

PAKISTAN'S TERRORISM LANDSCAPE: CHALLENGES AND PROJECTIONS

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Introduction

The year 2020 sustained the declining trend in the incidence of terrorist violence in Pakistan that has been ongoing since 2014. The statistics provided by Pakistan Security Report 2020 indicated a 36 percent decrease in the number of terrorist attacks this year, as compared to 2019; the number of people killed in these attacks also plummeted by 38 percent.¹ However, these plummeting numbers do not suggest, in any way, that the threat of terrorism has been completely eliminated. Secondly, the underlying factors of religious extremism and persecution persist in the country, which could feed into terrorist violence and/or faith-based violence by individuals and mobs. While the incidence and level of terrorist violence can be measured, it is very hard to measure extremism and extremist trends in society. Therefore, a reduction in terrorist violence should not be taken as a measure of a reduction in extremism.

The Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies' (PIPS) report expounded that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates continued to regroup in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2020; they were believed to be involved in most of the 79 attacks reported from KP, and also claimed few attacks in Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Balochistan. The TTP leadership has also managed to bring some former splinters as well as other groups into its fold, including Hizb-ul-Ahrar and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. The slow reforms process in erstwhile FATA has resulted in lackluster administrative, judicial, security, and economic reforms. Experts assert that any governance failures in merged tribal districts or a new war in Afghanistan in the wake of US withdrawal will likely open up new avenues for hardcore militants.²

Baloch insurgents were apparently also trying to intensify their attacks (they launched multiple high-impact attacks in 2020) and expand their areas of operations as was visible from their attack on Karachi Stock Exchange. Secondly, they have been placing more focus on south and southwestern Balochistan where Gwadar port - the lynchpin of China-Pakistan

¹ The report was prepared by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS). A summary of can be seen here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Conflict-and-Peace-Studies.pdf>

² Ibid.

Economic Corridor (CPEC), is situated. Similarly, Sindhi militant groups perpetrated at least 10 attacks in Sindh during the year.³ These groups have a history of undertaking sporadic low-intensity, low-impact attacks. But in 2020 they managed to create some impact both in terms of the number and intensity of the attacks they launched. Half of the attacks by Sindhi militants targeted security forces.

As far as the manifestation of religious extremism in the country is concerned, growing sectarian and communal tensions in the year were one indicator. While no such incident had taken place in 2019, as many as eight incidents of communal or faith-based violence were recorded in Pakistan in 2020, including six in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and two in Punjab. Members of the Ahmadi community and blasphemy-accused were targeted in such violence. In one of these incidents, the shrine (Samadhi) of a Hindu saint was vandalized and torched in Karak, KPK. Similarly, while on the whole sectarian violence has plummeted in Pakistan in recent years, yet its underlying drivers as well as sectarian discord and the groups promoting it, continue to exist. The sectarian tensions that gripped the country during and after Moharram in 2020 once again exposed the

country's sectarian vulnerabilities and fault-lines.⁴

In recent years, the government has produced clergy-backed documents like the Paigham-e-Pakistan and the Code of Conduct (CoC). Its aim is to promote interfaith and intersect harmony and counter the ideologies and narratives of extremist groups. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains to be seen. Released in October 2020, the CoC acknowledged the right of citizens to practice their religion and religious rites and declared that any resort to violence in the name of enforcing Islam was illegal and rebellious. The government has also developed a legal draft (Paigham-e-Pakistan bill) to protect the honour of the family members and companions of the Prophet (PBUH). Experts argue that the problem of sectarianism is structural and deep-rooted and cannot be solved with legislative measures and public relations exercises. Some even argue that religious organizations, including the banned ones, use such state-led initiatives as a cover to survive and keep their networks intact. For instance, during the countrywide sectarian protests in September 2020, "the same religious leaders who had been preaching sectarian tolerance until last year [as espoused

³ Ibid.

⁴ Data is derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) digital database on security incidents: www.pakpips.com/app/database

in Paigham-e-Pakistan] suddenly took to the streets with slogans of hatred.”⁵

Many experts also see this as an indication of the faltering and inconsistent implementation of National Action Plan (NAP). They argue that the successive governments have been using NAP to flaunt their anti-terror credentials to the world, instead of using it as a meaningful framework for addressing the challenges of terrorism and extremism. There is also this perception that the incumbent government is seemingly not interested in reviewing, revising, or expanding NAP. According to a media report, the Prime Minister was briefed, in June 2020, on an “Internal National Action Plan devised during the last 20 months for internal security and for that purpose 14 high-level committees of experts had been formed to submit proposals on different issues within a month.”⁶ However, the subsequent official efforts suggested that this plan largely relates to countering terrorist financing, and the wider internal security policy or NAP did not manage to get the required policy traction.

