figure 2 plots each against the body making it and the quality of that body's evidence.

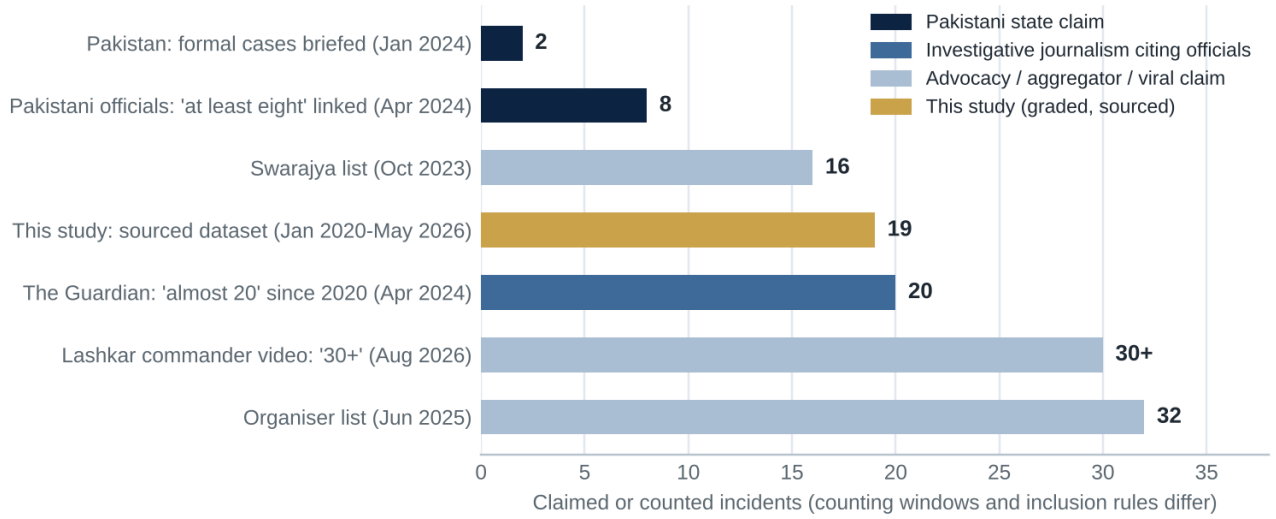



*Figure 2. Published tallies of unclaimed killings, by claimant and evidence tier. Windows and inclusion rules differ, so bars are not directly comparable. Sources: S1, S2, S5, S18 and this study.*

| Tally | What it counts | Weakness |
|---|---|---|
| **2 cases (Pakistan, Jan 2024)** | Killings of Shahid Latif and Muhammad Riaz, where Pakistan says it holds documentary, financial and forensic evidence; "a few other cases" under investigation [S5] | Deliberately narrow; evidence released only in summary |
| **8+ (Pakistani officials, Apr 2024)** | Killings that Pakistani officials told Al Jazeera could be linked to India [S2] | Anonymous; no list published |
| **~20 since 2020 (Guardian, Apr 2024)** | Killings that two Pakistani intelligence agencies suspect India of; the Guardian said its figures matched those of analysts tracking unclaimed killings [S1] | Anonymous officials; full methodology not public |
| **16 (Swarajya, Oct 2023)** | Militants killed by "unknown gunmen", Indian advocacy compilation [S18] | Includes cases we could not confirm; celebratory framing |
| **32 (Organiser, Jun 2025)** | Compilation including a death in a "mysterious road accident" [S18] | Loose inclusion rule; contains dating errors |
| **30+ (Lashkar commander video, Aug 2026)** | An unverified viral video in which a Lashkar figure says more than 30 members were killed over three to four years and blames Indian agencies [S18] | Authenticity and speaker unverified; reported only through Indian outlets |

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

Treat the credible range as roughly **10 to 20 killings** over 2020 to 2024, with the upper half resting on anonymous sourcing. Our 19-case dataset sits inside the published range, but ten of its cases are weakly sourced (grades C and D). Quote a number only with its source and window.

SECTION 1 (CONTINUED)

# When and where: a 2023 cluster

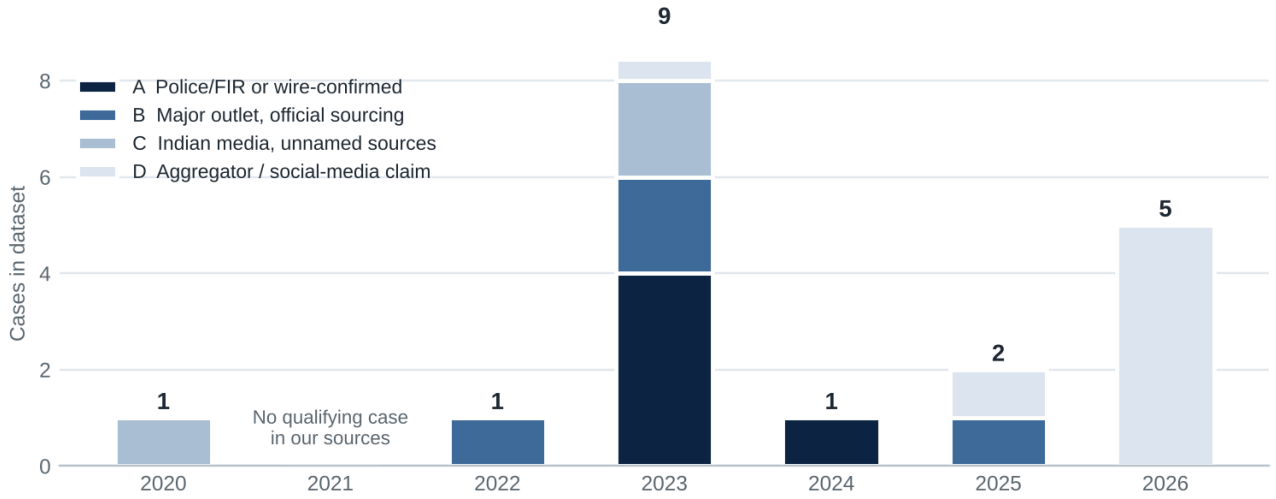



*Figure 3. Cases in the dataset by year and source grade (n = 19). Counts are a floor, not a census. Source: Appendix A.*

**Nine of the 19 cases fall in 2023**, including six of the nine better-sourced cases (grades A and B). That matches the Guardian's account, which credited the rise in 2023 to increased activity by alleged sleeper cells operating from the United Arab Emirates [S1, S4]. A single quiet year in our sources, 2021, is also the year of the Johar Town blast near Hafiz Saeed's house, which Pakistan blamed on India [S12].

**All five 2026 entries are grade D.** They come from a single aggregator list and social-media claims. Either the campaign continues or the aggregator pipeline is generating claims faster than facts. With current sources we cannot tell which, and we do not rely on them for any conclusion.

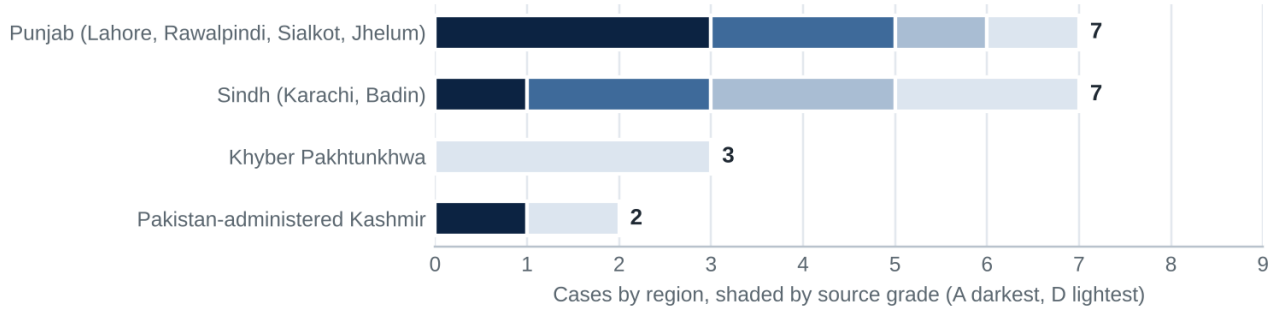



*Figure 4. Cases by region, shaded by source grade. Of the nine better-sourced cases, five are in Punjab, three in Karachi and one in Pakistan-administered Kashmir; none in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Source: Appendix A.*

## What the geography suggests

- **Urban Punjab and Karachi dominate** the better-sourced cases: Lahore (Panjwar, Tamba), Rawalpindi (Peer), Sialkot (Latif), Jhelum (Abu Qatal), Karachi (Raza, Zahoor Ibrahim, Ziaur Rahman). These are large cities where a short-notice approach and exit are practicable.
- **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa claims are weak.** The three KP entries are all grade D. The province also has dense militant-on-militant and anti-state violence, which makes unclaimed shootings there a poor basis for inference.
- **Targets are tied to attacks on India.** Indian media link victims to the 1999 IC-814 hijacking, the 2016 Pathankot attack, the January 2023 Rajouri attack and the June 2024 Reasi attack (Section 4). That is a pattern in how the killings are described in India, not evidence of who ordered them.

