



PAK INSTITUTE FOR
PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)
KNOWLEDGE FOR PEACE

Vol.17 | January 2025 | No.1

www.pakpips.com

SPECIAL REPORT FROM PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES

PAKISTAN SECURITY REPORT 2024

OVERVIEW OF SECURITY IN 2024:
CRITICAL CHALLENGES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

SECURITY LANDSCAPE OF
PAKISTAN IN 2024

ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE
IN 2024

STATE RESPONSES



PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)

PAKISTAN SECURITY REPORT 2024: AN ABRIDGED VERSION

By Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

**The complete report will be available online and in print by January 15, 2025*

Chapter 1

Overview of Security in 2024: Critical Challenges and Recommendations

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1.1 Overview of Security Situation in 2024

Marking a 70% increase from the previous year, Pakistan experienced a total of 521 terrorist attacks in 2024. This intensified wave of terrorism claimed 852 lives, reflecting a 23% rise compared to the terrorism-related fatalities recorded the year before. Another 1,092 people were injured in these attacks recorded during the year.

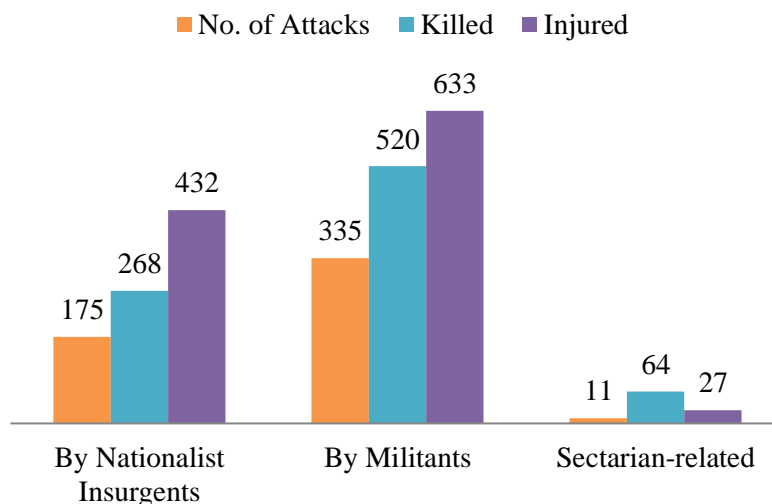
In 2024, as many as 358 personnel from security and law enforcement agencies were martyred in terrorist attacks—78 FC men, 140 policemen, 124 army officials, 13 Levies members, and three unspecified paramilitary soldiers. Similarly, 355 civilians lost their lives, and another 621 were wounded in these attacks. Meanwhile, 139 militants were killed, and another 10 were wounded—either during the suicide blasts they perpetrated or in retaliatory fire by security forces following certain attacks.

Out of the total 521 attacks in 2024, 335 were carried out by the religiously inspired militant groups—an increase from 208 in 2023. These groups mainly included Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), affiliated local Taliban factions such as Hafiz Gul Bahadur group and Lashkar-e-Islam, as well as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). These attacks resulted in 520 deaths and left 633 others injured.

Nationalist insurgent groups, primarily Baloch, were responsible for 175 attacks, a notable rise from 86 in 2023. These attacks claimed 268 lives and injured 432 individuals.

Meanwhile, compared to 12 in 2023, as many as 11 sectarian-related terrorist attacks were recorded in 2024 that claimed 64 lives, mostly in Kurram, and inflicted injuries on another 27 people.

Chart 1: Classification of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2024



As many as 308 attacks in 2024, or over 59 % of the total recorded attacks in the year, targeted personnel, vehicles, convoys, and posts or facilities of security and law enforcement agencies. Terrorists carried out a combined total of 70 attacks on political leaders, party workers, and election-related targets. Civilians were apparently hit in 35 attacks, while a combined total of 19 attacks targeted government officials, offices, state symbols, and property. As many as 15 attacks were directed against non-Baloch workers, travelers and settlers in Balochistan, and another 13 attacks specifically targeted polio vaccination teams and their security escorts, primarily police. Other sporadic targets attacked by terrorists in 2024 are given at Table 1.

Table 1: Targets Hit in Terrorist Attacks in 2024

Targets	No. of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security/law enforcement agencies (personnel, convoys, posts)	308	489	646
Education/institutions/teachers	7	0	1
Non-Bloch settlers/workers	15	62	32
Gas pipelines	4	0	0
Public sector, officials/ state symbols	15	24	36
Tribal elders/ peace committee members	8	5	11
Civilians	35	73	139
Private property/CD, barber and other shops	3	1	0
Shia religious scholars/community	4	53	20
Worship places/shrines/madrassas	1	0	4
Govt. offices/public property (hospitals, banks etc.)	4	3	5
Sunni religious leaders/community	6	6	4
Haqqani Network or Afghan Taliban	1	1	0
Political leaders/workers	53	57	111
Hindu community	1	1	1
Foreign interests/ Diplomats/Foreigners	2	4	2
Unknown	3	3	3
Alleged spy or collaborator	3	3	0
Media/journalists	1	3	8
Health/polio workers, security escorts	13	13	10
CPEC/workers/Chinese	4	10	16
Former militants	2	8	15
Railway tracks / trains	2	0	5
Development, exploration projects, companies, workers	9	29	12
Election-related targets	17	4	11
Total	521	852	1,092

Besides perpetrating 13 suicide and *fedayee* attacks, the terrorists mainly used direct infantry fire in 271 attacks, improvised explosive devices or IEDs of multiple types in 127 attacks, and hand grenades in 74 attacks. The terrorists also used other attack tactics or weapons, though less frequently, including 13 rocket attacks, 10 coordinated gun-and-bomb attacks, seven terrorist acts of sabotage and lynching, three mortar shell explosions, two incidents of kidnapping, and one beheading.

Although terrorist attacks were recorded in all four provinces and the federal capital in 2024, over 95% of them were concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa recorded the highest number of terrorist incidents in the country in 2024, with 295 attacks that also included five sectarian-related attacks. These attacks claimed 509 lives and left 517 others injured. Compared to the previous year, the number of terrorist incidents in the province increased by 69%, while fatalities rose by 21%. This indicates that militants not only escalated the frequency of their attacks but also carried out more intense and high-impact attacks during the year under review. Most of the terrorist activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was concentrated in six southern districts—North and South Waziristan, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat, and Dera Ismail Khan—which collectively accounted for 171 attacks, or 58% of the total incidents in the province. Other significant hotspots included Bajaur, with 34 attacks largely attributed to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), and the provincial capital, along with the neighboring Khyber district, which together witnessed 36 attacks. Overall, terrorist activity was reported in 22 districts across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024. Security and law enforcement personnel, particularly from the army and police, were the primary targets, accounting for over 68% of the total reported attacks in the province.

Balochistan witnessed a significant surge in terrorist attacks and casualties in 2024. The province experienced an 84% rise in attacks compared to the previous year, with 202 terrorist incidents that claimed 322 lives and injured 534 others. In contrast, 229 people were killed in such attacks in the province in 2023. Attacks by various Baloch insurgent groups, primarily the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), saw a staggering 119% increase, accounting for 171 incidents in the province. These attacks resulted in 261 fatalities and 412 injuries. Insurgent groups carried out numerous high-impact, coordinated operations targeting security forces, civilians, and non-Baloch workers, miners and travelers. The violence by these groups spread across 21 districts, predominantly in the central, southern, and southwestern parts of the province, focusing largely on security forces. Religiously motivated militant groups, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State (IS-K), were responsible for 30 attacks in the province, up from 29 in the previous year. These attacks caused 60 deaths and injured 122 people. While the TTP and its affiliates concentrated their operations in the northern, predominantly Pashtun-populated districts bordering Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, IS-K activities were more prevalent in Kalat, Pishin, Qillah Abdullah, Qilla Saifullah, Quetta, and Sibi districts.

A single sectarian-related attack was reported in Balochistan in 2024, resulting in one death.

Compared to 15 in the previous year, 12 terrorist attacks occurred in Sindh province, including 10 in Karachi and one each in Dadu and Larkana districts. These attacks killed a total of 14 people and injured 28 others. Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army was believed to be involved in attacks in Dadu and Larkana. The banned TTP, BLA and rival sectarian groups were involved in attacks reported from Karachi. The BLA's Majeed Brigade carried out two suicide bombings in Karachi: one targeting Japanese nationals near Mansehra Colony in the Landhi neighborhood and another targeting Chinese engineers near Karachi airport. The TTP mainly targeted police in the city.

In 2024, Punjab experienced 11 terrorist attacks, a significant increase from six in the previous year. These attacks claimed six lives and injured 12 individuals. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan was responsible for 10 of these incidents, including four in Dera Ghazi Khan, and three each in Mianwali and Lahore. An unidentified group was reportedly behind an attack in Sahiwal. Notably, all 11 attacks in Punjab targeted police personnel and stations.

