



AFGHANISTAN AS SEEN FROM PAKISTAN-V

PIPS Paper **Series**

Situation Review **5**

Jul-Sep, **2022**



Papers

Fallout of Afghan situation and Pakistan's policy responses

Ahmed Ali

Afghan refugees and border control: Pakistan's challenges and policy options

Urooj Jafri

Editor: Safdar Sial

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July-Sept, 2022

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Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

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Fallout of Afghan situation and Pakistan's policy responses

Ahmed Ali¹

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1. Introduction

For Pakistan, the perils of a militant regime in Kabul have become unmistakably clear as the country has witnessed a mindboggling 51% increase in the number of terrorist attacks in a single year since the Taliban takeover. On 10 August 2022, Defence Minister Khwaja Asif stated in the National Assembly that anti-Taliban sentiments were raging in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as locals were marching in protest in various districts against Taliban resurgence in their areas. He admitted that law and order were worsening in the province.² Just as the defence minister was acknowledging this brewing security exigency, a video circulating on social media was purportedly showing members of Pakistani law enforcement in the custody of militants claiming to be Taliban. The personnel were reportedly released later after talks with a local jirga.³

While disturbing, the emerging security situation in the north-western region was not fully unexpected. For Pakistan watchers it was not hard to foresee the dreadful fallout for Pakistan of the ill-fated fall of Kabul last August. For the hawks, the mindless jubilation over Taliban victory is now turning into a rude shock because the evolving security situation under the erratic Taliban rule indicates Pakistan is about to face yet another ordeal viz-a-viz terrorism. Just in July this year, the UN Security Council noted that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) constitutes the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan. Earlier in February, another UN report revealed there was no sign that the Taliban regime was taking steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist groups on Afghan soil. On the

² Amir Wasim, "Protests against militants' return echo in National Assembly", *Dawn*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1704266>

³ Fazal Khaliq and Haleem Asad, "Search for militants in Swat's mountains continues," *Dawn*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1704263/search-for-militants-in-swats-mountains-continues>

contrary, “terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history”, the report noted.⁴

The UN also notes that foreign terrorist groups based in Afghanistan take the Taliban victory as a motivation to disseminate their propaganda in Central and South Asia, and globally.⁵ Key terror outfits with active presence in Afghanistan include Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K). So far, the Taliban have acted only against the IS-K because it actively challenges the Taliban. In this backdrop, security analysts are on the edge as they watch a new pivot of terror taking shape in Pakistan’s immediate neighbourhood. Meanwhile, a rundown economy, governance incompetence, food insecurity, and humanitarian crises amidst the international community’s reluctance to recognize the Taliban regime are further eroding the Taliban’s ability to deliver security and basic services to the Afghans or fulfil their promises made to the world. However, beyond material resources, ideological affinities between the Taliban and the rest of the terror groups also deter the former to act against the latter. This factor, often overlooked by Taliban advocates in Pakistan, will haunt the neighbouring states including Pakistan in the days to come.

As per PIPS report, 433 people were killed and 719 were wounded in 250 terrorist attacks in Pakistan between 15 Aug 2021 and 14 Aug 2022.⁶ Likewise, there is a wave of fear and panic among residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the reported return of TTP militants from Afghanistan in recent months. What’s more concerning is that militants’ movements in the

⁴ UNSC Twenty-ninth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, February 3, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ UNSC Thirtieth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, July 15, 2022, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075689/N2239429.pdf>

⁶ Data and statistics are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ digital database of security incidents in Pakistan.

heart of KP such as Peshawar, Swat, Dir, and Tank have also been reported which points to a gradual expansion of militants in the settled districts. Recently, the police in Lower Dir issued advice to local notables, asking them to take measures for their safety and security in view of the emerging situation in the area. They were advised to reduce unnecessary movements and keep licensed weapons. Similarly, on August 10, the Swat police issued a statement saying they were undertaking search operations for militants in the mountains of Balasoor and Kabal as well as in Khwazkhela tehsil.⁷

Since security affairs in Pakistan are usually shrouded in ambiguities, there is a prevailing confusion about who or what allowed the TTP's resurgence and relocation in the northwest. If the militants are being allowed under any deal between the government and the TTP, the principal stakeholder i.e., the people deserve to know the terms and conditions of any such deal. Experts warn that any deal bypassing the people would be dashed because the people of KP will resist any peace settlement with the militants unless the former are taken into confidence and given guarantees that the militants will not resort to violence against them. In this evolving situation, this report provides a first-hand empirical investigation into post-US withdrawal terrorism landscapes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, new alliances among terrorist groups, and their implications for domestic and regional security. The report also offers corresponding and context-based policy measures for the Pakistani government.

2. Post-withdrawal militant landscape of Afghanistan & its implications

This section of the report analyses the emerging militant landscape in Afghanistan with a focus on the evolving strength, agendas, and future

⁷ Fazal Khaliq and Haleem Asad, "Search for militants in Swat's mountains continues," *Dawn*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1704263/search-for-militants-in-swats-mountains-continues>

course of transnational terrorist groups present on the Afghan soil. The underlying goal is to assess the threats emanating from this militant landscape for the countries in the region and beyond.

- *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*

The TTP has been an ideological and operational ally of the Afghan Taliban. TTP kingpins take oath of allegiance to the so-called Emir of the Afghan Taliban. In turn, the Taliban have bolstered the TTP,⁸ for instance, by freeing hundreds of TTP inmates from prisons in Kabul following the August takeover. Those freed included some key commanders such as the group's founding member Maulvi Faqir Mohammad etc. The TTP celebrated the freedom of its members through a power show by taking out a massive caravan of vehicles in eastern Afghanistan.⁹ The terror outfit has been allowed to establish itself in the Kunar province that lies just next to the tribal districts of Pakistan. It has forged relations with Afghanistan's Pashtun tribes, while its membership is estimated to be between 4,000 and 5,000 men.

In the current scenario, Pakistan is caught in a serious dilemma viz-a-viz TTP as it cannot push the Afghan Taliban to act against the TTP beyond a certain point, and on the other hand, it also cannot afford the outfit's resurgence either in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The Taliban regime avoids decisive action against the TTP probably as a strategy to extract concessions from Pakistan in bilateral affairs. Alternatively, the Pakistani government has sought the Taliban's help in reaching out to and reconciling with the TTP, a ploy that too is not working apparently. Despite the Taliban's mediation, there has been little substantive progress. The "indefinite ceasefire" declared by the TTP on the eve of Eidul Fitr lasted only few months. On September 2, the TTP ended the ceasefire after

⁸ Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

accusing Pakistan of breaching the agreement brokered by the Afghan Taliban.¹⁰

Given the TTP's detestable record of terrorism in Pakistan including its involvement in the massacre of school children in Peshawar, some forceful voices questioning the legitimacy of the government-TTP talks have surfaced. Sensing the heat, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah revealed in July that the military had been authorized by a parliamentary committee to hold the talks. He also asserted the talks were to be held within the purview of the constitution and that nothing in contravention of it was to be negotiated or agreed upon.¹¹ Similarly, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security (PCNS) also approved the process of negotiations and signaled the establishment of a Parliamentary Oversight Committee. On the other hand, a military huddle on July 22, chaired by Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff General Nadeem Raza also discussed the 'peace talks' and decided to pursue the matter according to a 'comprehensive security strategy'.¹²

The government has reportedly drawn what it calls "red lines" in relation to talks with TTP. These include respect for the constitution, disarming of the TTP, and no reversal of the merger of ex-FATA.¹³ The TTP rebukes Pakistan's participation in the US-led war on terror, declares the country's constitution as un-Islamic, and demands the reversal of the merger of ex-FATA. A delegation of Pakistani clerics led by Mufti Taqi Usmani that held talks with TTP on July 25-26 in Kabul reported that the TTP was unrelenting in its demand about FATA.¹⁴ Currently, the talks seem to have faltered as

¹⁰ "Accusing government of breaching accord, TTP ends 'indefinite' ceasefire", *Pakistan Today*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/09/03/ttp-accuses-govt-for-breaching-accord-ends-indefinite-ceasefire/>

¹¹ Iftikhar A. Khan, "Military given go-ahead for TTP talks, Says Sana," *Dawn*, July 3, 2022.

¹² Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Military huddle discusses 'peace talks' with TTP, *Dawn*, July 23, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1701083>

¹³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Parliamentary body to keep eye on talks with TTP," *Dawn*, July 6, 2022.

¹⁴ Shahabullah Yousafzai, "Pakistan ulema fail to soften TTP in Kabul meetings", *The Express Tribune*, July 27, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367953/pakistani-clerics-fail-to-soften-ttp-in-kabul-meetings>

just last week the TTP ended the ceasefire after accusing the government of breaching an agreement brokered by the Afghan Taliban. In all likelihoods, a scandalous national political scene, weakened economy, societal polarization, and resurgence of terrorist groups like TTP do not augur well for Pakistan's internal security and stability. The TTP will continue to pose a serious threat to Pakistan in the days to come.

- *Al-Qaeda*

Just months before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, American intelligence assessed that Al-Qaeda had weakened like never before with its membership below 200 in Afghanistan. However, a little over half a year after the Taliban victory, a reassessment of Al-Qaeda threat revealed the outfit's membership had doubled to about 400 under Taliban with recruits mostly from Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Pakistan.¹⁵ The Taliban deny Al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan, yet UN estimates show the group's presence in at least 15 Afghan provinces, mostly those in east and south of the country. The outfit has been keeping a strategic silence in Afghanistan for quite some time, likely to avoid any potential trouble for its host, the Taliban. However, despite remaining low key, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri was traced and killed by an American drone in Kabul on July 31st.¹⁶ What the killing means for Afghanistan's militant landscape remains to be seen.