SECTION 2

# The ten most prominent reported cases

Indian media describe most of these victims as high-value targets. We rank cases by **quality of documentation first, then prominence**, not by any official list. Saifullah Khalid (May 2025) and the 2026 cases are excluded from the ten because they rest on grade D sources only.

| # | Date | Target and affiliation (as reported) | Place | Reported method | Gr. | Attribution status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 11 Oct 2023 | **Shahid Latif**, Jaish-e-Mohammed; Indian media: aide of Masood Azhar, linked to 2016 Pathankot attack | Daska, Sialkot | Two gunmen posing as worshippers fired in a mosque; a guard also killed | A | **Pakistan alleges Indian agents** (Jan 2024); arrests claimed |
| 2 | 8 Sep 2023 | **Muhammad Riaz** (Abu Qasim Kashmiri); ex-Jamaat-ud-Dawa activist; Indian media: Dhangri attack conspirator | Rawalakot, AJK | Fajr prayer; helmeted gunman fired four rounds, accomplice waited outside (FIR) | A | **Pakistan alleges Indian agent** (Jan 2024) |
| 3 | 6 May 2023 | **Paramjit Singh Panjwar**, Khalistan Commando Force | Lahore, Johar Town | About 06:00 walk near home; two on a motorcycle; bodyguard present | B | Named in Guardian coverage; no official Pakistani attribution |
| 4 | 1 Mar 2022 | **Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim**, IC-814 hijacker living as "Zahid" | Karachi, Akhtar Colony | Four men entered his furniture shop; four to five shots | B | Indian officials identify him; police first cited "personal rivalry" |
| 5 | 20 Feb 2023 | **Bashir Ahmad Peer** (Imtiyaz Alam), Hizbul Mujahideen | Rawalpindi | Shot by assailants on a motorcycle | A | Not officially attributed |
| 6 | 14 Apr 2024 | **Amir Sarfaraz Tamba**, accused in the 2013 Sarabjit Singh killing; Saeed associate | Lahore, Islampura | Two motorcyclists entered house; four shots (two chest, two legs) | A | Not officially attributed |
| 7 | 15 Mar 2025 | **Abu Qatal**, Lashkar operations commander; name reported two ways | Dina, Jhelum | Motorcycle assailants fired on his jeep; guard also killed | B | Not officially attributed |
| 8 | 12 Sep 2023 | **Ziaur Rahman**, administrator, Jamia Abu Bakar; Lashkar-linked | Karachi | Evening walk; two motorcycle riders; 11 cartridges incl. 9mm | B | Police: "terrorist attack" |
| 9 | Feb 2023 | **Syed Khalid Raza**, former Al-Badr commander | Karachi | Police: "targeted attack" (no further detail) | A | Not officially attributed |
| 10 | Sep 2023 | **Mufti Qaiser Farooq**, reported Saeed associate | Karachi | Unidentified gunmen (Indian media only) | C | Not officially attributed |

*Table 1. Ten most prominent reported cases. Sources by row: S5, S9, S10, S11, S12 (rows 1–2); S15 (3); S14 (4); S11, S10 (5, 9); S16 (6); S17 (7); S13 (8, 10).*

## Reading the table

- **Only two of the ten carry a formal Pakistani attribution** (rows 1 and 2). For the other eight, the attribution is that of Indian media lists and, in Panjwar's case, the Guardian.
- **Indian outlets tie at least six of the ten** (Latif, Riaz, Panjwar, Zahoor Ibrahim, Tamba, Abu Qatal) to specific attacks on India or past cases; that is the common thread in Indian descriptions, not a finding about who killed them.
- **Three victims had a guard or bodyguard at the scene** (Latif, Panjwar, Abu Qatal); protection did not prevent the attacks.

SECTION 2 (CONTINUED)

# Case notes I: the three most documented killings

## Shahid Latif, Daska (Sialkot), 11 October 2023

**Reported.** Latif was shot dead with a security guard at a mosque in Mundeke Chowk, Daska; another person was wounded [S12]. Police called it targeted killing [S9]. AP reported the gunmen posed as worshippers [S7]. Indian media describe him as an aide of Jaish founder Masood Azhar and a suspect in the 2016 Pathankot attack; Pakistan registered a case against "unknown suspects" over Pathankot in 2016 [S7].

**Alleged.** Punjab's police chief said on 13 October 2023 that the attack was financed and planned from abroad by a hostile agency, that most of those involved had been arrested, and that police had identified both the reconnaissance and the shooters [S9]. On 25 January 2024 the Foreign Secretary said an Indian agent based in a third country recruited a labourer there, who contacted local criminals; a first attempt on 9 October failed; the labourer then travelled to Pakistan, assembled a team of five and succeeded. He said Pakistan holds confessional statements and records of financial transactions and communications [S5, S6].

**Gaps.** We found no public charge sheet, trial record or independent corroboration. The two alleged handlers were identified only through passport details released at a press briefing. India called the claims false and malicious propaganda [S8].

## Muhammad Riaz (Abu Qasim Kashmiri), Rawalakot, 8 September 2023

**Reported.** A former Jamaat-ud-Dawa activist was shot while offering Fajr prayers in the Al-Quds mosque. The FIR says a helmeted man in the second row fired four bullets while a second man waited on the veranda; both fled [S10]. Reuters noted it was the third such killing of 2023, after Peer and Raza in February [S11].

**Alleged.** A Muzaffarabad activist blamed R&AW within hours [S10]. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary later said a second Indian agent was behind the killing, citing documentary, financial and forensic evidence [S5]. As with Latif, no court record is public.

## Paramjit Singh Panjwar, Lahore, 6 May 2023

**Reported.** The Khalistan Commando Force leader, sheltered in Lahore for decades according to Indian outlets, was shot near his Johar Town home about 06:00 by two men on a motorcycle [S15]. Reports conflict on whether the bodyguard wounded or killed one assailant. His family were reported to be in Germany.

**Alleged.** Pakistani press summaries of the Guardian's April 2024 report name Panjwar among the killings in which it found RAW involvement [S1]. Pakistan has not briefed his case.

| What is public | Latif | Riaz | Panjwar |
|---|---|---|---|
| **FIR or police statement** | Yes (police statement, Oct 2023) | Yes (FIR quoted by Dawn) | Press reports citing security sources |
| **Official Pakistani attribution to India** | Yes (Jan 2024) | Yes (Jan 2024) | No |
| **Arrests announced** | Yes, "most" (not named) | Yes, "most" (not named) | Not found |
| **Evidence released** | Summary, two passport copies | Summary, same two passports | None |
| **Court record or charge sheet** | Not found | Not found | Not found |

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

Latif and Riaz are the only cases where a government has put a specific allegation on the record with released evidence. That evidence has not been tested in an open court. Treat them as **tier T2**: serious, specific and untested.

SECTION 2 (CONTINUED)

# Case notes II: the remaining cases

**Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim, Karachi, 1 March 2022**

Four men entered a furniture shop in Akhtar Colony and fired four to five times [S14]. Pakistani media identified the victim as "Zahid", 44; the senior police officer for Karachi East initially pointed to personal rivalry. Indian officials said he was Ibrahim, a Harkat-ul-Mujahideen member among the five IC-814 hijackers in 1999, living under an assumed name. A brother of Masood Azhar reportedly attended the funeral [S14].

**Bashir Ahmad Peer, Rawalpindi, 20 February 2023, and Syed Khalid Raza, Karachi, late February 2023**

Peer, a former Hizbul Mujahideen commander, was shot by assailants on a motorcycle; Raza, 55, a former Al-Badr commander, was killed in what police called a targeted attack [S10, S11]. Indian outlets place Peer's killing near military and intelligence installations in Rawalpindi [S13].

**Ziaur Rahman and Mufti Qaiser Farooq, Karachi, September 2023**

Rahman, an administrator at the Jamia Abu Bakar seminary, was killed on 12 September by two motorcycle riders on his evening walk; police recovered 11 cartridges, some 9mm, and called it a terrorist attack [S13]. Farooq, described by Indian media as a Hafiz Saeed associate, was killed days later in Karachi; details are thin and grade C. An Indian report said Pakistan's ISI moved some of its "assets" afterwards; this is unverified [S13].

