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# Minutes of the 49th Advisory Board Meeting of NIOC



The 49th Advisory Board Meeting of the National Initiative against Organised Crime (NIOC) was held online on Tuesday 12 August 2025. The following AB members attended: Tariq Parvez, Zahid Hussain, Samina Ahmed, Manzoor Ahmed and Jawaid Akhtar. Zubair Habib could not attend as he was in the US.

The NIOC/CGR directorate was represented by Tariq Khosa, Sarmad Saeed, Kaleem Imam, Tariq Javed, Ghulam Ali, Ammar Jaffri, Nawaz Nadeem and Hassan Sardar. Saud Ahmed, Azam Khan and Saroop Ijaz could not attend due to their other commitments.

Two new coordinators from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan were introduced to the board. Tariq Javed, a senior retired police officer, will cover the KP province. Ghulam Ali Leghari, the Rule of Law facilitator, based in Quetta, will cover Balochistan province.

The following matters came under discussion:

- 1) Recent visit of Paddy Ginn, Director of the Global Initiative Against Organized Crime (GI-TOC) to Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore was a great success. There are six members of GI Network in Pakistan, out of about 770 members globally: Shoaib Suddle, Tariq Parvez, Tariq Khosa, Zahid Hussain, Samina Ahmed and Kaleem Imam. Tariq Khosa is on GI's Global Board. GI has recently launched its regional Central and South Asia Observatory. For Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, the CGR is well positioned to partner with the GI-TOC in undertaking various studies and projects related to transnational organised crime. CGR is

a leading civil society organization against TOC in Pakistan. The Strategic Advisory Group for GI-TOC CSA will meet soon to follow up on Paddy Ginn's visit to Pakistan.

- 2) CGR is playing a lead role on behalf of the UNTOC Review Process Mechanism in assisting Pakistan's National Focal Person Dr Ehsan Sadiq, DG AMLA, to represent 25 NGOs and 50 national experts on TOC, during Cluster-1 (Criminalisation and Jurisdiction) review process. CGR continues to represent Pakistan's civil society in the UNTOC annual Constructive Dialogues since 2022. It has also participated in the UNTOC Conference of Parties held in 2022 and 2024. It has published annual reports on UNTOC Implementation Progress in Pakistan for 2022, 2023, and 2024.
- 3) UN Crime Congress is going to be held in Abu Dhabi in June 2026. The last congress was held in Kyoto, Japan in 2022. The CGR has applied for in-person participation for the Crime Congress.
- 4) The UN Pact for the Future conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya in June 2024. The UN Secretary General has established an Implementation Secretariat in New York. There are 5 key areas and 54 action points of the UN Pact for the Future. While the UN Member States are involved in key decision-making, the civil society is also meant to play a key major role in advancing the agenda of the Pact for the Future. The progress will be reviewed in 2028. CGR will get in touch with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other key GOP Stakeholders to collaborate on this latest UN initiative.
- 5) The 2nd International Day against TOC will be held on 15 November 2025. CGR, in collaboration with the CFHRs and GI-TOC held an online conference on the 1st International Day against TOC in Lahore on 15 November 2024. John Collins, Director Academic Engagement, based in Vienna, participated in person and was one of the keynote speakers. This year on 15 November, the AFIGP is holding its annual get together in Peshawar, hosted by IGP KP. The theme of the conference is Innovative Policing to Combat Organised Crime. CGR/NIOC's perspectives will be presented in the conference on 15 November 2025 in Peshawar.
- 6) An online Asia Regional Society Network (NET4U Asia) is also being planned for November 2025. CGR, CFHR and RSIL will be representing Pakistan in the Youth Congress against TOC.
- 7) CGR/NIOC has undertaken 12 research projects and studies for global donors since 2019. An average of 2 projects per year were undertaken. The research teams, under the strategic advice of NIOC AB President Tariq Parvez, have come up with quality policy briefs, position papers, and research studies. We will maintain the high quality of the selective studies to be undertaken in future. In that regard, an excellent team of young and highly qualified lawyers and researchers of the Centre for Human Rights (CFHR), is adding value to collaborative initiatives being undertaken.
- 8) Tariq Javed was requested to write a position paper on the pros and cons of the impact of the NMDs (newly merged districts) of erstwhile Fata, on organised crime.