One sectarian-related terrorist attack was recorded in Islamabad, which claimed the life of a Sunni religious scholar.

Table 2: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2024

Region	No. of Attacks	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	295	509	517
Balochistan	202	322	534
Punjab	11	6	12
Islamabad	1	1	1
Karachi	10	14	26
Sindh (excluding Karachi)	2	0	2
Total	521	852	1,092

1.1.1 Comparison

In 2024, a total of 785 incidents of conflict-related violence were recorded across Pakistan, as detailed in Table 3. This figure includes 521 terrorist attacks previously mentioned, along with 158 anti-militant operations or kinetic strikes conducted by security forces, and eight armed clashes or encounters between security forces and militants.

A combined total of 28 violent incidents occurred along Pakistan's borders with Afghanistan, India, and Iran. The Kurram tribal district witnessed 13 sectarian clashes,

while nine incidents of communal or faith-based violence, including mob attacks, were reported during the year. (For details on other sporadic incidents, refer to Table 3.)

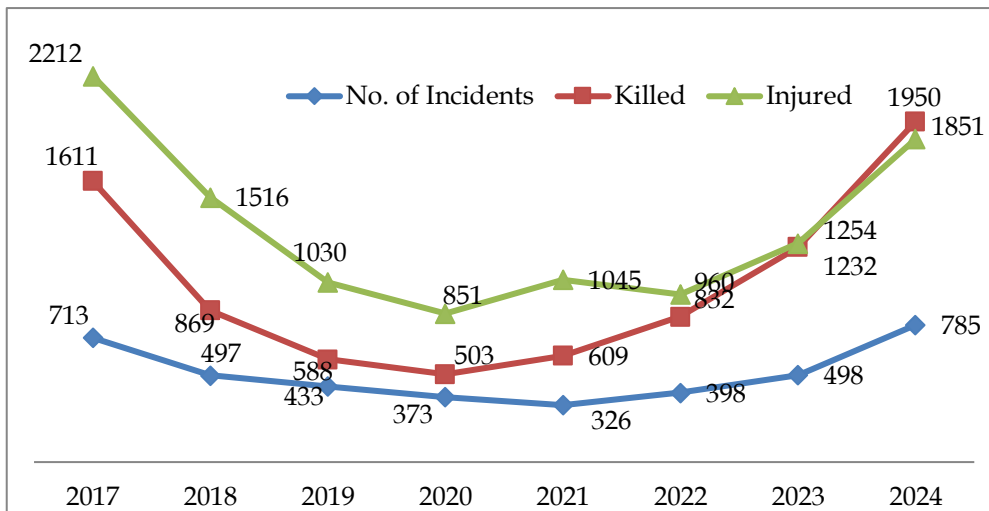
Overall, these incidents resulted in the deaths of 1,950 individuals and left 1,851 others injured.

Table 3: Nature of Overall Incidents of Violence

Nature of Incident	No. of Incidents	Killed	Injured
Terrorist attacks	521	852	1,092
Political/ethnic violence	19	15	43
Clashes & encounters between security forces & militants	8	29	18
Cross-border clashes/attacks	28	150	46
Operational attacks by security forces	158	677	129
Unspecified drone attacks	1	0	6
Sectarian/tribal clashes (Kurram)	13	170	414
Inter-militant clashes/attacks	3	19	16
Communal/faith-based violence	9	7	0
Abductions by militants & insurgents	3	0	0
Militants-tribesmen clashes	2	2	5
Plot/foiled terror attempts	8	2	1
Recovery of dead bodies	4	14	0
Unspecified targeted attacks	3	3	13
Protests/clashes with security forces	5	10	68
Total	785	1,950	1,851

The total number of conflict-related violent incidents increased by about 58%, rising from 498 in 2023 to 785 in 2024. Similar to the previous year, this surge was primarily driven by a rise in both terrorist attacks and counterterrorism operations. The number of fatalities associated with these incidents also saw a significant increase of over 58%, climbing from 1,232 in 2023 to 1,950 in 2024. (*See Chart 2*)

Chart 2: Comparison of Overall Incidents of Violence & Casualties (2017-24)



For the fourth consecutive year, the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan increased in 2024. This surge in terrorist violence coincided with the Taliban's rise to power in neighboring Afghanistan in 2021. Markedly, 2020 was the last year to witness a relative decline in terrorist violence in Pakistan, a trend that had been ongoing since 2014, following military operations in former FATA and Karachi, as well as an extensive counter-militancy campaign implemented nationwide under the National Action Plan. However, since 2021, this downward trend has not sustained, and the incidence of terrorist attacks has risen. (See Chart 3 and Table 4)

Chart 3: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2015-2024)

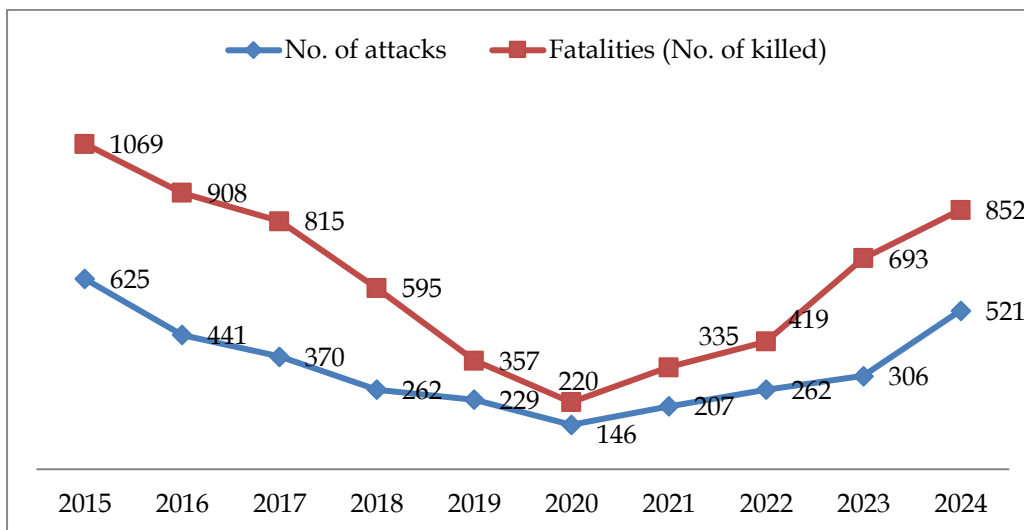


Table 4: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2009-24)¹

Year	No. of Terrorist Attacks (%Change)	No. of Killed (% Change)
2009	Baseline year (2,586 attacks)	Baseline year (3,021 Fatalities)
2010	18%↓	4% ↓
2011	7%↓	18%↓
2012	20%↓	14%↓
2013	9%↑	19%↑
2014	30%↓	30%↓
2015	48%↓	38%↓
2016	28%↓	12%↓
2017	16%↓	10%↓
2018	29%↓	27%↓
2019	13%↓	40%↓
2020	36%↓	38%↓
2021	42%↑	52%↑
2022	27%↑	25%↑
2023	17%↑	65%↑
2024	70%↑	23%↑

As shown in Table 4, the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan increased by 70% in 2024 compared to the previous year. This surge in terrorist violence was primarily driven by a rise in attacks reported from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the two provinces most affected by such violence. In Balochistan, the frequency of terrorist incidents rose by 84% compared to 2023, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa saw a 69% increase. Similarly, Punjab experienced an 83% upsurge in terrorist violence. In contrast, Sindh recorded a 20% decline in such incidents compared to the previous year.

Table 5: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks & Casualties (2024 vs. 2023)²

Province / Region	Number of Attacks (%Change)	Killed (% Change)	Injured (% Change)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	69%↑	21%↑	34%↓
Balochistan	84%↑	41%↑	89%↑

¹ ↑and↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, from previous year.

² ↑and↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, compared with previous year, i.e., 2023.

Punjab	83%↑	62%↓	50%↑
Sindh	20%↓	13%↓	8%↑
Islamabad	1 compared to 0 in 2023	1 compared to 0 in 2023	1 compared to 0 in 2023
GB and AJK	-	-	-
Total	70%↑	23%↑	3%↓

Compared to 23 in the year before, as many as 13 suicide and *fedayee* attacks happened in 2024 including nine (9) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two in Balochistan, and another two in Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh. The attacks claimed 111 lives—significantly lower than the 315 lives lost in suicide attacks in 2023—and injured 132 people. The banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan perpetrated five suicide bombings, while Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group, and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) were responsible for four suicide blasts each. The TTP carried out suicide attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, targeting security forces, former militants, and a convoy of Chinese engineers. The TTP attacks were distributed across North Waziristan (2), Dera Ismail Khan (2), and Shangla (1). These incidents resulted in the deaths of 12 civilians and 8 security and law enforcement personnel. The HGB group conducted suicide bombings in Bannu and North Waziristan, focusing on security forces. These attacks led to the martyrdom of 27 security personnel. The BLA executed four suicide bombings, two in Karachi and one each in Lasbela and Quetta, targeting Japanese and Chinese nationals in Karachi, as well as security forces in Balochistan. The BLA attacks resulted in the deaths of 17 army soldiers and 16 civilians.