**Amir Sarfaraz Tamba, Lahore, 14 April 2024**

Two motorcyclists entered his home in Islampura and shot him four times; his brother filed the FIR [S16]. He was acquitted in 2018 of the 2013 killing of Indian prisoner Sarabjit Singh after witnesses retracted. Early reports said he was dead, then alive, before he died, a reminder of how unreliable first-day reporting is [S16].

**Abu Qatal, Jhelum, 15 March 2025**

He and his guard were shot on the Dina road near Jhelum by motorcycle assailants; the driver was wounded [S17]. Indian media call him Lashkar's operations commander and link him to the January 2023 Rajouri and June 2024 Reasi attacks, and say he had Pakistani Army protection. His real name is reported as both Zia-ur-Rehman and Faisal Nadeem. No official attribution exists.

**Cases outside the top ten**

Harmeet Singh "Happy PhD" (Khalistan Liberation Force, January 2020, near Lahore) is the earliest case in the dataset and rests on Indian media reports only (grade C). Adnan Ahmed (Hanzala Adnan, December 2023, Karachi), Saifullah Khalid (May 2025, Badin) and five 2026 entries appear only on aggregator lists (grade D) and are not profiled here.

## Patterns across the case notes

- **Contradictory early accounts are the norm**: police versus Indian officials on Zahoor Ibrahim; dead versus alive for Tamba; two names for Abu Qatal; wounded versus killed assailant in Panjwar.
- **Pakistani authorities have framed most cases as ordinary terrorism or crime** at first ("personal rivalry", "terrorist attack"), then, in two cases, as foreign-sponsored murder.
- **Indian descriptions of victims lean on past attacks**, which is how a retaliation or prevention narrative is built even when nothing is known about who fired.

Table 2 in Section 4 lists the grievance each Indian outlet attaches to each victim.

SECTION 3

# The documented pattern of attacks

This section describes only what court filings, FIRs, police statements and wire reports say about the eight best-documented attacks (grades A and B with attack details). It is observational and does not extend beyond what has been published.

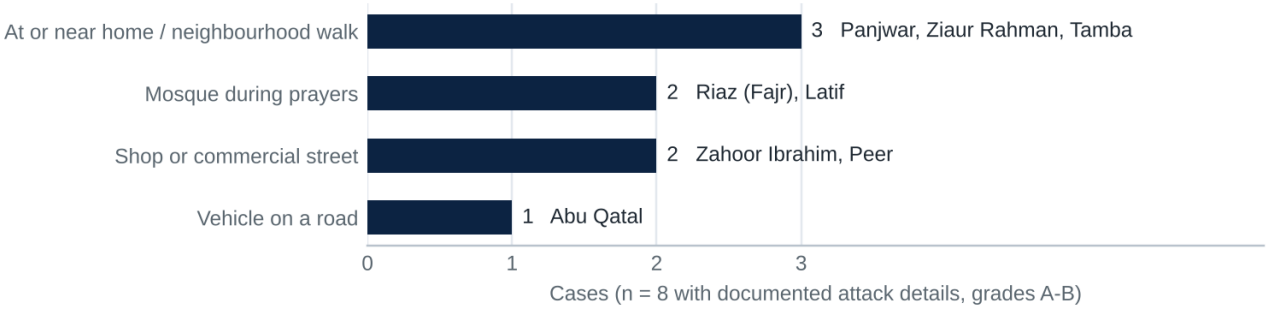



*Figure 5. Settings of the eight documented attacks. Source: Appendix A.*

| Feature | Where documented | Cases (of 8) | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Close-range firearm** | Cartridge cases incl. 9mm in Karachi (Ziaur Rahman); four rounds at Riaz; four shots at Tamba; four to five shots at Zahoor Ibrahim | At least 4 | No unusual weapon reported; pistols are common in Pakistan's criminal and militant violence |
| **Two or more attackers** | Panjwar (2), Ziaur Rahman (2), Riaz (shooter plus accomplice), Latif (2), Tamba (2), Zahoor Ibrahim (4) | 6 | Consistent with Pakistan's "team of five" account for Latif |
| **Motorcycle approach or exit** | Panjwar, Ziaur Rahman, Tamba, Peer, Abu Qatal | 5 | Also typical of Karachi and Punjab street crime and sectarian killings |
| **Routine setting and time** | Fajr prayer (Riaz); 06:00 walk (Panjwar); evening walk (Ziaur Rahman); afternoon at home (Tamba); evening drive (Abu Qatal) | 5 | Indicates prior surveillance of routines, as Punjab's police chief said of the Latif case |
| **Victim had a guard** | Latif (guard killed); Panjwar (bodyguard); Abu Qatal (guard killed, driver wounded) | 3 | Armed protection did not stop attacks |
| **No claim of responsibility** | All cases | 8 | Common to all; also common to unrelated killings |

## What this does not show

Method is weak evidence of authorship. Close-range motorcycle shootings by small teams are standard in Karachi's criminal and sectarian violence and in militant feuds. Pakistan itself drew a parallel with the method used in the Canada and US cases [S6], but the Nijjar killing involved gunmen at a temple car park and the Pannun plot involved a hired intermediary: similar outlines, very different evidence. A fair reading is that the documented attacks are **consistent with** a professionalised hiring model but equally with other explanations; only the evidence behind Pakistan's two briefed cases points more specifically.

> ANALYST JUDGEMENT
> A common signature across cases is suggestive, not probative. Prior surveillance of routines, access to a motorcycle and a willingness to attack protected men in places such as a mosque describe capability and intent that many actors in Pakistan have.

SECTION 4

# The alleged operating model (a): strategy

READ THIS FIRST

Everything in Section 4 is an **allegation**, mostly by Pakistani investigators and anonymous officials. R&AW has published nothing about its operations, and India denies the allegations. The agency was set up in 1968 and sits in the Cabinet Secretariat, answerable to the Prime Minister; to our knowledge it has no published statutory charter and its budget is not itemised publicly.

## Stated rationale

The Guardian reported two Indian intelligence officers saying the approach changed after Pulwama (2019): neutralise people *outside* India before they can launch attacks, because safe havens in Pakistan made defensive counter-terrorism insufficient [S1, S3]. Pakistani summaries of the report add that the policy was directed from the top of the Indian government and that officials cited the 2018 Khashoggi killing as a precedent [S4, S26]. These are anonymous claims reproduced second-hand.

## India's public position

| Statement | Speaker, date | Reading |
|---|---|---|
| Targeted killings abroad are "not the government of India's policy" | Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar (cited by India's MEA, April 2024) [S1] | Formal denial |
| Pakistan's allegations are "false and malicious" propaganda | MEA spokesperson, 25 Jan and 5 Apr 2024 [S8, S2] | Formal denial |
| If militants "run away to Pakistan, we will enter Pakistan to kill them" | Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, 5 Apr 2024 [S21] | Conditional; Pakistan called it an admission; the Guardian read it as India's first acknowledgement |
| India would be comfortable being linked to the Pakistan hits, though it has not acknowledged them | Michael Kugelman (Wilson Center), analysis, May 2024 [S19] | Analyst view of strategic ambiguity |

## Target logic as described by Indian media

| Victim | Grievance attached by Indian outlets | Source grade |
|---|---|---|
| **Shahid Latif** | Alleged planner of the 2016 Pathankot airbase attack | A (killing); C (grievance) |
| **Muhammad Riaz** | Alleged conspirator, Rajouri/Dhangri attack, January 2023 | A; C |
| **Abu Qatal** | Alleged Lashkar operations commander; Rajouri (2023) and Reasi bus attack (June 2024) | B; C |
| **Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim** | IC-814 hijacking (1999) and a passenger's murder | B; B |
| **Amir Sarfaraz Tamba** | Accused in the 2013 killing of Indian prisoner Sarabjit Singh | A; B |
| **Panjwar, Peer** | Khalistan Commando Force leader; Hizbul "launching chief" | B / A; C |

*Table 2. Grievances attached to victims by Indian media. They describe motive as Indian outlets see it; they do not prove who acted.*

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

The reported targets fit two logics at once: **retribution** for past attacks (Zahoor Ibrahim, Tamba, Latif) and **prevention** of future ones (Abu Qatal, Riaz). Both logics are consistent with the Guardian's account of a post-2019 shift, but consistency is not proof.

