

**TO:** Mr. Yousaf Naseem Khokar, Interior Secretary, Ministry of the Interior

**FROM:** Neiha Lasharie, Deputy Director of Policy, Directorate-General of Immigration & Passports

**SUBJECT:** Liberalizing Pakistan's Existing Pilgrimage Visa Regime

**DATE:** December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan has been unable to meet its economic and political potential in part for two reasons. First, South Asia is the least integrated region in the world, meaning that the region writ large underperforms economically.<sup>1</sup> Second, Pakistan's reputation as an insecure and occasionally intransigent country has stunted its relations with SAARC<sup>2</sup> member-states and disincentivized tourism (further truncating economic growth).<sup>3</sup> Liberalizing Pakistan's visa agreements with SAARC member-states<sup>4</sup> will help improve Pakistan's regional standing. This may precipitate liberalized visa regimes throughout South Asia; in turn leading to increased intra-regional tourism, thus boosting Pakistan's economy. Pursuant to your request for an actionable and realistic next-step for visa liberalization, I recommend that the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) **expand Pakistan's existing pilgrimage visa regime to attract tourists from different faith-backgrounds within SAARC.**

## BACKGROUND

Pakistan's improving security landscape has revitalized its tourism industry, which contributed to 7.1% of Pakistan's GDP in 2018.<sup>5</sup> The government has publicly stated its commitment to opening Pakistan up to religious tourism in particular.<sup>6</sup> The tourism sector in Pakistan is projected to become more

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<sup>1</sup> Only 5% of South Asia's total trade comes from intraregional trade, compared to 50% in East Asia and 22% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sanjay Kathuria, ed., *A Glass Half Full: The Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia*, South Asia Development Forum (Washington DC: World Bank Group, 2018), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/30246/9781464812941.pdf?sequence=8&isAllowed=y>, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> There are limited mobility arrangements between SAARC member-states, largely due to mutual distrust and hostilities. Selim Raihan, "Next Steps to South Asian Economic Union: A Study on Regional Economic Integration (Phase II)" (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, November 5, 2018), p. 167; Mohd Aminul Karim, "South Asian Regional Integration – Challenges and Prospects," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 2 (June 2014), p. 304; Kathuria, ed., *A Glass Half-Full*; Amita Batra, *Regional Economic Integration in South Asia: Trapped in Conflict?* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2012). The structure of SAARC precludes any attempt to discuss hostilities under its auspices, which only serves to exacerbate the problem. "Article X: General Provisions," *Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation*. Accessed: [http://saarc-sec.org/assets/responsive\\_filemanager/source/SAARC%20Charter/1\\_SAARC\\_CHARTER\\_Provisional\\_Rules\\_of\\_Procedure.pdf](http://saarc-sec.org/assets/responsive_filemanager/source/SAARC%20Charter/1_SAARC_CHARTER_Provisional_Rules_of_Procedure.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Though SAARC member-states are the targets of this policy recommendation, non-Indian Sikhs are the sole beneficiaries of Pakistan's extant pilgrimage visa regime, and they will thus be included in the scope of this memo.

<sup>5</sup> In 2018, travel and tourism in Pakistan contributed to 7.1% of total GDP, and 6.3% of total employment. World Travel & Tourism Council, "Travel & Tourism: Economic Impact 2018 Pakistan" (London, United Kingdom: March 2018). Accessed: <https://www.wttc.org/api/sitecore/DownloadForm/DownloadPdf?token=0%2B86MGpBDo3oYcNeueMHmLrvEMyYHm0zuZ1Kqt2%2FBmq%2F%2FxsAkjSGp4hHqvhqKc2KeYuA2IY4qksYnSCPoj%2BzRmnTa%2FNgXDSxIHxzdNrfZeTXjl26R6FGx7d7tixHtj3USa7%2FrFzrtZuOMxncNw%3D%3D>.

