

Sikhs, Panjab, India & the Diaspora: Locating the Current Crisis

*A Special Report on Historical Context
(1984-2023)*

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INTRODUCTION

The death of Canadian Sikh activist and community leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023 has once again brought the question of Khalistan to the center of many conversations. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a statement [confirming](#) that agents of the Indian government carried out the killing of Nijjar in British Columbia. India [responded](#) to the allegations as ‘absurd and motivated.’ US President Joe Biden also raised the issue of human rights, the role of civil society, and the importance of a free press with Indian Prime Minister Modi that same month. In November 2023, American authorities stopped the assassination attempt of Canadian and American citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. In this international scenario, we seek to provide context to the question of Khalistan and its use as a bogeyman against Sikhs and Indian Panjab. We focus on the issue of extrajudicial murders as a human rights issue in India and abroad. We emphasize the importance of justice and ethics, as the roots of Sikh separatism lie in injustice perpetrated and the prolonged denial of justice. We refrain from arguments about the issue of Khalistan and its supporters solely in terms of numbers.

We present this Special Report to provide historical context to the Sikh experience from 1984 to the present day vis-a-vis the Indian and Canadian governments. The information provided narrates the wrongdoings against the Sikh community and Indian Panjab, which have been largely ignored and even perpetuated by the state and media. The Indian government has long persecuted Sikhs in India and abroad, ignoring their grievances, denying them justice, and creating a culture of impunity ripe for gross human rights violations through decades. It is the culmination of this pattern that has resulted in multiple assassinations and assassination plots organized by India against citizens of Canada, the UK, and the US. We seek to contextualize India’s transnational repression as part of an ongoing project by the state against Sikhs and the latest [response](#) by the Indian Foreign Minister, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

This report serves as an educational resource for journalists, academics, governments, and the community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the current crisis involving Sikhs, Panjab, India, and the diaspora, with a focus on the historical context primarily from 1984 to 2023. The death of Canadian Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023 and subsequent accusations by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau against the Indian government have brought attention to the Khalistan issue. The report emphasizes historical grievances and injustices against Sikhs since 1947, the roots of the Khalistan movement, and varying degrees of support for Sikh separatism. It highlights the tactics used by the Indian state to oversimplify Sikh identity, portraying Sikhs as either extensions of Hindus or as terrorists and separatists.

The report underscores the unaddressed issues of human rights violations, state-led violence, and mass disappearances against Sikhs, particularly during the 1984 “Operation Blue Star”

and the Sikh Genocide. It discusses the Khalistan movement's evolution, the involvement of Sikh leaders, and the use of terms like terrorism and extremism in legal contexts. The report also mentions recent incidents, including the deaths of Sikh activists Avtar Singh Khanda and Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the Khalistan Referendum, the assassination attempt of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, and international reactions, including diplomatic tensions between Canada and India.

The policy implications section suggests recommendations specifically for the world, especially Canada, the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand; the recommendations also apply to countries with Sikh populations. These include assurances of Sikh rights and safety, appointing a Special Representative to combat anti-Sikh hate, and contextualizing the Khalistan movement's origin. The global recommendations call for pursuing justice for Nijjar's assassination, coordinating with other nations with Sikh populations, and addressing Sikh issues independently.

CRITICAL POINTS

1. The historical grievances and injustices perpetrated against Sikhs and the Indian Panjab since 1947 and their prolonged denial remain unaddressed issues.
2. Khalistan, in its roots, is a Sikh separatist movement with varying degrees of support since the 1940s and 1980s; it cannot be reduced to a violent fringe movement.
3. Nations with large Sikh diasporas are waking up to the tactics of the Indian State and recognizing them as direct threats to the safety of their citizens and sovereignty.

To understand these three points, we offer the following framing: the Indian state narrativizes Sikh theology, politics, and history to oversimplify Sikhi in an attempt to discount its inherently political-spiritual nature and its foundational principle of sovereignty outside of time and worldly nation-states. Current state narratives either play into the notion that any Sikh who asserts sovereignty against or outside of the state is an anti-national terrorist or that Sikhs are extensions of Hindus and the larger 'tree' of Dharmic religion who will protect the state against Muslim outsiders. In other words, Sikhs are reduced to either extensions of Hindus and protectors of Hinduism or terrorists and separatists (Khalistanis).