SECTION 4 (CONTINUED)

# The alleged operating model (b): financing

Open sources contain no financial data about R&AW. Intelligence budgets are secret, and no leak, audit or parliamentary disclosure has put a figure into the public domain. Any estimate of the agency's funding for such operations would be fabrication, so none is given. What exists is a handful of allegations about the *payments to hirelings*:

| Financial claim | Source | Corroboration | Our view |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sleeper cells paid "millions of rupees" to local criminals or poor Pakistanis [S26] | Pakistani investigators, via the Guardian, April 2024 | None public; Guardian said it saw documents on seven cases | Low |
| Payments moved through mobile-money channels such as EasyPaisa and JazzCash [S8] | Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, 25 Jan 2024 | Pakistan says it holds transaction records | Low to moderate (specific, but untested) |
| Financial transactions link the local network to Indian handlers [S6] | Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, 25 Jan 2024 | Not released beyond summary | Low |
| Financial statements were among documents on seven inquiries [S1] | Dawn summary of the Guardian report | Documents not published | Unverified |
| A US$100,000 payment was offered for the Pannun murder [S20] | US Justice Department allegation; DEA and FBI officials | Guilty plea by Nikhil Gupta (Feb 2026) | High (US case, not Pakistan) |

*Table 3. Financial claims and their evidential status. Sources as marked.*

## Putting the numbers in context

- **"Millions of rupees".** At 2023 exchange rates of roughly PKR 280 to 300 per US dollar, each million rupees is about US$3,300 to US$3,600. A payment of several million rupees to a team would therefore sit in the low tens of thousands of dollars, which is similar in order of magnitude to the US$100,000 price offered in the Pannun plot, though that plot involved one target and an intermediary working with US agents.
- **Mobile money leaves records.** If Pakistan's account is accurate, retail payment channels are the part of such a chain most visible to local investigators, which is how Pakistan says it traced the Latif case. That is an *evidential* observation: the proxy model, as alleged, trades operational distance for forensic exposure at the lowest tier.
- **Criminal-for-hire in Canada.** The Wire reports that US authorities unsealed a separate indictment charging jailed gangster Lawrence Bishnoi and associates with conspiring to murder Nijjar; we have not independently verified it [S20]. If accurate, it points to the use of organised-crime networks as hired hands in the Western cases, as Pakistan alleges in its own.

## What would count as proof

A traceable chain from an Indian state source to the handler, from the handler to the intermediary, and from the intermediary to the shooters, supported by independently verified transaction records and phone data, produced in a court that both sides can see. The Gupta case is the nearest example in the public record. Nothing at that level has been published about the Pakistan killings.

> ANALYST JUDGEMENT
> Funding for the alleged campaign is **unquantifiable** from open sources. The only defensible statement is that the alleged payments to local hirelings are small relative to any state intelligence budget, so cost is not a constraint on such a programme.

SECTION 4 (CONTINUED)

# The alleged operating model (c): logistics and hiring

Pakistan's account has a consistent shape. Intelligence officials told the Guardian that handlers worked for about two years to establish sleeper cells in the UAE, which "separately arrange different parts of the operation and recruit the killers" [S3]. Meetings of handlers were said to have taken place in Nepal, the Maldives and Mauritius [S1]. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary added that Indian agents used technology and safe havens on foreign soil and recruited "criminals, terrorists and unsuspecting civilians" [S5].

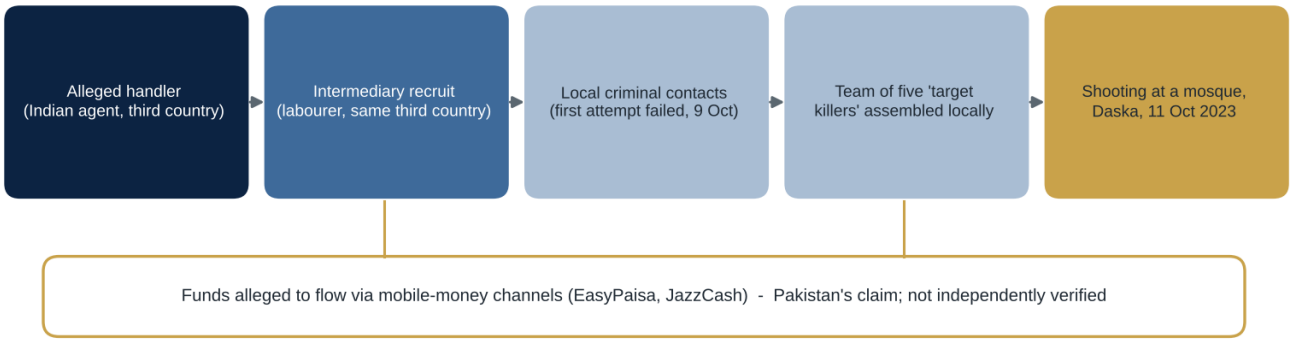



*Figure 6. The chain alleged by Pakistan for the 11 October 2023 killing of Shahid Latif. Source: Foreign Secretary's briefing, 25 January 2024 [S5, S6, S8]. Not independently verified.*

| Alleged element | Source | Corroboration | Our view |
|---|---|---|---|
| Handlers abroad, mostly in the UAE | Pakistani investigators via the Guardian [S1, S3] | None public; UAE has not commented in sources we found | Low |
| Third-country intermediaries (a labourer in the case of Latif) | Foreign Secretary [S5, S6] | Alleged confessions; not released | Low |
| A 20-year-old with little schooling, hired while working in a warehouse in the UAE | Guardian, as relayed by secondary sites [S26] | Not verified by us | Unverified |
| Local criminals used for reconnaissance and shooting, with failed first attempts | Foreign Secretary; Punjab police chief [S5, S9] | Pakistan says most were arrested | Low to moderate |
| Evidence types: WhatsApp messages, passports, arrest records, witness statements | Guardian via Dawn [S1] | Not published | Unverified |

*Table 4. Logistics and hiring claims. "Our view" is the confidence that the claim is accurate, not a judgement on motive.*

## What is, and is not, known about hiring

- **Known (alleged by Pakistan):** expendable local third parties do the shooting; recruiters are foreign-based; at least two cases involved multiple failed or staged attempts.
- **Not public:** how R&AW selects officers for such tasks, any training, cover or legal framework, and the identity of any handler other than two individuals named by Pakistan. Open sources say nothing credible about these, and we do not speculate.
- **Contrast with the Western cases.** In the US case, the alleged intermediary dealt with an undercover US agent. That is why the evidence is firm; no equivalent exists in Pakistan.

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

As alleged, the model outsources the dangerous end of the work to people who can be arrested and who have no formal link to India. That limits attribution but creates witnesses, phones and payments, the three kinds of evidence Pakistan says it holds. The open question is not whether such evidence exists but whether it is real, and whether anyone independent will ever see it.

SECTION 5

# Deniability: how it is built

Plausible deniability is not one device. It is a stack of features that raise the cost of proving attribution and lower the cost of denying it. The record points to six, each with a weakness the evidence has already exposed.

| Mechanism | How it appears in the record | Weakness |
|---|---|---|
| **1 Local proxies** | Pakistan says hired criminals and labourers did the shooting, not Indian officers [S5] | Arrests produce confessions, phones and payment records, which Pakistan says it holds |
| **2 Third-country orchestration** | Handlers said to be in the UAE and meetings in Nepal, the Maldives and Mauritius [S1, S3] | Needs a host state's cooperation to prove; none has been reported |
| **3 Ambiguous framing at the scene** | Police first said "personal rivalry" (Zahoor Ibrahim) or "terrorist attack" (Ziaur Rahman) [S13, S14] | Later Pakistani statements reversed the framing in two cases |
| **4 Crowded field of alternative culprits** | Militant feuds, sectarian groups, criminal gangs, the Pakistani Taliban and Islamic State all kill in Pakistan | Does not explain cases where only India-wanted men were hit |
| **5 No claim of responsibility** | All cases are unclaimed | A pattern across cases can itself invite attribution |
| **6 Formal denial plus calibrated ambiguity** | MEA denials; Jaishankar's "not policy"; Rajnath Singh's conditional remark [S1, S21] | Rhetoric can read as admission, as Pakistan's Foreign Office argued [S21] |

*Table 5. Deniability mechanisms. Sources as marked.*

## Where deniability is eroding

- **Indian voices.** The Guardian reported that serving Indian intelligence personnel discussed the alleged operations, which is new; India's Home Ministry called the allegations "false and malicious" [S3].
- **A defence minister's remark.** The Guardian reported Rajnath Singh's statement as India's first public acknowledgement of killings by its operatives abroad [S21]. The text is conditional and a reasonable reader can disagree; the effect is that India's rhetoric is now compatible with the allegation.
- **Western courts.** In the Pannun case a US court has a guilty plea and an indictment alleging an Indian official directed the plot. That does not prove anything about Pakistan, but it lowers the credibility of blanket denial [S20].