# Errors in counterterrorism

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**MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA**

**“THE population is the prize.” Those familiar with counterinsurgency warfare theories will recognise the context in which David Galula coined this phrase. Galula argued that insurgency is not a military contest but a political struggle, in which both insurgents and counterinsurgents vie for the population’s support and allegiance.**

Recent developments in Bajaur, where citizens are protesting against military operations and the tragic events in Tirah Valley last week, when five demonstrators were killed after security forces allegedly opened fire, must be viewed through this lens. These incidents suggest an urgent need for the state to reassess its counterterrorism (CT) strategies, which appear increasingly detached from the goal of winning hearts and minds.

In his seminal book *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Galula emphasises that military force must be subordinate to political objectives. Force used without legitimacy alienates civilians and reinforces the insurgents’ narrative. It is essential to remember that insurgents do not need to win militarily; they only need to survive, avoid defeat, and steadily erode the state’s credibility in the eyes of its people.

Militants in KP’s tribal districts have been challenging the state for the past two decades. Despite numerous operational successes, security forces remain engaged in prolonged conflict, arguably with little substantive change in their tactics or strategic orientation. The prevailing operational approach remains focused on achieving military victories while largely neglecting the critical objective of winning the population’s allegiance.

This strategic oversight not only deepens mistrust among the local population but also fosters suspicion towards the counterinsurgent forces themselves, ironically serving the militants’ very aim of delegitimising the state’s presence and actions.

Occasionally, the security forces convene jirgas with local tribes and mobilise lashkars against militants, as was recently seen in Bajaur, where security officials sought to gain the tribesmen’s confidence regarding their CT operations. However, such engagements are infrequent and seldom integrated into a broader strategy. The dominant pattern remains one of evacuating areas and displacing local populations or conducting small- to medium-scale operations that restrict civilian movement, often without prior warning or any provision for livelihoods.

Within this framework, engagement with local communities lacks the consistency, trust-building and institutional backing necessary for a successful CT strategy. Without a deliberate reorientation towards long-term civilian support and political legitimacy, operational victories are unlikely to translate into sustainable peace.



The engagement initiative in Bajaur came only after the launch of a military offensive against militants, a sequence that undermined its effectiveness. In that operation, three civilians, including a 12-year-old boy and a young girl, were reportedly killed, and at least 12 others injured. Engagement should have come first. The local population should have been taken into confidence before deploying a heavy military contingent and imposing prolonged curfews.

Moreover, the provincial government was apparently not brought on board during this operation, further deepening mistrust among the population. The jirga in Bajaur should have been initiated by the provincial government rather than the security forces to lend greater political legitimacy and reduce the perception of unilateral action.

KP is one of Pakistan's most critical provinces. It is grappling with severe governance challenges and widespread political discontent. The political outlook of the majority in KP often diverges from that of the power centres in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, fostering a sense of alienation and suspicion. Several districts in the province have become ungovernable due to persistent militancy. In such a context, nothing can replace the value of a consensus-based CT strategy, one that is locally rooted and politically inclusive.

The recent incident in Khyber district's Tirah Valley mentioned earlier, illustrates the urgency of such an approach. In response, a local jirga not only demanded a formal inquiry into the killings but also called for the evacuation of civilian homes occupied by security forces within 15 days and an end to unnecessary harassment of citizens at checkpoints. These demands reflect deep-seated grievances and highlight the need for a more humane, transparent, and politically accountable approach to security operations.

Pakistan's departure from the colonial-era counterinsurgency approach of rule by exception was shaped by a mix of military repression and divide-and-rule politics, rooted in imperial anxieties over borders, tribal autonomy and anti-colonial resistance.

The Frontier Crimes Regulation, based on collective action, was the worst legal framework, which Pakistan abandoned after seven decades. But there is still a mindset that wants to run the affairs of the tribal districts within the same framework. If someone is thinking of bringing back these laws and restoring Fata's status, it would be a grave mistake, which can trigger anger and mistrust.

The British co-opted the maliks and used jirgas to manage conflict and secure cooperation. Tribal lashkars were at times mobilised to act on behalf of the state. However, these colonial-era approaches can be counterproductive today. Past military operations in the tribal districts have significantly transformed the region's social structures. The forced displacement of local populations not only traumatised communities but also exposed many to urban life and alternative social models. As a result, a new middle class is emerging in these districts, one that does not identify with colonial methods of control. While a few traditional elders and religious parties, who once benefited from draconian colonial laws, may still support such approaches, they no longer represent the broader aspirations of the population.

As echoed by David Galula and reaffirmed in modern counterinsurgency doctrines, a lasting solution to insurgency lies not in overwhelming military force but in political strategy. Counterinsurgency is 80 per cent political and only 20pc military. It demands serious attention to the underlying grievances that fuel unrest, corruption, exclusion, inadequate service delivery and ethnic or sectarian marginalisation.