India's continuous position is as follows: 1) The Indian government has resolved issues with the Sikhs and the Panjab; 2) Khalistan is a 'fringe' group made up of 'disgruntled youths' with no backing in India; the diaspora is the root cause of this movement's revitalization; and 3) The governments of other countries should not be interfering with internal issues of India; they should leave India alone.

Asking for a sovereign Sikh nation-state is not antithetical to Sikh history. There have been movements for the creation of Sikh nation-states across the centuries, albeit aspirational, due to the violent nature of the state against the minority group. During the Guru Period (1469-1708), the foundations of major cities from Kartarpur to Anandpur were founded in the

Panjab by the Gurus as a means to self-governance. The Khalsa Raj (1710-1716) under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadar and the twelve sovereign Sikh Misls as commonwealth eventually culminated into the Sikh Empire (1799-1849) under Maharaja Ranjit Singh; both were established in the Panjab. Under British India, Azad (Free) Panjab was a strategic consideration in 1943 for maximizing the Sikh population; it was lost as the Partition resulted in Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Several princely Sikh states were in existence until 1950, first under British India in undivided Panjab and then under independent India in partitioned Panjab.

Sikhs, as a minority, are thus facing fundamental tension in India. If they allow their sovereignty, history, and theology to be co-opted as Hindu. In that case, they are deemed integral to the national story in unifying a portion of the population against a designated other (Muslims). If they do not, they are a threat to national unity by virtue of their difference and their assertions of individual and collective sovereignty. The critical points in more detail are as follows:

1. The historical grievances and injustices perpetrated against Sikhs and Indian Panjab since 1947 and their prolonged denial remain unaddressed issues.

Many Sikhs in the diaspora left India after 1984 because of gross human rights violations well documented by Amnesty [International](#), Human Rights [Watch](#), and [Ensaaf](#). Recent court judgments in India used the terms “[crimes against humanity](#)” and “[genocide](#)” when referring to what happened to the Sikhs in India during that time. State violence in the 1980s and 1990s was the norm. For a few weeks in 2020, Indian Panjab’s former Director General of Police (DGP) SS Saini was on the [run](#), evading his own security detail and arrest for fake encounters, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Saini was mentored by KPS Gill, who served as Panjab’s DGP from 1988-1990 and 1991-1995, during which time human rights violations against Sikhs peaked.

- a. Sikhs [disproportionately](#) made up those who died fighting for Indian Independence, making up 80% of deaths while only being 2% of the population. Despite this, from about 1965 to 1997, Sikhs were largely subsumed into the state narrative as terrorists who were demanding a separate state, leading agitations against the state’s policies on language representation (Panjabi Suba Movement), Sikh religious and political rights (Dharam Yudh [Morcha](#)), and water, defense, industrial, and other rights for Indian Panjab. This was a period of extreme persecution that culminated in June 1984 in what was termed “[Operation Blue Star](#)” by the state, during which time the army attacked Sri Harimandar Sahib and over 100 other Gurdwaras across Panjab. It further escalated in the November 1984 Sikh [Genocide](#) – another state-led operation throughout India.
- b. The years after 1984 saw mass disappearances and extrajudicial killings, mainly of Sikh boys and men. Mass graves are still being uncovered, and justice [has not been delivered](#).

- c. In April 1995, human rights lawyer Jaswant Singh Khalra gave his last speech in Canada. Khalra dedicated himself to uncovering thousands of disappearances, unlawful killings, and secret cremations of Sikhs perpetrated by the Panjab Police. In September 1995, Khalra was abducted from his home by Panjab Police and [killed](#). Although [witnesses](#) gave statements implicating the police, naming KPS Gill as a conspirator, the police denied ever arresting or detaining Khalra. In 1996, the Central Bureau of Investigation found evidence that Khalra was held at a police station in Tarn Taran and recommended the prosecution of nine Panjab police officials for his murder and kidnapping. The [accused](#) were not charged for ten years.

