

THE RESURGENCE OF THE TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN: A RENEWED THREAT

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INTRODUCTION

According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan was the fourth most impacted country by terrorism in 2023, a significant jump from its seventh position in 2022. This marks a return to the levels witnessed in 2015 and 2016, when it also ranked fourth.¹ Afghanistan, by contrast, after being the country most impacted by terrorism for four consecutive years from 2019 to 2022, slipped to sixth place in 2023. Although the number of terror attacks in Afghanistan has fallen, groups operating from there, especially the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), have intensified their attacks in Pakistan, triggering an increase in the latter's rank. For Pakistan's part, it is a conspicuous case of the chickens coming home to roost, considering the multi-domain support it had provided to the Afghan Taliban before they captured Kabul, unheeding of the writing on the wall, and cheering

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1. Global Terrorism Index 2024, Institute for Economics and Peace, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>. Accessed on July 2, 2024.

their takeover, presuming that such an act would help install a Pakistan-friendly government in Afghanistan. What Pakistan failed to account for is the Afghan Taliban's deep ideological and operational ties with the TTP, the unlikelihood of them severing ties with their offshoot in Pakistan, and the danger of the TTP acquiring a new lease of life.

With the benefit of hindsight, then, the overall violence levels in Pakistan increased progressively following three watershed events: the U.S-Taliban Doha Agreement in February 2020, the Afghan Taliban's rise to power in August 2021, and the termination of a tenuous ceasefire between the TTP and the Pakistan government in November 2022. These developments bolstered the TTP, which has since perpetuated attacks largely against the country's security forces. While the current resurgence is less potent compared to the pre-2018 period when the TTP was in its heyday, it, nevertheless, poses a grave security challenge to Pakistan's national security, resulting from a unique mix of factors at play. This is occurring at a time of growing radicalisation and political polarisation at home, prevailing economic hardships, and, most critically, an ensconced Afghan Taliban on Pakistan's western borders providing a safe haven to the TTP, which earlier was not the case. This paper aims to analyse the resurgence of the TTP roughly from 2020 until the present, with the principal objective of providing a holistic view of the group's evolving tactics and the dyadic interaction between the TTP and the Government of Pakistan.

SAME SCRIPT, DIFFERENT CAST

In December 2007, the Taliban-inspired militant groups in Pakistan coalesced under the banner of the TTP. In the years since, Pakistan has struggled to rein in its activities, occasionally striking peace deals with the TTP and its various factions from a position of weakness. Around a dozen counter-terror operations have been launched to counter the TTP, prominent among them being Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan (2009), Operation Rah-e-Haq and Rah-e-Rast in Swat (2007-2009), Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan (2014), Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), and, most recently, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in June 2024. How has the same script of militancy,

albeit with a new cast, continued to play out in Pakistan today, 17 years after the TTP's inception?

When, on February 29, 2020, the U.S. signed a peace deal with the Taliban in Doha, it virtually paved the way for the return of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The TTP, at the time, under the tutelage of its new Emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, who had taken over in 2018 following the death of its former chief Mullah Fazlullah, had been lying low after having lost its true mettle due to vigorous military operations. Looking at its parent organisation's fortunes that lay ahead, the Doha Agreement, as the deal came to be known, instilled renewed confidence within the TTP to embark on a path of resurgence. A prompt and visible manifestation of this momentum was the return of defectors who had previously parted ways with the TTP central. The perceived inability of Fazlullah, the TTP's first non-Mehsud leader, to hold sway over the group, alongside the debilitating impact of counter-terror operations and U.S. drone strikes, as well as the rise of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) during his tenure had engendered internecine fighting and many splits. With the return of a Mehsud as the TTP's leader, "many disgruntled Mehsud tribesmen" were persuaded to return to the TTP fold, as Hassan Abbas incisively notes.² Moreover, as Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming observe, the end of an active *jihadi* insurgency in Afghanistan, the transformation of the Afghan Taliban from an insurgent force to that of a government machinery, and the withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan, led a number of Pakistani militants, even those who had not fought in Pakistan *per se*, to join the TTP.³ This shift was driven by factors ranging from a willingness to continue their militant activities to facing obstructions in securing a desirable place within the Taliban's new governance structure.⁴ The latter is a result of the Taliban not

2. Hassan Abbas, "Extremism and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan: Changing Dynamics and New Challenges," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/extremism-and-terrorism-trends-in-pakistan-changing-dynamics-and-new-challenges/>. Accessed on July 13, 2024.

3. Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 16, issue 6, 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>. Accessed on July 13, 2024.

4. *Ibid.*

wanting to risk being viewed as “Pakistani stooges” and also due to the historical aversion towards foreign rule that is widely prevalent in Afghanistan’s politics and culture.⁵

Be that as it may, between July and November 2020, eight *jihadi* groups pledged their allegiance to the TTP, marking the beginning of a steady stream of support and infusing the group with greater strength that led to a sharp uptick in attacks.⁶ This is best evidenced by a United Nations report published in February 2021, highlighting that the TTP carried out over 100 cross-border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan between July and October 2020.⁷ These mergers, according to another U.N. report, had taken place in Afghanistan and were moderated by Al-Qaeda.⁸ At the time of writing, open source and social media intelligence estimate that since July 2020, approximately 60 *jihadi* groups have joined the TTP.⁹ This has largely been credited to Noor Wali Mehsud’s conciliatory policy and a larger shift in the organisation’s tactics. Mehsud is proactively seeking to redress the grievances of various splinter factions and reassimilate them to consolidate his control over the group and maintain internal cohesion. Under his leadership, the TTP even made a critical pivot in its targeting strategy, doing away with the policy of indiscriminate attacks on non-combatants, and focussing instead on targeted attacks against law enforcement personnel. Despite this shift, however, civilians continue to bear the brunt of its attacks. Another tactical adjustment involved narrowing their area of focus from a broader transnational or global agenda to a more localised one, concentrating and limiting their *jihad* within Pakistan’s borders only. In its 2018 manifesto, the TTP formally rescinded its support for a “greater *jihad*” in Afghanistan and distanced itself from

5. Ibid.

6. Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, “The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol 14, issue 4 (2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>. Accessed on July 13, 2024.

7. Abbas, n.2.

8. Sayed and Hamming, n. 6.

9. Abd. Sayed (@abdsayed), “The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) announced the latest merger of militants led by Fateh from the Bannu division in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province,” X (formerly Twitter), August 28, 2024, 11:12 am, https://x.com/abdsayed/status/1828669478839722383?s=48&t=kj2SjYszL_8Y8IP1fUrgvQ. Accessed on September 8, 2024.

Al-Qaeda's global *jihad* agenda.¹⁰ While there is evidence suggesting the genuineness of this move via its operational activities, it could also be a calculated short-term tactic aimed at evading the wrath of U.S. drone strikes, as well as to simultaneously impede the Pakistani state's ability to garner international support for its battle against the TTP. The rationale behind these policy shifts has been chronicled by Noor Wali Mehsud in his infamous book, published in 2017. In a 690-page book titled *Inqilab-e-Mehsud, South Waziristan: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraj Tak* (Mehsud Revolution, South Waziristan: From British Raj to American Imperialism), he has talked of how a lack of unity among the TTP rank-and-file and indiscriminate killings were central to the group's diminished *jihadi* credentials.¹¹ Consistent with this line of thought, he continues to usher in the required reforms, first, to restore the TTP's old fortunes, and now, to avoid the reversal of the gains achieved thus far.

It is worth noting that the TTP was the first militant group to congratulate the Afghan Taliban on its accession to power, rejoicing how it was "a great victory for the *jihadi* project", with the TTP chief publicly renewing his pledge of allegiance to Afghan Taliban supremo Hibatullah Akhundzada.¹² For their part, the Afghan Taliban released TTP leaders (alongside those of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State) who had been imprisoned by the Ashraf Ghani government, a factor that contributed to the significant escalation in the TTP's terrorist and criminal activities like extortion.¹³ Shortly after, the Pakistan government sought the mediation of the Afghan Taliban for talks with the TTP. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, along with key officials serving at the time such as President Arif Alvi and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, advocated offering amnesty to

10. Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/the-evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan?lang=en>. Accessed on September 8, 2024.

11. Farhan Zahid, "Profile of New TTP Chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud: Challenges and Implications", Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Profile-of-New-TTP-Chief-Mufti-Noor-Wali-Mehsud-Challenges-and-Implications.pdf>. Accessed on September 5, 2024.