## Why Indian deniability may matter less at home

Kugelman's reading was that India has not denied the Pannun plot outright and would not mind being linked to the hits in Pakistan, given the rivalry and the political value of projecting strength [S19]. That suggests deniability is aimed at **third countries and courts**, not at the domestic audience, which tends to welcome the killings (Section 6).

> ANALYST JUDGEMENT
>
> Deniability here is best described as **strategic ambiguity**: a state does not need to be believed, only to be unprovable to the audience whose reaction matters. For Pakistan that audience is not its own public but third-country governments and courts. The next page shows why that audience is hard to reach.

SECTION 5 (CONTINUED)

# Stress tests: when does deniability hold?

Comparing outcomes in other well-documented cases suggests a rule: **deniability collapses where a host jurisdiction with independent investigators and a willing court is involved**, and holds longest where the host state is the adversary and third parties discount its evidence.

| Case | Year | What the public record shows | Outcome for deniability |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Khashoggi, Istanbul consulate** | 2018 | Turkish recordings and a UN rapporteur's investigation; Saudi Arabia shifted its account | Collapsed within weeks |
| **Litvinenko, London** | 2006 (inquiry 2016) | UK public inquiry found the operation was probably approved at the top of Russia's FSB and by President Putin; Russia denies | Collapsed in the UK; denial persists at home |
| **Skripal, Salisbury** | 2018 | UK identified two Russian military intelligence officers; Russia denies | Collapsed outside Russia |
| **Pannun plot, New York** | 2023–2026 | US indictment alleges an Indian official directed the plot; Gupta pleaded guilty in Feb 2026; India says it is against policy [S20] | Weakened in the US; denial persists |
| **Nijjar, British Columbia** | 2023 | Canada alleged Indian government links; three Canadians were arrested in 2024; a further US indictment is reported [S20] | Contested; no public proof of state direction |
| **Killings in Pakistan** | 2020–2026 | Pakistan alleges Indian agents in two cases; no court record; India denies [S5] | Holds, at tier T2 |

*Table 6. Comparative cases. Sources: S19, S20 and widely reported public records for the non-South Asian cases.*

## Why Pakistan's cases look different

- **Host-state credibility.** In Istanbul, London, Salisbury, New York and Surrey the host state was a government whose findings other governments tend to accept. Pakistan's findings face an immediate discount: India calls them propaganda, and Pakistan's earlier dossiers drew no recorded action (Section 7).
- **Victim profile.** The Western victims were exiles, journalists or activists. The Pakistani victims are accused of militancy against India, some belonging to UN-listed organisations, so third governments feel little pressure to take up their cases.
- **No third-party evidence.** The US case was built around an undercover US agent. In Pakistan's cases the evidence is said to be generated by Pakistani security agencies, whose independence others cannot test.
- **Weaker alternative explanations in the West.** In Pakistan, unexplained killings of militants are common and attributable to many actors, so "unknown" is a plausible default.

## Attribution checklist applied to Pakistan's allegations

| Test | Met? | Basis |
|---|---|---|
| **Independent investigators with access to evidence** | No | Pakistani agencies lead; no neutral body has reviewed the files |
| **Court-tested evidence** | No | No charge sheet or trial record found |
| **Third-country corroboration** | No | No public cooperation or statement from the UAE or others |
| **Insider testimony** | Partly | Anonymous Indian officers quoted by the Guardian; not on the record |
| **Official acknowledgement** | Partly | Conditional ministerial remark; formal denial stands |

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

India's deniability is **durable in Pakistan's cases** and **fragile in Western cases**. That asymmetry shapes behaviour: the less exposure to Western courts, the lower the risk of attribution. It also means the next serious test of the Pakistan allegations is likely to come through a third-country proceeding, not a Pakistani one.

SECTION 6

# Pakistani media: why a story is told but not built

The premise that Pakistani media "cannot make a case" needs refining. They have covered the killings in detail: Dawn reported the Riaz FIR line by line [S10], Express Tribune and the Friday Times covered Tamba and Latif [S12, S16], and Dawn carried the Guardian's allegations and Pakistan's responses at length [S1]. What the media are poorly placed to do is **investigate independently, test official claims, or follow cases to trial**.

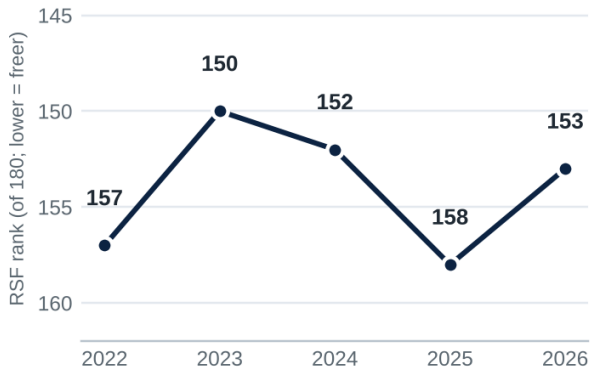



*Figure 7. Pakistan's rank in the RSF World Press Freedom Index (lower is freer; 180 countries). Sources: S22.*

### The constraints, with evidence

- **Ranking.** 157th in 2022, 150th in 2023, 152nd in 2024, 158th in 2025 and 153rd in 2026; the 2025 drop came as amendments to the electronic-crimes law (PECA) passed, with a new authority able to remove content judged contrary to the "ideology of Pakistan" [S22].
- **Foreign media.** In August 2026 reporting said anyone working for foreign media, including Pakistani citizens, needs government permission to report from outside Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore [S22]. Several of the killings occurred outside those three cities.

## Structural reasons the story stalls

| Constraint | Evidence | Effect |
|---|---|---|
| **Sensitivity of victim identity** | Many victims are linked to groups Pakistan has proscribed; Indian media allege some had state protection (Abu Qatal) [S17] | Reporting who the victims were can contradict the official line |
| **Official sourcing** | Police framed cases as "personal rivalry" or "terrorist attack" before later statements; briefings delivered by the state [S9, S13, S14] | Media become amplifiers of whichever line the state adopts |
| **Access** | Cases involve security agencies; FIRs name "unknown" suspects; arrests announced in bulk with no names [S9] | Reporters cannot reach suspects or evidence |
| **Legal risk** | PECA amendments and broad content-removal powers [S22] | Self-censorship on national-security stories |
| **Early attribution came from activists** | A Muzaffarabad activist named R&AW hours after the Riaz killing; the state endorsed that framing months later [S10, S5] | Narrative led by advocates, then adopted by the state |

### What a stronger media case would need

- Publication of FIRs, charge sheets and remand orders for the arrested hirelings, so reporters can test the official account.
- Access for reporters outside the three permitted cities, and protection for those covering security cases.
- Independent forensic or financial analysis commissioned by a newsroom or academic body, rather than state briefings alone.

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

Press freedom is a **necessary but not sufficient** condition for building a case. Even a freer press would face the same obstacle as the state: no independent party can see the underlying evidence. The limit on a media case is therefore as much about evidence as about censorship.

SECTION 6 (CONTINUED)

# The information environment: a contest of claims

Both governments and both national media ecosystems use these killings in a narrative contest, which degrades the quality of public information. Four patterns stand out.

## 1. Celebration and compilation in India

Indian outlets and advocacy sites have published running "lists" with triumphant headlines. Organiser's June 2025 compilation is headlined as "unknown gunmen" delivering justice, and its web address speaks of cleaning up filth; Swarajya's September 2023 list is titled around anti-India operatives "meeting their end" [S18]. These lists include unverified cases, dating errors and non-shooting deaths, and have become the source of the highest tallies in circulation.

## 2. Condemnation and framing in Pakistan

Pakistan's Foreign Office calls the pattern a "global phenomenon" requiring a coordinated international response, asserts breach of the UN Charter, and treated the Indian defence minister's remark as a "clear admission of culpability" [S1, S21]. Its information minister urged the international community to take notice [S21]. These statements are advocacy by a party to the dispute.

## 3. Viral claims

In August 2026 Indian outlets amplified a video in which a Lashkar figure was said to admit that more than 30 members were killed by unknown gunmen and to blame Indian agencies [S18]. We could not verify the speaker, the date or the context; the claim is grade D.