2. Khalistan's roots lie in the aforementioned unaddressed issues. It cannot be reduced to a violent fringe movement.

The separatist Khalistan movement has had varying degrees of support since the 1940s and 1980s. In February 1984, Indian Panjab leader and former Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal burnt copies of the Indian [Constitution](#). In 1992, Badal handed over a memorandum seeking independence for Sikhs to the United Nations Secretary-General, who was visiting [Delhi](#). Badal later became the chief minister of Indian Panjab three times but betrayed all his earlier stances. In July 1984, the World Sikh Organization (WSO) was founded with members representing Canada, the US, and the UK in equal numbers. It stated in its mission that it [supported](#) "a sovereign [Sikh] state that some call Khalistan." In the 1989 Panjab [elections](#), [ten](#) out of thirteen elected Members of Parliament (MP) advocated for self-determination. Amarinder Singh, the former Chief Minister of Panjab (formerly with the Indian National Congress, now with the Bharatiya Janata Party), resigned from the ruling party in 1984. He would go on to sign the Amritsar [Declaration](#) for Sikh sovereignty in 1994, along with almost all Sikh leaders. Notable among them was Surjit Singh [Barnala](#), who was Indian Panjab's Chief Minister and later Governor of Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh, and a Union Minister. There are still Sikhs loyal to this movement through nonviolent and constitutional means, including one of the thirteen MPs currently [serving](#) from Indian Panjab. The Indian Government frames Sikh activists and community leaders as misled [terrorists](#) looking to wreak havoc. They tried to do so with the [Farmers' Movement](#), but this narrative is no longer going unchallenged due to the widespread use of social media. This rhetoric is also used in countries with large Sikh diasporas, targeting Sikh community leaders and activists who raise Sikh and Indian Panjab human rights issues and grievances abroad.

- a. In June 2023, India's think tank, Observer Research Foundation, put out a [report](#) on Khalistan activities in the diaspora. It disregarded the 1995 Supreme Court of India [ruling](#) that found the raising of slogans in favor of Khalistan does not warrant the charge of sedition. It was entirely based on conversations and speculations, with no factual data. The circulation of these reports is common in diaspora countries as well, carried out by organizations aligned with the political right (for example, the Hudson [Institute's](#) "Pakistan's Destabilization Playbook: Khalistan Separatist Activism Within the US," Macdonald-Laurier [Institute's](#) "Khalistan: A Project of Pakistan," and the UK's [Bloom Review](#)).
- b. The Khalistan movement's militancy phase ended in 1995, but terms such as

terrorism, extremism, militancy, and insurgency are still being used to [sentence](#) people through the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). In June 2023, some of these terms were invoked to accuse two Sikhs of trying to revive the Khalistan movement by posting videos and pictures to lure youth. The two [accused](#) were a driver and a laborer. This is similar to the 2019 case where three youths were given life [imprisonment](#) in Indian Panjab for keeping Khalistan literature – otherwise freely available to the public.

- c. On 16 June 2023, we saw the mysterious [death](#) of UK Sikh activist Avtar Singh Khanda, who played a role in [Amritpal Singh's](#) immense growth as a religious figure between September 2022 and April 2023. Khanda was the chief of the UK-based Khalistan Liberation Force. He was also a member of Shiromani Akali Dal Amritsar and son of Kulwant Singh [Khukhrana](#), who was killed in an [encounter](#) in 1991. The Indian Consulate in England did not move papers for Khanda's funeral, so his family could not bring his body to India for the last rites. His mother and sister were not able to get [permission](#) to attend the funeral in London, and British police [announced](#) they would not be investigating his cause of death. In September 2023, UK barrister Michael Polak called for a [formal inquest](#) into Khanda's death, urging the chief coroner for England and Wales to direct an inquest into the activist's death and whether his right to life was properly protected given the public threats against him in India.
- d. In August 2023, the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) of India was [accused](#) of intimidating families of Sikhs living abroad. The Sikh Federation (a UK-based pro-Khalistan group) said that the families of its two prominent leaders in India had come under attack by Indian authorities. The Sikh Federation said that the family homes in India of Amrik Singh, the chair of the organization, and Kuldip Singh Chaheru, the vice chair, were raided by the NIA, and their family members were interrogated for many hours.
- e. Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) is a relatively small and new group. Most Khalistanis do not identify with it and prominent Khalistan leaders don't align with it. Despite that, SFJ and its founder, Gurbatwant Singh Pannun, are centered in Indian media as the movement's loudest and, therefore, most representative voice. News about SFJ and its [antics](#) are used time and again to invent and exaggerate a Sikh threat to the state, using these stories to impose curfew-like conditions, to argue that the Khalistan movement is violent and unhinged, and to distract from real, serious, and legitimate issues raised by Sikh and Panjabi activists and community leaders. Although Pannun's [video](#) pronouncements may be deemed [inflammatory](#), they are not illegal under the US and Canadian rights of freedom of expression.
- f. The quest for justice in Indian Panjab and the diaspora has overemphasized SFJ as the only lens in the media. There are legacy organizations in Panjab, such as [Dal Khalsa](#), and new ones, like [Panth Sewak](#), who continue to pursue the justice agenda through nonviolent means in Panjab. Dal Khalsa now regularly participates in Indian elections by supporting certain candidates. Currently, they support Simranjit Singh [Mann](#), a Member of the Indian Parliament. Panth Sewak is a thinkers' collective that engages with the Sikh community's codes and traditions; their leaders pursue justice

and independence in India while knowing the realities of its democratic norms.

