

## THE URGENT BATTLE AGAINST TERRORISM AND THE QUEST FOR INTERNAL SECURITY

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The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN)'s President, Shahbaz Sharif, took oath as Pakistan's 24th prime minister on March 4 amid several political, economic and security challenges.<sup>31</sup> Shahbaz is heading a weak coalition government, which will undermine his ability to govern, legislate, and formulate policies effectively.<sup>32</sup> The political infighting that started with the former prime minister and the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan's ouster in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in April 2022 has continued even after the February 8 elections due to allegations of fraud.<sup>33</sup>

Despite ongoing political turmoil and a narrow financial bandwidth, Pakistan needs a new internal security policy that corresponds to its current threat landscape.<sup>34</sup> The PTI's government in

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the most affected area by terrorism, and its conflictual relationship with the centre could hamper the counter-terrorism offensive and politicize it.

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, terrorism has surged by 73 percent in Pakistan.<sup>35</sup> The Taliban's victory had a rejuvenating impact on religiously-inspired Pakistani militant groups that the creation of a self-styled theocratic state is possible with strategic patience and perseverance.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the remnants of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) have moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan after the Taliban's ruthless offensive.<sup>37</sup> They are engaging in indiscriminately violent attacks to stay relevant. Similarly, the Baloch separatist groups have shown

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<sup>31</sup> "Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif takes oath as prime minister, directs team to talk with IMF," *Reuters*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-shehbaz-sharif-takes-oath-prime-minister-2024-03-04/>.

<sup>32</sup> Aamir Saeed and Naimat Khan, "Weak' Pakistan coalition government will struggle on political, economic and security fronts — experts," *Arab News*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2460001/pakistan/>.

<sup>33</sup> Nadim Asrar and Areesha Lodhi, "Pakistan election updates: Crackdown threats as PTI protests rigging," *Al-Jazeera*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/2/11/pakistan-election-results-live-wait-for-final-tally-three-days-after-vote>.

<sup>34</sup> Abdul Basit Khan, "Security challenges for the next Pakistani government," *Arab News*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2462686>.

<sup>35</sup> "Terror attacks increased by 73 percent in Pakistan since Taliban takeover," *Pak Institute for Peace Studies*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7646>.

<sup>36</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 16, Issue 5 (May 2023), pp. 1-12, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2023), p.89.

resilience and lethality in their attacks.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the growing intolerance bordering on ignorance, often taking the shape of mob and vigilante violence, is equally challenging for Pakistan's internal peace.<sup>39</sup> Against this backdrop, this brief discusses these security challenges in detail and provides policy recommendations.

### **Pakistan's Evolving and Complex Threat Landscape**

Pakistan's threat landscape is currently in flux, with old groups reviving while new ones emerge, rendering it fluid and volatile.<sup>40</sup> The revival of the old groups is a direct outcome of their sanctuaries in Afghanistan and Iran. At the same time, the internecine fighting, factional rivalries, and leadership disputes that engender a fractured landscape until 2020 have been replaced with mergers, alliances, and unifications. The alliances and mergers have augmented the militant groups' operational capabilities and geographical outreach.<sup>41</sup>

The current Pakistani militant landscape is multi-actor and diverse, necessitating a revision of existing counterterrorism and counter-insurgency policies. Since the revival and resurgence of some militant groups, their organisational structures, recruitment, fundraising and propaganda methods have undergone several changes.<sup>42</sup> Incorporating these variations while revising the counterterrorism and counter-insurgency frameworks will be crucial. In other words, a remapping of the current landscape should precede the new government's revision of the internal security policy. The policy-implementation gap is another challenge that the new government will have to contemplate. In the last few years, some good policy documents have emerged, such as the National Internal Security Policy 2018-2023 and the National Security Policy 2022-2026. However, they were never adopted, let alone implemented.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hari Parsad and Wil Sahar Patrick, "Pakistan Faces Rising Separatist Insurgency in Balochistan," *New Lines Institute*, January 24, 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/pakistan-faces-rising-separatist-insurgency-in-balochistan/>.