A total of 28 violent incidents—including attacks and clashes—were reported along Pakistan’s borders with Afghanistan (25 incidents), India (1 incident), and Iran (2 incidents), marking an increase from 12 such incidents in the previous year. These events resulted in 150 fatalities (136 militants, seven security personnel, and seven civilians) and 46 injuries. The majority of incidents occurred along the Afghan border, comprising nine instances of cross-border firing or skirmishes by Afghan security forces, 14 infiltration attempts and clashes involving the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and other militants, and two airstrikes conducted by the Pakistan Air Force inside Afghanistan in March and December. The December airstrikes reportedly killed 71 militants in Paktia province. Overall, border incidents with Afghanistan claimed the lives of 136 militants and seven Pakistani security personnel. Geographically, except for two incidents in Nushki, Balochistan, all other Afghan border incidents were concentrated in the bordering regions of KP in Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Lower Dir, and North and South Waziristan districts. Two cross-border attacks from Iran were recorded in Panjgur and Washuk districts of Balochistan, resulting in six deaths and five injuries. Similarly, one incident occurred along the Working Boundary with India in Lahore, causing one fatality.

In 2024, a significant increase in militant fatalities was observed during operational strikes conducted by security forces in Pakistan. Compared to 373 militants killed in such operations in 2023, the number rose to 621 in 2024, marking a rise of over 66%. Overall, security forces and law enforcement agencies carried out 158 anti-militant operations in 2024, which was a 22% increase from the previous year. These operations resulted in 677 fatalities, including 621 militants, 49 army soldiers, six policemen, and one FC personnel. Another 129 individuals were injured, including 109 militants. Of the 158 recorded operations, 118 (about 75%) took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 32 in Balochistan, four in Punjab, three in Karachi (Sindh's provincial capital), and one in Gilgit-Baltistan. While these operations were spread across 40 districts and regions nationwide, but only eight districts recorded five or more operations. These were Bannu, DI Khan, Khyber, Lakki Marwat, North Waziristan, South Waziristan, and Tank in KP, and Zhob in Balochistan. North Waziristan saw the highest number of operations, with 32, followed by Lakki Marwat (16), DI Khan (15), Khyber (14), South Waziristan (11), Bannu and Tank (eight each), and Zhob (six).

Security and law enforcement agencies also entered into in a total of eight armed clashes and encounters with militants – compared to 24 such incidents in previous year – in six districts or regions of the country. These armed clashes and encounters claimed 29 lives (18 militants, 10 army soldiers, and one FC man) and injured three militants and 15 security personnel. Five of these clashes took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two in Balochistan, and one in Punjab.

In 2024, a significant increase in incidents of political violence and armed clashes was observed compared to the previous year. While only two such incidents were reported in 2023, as many as 19 were recorded in 2024, resulting in 15 deaths and 43 injuries. These clashes occurred across 15 districts within a four-month period, from January to April, and were linked to the February general elections. The violence involved workers and supporters from various political parties. In Punjab, the clashes included members of PML-N, PTI, PPP, and PML-Q. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, parties such as PPP, PTI, and JUI-F were involved. Incidents in Sindh included supporters of PPP, MQM-P, and GDA, while in Balochistan, clashing workers included those affiliated with PPP, BAP, PML-N, PTI, and independent candidates.

Compared to 10 in 2023, as many as nine (9) incidents of communal or faith-based violence including incidents of mob violence were also recorded in Pakistan in 2024. These incidents claimed the lives of seven persons accused of blasphemy as well as members of Ahmadiyya community in Sargodha, Mandi Bahauddin, and Gujrat in Punjab, Swat in KP, Quetta in Balochistan, and Mirpur Khas in Sindh. Few highlights of communal violence in 2024 included: a mob attack on Christian families' homes in Sargodha's Mujahid Colony; the killing of two Ahmadiyya community members by a madrasa student in Mandi Bahauddin; the lynching of a blasphemy-accused individual inside a police station in Swat; the killing of a blasphemy suspect by a policeman inside the lockup of the Cantt Police Station in Quetta; and an an alleged religiously motivated

extra-judicial killing of Umerkot-based doctor Shah Nawaz Kunhbar by police in Mirpur Khas.

Sectarian violence surged in Pakistan in 2024, with a significant occurrence in the Kurram tribal district. A total of 234 people lost their lives, a sharp increase from 43 fatalities in 2023, and 441 others were injured in a combined total of 24 incidents of sectarian violence, which included 11 sectarian-related attacks, and 13 violent sectarian clashes. Kurram bore the brunt of sectarian violence, accounting for 227 fatalities (97%) from these incidents. The sectarian-related attacks in 2024 occurred primarily in Kurram (4 attacks) and Karachi (4 attacks), with one attack each reported in Islamabad, Peshawar, and Quetta. As many as 64 were killed and 27 injured in these attacks. Meanwhile, of the 13 recorded sectarian clashes during the year, 12 occurred in Kurram and one in Karachi, and resulted in 170 fatalities and 414 injuries. The incidents of sectarian violence predominantly involved Shia and Sunni sectarian groups, as well as rival tribes within Kurram.

The number of people killed in overall conflict-related violent incidents in 2024 (1,950) represented an increase of about 58% from those killed in such incidents in the year before (1,232). Civilian fatalities saw a sharp rise, with 577 reported deaths in 2024—a 91% increase from 302 in 2023. Security forces and law enforcement personnel also experienced a rise in casualties, with 441 martyred in 2024 compared to 405 the year before. The number of militants killed in violent incidents also grew significantly, reaching 932 in 2024, up from 525 in 2023. (See Table 6)

Table 6: Casualties in Overall Violent Incidents in 2024

Category	Killed	Injured
FC	85	178
Militants	932	140
Civilian	577	1,175
Police	152	217
Paramilitaries [unspecified]	3	9
Army	188	122
Levies	13	8
Rangers	0	2
Total	1,950	1,851

1.2 Critical Challenges and Recommendations

1.2.1 Cross-Border Terrorism and Strained Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

The frequency of cross-border incursions and armed clashes involving militants from Afghanistan into Pakistan has increased significantly in recent years. In 2024 alone, 25 border attacks and clashes along the Pak-Afghan border resulted in 143 fatalities, including 136 militants and seven security personnel. This figure does not account for incidents where militants from the Afghan side successfully infiltrated across the border to carry out attacks in areas near or beyond the border.

In September 2024, reports emerged of Afghan territory being used to support attacks inside Pakistan, with allegations of state support. One such instance involved a TTP suicide bomber, Rohullah, who detailed his training at a madrassa in Afghanistan's Dangam province. He named Maulvi Sabghatullah and others as his trainers and described how he was prepared and facilitated to cross into Pakistan for his mission.³ Another report claimed that the Afghan government has provided sanctuary and resources to key TTP leaders, including its emir Noor Wali Mehsud, granting them permanent residence, vehicles, and special arms licenses.⁴ International scrutiny has also focused on the strengthening of extremist groups in Afghanistan since the Taliban's 2021 takeover. Al-Qaeda, for instance, has expanded significantly, establishing nine new terrorist camps in 2024, including munitions depots in the Panjshir Valley.⁵

Similarly, Inspector General of Balochistan, Moazzam Jah Ansari, disclosed in September that terrorists were using advanced weapons left behind by US forces during their withdrawal from Afghanistan to carry out attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. He pointed out that the police lack modern weapons and night vision equipment, putting them at a disadvantage compared to the heavily armed militants.⁶

Independent reports, including those from the UN Security Council (UNSC), also reveal increasing support from the Afghan Taliban to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. This includes shelter, financial aid, and operational assistance. A UN report in July 2024 highlighted the Taliban's financial support for TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud and their facilitation of his fundraising efforts. The Taliban reportedly provided the TTP leaders with guesthouses and movement permits in Kabul.⁷

³ Daily *Jang*, September 4, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/750588%22>

⁴ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), September 2, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202409020114>

⁵ Jack Detsch, "Al Qaeda Expands Its Footprint in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, August 30, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/30/al-qaeda-presence-afghanistan-taliban-resistance-panjshir-cia/?tpcc=editors_picks&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editors%27%20Picks%20-%20008312024&utm_term=editors_picks

⁶ Saleem Shahid, "Terrorists using 'abandoned US arms' in KP, Balochistan," *Dawn*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1859054/terrorists-using-abandoned-us-arms-in-kp-balochistan-ig>

⁷ For details, visit: <<https://amu.tv/117695/>>

A March 2024 report mentioned Mehsud's alleged meeting with Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, though the Taliban denied this claim. The TTP, now the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan with 6,000-6,500 fighters, benefits from the Afghan Taliban's logistical and operational support, as well as assistance from Al Qaeda and its regional affiliate, AQIS. This support includes weapons, training, and facilitation of attacks in Pakistan, often using other names such as Tehrik-e Jihad Pakistan.⁸ The UNSC's July 2024 report also underscored heightened concerns about regional threats from Afghanistan-based groups like the TTP and IS-K.⁹

These reports bolster Pakistan's claims that the Afghan Taliban is unwilling or unable to act against Pakistan-targeting terrorist groups, despite growing international concern.