- g. On 18 June 2023, Sikh activist, SFJ Canada head, and Khalistan Tiger [Force](#) head, Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead in the parking lot of Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, Canada, by unidentified men less than a week after Khanda's death. Nijjar was President of the Gurdwara and had a list of cases against [him](#). There was a Rs 10 lakh (\$16,000 CAD) award on him, not for a killing but for [conspiracy](#) to kill. Three months after his death, Indian intelligence agencies compiled a [dossier](#) on Nijjar, building a case against him based on confessions of various arrested, but still did not link Nijjar directly to any crime. On 28 September 2023, the Washington [Post](#) accessed a video of Nijjar's murder recorded on the security cameras at the BC Gurdwara. It was discovered that at least six men and two vehicles were involved. The assailants fired about 50 bullets, with 34 hitting Nijjar. The assailants were supposedly in a 'Sikh get-up,' with hoodies pulled over small turbans and masks over their 'bearded faces.'
- h. In July 2023, 42,000 Sikhs voted in a Khalistan Referendum in Toronto, Ontario. In September 2023, a similar referendum was [held](#) in Surrey, British Columbia, with over 130,000 votes. Indian media framed the Referendum as a listless exercise with few participants. Californian Sikhs will [vote](#) on the Referendum in January 2024. Since 2021, seven of these referendums have been done [globally](#), including in Canada, the UK, and Australia. There are questions surrounding the Referendum's need and impact because it is non-binding and lacks consensus among the Khalistan advocates; nonetheless, the large voter participation cannot be ignored. The Khalistan movement is both exaggerated as a large and looming threat in state narratives and downplayed as the work of a small subsection of Sikhs. Over the last few years, under the current regime, the Indian media has [shown](#) its partisan bent. India's [ranking](#) in the press freedom index by Reporters Without Borders is 161/180, while Canada is [15th](#). The issue is reliability and the understanding that even if independent journalists are able to take the government to task on the domestic agenda, they still align with the state on international agendas as they cannot risk being seen as anti-Indian.

The way Sikhs continue to be treated in Indian Panjab remains unresolved. The Panjab's economy and its impact on the social and cultural fabric also remains unaddressed. The last several governments of Panjab formed by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Indian National Congress (INC), and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) have not addressed either the Sikh or Panjab concerns. They have also failed to work out amicable solutions with the Indian government. The ability of Sikhs to voice and organize globally is directly under threat; the same is true for all Indian minorities and dissidents. Movements against repression will continue in India and the diaspora; the Sikhs and the Panjabis are known to lead them, as witnessed during the Farmer's protest.

3. Nations with large or influential Sikh diasporas are waking up to the tactics of the Indian State and recognizing them as direct threats to their sovereignty.

Indian intelligence agencies, specifically the National Investigation Agency (NIA),

Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and their recent heads, have been very active in Panjab, South Asia, and Western democracies since the 1980s as operatives. The 1984-1994 [decade](#) saw rampant extrajudicial killings and fake encounters. This violence was initially done within Indian borders but has now become transnational, with the killings of Sikhs in the diaspora. Samant Kumar Goel retired in June 2023 as RAW chief, Dinkar Gupta is serving as NIA's Director General, and Ajit Doval is the National Security Advisor. These agencies are now facing backlash in the Global North. RAW agents have been [let go](#) from their positions in Canada, the US, and the UK. Pavan Kumar Rai, a prominent Indian diplomat, was [expelled](#) from Canada.