<sup>39</sup> Zia ur-Rehman, "Blasphemy Is a Crime in Pakistan. Mobs Are Delivering the Verdicts," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Abdul Basit and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan: An analysis of domestic and regional factors," in *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia: National, Regional and Global Implications*, M. Raymond Izarali and Dalbir Ahlwat (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 157-174.

<sup>41</sup> Kiyya Baloch, "Possible Merger of Baloch Militant Groups Threatens Pakistani and Chinese Interests," *James Town Foundation*, December 1, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/possible-merger-of-baloch-militant-groups-threatens-pakistani-and-chinese-interests/>.

<sup>42</sup> Abdul Basit and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The persistence of terrorism in Pakistan: An analysis of domestic and regional factors."

<sup>43</sup> "National Security Policy 2018-2023," *Ministry of Interior Government of Pakistan*, retrieved on March 6, 2024 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/National-Internal-Security-Policy-2018-2023-1.pdf>; National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026," *National Security Division Government of Pakistan*, retrieved on March 6, 2024,

## Resurgent TTP

Since the Taliban's return to power, TTP has resurged, it has resurrected its network in Pakistan. In its current incarnation, TTP is more dangerous operationally, politically and strategically. The Taliban's victory has energised TTP; it feels buoyed by their return to power in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> It has provided the group not only with a triumphant narrative and a victory template, notwithstanding the stark differences in Afghanistan and Pakistan's ground realities, but also a protection umbrella in Afghanistan to plot and launch attacks. Pakistan's oversimplistic thinking of expecting cooperation from the Taliban against TTP in return for helping them return to power overlooked their longstanding ethnic, ideological and battlefield camaraderie. Ahead of the Taliban victory, TTP renewed its oath of allegiance to the Taliban Supreme Commander Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada to continue living in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> The Taliban have persistently termed TTP as Pakistan's internal matter, refusing to cooperate

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<https://www.nsd.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/NSP%20summary.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud and Riccardo Valle, "Analysis: How TTP's resurgence came to pass," *Dawn*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1763906>.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Pakistani Taliban's emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban," *Long War Journal*, August 19, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> "TTP a matter Pakistan must take up, not Afghanistan: Taliban spokesman," *Geo Tv*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/367651-ttp-a->

other than facilitating the negotiations.<sup>46</sup> How the new government navigates this challenge will be a crucial determinant of success, or its lack, against TTP's new wave of attacks in Pakistan.

Presently, TTP is transitioning from a terrorist to an insurgency group. It has reorganised its organisational framework along the Taliban's structure, announcing shadow provinces, ministries and military zones in Pakistan. Likewise, it has switched from an indiscriminate (hitting soft and hard targets) to a discriminate (only hardtargets) attack strategy.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the group has upped its propaganda campaign on social media through its media arm, Al-Umar Media. Unlike in the past, TTP regularly publishes two monthly magazines in Urdu and Pashto languages, a podcast, infographics and regular statements to articulate its position on several political, religious and socio-economic issues confronting Pakistan.<sup>48</sup> However, it lacks control of territory and some form of public support to be classified as an insurgency. In its current form, it can be described as a proto-insurgency or a hybrid terrorist

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[matter-pakistan-must-take-up-not-afghanistan-taliban-spokesman](https://www.nsd.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/NSP%20summary.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover."

<sup>48</sup> Joshua Bowes, "Telegram's Role in Amplifying Tehreek-e-Taliban's Umar Media Propaganda and Sympathiser Outreach," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, January 30, 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/01/30/telegrams-role-in-amplifying-tehreek-e-talibans-umar-media-propaganda-and-sympathiser-outreach/>.

entity, i.e., a terrorist group behaving like insurgents.

Since July 2020, TTP has secured oaths of allegiances (read mergers and unifications) from more than 42 like-minded militant factions across Pakistan.<sup>49</sup> The absorption of these factions has increased TTP's operational strength and geographical reach. Interestingly, TTP has distanced itself from sectarian militancy, currently spearheaded by ISK. TTP's behaviour of avoiding sectarian feuds is consistent with the Taliban's approach of being more accommodating of the Shia community in Afghanistan. At the same time, TTP has created a front group, Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), which has engaged in daredevil suicide and self-sacrificing attacks against the military and other law enforcement agencies.<sup>50</sup> Reportedly, TJP's membership includes Afghan nationals apart from Pakistanis as well as the presence of Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate, the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent.<sup>51</sup> This is corroborated through AQIS' propaganda publications, where it

is throwing its weight behind TJP's violent campaign in Pakistan.<sup>52</sup> The new government will have to look into TTP's nexuses with other militant groups to effectively tackle militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### Resilient Baloch Insurgents