Apart from Zawahiri, other senior members of the group such as Saif al-Adel etc. are also believed to be residing in Afghanistan. Another report claims Bin Laden's former security manager Amin Muhammad-ul-Haq returned to Afghanistan in late August last year. Similarly, as per another account, Bin Laden's son Abdullah visited Afghanistan to meet Taliban

¹⁵ Seth G. Jones, "Countering resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>

¹⁶ Robert Plummer & Matt Murphy, "Ayman Al-Zawahiri: Al-Qaeda leader killed in US drone strike" *BBC News*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62387167>

leaders in October 2021. The presence of Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan may be for security and strategic purposes rather than operational ones because the outfit usually operates in collusion with its local allies and cells in different parts of the globe including South Asia. The US engagement in Afghanistan, as reflected in Doha agreement, is guided by its interest to pre-empt any threat emanating from the Afghan soil for the United States. UN reports suggest some core members of Al-Qaeda may have moved westward to Farah and Herat regions. While categorizing the Al-Qaeda as a long-term threat, the UN has also reported about the group's intention to establish itself in northern Afghanistan, mobilize new fighters, and generate increased resources.¹⁷

On the other hand, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), led by Osama Mehmood and his deputy Atif Yahya Ghouri, is also believed to have presence in Afghanistan's Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Paktika, and Zabul provinces where the group fought alongside the Taliban against the ousted Ghani government. AQIS is estimated to have between 200 and 400 fighters, mainly from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan.¹⁸

- *Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K)*

The Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) controls limited territory in eastern Afghanistan, yet it has the demonstrated ability to inflict high-profile and high-impact terrorist attacks such as the August 2021 bombing at the Kabul airport that killed more than 180 people. Like the Al-Qaeda, the IS-K has found vigour in Taliban's Afghanistan. The American withdrawal allowed it to recover, regroup, and strengthen its membership and position in the

¹⁷ UNSC Thirtieth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, July 15, 2022, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075689/N2239429.pdf>

¹⁸ UNSC Twenty-ninth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, February 3, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement>

country. A UN report in July 2021 estimated the number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan around 500 to 1,500. However, multiple accounts suggest the figure may have doubled since the Taliban victory. One explanation is that many IS-K members were amongst the prisoners released from Bagram and Pul Charkhi prisons by the Taliban regime. In early 2022, a UN Security Council report warned that the number of IS-K members was approaching 4,000 following the release of several thousand prisoners from Afghan jails by the Taliban.¹⁹ The IS-K declared a “new long war” against the Taliban and intensified its attacks in Afghanistan after the Doha deal between the US and Taliban. In 2021, the IS-K perpetrated 339 attacks in Afghanistan, compared to 82 attacks a year before.²⁰ Likewise, it executes intense propaganda, declaring the Taliban as an American ally and puppet that abandoned the way of jihad. In other words, the propaganda tool Taliban used against previous Afghan governments is being used against it now.

The threat posed by IS-K has wider dimensions and regional implications due to diverse origins of its fighters who come from Afghanistan, Central Asia, Middle East, India, Pakistan, Kashmir, and China. As per reports, about half of its fighters are foreigners.²¹ The group has reportedly recruited educated and highly radicalized Salafists from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Indonesia, and some Ikhwani members from former Afghan militant groups.²² The IS-K is believed to have an urban base where it recruits disgruntled and battle-hardened members of other groups as well as self-radicalized educated youth from the Salafi school of thought.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ @abdsayedd (2021, December 31), “ISKP attacks in Afghanistan increased from 82 in 2020 to 339 in 2021, excluding the 19 attacks it claimed in Pakistan Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Detailed analysis publishing out next month on the ISKP resurgence, evolution, and future threat.” <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1476827070307127298>

²¹ Seth G. Jones, “Countering resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>

²² Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury “View: Can Taliban tame ETIM, checkmate ISIS-K and ensure China’s security?” *Economic Times*, September 7, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/view-can-taliban-tame-etim-checkmate-isis-k-and-ensure-chinas-security/articleshow/85998917.cms?from=mdr>

Experts say the outfit's Kabul network has absorbed splinters and defectors of the radical Haqqani network.²³

As discussed above, the IS-K threat goes beyond the Afghan frontiers. In recent months, the outfit has claimed cross-border attacks inside Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from the northern provinces of Balkh and Takhar. Analysts view this move as an attempt to drag the neighboring states into Afghanistan to create chaos and anarchy where IS-K could flourish, taking stock from its experiences in Iraq and Syria. Others, however, argue that by conducting such attacks, the outfit seeks to recruit Uzbeks and Tajiks and incite violence against their governments. In addition, the move may also aim at discrediting the Taliban regime in the eyes of the Tajiks and Uzbeks. Lastly, cross-border terrorism may also undermine faith in Taliban regime's ability to secure Afghanistan's borders. On the other hand, the IS-K also has increased its propaganda against China's Uyghur policy and its engagement with Taliban regime. The outfit protects Uyghur militants in Afghanistan with an aim to win their support and recruitment. Experts argue the IS-K's Kunduz mosque attack on October 8, 2021, which was carried out by a Uyghur militant Muhammad al-Uyghuri, marked, or at least brought to surface, the terrorist group's position on China as well as Uyghurs.²⁴ The IS-K said in its online statement that the attack had been targeted against Shia community as well as the Taliban for their "willingness to expel Uyghurs to meet demands from China."²⁵

²³ Abdul Sayed, "ISIS-K is ready to fight the Taliban," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/29/abdul-sayed-isis-k-taliban-afghanistan-threat/>

²⁴ Nodirbek Soliev, "Why Is the Islamic State in Afghanistan's Propaganda Targeting China?," *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-targeting-china/>

²⁵ "Afghanistan: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz mosque", *Al-Jazeera*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/blast-hits-a-mosque-in-afghanistans-kunduz-during-friday-prayers>

- *Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)/East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), also known as East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has rebuilt several strongholds in Badakhshan, expanding its area of operations and covertly purchasing weapons to improve its capacity for terrorism.²⁶ Analysts believe the group has expanded its operational space under the Taliban and cultivated relations with local commanders to operate locally. It is further entrenching itself in Afghanistan through intermarriages with local population and facilitating the relocation of Uyghur women to Afghanistan. Reportedly, it is also opening schools to promote its jihadist ideology. As per the UN assessment, approximately 40-50 Uyghurs are also affiliated with IS-K in Nuristan province, while the group also collaborates with the TTP.²⁷ The ETIM leadership is mainly active in Baghlan.

China is highly concerned about ETIM's presence in Afghanistan which it blames for attacks at home. The outfit will be a key factor in Taliban-China relations. The Taliban regime is unlikely to antagonize China, and most likely would take a pragmatic approach in this regard. China, nonetheless, has maintained, unlike the US, a stance of non-interference in Afghanistan. In addition, China also has the benefit of its good ties with Pakistan in terms of dealing with the Taliban, though it has gradually been developing independent relations with the Taliban. But ETIM and Uyghurs will continue to remain a major irritant in China-Taliban relations.

²⁶ UNSC Thirtieth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, July 15, 2022 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/394/29/PDF/N2239429.pdf?OpenElement>

²⁷ UNSC Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, May 26, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/333/77/PDF/N2233377.pdf?OpenElement>

2.1 The Taliban's challenges and responses

The Taliban regime is scrambling to overcome domestic security challenges and the emerging resistance in the north. The void is filled mostly by more radical groups like the IS-K that challenges the regime and its claims of delivering security to the Afghans. The declining Afghan economy has triggered an alarming uptick in poverty and hunger across the country. Governance is in tatters due to financial, political, and sociocultural reasons, and the regime is yet to achieve domestic recognition and form an inclusive government.²⁸ Some experts link the growing resistance to Taliban's inability to deliver basic services to the populace. However, despite its many failings, the Taliban are ruthlessly suppressing militant groups like the IS-K and resisting ethnic factions. Here it may be noted that while the Taliban have demonstrated to be a cohesive group, rifts within its ranks have managed to surface on intervals. One point of divergence within the group was on the question of girls' education about which the Taliban leaders have expressed contrasting views.

Apart from ideological differences, experts have also highlighted a divide within the Taliban based on their origins from Pashtun tribes in eastern and southern Afghanistan. This factor was also pointed at in a UN Security Council report in May this year that Taliban's jirga in March 2022 exposed Kandahari vs Haqqani, Kandahari vs de facto cabinet, and military vs ulema rivalries. As per the report, the foremost internal division was defined by opposing views between the moderate and hardliner blocs.²⁹ Still, there is also fear that the Taliban will not concede on its rigid ideology

²⁸ Viola Fee Dreikhausen, "Taliban in or out? Afghanistan in 2025," The EU Institute for Security Studies, Brief 5, April 2022.

²⁹ UNSC Thirteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, May 26, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/333/77/PDF/N2233377.pdf?OpenElement>

and will continue to show its ultra-conservative face in the days to come. If that happens, it will only add to Taliban's failure to deal with economic and diplomatic challenges. The regime is already under criticism from Afghan diaspora and international rights groups for serious human rights abuses. In July, the Human Rights Watch noted that since the Taliban takeover, hundreds of bodies have been found dumped in canals and deserted spots in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. The watchdog said the Taliban have apparently given their forces free rein to detain, disappear, and kill suspected anti-Taliban militants particularly those belonging to IS-K.³⁰

3. Emerging terrorist threats in Pakistan

Evidence suggests security threats for Pakistan have increased since last August. The gains of the Operation Zarb-e-Azb are seemingly reversing as cross border movement of militants has increased and groups like TTP and IS-K have intensified their attacks in Pakistan. Similarly, Baloch and Sindhi separatist insurgents have also perpetrated some high-impact attacks in recent months. The spike in terror attacks and tensions on Pak-Afghan border are also negatively impacting Pakistan's relations with Taliban regime. In early 2022, the Taliban regime accused Pakistan of military incursions in Khost and Kunar provinces. A Taliban government statement said Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul had been summoned over the issue, while Pakistan's Foreign Office said the government was looking into the situation.³¹

In April 2022, the TTP and its affiliates carried out 20 terrorist attacks in Pakistan including some from across the border. In one of these attacks in North Waziristan, seven army soldiers were killed. In response, Pakistan

³⁰ HRW, "Afghanistan: Taliban execute, 'disappear' alleged militants," July 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-execute-disappear-alleged-militants>

³¹ "FO 'looking into' Afghan allegation of air strikes," *Dawn*, April 17, 2022.

demanded stern action against the perpetrators.³² Attacks on Pakistani security personnel from across the border and destruction of Pakistani fences by militants would only increase bilateral tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Such a scenario would only benefit other terror groups that find breeding grounds in chaos and security instability. While Pakistan needs to enhance bilateral cooperation with the Taliban regime, the latter also needs to respond to Pakistan's border and security sensitivities.

