

COUNTERING TERRORISM IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA: CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES AND THE PATH TO STABILITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is one of the most significant challenges facing the modern world, impacting local, regional and international security. The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, has been particularly affected due to its geopolitical significance and proximity to conflict zones like Afghanistan. KP has served as a battleground for terrorism for decades, initially influenced by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which led to the displacement of millions of Afghan refugees into Pakistan.¹

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan post-9/11 and reseizure of power by the Taliban again in 2021, KP became a critical region for militant activity, with terrorist groups such as *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)* and *Al-Qaeda* using the area to launch attacks. In the month of October 2024 alone, more than 35 terrorist attacks took place in KP, while more than 193 security personnel have lost their lives besides many others injured. While military operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* have helped reduce terrorism in the region, the threat continues to evolve with the militants finding new ways and means for generation of revenues for their operations and finding new safe havens.² This paper examines the spectrum of terrorism, explores its dynamics, causes and reviews counter-terrorism strategies adopted by KP Police, and identifies the challenges they face while suggesting a way forward for sustained peace and security.

II. SPECTRUM OF TERRORISM

Terrorism in KP manifests in diverse and evolving forms. Over the years, terrorists have employed a variety of tactics, each designed to instil fear, destabilize communities and undermine the State's control. Common methods include suicide bombings, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), targeted killings, kidnappings for ransom and extortion. These strategies have been particularly devastating due to their ability to target both high-profile and civilian areas.

Among the most active groups in KP are *Tehrik Taliban Pakistan* and *Al Qaeda* both of which have orchestrated numerous attacks. Suicide bombings, in particular, have been devastating, often targeting densely populated public spaces or security personnel. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have also been a preferred method for targeting military/police convoys, checkpoints and infrastructure. IED attacks cause significant loss of life, disrupt public services and spread fear throughout the region.

In addition to these direct acts of terrorism, a strong nexus exists between terrorist groups and criminal organizations. The blending of terrorism with organized crime, such as drug trafficking, extortion, smuggling and informal financial transactions via *hundi/hawala* systems, has provided these groups with the necessary resources to continue their operations.³ The ability of terrorist organizations to finance their activities through criminal networks has made it harder for law enforcement agencies to dismantle these groups, as the line between terrorism and organized crime becomes blurred.⁴

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¹ Perri, T. (2021). Militant financing: A regional perspective on South Asia. Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Strategic Studies.

² KP Police, 2024.

³ Fair, C. C. (2014). Militant conflicts and terrorist financing in Pakistan. *South Asia Journal of Political Studies*, 4(1), 45–60.

⁴ Stern, Jessica. Terrorism Financing: The Failure of Counter Measures. *International Security Journal*, 2010.

III. EXTENT AND DYNAMICS OF TERRORISM

The scale of terrorism in KP has been immense, with the province enduring over 4,100 terrorist attacks over the past two decades. These attacks have claimed more than 50,000 lives, including members of the police, military and civilians. KP has also been the site of some of Pakistan's deadliest terrorist incidents, such as the 2014 Army Public School (APS) attack, which left 144 people dead, most of them children, a suicide attack inside a mosque of Police Lines Peshawar claiming lives of more than 100 police personnel in 2023 and an attack on Chinese engineers working on construction of Dassu Dam in district Kohistan killing five of them on the spot.⁵ These attacks shocked the nation and underscored the vulnerability of educational institutions, law enforcement agencies and foreigners working on the infrastructure development of the country to the militants' violence.

The dynamics of terrorism in KP are shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. A key driver of militancy in the region is its geographic proximity to Afghanistan, which has a long and porous border with Pakistan. This border allows militants to easily cross between the two countries, using former tribal areas as safe havens. The border areas, characterized by difficult terrain and minimal governance, have historically provided ideal conditions for militant groups to hide, train, regroup and launch attacks.