The fifth wave of ethno-separatist insurgency, the 1948, 1958-59, 1962-63, and 1973-77 being the other four waves, is the longest, most violent and resilient from its predecessor.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, unlike the parochial waves that revolved around one tribe or chieftain and demanded autonomy, the educated middle class spearheaded the current wave. More importantly, the centre of gravity of the ongoing insurgent wave is in the non-tribal Makran coastal belt, and it is driven by unequivocal demand for separatism.<sup>54</sup> In recent years, the resilience and longevity that the Baloch insurgency has exhibited points to its deep roots in the Baloch grievances of political marginalisation, socio-economic deprivation and extra-judicial disappearances.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Abdul Sayed, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Latest Merger Enables Renewed Attacks in Pakistan," *James Town Foundation*, August 13, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-latest-merger-enables-renewed-attacks-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>50</sup> Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "TJP: A Front Group for the Pakistani Taliban?" *James Town Foundation*, August 21, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/tjp-a-front-group-for-the-pakistani-taliban/>.

<sup>51</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "Does Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) Actually Exist?" *The Khorasan Diary*, April 29, 2023,

<https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2023/04/29/does-tehreek-e-jihad-pakistan-actually-exist>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Yunas Samad, "Understanding the insurgency in Balochistan," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 52, Issue 2 (2014), pp. 293-320.

<sup>54</sup> Mahvish Ahmad, "Balochistan: middle-class rebellion," *Dawn*, June 5, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/723987/balochistan-middle-class-rebellion>.

<sup>55</sup> Shakoor Ahmad Wani, "The New Baloch Militancy: Drivers and Dynamics," *Indian Quarterly* 77, Issue 3 (July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284211027253>.

At any rate, the issue of Balochistan is primarily a political problem which has no security solution. Its over-securitisation over the last two decades has complicated it further. In this regard, the new government's major challenge will be to start a political process that aims to i) address genuine grievances by talking to disenchanted elements and ii) bring the military operation under a political strategy of a revised counter-insurgency framework. The existing security approach in Balochistan is adding to the litany of the problems in the restive province.

As mentioned, the middle-class drives the current insurgent wave and draws its recruits mostly from non-tribal areas of Balochistan. The current Baloch insurgent leadership, Dr Allah Nazar Baloch of the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF)<sup>56</sup> and Bashir Zeb of the Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction, has emerged from the Baloch Student Organisation-Azad (BSO-A).<sup>57</sup> The intensity of the current wave resides in the Makran region rather than Kohlu, Khuzdar and Dera Bugti. It does not mean the latter regions are free of

insurgent presence, but the intensity is more pronounced in the Makran coastal belt.

In recent years, the most alarming trend in the Baloch insurgency has been its embrace of suicide terrorism through BLA's Majeed Brigade, the group's suicide squad. Since 2018, the Majeed Brigade has carried out several high-profile attacks in Balochistan and Karachi.<sup>58</sup> The decision to embrace suicide terrorism was difficult for Baloch insurgent, keeping in view its reputational and security repercussions given their secular leanings, but they embraced it. The Baloch insurgent groups' adoption of suicide terrorism underscores the deterioration of the conflict as well as a generation shift of insurgents within the movement.<sup>59</sup> The new generation of Baloch insurgents is more extreme in its tactics and carries no tribal baggage and it unapologetically espouses separatism.<sup>60</sup>

Concurrently, the involvement of Baloch women, including in suicide bombings, in the insurgent movement is equally

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<sup>56</sup> "Baloch rebel leader Allah Nazar appears in new video," *BBC News*, November 26, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34936122>.

<sup>57</sup> "Who are the Pakistan separatists behind attack on Chinese citizens?" *Reuters*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/who-are-pakistan-separatists-behind-attack-chinese-citizens-2022-04-26/>.