- ***Deteriorating Pak-Afghan Relations***

The banned TTP's shelter in Afghanistan and its cross-border terrorist activities inside Pakistan remain the central issue in Pakistan's strained relations with the Afghan Taliban. Despite repeated requests, the Taliban appear unwilling to assist Pakistan in tackling this threat, offering only to mediate between Pakistan and the TTP. The TTP, which began regrouping in Pakistan in 2020, gained further strength after the Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021. Taliban-mediated talks between Pakistan and the TTP failed, and the TTP ended a months-long ceasefire in November 2022.

In response, Pakistan's new political and military leadership has shifted towards kinetic actions against militants, aiming to deny them the leverage and time to reorganize through negotiations. These developments underscore the continued challenges in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, exacerbated by the TTP's activities.

During 2024, no significant progress was made in fostering closer ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In January, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman visited Afghanistan, meeting several Taliban officials, including their leader, Mullah Hibatullah. The JUI-F clarified that this six-day visit was conducted in Rehman's individual capacity and not as a representative of the Pakistani government—a stance reiterated by Pakistan's foreign office.¹⁰ Reports suggesting meetings with members of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan were denied by party leaders. The visit elicited mixed reactions, with some considering it a constructive move to establish communication channels with the Taliban leadership. However, it did not lead to any tangible or positive outcomes in terms of advancing constructive bilateral engagement between the two countries.

⁸ Hassan Belal Zaidi, "TTP now largest terror group in Afghanistan", *Dawn*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1845334/ttp-now-largest-terror-group-in-afghanistan>

⁹ UNSC Monitoring Team's 34th report can be downloaded here: <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>

¹⁰ Kalbe Ali, "JUI-F raised voice against refugees' mistreatment, Fazl tells Afghan govt", *Dawn*, January 13, 2024.

After a deadly attack in North Waziristan in March 2024 by the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, Pakistani officials, including President Asif Ali Zardari, issued strong warnings to Afghanistan, with Zardari vowing to avenge the deaths of Pakistani soldiers. This was followed by Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces, reportedly killing at least five people. Pakistan's Foreign Office confirmed the strikes targeted the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, responsible for multiple attacks in Pakistan. Pakistan emphasized its preference for dialogue and cooperation with Kabul but reiterated demands for the Afghan authorities to prevent Afghan soil from being used as a base for terrorism, deny safe havens to the TTP, and hand over its leadership. In response, the Afghan Taliban acknowledged the strikes and launched counterattacks targeting Pakistani security forces along the border.¹¹

Tensions escalated with cross-border clashes, though the intensity of fighting later subsided. The events underscored a shift in Pakistan's stance, signaling that attacks by Afghanistan-based militant groups, such as the TTP, will face direct repercussions. However, aside from militants' incursions and their clashes with Pakistani border security forces, such cross-border strikes from either country were rare throughout the year.

Pakistan has been persistent in its protests before the Afghan government to stop cross-border terrorist violence, but sadly it has not worked. Following the Bannu Cantonment attack in July, which resulted in the martyrdom of eight security personnel and injured several others, Pakistan again lodged a formal protest with the Afghan Taliban regime over the involvement of militants from the Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) Group. The government subsequently banned the HGB group and the Majeed Brigade of the BLA. The HGB group, supported by the TTP, has escalated attacks across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in recent years, mainly in Bannu and North Waziristan. A leaked call, reportedly featuring Noor Wali Mehsud (TTP leader), Ahmed Hussain (aka Ghat Haji), and local commander Saqib Gandapur, revealed explicit plans to target government schools, hospitals, and homes of police and military personnel. Mehsud advised concealing TTP's involvement by framing such attacks as retaliation for the destruction of militants' homes. This audio highlighted the TTP's ongoing strategy of targeting public welfare centers, including schools, and its link to terrorist violence in KP.¹²

Pakistan has also called on the United Nations to initiate a campaign to recover weapons from terrorist groups like the banned TTP. At the UN's Fourth Review Conference on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in June 2024, Ambassador Munir Akram highlighted concerns about terrorist access to sophisticated arms, urging an investigation into their sources and emphasizing member states' responsibility to prevent illicit arms trade. He reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to disarmament initiatives and enhanced legislative measures.¹³

¹¹ Iftikhar A. Khan and Umer Farooq, "Pakistan ends restraint, bombs militant bases in Afghanistan," *Dawn*, March 19, 2024.

¹² "TTP chief's leaked call reveals nefarious terror plans in Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, July 19, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2481078/ttp-chiefs-leaked-call-reveals-nefarious-terror-plans-in-pakistan>

¹³ "Pakistan seeks UN efforts to disarm TTP," *Dawn*, June 20, 2024.

Separately, at the Doha-III conference on June 30, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan, Asif Ali Durrani, urged the Afghan interim government to act against the TTP and other militants. Discussions also included the Trans-Afghan Railway project connecting South and Central Asia, international engagement with Afghanistan, and the unfreezing of Afghan assets. Pakistan raised concerns about Afghan refugees, advocating for conditions that would enable their return.¹⁴ On July 1, Pakistani and Afghan officials met to address tensions following Pakistan's announcement of a new operation against the TTP, underscoring the ongoing challenges in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.¹⁵

In August, the Taliban once again expressed willingness to mediate between Pakistan and the TTP if both parties request it, but Pakistan rejected this offer, deeming it an insult to victims of TTP terrorism. While the Taliban facilitated previous talks that failed, Pakistan has since refused further negotiations with the TTP, urging the Taliban to act against the group instead. However, the Taliban repeatedly terms the TTP as Pakistan's internal problem, albeit offering mediation in negotiations.

Most recently, in December 2024, the Foreign Office has emphasized that counterterrorism remains a key focus in Pakistan's discussions with Afghanistan, particularly regarding threats from terror groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which operate from within Afghanistan.¹⁶ The statement came after Pakistan's chargé d'affaires in Kabul, Obaid Nizamani, met with the Taliban's Defence Minister, Mullah Yaqoob, to discuss bilateral cooperation. Relations between Pakistan and the Taliban administration have been strained due to TTP attacks on Pakistan, and Islamabad has repeatedly urged the Afghan Taliban to act against the group. Some reports suggested that the Afghan Taliban might be relocating TTP fighters and their families to Ghazni province, but this remains unconfirmed.¹⁷

About a week later, Pakistan's Foreign Office underscored Pakistan's commitment to resolving issues with Afghanistan through dialogue. At a weekly media briefing, spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch highlighted recent high-level meetings as an indication of Pakistan's interest in finding constructive solutions to concerns, including serious issues affecting bilateral relations. Notably, meetings between Afghan and Pakistani officials, such as Deputy PM Ishaq Dar's discussion with Afghan chargé d'affaires Sardar Ahmad Shakeeb and Pakistan's chargé d'affaires in Kabul Obaid Nizamani's meeting with Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, signal a renewed engagement following tensions over allegations of Taliban harboring TTP militants in Afghanistan.¹⁸

Apart from March 2024 cross-border strikes cited earlier, Pakistani fighter jets bombed camps of the banned TTP in Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province on the night of December 24.

¹⁴ Tahir Khan, "Afghan Taliban meet Pakistani officials in Doha, terming meeting 'good'," *Dawn*, July 2, 2024.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Dawn*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1876923/counterterrorism-remains-central-to-talks-with-afghanistan-fo>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Dawn*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1878420/pakistan-reaffirms-commitment-to-dialogue-with-afghanistan>

More than 71 militants, including key commanders, were reportedly killed, and four important centers, including a suicide jacket factory, were destroyed. The Afghan Ministry of Defense said 46 civilians were killed. TTP camps in the Murgha and Laman areas of Bernal district were targeted, including one that was used by Sher Zaman alias Mukhlis Yar, Commander Abu Hamza, Commander Akhtar Muhammad and the head of TTP's media arm, Umar Media.¹⁹

The airstrikes followed a terrorist attack in South Waziristan on the night of December 24 that martyred 16 soldiers of Pakistan army. Few days after the strikes, Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) emphasized the presence of terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan and vowed to dismantle these networks.²⁰ Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif reiterated Pakistan's demand for the Afghan regime to stop TTP activities against Pakistan, labeling it a critical red line. While expressing willingness to hold dialogue with Kabul, he emphasized that negotiations cannot coexist with permissive policies towards the TTP.²¹

- ***The Refugee Issue***

Pakistan has undertaken several measures concerning Afghan refugees and illegal immigrants, reflecting the complexity of managing a large refugee population amid strained bilateral relations with Afghanistan.