⁵ Muhammad Amir Rana, “Perils of sectarianism,” *Dawn*, October 4, 2020.

⁶ Syed Irfan Raza, “Internal security plan prepared, PM told,” *Dawn*, June 11, 2020.

Pakistan’s Terrorism Landscape in 2020⁷

According to PIPS’ Pakistan Security Report 2020, marking a decline of over 36 percent from the year before, different militant, nationalist/insurgent, and violent sectarian groups perpetrated a total of 146 terrorist attacks across Pakistan including three suicide blasts. These attacks claimed 220 lives – a decline of 38 percent from those killed in similar attacks in 2019 – and injured another 547 people.

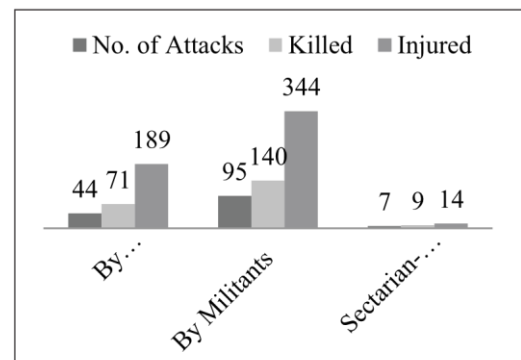


Chart 1: Classification of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2020

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessed the highest number of terrorist attacks for any one region of Pakistan in 2020. A total of 79 terrorist attacks happened in the province, including 31 in the North Waziristan tribal district alone, which in all claimed 100 lives and inflicted injuries on another 206 people. After Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan province was most affected by terrorism, in 2020, where 95 people were killed and 216 others were

⁷ Data and statistics used in this section are derived from Pakistan Security Report 2020 and PIPS digital database on security, unless otherwise described.

injured in 42 reported attacks. As many as 18 terrorist attacks happened in Sindh province – 15 in Karachi and 3 in interior Sindh – which killed a total of 20 people and injured 66 others. In all, seven (7) terrorist attacks took place in Punjab in the year 2020 which claimed five lives and injured 59 people.

Region	No. of Attacks	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	79	100	206
Balochistan	42	95	216
Punjab	7	5	59
Karachi	15	17	65
Sindh (excluding Karachi)	3	3	1
Islamabad/AJK /GB	0	0	0
Total	146	220	547

Table 1: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2020

While in 2020, a considerable decrease was recorded in the number of terrorist attacks compared to the previous year, there has been a gradual decrease in such attacks and consequent fatalities in Pakistan since 2014; indeed terrorism had started to take a downturn from 2009 onward with the only exception of 2013. The continuous operational and surveillance campaigns by security forces and police's counter terrorism

departments (CTDs) – including military operations Zarb-e-Azb, Khyber I-IV, Karachi Operation as well as the operation Raddul Fasaad – and some counter-extremism actions taken under the NAP have apparently helped sustain that declining trend in the terrorist violence.

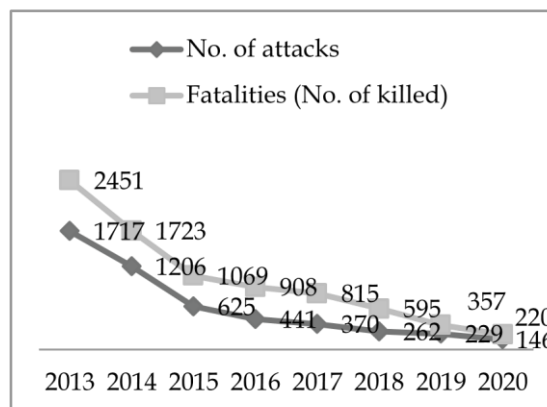


Chart 2: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2013-2020)

Security forces apparently stepped up anti-militant operations in 2020. Compared to 28 in the year before, security forces and law enforcement agencies conducted 47 anti-militant operational strikes, during 2020, in 22 districts and regions of Pakistan. There were 146 people fatalities in these actions, as compared to 81 in 2019, and injured 22 others. Those 146 included 129 militants killed and 17 Pakistan Army soldiers martyred. Out of the total 47 operational strikes reported, in 2020, as many as 28 were conducted in KP, 15 in Balochistan, and two

each in Punjab and Sindh. Security and law enforcement agencies also entered in a total of 15 armed clashes and encounters with militants – a decrease of 40 percent from such incidents in previous year – across 11 districts of the country. These armed clashes and encounters claimed 38 lives (29 militants, 7 security personnel, and 2 civilians).