3.1 Geographical spread of insecurity and terrorist violence in Pakistan³³

As noted earlier, since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, terror incidents have increased in Pakistan.

In exactly a year since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Pakistan has seen 51% rise in number of terrorist attacks. In 250 attacks during the period (15 Aug 2021 to 14 Aug 2022), 433 people were killed and 719 wounded. This also represents a 47% increase in casualties as compared to the previous year.

Table 1: Terrorist attacks in Pakistan in one year since the Taliban takeover

Region	August 15, 2021, to August 14, 2022		August 15, 2020, to August 14, 2021		% Change ³⁴	
	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed
KP	156	286	87	151	79%↑	89%↑
Balochistan	79	127	60	113	32%↑	12%↑

³² "Pakistan seeks 'stern' Afghan actions against terrorists," *Dawn*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1685555/pakistan-seeks-stern-afghan-actions-against-terrorists>

³³ Most of the data and statistics provided in this section are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents.

³⁴ ↑ and ↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, from the corresponding period of previous year, as given at the table.

Region	August 15, 2021, to August 14, 2022		August 15, 2020, to August 14, 2021		% Change ³⁴	
	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed
Punjab & Islamabad	6	12	7	15	14%↓	20%↓
Sindh	9 ³⁵	8	11 ³⁶	15	18%↓	47%↓
GB & AJK	0	0	0	0	-	-
Total	250	433	165	294	51%↑	47%↑

Majority of the terror incidents happened in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. In contrast, attacks in Punjab, Sindh, and Islamabad have declined, though only slightly. Overall, the inflated figures reflect that militant carried out some major attacks. In short, terrorism has risen both in frequency and intensity. The emerging situation only adds to Pakistan’s security challenges in terms of TTP militancy in KP, separatist insurgency in Balochistan, ethno-nationalist violence in Sindh, as well as growing religious extremism. If protracted, such insecurity may undermine foreign interests and engagements in Pakistan.

3.2 Key terrorist groups in Pakistan

Pakistan has a multitude of militant groups that subscribe to various religious ideologies and nationalist ideals. However, currently, the TTP and IS-K and certain Baloch and Sindhi separatists cause utmost concerns for internal security. These groups have not only resurged in recent times but have carried out most of the terrorist attacks in the country. As mentioned earlier, the militants flushed out from the tribal areas under the Operation Zarb-e-Azb are now making a comeback. Apparently, the Taliban’s taking of power in Afghanistan has encouraged the Pakistani militants to resume their terrorist campaigns against the state. However, it must be noted that

³⁵ Including 5 in Karachi alone.

³⁶ 10 in Karachi alone.

not all militant infrastructure had relocated to Afghanistan. For instance, most fighters and commanders of Baloch and Sindhi insurgent groups have remained entrenched in their respective areas, though they do have hideouts in times of military operations such as in the mountainous terrains of Balochistan. Likewise, members of Taliban groups have also remained in the merged districts and other cities of KP either by hiding and going underground or keeping low profile. The next section will draw brief profiles of militant groups that have actively resurged in the wake of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

3.2.1 Baloch nationalist insurgent groups

In recent years, Baloch insurgents have attempted to deliver more impactful attacks on high value targets through coordinated suicide attacks. A short description of key Baloch militant outfits is given below:

- *Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)*

The BLA has already claimed 22 terrorist attacks in 2022 (until August 20) including some major ones such as the coordinated fidayeen attacks on FC camps in Panjgur and Nushki, killing of FC soldiers in Sibbi, and a female suicide attack on Chinese nationals in Karachi. In 2021, too, the group had carried out 38 terrorist attacks including 37 in Balochistan, and one in Karachi. These attacks had killed 72 people including 43 members of law enforcement. It is believed the group receives funding through hawala and hundi from Baloch dissidents in Europe and North America.³⁷ The outfit recruits from indignant Baloch youths including those with history of association with the Baloch Students Organization (Azad). Security forces, mega development projects and their workers including the Chinese, and non-Baloch workers or settlers are key targets of the BLA.

³⁷ Jamestown Foundation: "BLA's Suicide Squad: Majeed Fidayeen Brigade," Terrorism Monitor, Volume: 17 Issue: 2 (January 25, 2019), <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2002366.html>

- *Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)*

In Jan 2022, the BLF issued its 2021 annual report, claiming it had perpetrated 176 attacks against security forces including those deployed at development projects, and killed 226 personnel. BLF spokesman Gohram Baloch said the outfit was resisting forced colonization of Balochistan by Pakistan and its foreign allies. In January, the group launched a lethal attack on security post in Kech district, martyring at least 10 FC personnel and injuring three others. In the previous year, BLF claimed 25 attacks including 23 in Balochistan and two in Karachi. These attacks left 18 people dead. Most of the attacks were carried out in southern districts including 16 in Kech, 3 in Panjgur, 2 in Lasbela and one each in Gwadar and Khuzdar.

- *Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA)*

The BNA was formed with the merger of United Baloch Army (UBA) and a faction of Baloch Republican Army (BRA) in January 2022. BNA spokesman Mureed Baloch said the purpose of unification was to strengthen the Baloch resistance movement. The outfit has also reportedly joined the umbrella organization of Baloch insurgents called BRAS – an alliance of BLF, Baloch Republican Guards, and factions of BLA and BRA. The BRAS has extreme stance on foreign engagement in Balochistan. Since its formation, the BNA has claimed two attacks, one each in Lahore and Panjgur.

- *Other Baloch Insurgent Groups*

Baloch Republican Army (BRA) consists of mainly Bugti tribesmen. Pakistani security agencies claim BRA is a militant wing of the Baloch Republican Party (BRP) and headed by Brahamdagh Bugti, which he denies. The group has perpetrated four attacks against government targets, killing five people in Dera Bugti and Kohlu in 2022. Statistics suggest the outfit is not as actively engaged in militancy as it was in the past.

United Baloch Army (UBA) has claimed a single attack so far in 2022, as in 2021. Abdul Nabi Bungalzai, a hardliner commander who was expelled from BLA while attacking the civilians and looting the Baloch traders, leads the more lethal faction of the group. The Baloch insurgents usually avoided attacking the civilians, especially the Baloch, but Bungalzai believed that the Baloch elites that do not support the separatists and are pro-federation, also deserved to be punished. Similarly, another Baloch insurgent group **Baloch Republican Guard** (BRG) has been quite active recently in Naseerabad district of Balochistan, where it has claimed three attacks in 2022 targeting security forces, railways tracks and power pylons. In 2021, the group had claimed a single attack on non-Baloch workers in Sibi.

Lashkar-e-Balochistan has been semi-dormant in recent years. It was formed in 2008 and operates mainly in and around Makran region. The LeB is led by Mir Javed Mengal, elder brother of BNP chief Akhtar Mengal; Javed lives in exile in London and UAE. However, he denies any links with LeB. Javed Mengal and his son Mir Noorudin Mengal have been active in pleading the Baloch case at different international forums. Mir Noorudin Mengal has been active in UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations) and has been instrumental in organizing some events in the US on the Balochistan issue.

3.2.2 Religiously inspired militant groups

The profiles and agendas of key religious terrorist groups such as the TTP, IS-K, and Al-Qaeda have been given in Chapter 2. In this section, the activities of these groups in Pakistan and their threat matrix will be discussed.

- *TTP*

TTP is a major actor of terrorism in Pakistan. So far this year, the group and its affiliates have perpetrated 51 attacks with 47 of them in KP alone. Besides, two attacks were carried out in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, and one each in Quetta and Karachi. Last year, it was believed to be involved in 87 attacks in Pakistan which reflected an increase of 84% as compared to 2020. Since last August, the TTP has continued to absorb smaller militant groups. In March, TTP announced that three militant groups from Lakki Marwat under Maulvi Tipu Gul had merged with the TTP, and a month later, some former Taliban commanders from North Waziristan also joined the group. Currently, peace talks between the Pakistani government and TTP are underway. However, the continuing violence linked to TTP or its allies validates the concerns that even a peace deal with the terror outfit may only partially help in reducing terrorism in Pakistan. Not all TTP commanders approve of peace agreement. A potential backlash to a possible peace agreement would be disenchanted TTP fighters deserting their parent group and joining IS-K. Such a scenario would be nightmarish both for the Taliban regime and Islamabad.

On the other hand, unverified reports claim the TTP demands strict Shariah enforcement in ex-FATA and Malakand, in addition to pushing for prisoners' release, reversal of FATA merger, and TTP's relocation to its native towns in KP. If Pakistani negotiators agree to these demands, there would be strong resistance from the Parliament, civil society, and media. Even if any such peace settlement is reached, there is no clarity as to what Pakistan will get in return. Will the TTP abandon terrorism permanently? Pakistan's mainstream political parties and civil society are not contended with the military unilaterally pursuing talks with the TTP and have been asserting that the Parliament be allowed to decide on that. Experts warn that a TTP emboldened by Taliban victory may see messages of peace and reconciliation from the Pakistani state as a sign of the latter's weakness.

- *IS-K*

The IS-K has demonstrated its operational presence in Pakistan through multiple acts of terrorism in 2021 and 2022, targeting the Hazara Shias, Sikh community, members and clerics of the Afghan Taliban, and political leaders, and tribal elders in KP and Balochistan. During the past year, several IS-K operatives were nabbed in search operations by the law enforcement from Sindh, KP, and Punjab. This year (till August), the outfit has carried out 19 attacks in Pakistan, killing at least 87 people. The deadliest of these was the bombing of a Shia Mosque in Peshawar that left 65 dead. In another suicide attack claimed by the group, at least six FC personnel were martyred, and 19 others were injured in Sibi (Balochistan). In 2021, the group had perpetrated a total of eight terrorist attacks including seven (7) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one in Balochistan, claiming in all 21 lives.

In its propaganda campaign, the IS-K has increasingly focused on Pakistan particularly the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. For instance, in an eleven-page pamphlet in Urdu, the outfit urged the people of Bajaur to support the group through money and manpower. Likewise, in its Eid message, it instructed its covert cells in Central and South Asia to recruit lone-wolves and suicide bombers. The ultra-radical group also targets the TTP in its propaganda, calling TTP commanders as “apostates” and urging its fighters to join IS-K for what it calls “true jihad”. Apart from KP, the IS-K also has had presence in Balochistan and Sindh. In the past, law enforcement agencies busted several cyber and physical cells of the outfit in Punjab, KP, Sindh, and Balochistan. However, in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, IS-K has cast its eyes largely on KP and, to some extent, Balochistan.