Military force must be applied with precision and restraint, avoiding harm to civilians, which only deepens alienation. Insurgencies are long and complex wars; tactical victories mean little without strategic consistency and political legitimacy. The most effective strategies are those that are adaptive, locally grounded and responsive to evolving realities on the ground. The wisdom distilled from decades of conflict is simple yet profound — we can't kill our way out of an insurgency.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 3RD, 2025**

# Gender-based violence surges in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, says report

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**ISLAMABAD: A report on gender-based violence has showed high levels of abuse in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024 with hundreds of cases and almost no conviction.**

The report said Balochistan recorded 21 rape, 185 kidnapping/abduction, 32 honour killing cases and 160 incidents of domestic violence in 2024 with no convictions across all indicators. It said KP reported 258 rape, 943 kidnapping/abduction, 134 honour killing and 446 domestic violence cases with only one conviction recorded.

The report “District Analysis of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) - Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2024)” was released by Sustainable Social Development Organisation (SSDO).

The report presented alarming trends of underreporting, systemic justice gaps and district-specific hotspots of gender-based violence in the two provinces.

The study analysed four key indicators: rape, kidnapping/abduction, honour killings, and domestic violence across all districts of Balochistan and KP, using data obtained through Right to Information (RTI) requests under Article 19-A of the constitution and laws of the provinces.

It provides both the number of reported cases and crime rates per 100,000 population.

The high-risk districts for honour killings in Balochistan include Naseerabad and Sohbatpur, Quetta for rape, kidnapping and domestic violence and Swat, Upper Kohistan and Mansehra in KP for multiple GBV indicators. Underreporting was particularly acute in rural and tribal districts, where social stigma, lack of access to justice and weak institutional presence hindered survivors from coming forward.

Syed Kausar Abbas, Executive Director SSDO, said the absence of convictions despite hundreds of registered cases underscored critical weaknesses in law enforcement, prosecution and survivor protection mechanisms.

SSDO called for urgent action to address these gaps by establishing GBV-specific crisis centres, gender crime units and provincial data observatories.

He added that despite hundreds of registered GBV cases in 2024, convictions remained almost non-existent reflecting deep-rooted systemic failures where survivors are left without justice.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 3RD, 2025**

# Terror potpourri

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**DESPITE persistent denials by the Afghan Taliban that terrorist groups are using their country as a safe haven, the global consensus — backed by evidence — is that Afghanistan indeed continues to be a base for militants and violent extremists.**

For example, the latest edition of the relevant UN Security Council monitoring report on IS and Al Qaeda reveals that both the banned TTP and IS-K continue to operate in Afghanistan with relative freedom. In fact, where the latter group is concerned, the report says that IS-K poses a major threat regionally and internationally. The UN document again validates what Pakistan has long been arguing — that the Afghan Taliban are not doing enough to address the presence of terrorist groups on their soil, and that these outfits pose a significant challenge to regional security.

With regard to the TTP, which has been carrying out terrorist attacks in Pakistan with regularity, the report states that the outfit has some 6,000 fighters, and that it “continued to receive ... logistical and operational support” from the Afghan Taliban. This is despite the fact that some within the Afghan Taliban were of the view that Afghanistan’s de facto rulers should distance themselves from the TTP. The document also observes that the TTP maintains ties with IS-K, Al Qaeda as well as Baloch militants.

Interestingly, the TTP seems to be ‘diversifying’ its options, as it has links with both the Afghan Taliban and IS-K, which oppose one another. The UN report points out that IS-K “is the most serious threat” regionally and internationally. For this country, it should be a matter of great concern that this dangerous group is reportedly operating “close to the Pakistani” border, where it is training suicide bombers, who include minors.

These findings should prompt the Pakistani state, regional countries as well as the international community to address the problem of militancy in Afghanistan with alacrity. Though the Foreign Office has said there has been “better receptivity” to Pakistan’s concerns in Kabul, concrete action is needed from the Afghan Taliban regime to ensure that the potpourri of terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil do not transform into a global security nightmare.

While Pakistan needs to secure its borders and ensure that TTP and IS-K terrorists are not able to enter the country and find a foothold here, on its part, Kabul must do much more to neutralise the militant threat in Afghanistan. The prospect of the TTP and IS-K joining forces is a frightening one, and this budding terrorist alliance must be nipped in the bud.

