What about Pakistan?

Part of Southeast Asia, Pakistan is generally considered to be geographically outside what is known as the Middle East. However, it still has strong ties and shares common challenges with the region. The country is also frequently subject to terrorist attacks which rarely make the headlines in news reports. This brief guide looks at the importance of the country in relation to the great Islamic world and Middle East through the lens of a recent attack on a Sufi shrine in the town of Sehwan to give insight on global connections and trends.

1. What happened in Sehwan?
Sehwan is a small town in the Southwestern province of Sindh where a very popular and sacred shrine is situated called the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, dedicated to a renowned Sufi saint. Amidst a holy Sufi ritual being performed on February 16th, the shrine was attacked in a suicide blast, killing 88 people and injuring hundreds. The Islamic State Khorasan, which is the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the attack. This was the bloodiest event of several violent attacks that took place in Pakistan all in the same week which resulted in over 112 deaths total from Lahore to Quetta.

2. Why should we care about Pakistan?
Pakistan is often seen as being an extension of the problematic Middle East region, although it is geographically situated in South Asia. Due to shared borders with Iran and Afghanistan as well as shared religions and security ties with many countries in the Middle East, it is important to be aware of major trends and events in what is one of the most most populous and pertinent countries in the world. Pakistan is a state with
nuclear power, primarily developed for defense against its rival nuclear state, and neighbor, India. It has a variety of ethnolinguistic groups and a history of violence against minorities by the government and between groups, which lead to differences among the population. Rich in culture and natural resources that both hold great potential for development, Pakistan nonetheless remains stagnant in terms of both human development and economic growth due to widespread corruption and terrorism in the country.

3. **What is Pakistan’s relationship with neighboring countries and the Middle East region?**

   Pakistan makes an effort to maintain cordial ties with each Islamic country in the region. While remaining an ally of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has been opposed to Iran, which it considers antagonistic. However, Pakistan has a complex relationship with Afghanistan, often blaming them for the terror that has spilled into Pakistan as a result of hosting so many Afghan immigrants. Pakistan continues to maintain a working relationship with the Gulf, and has earned a lot of money in remittances from Pakistanis employed in the region. As for Turkey, Pakistan maintains what is called a “friendship” over many years and often refers to it as Pakistan’s “brother country.” Pakistan refuses to recognize Israel and supports the Palestinian cause along with several of the Middle Eastern countries, strengthening Pakistani ties in the region.

4. **What is Sufism and why was it targeted?**

   Sufism is a facet of Islam that combines mysticism, cosmology and poetry. It consists of storytellers, artists, musicians and those who practice divine rituals that are unlike orthodox Islam. Islam traditionally does not have a place for music and mysticism, but because Sufism combines these elements, it is seen as problematic to some. Pakistan is predominantly Sunni Muslim and with very small minorities of Shi’ias, Christians, Hindus and others. Religion is not separate from the Pakistani state and Pakistan is
referred to as an Islamic Republic. Sehwan welcomes all religions, from the various sects in Islam to Hinduism to Christianity and believes in inclusion towards all, which is something that deeply bothers terrorists, whose primary agenda is one of exclusivity and the destruction of anything that is “other” or “different.”

5. What was the U.S. response to the series of violent attacks in Pakistan?
President Donald Trump did not give any remarks upon the various acts of terrorism that just took place in Pakistan, an old strategic ally of the United States in the fight against terrorism since the Cold War. However, he did condemn a terrorist attack in Sweden that did not actually happen. There were no flags of solidarity on social networks or words of support from the mainstream media as is often the case when an act of terror affects a Western country. Although this type of international solidarity does not necessarily change the political climate in individual countries, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the very terror that is believed to be perpetrated by Islamic terrorists affects Muslim-majority countries most of all. That is what makes Pakistan similar to some of the other unstable Middle Eastern states who are also experiencing senseless violence against their civilians.

6. What can Pakistan do to combat terrorism?
The Pakistani military tends to blame Afghanistan and India for the violence that takes place on its soil, however there is much Pakistan can do on its own to combat terrorism. Madrassas, or religious schools in which there are some that teach militancy, are not being as strictly regulated as they should be. Sectarianism continues to thrive. The army that is already very involved in political affairs, wants a bigger role in national security which troubles civilians. There is no one to blame but Pakistan for not resolving some of these issues.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you think Sufism is a threat to the terrorist agenda?
2. Why does President Trump fail to comment on attacks in Muslim-majority countries? How does it relate to his controversial immigration ban?
3. Why should we take Pakistan into account when discussing Middle Eastern affairs or Muslim-majority states?