While Pakistani security forces' anti-militant operations continued to weaken the militants, some important Pakistani Taliban leaders were also killed in Afghanistan. Similarly, few key Al-Qaeda leaders were killed in Afghanistan including Husam Abd al-Rauf, also known as Abu Muhsin al-Masri. Al-Qaeda has been striving to improve its relevance and alliances in the region including through the establishment of its franchise, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in 2014. While it has cemented its ties with the Afghan Taliban, according to some accounts, it has also helped the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in recovering and regrouping in recent years; some AQ-aligned Pakistani groups even joined the TTP.⁸ The Islamic State (IS) group in Afghanistan has also suffered serious losses in recent years, including on the hands of the Afghan

government as well as the Afghan Taliban, and has undergone fragmentations including in its main ally the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Yet, its surviving cells are engaging in large attacks, and analysts warn against underestimating the IS threat in the region, mainly due to its ability to exploit the conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Kashmir, or elsewhere.⁹

In February 2020, media reported that some key TTP leaders had been killed in Afghanistan including TTP deputy leader Sheikh Khalid Haqqani, and Qari Saif Younis, a military commander within the group,¹⁰ and Shehryar Mehsud, leader of a breakaway faction of the TTP.¹¹ Later in August, Assadullah Orakzai, a former Pakistani Taliban leader who later joined IS and became the head of intelligence for its Khorasan chapter, was reportedly killed in an operation by Afghan security forces. A BBC report, in April 2020, claimed the Pakistani Taliban militants who are sheltered across the border may want to relocate to their native towns in tribal districts. The report quoted the defense

⁸ Asfandyar 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>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Secunder Kermani & Sami Yousafzai & Ishtiaq Mehsud, "Kabul Taliban: Spies, militants and a mysterious assassination", *BBC News*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51356940>

¹¹ Secunder Kermani & Ishtiaq Mehsud, "Crackdown on militants as US and Afghan Taliban seek deal", *BBC News*, February 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51495137>

analyst Brigadier (Retd.) Mehmood Shah to claim that about 9,000 such Taliban militants wanted to come back to their native towns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after seeking forgiveness and promising to quit violence.¹² Similarly, a UN report estimated “[t]he total number of Pakistani foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan, posing a threat to both countries” to be between 6,000 and 6,500 and most of them with the TTP.¹³ While the UN report termed the TTP as the largest Pakistani group in Afghanistan and the main threat for Pakistan, it noted that that many former TTP members had already joined the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province or chapter, also called ISKP.¹⁴

As stated earlier, the TTP and its affiliates are continuing their effort to regroup in parts of Pakistan, which is visible from their growing presence and activities in North Waziristan, Bajaur, and other tribal districts. Moreover, they have also claimed some attacks in Karachi (Sindh), Balochistan, and Punjab’s Rawalpindi district in recent months.

On the whole, as compared to the nationalist insurgents and violent sectarian groups, the militant groups such as TTP and its ilk committed more terrorist violence in the country in the year 2020. On the whole, the TTP, its splinter groups Hizbul Ahrar and Jamaatul Ahrar – which rejoined it in August – as well as other militant groups with similar objectives such as local Taliban groups, Lashkar-e-Islam and ISIS-affiliates, etc., carried out 95 attacks in Pakistan killing 140 people and injuring 344 others. Most of these attacks (75, or about 79 percent) concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 31 in North Waziristan alone; another nine attacks happened in Bajaur and six each in in South Waziristan and Peshawar districts. Similarly, the TTP and similar groups perpetrated 10 attacks in Balochistan, including four attacks in each of Quetta and Qilla Abdullah districts, and carried out another four attacks in Karachi. Meanwhile, the TTP and its former splinters were believed to be involved in six attacks in Rawalpindi, the twin city of the federal capital Islamabad.