12. Sayed and Hamming, n. 3.

13. Shahzad Akhtar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2023, pp. 285-306.

militants willing to lay down arms and return as normal citizens.¹⁴ Khan, emphasising his stance as an “anti-military solution”, favoured pursuing a political dialogue with the TTP above all else.

On November 9, 2021, the TTP agreed to a month-long ceasefire, but chose not to extend it after its expiry, criticising the government’s alleged lack of interest in upholding its end of the bargain. It may be useful to recall that the TTP had demanded the release of its members in Pakistan’s custody, including some prominent ones, and the government had reportedly agreed to release over 100 prisoners as a goodwill gesture to advance the peace process.¹⁵ Following the end of the ceasefire in December, the TTP’s attacks increased in both number and intensity. With the intercession of the Afghan Taliban, most notably Sirajuddin Haqqani of the Haqqani network, the peace process was back on track. After the TTP announced a few ceasefires in May 2022, it announced an indefinite ceasefire on June 2, 2022, which finally came to naught on November 28, 2022, when the ceasefire that had existed only in name, officially ended. Subsequently, the TTP directed its forces to launch attacks across the country. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-grade weaponry that the TTP militants had acquired following the hasty U.S. withdrawal aided their attacks in no small measure, especially when placed in the context of a poorly-equipped police force, which continues to be one of the TTP’s primary targets.

The sticking points that led to the talks collapsing emanated from several demands put forward by the TTP: reversal of the 2018 Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; the implementation of the *Sharia* in the tribal border regions, and amnesty to, and release of, their detained members, with the supposed ceasefire violations by the Pakistan Army in the form of continued military operations during the talks proving to be the last straw. It is widely believed that while the negotiations were underway, the TTP took advantage of the time to regroup, reactivate

14. “Govt in Talks with TTP Groups for Reconciliation Process: PM Imran”, *Dawn*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649520/govt-in-talks-with-ttp-groups-for-reconciliation-process-pm-imran>. Accessed on September 6, 2024.

15. Mushtaq Yusufzai, “TTP to Cease Fire as Govt Ready to Release Prisoners”, *The News International*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/906331-ttp-to-cease-fire-as-govt-ready-to-release-prisoners>. Accessed on September 6, 2024.

its sleeper cells, and reestablish its writ in its former strongholds—the National Counter-Terrorism Authority, in December 2022, had informed as much to the Parliament.¹⁶ The surge in attacks throughout the following year increasingly reflected this. According to the 2023 annual report of the Centre for Research and Security Studies, the overall fatalities marked a six-year high—the highest since 2017—with a staggering 56 per cent increase from the 2022 levels. In the meantime, media reports indicate that the TTP is currently active in 10 of the 34 districts in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where it often exerts control after dark, leading government officials to retreat to their bases, while civilians remain fearful to venture out at night.¹⁷

While KP and Balochistan have long been the epicentres of terrorism due to their proximity to the Afghan border, the TTP's ingress into Punjab, although it remains significantly and comparatively less, has put Punjab's counter-terrorism department on high alert, as per *The Khorasan Diary*.¹⁸ One of the most high-profile attacks in 2023 that grabbed a great number of eyeballs occurred in Mianwali (Punjab), where the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), a TTP front operating under plausible deniability, stormed the Mianwali Training Air Base of the Pakistan Air Force in November 2023. The TTP's footprint is primarily concentrated in Punjab's southern regions and other areas abutting KP, and it is no coincidence that South Punjab remains the most underdeveloped part of the otherwise affluent province, ranking poorly in almost all socio-economic metrics. This sort of expansion is furthermore a microcosm of the TTP's broader revisionist strategy that entails extending operations beyond traditional bastions, including areas within the militancy-prone KP that had previously

16. Samina Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", International Crisis Group, March 29, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistani-taliban-test-ties-between-islamabad-and-kabul>. Accessed on September 6, 2024.