## 4. Early-report errors

| Case | Early report | Later or conflicting report | Lesson |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Amir Sarfaraz Tamba (Apr 2024)** | PTI: killed in Lahore | Dawn: alive and critically wounded; he died later in hospital [S16] | First-day reports are unreliable |
| **Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim (Mar 2022)** | Pakistani agency: "Zahid", a businessman; police: personal rivalry | Indian officials: an IC-814 hijacker living under a false identity [S14] | Identity is itself contested |
| **IC-814 hijackers (Mar 2022)** | Social post: second hijacker killed | Newschecker: same person under another name [S14] | Viral duplication |
| **Bashir Ahmad Peer** | Indian list: killed Feb 2022 | Reuters and Dawn: killed 20 Feb 2023 [S10, S11] | Aggregator dating errors |
| **Panjwar (May 2023)** | Bodyguard shot dead one assailant | Other reports: assailant wounded [S15] | Conflicting detail on the same event |
| **Abu Qatal (Mar 2025)** | Reported as Zia-ur-Rehman | Reported as Faisal Nadeem [S17] | Alias confusion |

*Table 7. Observed reporting errors and conflicts. Sources as marked.*

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

Practitioners should treat any single list, headline or viral clip about "unknown gunmen" as a lead, not a fact. A defensible dataset needs two independent confirmations of the fact of a killing before anything is said about who did it, and a separate evidence grade for attribution.

SECTION 7

# Pakistan's diplomatic record: what has been tried

Pakistan has taken the allegation of Indian-sponsored violence to the international community several times, and its Foreign Office describes the 2024 briefing as providing irrefutable evidence [S21]. We found no Security Council resolution or presidential statement that adopts Pakistan's claims.

| Date | Action | Audience | Content | Result found |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Oct 2016; 6 Jan 2017 | Dossiers delivered to UN Secretary-General | UN, Security Council members | Alleged Indian interference in Balochistan, former tribal areas and Karachi [S23] | No Council action found |
| 14–24 Nov 2020 | Public dossier; P5 ambassadors briefed (16 Nov); dossier handed to the Secretary-General (24 Nov) | UN, OIC, P5 | Claimed Indian support for militant groups and 87 camps [S23] | Pakistan's envoy said the Secretary-General promised to study it; India called it a "dossier of lies" |
| Dec 2022 | Punjab counter-terrorism police disclose findings on the 2021 Johar Town blast | Domestic | Alleged Indian role in the 2021 bombing near Hafiz Saeed's house [S12] | No international follow-up found |
| 13 Oct 2023 | Punjab police chief's press conference on the Latif killing | Domestic and media | Foreign planning, financing; most suspects arrested [S9] | No court record found |
| 25 Jan 2024 | Foreign Secretary's briefing on two killings; passport details released | Local and foreign media, diplomats | Documentary, financial and forensic evidence of two alleged Indian agents [S5, S7] | India: false and malicious; no third-party endorsement found |
| 5–6 Apr 2024 | Foreign Office responses to the Guardian and Rajnath Singh | International community | "Global phenomenon"; breach of UN Charter [S1, S21] | No collective response found |

*Table 8. Pakistan's diplomatic and public actions on alleged Indian-sponsored violence.*

## Reading the record

- **The same format each time:** a press briefing or dossier, then rapid rebuttal by India, then silence. That pattern is typical of a dispute where each side's evidence is not accepted by the other.
- **2020 and 2024 are different in kind.** The 2020 dossier alleged support for militant groups (TTP, BLA and others) and used broad claims. The 2024 briefing is narrower: two named killings, named alleged agents, and a hired-killer chain. A narrower claim is harder to dismiss, but it has still not been judicially tested.
- **No multilateral forum has taken it up.** The Security Council is unlikely to take up allegations against a member whose relations with several permanent members are close, and India held a Council seat in 2021 and 2022.
- **Pakistan's own call is for a "coordinated international response"** but it has not, in sources we found, put forward a draft resolution, requested a Human Rights Council inquiry, or asked the UAE or any other state for mutual legal assistance in public.

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

Pakistan has used the **press conference** as its main instrument. A press conference signals a claim; it does not generate the evidentiary chain a foreign court or the Security Council needs. The gap between the two is the story of this section.

SECTION 7 (CONTINUED)

# Why the dossier has not travelled

Six structural reasons explain why Pakistan's claims have not gained international traction. They interact, and some are outside Pakistan's control.

| Constraint | Evidence | What would change it |
|---|---|---|
| **1 Forum closed** | India's optional-clause declaration to the ICJ excludes disputes with Commonwealth states; in the 2000 Aerial Incident case the Court held it had no jurisdiction over Pakistan's claim against India | India's consent, or a UN General Assembly advisory request (politically unlikely) |
| **2 Security Council politics** | A resolution needs nine votes and no permanent-member veto; India holds close ties with several permanent members; no Council action found on 2016–2020 dossiers [S23] | A shift in the P5 view of India, or a case with a Western victim |
| **3 Victim profile** | Victims linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, both UN-listed; Pakistan was on the FATF grey list from 2018 to 2022 | A change in how these groups are policed in Pakistan |
| **4 Evidence asymmetry** | Pakistan's evidence is generated by its own agencies and summarised in briefings; no third party has examined it [S5] | Release of charge sheets, forensic reports and transaction records for independent review |
| **5 Third-country dependence** | The alleged handlers and intermediaries are in other jurisdictions; no public cooperation from the UAE or other states [S1, S5] | A mutual legal assistance request, and public cooperation |
| **6 Credibility discount** | India rejected the 2020 dossier as lies; Western governments see India as a counterweight to China, and Canada and the US pressed it only when their own citizens or residents were targeted [S23, S25] | Evidence that survives scrutiny in a foreign proceeding |

*Table 9. Constraints on internationalising Pakistan's allegations.*

## The 'victim profile' problem in detail

A state that formally complains about the killing of members of a UN-listed group invites the question of why those individuals were living openly in its cities. Indian media allege that some victims, such as Abu Qatal, were under Pakistani Army protection [S17]; we cannot verify that. If a victim were shown to have state protection, a formal complaint would also be an admission that the state sheltered him. Pakistan's selection of Latif and Riaz for its briefing is consistent with choosing cases whose victims were less prominent, but this is inference.

## The 'Nijjar and Pannun' contrast

In Canada and the United States the victims were residents or citizens, local police and prosecutors had jurisdiction, and the investigators had intelligence-sharing partners. Those conditions do not exist for foreign militants killed in Pakistan, whose own security services lead the investigation and whose government is a party to the dispute.

> ANALYST JUDGEMENT
> Pakistan's difficulty is not mainly rhetorical. It lacks a **neutral forum**, **independently verifiable evidence** and **third-country cooperation**. Publishing full charge sheets and seeking mutual legal assistance would address the second and third; no step in the public record addresses the first.

SECTION 8

# Legal analysis: extraterritorial targeted killing

If the allegations were proven, what would international law say? The answer is clearer than the facts. This section sets out the prevailing legal view; it is not a finding that any state has acted unlawfully.

| Question | Prevailing view | Application to the allegations |
|---|---|---|
| **Sovereignty and non-intervention** | The UN Charter (Art. 2(4)) and customary law bar a state from exercising coercive power on another's territory without consent | Covert killings by agents or hirelings in Pakistan would breach Pakistan's sovereignty; Pakistan says so [S5] |
| **Right to life** | ICCPR Art. 6 binds both states (India acceded in 1979, Pakistan ratified in 2010). The Human Rights Committee holds that states must respect the right to life of people within their power or effective control, including abroad. UN rapporteurs (Alston 2010; Callamard 2019) reject targeted killing outside armed conflict except in narrow cases of imminent threat | Premeditated killing of named individuals without charge or trial is hard to reconcile with Art. 6 |
| **Laws of war** | These apply only in armed conflict. A four-day inter-state conflict occurred in May 2025, but most killings in the dataset predate it | Does not provide a general licence for killings in Pakistan in peacetime |
| **Self-defence (Art. 51)** | Requires an armed attack or an imminent threat; the "unwilling or unable" theory, under which a state may act in another's territory against a threat the host will not stop, is contested | India has used open force when it claimed self-defence (2016, 2019, 2025); covert killing of individuals is a harder fit |
| **Countermeasures** | A state responding to another's breach may take countermeasures, but not ones that involve force or breach fundamental human rights (ILC Articles on State Responsibility, Art. 50) | India's argument that Pakistan fails its UNSC 1373 and 1267 duties does not license killing |
| **Proof of attribution** | Conduct of state organs, or of persons acting on a state's instructions or under its control, is attributable (ILC Arts. 4 and 8). For grave allegations the ICJ has required evidence that is "fully conclusive" (Bosnia Genocide, 2007) | A hired criminal acting on instruction would be attributable, but the standard of proof is high and untested here |

*Table 10. Legal questions raised by alleged extraterritorial killing. Legal sources are public treaties, ILC Articles and ICJ judgments; they have not been interpreted for any court.*

## The mirror argument

India says Pakistan breaches Security Council resolution 1373, which requires states to deny safe haven to terrorists, and the 1267 sanctions on Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and their leaders. Pakistan says India breaches the Charter's ban on force and the right to life. Both claims can be true at once; neither is currently being decided by any forum.