- a. In 2009, Canadian intelligence operative Michel Juneau-Katsuya wrote *Nest of Spies*, a book on the hive of foreign agents who work in Canada. In the context of the 1985 Air India bombing, Juneau-Katsuya, [says](#): "This is a case in which there is troubling evidence of that country's undercover agents infiltrating Canada's Sikh community and being in contact with the principal suspects of the crime. The agents operated secretly out of India's embassy in Ottawa." In 1982, Pierre Trudeau [denied](#) [calls](#) for the extradition of one of the men who would eventually be accused of the bombing. In 2005, the accused were [acquitted](#) due to factual errors and credibility issues with key witnesses who testified against them.
- b. Over the last decade, Germany has cracked down on Indians spying on their communities. In 2014, Ranjit S. was [sentenced](#) to nine months in jail for engaging in espionage. The 45-year-old was found collecting information on the Indian community, specifically Sikh extremists, and reporting back to the Consulate General of India (CGI) in Frankfurt. In 2019, couple Manmohan S. and Kanwal Jit K., were sentenced to 18 months and 180 days in prison for acting as a foreign intelligence agent and aiding, respectively. S. was [recruited](#) by RAW and was asked to spy on the Kashmiri opposition movement, as well as Sikhs. Lastly, in [2020](#), Balvir S. went on trial for working with RAW, obtaining information about the Sikh opposition and Kashmiri movement and passing it on to the CGI in Frankfurt.
- c. In July 2020, the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) released a [report](#) on the use of social media by Indian authorities to target and persecute Sikhs for speaking out against human rights violations and political wrongdoings. As of June of that same year, WSO reported that hundreds of Sikhs were in custody due to their posts on social platforms, with some being charged under UAPA.
- d. In February 2021, WSO released a [report](#) on the use of disinformation by India to target Canadians. The goal of the state is to marginalize Sikhs with narratives of extremism further so that the community can be looked upon with suspicion.
- e. In July 2023, US Politician [Trent Franks](#), a former member of the International Religious Freedom Caucus, Human Rights Caucus, and India Caucus, [warned](#) the Indian Government against targeting the Sikh-Americans.
- f. In August 2023, UK Sikh MP Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi acknowledged that Indian

authorities' attempts to label him as '[Anti-India](#)' is part of a larger state tactic to silence dissent. Indian immigration authorities at Guru Ramdas Jee International Airport in Amritsar held up Dhesi for over two hours over his OCI Card. This was an attempt by the Indian government to bully foreign representatives. Dhesi is one of the most vocal UK voices on Indian Punjab and India.

- g. After the Group of 20 (G20) summit in Vietnam, where US President Biden was not allowed a press conference and foreign media were [curtailed](#), Biden said he [raised](#) the issue of human rights, the role of civil society, and the importance of a free press with Prime Minister Modi.
- h. In September 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [said](#) that agents of the Indian government carried out the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023. Speaking in the House of Commons, Trudeau said he raised India's involvement in the shooting of Nijjar directly with Prime Minister Modi at the G20 summit meeting earlier that month in no uncertain terms. He said the allegation was based on intelligence gathered by the Canadian government. India has denied the allegation. Sikhs have been targeted with reports and incidents in nations where the Five Eyes intelligence sharing exists between the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Canada has [expelled](#) Indian diplomat Pavan Kumar Rai, who was station head of Indian intelligence. India went on to [expel](#) Canadian diplomat and station head of Canadian intelligence, Olivier Sylvestre. The two countries have [paused](#) their negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement. Both have issued travel advisories to each other's countries. Australia, the UK, and the US have all called the reports on Nijjar's killing concerning and stated that they have raised the issue with their Indian counterparts. The [FBI](#) visited Sikh activists in the US to warn them about death threats after Nijjar's killing. It has been reported that the United States [actively supported](#) Canada's investigation into the murder. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken addressed the growing tension between Canada and India on 22 September 2023, saying the US is "[deeply concerned](#)" about the allegations made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that India was involved in the murder of a Canadian citizen earlier this year, supporting the Canadian investigation and calling for accountability from India.
- i. On 3 October 2023, India asked Canada to withdraw 41 diplomats from the country. Canada did so by the 20 October deadline without reciprocation. However, when Canada stated that India apparently threatened to 'unilaterally revoke the diplomats' official status,' India responded to Canada by [saying](#), 'New Delhi rejects any attempt to portray the implementation of parity as a violation of international norms.' Canada [invoked](#) the Vienna [Convention](#), while India maintains it has not broken the [Convention](#). The United Kingdom and the United States have also expressed [concern](#) over India breaking international conventions. Global visa agency [VFS](#) said on 20 October it would [operate](#) all ten visa and immigration centers in India, but also stated, '[IRCC](#) [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada] is reducing its number of employees in India from 27 to 5. IRCC will continue accepting and processing applications from India, but reduced staffing levels are expected to