By January 2024, Pakistan updated the biometric data of 1.45 million registered Afghan refugees through smart identity cards while repatriating 541,210 illegal immigrants as part of its deportation drive. Also, the caretaker federal government extended the stay of 1.3 million illegal Afghan refugees until March 2024, following a request from Afghanistan.²²

The second phase of the repatriation initiative began later, aiming to return nearly one million documented Afghan refugees. With 2.18 million documented Afghan refugees in Pakistan and an additional 600,000-800,000 undocumented individuals entering after the Taliban's 2021 resurgence, this initiative highlights the challenges of balancing humanitarian concerns and security issues.²³

Following the UNHCR's request to halt repatriation, Pakistan extended the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards for 1.45 million refugees until June 2025.²⁴

¹⁹ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), December 25, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202412250101>; Daily *Jang* (Urdu), December 26, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/819420>

²⁰ For details, visit: < <https://www.dawn.com/news/1881429/banned-outfits-provided-sanctuaries-support-on-afghan-territory-ispr>>

²¹ Syed Irfan Raza, "Talks cannot go hand in hand with backing for terrorists, OM Shehbaz tells Kabul," *Dawn*, December 28, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1881519/talks-cannot-go-hand-in-hand-with-backing-for-terrorists-pm-shehbaz-tells-kabul>

²² Ariana News, February 4, 2024, <https://www.ariananews.af/pakistan-extends-stay-of-1-3-million-afghan-refugees>

²³ Ismail Khan, "Second phase of Afghan repatriation in the works," *Dawn*, March 25, 2024.

²⁴ Syed Irfan Raza, "'Legal' Afghans allowed to stay for another year," *Dawn*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1845147/legal-afghans-allowed-to-stay-for-another-year>

Amid these efforts, militants' infiltration from Afghanistan remained a serious concern, with the Pakistani military urging the Taliban to ensure effective border management. Concerns also grew over the deportation drive potentially enabling militant groups to recruit vulnerable refugees.

While Pakistan maintains that illegal foreigners should return home, the federal government faces pressure from provincial leaders, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Chief Minister, to negotiate with the TTP for regional peace. Accusations of Afghanistan harboring Pakistani militants have further strained relations, which the Taliban government denies.

- ***Recommendations***

PIPS believes that by adopting the following measures, Pakistan can work toward resolving its security challenges, improving bilateral relations with Afghanistan and fostering stability in the region.

- While Pakistan's relations with the Taliban-led Afghan administration remain tense, it is unlikely that the banned TTP can be fully constrained from attacking Pakistan. Although kinetic actions and enhanced surveillance by security forces may reduce or prevent some attacks, the root cause—shelter and support available to the TTP within Afghanistan—must be addressed to achieve long-term security.
- Pakistan needs to focus on improving its deteriorating relations with Afghanistan by initiating practical, sustained state-to-state engagement. The Afghan Taliban's interim government has largely remained unresponsive regarding the TTP issue, while Pakistan has limited its interactions to a security-focused approach. To build trust, Pakistan must expand its engagement beyond security matters to address key concerns such as:
 - ⇒ Border security and management.
 - ⇒ Cross-border violence by groups operating from Afghanistan.
 - ⇒ Afghan refugees in Pakistan and their repatriation.
 - ⇒ Cross-border movement and visa issues.
 - ⇒ Enhanced bilateral dialogue, trade and cooperation.
- Talks with Afghanistan may not be limited to one-off delegations. A structured, ongoing dialogue covering all contentious issues is essential. Pakistan must aim to create a framework for regular communication to reduce mistrust and foster long-term collaboration.
- Pakistan shall make its border management policies more people-friendly to build goodwill among the Afghan population. Facilitating cross-border movement, trade, and humanitarian engagement will help improve public perceptions and strengthen ties at the grassroots level.
- The ultimate solution to bilateral issues lies in meaningful engagement with the Taliban-led interim government in Kabul. Pakistan's Afghan policy should be led by its civilian government with oversight and direction from parliament. Security agencies should provide input, but policy ownership must rest with civilian leadership to ensure a holistic and balanced approach.

1.2.2 Growing Terrorist Threat & Insecurity

The year 2024 has witnessed a perturbing rise in both the frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks. After a gradual decline in terrorist violence since 2014-15, the trend began reversing following the Taliban's 2021 capture of Kabul. By 2024, the number of attacks has reached levels comparable to the security situation in 2015 or before. If this trajectory persists, the security landscape could regress to the pre-APS era. However, a significant difference remains: unlike the period before 2014, terrorists no longer control specific territories inside Pakistan. Yet, the prevailing insecurity in parts of KP and Balochistan is alarming.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and its affiliates—including the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, local Taliban factions, and Lashkar-e-Islam—continue to dominate the terrorist landscape. Meanwhile, Baloch insurgent groups have escalated attacks in Balochistan and Karachi. The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has also launched notable attacks in parts of KP and Balochistan. These groups have consistently carried out terrorist operations, with occasional high-impact incidents. In 2024, they have simultaneously worked to consolidate and expand their influence across various regions.

At the start of 2024, reports indicated that militants had begun regrouping across various areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, marked by a surge in attacks in multiple districts. In January, residents of southern and other KP districts voiced alarm over the growing presence of militants, citing frequent encounters and sightings in their neighborhoods. On January 2, 2024, the Ministry of Interior informed the upper house of parliament that the continuous influx of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members—along with their recruitment, training, and deployment of suicide bombers—into KP's merged districts posed a significant threat. In a written statement during a parliamentary question hour, the ministry underscored the TTP's reorganization and operational expansion during the 2022 peace talks, which has led to a notable increase in militant activity. The statement also highlighted concerns regarding the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), also known as Daesh. The group is reportedly attempting to establish a foothold in Pakistan and has resorted to terrorist activities targeting Shia Muslims and other religious minority communities in an effort to incite sectarian violence.²⁵

Since then, the threat from the TTP and its affiliates, as well as Baloch insurgent groups, has gradually increased. This rise has been most evident in KP and Balochistan, with occasional attacks also occurring in parts of Punjab and Karachi.

- ***Recommendations***

To address the challenges posed by the deteriorating internal security situation, PIPS offers the following recommendations:

- Stick to the ongoing zero-tolerance policy towards terrorist groups with no negotiations unless they renounce violence.

²⁵ Iftikhar A. Khan, "TTP influx continues in merged districts, Senate told," *Dawn*, January 3, 2024.

- Develop and implement mechanisms for the National Extremism and Security Policies and the revised National Action Plan (NAP), with annual reviews and parliamentary oversight for transparency and adaptability.
- Increase the capacity and role of civilian law enforcement agencies, especially the police Counter-Terrorism Departments (CTDs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, to better address terrorist threats through community-rooted structures.
- Counter the unpredictable and high-impact attacks by Baloch insurgent groups (e.g., BLA, BLF, BRAS) with heightened vigilance and coordinated efforts among security and law enforcement agencies.
- Initiate comprehensive dialogue with local communities and representatives of political and social groups, particularly in Balochistan and KP, to isolate militants and gain community trust and support for counterterrorism efforts.
- Ensure that legal frameworks and fundamental rights are upheld when addressing insurgency or terrorism so that the state and its institutions retain their legitimacy and public trust.

1.2.3 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa & Balochistan: Hotspots of Militancy and Insurgency

Over 95 percent of terrorist attacks recorded in Pakistan in 2024 were concentrated in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The data highlights a troubling expansion of militant influence in these regions, which have become pivotal to their operations. In addition, 10 attacks occurred in Karachi and about a dozen in various parts of Punjab. This pattern reflects a deliberate strategy by militants to destabilize areas offering greater operational flexibility due to geographical or socio-political factors.

While attacks in Punjab and Sindh were fewer, they underscore efforts by militant groups to expand beyond their traditional strongholds. For instance, the Balochistan Liberation Army's (BLA) deadly vehicle-borne suicide attack targeting Chinese nationals in Karachi demonstrates a focused strategy to disrupt vital economic partnerships.

Simultaneously, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants are reportedly attempting to extend their reach into Balochistan's Pashtun belt and parts of Punjab, particularly districts bordering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as Mianwali. This signals a strategic effort to broaden their operational footprint and influence across the country.

- ***KP's Mounting Terrorism Challenge***

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, militants have extended their early footholds from tribal and southern districts to strengthen their positions and operational capabilities across almost all regions of the province. Terrorist attacks were reported across nearly all districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024. However, the six southern districts—DI Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, Tank, and the twin Waziristans—along with Bajaur, Kurram, the provincial capital Peshawar, and neighboring Khyber bore the brunt of these incidents.

While the banned TTP remains a key perpetrator of terrorist violence in southern and other districts of the province, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group has emerged as a significant threat in Bannu and parts of Waziristan. A notable incident was the group's November attack on the Mali Khel check-post in Bannu, where 12 soldiers were martyred. Over the past year, the group has claimed responsibility for multiple attacks, including suicide bombings, in Bannu and Waziristan.