The TTP has spilt innocent blood for years in this country, while the world has witnessed the horrors that the IS is capable of inflicting in the Middle East. Therefore, urgent action is needed to address the problem of terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 4TH, 2025**



# Peace and justice

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## MOHAMMAD ALI BABAKHEL

**THE Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity by 2030. Achieving these ideals is difficult in a world that is increasingly divided, with some regions enjoying sustained levels of peace and security while others are confronted with endless cycles of violence. Violence and insecurity have a destructive impact on global peace, affecting economic growth. Addressing this requires a global approach and cooperation.**

SDG 16 — ‘Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions’ — focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. For developing societies with strong colonial pasts, the implementation of SDG 16 is complex. Its primary aim is to reduce all forms of violence by working with governments and communities to find solutions to conflict.

It includes 12 targets and 23 indicators. Its priority areas include strengthening police and judicial systems, community-based violence prevention programmes, reintegration of former combatants, ensuring access to justice through legal aid programmes and simplification of court procedures, human rights training for police and judiciary, fighting corruption through transparency in public finance, anti-corruption commissions, whistleblower protection laws, and building effective institutions with transparent governance structures, citizen participation in decision-making and digital governance. To protect human rights, national human rights commissions are to be formed, and human rights protection laws and monitoring mechanisms for rights violations are to be established.

A few countries have introduced innovations to achieve the targets set in SDG 16. Rwanda introduced community courts (Gacaca) for post-genocide justice. They were designed to address the massive scale of crimes committed during the Rwandan genocide by involving local communities in the judicial process. Argentina opened 90 access-to-justice centres. Latvia planned the promotion of dialogue and civic education through accessible spaces like libraries and museums. Georgia initiated juvenile justice reforms that have lowered child incarceration and recidivism rates. South Korea and Sierra Leone established legal aid corporations and justice centres that have provided assistance in millions of cases, expanding equitable legal access. Australia introduced interdepartmental governance mechanisms for improved coordination, and Nigeria introduced a youth alliance to incorporate the participation of youth in civic engagement.

In Pakistan, point 20 of the National Action Plan lists a commitment to revamp and reform the criminal justice system. Point 12 of the revised NAP 2021 includes it as one of its priorities. Pakistan has also drafted two internal security policies: NISP I 2014, NISP II 2018 and the National PVE Policy

2024. These federal initiatives need to be translated into action plans by all provinces, irrespective of political inclinations, as they are meant to improve institutional capacity and ensure order, security and peace. Pakistan's security rankings warrant more coordinated efforts among all federal and provincial agencies. In the Global Terrorism Index 2025, Pakistan has been ranked the second most impacted country by terrorism. In the Rule of Law index, it has been ranked 129th, and in the Human Development Index at 168.

Translating global commitments into tangible action requires locally tailored strategies. When evaluating the legal system, countries need to consider the cost, complexity, discrimination and distance from rural communities. In rural areas, community-based justice solutions should be funded, and barriers to justice for vulnerable groups addressed. By improving transparency through digital tools, fostering partnerships between governments and civil society, strengthening legal aid and anti-corruption bodies, empowering women and youth in governance and peacebuilding, and encouraging robust data collection systems, the hurdles may be overcome.

Implementation strategies include policy reform to align national laws with international human rights standards, capacity building of bureaucracy, data collection, encouraging civil society and youth engagement in governance, and fostering international cooperation.