impact processing times.’ Canadian Prime Minister Justin [Trudeau](#) said India is ‘making millions of lives unbelievably difficult.’ This is accurate, as over 300,000 students from India go to Canada yearly for higher studies; however, their visas will be immensely delayed. About 70% of these students are from Indian Panjab. Fifteen Canadian Gurdwaras have raised concerns about the travel difficulties of families in a large Panjabi diaspora split between the two [countries](#). Meanwhile, in an interview, Australia Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Mike Burgess [said](#), ‘I would have no reason to dispute what the Canadian government has said in this matter (of Nijjar’s killing blamed on India).’ It is increasingly apparent that India stands isolated among the more powerful nations. This will largely impact the rights of all Indians, democratic institutions, and press freedom. The ruling Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) might use it to foment nationalism in the 2024 elections.

- j. In October 2023, Indian citizen Kamaljit Ram told Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) officers about his supporting militants in Indian Panjab between 1982 and 1992 when he was seeking admission into Canada. Ram also told the officers that he supported the ideas promoted by followers of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale for a separate Khalistan state and other social issues. The CBSA denied him entry for his support to those who waged war against India. The case went to the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). In a recent hearing, IRB tribunal member Heidi Worsfold [said](#) the federal government did not have reasonable grounds to declare ‘Indian citizen Kamaljit Ram inadmissible to enter Canada.’ She took the humane view that Ram’s support to Khalistani militants by providing them with a ‘safe house’ and other ‘logistical support’ was ‘mostly out of necessity.’ Their judgment displayed a deep understanding of societies in conflict and a nuanced view of how citizens are often forced to provide help to radicals against their will. However, given Canada’s recent accusation of India being involved in the killing of Nijjar and India [calling](#) ‘Canada a safe haven’ for Khalistan-related activities, Indian media released this story as a toolkit template with [various](#) media [houses](#) publishing the exact same wording: ‘the ruling comes amid a diplomatic standoff between India and Canada.’
- k. On 25 October, the Indian government [accused](#) Canadian diplomats of misusing their powers to give visas to ‘people with known criminal antecedents who are Khalistani supporters.’ Earlier this summer, two senior RAW Indian intelligence officers in two major Western countries were asked to [leave](#) their stations, one who was the head of the station in San Francisco and the other who was second-in-command of operations in London. The US also blocked RAW from replacing its station head in Washington, DC. This is [unprecedented](#) and has never happened since RAW was founded in 1968. This is yet another element of the diplomatic fallout of the conflict between India and Canada over the killing of Nijjar.
- l. US authorities [thwarted](#) an assassination attempt on SFJ leader and US and Canadian Citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. The US issued a warning to India over concerns it was involved in the plot. On 29 November 2023, the US Justice Department [filed](#) murder-for-hire charges against Indian national Nikhil Gupta in connection with his participation in the foiled plot. Federal prosecutors describe

Gupta as an associate of an Indian government agency employee identified only as “CC-1”. CC-1 has previously described himself as a senior field officer who works with security management and intelligence. CC-1, according to the indictment, previously worked with the Central Reserve Police Force, a leading Indian government paramilitary force. The indictment alleges that CC-1 directed the murder plan from India and recruited Gupta around May 2023 to coordinate it. At CC-1’s direction, Gupta contacted an individual whom Gupta believed to be a criminal associate but who was, in fact, a confidential source working with US law enforcement for assistance in contracting a hitman to murder the victim in New York City. The source introduced Gupta to a purported hitman, who was, in fact, an undercover US law enforcement officer (the UC).

- m. On 5 December 2023, David Shoebridge, a member of the upper house of the Australian parliament, [stated](#) that in light of the US thwarting an alleged Indian plot to kill an American on US soil, the Australian government needs to give “a clear and direct assurance” that proactive measures are being taken to ensure the safety of Sikhs. Shoebridge said these actions “show how far to the extreme the BJP government in India has lurched. If the BJP administration is actively plotting to kill political opponents in the US and Canada, just imagine what’s happening in India itself.” Shoebridge has been a consistent critic of the Modi government.
- n. On 6 December 2023, US Senator Ben Cardin [expressed](#) his concern regarding the assassination attempt of Pannun, stating that the conspiracy was “disturbing” in a hearing. He continued to say that the case exemplified the rise in transnational repression in the United States.