17. Abubakar Siddique and Abdul Hai Kakar, "No One is Safe: Life Under The Rule of The Pakistani Taliban", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 10, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-ttp-taliban-khyber-pakhtunkhwa/33113386.html>. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

18. Iftikhar Firdous, "Deciphering the TTP's Strategy to Revive in Punjab", *The Khorasan Diary*, May 7, 2024, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2024/05/07/deciphering-the-ttps-strategy-to-revive-in-punjab>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

witnessed little to no militant activity. For instance, in September 2023, hundreds of TTP fighters attacked two military checkpoints in the Kalash area of Chitral district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Chitral is home to the Kalash community, Pakistan's smallest religious minority, as well as a substantial Ismaili population, and, for the most part, has remained a peaceful district.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, the Chitral incursion laid bare the TTP's renewed intent and ability to establish a territorial foothold in new regions to increasingly challenge the state's already tenuous writ. According to the 33rd report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) had supplied armed fighters to the TTP for its Chitral attack, and the international spotlight on the attack is believed to have boosted the TTP's morale.²⁰ Reports in the past have suggested the possibility of a potential merger between the TTP and AQIS, given the AQIS and Al-Qaeda core's advisory role and continued guidance to the TTP.

The latest report from the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, released in July 2024, acutely sets out similar disturbing (albeit not surprising) trends concerning the TTP.²¹ First, the TTP remains the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan, with an estimated strength of 6,000 to 6,500 fighters. That greater support from Al-Qaeda to the TTP could transform the latter into an "extra-regional threat" is also brought out by the report. Third, as a means of exerting pressure, the Taliban are reportedly providing Noor Wali Mehsud with around Afghans 3.5 million (\$50,500) per month, but at the same time, are cautious of pushing too hard, considering high-pressure could spur collaboration between the TTP and ISKP, all the more so when the TTP chief is keeping his options open by allegedly maintaining a "backdoor line of communication" with the ISKP.

19. Adnan Aamir, "The Kalash are Under Threat from Pakistani Taliban", *The Interpreter*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kalash-are-under-threat-pakistani-taliban>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

20. Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities.

21. Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2716 (2023) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan.

Even as the Taliban have prohibited the TTP from carrying weapons in cities, they have built guest houses in Kabul for the TTP leaders and issued special passes for the senior leadership that would not only facilitate their ease of movement, but also grant them weapon permits and immunity from arrest. These magnanimous concessions are principally driven by the Taliban's overriding fear of potential defections to the ISKP.

A REACTIONARY APPROACH TO THE TTP CHALLENGE

The Pakistani state's response to the TTP challenge has been inconsistent and largely reactive, characterised by a series of knee-jerk actions and policies rather than a well-thought out, cohesive strategy. With peace talks off the table (at least for the time being), the government has broadly taken the following approaches:

Expulsion of Afghan Refugees

In October 2023, the Pakistani government, under the then military-backed caretaker government, unveiled its Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP), which, in theory, was aimed at expelling all illegal foreigners residing in Pakistan, but, in reality, was directed at the 1.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees. The October decision marked the first of a three-phase IFRP targeting of undocumented Afghan refugees. Reports indicate that the second phase, directed against Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders, is already underway, with the third one aimed at Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders, still pending. Conventional wisdom suggests that this was a pressure tactic against the Taliban to rein in the TTP. Instead of achieving its intended goals, the move, as critics had warned, backfired to a certain extent. It has fuelled resentment among ordinary Afghans toward Pakistan – a sentiment the TTP has conveniently tapped into for its recruitment efforts. The 33rd report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team lends credence to this as it highlights the growing presence of Afghan nationals within the TTP ranks.²²

22. n. 20.

Flexing Diplomatic and Economic Muscles

As part of its broader coercive campaign to bludgeon the Taliban into revisiting its TTP policy, Pakistan has exercised both diplomatic and economic levers. On the diplomatic front, Pakistan has decided “not to advocate the Afghan Taliban’s case internationally”, meaning it is unlikely to back the Taliban’s efforts for formal recognition.²³ This signals a stark departure from its traditional position of consistently encouraging the international community to engage with the Taliban, especially as Pakistan was one of the three countries to formally recognise the Taliban’s first regime (1996-2001). On an economic level, Pakistan has tightened the rules of the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement, by banning the import of certain smuggling-prone goods, imposing a 10 percent processing fee on other commodities and enforcing stringent rules on Afghan importers.²⁴ Another tool of trade being politicised is the disruption and closure of border crossings, geared towards drying up the Taliban’s revenue streams. In the first half of 2024, trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan dropped to \$1.081 billion, down from \$1.152 billion during the same period in 2023.²⁵ This decline has forced landlocked Afghanistan to reduce its over-reliance on Pakistan by seeking trade opportunities with Iran and other regional neighbours.