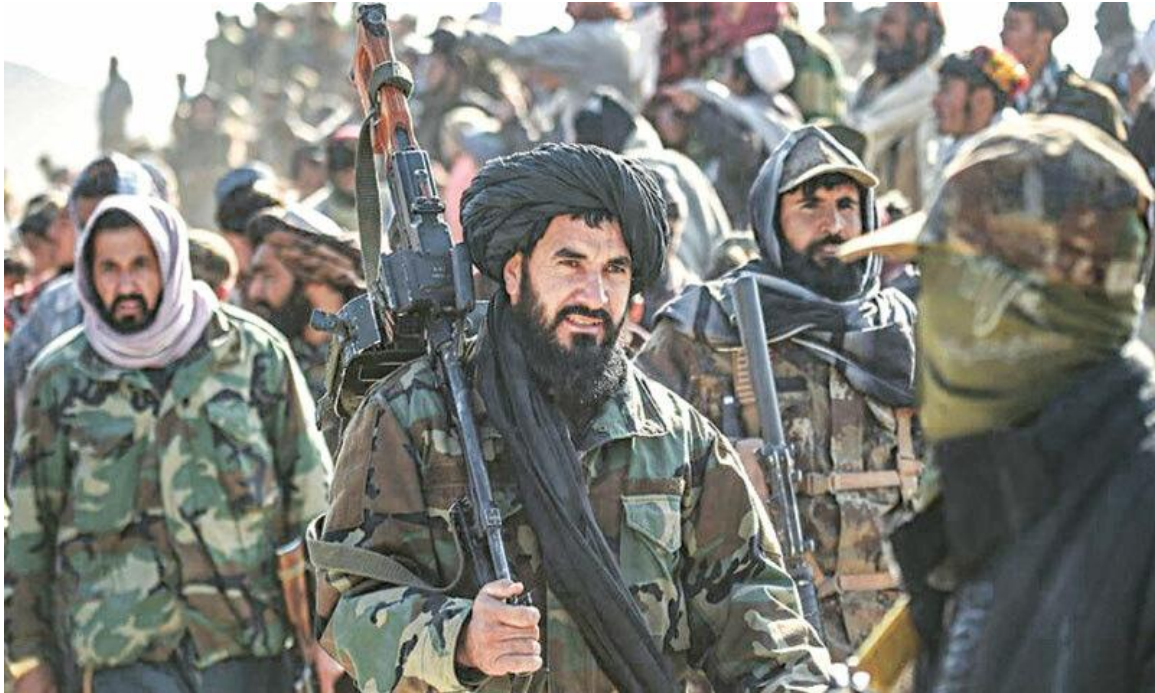
The SDGs and peace are interconnected. A developing state should interpret SDG 16's targets more flexibly. It must be understood that investing in the criminal justice system is not a non-developmental activity, but an investment in sustainable development and peace.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 7TH, 2025**

# Rethinking the Taliban doctrine

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**ZIA UR REHMAN**



Just one month before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, a closed-door discussion organised by an Islamabad-based security think-tank brought together regional experts, retired military officers and policymakers to assess the potential fallout of the Taliban's rapid territorial gains in Afghanistan amid the US military withdrawal.

While many participants expressed concern over a looming security vacuum and its likely spillover into Pakistan, a few struck a markedly optimistic tone. Among them was a retired senior military official who declared confidently: "The good days are returning. The Delhi-leaning set-up in Kabul is on its way out. With the Taliban back in charge, all Islamabad needs to do is press for the closure of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan [TTP] and Baloch separatist sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, and the Taliban will comply. They owe us."

He was not alone. Across Pakistan's political and security establishment, the Taliban's return in August 2021 was initially greeted with a cautious but clear sense of opportunity. A friendly regime in Kabul appeared to serve Islamabad's long-standing strategic goals: rolling back Indian influence, reducing Western presence and restoring Pakistan's central role in shaping regional outcomes.

Then-prime minister Imran Khan hailed the moment as the breaking of "the shackles of slavery." Then-interior minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed, speaking triumphantly at the Torkham border crossing, predicted the rise of "a new bloc" that would elevate the region's global significance.

Even Khawaja Muhammad Asif, then in opposition and now defence minister, posted a photograph of Taliban leader Mullah Baradar alongside US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, captioned: “You may have the power, but God is with us. Allah-o-Akbar.”

Four years later, that optimism has all but vanished. As Afghanistan slips from international headlines, Pakistan faces mounting costs from what was once hailed as a strategic win. Instead of securing its western frontier, Islamabad confronts a resurgence of militant violence, a worsening security climate and a strained relationship with a regime it once considered an ally.

Drawing on recent fieldwork in both countries, this article examines how the Taliban’s return has deepened Pakistan’s domestic security crises, exposing the limits of its longstanding strategic assumptions.

## ACROSS THE BORDER, VIOLENCE RISES AGAIN

For the political and religious elders of Bajaur, the stakes could not have been higher. With the government poised to launch a new counterterrorism operation in the district bordering Afghanistan against the TTP and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) — the local affiliate of the transnational Islamic State network — they took it upon themselves to negotiate a peaceful resolution through a jirga.

Their appeal to local TTP commanders was straightforward: either retreat into Afghanistan or relocate to remote mountainous areas to engage security forces. Such a move, they argued, would spare civilian populations from the destruction, displacement and the fear that inevitably follow armed conflict in villages.

Yet the militants, sensing a shift in regional power dynamics, refused.

Emboldened by the Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan, the TTP leaders, according to a participant in the jirga, demanded terms that Pakistan could never accept. The talks collapsed, making renewed conflict all but inevitable. The renewed military operation was launched on August 11.

The Taliban’s triumph in Kabul has emboldened militant groups across Pakistan’s western belt. Alongside the TTP, groups such as the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baloch ethno-separatist organisations such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) have exploited the shifting regional balance to intensify their insurgencies against the Pakistani state.