Meanwhile, Baloch and Sindhi nationalist insurgent groups carried out 43 attacks – as compared to 57 such attacks in 2019 – which claimed 71 lives and wounded another 174 people. Different Baloch insurgent groups perpetrated 33 attacks in 2020 including 31 in

¹² Azizullah Khan, “Skrimishies between Security forces and militants: Are militants regrouping in tribal areas?”, *BBC Urdu*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-52305891>

¹³ Anwar Iqbal, “6,500 terrorists still active in Afghanistan: UN,” *Dawn*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1571172/6500-terrorists-still-active-in-afghanistan-un>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Balochistan (while 9 and 5 of such attacks, respectively, took place in Kech and Quetta, Baloch insurgents also launched few major attacks in Gwadar and Harnai districts) and one attack each in Karachi and Rahim Yar Khan (south Punjab) districts. Six Baloch insurgent groups were found active in Balochistan in 2020 but the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) were the two major groups that carried out most of the reported attacks from the province. The BLA even carried out two attacks outside Balochistan including the coordinated attack against Pakistan Stock Exchange, Karachi.

Although during 2020 attacks by Baloch insurgents were less frequent as compared to the previous year yet those were more high-impact strikes. Secondly, Baloch insurgents were apparently also trying to expand their areas of operations. Thirdly, they have been placing the focus more focus on south and southwestern Balochistan besides continuously showing presence in the provincial capital Quetta.

On the whole, Sindhi nationalist groups perpetrated 10 terrorist attacks in Sindh in 2020, including seven in Karachi, two in Larkana, and one in Ghotki. Sindhi insurgent groups have a history of perpetrating sporadic

low-intensity, low-impact attacks. But in 2020 they managed to create some impact both in terms of the number and intensity of the attacks they launched. Half of the attacks by Sindhi insurgents targeted security forces.

Similarly, seven reported terrorist attacks in 2020 were sectarian-related – half from the year before – which killed nine people and inflicted injuries on 14 others. While four of these attacks happened in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, another three took place in Karachi.

In 2020, over 57 percent of the total recorded attacks in the country targeted personnel, vehicles, and posts of security forces and law enforcement agencies. That represented an increase of six percent in such attacks from the year before indicating militants' increasing focus on hitting security forces. While security forces remained the primary target of the militants in all regions of Pakistan, tribal elders, political leaders, and the Shia community also faced significant attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, in particular. Meanwhile, the terrorists mainly employed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) of various types in 67 attacks and firing or direct shootout in another 56 attacks. Militants increasingly used vehicle-borne (motorcycle/bicycle etc.) IED blasts; around

20 attacks employed this particular tactic in Sindh, Balochistan and Rawalpindi. Few years ago, that was a pertinent attack tactic employed by the Baloch insurgents. But now it seems some other groups including the Taliban are emulating it, which is apparently easy to perpetrate and involves less reliance on suicide bombers, though it could have a similar impact. However, most vehicle-borne bombings in 2020 were of relatively low intensity; the worst of these attacks occurred in Chaman killing six and injuring 21 people. But the threat is there that militants could improvise such attacks causing a significant impact in terms of casualties.

Meanwhile, Baloch insurgents are also striving to increase the impact of their attacks, mainly to attract the international attention among other reasons, including through the selection of high-value targets and employing coordinated *fidayeen* attacks.

Challenges and Projections

• TTP's Regrouping and Reunion

TTP is feared to pose a serious security challenge in the coming weeks and months. The TTP is adding to its strength by luring small groups and commanders into it. Analysts assert that the TTP has not only successfully recovered from its internal crisis

but also “appears to be growing,” which should be a matter of real concern for the Pakistani government and security agencies.¹⁵ For one, two key TTP splinters, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Hizb-ul-Ahrar, declared a return to their parent group, i.e. TTP, in August 2020.¹⁶ According to another account, the militants of the Hakimullah Mehsud Group headed by commander Mukhlis Yar were the first to come back to the TTP fold in July. Moreover, in July, the TTP had announced the inclusion of Al-Qaeda-affiliated Amjad Farouqi group of the so-called Punjab Taliban in its fold, which was followed, as claimed by the TTP media cell, the inclusion of a Lashkar-e-Jhangvi faction headed by Maulvi Khush Muhammad Sindhi into the TTP in early August. Reportedly, Noor Wali Mehsud is also working to persuade Mangal Bagh and his Lashkar-e-Islam to join the TTP.¹⁷

Later in December 2020, the TTP head Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud appeared in a video released by the group's media wing. The video showed two militant commanders Maulvi