Another critical factor shaping the dynamics of terrorism in KP is the geopolitical context. The post-9/11 war on terror brought new challenges to KP, as militants fleeing Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in 2001 sought refuge in Pakistan's tribal belt. These militants, once welcomed as part of the Afghan resistance against the Soviets, became a source of instability for Pakistan as they targeted the State for aligning with Western powers. They got another boost when the Afghan Taliban got hold of affairs in Afghanistan in 2021. Being their ex-comrades-in-arms, they not only turned a blind eye on their terrorist activities in Pakistan but also allowed them to use Afghanistan as their launching pad for attacks inside KP. The failure of the State to integrate displaced populations combined with a weak governance system in the former tribal areas, diminishing returns of the kinetic operations and loopholes in the legal framework have allowed extremist ideologies to take root, particularly in underdeveloped regions of KP.

IV. MOST VIOLENT RECENT CASES IN KP

KP has been the scene of some of the most lethal terrorist incidents in the history of Pakistan. These cases have not only caused tremors in the security infrastructure of the country but also posed serious challenges to the KP Police, which has long been on the forefront in fight against militancy.

A. Police Lines Peshawar Case, 2023

Peshawar is the capital of KP province and hub of business and commercial activities. Tragically on 30 January 2023 a suicide bomber detonated explosives amid policeman who gathered in the mosque of Peshawar Police Lines for mid-day prayers. Resultantly, more than 100 police officers lost their lives, while 200 were injured. The explosion was so devastating that it not only razed the whole mosque to the ground but also shook foundations of the nearby buildings. This incident demoralized the local police and raised serious questions about increasing capacity of the militants to infiltrate deep into the headquarters of the local police. The Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of KP Police took up the investigation and started a multifaceted and multipronged hunt for the perpetrators. Soon the investigators found clues about the culprits, but they were shocked to know that the militant group TTP had succeeded to allure and brainwash one of their own police constables who was working in the same premises. Further interrogation revealed that he was initially influenced by the militant's propaganda tools through social media and later on contacted through social media apps. Once in the loop he was influenced to such a level that he not only informed the militants about the exact map of the police headquarters but also made one of them do reconnaissance for the mission. On the day of the incident, he made the suicide bomber wear a police uniform and brought him on a motorcycle to police lines. He succeeded in getting him passed through all checkpoints, taking benefit of the police uniform and dropped him near the police mosque, causing the mayhem. He was later on arrested and

⁵ KP Police, 2024.

formally charged in a court of law. The involvement of a young serving police officer in such a gruesome incident brought to the fore a new challenge for the KP police to keep a close watch on its new entrants and their activities on social media. It led to the formulation and enforcement of social media regulations by KP Police and psychological testing before recruitment.⁶

B. Attack on Chinese Engineers, 2024

Pakistan and China have started a joint development project called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2014. Under this initiative a number of infrastructure development projects have been started. The construction of Dassu Dam in KP is one such project which was designed not only to provide cheap hydro-electricity but also irrigation water during winter.

On 26 March 2024, when the Chinese engineers working on the project were travelling from Pakistan's capital Islamabad to the dam site, their coaster vehicle was hit by an explosive laden car driven by a suicide bomber. The coaster after the incident fell into a deep ravine killing all five engineers on board. This incident created serious diplomatic problems for Pakistan as the Chinese government called upon Pakistan to bring the culprits to justice as soon as possible.⁷ The KP Police Counter Terrorism Department took up this challenge and with the help of ground intelligence, profiling and interviews of the previously held militants and technical tools, unearthed the whole network. This network of more than 20 young men got together in Afghanistan where they fought by the side of Afghan Taliban against the coalition forces. This incident was planned and executed by a group of young men all in their early twenties. However, the most alarming aspect which came to the fore during investigation was that a number of the network's members were already in jails in other militancy related cases, but they provided the motivation, guidance, planning techniques, social contacts and mentors for the execution of this plan from jails through cell phones and social media apps. The CTD arrested a few of them, who are now facing prosecution. This incident showed the capacity and tenacity of the militants to use the modern social media tools and operate from within the jails to achieve their targets.

V. CAUSES OF TERRORISM IN KP

Several interrelated factors have contributed to the rise of terrorism in KP, including geopolitical events, socio-economic conditions and ideological influences.