<sup>6</sup> The existence of political will means that such a policy suggestion will receive wide political support. "Buddhist Trail' in works to encourage religious tourism," *Newsweek*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/buddhist-trail-in-works-to-encourage-religious-tourism/>; "PTI seeks religious

productive over the next nine years. The direct contribution of travel and tourism to Pakistan's GDP is projected to rise from PKR 1000 billion to nearly PKR 1800 billion by 2028 – *without* accounting for future visa facilitation policies.<sup>8</sup> Visa facilitation policies significantly improved tourism rates in G20 countries, paired with the implementation of e-visas.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, while the demand for tourism exists, most of this tourism comes from outside the SAARC region.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan can fill this tourist disparity by championing a more mobile SAARC through its own policies.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of the Kartarpur Corridor (designed to facilitate visa-free pilgrimage for Indian Sikhs to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan<sup>12</sup>) creates precedent for additional bi- and multilateral regional agreements to facilitate SAARC tourism into Pakistan and vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

### EXISTING PILGRIMAGE REGIMES

The MoI only extends pilgrimage visas to members of the Sikh faith, so long as they are not Indian nationals.<sup>14</sup> This brings up two points: first, while we are a long way away from normalizing relations – let alone movement – between Pakistan and India, that does not preclude Pakistan from improving

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tourism for Pakistan: P.M. Khan," *Newsweek*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/pti-seeks-religious-tourism-for-pakistan-p-m-khan/>.

<sup>7</sup> Pakistani Rupee.

<sup>8</sup> Taking indirect contributions – that is, contributions arising from the “wider impact” of travel and tourism, through local marketing, purchases made by the hospitality industry to facilitate tourism, etc - into consideration, this amount jumps from PKR 2500 billion to PKR 4200 billion by 2028. World Travel & Tourism Council, “Travel & Tourism: Economic Impact 2018 Pakistan,”

<https://www.wttc.org/api/sitecore/DownloadForm/DownloadPdf?token=0%2B86MGpBDo3oYcNeueMHmLrvEMyYHm0zuZ1Kqt2%2FBmq%2F%2FsxAkjSGp4hHqvHqKc2KeYuA2IY4qksYnSCPoj%2BzRmnTa%2FNgXDSxIIXHzxdNrfZeTXjI26R6FGx7d7tIxHtj3USa7%2FrFzrtZuOMxncNw%3D%3D>.

<sup>9</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, “Visa Facilitation” (London, United Kingdom: August 2019),

<https://www.wttc.org/api/sitecore/DownloadForm/DownloadPdf?token=J8adNKookSGe3JdHjTm6%2BUedQWxiqG1VoTZ0X9G0TptleJBFJ9aBOr2Mf1hfc31im5CO2h91NZEsmHJaXR6pdF5Oq3XsukztUjGIQ%2F3Js%2BU6WgGykLLwA5anLSS5RMLwhVz%2FQe6X%2FVPjxUAY5w%2B0pQ%3D%3D>. The Pakistan MoI has already taken the step of mainstreaming e-visas.

<sup>10</sup> Sana Jamal, “Pakistan tops list of world's best travel destinations for 2018,” *Gulf News*, December 28, 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-tops-list-of-worlds-best-travel-destination-for-2018-1.2148655>;

Ann Abel, “The 10 Coolest Places to Go in 2019,” *Forbes*, December 12, 2018,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/annabel/2018/12/12/the-10-coolest-places-to-go-in-2019/#25dc418b1fdc>; World Travel & Tourism Council, “Pakistan - 2019 Annual Research: Key Highlights” (London, United Kingdom: 2019).

More transparent data on the origins and purpose of international arrivals to Pakistan would be helpful.

<sup>11</sup> It would be unwise for Pakistan to remove inbound travel barriers across the board; incremental and strategic growth is crucial. Offering expanded pilgrimage visas to citizens of South Asian countries will be less of a shock to the system. Evaluating this initial step will inform future decisions for visa liberalization agreements, bi- and multilaterally.

<sup>12</sup> One of the holiest shrines in the Sikh faith.

<sup>13</sup> “Pakistan to open Kartarpur Corridor on November 9: Imran Khan,” *India Today*, October 20, 2019,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistan-to-open-kartarpur-corridor-on-november-9-imran-khan-1611262-2019-10-20>.