- *Al-Qaeda*

Although Al-Qaeda has not been found involved in terrorism in Pakistan in recent years, still it has its presence and affiliations with local groups in

Pakistan and Afghanistan. It maintains ties with the Afghan Taliban and has reportedly helped the TTP in recovering and regrouping in recent years. Reports suggest some AQ-aligned Pakistani groups even joined the TTP.³⁸ In April 2021, CNN citing interviews with two Al-Qaeda operatives claimed that the group intended to set up its operations and fighting in the region after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It further added that the outfit was planning a comeback by relying on its enduring ties with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.³⁹

3.2.3 Sindhi nationalist insurgent groups

Sindhudesh Revolution Army (SRA) is emerging as a critical threat to foreign interests in interior Sindh and Karachi. For instance, while claiming the recent Karachi attack (on May 12th) near a Coast Guards vehicle, the group accused Pakistan and China of capturing and exploiting lands, ports, and islands of Sindh's coastal line. It also said Sindhis were being turned into minority on their own soil and people from outside were being settled and provided employments. Similar concerns and grievances are expressed by the Baloch nationalist insurgents.

So far, the group has executed three attacks in Sindh in 2022 including one each in Naushahro Firoze, Tando Muhammad Khan and Karachi, targeting a railways track, a power pylon, and security forces, respectively. In 2021, too, the group had carried out three attacks in interior Sindh, including one attack in each of Khairpur, Naushahro Firoze and Qambar-Shahdadkot districts targeting security forces, railways track, and a so-called Punjabi settler. The SRA and its parent organization Sindhudesh Liberation Army

³⁸ Asfandiyar Mir, "Afghanistan's terrorism challenge: the political trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State," Middle East Institute, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf>

³⁹ Nic Robertson and Saleem Mehsud, "Al-Qaeda promises 'war on all fronts' against America as Biden pulls out Afghanistan." *CNN*, April 30, 2021.

or Front (SLA/F) have been targeting state infrastructure, security forces, and foreign nationals and interests in Sindh since 2013.

The outfit is also linked to the Baloch BRAS (nexus was formed in July 2020), which was especially designed to hit foreign interests in Balochistan. BRAS is an alliance of BLF, Bashir Zeb's BLA, Gulzar Imam's BRA and Bukhtiar Domki's BRG. After joining BRAS, SRA increased its attacks, which also hinted at enhanced funding and training for the group. Security forces also intensified crackdown against the group after it hit Chinese nationals and security forces.

4. Analysis of state responses and capacities

This section provides brief narratives on Pakistan's soft and hard approaches to countering terrorism and extremism.

4.1 Political or soft measures

In the wake of the gruesome massacre at the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, the Pakistani government immediately put out a National Action Plan (NAP) to effectively deal with the scourge of terrorism and extremism. As the national leaders announced the new CT and CVE policy, the Operation Zarb-e-Azb was already in full swing. The 20-point NAP provided for the establishment of military courts and special counter-terrorism units, curbing hate speech, containing violent sectarianism and persecution of minorities, countering militancy in Punjab, continuing CT operations in Karachi, reforming the judicial system, reforming FATA, empowering NACTA, etc. About eight years down the road, the NAP has achieved only partial success. Some NAP points such as judicial reforms remained non-starter.

However, the Karachi CT operation was concluded successfully, bringing relative peace to the city. Similarly, the ex-FATA has been merged with

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, even though the region still awaits meaningful political, administrative, and judicial reforms. Thirdly, significant legislative and administrative measures have been taken to curb terror financing. Fourthly, the issue of illegal sale and purchase of telephone SIMs was handled successfully, which contributed to checking terrorist communications in Karachi, in particular. Fifthly, many believe that NAP has in general put pressure on violent and non-violent religious extremist groups, and their supporters. Sixthly, since the launch of NAP, the government has banned 18 outfits and sanctioned 88 individuals, seizing their properties and freezing their bank accounts. Finally, NAP provided for reconciliation with the Baloch insurgents, and the government initiated the Pur Aman Balochistan (Peaceful Balochistan) project to offer monetary and rehabilitation support to militants laying down their weapons. But the initiative did not yield concrete results.

Apart from criticism of the weak implementation of the NAP, there have also been concerns about the misuse of cyber security laws (mainly Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016) as well as the Action in Aid of Civil Power law, among others. The government formed in 2018 showed little interest in reviewing or revising the NAP. The Parliament too has lost focus on NAP or CT and CVE in general except for the extensive legislations on terror financing. In 2021, however, the government did undertake a revision of the NAP, bringing down the 20 points to 14. But action on revised plan never started. While many clauses were retained as such from the original draft, some have been amended, and a couple of new ones have been included in the revised plan. However, experts see it as a vague plan that can be interpreted and thus misused in several ways. “For example, the fourth clause talks about acting against the spread of terrorism through media (electronic, print, and social media), communication, and cyber networks. One can imagine how such clauses

could be used to further restrict the freedom of press and media.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the clause 12 of the revised NAP creates more ambiguity when it mentions legislative/ legal oversight for espionage/ subversion without providing any auxiliary context or scope; it could easily be misused against sub-nationalist groups.⁴¹

Experts also point to another lacuna in the revised plan, arguing that the original NAP was developed and executed after taking political parties and the Parliament on board, but it has been revised without any such exercise. Similarly, experts assert that the “focus of the new NAP has been reverted to ‘externalizing’ the internal security threats, where the security apparatus will once again start employing the pre-APS lens to see all the security-related problems.”⁴² Put in this context, the ongoing peace talks with TTP should not be a surprise, as the revised threat perception focuses more on curtailing the external links of the terrorists.

On the other hand, the government has approved a National Security Policy (2022-26) that puts economic security at the core. The overall framework of the NSP as stated by the National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf is safety, security, and dignity of the citizens. The new NSP’s progress would be reviewed by the National Security Division in collaboration with relevant ministries. However, opposition political parties in the Senate have questioned the unilateral formulation of the NSP, objecting that the Parliament was overlooked in the process. Still worse, even the treasury bench showed little interest in in the parliamentary briefing on the new policy. The political parties’ indifference towards the NSP indicates the document is a product of pure bureaucratic exercise. Commenting on the NSP briefing, the media reported there was nothing new in the new

⁴⁰ Muhammad Amir Rana, “Security policy impasse,” *Dawn*, December 26, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665809>

⁴¹ *Ibid*

⁴² *Ibid*

document except the jugglery of words. On the question of merged districts of KP, the revised NAP called for political, economic, and administrative reforms including equitable share in NFC, capacity building of local law enforcement, and electoral and land reforms. In the local bodies elections in KP in 2021-22, polls were also held for the first time in the merged districts which is a major political achievement. However, much remains to be done. For instance, the IDPs still await repatriation and basic public infrastructures like roads and schools need to be built.⁴³

While the state has shown some will and capacity to address security challenges in KP, it remains aloof to the plight of Balochistan. Despite the government's intermittent claims of reaching out to Baloch insurgent leaders for resolution of the conflict, little has been done to crystalize the intentions and plans. On his visit to Gwadar in July 2021, Prime Minister Imran Khan promised he was considering talks with Baloch insurgents. He also appointed Baloch tribal leader and politician Shahzain Bugti as his assistant on reconciliation and harmony in Balochistan. Experts, however, contended the appointment of Bugti on the premise that he did not enjoy the trust and confidence of Baloch nationalists. Later, on July 7, media reported that the federal cabinet had green-signaled to talks with indignant Baloch tribes to achieve peace in the province.⁴⁴ Similarly, on July 6, military chief General Bajwa said peace and prosperity in Balochistan formed the "bedrock of Pakistan's progress".⁴⁵

In November last year, Balochistan's new Chief Minister Mir Abdul Qudoos Bizenjo said that the government was in talks with self-exiled Baloch leaders. He reiterated his government's resolve to address the grievances of all disgruntled Baloch leaders. Later, in an interview with the Arab News, the chief minister claimed his government was in indirect contact with the

⁴³ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), February 10, 2021, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story?story=202102100306>

⁴⁴ Syed Irfan Raza, "Second biggest Indian terrorist network unearthed: govt," *Dawn*, July 7, 2021.

⁴⁵ "*Dawn*, July 6, 2021, "Balochistan's peace and prosperity the bedrock of Pakistan's progress: Army chief, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1633563/balochistans-peace-and-prosperity-the-bedrock-of-pakistans-progress-army-chief>

leaders of Baloch insurgent groups including BLF. However, his statement was instantly refuted by BLF spokesperson Gohram Baloch. The state's traditional approach towards Balochistan has been those of temporary and haphazard fixes rather than long-term policy. Instead of initiating a meaningful reconciliation process, successive governments have attempted, mostly in vain, to appease the Baloch through relief programs and packages, entailing financial incentives and rehabilitation for insurgents quitting militancy and surrendering before the authorities. Since early 2017, media have reported hundreds of insurgents surrendering before the state. But this strategy cannot be a substitute for a genuine reconciliation. Many question that if the state can hold talks with a terror outfit like TTP why it cannot do the same with Baloch insurgents.

4.2 Continuing kinetic actions against militants

Pakistan continues to take kinetic measures including combing operations against militants around the country. This year alone till August 20, the forces conducted 52 such operations (as shown in the table below) including 34 in KP, 17 in Balochistan and one in Karachi. These actions killed 164 militants of mainly the TTP and Baloch insurgent groups. Nine army soldiers and one civilian were also martyred.

