

PAKISTAN'S MILITANT LANDSCAPE IN 2022: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

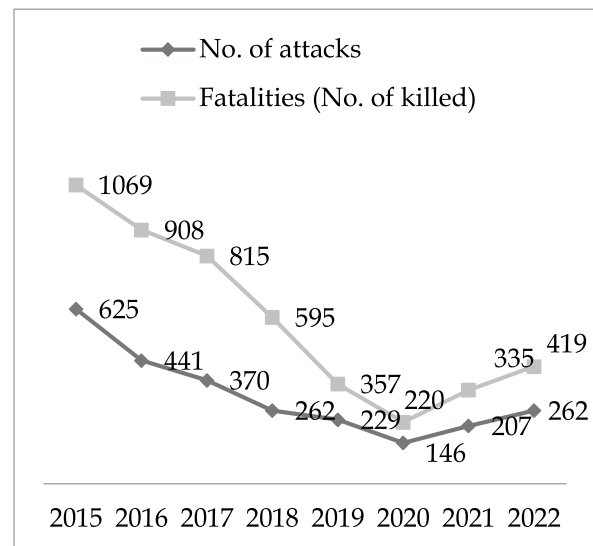
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1. Introduction

As noted in Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) 2022 security review of Pakistan, different nationalist insurgent, religiously inspired militant, and violent sectarian groups perpetrated a total of 262 terrorist attacks in the country during the year, including 14 suicide bombings.¹ It marked a 27 percent increase in the incidence of terrorist violence in 2022, as compared to the previous year. These terrorist attacks claimed in all 419 lives and injured another 734 people. About 95 percent of the total recorded terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2022 were concentrated in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.

For a second year in a row, the number of terrorist attacks posted an upsurge in the year 2022. Since 2014-15, when military operations including Zarb-e-Azb, and National Action Plan were launched, there had been a gradual decline in the incidence of terrorist violence and consequent casualties in the country that continued until 2020. From 2021-onward this declining trend did not sustain, and the incidence of terrorist attacks took an upturn. (See Chart 1) This clearly indicates that the militants have once again increased their presence and activities in Pakistan over the past two years.

Chart 1: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2015-2022)²



¹ For details, visit: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SR22-Preview.pdf>

² Data and statistics are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents: www.pakpips.com/app/database

Table 1: Geographical Distribution of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2022³

| Region | No. of Attacks | Killed | Injured |
|---------------------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | 169 | 294 | 393 |
| Balochistan | 79 | 106 | 271 |
| Punjab | 3 | 6 | 30 |
| Karachi | 6 | 8 | 31 |
| Sindh (excluding Karachi) | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Islamabad | 2 | 5 | 9 |
| Gilgit-Baltistan | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 262 | 419 | 734 |

2. Pakistan's militant landscape in 2021

After military operations in North Waziristan, Khyber and other tribal districts in 2014, much of the terrorist infrastructure based in ex-FATA had relocated across the border to Afghanistan. But since August 15th (2021), when the Taliban took power in Kabul, a new shift in the militant landscape and terrorist threat has been observed. As in the year before, the banned TTP, the Baloch insurgent group Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) were the main highlights of Pakistan's militant landscape in 2022. There were believed

to be involved in 158 terrorist attacks, or over 60 percent of the total attacks recorded across Pakistan during the year.

Most analysts agree that the establishment of the de facto Taliban government in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's negotiation ventures emboldened the *Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan* to regroup and escalate terrorist violence in Pakistan. The group was believed to be involved in 89 terrorist attacks across Pakistan, compared to 87 in the year before. The reported terrorist attacks by the group also included six suicide bombings. The attacks by the TTP claimed 135 lives, compared to 158 in the TTP-orchestrated attacks in the previous year, and left 120 others injured. Geographical spread and statistics of the attacks perpetrated by the TTP in 2022 indicate that while the group had carried out most of the attacks in the tribal districts or former FATA, it was also successful in showing its presence in northern Balochistan, and twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad.

It was in March 2022 the leadership council of the TTP announced start of operation *Al-Badr* from the first of Ramadan as part of its spring offensive in Pakistan. According to the declaration issued by the TTP, the *Al-Badr* Operation would entail *istishhadi* or suicidal/martyrdom actions, ambushes, mine blasts, targeted attacks, assaults, and laser/sniper attacks with exclusive focus on targeting Pakistani security forces. The operation was announced for

³ Ibid.

one year but only after one month of its launch, the TTP announced ceasefire on Eid-ul-Fitr which the group later extended twice. It was finally extended until the end of May 2022, due to talks with Pakistani government in Afghanistan, which were mediated by the Afghan Taliban. In May, the TTP extended the ceasefire for an indefinite period. Towards the end of August 2022, there were reports including on social media that the TTP may have ended the ceasefire and again will resort to violence. In the beginning of September, the TTP claimed multiple attacks including in DI Khan, Lakki Marwat, Khyber and Peshawar districts, but the TTP spokesman termed these attacks as 'defensive'. These attacks continued, and rather intensified in November when the banned TTP formally announced to call off the ceasefire it had agreed to with the Pakistani government.