ISKP — previously weakened by crackdowns by the US, the former Afghan government, and the Taliban — has also been reinvigorated since the Taliban’s takeover. After facing sustained pressure from the Taliban inside Afghanistan, some ISKP fighters crossed into Pakistan, particularly into Bajaur, where the group has since carried out several high-profile attacks.

The release of this year’s Global Terrorism Index (GTI) by the Institute for Economics and Peace think-tank coincided with an attempted hijacking of the Jaffer Express passenger train in Balochistan by BLA militants in March, an incident that drew international attention.

According to the GTI, Pakistan is now ranked as the world’s second most terrorism-affected country, after Burkina Faso, a name unfamiliar to many Pakistanis. The report also highlighted a

troubling reality: three Pakistani militant groups, the TTP, the BLA and the ISKP, are among the world's 10 deadliest terrorist organisations, posing a formidable challenge to Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy.

Findings from the GTI, corroborated by statistics from law enforcement agencies and other security research organisations, indicate that Pakistan has witnessed a sharp escalation in terrorism since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. In the years since, the country has faced a renewed wave of attacks, including suicide bombings, targeted assassinations, and complex assaults on military installations, political gatherings and mosques.

## **RESURGENCE OF MILITANT GROUPS**

Until 2020, militant outfits such as the TTP and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group were under sustained pressure from multiple fronts. Pakistan's large-scale counterterrorism campaigns, including Operation Zarb-i-Azb launched in 2014, inflicted heavy losses on their ranks. Internal divisions further weakened these groups, while US drone strikes eliminated much of their senior leadership. By that period, many TTP factions had either gone dormant or dispersed into Afghanistan's eastern provinces, including Khost, Kunar and Nangarhar.

In Balochistan, too, attacks by the BLA and other major separatist organisations had declined, due to a persistent security crackdown and internal splintering.

However, the US-Taliban peace talks in Doha and the subsequent American withdrawal from Afghanistan breathed new life into Pakistani militant groups, particularly the TTP. The anticipation of a Taliban victory triggered a wave of reunifications among previously fragmented TTP factions.

By mid-2020, several key splinters, including those aligned with al-Qaeda, had rejoined under the leadership of TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali. In internal communications, Wali praised the Afghan Taliban's unity and urged Pakistani jihadist groups to follow suit, reportedly telling his commanders: "The jihad in Pakistan will not succeed until all mujahideen unite under one flag, as our Afghan brothers have done."

The Taliban's return to full power in August 2021 was a watershed moment for militant ideologues across the region. For the TTP, it was both an inspiration and a validation of their long-term strategy.

Since then, Pakistan has seen a sharp resurgence in insurgent violence. In 2024, terrorist attacks rose 70 percent from the previous year, reaching 521 incidents. These claimed 852 lives, a 23 percent increase in fatalities, according to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies. The surge marks the fourth consecutive year of escalating attacks on security forces and related casualties since 2021.

## **"PERMISSIVE ENVIRONMENT" IN AFGHANISTAN**

The Pakistani military recently claimed it had killed 47 militants in two separate raids, as they attempted to infiltrate from Afghanistan into Balochistan's Zhob district, one of the deadliest cross-border clashes in recent months. While the military provided few details, it identified the



militants as belonging to Fitna al-Khwarij, a term coined by the military leadership for the TTP and other Islamist militant groups.

“While the US may have ended its presence, it left behind an unstable Afghanistan, making it a sanctuary for regional militant groups,” a senior security official in Islamabad tells me. “Whether it is ideological confidence, access to abandoned US weaponry, or physical sanctuaries, these groups are receiving active support or passive facilitation from the Taliban administration in Kabul.”

A recent report by the UN Security Council’s Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team echoed these concerns. It noted that the TTP, operating in a “permissive environment” in Afghanistan, now fields around 6,000 fighters and has acquired advanced weaponry, significantly enhancing its operational capabilities with substantial logistical and tactical support from the de facto Afghan authorities.

Muhammad Feyyaz, a Lahore-based academic specialising in terrorism studies, describes the Taliban’s return as “costly” for Pakistan. “Before the takeover, Pakistan faced no existential threat from Afghanistan. Now, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan poses exactly that,” he says. He said that the Taliban administration is actively backing the TTP’s efforts to regain Pakistan’s tribal belt as part of a larger vision for a transnational Islamic emirate.