Table 6: Security/Military Operations against Militants in 2022

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Awaran	1	4	1
Bannu	3	10	2
D.I Khan	4	8	0
Gwadar	1	1	0
Karachi	1	2	0
Kech	5	33	1
Khyber	1	3	0
Kohlu	1	1	0

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Lakki Marwat	3	8	0
Mastung	1	2	1
North Waziristan	20	57	4
Nushki	1	2	0
Panjugur	1	6	0
Peshawar	3	7	0
Quetta	2	9	0
Sibi	1	7	1
Tank	1	1	0
Ziarat	2	13	0
Total	52	174	10

In 2021, as many as 186 suspected militants were killed by law enforcement agencies in operations and encounters. Also, in 2022 so far (until August 20), the security forces have arrested 104 suspected militants in 49 search and hunt operations they conducted across Pakistan. Most of those arrested belonged to the TTP and Baloch and Sindhi insurgent groups. In 2021, too, security and law enforcement agencies had arrested 156 suspected terrorists and members of militant groups in as many as 70 search and combing operations conducted all over the country as part of *Raddul Fasaad*. Highest arrests for any one militant group were made of the TTP and local Taliban militants (74). As many as 20 members of a Sindhi nationalist insurgent group, Sindhudesh Revolution Army, were detained during different operations conducted by law enforcers in Sindh. Similarly, security forces and law enforcement agencies arrested as many as 18 members and affiliates of Islamic State terrorist group and six operatives of Al-Qaeda from different parts of the country. A total of 17 suspected militants linked to different Baloch nationalist groups including 10 BLA militants were also detained during the year. As many as 7 among those detained were reportedly affiliated with Sipah-e-Muhammad.

5. Challenges and policy options

5.1 Dealing with the Afghanistan situation

- Pakistan needs to enhance bilateral engagement and cooperation with Kabul on countering terrorism, improving trade, and developing joint mechanisms for border security etc. Pakistan can formulate such agreements under the table and once the Taliban government is recognized, these can be made formal.
- Pakistan needs to resist too much optimism about a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. A Taliban rein does not mean zero Indian presence in Afghanistan because the Taliban are pragmatic, and they seek good relations with India. As far as the recognition of the Taliban regime is concerned, there is already a de facto recognition which is the reason Taliban participated in the Antalya and Oslo events. Therefore, Pakistan may resist the urge to take up the issue of recognition repeatedly, and instead it may focus on developing joint CT strategies for mutual security stability.
- Pakistan's Afghan policy has traditionally centered around militant groups, notorious warlords, and corrupt politicians instead of the citizens of Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan may adopt a policy to reach out to different factions of Afghan society to help address anti-Pakistan sentiments held by many Afghans.
- Most people consulted for this study asserted that Pakistan needs to devise a balance between the onerous task of encouraging the Taliban to acquiesce to international conditions and the mission of rallying for the removal of western sanctions. This approach will not only epitomise Pakistan's diplomatic grit but will also help shatter the perception that Pakistan plays a mouthpiece for the Taliban.

- Pakistan needs to take lead in ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches Afghanistan. This can be done by keeping the air and road corridors open for humanitarian assistance including for UN agencies, NGOs, and other donors. Moreover, Pakistan shall be on the front foot with regards to implementation of OIC's commitments pertaining to the Afghan situation.
- Pakistan may devise a pro-trade policy that facilitates bilateral trade and also includes barter system until Afghanistan gains an adequate level of economic stability. This will be a practical implementation of Pakistan's National Security Policy that asserts that Pakistan's security-oriented outlook has shifted to economics. According to the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, there has been a 34% decline in Pakistan's export to Afghanistan and 2% decrease in import since Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Hence, an impetus to Pak-Afghan trade can be a mutually beneficial for the two countries.

5.2 Dealing with internal security

- Pakistan needs to devise formal implementation plans along with well-defined timelines to implement the NSP and NAP in a meaningful way. Regular periodic reviews of the two policies may be undertaken to draw lessons and improve responses in the context of changing situations. The Parliament's supervisory role is also needed for broader transparency and effectiveness.
- There is a need to increase the capacity and role of civilian law enforcement agencies in internal security matters. This will help prevent security issues from morphing into bigger crises. Civil law enforcement structures are rooted in the people, and they enjoy more freedom to operate due to their regular interaction with local communities.
- The Baloch and Sindhi nationalist insurgents pose major threat to foreign engagements in Balochistan and parts of Sindh. Attacks by BLA, BLF and BRAS are highly unpredictable and recently they have acquired

the resolve and capacity to perpetrate high-impact attacks, also targeting foreign nationals and interests. Therefore, a very high vigilance level is required to counter the threat. Foreign projects and workers may be provided security, preferably by civilian forces in Balochistan. Public awareness programs may be launched in Balochistan as many people are unaware of the ongoing developments there. Public awareness about the utility of development projects may help reduce support for militant groups.

- The Baloch insurgency is decades old now, yet successive governments have lacked a well-thought-out policy and mechanism for conflict resolution in the province. Mutual trust deficit has widened, making negotiations highly challenging. However, still there is no royal road to achieving peace. The government needs to develop a comprehensive policy to address the insurgency.
- Among religious terrorist groups, the TTP and IS-K could emerge as a mid-to-high-level threat to foreign engagements and interests in Pakistan in coming months and years depending on how situation in Afghanistan unfolds and how Pakistan deals with it. Pakistan needs to develop multi-level plans to deal with the TTP threat. For instance, nobody knows about the government's plan-B if the ongoing talks fail, which is the likely scenario.
- There are some Balochistan-specific suggestions that emerged during conversations with the Baloch people, leaders and experts. These are summarized below.
 - 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.
 - There is a need to increase the socio-cultural engagements between foreigners working on development projects and local populations. The Government of Balochistan need to reach out to

people in the province to address the concerns of general public, educated youth and the civil society.

The Baloch demand a network of technical institutions to be set up in the urban areas of the province to train youth from the area to be actively becoming part of development projects. Most of the educated youth of the region is unemployed, according to locals, as they do not qualify the technical and experience requirements needed for most of the jobs at Gwadar port and industries that will be set up in future.

Afghan refugees and border control: Pakistan's challenges and policy options

Urooj Jafri⁴⁶

Contents

1. Introduction and background
2. An appraisal of Pakistan's refugee policy
3. Afghan refugees can help Pakistan promote its soft image
4. Border control: implications for bilateral trade, travel, and security

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1. Introduction and background

Following the Taliban's capture of the Afghan capital last year, thousands were seen rushing to the Kabul airport in an effort to flee out of the country. While in the beginning many were evacuated directly to countries in the West, later some were flown out to Qatar and then onwards. Scores of other Afghan people later sought to cross into neighbouring Pakistan and Iran to file for emigration in western missions, most of which had closed their outlets in Kabul.

Those trying to flee were largely workers and associates of foreign funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local and international media, and health, education and other sectors funded by the US, Canada and others such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, etc. These countries had announced to evacuate Afghans who had worked for their respective projects in Afghanistan.

As of now, thousands of 'transiting' Afghans are still stranded in Pakistan due to delays in the processing of their emigration papers.¹ Many experts cite the outbreak of the Ukraine war and influx of over 3 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe as the main reasons for this delay.²

According to UNHCR, more than 300,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan since the Taliban takeover of Kabul. However, Pakistani authorities claim about 60,000 to 70,000 Afghans have entered Pakistan since then. Most of these new Afghans have entered Pakistan through valid documents.³ Similarly, most of the new Afghan refugees are concentrated in Quetta,

¹ Ashleigh Stewart, "Afghan refugees approved for Canada relocation languish in Pakistan," Global News, April 12, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8747120/afghan-refugees-canada-resettlement-delays/>

² Scott Worden, "Russia's invasion of Ukraine helps the Taliban and makes Afghans worse off," United States Institute of Peace, March 16, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/russias-invasion-ukraine-helps-taliban-and-makes-afghans-worse>

³ Freedom Network of Pakistan, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: lives in limbo," 2022, <https://www.fnpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Afghan-Refuges-in-Pakistan-Lives-in-Lombo.pdf>

Peshawar, and Islamabad. Persian speaking Afghans with Tajik and Uzbek ethnic identities are mostly staying in Rawalpindi/Islamabad region, while ethnic Pashtun Afghans are mostly living in Quetta and Peshawar. While about 40 percent of the new Afghan refugees in Pakistan hail from Kabul, others are from various regions of northern Afghanistan such as Sheberghan and Sar-e-Pul, as well as southern city of Jalalabad.⁴

Most of these emigrating Afghans are well-educated and financially well-off. They hail from families whose members had either jobs or other financial linkages with the Afghan government and/or other western, international institutions operating in Afghanistan. They left Afghanistan mainly due to an acute financial crisis and receding hopes of a revival of Afghan economy due to 'vague' policies of the Taliban.⁵

Some of them had been part of the Afghan army or police and had as such been part of the government's war against the Taliban. With the Taliban's return to power, they were afraid of being hunted. While some of them came to Pakistan, most opted to travel to Iran, mainly to "avoid possible victimisation by the Pakistani government which considered the previous Afghan government as hostile, and, secondly, to avoid revenge attacks by displaced Afghans (most of which were Pashtun) affected by previous government's security operations."⁶

Former officials of Afghan military and police were not the only ones who preferred Iran over Pakistan for refuge and asylum. During the weeks following Taliban's takeover of Kabul, a BBC correspondent Secunder Kermani traveled to the Zaranj border area in southwestern Afghanistan to meet ordinary Afghans fleeing to Iran.⁷ He reported that some 4,000 to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abdul Sayed, a Sweden-based researcher covering Afghanistan. Telephonic conversation with M Ilyas Khan, who conducted fieldwork for this study.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The BBC documentary titled "The Afghans turning to people smugglers to flee their country" can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV9LaqpFqmY>

5,000 Afghans, mostly from low-income urban as well as agrarian backgrounds, were being taken across the border every day by human smugglers after paying Taliban border guards. Since Iran had closed the border crossing points at Zaranj, these refugees were crossing into Pakistan's Balochistan province for onward travel to Mirjaveh and other destinations in eastern Iran.

These migrants predominantly came from the Persian speaking belt in northern and western Afghanistan. Their relocation to Iran is linked to their geographical contiguity as well as ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affinity with the Iranian population across the border. Most of them adhere to Shia sect of Islam, which is the predominant religion in Iran.

Vulnerable Afghans in the northern Afghanistan have also been seeking refuge in the bordering Central Asian states. There were reports in November 2021 that around 500 to 600 Afghans were crossing into Tajikistan every day.⁸ The country registered some 7,500 refugees during 2021, adding to around 6,500 who had already been living there. Tajikistan has since stopped accepting more refugees and has deported some asking them to await a decision on their asylum applications.