<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Sikhs who are: a) foreign nationals of Indian origin; b) valid legal and permanent residents of a third country other than India; and c) spouses and children of applicants who fall under subcategory b. Sikh pilgrims are only granted two-week visas to visit Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Sheikhpura. Government of Pakistan Ministry of Interior, “Pilgrim Tourism,” <https://visa.nadra.gov.pk/pilgrim-tourism/>.

relations with other SAARC states.<sup>15</sup> Second, by limiting pilgrimage visas to Sikhs, Pakistan is unable to reap the social, political, or economic benefits of organized religious tourism<sup>16</sup> from members of other faiths.<sup>17</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Three major faiths - Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism - can find religious sites of interest in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> While these religions find purchase all around the world, favoring nationals of SAARC countries for visa facilitation schemes will advance progress towards Pakistan's regional goals and mobility within the region in general.

1. *Expand access for non-Indian Sikhs under existing regime:* Though the pilgrimage visa for non-Indian Sikh pilgrims is only extended to Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Sheikhupura, there are several Sikh pilgrimage sites throughout Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> **Expanding pilgrimage access for Sikhs beyond Lahore, Rawalpindi and Sheikhupura will create goodwill among Sikh communities in South Asia and elsewhere toward Pakistan.** This will be important for future bi- and multilateral visa agreements.

2. *Capitalize on existing will to facilitate Buddhist pilgrimages:* Despite efforts to destroy sacred Buddhist sites, Pakistan still retains several points of interests for South Asian Buddhists.<sup>20</sup> Prime Minister Khan and Buddhist communities globally have publicly stated their desire to see Pakistan become a hub for religious – especially Buddhist – tourism.<sup>21</sup> **Bhutan and Sri Lanka<sup>22</sup> could be special beneficiaries of this scheme.**

3. *Strategically grant access to Hindu sites of pilgrimage:* The government will approve of granting Hindus access to sites of pilgrimage, given its recent policy of reclaiming and restoring Hindu temples to the Hindu community of Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> However, relations between Pakistan and the Hindutva Indian government are far too tense to consider expanding access to Hindus of Indian nationality. **Nepal,**

<sup>15</sup> Indian citizens are subject to stricter criteria for travel into Pakistan. Government of Pakistan Directorate General of Immigration & Passports, "Visa Policy (for Indian Nationals)," <http://www.dgip.gov.pk/Files/VisaforIndian.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that religious tourism is completely nonexistent in Pakistan. But the process is decentralized. Advancing *specific* visa categories can make for targeted marketing, while improving the chances of approval for visa applications from more politically sensitive countries.

<sup>17</sup> An important and recent exception is the Kartarpur Corridor, which allows Indian Sikhs access to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib visa-free. The corridor *does not* allow Pakistani Sikhs to access the analogous Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak in India without first obtaining an Indian visa. This is something the MoI should consider negotiating with India.

<sup>18</sup> Pakistan has many important religious sites for Muslim sects, offering pilgrimage visas to whom would also be beneficial to Pakistan's standing in the region. But it is more politically expedient to focus on non-Islamic faiths, as it highlights Pakistan's avowed commitment to pluralism.

<sup>19</sup> Nankana Sahib, Hasan Abdal, and Karachi should be made accessible to Sikh pilgrims.

<sup>20</sup> The Taliban in particular targeted Buddhist sites. Fazal Khaliq, "Iconic Buddha in Swat valley restored after nine years when Taliban defaced it," *DAWN*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1294246>. Takht-i-Bahi, Taxila and Swat could be major attractions for Buddhist pilgrims.

<sup>21</sup> This includes a will to restore and maintain the sanctity and appearance of sites. Sana Jamal, "Buddhist Monks hope Pakistan can become hub of religious tourism," *Gulf News*, November 2, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/buddhist-monks-hope-pakistan-can-become-hub-of-religious-tourism-1.67561112>.

<sup>22</sup> Sri Lanka and Bhutan are majority Buddhist countries, relatively friendly with Pakistan.

<sup>23</sup> "Pakistan to restore, hand over 400 Hindu temples," *India Today*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pakistan-restore-hindu-temples-1498397-2019-04-10>.

**Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are three South Asian countries with significant Hindu populations that could be granted pilgrimage visas to major Hindu sites.<sup>24</sup>**

4. *Use potential successes to facilitate mobility and visa liberalization for Pakistanis:* Contingent on the success of and political capital generated by the above steps, Pakistan can negotiate visa agreements loosening restrictions on the mobility of Pakistani nationals. **The MoI can condition access to pilgrimage visas for Indian Sikhs on allowing Pakistani Sikhs to use the Kartarpur corridor to access Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak in India, visa-free.<sup>25</sup>**

#### OVERCOMING POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

CHALLENGE	RESPONSE
<i>Tourism in Pakistan requires the safety and security of tourists. How can Pakistan ensure the safety of pilgrims?</i>	Religious sites, being limited in scope, can be more readily and effectively secured as opposed to the country writ-large. To further streamline this process, the MoI should encourage private tour companies to partner with specific hotels in cities and towns with sites of interest. <sup>26</sup> Over time, if the program maintains both its success and the security of tourists, then these restrictions can be loosened to allow tourists their pick of hotels and the ability to travel more freely in Pakistan.
<i>What is the assurance that the government will back this move? Why should it?</i>	The Tehreek-e-Insaaf government has indicated its desire to make Pakistan a destination for religious tourism. It has also indicated a desire to restore religious sites that have been desecrated. The recent establishment of the Kartarpur corridor is an encouraging step. The government has also proclaimed its commitment to human rights and plurality at multiple international fora – institutionalizing this commitment through liberal pilgrimage visas will reinforce Pakistan’s image.
<i>What does Pakistan have to gain from liberalizing its visa regimes?</i>	Liberalizing visa regimes will improve Pakistan’s perception in the region by facilitating “people-to-people contact,” <sup>27</sup> and leading to further bi- and multilateral agreements in the future. Focusing these efforts on SAARC countries demonstrates Pakistan’s commitment to regional integration. A vibrant tourism industry will contribute to Pakistan’s GDP and overall employment rates. Tourism-based employment is projected to generate 5 million jobs in 2028. <sup>28</sup> This productivity can only be helped by facilitating religious tourism. Finally, bilateral visa facilitation agreements that occur as a result of this

<sup>24</sup> Access to Hindu shrines in Sindh alone would be a significant step in extending goodwill.

<sup>25</sup> “Allow Pak Sikhs to visit Dera Baba Nanak: Takht jathedar,” *Hindustan Times*, November 9, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/allow-pak-sikhs-to-visit-dera-baba-nanak-takht-jathedar/story-yU2XI2cuHzW1qx3AVWGFSL.html>. Depending on relations with India, the MoI can also negotiate access for Indian Hindus, or fewer restrictions on Pakistani Muslim pilgrims wishing to visit Sufi shrines in India.

<sup>26</sup> Precedent for this exists. The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation endorses Pakistan Tours Limited and its tourism packages, which even include limited tourism from India to Pakistan and some religious tourism for Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus. Pakistan Tours Limited, “PTL Transport,” <http://paktourslimited.com/>.

<sup>27</sup> “People-to-people contact” is a goal of SAARC; using this specific terminology will underscore Pakistan’s desire to be a leader in SAARC. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, “Human Resource Development and Tourism,” [http://saarc-sec.org/areas\\_of\\_cooperation/area\\_detail/human-resource-development-and-tourism/click-for-details\\_3](http://saarc-sec.org/areas_of_cooperation/area_detail/human-resource-development-and-tourism/click-for-details_3).

<sup>28</sup> World Travel & Tourism Council, “Travel & Tourism: Economic Impact 2018 Pakistan.”

	endeavor may loosen restrictiveness of the Pakistani passport, allowing Pakistani nationals to travel more widely.
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## CONCLUSION

It is in Pakistan's best interest to commit to liberalizing its visa agreements. Expanding pilgrimage visas is an actionable next step that will build upon existing commitments and leadership, and lead to liberalization in other visa regimes. It will have long-term benefits for Pakistan's economy, the livelihood of its people in terms of employment, its internal societal cohesion and pluralism, and its political standing in the region and internationally. **Pakistan should expand visa access for Sikhs to other pilgrimage sites in Pakistan; establish pilgrimage visas for Buddhists from SAARC countries; expand the pilgrimage visa to Hindus from SAARC states; and, in return for allowing Pakistani Sikhs access to Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak, expand the Sikh pilgrimage visa regime to Sikhs from India.**

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