Similarly, the Lashkar-e-Islam and TTP nexus in Khyber district has exacerbated the terrorism situation in the district. Local residents have been voicing growing concerns over the increased presence and movements of militants in Khyber, which shares a border with the provincial capital, Peshawar. In October, reports revealed that the TTP and Lashkar-i-Islam continue to wield influence in parts of the Tirah Valley, demanding a share of profits from local narcotics dealers involved in cannabis sales. The valley, renowned for its cannabis and poppy cultivation, depends heavily on these crops for livelihoods. Despite ongoing intelligence-based operations since August, militants remain active in the rugged, forested terrain. Armed groups have been crossing into Tirah from Afghanistan to claim their "share," a practice persisting since before the military operations of 2012.²⁶

At the end of December, security forces launched a major operation in the Tirah Valley following recommendations from the Apex Committee meeting.

Meanwhile, IS-K remained highly active in Bajaur, a region bordering Afghanistan's Kunar province and part of the Salafist belt. The group was suspected of involvement in the targeted killings of several religious scholars, including members of JUI-F, on suspicion of their affiliation with the Taliban.

Adding to the challenges, Pakistan's polio vaccination efforts in the province faced severe disruptions. The campaign was suspended in certain districts due to escalating attacks on health workers amidst the deteriorating security situation.

Militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have primarily targeted law enforcement personnel, tribal elders, and government officials, including judges. These attacks aim to weaken the administration by undermining government officials and tribal elders, while also crippling law enforcement by targeting police. Such strategies are likely intended to facilitate militant operations in the region.

- ***Protests/ Rallies and Other Anti-Militancy Responses in KP***

As militants attempt to regroup and resort to violence in parts of KP, local people have been actively expressing their fears and desire for peace in various ways. Protests that began several months ago, following the Taliban's resurgence in Swat and other areas, have continued steadily, reflecting ongoing public unrest. Local residents, alongside social and political

²⁶ *Dawn*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1862688/militants-demand-share-in-cannabis-income-of-tirah-drug-dealers>

groups, have been holding rallies, gatherings, and jirgas to voice their opposition to the reemergence of terrorist groups and escalating violence. Additionally, they have openly expressed mistrust toward the government and security forces, criticizing their inability to ensure security.

In October, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) convened a grand jirga, presenting a 22-point resolution demanding the withdrawal of both militant groups and military forces from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The three-day event, supported by the provincial government, condemned decades of militancy and anti-terror operations that have displaced millions. The Pakhtun Qami Jirga issued a two-month ultimatum for militant groups and military forces to vacate the province. The federal government had imposed a ban on the PTM on October 6, citing threats to national peace and security.²⁷

Simultaneously, peace rallies under the “Pakhtun Ulasi Pashoon” banner were held across the province in support of the jirga’s resolutions. Participants in districts like Peshawar, Swat, and South Waziristan criticized violence perpetrated by both militants and security forces, highlighting issues such as forced disappearances and insecurity. In Swat, local leaders emphasized the urgent need for peace and justice.²⁸

In September, police in Bajaur and Lakki Marwat protested against targeted killings, demanding better protection and operational autonomy. Lakki Marwat police, after five officers were killed, staged sit-ins and blocked major roads, eventually securing concessions, including the confinement of security forces to their camps. Similarly, Bajaur police boycotted duties, reflecting their growing frustration with ongoing violence.²⁹

Earlier, widespread protests and rallies were held across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in July, reflecting public frustration with escalating violence and opposition to proposed military operations. On July 7, the PTM staged a protest in Swabi against terrorism, while tribesmen in Lakki Marwat rallied for peace, urging the government to address terrorism through intelligence-based operations rather than broad military action. Similarly, youth in Torghar opposed the proposed Azm-i-Istehkam military operation, fearing mass displacement.³⁰

Separately, in Bannu, unrest escalated during a large protest rally where casualties occurred, reportedly due to security forces firing on protesters demanding peace and opposing the Azm-i-Istehkam operation. Protesters included supporters of PTM, JUI-F, and civil society members. Subsequently, the KP government agreed with the Bannu Aman Jirga to convene a

²⁷ For details, see: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1865183>

²⁸ "Peace rallies across KP endorse PTM's Khyber jirga decisions," *Dawn*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1866527/peace-rallies-across-kp-endorse-ptms-khyber-jirga-decisions>

²⁹ *Daily Jang*, September 12, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/755240>

³⁰ Details can be seen here: < <https://www.dawn.com/news/1844559/thousands-pour-onto-roads-in-lakki-marwat-for-peace> >

provincial apex committee meeting to address security issues, leading to a crackdown on armed suspects in Bannu.³¹

Later in the month, tens of thousands marched in Bannu, Bajaur, and Waziristan, carrying white flags symbolizing peace. A large rally in Bajaur emphasized maintaining peace and improving law and order in the wake of rising militancy. Participants condemned violence and called on authorities to ensure residents' safety, dedicating the rally to victims of past terrorist attacks.³²

- ***Inter-Tribal and Sectarian Challenges in Kurram***

Kurram is currently plagued by sectarian clashes between rival Sunni and Shia tribes, with violent groups from both sides intensifying the ongoing wave of violence. The recent surge in clashes began with a deadly attack on passenger buses on November 21, which claimed the lives of around 50 people, predominantly Shia.

Experts stress the need for urgent government intervention to analyze and address the root causes of the conflict. Speculation has also surfaced regarding the involvement of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has been increasingly active in Lower Kurram, further heightening fears among local residents. However, government officials largely attribute the violence to land disputes,³³ downplaying the significant role of sectarian tensions despite clear indications to the contrary.

The district is already burdened with long-standing sectarian and inter-tribal tensions, with certain sectarian groups reportedly attempting to regroup in the area. Additionally, the infiltration of Taliban militants from Afghanistan exacerbates Kurram's vulnerability to violence. While security forces remain focused on counterterrorism operations in southern KP districts, Kurram poses a growing challenge to the government's strategy.

Although the district has a history of resisting militant support, the entrenched sectarian divisions and cross-border militant activities present significant hurdles. Without decisive action, Kurram may emerge as a new flashpoint in the region's security landscape.

- ***Growing Unrest and Insurgency in Balochistan***

Baloch insurgent groups, particularly the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), have escalated their attacks in Balochistan, marking a significant increase in both frequency and intensity over the past several months. Concurrently, social unrest has been growing, manifesting in the form of social movements organizing protests, sit-ins, and long marches.

³¹ *Friday Times*, July 20, 2024, <https://thefridaytimes.com/20-Jul-2024/bannu-peace-rally-disrupted-after-participant-killed>

³² For more details, visit: <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1849059/participants-of-mammoth-rally-vow-to-maintain-peace-in-bajaur>>

³³ Javed Hussain, "39 killed in Kurram convoy bloodbath," *Dawn*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874037/39-killed-in-kurram-convoy-bloodbath#:~:text=citing%20sectarian%20sensitivities.,Speculation,-also%20surrounds%20the>

The BLA, along with the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), has increasingly targeted security forces, with the Majeed Brigade of the BLA—banned by the government in July—carrying out numerous high-impact attacks. These coordinated assaults have primarily targeted the army, Frontier Corps (FC), and police. Additionally, the insurgents have focused on Chinese interests, CPEC projects, perceived collaborators of security forces, and non-Baloch workers.

At the same time, militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) have expanded their presence in Balochistan, further increasing the frequency and severity of attacks.

However, there has been a notable evolution in the operational strategy and capabilities of Baloch insurgent groups. The BLA, in particular, has transitioned from conducting low-intensity, small-scale attacks several years ago to executing more sophisticated and high-profile operations today. This shift underscores the urgent need for a revised and comprehensive approach by the Pakistani state to effectively counter the growing threat posed by these insurgent groups.

In 2024, while security forces remained the primary target of Baloch insurgent groups, attacks on non-Baloch workers and settlers, particularly individuals from Punjab, intensified. One of the most harrowing incidents occurred in the Rarasham area of Musakhel district, near the Balochistan-Punjab border, in August 2024. According to police reports, at least 23 individuals were forcibly taken from their vehicles, identified as Punjabi migrant workers, and subsequently executed.

These attacks represent a calculated effort by Baloch insurgents to exacerbate tensions between Balochistan and Punjab. The ethno-nationalist groups thrive on perpetuating hostility toward Punjab, which they perceive as exploiting Balochistan's resources. Additionally, insurgents often view Punjabis as collaborators with the state, suspecting them of being agents or spies for security forces.

In addressing this threat, the government must exercise extreme caution, ensuring a clear distinction between the Baloch population and insurgent groups. A heavy-handed approach risks further alienating the local populace, potentially fueling resentment and hindering efforts to establish peace in the region.

In February, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) gained the opportunity to form the provincial government in Balochistan, raising hopes for improved relations between the province and the central government, as well as the initiation of a reconciliation process. Mir Sarfraz Bugti, who stepped down as the caretaker interior minister, assumed the role of Chief Minister and is now associated with the PPP. His bid for the position was supported by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), another major party in the provincial assembly. With these two parties also leading the federal government, many anticipated a potential thaw in center-province relations.