<sup>58</sup> Abdul Basit, "No End in Sight: Jihadist and Baluch Ethno-Nationalist Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan Since the U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan," *James Town Foundation*, May 6, 2022, [https://jamestown.org/program/no-end-in-sight-](https://jamestown.org/program/no-end-in-sight-jihadist-and-baluch-ethno-nationalist-suicide-terrorism-in-pakistan-since-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/)

[jihadist-and-baluch-ethno-nationalist-suicide-terrorism-in-pakistan-since-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/](https://jamestown.org/program/the-majeed-brigade-the-baluch-liberation-armys-suicide-squad/).

<sup>59</sup> Abdul Basit, "The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad," *James Town Foundation*, July 1, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-majeed-brigade-the-baluch-liberation-armys-suicide-squad/>.

<sup>60</sup> Shakoor Ahmad Wani, "The Changing Dynamics of the Baloch Nationalist Movement in Pakistan: From Autonomy toward Secession," *Asian Survey* 56, No. 5 (October 2016), pp. 807-832.

concerning. In 2022 and 2023, Shari Baloch and Sumaiya Qalandrani Baloch carried out suicide attacks, bringing into sharp focus women's evolving roles in the insurgency from propagandists, matchmakers, recruiters, caregivers and nurturers to combatants.<sup>61</sup> The two suicide bombers and the propaganda around their self-sacrificing attacks have served as a conduit for luring more Baloch women towards insurgency.<sup>62</sup> The new government must pay closer attention to this aspect of the Baloch insurgency while revising the counterinsurgency framework.

Since 2018, the Baloch insurgent groups have overcome internal disputes and forged the Baloch Raji Ajoji Sangar (BRAS) alliance. BRAS comprises a partnership between BLF, BLA-Jeeyand, Baloch Republican Guard (BRG) and the Baloch Republican Army (BRA)-Gulzar faction, who later founded his faction, the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA).<sup>63</sup>

BRAS also partners with a Sindhi separatist group, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army. The alliance allowed the Baloch groups to pool their resources, optimally utilise their human capital, and expand their geographical arch from Balochistan to Karachi. Various groups in BRAS are discussing potential mergers, given their identical goals and a common adversary.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the issue of enforced disappearances will be a significant challenge for the new government.<sup>65</sup> The more the state tries to brush it under the carpet, the more prominent it will become.<sup>66</sup> It is the potential starting point for addressing the Baloch grievances if the new dispensation is genuinely interested in finding a durable solution to the Baloch conflict.<sup>67</sup> The recent rise of Mahrang Baloch, a lady doctor who led a long march to Islamabad to highlight the extrajudicial disappearances of the Baloch, underscores the gravity of the

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<sup>61</sup> Kiyya Baloch and Akbar Notezai, "Pakistan: Woman suicide bomber change in Baloch rebels' strategy?" *Al-Jazeera*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/28/pakistan-woman-suicide-bomber-change-in-baloch-rebels-strategy>.

<sup>62</sup> Amira Jadoon and Iqraa Bukhari, "A Looming Challenge: Women in Pakistan's Terrorism Landscape," *9 Dashline*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/a-looming-challenge-women-in-pakistans-terrorism-landscape>.

<sup>63</sup> Farhan Zahid, "Baluch Raji Ajoji Sangar: Emergence of a New Baluch Separatist Alliance," *James Town Foundation*, September 20, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/bras-emergence-of-a-new-baluch-separatist-alliance/>.

<sup>64</sup> Fahad Nabeel, "Interpreting BRAS-SRA Alliance," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Studies*, July 27, 2020,

<https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/interpreting-bras-sra-alliance/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Why are people disappearing in Balochistan?" *Al-Jazeera*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/podcasts/2022/5/4/why-are-people-disappearing-in-balochistan>.

<sup>66</sup> Somaiyah Hafeez, "In Balochistan, Families Demand Answers for Forced Disappearances," *The Diplomat*, December 1, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/in-balochistan-families-demand-answers-for-forced-disappearances/>.

<sup>67</sup> Mahrang Baloch, "new chapter in the Baloch struggle for justice in Pakistan," *Al-Jazeera*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/2/8/a-new-chapter-in-the-baloch-struggle-for-justice-in-pakistan>.

situation. The Baloch separatists have exploited the issue to fuel recruitment and attacks. The government can cut the supply line of recruits to Baloch groups if it finds a lasting solution to the issue of enforced disappearances. At least 5,000 Baloch persons are missing on suspicions of aiding or participating in insurgency.