- **Geopolitical Context and Historical Conflict:** The roots of terrorism in KP can be traced back to the Soviet-Afghan war in the late 1970s and 1980s, when millions of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan in the face of the Russian invasion, bringing with them radical ideologies and militant groups. These groups, initially backed by global powers during the Cold War, later turned their attention toward destabilizing Pakistan, particularly after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan post-9/11. The constant conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan has had a direct impact on KP, as militants used the porous border to escape military crackdowns. They felt more religiously inspired/motivated and encouraged particularly after the seizure of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021.
- **Socio-Economic Deprivation:** KP is one of Pakistan's most impoverished regions, with weak institutions and limited access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities. The lack of development, particularly in the former tribal areas, has made the local population vulnerable to militant recruitment. Terrorist organizations often exploit the grievances of young men who feel marginalized and powerless, offering them a sense of purpose, financial stability and ideological justification for their actions.
- **Radicalization and Ideological Influence:** Extremist ideologies have played a significant role in fuelling terrorism in KP. Many of these ideologies are propagated through religious schools (*madaris*)

⁶ Counter Terrorism Department, *Case File FIR No. 12 dated 31-01-2023 u/s 302,324 353,427 PPC, 7ATA PS CTD* (Peshawar: Criminal Record, 2023).

⁷ Counter Terrorism Department, *Case File FIR No. 05 dated 26-03-2024 u/s 302,324 353,427 PPC, 7ATA PS CTD* (Malakand: Criminal Record, 2024).

that promote radical interpretations of Islam. These *madaris*, often operating without oversight, serve as breeding grounds for future militants. Additionally, the rise of online propaganda has further facilitated the radicalization of young people. Terrorist groups use social media and encrypted communication platforms to reach vulnerable individuals, often luring them into militancy with promises of martyrdom or financial gains.

VI. RESPONSE STRATEGY

In response to the growing threat of terrorism, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police have developed a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. This strategy focuses on three key pillars: capacitating the force, obstructing militant activities and promoting public trust.⁸

- **Capacitating the Force:** Recognizing the limitations of traditional policing methods, the KP government established specialized units to enhance the capacity of law enforcement to deal with terrorism. The Counter Terrorism Department (CTD), the Rapid Response Force (RRF) and the Special Combat Unit (SCU) are some of the specialized units that have been developed. These units are equipped with modern technology and trained to conduct intelligence-based operations (IBOs), investigate terrorism-related crimes and engage militants in combat. The establishment of these units has allowed for more targeted and efficient counter-terrorism efforts.
- **Obstructing Militants:** One of the key strategies employed by the KP Police is to obstruct militant activities by denying them the space and resources to operate. Laws such as the KP Restriction of Rented Buildings (Security) Act and the KP Restriction of Hotel Businesses (Security) Act, both passed in 2014, require landlords and hotel owners to verify the identities of tenants and guests. This makes it more difficult for militants to hide in urban areas. In addition, the KP Police have increased snap-checking, surveillance and intelligence gathering in high-risk areas to pre-empt potential attacks. Police have also focused on target hardening by securing sensitive installations and infrastructure to prevent attacks on high-profile targets.
- **Promoting Public Trust:** The success of any counter-terrorism strategy depends on public cooperation. To foster better relationships with the local population, the KP Police established Dispute Resolution Councils (DRCs) and Public Liaison Councils (PLCs). These councils serve as platforms for resolving conflicts and grievances at the community level, which helps build trust between the police and local residents. Police Assistance Lines (PALs) have also been set up to facilitate the reporting of suspicious activities by the public, further enhancing the ability of the police to gather intelligence.

VII. CHALLENGES IN COUNTERING TERRORISM IN KP

Despite the progress made by the KP Police, several challenges remain in the fight against terrorism.

- **Geographic and Legal Complexities:** KP's geographic location, with its long and porous border with Afghanistan, continues to pose a major challenge. Militants can easily evade capture by crossing into Afghanistan, where they can regroup and plan further attacks. The former tribal areas have been brought into the mainstream legal frameworks recently, but the new system has yet to take root there, making it difficult for the KP Police to conduct operations in these regions. The Durand Line – the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, is extremely treacherous and difficult to manage, within limited human, financial and technical resources.
- **Resource Constraints and Fragmented Roles:** Although specialized units have been established, the KP Police face ongoing resource constraints. Many units are underfunded and underequipped, lacking modern investigative tools such as forensic labs, digital extraction and cybersecurity capabilities.