## Accountability routes

- **International courts.** India's 1974 declaration to the ICJ excludes disputes with Commonwealth states, and the Court applied that reservation in the 2000 Aerial Incident case. The route is closed unless India consents.
- **UN human rights bodies.** Special rapporteurs can request information. A Pakistani communication could create a public record but not binding consequences.
- **Domestic prosecution in Pakistan.** Trying the arrested hirelings in open court is the most direct way to test Pakistan's evidence. We found no public record that this has happened.
- **Third-country prosecution.** The route that has actually produced a conviction, in the United States, concerned a plot against a US citizen on US territory.

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

On the law as it stands, a state-directed killing of a named person on another state's territory in peacetime is very difficult to justify. The legal weakness of the practice and the practical weakness of the remedies are both real, and they reinforce each other.

SECTION 9

# Strategic effects and escalation risk

Did the killings work? The honest answer is that **causal effects cannot be established from open sources**. Two kinds of claim circulate, and neither is robust.

| Claimed effect | Source and grade | Assessment |
|---|---|---|
| Pakistan moved some militant "assets" to safer locations | Indian press (IANS), grade C [S13] | Plausible; unverified |
| Militant groups have been disrupted and fear further hits | Indian advocacy lists; viral video of a Lashkar commander, grade D [S18] | Unverified; self-serving |
| Deterrence of attacks on India | No direct evidence | Contradicted by sequence: Reasi (June 2024) and Pahalgam (April 2025) occurred after the 2023 peak, and about five weeks after Abu Qatal's killing [S17, S24] |
| Higher diplomatic cost | Canada and US actions; Pakistan's Foreign Office statements [S20, S21] | Observed, but costs fell mainly in the Western cases |

## Open and covert force: how India has used each

| Episode | Form | Acknowledged by India? | Pakistan's response |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Feb 2019 (after Pulwama)** | Air strike at Balakot | Yes, publicly | Air strikes next day; aerial combat |
| **Apr–May 2025 (after Pahalgam)** | Cross-border strikes and four-day conflict | Yes, publicly [S24] | Military response; both sides claimed success |
| **2020–2026** | Unclaimed killings of individuals | No; formal denial [S1] | Diplomatic protest, press briefings, call for international action |

*Table 11. Open versus covert use of force. India has taken credit when it chose open force and denied when it did not.*

## Risks

- **Misattribution under crisis.** If a Pakistani militant leader is killed by a rival or by another group and Pakistan blames India, a nuclear-armed state may respond to an event India did not cause. The ambiguity that protects the sender can mislead the recipient.
- **Reciprocity.** Pakistan's accusations that India fuels militancy in Balochistan and the former tribal areas are old [S23]. A visible Indian covert campaign gives Pakistan's security services a justification for retaliatory covert action, including against Indian officials and diaspora targets abroad.
- **Normalisation.** Other states already invoke similar arguments to justify killings abroad (Section 5); a visible precedent in South Asia makes it easier for them to do so.
- **Narrowing escalation ladder.** India's defence minister said in April 2024 that militants who flee to Pakistan will be pursued there [S21]. Rhetoric of this kind lowers the threshold at which both states regard covert action as a legitimate rung.

ANALYST JUDGEMENT

The strategic case for the programme, if it exists, rests on **cumulative disruption and signalling** rather than on measurable deterrence. The costs, which are diplomatic exposure, misattribution and reciprocity, are more observable than the benefits.

SECTION 10

# Scenarios and indicators, 2026–2028

The matrix below is an analyst's qualitative judgement about plausibility and consequence. It is not a probability model, and the positions are provisional.

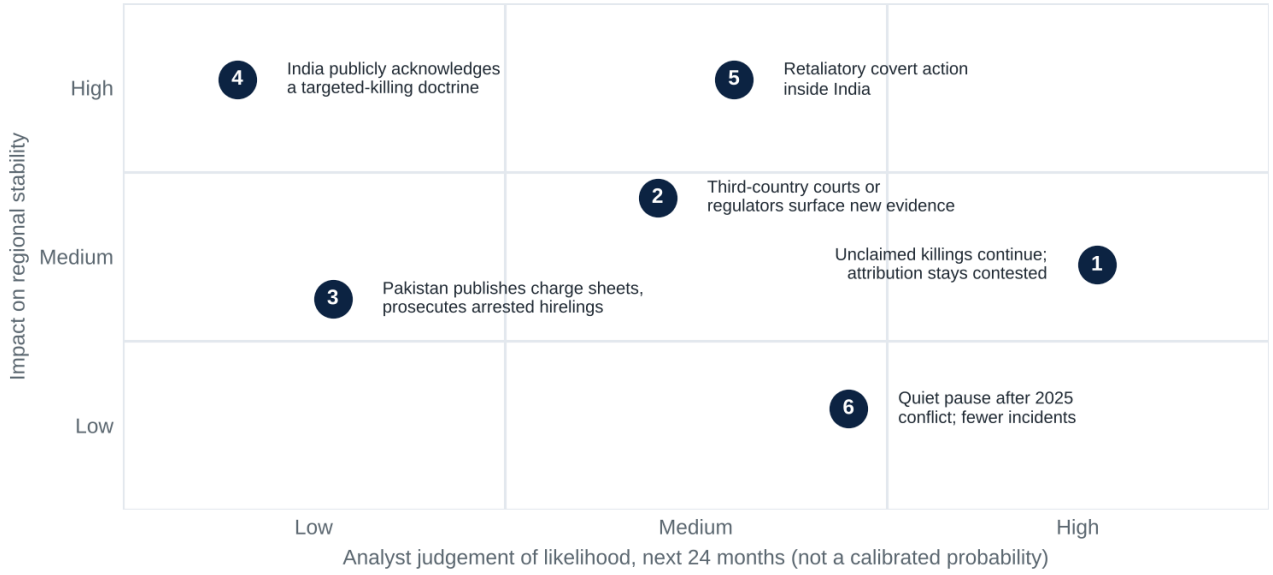



*Figure 8. Scenario matrix. Numbers refer to the table below. Likelihood and impact are analyst judgement, not calibrated forecasts.*

| # | Scenario | Indicators to watch | Dated trigger |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Unclaimed killings continue; attribution contested | New grade A or B incidents; FIR language; aggregator surges | Ongoing |
| 2 | Third-country courts or regulators surface new evidence | Gupta sentencing; any Canadian trial; any unsealed filings that name an official or a Pakistan link | **20 Nov 2026**: Gupta sentencing, New York [S20] |
| 3 | Pakistan publishes charge sheets and prosecutes | Court filings in Latif and Riaz cases; mutual legal assistance requests to the UAE | None scheduled |
| 4 | India publicly acknowledges a doctrine | Parliamentary statements; official doctrine papers; ministers' interviews | None scheduled |
| 5 | Retaliatory covert action inside India | Attacks on Indian targets with Pakistani-based planners; Pakistani officials speaking of "reciprocity" | None scheduled |
| 6 | Quiet pause | No grade A or B incident for 12 months; fewer aggregator claims | Mid-2027 |

## What would change our assessment of attribution

- **Court-tested evidence**, in any jurisdiction, that links the Pakistan killings to a handler in a third country and to an Indian state source.
- **Independent forensic review** of Pakistan's evidence by a body neither side controls.
- **Credible insider or documentary disclosure**, corroborated by independent sources.
- **An official acknowledgement**, as opposed to a conditional or rhetorical statement.

Conversely, evidence that the killings were intra-militant, criminal or sectarian would reduce the plausibility of the Indian-direction hypothesis for the cases concerned; none has been published, but the field of alternative culprits means it cannot be ruled out.