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### Rebellious ISK

ISK has emerged as a new potent threat on Pakistan's threat landscape. Though the group had carried out large-scale attacks in the past against the Shia community, Sufi shrines, religious minorities as well as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUIF), its organisational presence was not very strong.<sup>69</sup> After taking a beating from the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISK remnants have relocated to Pakistan, and they have engaged in indiscriminate violence to dispel the impression of the group's decimation. In other words, ISK is

fighting a battle for survival in Pakistan.<sup>70</sup> However, ISK has bounced back several times in the past, disproving the projection of its demise by leveraging its alliances with like-minded groups and the ability to exploit sectarian and ideological fault-lines on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This time, ISK has found strongholds in the Tirah valley of Khyber and Bajaur tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan's Mastung district.<sup>71</sup>

ISK's growing footprint is challenging for Pakistan for three reasons.

First, ISK, despite being trounced by the Taliban in Afghanistan, has kept its external operations capability intact.<sup>72</sup> The group has plotted and executed attacks, using Central Asian diasporic links as far afield as Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia, along with flexing its muscles in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>73</sup> ISK is the group of concern in Afghanistan for the West and the US. The

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<sup>68</sup> Sammi Deen Baloch, "More than 5,000 people are missing in Balochistan. I want my father back," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2022,

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/06/pakistan-5000-people-disappeared-missing-balochistan>.

<sup>69</sup> Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines and Abdul Sayed, "The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan's Survival under Afghanistan's New Rulers," *CTC Sentinel* 16, Issue 8 (August 2023), pp. 8-15,

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/>.

<sup>70</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Commentary: No Good Choices: The Counterterrorism Dilemmas in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 16, Issue 10 (October-November 2023), pp. 40-52,

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CTC-SENTINEL-102023.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander Palmer and Mackenzie Holtz, "The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, August 3, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> "Islamic State Khorasan Remains a Stubborn Threat in Afghanistan," *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-march-29/>.

<sup>73</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>.

international community is not fixated on Al-Qaeda anymore. At least 13 to 16 terrorist plots against Western interests, nationals and worship places have been traced to ISK in Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> ISK's relocation to Pakistan could bring the country into the crosshairs of the West's more pressure.

Second, ISK is different from other militant groups in the region vis-à-vis its ability to use social media for recruitment, fundraising and propaganda. It has successfully made inroads into the educated segments of middle-class and upper-middle-class youth of Pakistan's urban centres.<sup>75</sup> From a youth radicalisation perspective, the new government will have to pay closer attention to how ISK's social media ecosystem operates and links up with vulnerable segments of society, including females.<sup>76</sup> ISK has shown its knack for luring educated radicals to fold in other South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh as well.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Dan Lamothe and Joby Warrick, "Afghanistan has become a terrorism staging ground again, leak reveals," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/22/afghanistan-terrorism-leaked-documents/>.

<sup>75</sup> Hussain Nadim, "Pakistan's New Breed of Militants," *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/09/pakistans-new-breed-of-militants/>.

<sup>76</sup> Lucy van der Kroft, Sonya Merkova and Horia Mosadiq, "The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment Evolving Trends," *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, (2023), pp. 19-20, <https://static.rusi.org/role-of-gender-in->

Third, ISK capitalises on sectarian fault lines to create space and justify its violence. The anti-Shia Pakistan militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jandullah have been absorbed into ISK. They will try to revive their sectarian militancy through ISK's platforms, which could trigger a violent pushback from Iran-trained/backed Shia militant groups like Liwa al-Zainabiyoun.<sup>78</sup> The Iran-backed Shia militants have a formidable presence in Kurram, Kohat and Hangu districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Likewise, their cells are active in Karachi as well. If Pakistan fails to check ISK's attacks against Shias, it could spark a backlash from Iran-backed Shia groups, triggering a fresh spate of sectarian violence in the country.