¹⁵ Abdul Sayed, “Waziristan militant leader Aleem Khan Ustad joins Tehreek-e-Taliban,” The Jamestown Foundation, January 5, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/brief/waziristan-militant-leader-aleem-khan-ustad-joins-tehreek-e-taliban>

¹⁶ “Breakaway faction, splinter group join TTP,” *Dawn*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1575010/breakaway-faction-splinter-group-join-ttp>

¹⁷ Daud Khattak, “Whither the Pakistani Taliban: An assessment of recent trends,” *New America*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/blog/whither-pakistani-taliban-assessment-recent-trends/>

Aleem Khan Ustad and Commander Umar Azzam, who headed their respective Taliban groups, declaring a merger with the TTP and taking an oath of allegiance to Mehsud. TTP had announced the merger of both groups into its ranks on November 27.¹⁸ Aleem Khan hails from North Waziristan and was once a deputy to Hafiz Gul Bahadur, who led a local Taliban group. After the 2014 military operation, Aleem Khan developed differences with the Gul Bahadur group and reportedly started to operate independently. A media report in 2015 had stated that the Aleem Khan group had announced to quit fighting against the government and promised its support for the rehabilitation of IDPs in North Waziristan. The group also vowed to work for establishing peace in the area.¹⁹ This is why experts are terming the group's merger into anti-Pakistan TTP a significant development, which they say will strengthen the latter.

Most of these groups of Pakistani Taliban are believed to be based in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Khost provinces of Afghanistan. The unification of Taliban groups has happened mainly due to the efforts of the TTP chief

¹⁸ Abdul Sayed, "Waziristan militant leader Aleem Khan Ustad joins Tehreek-e-Taliban," The Jamestown Foundation, January 5, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/brief/waziristan-militant-leader-aleem-khan-ustad-joins-tehreek-e-taliban/>

¹⁹ Ibid; Daily *Pakistan*, March 16, 2015, <https://dailypakistan.com.pk/16-Mar-2015/203637>

Noor Wali Mehsud, who took lead in resolving all contentious issues. He had previously been associated with the Afghan Taliban but later joined the TTP. Therefore, some analysts are linking the development to the emerging situation in Afghanistan, where the Afghan Taliban are gaining ground since they concluded a peace agreement with the US.²⁰ Apparently, the Pakistani Taliban militants are realizing that factionalism has only weakened them and they would gain little even if their Afghan counterparts reach the power corridors in Afghanistan. They are apparently trying to restore the TTP as an alliance of the Pakistani Taliban and trying to bring back all the disgruntled groups.

• The FATF Challenge

During 2021, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) pressure is likely to continue keeping Pakistan under duress. The FATF has announced that Pakistan will remain on its grey list for another four months, till February 2021. Until then, the country will have to implement the remaining six targets on the 27-points action plan on anti-money laundering and combat financing of terrorism. That means Pakistan will continue to manifest its resolve and action against terrorist

²⁰ Azizullah Khan, "Jamiat Alharar and Hizb Alharar announce merger with TTP", BBC Urdu, August 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-53809415>

financing and groups. But a lot will depend, including in terms of convincing the FATF, on whether or not these actions are meant to bring some structural changes to Pakistan's policy and responses.

Pakistan took several measures to address the concerns of the FATF and move out of the grey list. The government carried out financial crackdowns on UNSC-designated terrorist entities, prosecuted persons for terror financing, and went on an eleventh-hour legislation spree to meet the FATF criteria. Discussions and debates on these legislations were mostly blocked on the ground of 'urgency'.

Similarly, another significant development has been the prosecution of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) leaders for money laundering and terror financing. On 3 July 2019, the CTD Punjab had booked thirteen JuD leaders including Hafiz Saeed in multiple cases of money laundering and terror financing.²¹ Hafiz Saeed and his associate Malik Zafar Iqbal were convicted in two cases of terror financing and handed down five-and-a-half years in prison by a Lahore anti-terrorism court in February

²¹ Nauman Wahab, "Hafiz Saeed awarded 15-year jail in terror financing case," *The News*, December 25, 2020 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/764051-hafiz-saeed-awarded-15-year-jail-in-terror-financing-case>

2020.²² On 24 December 2020, Hafiz Saeed and five others were again convicted in separate cases of terror financing and terrorism and awarded jail terms of 15 years each.²³