SECTION 11

# Recommendations and limitations

| Audience | Recommendation |
|---|---|
| **India (policy and oversight)** | Weigh the diplomatic and legal exposure against unproven security returns. Prefer attributable tools where they exist: UN 1267 listings, FATF scrutiny, prosecutions and intelligence sharing. If covert instruments are used, subject them to a defined legal and parliamentary oversight framework. |
| **Pakistan** | Prosecute the arrested hirelings in open court and publish charge sheets, forensic and transaction evidence for independent review. Request mutual legal assistance from the UAE and other host states. Pair this with transparent enforcement against listed groups, since a case that exposes sheltering will otherwise stall. |
| **Third countries (UAE, Canada, US, UK)** | State clearly that their territory and financial systems will not be used for killings of any target, by any state. Respond to a Pakistani request for legal assistance on the same terms as any other state's. |
| **International bodies** | UN human rights mechanisms should seek information from both governments on extraterritorial killings and record responses publicly. |
| **Analysts and media** | Adopt a two-confirmation rule for the fact of a killing, grade attribution separately, track aliases, and avoid celebratory framing. Publish datasets with source grades so that tallies can be audited. |
| **Both governments (crisis management)** | Preserve military hotlines and agree that any incident reported as a targeted killing is investigated and communicated through them before public attribution. |

## How the five original questions are answered

| Question | Short answer | Page |
|---|---|---|
| **1 Killings since 2020 and top ten cases** | 19 graded cases; ten profiled; only two carry a formal Pakistani attribution | 6–11 |
| **2 Strategy, financing, logistics and hiring** | Alleged only; no verified data; funding unquantifiable | 12–14 |
| **3 How deniability is maintained** | Proxies, third-country handlers, ambiguity, formal denial; eroding | 15–16 |
| **4 Why Pakistani media cannot make a case** | They report claims but cannot test evidence or follow cases to trial | 17–18 |
| **5 Why the dossier has not travelled** | No neutral forum, no independent evidence, no third-country help | 19–21 |

## Limitations

- **English-language sources only**; Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi reporting may contain more cases and more detail.
- **Secondary sourcing for the Guardian report.** We read it through Dawn, Al Jazeera, Deccan Herald and The Week, not the original text. Details may differ.
- **The dataset is not a census.** Ten of 19 cases are grade C or D; the 2026 entries rest on one aggregator list.
- **No access to Pakistani court records or the evidence Pakistan says it holds.** Our statements that no record is public mean none that we could find.
- **No classified information.** Statements about R&AW reflect public information only.
- **Time frame.** Searches were conducted on 11 October 2026; later developments are not covered.

## Research agenda

A shared, graded, open dataset of killings and claims; archival work on how Pakistani courts have handled the arrested hirelings; comparative work on how third-country law enforcement treats foreign-state murder-for-hire; and a legal paper on what evidence the ICJ would require for attribution in a case of this type.

APPENDICES

# A. Incident dataset | B. Source register

| Date | Victim (as reported) | Place | Grade | Main sources |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2020-01 | Harmeet Singh 'Happy PhD' | Near Lahore | C | Swarajya; The Week |
| 2023-02-20 | Bashir Ahmad Peer (Imtiyaz Alam) | Rawalpindi | A | Reuters; Dawn |
| 2023-02-late | Syed Khalid Raza | Karachi | A | Reuters; Dawn |
| 2022-03-01 | Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim (alias Zahid Akhund) | Karachi (Akhtar Colony) | B | Tribune India; Outlook/PTI; Newschecker |
| 2023-05-06 | Paramjit Singh Panjwar | Lahore (Johar Town) | B | Business Today; The Week; Tribune India |
| 2023-09-08 | Muhammad Riaz (Abu Qasim Kashmiri) | Rawalakot, AJK | A | Dawn; Reuters |
| 2023-09-12 | Ziaur Rahman (Jamia Abu Bakar admin.) | Karachi | B | Tribune India (IANS) |
| 2023-09 | Mufti Qaiser Farooq | Karachi | C | Tribune India (IANS) |
| 2023-09 | Qari Khurram Shehzad | Nazimabad, Karachi | C | Tribune India (IANS) |
| 2023-10-11 | Shahid Latif | Daska, Sialkot | A | AP/Fox; Aaj News; Friday Times |
| 2023-12-06 | Adnan Ahmed (Hanzala Adnan) | Karachi | D | Organiser list |
| 2024-04-14 | Amir Sarfaraz Tamba | Lahore (Islampura) | A | Express Tribune; Friday Times |
| 2025-03-15 | Abu Qatal (alias reported as Zia-ur-Rehman / Faisal Nadeem) | Jhelum (Dina) | B | UNI/The News; Deccan Herald |
| 2025-05-18 | Saifullah Khalid | Matli, Badin | D | Organiser list |
| 2026-01-28 | Lt Col Imran Dayal (alleged Pahalgam handler) | Dera Ismail Khan | D | wikibharat list |
| 2026-02-16 | Mohammad Qasim Gujjar | Peshawar | D | wikibharat list |
| 2026-03-21 | Bilal Arif Salafi | Muridke | D | wikibharat list |
| 2026-04-27 | Sheikh Yousuf Afridi | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | D | wikibharat list |
| 2026-05-21 | Hamza Burhan | Pakistan-administered Kashmir | D | wikibharat list |

## Source register (shortened web addresses; the CSV carries the same sources by case)

| ID | Source |
|---|---|
| S1 | Dawn, "Indian network of extra-territorial killings 'global phenomenon'", 5 Apr 2024 (dawn.com/news/1825866) |
| S2 | Al Jazeera, "Is India behind targeted killings in Pakistan? What we know", 5 Apr 2024 (aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/5/...) |
| S3 | Deccan Herald, "Not our policy: India on report of 'targeted killings'", 5 Apr 2024 (deccanherald.com/world/...) |
| S4 | The Week, "Indian spy agency carried out targeted killings...", 5 Apr 2024 (theweek.in/news/india/2024/04/05/...) |
| S5 | Pakistan MoFA, Foreign Secretary's remarks, 25 Jan 2024 (GlobalSecurity mirror) (globalsecurity.org/.../mil-240125-pakistan-mfa01.htm) |
| S6 | Al Jazeera and Arab News, Pakistan "credible evidence" report, 25 Jan 2024 (aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/25/...; arabnews.com/node/2448091) |
| S7 | AP via KSAT, Pakistan accuses Indian agents of orchestrating killings; AP via Fox, Daska mosque attack (ksat.com/news/world/2024/01/25/...) |
| S8 | Tribune India, "'Malicious': MEA on Pakistan claim of Indian role in 2 targeted killings" (tribuneindia.com/news/india/...) |
| S9 | Aaj News / Dawn, "Indian agencies involved in Sialkot killing, says IG Punjab", 13 Oct 2023 (english.aaj.tv/news/30336877) |
| S10 | Dawn, report on the Rawalakot killing and FIR (Muhammad Riaz), Sep 2023 (dawn.com/news/1774823) |
| S11 | Reuters via Yahoo/AOL, "Former anti-India militant killed in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir" (au.news.yahoo.com/former-anti-india-militant-killed-...) |
| S12 | The Friday Times, 25 Jan 2024 and 15 Apr 2024 (Latif; Tamba; Dec 2022 CTD disclosures) (thefridaytimes.com) |
| S13 | Tribune India (IANS), Karachi killings Sep 2023 (tribuneindia.com/news/india/26-11-masterminds-aide-shot-in-karachi-549545) |
| S14 | Tribune India; Outlook/PTI; Newschecker, Mistri Zahoor Ibrahim, Mar 2022 (tribuneindia.com/news/nation/...; newschecker.in) |
| S15 | Business Today; The Week; Tribune India; Kerala Kaumudi, Panjwar, 6 May 2023 (businesstoday.in; theweek.in/news/india/2023/05/06/...) |
| S16 | Express Tribune; Friday Times; ETV Bharat, Tamba, 14–15 Apr 2024 (tribune.com.pk/story/2462571/...) |
| S17 | UNI; Deccan Herald; StratNews, Abu Qatal, 16 Mar 2025 (uniindia.com; deccanherald.com/...) |
| S18 | Swarajya (Sep/Oct 2023); Organiser (1 Jun 2025); India TV/PGurus (Aug 2026); wikibharat list (swarajyamag.com; organiser.org; indiatvnews.com) |
| S19 | VOA via GlobalSecurity, 1 May 2024 (Washington Post report; M. Kugelman) (globalsecurity.org/.../india-240501-voa01.htm) |
| S20 | NBC News; ABC News; The Wire; India Currents (Gupta; Nijjar; Bishnoi indictment) (nbcnews.com; thewire.in; indiacurrents.com) |
| S21 | Al Jazeera, 6 Apr 2024; Arab News; Dawn 1826054; Brecorder (Rajnath Singh and Pakistan's response) (aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/6/...) |
| S22 | RSF index reporting: Aaj (May 2025); Tribune India/ANI; WION (2026); Ekantipur (6 Aug 2026) (english.aaj.tv; wionews.com; ekantipur.com) |
| S23 | Dawn 1590441; Al Jazeera, 25 Nov 2020; Pakistan MoFA, 6 Jan 2017; Dawn 1592313; ProPakistani (dawn.com/news/1590441; mofa.gov.pk) |
| S24 | NPR, AP/BBC via Yahoo, July 2025 (Pahalgam; May 2025 conflict) (npr.org/2025/07/30/...) |
| S25 | Reuters via Stabroek News; Eastern Eye (Gupta; Western relations with India) (stabroeknews.com; easterneye.biz) |
| S26 | National Herald Tribune (NNI) summary of the Guardian report; Myind summary, Apr 2024 (pressreader.com/pakistan/national-herald-tribune/20240406/...) |