The Islamic State's Khorasan chapter also expanded its footprint in Pakistan in 2022. Its members were believed to be active in Bajaur, Peshawar, Mohmand, Orakzai, and Kurram areas of KP; Bolan, Sibi, Awaran, Mastung, and Quetta districts of Balochistan; and Karachi and northern Sindh. Compared to eight in 2021, IS-K perpetrated a total of 23 terrorist attacks during the year under review including 21 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and two in Balochistan. In all, 92 people lost their lives and another 222 were injured in these attacks. Most of these casualties resulted from the suicide bombing the IS-K carried out in a mosque of Shia Muslims in Peshawar.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, IS-K perpetrated eight attacks in Peshawar, nine in Bajaur and one attack each in Khyber, Orakzai, Tank and South Waziristan districts targeting security forces, a mosque of Shia Muslims, members of Sikh community, leaders of political parties mainly including JUI-F, and tribal elders. In Balochistan, the group targeted FC personnel in Sibi and members of Christian community in Mastung. In a suicide attack claimed by the group, at least six FC officials were martyred, and 19 others were injured in Sibi.

In its propaganda campaign, the group has increasingly started to focus Pakistan, mainly the KP province bordering on Afghanistan; this campaign also includes anti-TTP ideological and operational propagation. For one, the group's Al-Azaim media in July 2022 released several videos and text outputs declaring the TTP leaders "apostates" and calling on TTP fighters to join the IS-K for "true jihad". The group through its Eid message sent instructions to its cells in Central and South Asia to enlist for lone-wolf and suicide attacks. Similarly, in an 11-page message/pamphlet in Urdu, the IS-K urged the people of Bajaur tribal district to extend assistance to the group either through manpower or financial means.

While multiple Baloch insurgent groups remained active in Balochistan in 2022 (some have presence even in Karachi and parts of southern Punjab), *Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)* was the most active and believed to be involved in most of terrorist attacks. Compared to 38

in the previous year, the BLA carried out 46 terrorist attacks in 2022 – including 45 in Balochistan, and one in Karachi. These attacks killed 65 people – including 30 security and law enforcement personnel and 15 civilians; 20 militants also died in these attacks – and injured 109 people.

The Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) carried out seven terrorist attacks in Balochistan in 2022, including two in each of Kech, Panjgur and Awaran districts and one attack in Hub (Lasbela). In these attacks 14 people were killed including 11 security officials, two civilians (one alleged spy and one non-Baloch worker), and one militant, while 16 others got injured. Most of the attacks by BLF (5) targeted security forces; others hit non-Baloch settlers, and an alleged spy. A new Baloch insurgent group *Baloch Nationalist Army* (BNA) claimed two terrorist attacks in 2022 including one in Lahore (Punjab) on security and bank officials, and another in Karachi (Sindh) targeting police. *Baloch Republican Army* (BRA), also known as Bugti Militia, as well as *Baloch Republican Guards* (BRG) perpetrated four terrorist attacks each in 2022, while *United Baloch Army* (UBA) claimed one attack.

Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) carried out three attacks in Sindh, including one attack in each of Naushahro Firoze, Tando Muhammad Khan, and Karachi districts targeting a railways track, a power transmission

line, and security forces, respectively. In all, one person was killed, and seven others were wounded in these attacks. Meanwhile, a new Sindhi insurgent group, which calls itself *Sindhudesh People's Army* (SPA), claimed the responsibility of a heinous attack that targeted a dental clinic run by a Chinese couple in the busy Saddar area of Karachi, near Empress Market.

3. Challenges and Recommendations

3.1 The Fallout of Afghan Situation and Its Management

A United Nations report on terrorism in early February 2022 said that there are no recent signs that the Taliban have taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country. On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history.”⁴ Another report released by the UN in July 2022 noted that while the situation in Afghanistan remained complex, international terrorist organizations based there view the victory of the Taliban as a motivating factor for disseminating their propaganda in the neighboring regions of Central and South Asia, and globally.⁵ Most analysts appear unconvinced that the Taliban will or could fulfil their promises on foreign militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Movement of Uzbekistan, ETIM or TIP, and TTP, etc.;

⁴ United Nations Security Council’s twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, February 3, 2022, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2022>

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⁵ The report was released around mid-July 2022 and can be downloaded here: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075689/N2239429.pdf>

the Taliban have so far only acted against Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).