In Pakistan, political leaders have expressed apprehension about the alleged politicization of the FATF. In August 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan warned that blacklisting would ruin Pakistan's economy and make it an international pariah like Iran. He accused India of mounting pressures on Pakistan through the FATF.²⁴ In October 2019, the Indian Defense Minister, Rajnath Singh, had announced that Pakistan would soon be blacklisted by the FATF, raising concerns in Pakistan that the FATF was being politicized.²⁵ However, on the other hand, Pakistan has also been provided with some cushion at the FATF forum because of strong support from China, Turkey, and Malaysia. China currently heads the Asia-Pacific Group

²² Rana Bilal, "Hafiz Saeed sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison," *Dawn*, February 13, 2020 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1534025>

²³ Nauman Wahab, "Hafiz Saeed awarded 15-year jail in terror financing case," *The News*, December 25, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/764051-hafiz-saeed-awarded-15-year-jail-in-terror-financing-case>

²⁴ Siddhant Sibal, "FATF blacklisting will ruin Pakistan's economy, warns PM Khan," *Zee News*, August 28, 2020, <https://zeenews.india.com/world/fatf-blacklisting-will-ruin-pakistans-economy-warns-pm-imran-khan-2305976.html>

²⁵ "FATF can anytime blacklist Pakistan for terror financing: Rajnath," *Times of India*, October 1, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/fatf-can-anytime-blacklist-pak-for-terror-financing-rajnath-singh/articleshow/71392712.cms>

of FATF which allows some breathing space to Pakistan. e

In addition, Pakistan has also been banking on the US for support at the FATF. In February 2020, while addressing a news briefing, Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that Pakistan hoped that the US would help Pakistan get off the grey list.²⁶ Some analysts believe that with Pakistan's role in facilitating the US-Taliban deal, the US might not be eager to push Pakistan hard, especially in view of Pakistan's weakening economy. Following the conviction of Hafiz Saeed in February 2020, the US chief diplomat for South Asia, Alice G. Wells, called the sentence an important step forward towards Pakistan's commitment to fighting terror financing.²⁷ Some experts are of the opinion that the US is unlikely to help Pakistan get off the grey list. The US would probably ensure that Pakistan remains on the grey list and does not fall into the blacklist.

- **The Challenge of Countering Violent Extremism**

As cited earlier, despite a decline in terrorist violence Pakistan continues to face the

challenge of religious extremism. This is partly because countering violent and non-violent forms of extremism has barely been a priority for a state that has traditionally focused more on the acts of terrorism and less on its drivers. Surely, other factors such as lack of political will and definitional clarity about extremism and resource constraints etc. also explain why extremism is going largely unchecked.

Quite often, in cases of extremism, the state either adopts an ambiguous stance or resorts to the tried-and-failed strategy of appeasing the radicals in order to de-escalate a standoff or situation. Such an approach, often contradicting the existing laws and policies, only emboldens the extremist lots and incentivize hostile behavior on their part. The year 2020 witnessed one of the most worrying manifestations of religious extremism in Pakistan in years as an alliance of various Sunni extremist groups rallied against the Shias in several cities including Karachi and Islamabad, calling the Shia sect 'heretical' and demanding violent action against its followers. Spearheaded by the proscribed outfit Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), four major anti-Shia rallies were taken out in mid-September after a Shia cleric had made some controversial remarks during a *Mobarram* sermon in late August.

²⁶ Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan wants US to get it off FATF grey list," Dawn, February 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1529245>

²⁷ Tahir Sherani, "FATF decides to keep Pakistan on its grey list, next review in Jun," Dawn, Feb 22, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1535808>

Similarly, the Ahmadi community came under increased attack in 2020 particularly in Peshawar where five Ahmadis were killed in separate attacks. In one of the incidents, an under-trial prisoner, Tahir Ahmed Naseem, 57, was shot dead inside a courtroom in Peshawar. The victim, an American national of Pakistani origin, was undergoing a trial for blasphemy. The teenage murderer told the police that he killed the victim because he was an Ahmadi. Apart from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two Ahmadi men were also killed in Khushab and Nankana Sahib districts of Punjab. In December last year, a religiously inspired mob vandalized and torched a shrine (Samadhi) of a Hindu saint in Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The resurrection of extremist groups after years of hibernation does not augur well for Pakistan particularly at a time when the country is already under increased monitoring by the FATF and lingering on the threshold of sanctions. The government is apparently cognizant of this fact which is probably the reason it took some initiatives to promote interfaith and intersect harmony following the sectarian tensions. In October last year, the government and the clergy signed a 'Code of Conduct' (CoC) for sectarian harmony in the country. A month after the pronouncement of the CoC, the cabinet also approved an interior

ministry proposal for the establishment of a commission for the implementation of national narrative and development of structures against violent extremism and radicalization. The proposed commission's main objectives include, among other things, providing a legal mechanism to curb violent extremism and enforcing national narratives and policies in line with the National Action Plan.²⁸ It is unclear how this proposed commission would be any different from existing institutions with similar mandates such as NACTA. Besides, the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) has more or less identical objectives.