According to a UNHCR report in October 2020, nearly five million Afghans remained displaced outside of the country, of which 90 percent were hosted by Pakistan and Iran.⁹ Citing figures communicated by the Iranian government, the report said there were around 780,000 registered and some two million undocumented Afghans living in Iran. Meanwhile,

⁸ Umida Hashimova, "No place for Afghan refugees in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, November 29, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/no-place-for-afghan-refugees-in-central-asia/>

⁹ UNHCR, "Refugees in Iran," <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>

estimates by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) put the post-2021 number of Afghan refugees to Iran at around 300,000.¹⁰

These figures closely match the number of Afghan refugees moving to Pakistan post-August 2021. While most among the new arrivals are from middle and upper middle-class families and individuals from educated urban backgrounds, it has not always been like this. A look at the migration history in the Af-Pak region shows an evolving demographic pattern of cross-border movements dating back to the times of pre-partition India.

Experts say that Afghans have always been prone to migration due to various factors. For one, they are geographically located at a transit route for traders and invaders between India and Central Asia. The harsh mountainous terrain of the country offers limited prospects for agricultural activity, thus pushing large segments of population to a pastoral, nomadic lifestyle. The country also lacks employment opportunities due to a near absence of major industries.

The British rulers of India demarcated their empire from Afghanistan through a hurriedly drawn border in 1893 which divided villages, communities, and families. The intention was to secure their colony against the expanding influence of Tsarist Russia. But it created anger and frustration among the Pashtun and Baloch tribes that were divided by the Durand Line. However, being porous, the border allowed freedom of movement to the divided families and tribes. A 2022 report by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) noted that the movement of people across the (Afghanistan-Pakistan) border between 1947 and the 1970s was limited “to a few thousand nomads, traders, and families with

¹⁰ Norwegian Refugee Council, "Humanitarian needs in Iran rise as 300,000 Afghans arrive since Taliban takeover," November 10, 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/november/humanitarian-needs-in-iran-rise-as-300000-afghans-arrive-since-taliban-takeover/>

historic connections across both sides of the border.”¹¹ The numbers gradually increased and more and more people crossed into Pakistan for reasons including cross-border trade, family ties, education, work, medical services, or in order to flee violence.

The Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89) caused mass exodus of vulnerable populations to Pakistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries. Over 1.5 million Afghans crossed over into Pakistan during that period. A majority of them hailed from rural areas and were displaced due to fighting and air raids. Most of them ended up in refugee camps set up for them by the Pakistani government with international funding.

A second wave of migration started when a civil war among various "mujahideen" groups erupted following the Soviet troops withdrawal, which continued until the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s.

By that time, the international aid as well as Pakistani people's warm response towards the Afghan refugees had started to wane. According to a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) report, UNHCR's aid and interventions in Pakistan to handle the Afghan refugees had come to a halt by 1998. This was later combined with the closed border policy introduced by General Pervez Musharraf on the pretext of border security, who insisted on the repatriation of Afghan refugees and refused to take in more refugees.¹²

Repatriation of Afghans to their homeland also happened during the post-9/11 period when American troops landed in Afghanistan to combat terrorism. The UNHCR data shows that it facilitated the voluntary

¹¹ European Union Agency for Asylum, "Pakistan-Situation of Afghan refugees: Country of origin report," May 2022, https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2022_05_EUAA_COI_Report_Pakistan_Situation_of_Afghan_refugees.pdf

¹² Ayesha Qaisrani, "Bridging the gaps: Migration management and policy options for Afghan refugees in Pakistan," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18612.pdf>

repatriation of over 4.3 million Afghan nationals from Pakistan between 2002 and 2021.¹³

As such, the post-2021 migration may well be seen as the third major wave of refugees from Afghanistan during the last four decades. It is not as big as the previous waves, mainly because all the neighbouring countries have closed their borders to new refugees. And there are virtually no international funds available to house and feed the refugees.

As cited earlier, a majority of the new refugees arriving in Pakistan hail from educated urban classes, unlike the 1980s and 1990s when rural farming and pastoral communities dominated the flow. It doesn't mean that the latter groups have decided to stay in Afghanistan this time. There has been movement, though largely invisible.¹⁴ According to some reports, Afghan economy has virtually collapsed and there are widespread food shortages. As a result, more than half (24.4 million) of the country's 41.7 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian support, and if these conditions prevail, almost 97 percent of the Afghan population will be faced with the risk of "sinking into poverty". Also, inequality of women is rising under the conservative Taliban rule.¹⁵

According to a Pakistani researcher and security analyst, Dr Ayesha Siddiqua, there is a mixed pattern of refugee influx from Afghanistan this time.

"Many have come silently, many others tried to come but were discouraged; Pakistan also deported many that crossed over. I can't

¹³ For details, please visit: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>

¹⁴ Farid Kasi and Sahar Habib Ghazi, "This is what it's like for Afghan refugees crossing the border into Pakistan," VICE World News, September 17, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj8qm5/afghan-refugees-pakistan-border-escape-journey>

¹⁵ Kellie Ryan, "Crisis in Afghanistan: Unprecedented hunger after the conflict," International Rescue Committee, January 7, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-afghanistan-unprecedented-hunger-after-conflict>

cite numbers but definitely far less tried to move as compared to the previous years of conflict. I believe that the international attitude of turning a blind eye to the Afghan issue has had a major impact on numbers. There are two angles. First, Afghans that had the financial and political capacity to move, moved out. Second, the poor or less powerful can sense the unwelcome attitude abroad and have accepted the change as *fait accompli*.”¹⁶

2. An appraisal of Pakistan’s refugee policy

Pakistan is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention (Geneva Convention) of 1951 and the Refugee Protocol of 1967 which define the term ‘refugee’ and outline rights of refugees as well as legal obligations of the host states to protect them. As such, Pakistan is not legally bound to accept any refugees on its soil.

The country also does not have a national policy on migration. There are no laws to define refugees and spell out their rights. Foreign nationals' entry and stay in Pakistan are regulated under four laws: the Foreigners Act of 1946; the Naturalisation Act of 1926; the Pakistan Citizenship Act of 1951; and the Citizenship Rules of 1952. But there are no rules and criterion to determine who is a foreign visitor and who is a refugee, or how long one can remain a refugee before being considered for citizenship. Until last year, Pakistan's policy was to extend refugee status to those classified as refugees by the UNHCR.¹⁷

¹⁶ Dr Ayesha Siddiqua, defence and strategic analyst. Telephonic conversation with M Ilyas Khan, who conducted fieldwork for this study.

¹⁷ Haroon Rashid, Managing Editor Independent Urdu. Interview by M. Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 27, 2022.

Though the Naturalisation Act offers nationality to children born in Pakistan, this provision is not extended to Afghan refugees, and all such requests were rejected at both the administrative and judicial levels.¹⁸

But since the country has been hosting millions of Afghan refugees for over four decades, it has evolved a system to manage refugee affairs. In 1980, after the first wave of Afghan refugees hit the country, the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) set up the office of the Chief Commissioner of Afghan Refugees (CCAR). Its aim was to coordinate with international humanitarian agencies, such as the UNHCR, which also set up its permanent office in Pakistan in the same year. Besides, the Commissionerate was tasked to register and regulate the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that were moving in to deliver aid and support to the refugees. With its central office in Islamabad, the Commissionerate had sub-offices in all the four provinces of Pakistan.

Despite this institutional arrangement, Pakistan showed no inclination to mainstream the refugee issue into its overall national planning. That led to a lack of coordination among the provincial and federal entities, and an ad-hoc management of most policies and mechanisms enacted to deal with the Afghan refugees. Such an approach "might bring flexibility into policy-making, but it is not the best one for problem-solving."¹⁹

Many analysts believe that this ad-hoc-ism in Pakistan's refugee policy was driven by its strategic aims in Afghanistan. During the cold war, when massive Western funds had started to pour into Pakistan, it had a chance to channel a part of those funds to achieve its own ends. According to a

¹⁸ Faryal Nazir, "Report on Citizenship Law: Pakistan," European University Institute, December 2016, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/44544/EudoCit_2016_13Pakistan.pdf?sequence=1

¹⁹ Ayesha Qaisrani, "Bridging the gaps: Migration management and policy options for Afghan refugees in Pakistan," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18612.pdf>

2008 UNHCR paper, despite the UN agency's presence in Pakistan, the Pakistani government remained in control of refugee management.²⁰

According to one account, for the Afghans to be recognised as refugees and thus become eligible for international assistance, they had to register with one of the seven Afghan "mujahideen" groups which enjoyed Pakistan's support in their fight against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The purpose was to give these groups the required manpower to fight the Russian army in Afghanistan; Pakistan had tacit support of the West in this regard. This led the UNHCR to effectively suspend its practice of prima facie recognition of refugees.

Following the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the process of registering refugees came to a halt. Beginning in 1992, Pakistan embarked on a policy of forced eviction of refugees by closing down camps saying they served as recruitment centres for armed groups.²¹ The police were reportedly authorised to harass the refugees by making random arrests without a warrant.²² Since the authorities made no effort to differentiate between civilians in need and armed militants in refugee areas, thousands of refugees had to return to Afghanistan against their will.

However, due to continued vulnerability of life in Afghanistan, the refugee inflow across the porous borders continued. According to a report by the

²⁰ Rüdiger Schöch, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan during the 1980s: Cold War politics and registration practice," UNHCR [Asia Pacific], Research Paper No. 157, June 2008.

²¹ HRCP, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: Push comes to shove," April 2009, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2009-Afghan-refugees-in-Pakistan.pdf>

²² Zulfiqar Ali, "Afghan govt seeks extension in stay of refugees in Pakistan," *Dawn*, May 30, 2016.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM), there were over 2.84 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan in December 2021.²³

In 2007, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement which finally gave Afghan refugees in Pakistan the right to register and obtain a Proof of Registration (PoR) card. These cards were issued by Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) in collaboration with SAFRON and the UNHCR. The cards had to be renewed every year and were valid until 2020, after which their data has been shifted to biometric identity documents.²⁴

The PoR cardholders can temporarily stay in Pakistan, have freedom of movement, and have access to public health and education. They can rent property, open bank accounts and can register births in the family. They cannot legally work, although many do work in the informal sector. According to UNHCR, verification of around 1.4 million registered refugees had been completed and close to one million had been issued the PoRs by June 2022.²⁵

In 2017, Pakistan had launched another program, too, to register the hitherto undocumented Afghans by issuing them Afghan Citizenship Cards (ACCs). The ACC is a temporary identity document for Afghans having no other forms of identification and offers limited benefits compared with the PoR. ACC holders are entitled to stay temporarily in Pakistan and have freedom of movement but cannot access public health services or public

²³ For details, please visit: <https://pakistan.iom.int/news/iom-and-government-pakistan-celebrate-provision-multi-purpose-cash-assistance-afghan-citizenship-card-acc-holders-international-migrants-day-event>

²⁴ Bakhtawar Mian, "1.4m Afghan refugees begin receiving new smartcards," *Dawn*, May 26, 2021.