### **Non-violent Extremism**

The February 25 incident in Lahore, where a mob harassed a woman, confusing her dress with Arabic calligraphy design with Quranic verses, and accused her of blasphemy, sums up the challenge of non-violent extremism.<sup>79</sup> Had the brave lady police officer not

[taliban-and-is-k-recruitment-rusi-whitehall-report-oct-23.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/taliban-and-is-k-recruitment-rusi-whitehall-report-oct-23.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Abdul Basit, "Threat of Urban Jihadism in South Asia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, No. 3 (March 2018), pp. 1-5.

<sup>78</sup> "A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan," *International Crisis Group Report No. 327*, September 5, 2022, p.15, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-09/327%20Pakistan%20-%20Sectarian%20Violence%20-%20Print.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> Caroline Davies, "Pakistan woman in Arabic script dress saved from mob claiming blasphemy," *BBC News*, February 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68399822>.



interjected and removed the hapless woman from the scene, the mob could have taken her life.<sup>80</sup> At any rate, the incidents bring into sharp focus the interplay between intolerance and ignorance in Pakistan. Some confessional movements and denominational groups have exploited certain religious narratives, which are extremely sensitive, to carve out space for their political activism.<sup>81</sup>

The case of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which has politicised the Barelvi community's grievances around the blasphemy issue and positioned itself as the self-appointed guardian of Prophet Muhammad's honour and finality, is instructive. The way TLP has weaponised the blasphemy issue using social media has resulted in mob violence against religious minorities, vigilante killings and numerous cases of harassment.<sup>82</sup> On one hand, people have used fake blasphemy charges to settle personal scores and vendettas. On the other, any attempt to remove procedural lacunae from the anti-blasphemy laws to stop their abuse has been seen as an

attempt to repeal them. It has created an environment of fear and intimidation where the space for critical inquiry, free-thinking, freedom of opinion and speech is shrinking.<sup>83</sup>

Groups like TLP exist right at the intersection of violent and non-violent extremism. Officially, the group does not profess organised violence as its preferred tactic to achieve its goal of governing Pakistan through the framework of Nizam-e-Mustafa, a theocratic state from the Barelvi lens.<sup>84</sup> However, it does not discourage vigilante violence (read lone actor incidents) and vigilante killings either. In fact, it has popularised unsubstantiated slogans attributing them to the Prophetic tradition like (فَاَقْتُلُوهُ نَبِيًّا سَبًّا مَنْ) Whoever insults the Prophet, kill him).<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, TLP lionises Mumtaz Qadri, the self-confessed assassin and policy bodyguard of former Punjab governor Salman Taseer on fake blasphemy charges. TLP's supporter

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<sup>80</sup> "Female officer rescues woman from violent mob in Lahore's market," *The Nation*, February 26, 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/26-Feb-2024/female-officer-rescues-woman-from-violent-mob-in-lahore-s-market>.

<sup>81</sup> Jawad Syed, "Barelvi Militancy in Pakistan and Salman Taseer's Murder," in *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, Jawad Syed et. al (eds.) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp. 231-272.

<sup>82</sup> Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: An emerging right-wing threat to Pakistan's democracy," *The Atlantic Council*, January 15, 2022,

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/tehreek-e-labbaik-pakistan-an-emerging-right-wing-threat/>.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Abdul Basit, "Why Banning Hybrid Radical Groups May be Counterproductive in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, November 30, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/why-banning-hybrid-radical-groups-may-be-counterproductive-in-south-asia/>.

<sup>85</sup> "Man Sabba Nabiyyan Faqtolohu / ای بن بس نم / فقتلوه نبی،" *YouTube*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXyf0oTqiT4>

base endears Qadri as a hero and a role model.<sup>86</sup>

In sum, the challenge of non-violent extremism is spread across social segments and cannot be eradicated by cracking down on one or two groups. It will require sensitising the masses against the exploitation and weaponisation of certain religious narratives for political gains, and promoting moderation by inculcating peaceful co-existence, diversity and respect for religious heterogeneity.