Key US [Sikh](#) organizations and a [coalition](#) of ‘South Asian American civil society organizations’ continue to bring these events to the forefront of lawmakers and the media. Rising tensions against India worldwide, specifically the US, have forced India to meet with and address the issues with its counterparts. India started to change its behaviors, including acknowledging and initiating an internal investigation, as the US administration and politicians became vocal and the global media continued its coverage.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Countries with considerable Sikh Diasporic populations, such as Canada, the US, and the UK, must safeguard Sikhs against all foreign interference by both nuclear adversaries India and Pakistan. At the same time, it is critical to safeguard Sikh rights and protections not just in the Diaspora but also in India, given the historical ties of the Sikhs with Indian Panjab, where the faith originated and where its adherents became the first indigenous rulers in South Asia. Sikh children who grew up in the diaspora with assaults on their identity and image, many of whose parents fled India due to persecution against Sikhs, are now not just lawmakers in the diaspora but also targeted and maligned for their trauma-filled backgrounds. But they are not being silenced; they have commemorated, crossing party lines, Sikh Genocide and Remembrance Day, and championed Jaswant Singh Khalra, who was extrajudicially killed

for documenting evidence against the state and its apparatus. Even as politicking in foreign countries is taking place and unsupported ‘reports’ are released, none of these narratives affect policy-making. After the release of the Bloom Review, the UK government released its counter-terrorism [agenda](#), and Khalistanis were not mentioned. Canada also removed Khalistanis from their threat list after initially citing the movement a few years ago. The ‘threat’ of the Khalistan movement is also not an official item on policy agendas in India, but it is invoked as a security and border threat that is then used to justify the strong arm of the state coming down on the Sikhs and Indian Panjab.

GLOBAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assure the Sikhs in the diaspora and India that their rights are protected and their safety is guaranteed. Create open channels of communication with the leadership of Sikh Gurdwaras, not-for-profit and charity organizations across the country, and the Department of Public Safety, along with all other security agencies, to ensure the safety of Canadian Sikhs.
- Stop the amplification of manufactured and/or rare events as a pattern of violence by the Sikhs, as the data and trends do not support this narrative. Conduct intentional and genuine dialogue sessions with Sikh representatives, not just political party loyalists, in the coming weeks. Remain steadfast in the pursuit of justice regarding a foreign government’s assassination and assassination plots against Sikh citizens of Canada, the US, and the UK.
- Address the Sikhs as an independent entity, not as Hindus; do not treat them as terrorists or as a security threat. Understand that the Sikh and Indian Panjab issues remain unaddressed; end their demonization as violent Khalistanis every time they protest. Treat Indian Panjab grievances as part of the national and international political solution.
- Include India in the list of countries for public inquiry into foreign interference in the electoral process. Moreover, broaden the scope of Indian interference beyond the rhetoric during general national elections.
- Sign the [Declaration of Principles to Combat Transnational Repression](#).
- Contextualize the origin of the Khalistan movement for elected officials and public servants as a response to the memory of human rights violations encompassing rapes, tortures, thousands of enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, revived ever so often by ongoing intimidation of Sikhs; breakdown of the structures of democracy in Indian Panjab, and the region’s falling development indices. Essentially, a failure of the Indian state to provide legal, economic, and social justice.
- Appoint Special Representatives in their respective countries to combat anti-Sikh hate and narrative.

- Develop anti-Sikh impact assessment audits.
- Foster a working group of members of Parliament or Congress to coordinate with other nations with active Sikh populations, especially the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia, to extend the protection and safety of Sikhs with great urgency and combat anti-Sikh hate crimes.

FURTHER READING

- Amandeep Sandhu, [Panjab, Journeys Through Fault Lines](#)
- Jagjit Singh, [Percussions of History: The Sikh Revolution & In the Caravan of Revolutions](#)
- Reuters: [India PM Modi's Sikh separatist fight driven by security, politics](#)
- The Economist: ["If India ordered a murder in Canada, there must be consequences"](#)
- The Economist: [Will India-US relations be hurt by India's assassination scheme?](#)
- The Financial Times: ["India to investigate US allegations of foiled Sikh assassination plot"](#)
- The Times: [The Times view on the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar: Prime Suspect - India risks being cast as a rogue state following an assassination in Canada](#)
- The Washington Post: ["Video of Sikh leader's killing shows coordinated attack"](#)
- Time: [Why India Is Targeting Sikhs at Home and Around the World](#)