⁸ KP Police, 2024.

These limitations hinder the police's ability to track, investigate and prosecute militants effectively to prevent attacks. Similarly, duplicity and fragmented roles among military, paramilitary, police and intelligence tentacles have led to tactical and operational inefficiencies in action against militants on the ground.

- **Evolving Tactics of Terrorists:** Terrorist groups in KP have adapted their tactics over time, shifting their focus to soft targets such as schools, universities and public markets. The 2014 APS attack and the 2023 Police Lines Peshawar Mosque attack demonstrate how militants have increasingly changed their modus operandi and targeted less guarded institutions. Additionally, the use of encrypted communication tools by militants has made it more difficult for security agencies to intercept their communications and prevent planned attacks.
- **Malpractice and Public Distrust:** Allegations of malpractice within the police force, particularly in recruitment and procurement, have undermined public confidence in law enforcement. Public perception of rampant corruption, heavy handed security measures and state neglect erodes the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts making it difficult for police to gain the trust and cooperation of local communities, which is a key to success for any counter-terrorism strategy.

VIII. WAY FORWARD

To effectively combat terrorism in KP, a comprehensive, multifaceted and integrated approach is needed. The following strategies can help ensure long-term peace and security in the region:

- **Strengthening Border Security:** Improved border management along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is critical. This includes the construction of a digitally monitored secure fence, establishment of more regulated crossing points, and enhanced intelligence sharing between Pakistani and Afghan security forces for dismantling the militants' safe havens along the border.
- **Enhancing Law Enforcement Capacity:** The KP Police need continued investment in modern investigative tools and technologies. Forensic labs, surveillance systems and cybersecurity capabilities should be expanded to help police better track and prosecute militants to prevent attacks.
- **Community Engagement and Trust Building:** Strengthening programmes like Police Assistance Lines (PALs) and Dispute Resolution Councils (DRCs) can help enhance public trust in law enforcement particularly in the former tribal areas, where the traditional *Jirga System* has been abolished after the 25th amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan. Engaging community leaders, addressing local grievances and involving residents in security efforts will create stronger partnerships between the police and the public, thus reducing operational space for militants.
- **Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Militants:** Vocational training, psychological counselling and educational plus economic opportunities for former militants are essential for preventing re-radicalization. Programmes focused on youth empowerment, job creation, skills acquisition and DE radicalization can help rehabilitate those who have been involved in militant activities.
- **Addressing Root Causes of Terrorism:** Long-term solutions must address the ideological indoctrination and socio-economic deprivation that fuels terrorism. Investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, particularly in former tribal areas, are necessary to reduce poverty, unemployment and radicalization.
- **Regional and International Cooperation:** Strengthening regional cooperation with Afghanistan, China, Russia and international organizations is vital for countering terrorism in KP. Pakistan must collaborate with neighbouring countries and global counter-terrorism agencies to disrupt militant networks, cut off their financial resources and deny bases to them.
- **Reinvigoration of the Legal Framework:** The current legal framework has not been able to ensure

speedy and timely prosecution of those involved in the acts of terrorism. Several loopholes and procedural flaws enable the perpetrators of terror to go scot free. The inability of investigators to collect and connect the evidence, the lack of hands-on knowledge of the prosecutors and fear of reprisal from terrorists among the prosecutors and judiciary play a crucial role in undermining counter-terrorism efforts.

IX. CONCLUSION

Terrorism in KP remains a complex and evolving threat, shaped by both local vulnerabilities and international dynamics. It poses a serious threat to Pakistan's stability and prosperity. While progress has been made through police reforms and military operations, significant challenges remain which require a more integrated strategy involving institutional reforms, community engagement and kinetic precision. Addressing the root causes of extremism, such as ideological indoctrination, socio-economic deprivation and radicalization, is also essential for ensuring long-term peace and stability in the region.

By focusing on international cooperation, border management, enhancement of law enforcement capacity, overhauling of legal framework and promoting community engagement, KP can fight the challenge of terrorism. With continued efforts from the government, law enforcement agencies and people, KP can achieve lasting peace and serve as a model for others facing similar challenges.

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RESOURCE MATERIAL SERIES No. 120