Though TLP failed to win a seat in the February 8 elections, its overall vote share has surged from 2.2 in 2018 to 2.88 million in 2024.<sup>87</sup> Hence, judging these groups' influence, or the lack thereof, through the number of seats they secure in the elections needs to be reconsidered. Their participation in the electoral process provides legitimacy to their narratives, and as pressure groups, they use their street influence and agitational politics to influence policymaking. TLP, on several occasions, has held successive civilian governments since 2017 hostage through sit-ins to surrender to its

demands. The successive governments have bent backwards to appease TLP and keep it off the streets. Such poor optics worked in TLP's favour, portraying such agreements as victory shields to its constituents.<sup>88</sup>

### Policy Recommendations

Pakistan's new government will have to map the current threat landscape before devising a new internal security policy. Since the Taliban's takeover, as outlined, of Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan's militant landscape has undergone a significant change. It requires a thorough remapping before devising a new policy. The three key areas that the new policy should focus on are: a) youth radicalisation, including the evolving roles of gender within radical and extremist groups, b) the role of social media in facilitating and shaping extremist narratives, recruitment and fundraising, and c) the role of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation facilitating terrorism.

The second key of focus should be the issue of missing persons in Balochistan. A genuine effort to resolve this issue

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<sup>86</sup> Farrukh Khan Pitafi, "How TLP came into being?" *Express Tribune*, November 20, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2330195/how-ttp-came-into-being>.

<sup>87</sup> "General Elections 2024 Pakistan Dashboard," *Gallup Pakistan*, retrieved on March 7, 2024, <https://www.gallupakistanandigitalanalytics.com/general-elections-2024-pakistan-dashboard/>.

<sup>88</sup> Mohammad Asghar and Munawer Azeem, "TLP claims govt accepted all its demands," *Dawn*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1590747>; Vinay

Kaura, "Failing to learn from past mistakes, Pakistan caves to the TLP," *The Middle East Institute*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/failing-learn-past-mistakes-pakistan-caves-ttp>; Kriti M. Shah, "The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan and the defeat of state authority in Pakistan," *Observer Research Foundation*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/tehreek-e-labbaik-pakistan-ttp-defeat-state-authority-pakistan>.

through a political process will dent the appeal of Baloch separatist groups and block a steady recruitment channel to them. Over the years, Baloch separatists have exploited this issue to lure angry Balochs to their fold. The state's inability to find a durable solution to this problem has strengthened the Baloch insurgency. Likewise, the ongoing counterinsurgency framework in Balochistan needs a massive overhauling where the military component should be brought under the political strategy. Currently, a militarized counterinsurgency model is being followed in Balochistan without any political strategy. In hindsight, this militarised counterinsurgency policy has done more harm than good.

Finally, the new government should pay close attention to the evolving alliances and mergers of jihadists and insurgent groups. These groups have been forging coalitions to sustain their violent campaigns in Pakistan. The availability of external sanctuaries to these groups in Iran and Afghanistan is instrumental in their ability to forge cooperative ties. Terrorist groups require safe havens to gain each other's trust and enter into unifications and mergers. So, the new government should devise a strategy to undermine these alliances along with tackling the question of their support networks in Iran and Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion**

The new government's plate is full as far as internal security threats are

concerned. From one end of the threat spectrum to the other, violent and non-violent extremist groups are entrenched in a system which lacks governance and legitimacy and suffers from ethnic, political and sectarian fault lines. Likewise, the external sanctuaries of TTP and Baloch insurgents in Afghanistan and Iran further add a layer of complexity to these challenges. So, alongside revising the existing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency frameworks, the new government's diplomacy towards Afghanistan and Iran will also be a key component in tackling the externally-enabled internal security challenges.

As the great power competition has come to define global geopolitics, the efficacy of military means to provide decisive strategic advantages to their respective states has declined. The nature of warfare has transformed, and the robustness of non-kinetic (non-military) means, such as social resilience and cohesion, economic well-being, and technological advancement, is equally crucial. Without non-kinetic means, it will be difficult for the new government to gain a decisive upper hand against the abovementioned threats, and any security gains will remain fragile. In other words, while devising the new internal security policy, maintaining a balance between kinetic and non-kinetic components is crucial.

Finally, Pakistan's struggle against extremist groups will be a generational fight requiring a whole-of-state-and-

society approach. The states can push back against violent extremist threats, but it is the societies that prevail over these groups by refusing to embrace their narratives and exhibiting social cohesion. This is a fight for Pakistan's heart and soul; we cannot afford to lose it.

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