²⁵ Amin Ahmed, "Verification of Afghan refugees completed," *Dawn*, June 4, 2022.

education. Around 840,000 refugees had been issued these cards by the end of 2021.²⁶

With the latest developments following the Taliban's return to power last year, Pakistan, like other countries in the region, has officially closed its borders to new refugees. Saleem Khan, Chief Commissioner Afghan Refugees explained Pakistan's policy to Freedom Network (FN) in the following words: "We have a clear policy, that is: no new influx is accepted." He argued that this time around the Afghan people were not confronted with persecution or threats to their lives and properties, but faced shortage of food, medicines, and other needs due to the financial situation and droughts, which required assistance from the international community within Afghanistan.²⁷

Many believe that Pakistan's approach towards the refugee problem has not helped the displaced Afghan people and, instead, added to their miseries. At least two generations of refugees have been born and raised in Pakistan, but they have no right to nationality and other legal protections. On the contrary, many of them, especially the undocumented Afghans, "face a high risk of official and societal discrimination, including harassment by security services."²⁸

Those arriving Pakistan after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul last year face a host of other problems including inflationary pressures, liquidity

²⁶ Visit IOM webpage for the event press release at <https://pakistan.iom.int/news/iom-and-government-pakistan-celebrate-provision-multi-purpose-cash-assistance-afghan-citizenship-card-acc-holders-international-migrants-day-event>

²⁷ Freedom Network of Pakistan, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: lives in limbo," 2022, <https://www.fnpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Afghan-Refuges-in-Pakistan-Lives-in-Lombo.pdf>

²⁸ Please see "DFAT country information report Pakistan" at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-pakistan.pdf>

problems and difficulty in finding affordable accommodation.²⁹ Khudainoor Nasar, an Islamabad-based correspondent for BBC Pashto service, asserted that while many new refugees have come after obtaining a Pakistani visa, the majority of them have crossed over either through remote border routes or by bribing officials at the crossing points at Torkham and Chaman.³⁰ While the latter managed to settle with refugee populations in small towns and villages, those who came on valid visas remained stranded. They were mostly employees of Western organisations who wanted to transit through Pakistan to other countries mainly in the West. Their travel and hotel accommodation were funded by their sponsors. Due to long delays in emigration approvals, Pakistani visas of most of them have expired making their stay in the country illegal. "They need to return to Afghanistan before they can apply for a fresh Pakistani visa, and many are not willing to do that because funding by their sponsors has tapered off and they are also afraid the Taliban will arrest them."³¹

Those who bore their own travel and accommodation expenses were even worse off. Only few of them had any cash with them as their bank accounts in Afghanistan had been frozen. As they started arriving in Islamabad and elsewhere in large numbers, local house rents went up by at least 50 percent. While they were desperate to find shelter, local hotels and guesthouses were already occupied to full capacity. This even created problems for Pakistani citizens seeking rented accommodations.³²

Some refugee groups, mainly from the northwestern region of Afghanistan, who couldn't afford rentals set up camps outside Islamabad's National Press Club as well as in the empty area alongside the city's Marriot

²⁹ Zofeen T. Ebrahim, "In Pakistan, Afghan refugees face hardship and a frosty reception," Thomas Reuters Foundation, April 19, 2022, <https://news.trust.org/item/20220419101624-lnxrj>

³⁰ Khudainoor, BBC Pashto service's Islamabad correspondent. Interview by Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 8, 2022.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Hotel. They held a sit-in for months with banners reading 'Kill Me', among other things.³³ The families housed near the Marriot were later forced to leave the spot by the police, possibly to prevent their exposure to foreign visitors staying at the hotel. Those outside the NPC are still lying there.

There were also protests by Afghan musicians and civil society groups in Peshawar around early June 2022 after police arrested four Afghan musicians for being illegal residents. Following repeated protests, a court granted them bail and the authorities promised they will issue them registration cards. Around 150 Afghan music artists have moved to Peshawar since the Taliban took power last year.³⁴

Since the Commissionerate of Afghan Refugees only deals with the registered refugees, the new refugees are not getting any information or support from it. This is also true for the civil society organisations (CSOs). Some observers hold that this is because of the absence of a clear policy or guidelines from the government about new arrivals. The Commissionerate has no shortage of resources, but CSOs can help Afghan refugees only after receiving instructions from the SAFRON.³⁵

A vague refugee policy has been among the key factors of Pakistan's diminishing credibility in Afghanistan. Despite hosting millions of refugees, and granting them housing, educational, and health facilities, among other things, Pakistan has remained an object of hate in Afghanistan not only during the previous "unfriendly" governments but also during the present

³³ Rehan Piracha, "Displaced and forgotten Afghans seek basic rights from international community," VoicePk, June 8, 2022, <https://voicepk.net/2022/06/displaced-and-forgotten-afghans-seek-basic-rights-from-international-community/>

³⁴ Manzoor Ali, "Afghan musicians in Peshawar: between a rock and a hard place," *Dawn*, June 6, 2022.

³⁵ Freedom Network of Pakistan, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: lives in limbo," 2022, <https://www.fnpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Afghan-Refuges-in-Pakistan-Lives-in-Lombo.pdf>

Taliban rule.³⁶ "The anti-Pakistan narrative is so strong that it remains the only narrative across populations old and young, and across households, communities, districts and regions."³⁷

On the other hand, the new Taliban regime faces multiple challenges and risks, such as an evolving terrorism campaign by the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) group, a possible fracturing of the broad Taliban coalition itself which may lead to another round of civil war, resistance against Taliban rule by urban population and ethno-religious minorities, and an economic breakdown that is leading to a grave humanitarian crisis.³⁸

3. Afghan refugees can help Pakistan promote its soft image

Analysts believe that any policy by Pakistan to win hearts and minds in Afghanistan will require a 360-degree turn in its long-pursued regional approach. For many, this is not something the country can achieve in the short term. But it is an important thing for Pakistan to do because its own political and economic survival depends on stability in Afghanistan and the region.

Needless to say, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to establish good neighbourly relations. To start with, they need to develop some joint counterterrorism and border security mechanisms wherein they undertake to not support the militant groups hurting either side.³⁹

³⁶ Khudainoor, BBC Pashto service's Islamabad correspondent. Interview by Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 8, 2022.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ayesha Qaisrani, "Bridging the gaps: Migration management and policy options for Afghan refugees in Pakistan," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18612.pdf>

³⁹ Amira Jadoon, "The evolution of potential resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," USIP Special Report No. 494, May 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-

the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf

Secondly, Pakistan needs to strictly tame the clergy and bring within acceptable levels the madrassa culture in the country,⁴⁰ which will not only help in countering domestic radicalism but also add to neighbours' confidence in the country's countering extremism discourse.

In the short term, Pakistan can easily win hearts and minds of Afghan people with a sympathetic visa policy and facilitation of cross-border movement. But there are no signs yet that Pakistani strategists are thinking in that direction at the moment.

Some observers underscore that Pakistan needs to make relevant laws, which will not only help in removing uncertainty on the refugees' status in Pakistan but could also open up more avenues of international support for Pakistan's s refugee management.

More than 65 percent of the Afghan population in Pakistan is under the age of 25.⁴¹ The circumstances are not ideal for them to return any time soon. So even if Pakistan is not willing to give them citizenship, it should at least offer a legal status to children born in Pakistan, with the right to education, work, residence, as well as the right to own property. "Access to quality education is not only essential for these young Afghans to find employment and self-sustenance, but also to develops their profile better for resettlement or migration to third countries, and even reintegration to Afghanistan."⁴² Some observers even recommend for Pakistan to have a

⁴⁰ Mirza Khurram Shahzad, "Pious claims and encroached lands," *The News on Sunday*, August 9, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/559163-pious-claims>

⁴¹ "Why do young Afghan refugees in Pakistan lack education, skills?" *The Express Tribune*, June 19, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2306068/why-do-young-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan-lack-education-skills>

⁴² Ayesha Qaisrani, "Bridging the gaps: Migration management and policy options for Afghan refugees in Pakistan," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18612.pdf>

uniform policy on educational and skills needs of all youth in the country, whether local or refugee, instead of running parallel systems.