Cross-Border Air Strikes

In March 2024, Pakistan conducted intelligence-based cross-border air strikes in Afghanistan’s Khost and Paktika provinces, targeting the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group (HGB), an outfit affiliated with the TTP, which was once, interestingly, regarded as the “good Taliban”. These were in retaliation for the HGB’s attack on a security checkpoint in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, that left seven soldiers dead. The precedent for such air strikes was established in April 2022, when Pakistan carried out similar strikes in Khost and Kunar provinces—

23. Kamran Yousuf, “Pakistan Shifts Stance on Afghan Taliban”, *The Express Tribune*, November 9, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2445604/pakistan-shifts-stance-on-afghan-taliban>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

24. Shahbaz Rana, “Govt Tightens Transit Trade Import Regime”, *The Express Tribune*, October 4, 2023, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2439142/govt-tightens-transit-trade-import-regime#google_vignette. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

25. “Afghanistan’s Exports to Pakistan Plummet by 31 Percent, Taliban Reports”, *Amu TV*, August 28, 2024, <https://amu.tv/120080/>. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

though they were not officially acknowledged at the time, unlike the March 2024 ones. The issue with this escalatory measure is that, besides the obvious souring of relations with the Taliban, these air strikes often result in the death of civilians, as seen in both instances, which risks increasing sympathy for the TTP within Afghanistan. However, with improvements in strike precision and enhanced intelligence gathering, particularly human intelligence, this strategy could perhaps be utilised as a less controversial last-resort option.

Azm-e-Istehkam

In June 2024, Pakistan's top leadership approved the launch of its latest counter-terror operation named Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) "to combat the menaces of extremism and terrorism in a comprehensive manner". The operation was immediately adjudged as a move to placate China's security concerns, particularly in the wake of the attack on Chinese engineers in March 2024, with anecdotal evidence, by and large, supporting this view. While it was highlighted that this was launched with the consensus of all stakeholders, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, lamented that the operation was not discussed with him, with leaders from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Awami National Party (ANP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) expressing reservations about the effectiveness of the operation. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud openly supported and encouraged such opposition to the operation. The predominant concern among the political parties and civilians alike was that the operation would lead to collateral damage, manifesting in the form of large-scale civilian displacement, like previous military operations. Amidst a torrent of criticism, the Prime Minister's Office clarified that the initiative was being misunderstood as a kinetic operation, when, in actuality, it entailed a reinvigoration of the ongoing Revised National Action Plan (R-NAP) and an intensification of Intelligence-Based Operations (IBOs).²⁶ Despite attempts to downplay the operation's kinetic aspect, the government has struggled to gain consensus from both the political spectrum and the local population. This was glaringly exposed by

26. Ikram Junaidi, Saleem Shahid and Umer Farooq, "Azm-i-Istehkam is no 'Large-Scale Military Op'," *Dawn*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1841822>. Accessed on July 2, 2024.

a series of rallies and *jirgas* held across KP to protest against the operation following its launch. The most notable among them was the peace march in Bannu under the banner 'Aman Pasun' in July 2024, where the Pakistani military reportedly fired on peaceful protesters, leading to a few deaths and scores of injuries.²⁷ The Bannu episode in particular highlighted the gaping disconnect between the state and the society, where the former appears to have failed in conveying that the operation was intended to benefit the populace and is not to their detriment, as perceived. Moreover, when the security forces open fire on protesters demanding peace and an end to militancy in their region, they risk antagonising the population toward the state's security apparatus. This is equally concerning as the security forces not only remain on the front lines of combating militancy, but are also in the crosshairs of the militants, while concurrently wrestling to prevent the breakdown of law and order amidst growing unrest and protests in crisis-stricken Pakistan. In addition, there seems to be a lack of bipartisan agreement on how to address the TTP issue with the Afghan Taliban, or even whether to engage with them at all. For instance, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, embittered by the burgeoning militancy problem in his province, wishes to directly negotiate with the Afghan Taliban.²⁸ While Gandapur's frustration is understandable, foreign policy falls within the federal government's wheelhouse, and circumventing the central authority to chart out an independent policy for his province may not be the most effective way to deal with the pressing issue at hand. It would unarguably worsen the ongoing political tussle in the country, undermine national consensus and weaken the government's writ. Such political instability, in turn, leaves room for the militants to weaponise the situation, potentially luring into their rank-and-file disillusioned and disgruntled citizens who no longer perceive the government to be the primary provider of stability and prosperity. Thus, reaching a consensus with all stakeholders must assume high priority in the