Pakistan is concerned about the Taliban not being willing or able to help in countering the TTP threat. The group is becoming a major irritant in Pakistan's relations with the Taliban government. That is because insecurity and violence at the Pak-Afghan border and bordering regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have been growing gradually, since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. Only in 2022, 34 Pakistani citizens lost their lives (including 20 security officials) in 13 border attacks/clashes along the Durand Line.

Pakistan needs to be careful in its dealing with the Afghan situation as well as the Taliban. It needs a complete reorientation of its policy towards Afghanistan in the wake of growing threats of terrorism in the country after the banned TTP called off a ceasefire it had agreed to with the government earlier 2022. Civil-military leadership, political parties, bureaucracy and ulema should be on the same page to tackle the threat, and there should be an inclusive policy on how to deal with Afghanistan and the TTP.

3.2 Growing Terrorist Threat: Revitalizing NAP and Security Policy

National Action Plan came under discussion a few times during 2022 following some major terrorist attacks. The previous government had also approved the country's so-called first-

ever National Security Policy (2022-26) which is no more heard about.

Pakistan needs to come up with a proper implementation mechanism to implement National Security Policy as well as revised NAP. A yearly review of both NSP and NAP is also needed to improve the responses to rapidly changing security scenarios. Along with it a parliamentary oversight committee can be formed to ensure broader transparency and effectiveness.

There is also a need to increase capacity and role of civilian law enforcement agencies, which will prevent the terrorist threat to a significant extent. Civilian law enforcement structures are rooted in the people and enjoy more freedom to operate due to their frequent interaction and confidence-level with the communities.

Meanwhile, there should be a zero-tolerance policy towards the terrorist groups, and there should be no negotiations with those who are unwilling to quit violence. Further, any reconciliation overture with militants should come through the Parliament.

3.3 Persisting Conflict and Insecurity in Balochistan

While the frequency of terrorist attacks has been varying, but the most recent phase of the Balochistan conflict that started in 2005-06 continues unabated. There have been some fundamental shifts in the Baloch insurgency, such as emergence of educated, middle class leadership, and emphasis on more lethal,

high-impact attacks on what the BLA claims 'political targets' or the ones which brings them into the limelight and international focus.

The Pakistani state, nonetheless, is largely employing the same traditional methods to counter the insurgent movement. For one, relying merely on kinetic actions, the state does not seem interested in engaging the insurgent leaders and/or Balochistan's legitimate nationalist political leadership in talks or process of reconciliation. The issue of missing persons is adding fuel to fire. Meanwhile, by intensifying their terrorist attacks, the Baloch insurgent groups are not only increasing their prospects of recruitment from disgruntled Baloch youths but also putting pressure on moderate nationalist political forces of Balochistan. Balochistan is not merely a security problem but a political conflict which calls for corresponding efforts at achieving reconciliation as well as security.

Also, as the socioeconomic trickledown impact of mega development projects for masses in the Balochistan has been minimum so far, Pakistan needs to make sure that people in the province start reaping the benefits of big projects as soon as possible.

3.4 Reforms in Ex-FATA

The government's failure to speed up the process of introducing reforms in erstwhile FATA region after it was made

part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has left the people complaining and even questioning the merger. Many local groups have been asserting that the merger is not solving their problems and issues and hence it should be reversed; a demand that the banned TTP also made during peace talks with the government. Some tribesmen even filed the petitions before the court to undo the merger. . In March 2022, the Supreme Court of Pakistan decided to establish larger bench on petitions against the 25th Amendment that allowed the integration of erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Amendment had received presidential consent on March 31, 2018.⁶

The growing attacks on police in the merged tribal districts once again remind the need of reforming and capacitating the law enforcement structures of these districts. Apparently, the government is aware of that need. The establishment of police stations and training of law enforcement agencies also needs to be stepped up. Although the process is underway, but it is quite slow, according to local accounts.

The revised NAP also places emphasis on introducing reforms in merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including ensuring an adequate share in NFC, capacity building of law enforcement agencies and introduction of political-administrative structures like local government elections and land reforms. There is a need to rehabilitate

⁶ "SC decides to form larger bench on FATA integration petitions," *The Express Tribune* March 9, 2022.

the internally displaced persons from ex-FATA and develop educational, road and other infrastructure in these areas.

It is heartening that local body elections were successfully held in ex-FATA in 2021-2022. During first phase of local bodies election held in KP on December 19th, polls were also held for the first time in Khyber, Mohmand and Bajaur tribal districts. In the second phase, voting was held in 65 tehsils in 18 districts of the provinces on March 31st including in tribal districts of Orakzai, North and South Waziristan, and Kurram.

Experts assert that to heal and rehabilitate the citizens of ex-FATA, there is a need to enhance the economic and infrastructure development of this strategically critical area to bring back the internally displaced persons and rehabilitate them as it would speed up the process of political, administrative, and judicial reform in tribal districts.

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