While Pakistan’s military demonstrated during Operation Zarb-i-Azb that it could inflict severe damage on militant networks, the security environment of today is fundamentally different, more fragmented, more complex, and far less conducive to decisive action. The political, security, and economic realities of post-2021 Pakistan are inextricably linked to the dramatic shifts in Afghanistan following the Taliban’s return to power.



Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi meets with Pakistan’s army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, in Rawalpindi on May 7, 2023: the resurgence of militant groups, such as the TTP and Baloch separatists, has emerged as Pakistan’s most pressing security challenge in years | AP

Pakistan has not been able to mount an effective counterterrorism response against TTP, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction and other groups due to the US exit from Afghanistan, fractured relations with the Taliban, divergent postures on the TTP and the growing state-society gap in the areas along with Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions, according to Abdul Basit, an expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

## **POLITICAL CHAOS, FRACTURED CONSENSUS**

In recent weeks, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur has been navigating turbulent political waters. Meeting with jirga leaders from the former tribal districts, he encountered a unified stance against any new military operation and the mass displacement it could trigger. Tribal elders instead proposed a broad-based, empowered jirga, including federal and provincial representatives, elders and key stakeholders, to open dialogue directly with the Taliban administration in Kabul.

Gandapur also faces resistance from within his own party. From jail, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) chairman Imran Khan has warned against authorising military action in KP, particularly in the merged tribal districts. The party's stance is explicit: no renewed operations on home soil.

This is a sharp contrast to 2014, when the Karachi airport attack and the Army Public School (APS) massacre forged an unprecedented national consensus behind Operation Zarb-i-Azb. Political parties, civil society and the media stood united.

Today, however, major political parties, including PTI, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) and the Awami National Party (ANP), openly oppose a new offensive, warning of mass displacement and social disruption. Grassroots peace campaigns in KP are already rallying public resistance, underscoring that, without political consensus, the state's ability to act decisively will remain limited. Since 2008, residents have endured multiple operations under different names, yet neither peace has returned nor terrorism has been eradicated, local activists complain.

## **CROSS-BORDER SANCTUARIES**

A decade ago, the TTP was weakened by internal divisions, defections to the ISKP and the loss of senior leaders to US drone strikes. Today, the picture is starkly different. Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the TTP has consolidated its splinter factions, absorbing smaller outfits linked to al-Qaeda and sectarian militancy.

"They've now dispersed across Pakistan, while securing hideouts in Afghanistan," a senior Peshawar-based law enforcement official says. "The Taliban regime not only shelters them but also arms them with modern weapons and night-vision gear abandoned by US forces." This level of support marks a significant shift from the previous Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani, which had at times cooperated with Islamabad to capture senior TTP leaders, such as Maulvi Faqir Muhammad of Bajaur.

The Taliban administration's release of hundreds of imprisoned TTP fighters from Afghan jails has revitalised the insurgency, allowing the group to regroup, rearm and conduct operations with heightened sophistication, according to officials.

Adding to the complexity is the emergence of a new jihadist alliance, Ittehadul Mujahideen Pakistan (IMP), comprised of the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction, Lashkar-i-Islam, and Inqilab-i-Islami Pakistan. Since its formation, the IMP has conducted numerous attacks against Pakistani police and armed forces, primarily in southern KP. The alliance has also expressed its intention to expand operations into other provinces, including Punjab.

The overall conflict has also seen a growing use of drones by both militant groups and state security forces, tactics that have, tragically, increased civilian casualties, including children.

## **ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS, REDUCED US SUPPORT**

Pakistan now confronts the challenge of counterterrorism in an environment devoid of the robust external support it enjoyed a decade ago. In 2014, political stability, relative economic health, and American assistance, including funding, intelligence sharing, and targeted drone strikes, played a decisive role in degrading TTP capabilities.

Today, the economic situation is far bleaker. Mounting debt and fiscal instability have left fewer resources for intelligence gathering, advanced technology procurement, and the deployment of specialised manpower, all crucial to effective counterterrorism operations.

According to Basit, “The US exit from Afghanistan, which had provided intelligence and financial assistance while also restricting TTP and other groups’ movements into Afghanistan, altered regional dynamics.”

There are signs of renewed, albeit limited, US cooperation. Washington recently acknowledged Pakistan’s role in capturing a regional ISKP leader linked to the 2021 Kabul airport attack that killed American troops. Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir’s two visits within just one and a half months to Washington underscore Islamabad’s efforts to re-engage with the US security establishment.

On August 11, the U.S. administration designated the BLA and its suicide bomber unit, the Majeed Brigade, as foreign terrorist organizations.

However, Basit warns that it will be nowhere near the coordination we witnessed during the war on terror or the pre-2021 era.