Upon taking office, Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti emphasized the importance of fostering reconciliation, echoing the Pakistan People's Party's long-standing commitment to this policy. He highlighted the need for dialogue with opposition parties to drive development and address Balochistan's pressing challenges. While he refrained from explicitly discussing engagement with Baloch insurgent leaders, he urged those "sitting on the mountains"—a reference to insurgents—to reintegrate into the mainstream.

Despite these initial promises, Bugti's statements have yet to translate into concrete actions or meaningful steps toward reconciliation. The optimism surrounding his appointment has so far yielded little progress in addressing the province's longstanding issues.

Baloch nationalist political parties, particularly the National Party led by Dr. Malik Baloch and the Balochistan National Party (BNP) led by the Mengals, have seen a decline in confidence from Baloch insurgent groups in recent years. Despite this, they continue to act as a vital bridge between the state and the insurgents. However, these parties performed poorly in the February 8 general elections, raising concerns about the fairness of the electoral process. A key demand of the Baloch people remains the holding of free and fair elections in the province, ensuring that genuine leaders have the opportunity to govern.

Baloch insurgent groups have increasingly escalated their attacks while adeptly exploiting the growing unrest and public protests in Balochistan. They capitalize on the prevailing sense of victimhood and grievances among the local population to garner recruits and public support. In recent years, these groups have actively expressed sympathy toward the families of missing persons in Balochistan, leveraging longstanding grievances against the central government to advance their cause. This tactic not only strengthens their narrative but also highlights the unresolved discontent and deep-seated issues within the region. By aligning themselves with the plight of the families of missing persons, the insurgents aim to bolster their legitimacy and position themselves as defenders of Baloch rights and autonomy.

External factors have also played a role in intensifying the insurgency in Balochistan. Allegations of foreign involvement, particularly from neighboring countries, in providing support and arms to insurgent groups have further complicated the situation. This external influence has fueled the conflict and made it increasingly challenging for the Pakistani government to address the root causes of the insurgency effectively.

- ***Recommendations***

- Pakistan must develop comprehensive and distinct counterterrorism and counter-insurgency strategies tailored specifically for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. These strategies should include well-defined implementation mechanisms and be seamlessly aligned with national extremism and security policies, as well as the revised National Action Plan. Furthermore, sustained efforts are essential to execute these measures effectively. This requires the active engagement and collaboration of all relevant stakeholders.
- As previously mentioned, there is a need to enhance the capacity and role of civilian law enforcement agencies. These agencies, being closely connected to the community, benefit from

greater operational freedom due to their frequent interactions and established trust with the people. To strengthen their effectiveness, they should be equipped with the necessary confidence, resources, equipment, and training.

- While security forces make significant sacrifices to combat the terrorist threat, two critical factors are essential for achieving lasting success. First, building trust with local communities in both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces is paramount. Second, given that both provinces share borders with Afghanistan, it is imperative to establish a constructive counterterrorism framework with the Afghan government or, at the very least, foster functional relations to address border insecurity and cross-border incursions effectively.
- In general, Pakistan requires to implement critical shifts in its foreign policy. Establishing peace with immediate neighbors, including Afghanistan, India and Iran, would allow the government to allocate greater resources to essential social services, such as health and education, while also enhancing governance.
- The KP provincial government and the federal government must strengthen cooperation and dialogue to effectively counter terrorism and enhance security in the province. The December meeting of the Apex Committee serves as a positive example, where both governments reached significant decisions, particularly concerning the security situation in Kurram district. Similar collaboration is essential to accelerate the reform process in the former FATA districts, which require greater funding and attention. In these areas, militants and social movements have been exploiting ongoing governance gaps and local grievances, underscoring the urgency for concerted action.
- Resolving the conflict in Balochistan requires comprehensive political dialogue, socio-economic reforms, and efforts to address grievances and rebuild trust. Winning public trust is crucial to reducing the appeal of insurgent ideologies among the Baloch people. The issue of enforced disappearances, often exploited by insurgents to gain support and recruits, must be addressed through a lawful and amicable policy to counter militant narratives effectively.
- Pakistan must introduce employment opportunities for youth to improve their living conditions and prevent them from being drawn toward militancy and insurgency. It is imperative to conduct extensive deradicalization initiatives, including seminars, campaigns, and training programs, across all provinces to counter radical ideologies among the youth effectively.

1.2.4 The BLA: An Emerging Security Threat on Par with the TTP

In 2024, the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) carried out several high-profile terrorist attacks targeting security forces, non-Baloch workers, miners, and Chinese nationals. The BLA's increased operational capabilities, including the use of suicide bombers and coordinated gun-and-bomb fedayeen assaults, indicate access to steady financial resources, advanced training facilities, and effective recruitment mechanisms.

The attacks by the banned TTP killed about 300 people in 2024. Meanwhile, the BLA-orchestrated attacks caused 225 fatalities during the year, a figure comparable to TTP-led terrorism.

The group began the year with a coordinated gun-and-bomb assault in the Mach area of Bolan, targeting security and law enforcement personnel across multiple locations. In April, the group carried out a major attack, killing nine individuals from central Punjab who were attempting to reach Europe via Iran. BLA gunmen abducted the victims from a Taftan-bound bus due to their ethnicity and later disposed of their bodies under a bridge in the hilly region of Nushki.

On August 26, coinciding with the death anniversary of Baloch chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti, the group launched attacks across more than seven districts of Balochistan, targeting three main categories: 1) security forces, 2) non-Baloch Pakistanis, particularly those from Punjab, and 3) national infrastructure such as railway bridges and gas pipelines. Several aspects of these attacks merit close examination.

Firstly, the involvement of several dozen militants across various locations indicates that these were well-planned and coordinated assaults. This suggests the BLA has a considerable number of militants ready to participate in such operations.

Secondly, the militants were seen using sophisticated weaponry and openly displaying these arms on roads and streets before the attacks. This development marks an escalation in the group's capability, especially in conducting high-impact operations like vehicle-borne suicide bombings. The destruction of the Mach railway bridge, where entire sections were obliterated, signals the BLA's growing expertise in acquiring and deploying advanced explosives, in contrast to the locally made bombs they previously relied on.

Thirdly, while the BLA has historically targeted non-Baloch people, primarily Punjabis and Sindhis, it has now adopted a new tactic of stopping passenger buses and trucks on major highways and executing Punjabis after verifying their identity through ID cards. This strategy could exacerbate tensions between the province and the central government, which seems to be one of the group's objectives.

Finally, the BLA continues to position itself as the defender of Baloch interests, frequently issuing statements that highlight grievances such as enforced disappearances and the perceived exploitation of resources. Analysts warn that as the Baloch people lose faith in the political process, groups like the BLA are likely to gain more support. To isolate the BLA and similar factions from the conflict, the government must create political and social spaces for the Baloch people.

Apart from security forces and non-Baloch workers, CPEC-related projects and Chinese nationals have been a major target of the BLA attacks. In October, the media wing "Hakkal" of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) released a photo of its Majeed Brigade suicide attacker, Shah Fahad, also known as Aftab, who carried out the vehicle-borne suicide blast near the Karachi Airport killing four people including three Chinese engineers.

The Majeed Brigade is a highly trained suicide unit that has carried out approximately a dozen large-scale suicide attacks since 2018 in Karachi, Gwadar, Turbat, Panjgur, Nushki, and Bolan,

involving numerous suicide fighters. Their primary targets include key military installations of the Pakistani army, economic interests, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and international investors in Balochistan, particularly those from China.

Since 2017, the BLA has conducted 10 terrorist attacks on Chinese individuals and interests in Pakistan, including CPEC workers and project sites. At least four of these attacks took place in Karachi, such as the 2018 assault on the Chinese consulate, the 2022 attack on the Chinese teachers at Confucius Institute, Karachi University, and the October 6 blast near Karachi airport.³⁴

The timing of the Karachi airport attack was particularly significant, occurring just 10 days before Pakistan was set to host the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting, with world leaders, including the Chinese premier, expected to attend. The BLA often aims to draw international attention through its attacks, targeting political symbols, foreign nationals, and events of global importance.

- ***Recommendations***

- There is a critical need to isolate the BLA from the broader Baloch population. This can be achieved through a comprehensive political and socioeconomic program aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the Baloch people. Such an initiative would not only undercut the group's support base but also contribute to long-term peace and stability in the region.
- There is a pressing need to investigate the sources of the BLA's training, weaponry, and funding. In this context, Pakistan should engage more constructively with its neighbors, particularly Afghanistan and Iran, to develop a joint counterterrorism and border security strategy.
- 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 the foreigners working on development or other projects and local populations. Government of Balochistan and development-related departments/authorities need to reach out to people in the province to address the concerns of general public, educated youth and the civil society.
- There is an urgent need of investing in the health and education sector in Balochistan. Both sectors are in shambles, as the hospitals are out of medicines and schools without teachers. Investing only in security will be counterproductive to solving the Balochistan conundrum, which needs a holistic approach.