In addition, Pakistan also needs to put an end on the persisting ambiguity caused by different legal statuses of PoR holders, ACC holders and the undocumented refugees. They should be issued a holistic long-term legal residency so as to simplify their long-term management by the government.⁴³

Many of the needs of the old and new refugees are similar, such as the need for shelter, livelihood, health and education. However, security appears to be the most important need of the new refugees. According to one account, “since most of these newly arrived Afghan refugees are women and children, their protection is extremely important.”⁴⁴

As noted earlier, NGOs also avoid communication with new refugees. A Freedom Network report quoted an NGO worker as saying that as they could not do anything for the refugees, they avoided communicating with them or raising their expectations. NGOs themselves rely on UNHCR to get updates and data about new Afghan refugees.⁴⁵

Experts believe that this situation needs to change. An expert consultation on Afghanistan, held in Islamabad in March 2022, noted that Pakistan in the current situation requires an “all-encompassing parliament-led policy that focuses provision of humanitarian assistance and on winning hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Along with humanitarian assistance,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Freedom Network of Pakistan, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: lives in limbo," 2022, <https://www.fnpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Afghan-Refuges-in-Pakistan-Lives-in-Lombo.pdf>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Pakistan's present Afghan policy must address its bilateral equation with Afghanistan and counter-terrorism mechanisms."⁴⁶

Some experts believe that Pakistan needs to highlight the support it has been rendering to the Afghan people. For instance, Pakistan has funded a huge hospital in Kabul, built an engineering block in Balkh University, and established a faculty of arts at Kabul University.⁴⁷ But none of this is publicly known, because Pakistan has been reluctant to promote its humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Similarly, most members of Afghanistan's cricket team learned the game during their time of refuge in Pakistan, but Pakistan "never issued any 'emerging refugee stars' certificates to them to highlight its contribution."⁴⁸

But given the emerging international realities in terms of politics, war and economy, Pakistan will sooner or later need to find ways to evolve a policy that is driven towards achieving harmony in regional as well as international relations. As Afrasiab Khattak pointed out during PIPS-led expert consultation cited earlier, Pakistan needs to develop a policy towards Afghanistan that will help evolve a "bilateral security framework that focuses the brotherly relations between two sovereign countries, irrespective of great powers' preferences. The new policy is indispensable as all other approaches and objectives (of Pakistan) are interlinked with its Afghan policy."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, "Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan's interests and policy options," Report of a PIPS consultation held on March 27, 2022, in Islamabad, which can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/afghan-peace-and-reconciliation-pakistans-interests-and-policy-options-3>

⁴⁷ Haroon Rashid, Managing Editor Independent Urdu. Interview by Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 27, 2022.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, "Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan's interests and policy options," Report of a PIPS consultation held on March 27, 2022, in Islamabad,

4. Border control: implications for bilateral trade, travel, and security

Pakistan has fenced its border with Afghanistan for several reasons. These include checking militant infiltration, preventing smuggling of drugs and weapons, and preventing large-scale migrations from Afghanistan during any future crises.

Pakistan first proposed to build a 2,500km long fence along the Durand Line in 2005. The decision was endorsed by the US, which had military presence in Afghanistan to curb militancy and support the democratic process there.⁵⁰ But progress on the project stopped after the fencing of a 35km stretch as it triggered opposition from both Afghanistan and the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), saying it will divide the population living on both sides of the border.⁵¹ In 2017, Pakistan began erecting a chain-link fence equipped with surveillance cameras and infrared detectors. According to a EUAA report, 94 percent of the border had been fenced by the end of 2021.⁵²

Pakistani officials maintain that the fencing is part of the broader border management that is meant to address security threats to Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. According to one official account, "both countries had

which can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/afghan-peace-and-reconciliation-pakistans-interests-and-policy-options-3>

⁵⁰ Randeep Ramesh, "US backs Pakistani-Afghan border fence," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/14/pakistan.afghanistan>

⁵¹ "Plan to fence, mine Afghan border," *Dawn*, June 23, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/638649/plan-to-fence-mine-afghan-border>

⁵² European Union Agency for Asylum, "Pakistan-Situation of Afghan refugees: Country of origin report," May 2022.

previously reiterated allegations of undesirable and illegal movement, after which [Pakistan] decided to document all movement.”⁵³

Initially, the Pakistani authorities were planning to provide for at least 18 border crossings to facilitate movement of local people,⁵⁴ but so far only eight crossing points have been set up. Four of these have been made operational, while only two of them – Torkham in KP and Chaman in Balochistan – allow non-trade travelers to cross.

These travelers, as well as the trade convoys, must possess travel documents. This measure was introduced in 2016 and was also extended to Pashtun tribespeople living in the bordering region. Previously, these Pashtun people living along the border were exempted from visa requirement. This exemption was based on the Easement Rights of the tribes living on both sides of the border and was granted to them in treaties signed by those tribes and the Afghan government with the British colonial rulers of India.

Local observers believe that easement rights were granted to Pashtuns because they were “one people, with a single language and shared history,” and as such, a hard division was not possible.⁵⁵ Afghanistan still allows visa-free travel to the residents of former FATA (now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province), but Pakistani officials say there is no

⁵³ Mansoor Ahmad Khan, Pakistan’s ambassador in Kabul, was quoted in Pamir Sahill, “Divided by Pakistan’s border fence, Pashtuns lose business, rights, and tribal ties,” Gandhara RFERL, May 17, 2021.

⁵⁴ Ismail Khan, “Afghan border crossings throw up security concerns,” *Dawn*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1281514/afghan-border-crossings-throw-up-security-concerns>

⁵⁵ Pamir Sahill, “Divided by Pakistan’s border fence, Pashtuns lose business, rights, and tribal ties,” Gandhara RFERL, May 17, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-afghan-border-pashtun-lose-business-rights-tribal-ties/31258865.html>

chance of the government issuing “corridor passes” to tribes living near the border on the Afghanistan side anymore.

Pakistan has been issuing long-term multi-entry visas to Afghans traveling to Pakistan, but with the condition that they can stay in Pakistan for only 22 days at a time. According to Pakistani journalist Haroon Rashid, who recently met officials of the Pakistani mission in Kabul, Pakistani authorities claim that ever since Taliban’s takeover the Pakistani Embassy has been issuing roughly 700 visas a day.⁵⁶

Observers assert that the border still remains porous in parts, but the two-way movement of more than two dozen tribes living on both sides of the border has been drastically curtailed. While hardly any reports are available on their plight, a little information that is coming out of the region indicates serious humanitarian issues.

The scale of the likely disturbances can be gauged from a 2016 *Dawn* report that provided details on the volume of cross-border travel during the previous years across just one crossing point at Torkham.⁵⁷ Quoting data from Fata Analysis and Strategy Team (FAST), an intelligence and information collation/analysis wing under the FATA Secretariat’s Law & Order Department, it said, “the (annual) inflow and outflow of undocumented Afghans to and from Pakistan at Torkham never dropped below the one million mark” in the past.⁵⁸

Accordingly, in 2010, a total of 1.7 million undocumented Afghans poured into Pakistan while 2.1 million went back. During 2011-12, the numbers of those crossing into Pakistan shot up to 3.57 million and 3.58 million

⁵⁶ Haroon Rashid, Managing Editor Independent Urdu. Interview by Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 27, 2022.

⁵⁷ Ismail Khan, "Afghan border crossings throw up security concerns," *Dawn*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1281514/afghan-border-crossings-throw-up-security-concerns>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

respectively, while an almost equal numbers of refugees went back. In 2013, the inflow went down to 2.3 million while returns went up to 3.6 million. This trend continued over subsequent years, with numbers fluctuating in tune with seasons and politico-security developments on both sides of the border, until Pakistan enforced its visa regime in early 2016. Following that, the number of undocumented Afghans crossing into Pakistan via Torkham dropped to zero in July that year.⁵⁹

Experts believe that while the open border policy certainly benefited drug smugglers and militants, the bulk of the cross-border movement was by clans and tribes having properties and familial links on both sides, as well as local nomads moving their livestock between their summer and winter pasturelands. Farming, livestock, and cross-border trade have traditionally been the main sources of income for Pashtun border communities. Tribes owned property on both sides of the border. They have now lost access to thousands of hectares of land they owned which fell on the other side of the border.⁶⁰

They have also lost access to communally owned meadows. The Afghan nomads known as Kuchis have borne the brunt of the impact. "The fence has cut off traditional migratory routes that enabled Ghilzai Pashtun tribes to move between the lush plains of the river Indus in Pakistan and the cool Hindukush meadows" in Afghanistan.⁶¹

Apart from ruining local economies in remote areas, the border control has also had an adverse impact on formal trade which has plummeted over the past four years. Annual Pakistani exports to Afghanistan, which touched the highs of between \$1.5 billion to over \$2 billion per annum during 2010-

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Pamir Sahill, "Divided by Pakistan's border fence, Pashtuns lose business, rights, and tribal ties," Gandhara RFERL, May 17, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-afghan-border-pashtun-lose-business-rights-tribal-ties/31258865.html>

⁶¹ Ibid.

14, “dropped more than 40 percent over the past three years, to \$889 million, according to the Federal Board of Revenue.”⁶² The fencing has also caused some serious humanitarian issues “threatening to break familial ties and social relations in a seamless tribal society united by kinship, religion, language, and history.” Over the last four to five years, thousands of people have been rendered unable to contract marriages within the extended clan or attending funerals of the near and dear ones.⁶³

According to some observers, the border fencing has not only stulted lives of Afghan citizens, but also brought the Afghan government under pressure. When Afghanistan was a peaceful monarchy having broader ties with the international community, it would “still crack up as and when Pakistan put restrictions on border crossing.” Given their international isolation and a dysfunctional economy, Afghanistan’s present rulers are even more dependent on Pakistan. “They have no other option to survive except Pakistani support.”⁶⁴

As for Pakistan, experts believe that though strict border controls put it in an advantageous position to check militants’ infiltration from Afghanistan, but it cannot block it completely. The border still remains porous in places, which the locals know and have been crossing it both ways in recent times.

Militant attacks by TTP have also continued against Pakistani military targets in the border region, though their frequency has gone down considerably. The reason for this, however, is not necessarily the border controls. With the Taliban in Afghanistan, it doesn’t matter whether the border is open or closed. For Taliban it’s not the issue. They can take people across the border whenever they would want. As for the Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K), “they may have sleeping cells in Pakistan, but are

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Abdul Sayed, a Sweden-based researcher focusing Afghanistan among other things. Email correspondence with Ilyas Khan, who conducted fieldwork for this study.

not much active, which means that Taliban have kept them under control.”⁶⁵ Regarding TTP, Pakistan released some of their leaders who were under arrest, and is holding talks with them, even though the Pakistani military is supposedly better placed to crush the movement now that border fencing has blocked their escape routes to Afghanistan.

Pakistan needs to revisit its Afghan policy as well as the approach to deal with the militants and border security. Some assert that while Pakistan has been blaming Afghanistan for not accepting the Durand Line, but the fencing of the border shows that Pakistan too does not accept the border (and its communal realities). Apart from its assumed border security and control utility, few experts hold that the fencing is “alienating Pashtuns ... (and causing) trade restrictions that have dismantled the livelihood of Pashtuns.” They also underscore that Pakistan “needs to employ soft power to enhance people to people relations.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Haroon Rashid, Managing Editor Independent Urdu. Interview by Ilyas Khan in Islamabad on June 27, 2022.

⁶⁶ Comments by Afrasiab Khattak in a PIPS expert consultation held on March 27, 2022 in Islamabad, whose proceedings can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/afghan-peace-and-reconciliation-pakistans-interests-and-policy-options-3>

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