Similarly, the government appears hampered in its efforts to combat faith-based persecution and hate speech as well as violence by the religious pressure groups. All indicators suggest that such faith-based violence and persecution of minorities will continue until the state decides to confront these pressure groups and enforce the rule of law. Sectarian tensions will also sustain in coming months and years, though with variable intensity. Meanwhile, good-faith codes and declarations like Paigham-e-Pakistan and the CoC may have some impact on defusing the current sectarian tensions, but

²⁸ Tariq Khosa, "Countering extremism," *Dawn*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1596792>

will eventually fail in addressing the larger problem and root causes. Secondly, implementation of such declaration is also an issue because these are just voluntary pronouncements and have no legal binding on the signatories. Some even highlight that when the state has been failing to implement available laws on curbing sectarian hatred, speech, and violence, how can it ensure to materialize the demands of such codes of conduct.

- **Sub-nationalist Insurgency**

In 2020, while Sindhi insurgents stepped up terrorist attacks, Baloch insurgent groups executed some major attacks in Balochistan against security forces and also launched coordinated *fidayee* attacks against Pakistan Stock Exchange, Karachi. Various Sindhi separatist outfits such as the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SDRA) and the Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SDLA) perpetrated ten terrorist attacks in Sindh during the year. Seven of these attacks were carried out in Karachi, two in Larkana, and one in Ghotki. The main targets were the Rangers and an office of Ehsaas Program. The attacks came a month after the interior ministry proscribed (in May) the JSQM-A, SDRA, and SDLA under the anti-terrorism act of 1997. According to the interior

ministry, there were “reasonable grounds” to believe that these outfits were involved in terrorism in Sindh.²⁹

The insecurity in Balochistan is also projected to continue with a likelihood of increased attacks from Baloch insurgents and religiously inspired groups. Indeed, the Baloch insurgent groups have been brushing aside the traditionally-held perception that the Baloch insurgency is a low-scale insurgency. In recent years they have manifested the will and capacity to launch high-impact or major attacks and that trend apparently continues, though such attacks are only sporadic and not so frequent.

Similarly, although the federal government has recently announced the “Accelerated Development Package for South Balochistan” but it may find it difficult to implement it due to financial as well as other related constraints. Analysts believe the conflict cannot be mitigated without talking to Baloch nationalist as well as insurgent leaders.

- **Implementation of National Action Plan**

Actions under NAP put significant pressure on militant and extremist groups, forcing

²⁹ Azaz Syed, “Sindhi separatists JSQM-A, SRA, SLA be banned”, *The News International*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/657684-sindhi-separatists-jsqm-a-sra-sla-by-banned>

them into hibernation modes, but reports suggest some of these groups made a comeback in 2020. Reports emerged of extremist elements patrolling public places in areas of ex-FATA, and sectarian outfits returning to the streets. The situation brought into focus the NAP's role as the lynchpin of the state's counterterrorism (CT) and counter-violent extremism (CVE) policies.

NAP is extremely heavy on agenda with short-term and long-term goals haphazardly placed with one another. Some goals are very broad and vague with no strategy as to how they would be achieved. Very limited attention has been given to the non-kinetic side of the NAP. The *Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan* (TLP) – an extremist outfit - was born in the post-NAP period which is extremely worrying as it raises questions over the effectiveness of NAP as a CVE tool. To make matters worse, the government sought to appease the TLP in 2017 which emboldened the latter to assert itself with greater confidence. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the NAP has failed to initiate reconciliation in Balochistan to end the deadly insurgency. The *Pur Aman Balochistan* (Peaceful Balochistan) project failed to open up the dialogue process with the indignant tribal leaders. The government claims thousands of insurgents have surrendered under the *Peaceful Balochistan* project, but

observers doubt if they were genuine militants. Overall, the state has lacked the capacity or will to implement the NAP in letter and spirit.

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