1.2.5 National Security and Counterterrorism & Counter Violent Extremism Approaches

PIPS recommends the following measures to enhance the frameworks and implementation of the revised NAP, as well as national security and CT/CVE policies, making them more effective and actionable.

³⁴ Data and details are sourced from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents: <www.pakpips.com/app/database>

- Despite numerous challenges, democracy in Pakistan has endured, reflecting the people's aspirations and steadfast belief in a democratic political system. Therefore, the cornerstone of national security and counter-terrorism strategies in Pakistan must be a robust democratic framework, upheld through free and fair elections, the supremacy of parliament, and adherence to the constitution.
- The National Action Plan (NAP) and counterterrorism framework shall be "civilianized," with the parliament playing a leading role in its implementation and oversight. The elected representatives of the people, as well as political parties, must articulate their vision for addressing the challenges facing Pakistan and should present their ideas for countering extremism and terrorism at the parliament.
- Modernize and reform police, strengthen its investigation branches, reform the Evidence Act and enhance police's operational autonomy.
- Devise well-defined, realistic, and achievable plans/objectives with effective monitoring and evaluation systems against individual NAP goals/clauses. Monitoring and evaluation be done using clearly defined and concrete performance indicators, otherwise NAP would continue to be judged subjectively on the basis of varying perceptions.
- Strengthen NACTA; the prime minister may take ownership of NAP and use the NACTA platform to regularly review the status of and progress on NAP provisions.
 - Inter-Provincial Coordination Ministry (IPCM) be activated to work along with NACTA for better coordination and results.
- Reform the criminal justice system with much greater urgency and focus as this particular NAP action has practically remained a nonstarter so far.
 - The government shall review and refine key definitions in the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 in consultation with relevant stakeholders, which will also contribute to avoiding delays in prosecution.
 - Afford rigorous training and sensitization to the ATC judges in handling terrorism cases.
 - Strengthen ATCs through infrastructural uplift and capacity building.
- Develop and run an effective de-radicalization and rehabilitation program, led by civilians that also engages or partner with civil society organizations.
- Build and promote counter-narratives, including on social media platforms.
 - The Paigham-e-Pakistan can be a significant ideological response to the extremist ideologies; the message be disseminated widely and transformed into national narrative.
 - Categorization of militants into pro-state and anti-state must end.
 - Curb the access of militant/jihadist and sectarian groups to cyberspace and other means of communications without misuse of related laws, with a view to evade loss of public trust and confidence in state institutions.
- Comprehensive educational reforms are needed, aiming at removal of hateful, discriminatory, and insensitive contents from the textbooks and inclusion of more scientific inquiry, debate, and critical thinking and reasoning. There is also a need to increase in education budget to improve the quality of education.
- It is utmost essential to include women in all walks of life and protect their social, political, and economic rights; the Parliament needs to rectify laws that discriminate against women in any shape or form. Women should also be included in efforts meant to CVE as the UN resolution 1325 acknowledges the role of women in the promotion of peace and security.
- While acknowledging the bulging youth population, all political parties also need to empower the youth by providing them space and platform for free expression and creativity as well as leadership.

1.2.6 Reforms in Ex-FATA or Merged Tribal Districts

The merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, previously known as FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), are once again becoming hotspots for terrorist violence. This resurgence has intensified since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, which led to an increase in attacks by Pakistan Taliban militants. Districts in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border are particularly vulnerable, as suggested by the frequency of attacks and local responses such as anti-militant protests and rallies.

In November 2024, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government sent a letter to the federal government expressing concerns over the alleged exclusion of the province's merged districts from the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award. KP's Finance Minister emphasized that despite the constitutional requirement for the NFC to act as a consultative forum under the 18th Amendment, it has not been implemented to include the merged tribal districts. These districts, which joined KP to integrate into the national structure, have been underfunded since the 7th NFC Award, receiving less financial support than even other underdeveloped areas such as Balochistan.

With KP already facing financial constraints, it is struggling to support these historically deprived districts, particularly as promised federal funding and the 10-year development plan have yet to materialize. The KP government has called for an immediate amendment to the 7th NFC Award, an urgent NFC meeting, and recognition of KP's expanded geography and population under the 25th Amendment.³⁵

PIPS emphasizes that accelerating the reform and governance process, as well as rehabilitating the citizens of the former FATA, requires the following actions:

- Enhance the economic and infrastructure development of this strategically critical area.
- Schools, colleges, and universities should be built on modern footings to educate the youth of tribal areas in modern arts and sciences. Along with education, employment opportunities should be introduced to prevent the youth of tribal districts from turning to illicit means of earning their livelihoods.
- Bring back the internally displaced persons and rehabilitate them.
- Speed up the process of political, administrative, and judicial reforms in tribal districts.
- Police in the tribal areas, which is at the frontline of fighting the resurgent TTP and other militant groups, should be incentivized and equipped with the latest weapons to better counter terrorism and the loss of precious police life is reduced.

1.2.7 The Madrassa Challenge

The progress on registration and regulation of religious seminaries in Pakistan has been slow. Efforts to reform and regularize madrassas, including curriculum changes and registration, have not led to significant improvements in their environment or mindset. Madrassas in

³⁵ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), November 8, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/latest/377895/>

Pakistan are affiliated with five sectarian boards and contribute to sectarian thinking among students. Despite the launch of National Action Plan and increased surveillance, reform efforts have been inconsistent. In 2019, an MoU was signed to address madrassa reform, leading to the establishment of the Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE) and regional offices, but few madrassas have registered with the government.

In 2024, the Societies Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 sparked political tension when President Asif Ali Zardari withheld approval due to “technical objections.” The bill aims to amend Article 21 of the Societies Registration Act of 1860, transferring madrassa oversight from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Industries. This proposal raised significant concerns about its potential impact on Pakistan’s international standing as well as fears of increased sectarianism and destabilization.

The bill was part of a political bargain to secure Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl’s (JUI-F) support for the 26th Constitutional Amendment, passing both the Senate and National Assembly by October 21. On October 28, President Zardari outlined eight objections and advised Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to reassess the bill's implications for Pakistan's global reputation. While the government defends the president’s stance, JUI-F and the Ittehad Tanzeemat-i-Madaris Pakistan threaten protests, escalating tensions further.

The bill proposes allowing seminaries to register as charities rather than educational institutions, shifting their oversight from the Directorate General of Religious Education to the Ministry of Industries. This change would reduce financial scrutiny, enabling seminaries to receive donations and qualify for tax exemptions. However, this raises serious concerns for the President and government, as the lack of financial transparency could potentially facilitate terror financing, a recurring issue in the past. Such risks could invite international sanctions, particularly from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), further complicating Pakistan's global standing.

President Zardari's reservations about the Societies Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024, including concerns over the definition of madrassas, Pakistan's international standing, the proliferation of seminaries, and sectarianism, have drawn backlash from religious groups and the Ittehad Tanzeemat-i-Madaris Pakistan. JUI-F leader Maulana Fazl Ur Rehman questioned why seminaries should operate under the Ministry of Education when other private organizations fall under the Ministry of Industries. He also criticized the government for failing to honor agreements and warned that further changes to the bill could lead to public protests.

On December 25, Senator Murtaza responded to Pakistan Ulema Council Chairman Tahir Ashrafi’s remarks by suggesting another amendment. This proposed amendment would give madrassas the discretion to register either under the Ministry of Education or the Societies Registration Act, offering them greater autonomy in choosing their oversight body.

On December 27, prominent digital media outlets report that the government, JUI-F, and other stakeholders have reached an agreement, and a new ordinance will be issued following the notification of the Societies Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024.

After over a month of controversy regarding the registration of seminaries, President Asif Ali Zardari signed the Societies Registration (Amendment) Act 2024 into law. This was promptly followed by the promulgation of the Societies Registration (Amendment) Ordinance, which further amended the act passed by parliament. On December 29, the National Assembly Secretariat issued a gazette notification stating that the president had assented to the Societies Registration (Amendment) Act 2024 on December 27, and that it would “come into force at once.” Additionally, on the same day, the president’s office issued a notification, dated December 28, announcing an amendment to the act.³⁶

The ordinance introduced a new clause, ‘21-C,’ which provides seminaries with the option to register either with the Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE) or the relevant deputy commissioner’s office. The ordinance was necessary because approximately 18,600 seminaries had been registered with the education ministry under a federal cabinet decision that lacked legal backing. The promulgation of the ordinance grants legal cover to this decision. Furthermore, the ordinance restricts the Societies Registration Act’s applicability to Islamabad, as education is a provincial subject under the 18th Amendment.

³⁶ Syed Irfan Raza, "Govt settles seminary spat with legal sleight of hand," *Dawn*, December 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1881899/govt-settles-seminary-spat-with-legal-sleight-of-hand>