27. "Bannu Peace Rally Disrupted After Participant Killed", *The Friday Times*, July 20, 2024, <https://thefridaytimes.com/20-Jul-2024/bannu-peace-rally-disrupted-after-participant-killed>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

28. "Ex-FM Hina Rabbani Khar Slams Gandapur's Plans of Direct Talks with Kabul on Terrorism", *Dawn*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1859056>. Accessed on September 17, 2024.

government's agenda, as history demonstrates that without public support, a state cannot successfully take on terrorists, radicals, and the like.

Proscriptions and Rechristening of the TTP

The Pakistan government has announced that the TTP would be called 'Fitna al Khawarij', with prefixes like 'Hafiz' and 'Mufti', used by TTP leaders, replaced with Khawarij in all official correspondence.²⁹ The term Khawarij, referring to an early aberrant Islamic sect, is intended to blunt the TTP's interpretation of Islam and thereby present a counter-narrative; however, invoking a historically controversial religious term to do so may give rise to a few concerns. Firstly, it risks deepening religious polarisation within Pakistani society, as it may alienate those with similar ideologies.³⁰ Secondly, given that the TTP and the Afghan Taliban are cut from the same ideological cloth, Pakistan, by corollary, would be labelling its former client with the same term.³¹ Having said that, leveraging religion and the associated infrastructure remains a beneficial tool to counter the extremists' version of religion. Besides renaming the TTP, Pakistan has proscribed TTP-affiliated groups such as the HGB group under Section 11-B-(1) and Schedule-1 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997.

CONCLUSION

For over two decades, Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban was rooted in the misguided belief that securing the group's rise to power would protect its interests along the western border, but since sweeping back to power for the second time, the Taliban have once again emboldened the TTP. While the Taliban, under pressure from Pakistan, have sporadically announced the arrest of TTP members and their relocation away from the border areas, these steps have proved to be cosmetic in nature. The Afghan Taliban, whenever asked to restrain the group, have frequently shifted the blame onto

29. Iftikhar A. Khan, "Govt Proscribes Gul Bahadur Group, Majeed Brigade," *Dawn*, August 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1849349>.

30. Umer Farooq, "Labeling the TTP 'Kharijites'," *The Friday Times*, August 20, 2024, <https://thefridaytimes.com/20-Aug-2024/labelling-the-ttp-kharijites>, Accessed on September 20, 2024.

31. *Ibid.*

Pakistan, thundering that it is Pakistan's responsibility to manage its own security. For Pakistan's part, this is not promising to hear, but it presents an opportunity to promulgate a more realistic approach to tackle the threat within its borders, revisit its Afghanistan policy, and reevaluate its long-standing strategy of courting terror groups to further its foreign policy objectives. Till then, relations between Islamabad and Kabul will continue to wax and wane, with the TTP threat posing a dire security threat to Pakistan's stability and development. Prominent security analyst Muhammad Amir Rana, in a *Dawn* op-ed, quoted an official handling Afghan affairs, who maintained that "there may be no military, diplomatic or political solution to TTP terrorism in Pakistan" without first establishing the rule of law.³² Indeed, this view could not be more true. In this context, the most crucial step for the government is to strike at the root causes of extremism by upholding its share of social contract and delivering good governance and speedy justice, which will reduce the appeal of terrorism and lead individuals and society at large to reject groups that endorse violence. This will necessitate a whole-of-government approach, involving a wide array of stakeholders, including women, youth, tribal leaders, political parties and provincial governments. Lastly, prioritising the strengthening of civilian law enforcement and intelligence agencies, along with enhancing counter-terrorism coordination between the federal and provincial governments, is not a hackneyed prescription but one that is the need of the hour.

32. Muhammad Amir Rana, "An Ideal Justice System?", *Dawn*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1859078/an-ideal-justice-system>. Accessed on September 17, 2024.