“During that time, it was a US-led, Pakistan-assisted counterterrorism template. Now it is a Pakistan-led, US-enabled counterterrorism equation, where Washington will provide technical support, training and intelligence assistance, and some specialised counterterrorism equipment,” he adds. “But, there will be no funding made available to Pakistan.”

He says that counterterrorism is no more a top priority for the US; it is a tactical concern, and the Munir-Trump bromance will unlock limited, tactical and transactional cooperation on counterterrorism.

## BETWEEN BROTHERHOOD AND BLOWBACK

“It’s easy for Pakistan to demand the expulsion of muhajireen from Afghanistan,” says Qari Jamaluddin, a mid-ranking official in the Taliban administration, using the term to refer to Pakistani militants who sought refuge in Afghanistan after Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-i-Azb in 2014. “But such demands do not align with the jihadist worldview, nor with the principles of Islamic or Pashtun brotherhood.”

We met in Kabul on a cold evening in late 2023. I had first known Jamaluddin during his Karachi days. A staunch loyalist of the Taliban’s first regime, his family fled to Pakistan following the 2001 US invasion. In exile, he attended a madressah [religious school] and ran a cloth shop, but his conviction in the Taliban’s eventual return never faltered. “It was only a matter of time,” he would often say.

Shortly after Kabul fell in August 2021, Islamabad pressed the Taliban leadership to stop the TTP from launching attacks inside Pakistan. The effort failed. Instead, the Taliban urged Islamabad to address the TTP’s so-called “grievances” and offered to mediate peace talks, a proposal that exposed the depth of their reluctance to act against former battlefield allies. Talks began but quickly collapsed, leading to renewed violence.

Officially, the Taliban administration denies harbouring foreign militants and frames Pakistani concerns as internal political matters. Yet their counterterrorism policy remains selective: while actively targeting the ISKP, they tolerate the TTP. The Taliban refrain from labelling the TTP as terrorists, viewing them instead as ideological kin and historical comrades-in-arms.

Jamaluddin characterises Islamabad’s support for the Taliban as strictly transactional. “Pakistan backed us to counter Indian influence but, at the same time, it handed over our leaders to the Americans. We endured it because every insurgency needs sanctuaries in a neighbouring country.”

In Pakistan, the Taliban once found an enabling ecosystem across segments of society that allowed them to reorganise and mount a lethal insurgency from around 2003 onward. Without that support, Jamaluddin acknowledges, the Taliban’s rise to power would have been far more difficult.

“It was not the Pakistani state, but the TTP, Pakistani religious activists and madressah teachers that stood unwaveringly with the Taliban,” he says. “They fought and died for us while being hunted by US drones in North Waziristan.”

Many Taliban leaders and experts argue that the reluctance to confront the TTP runs deeper than politics. “The relationship between the Taliban and the TTP is built upon shared ideological, historical, and cultural bonds,” says Jabbar Durrani, an Afghan researcher based in Britain. “This connection extends beyond the top leadership to include their rank-and-file members, who often maintain close personal and operational ties.”

Former-Afghan refugee minister Khalilur Rehman Haqqani, later assassinated in an ISKP attack in December 2024, recounted in a 2023 TV interview how TTP founder Baitullah Mehsud once captured dozens of Pakistani security personnel to secure the release of Taliban prisoners,



including Haqqani himself. For many Taliban leaders, such episodes are enduring reminders of shared sacrifice.

This history reinforces the perception among the Taliban's ranks in Afghanistan that cutting ties with the TTP would be both ungrateful and dangerous. "Any heavy-handed move against the TTP," warns Durrani, "could trigger internal dissent and drive their fighters into the arms of ISKP, already locked in a bitter conflict with the Afghan Taliban."



Police officials examine the site of a suicide bombing carried out by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) at a Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) rally in Bajaur district on July 31, 2023: frustrated by a surge in terrorist attacks, Pakistan has adopted a mix of hard and soft power tactics to pressure the Taliban administration in Kabul | AFP

## PAKISTAN'S RESPONSE

Frustrated by a surge in terrorist attacks, Pakistan has adopted a mix of hard and soft power tactics to pressure the Taliban administration in Kabul into acting against the TTP.

Since 2022, the Pakistani military has carried out at least three airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan, the most significant occurring in December 2024, when jets targeted suspected Pakistani militant hideouts in Paktika province.

In parallel, Islamabad has sought to exert economic and demographic pressure. Since September 2023, it has expelled over one million undocumented Afghans, imposed a strict visa regime at the previously open Chaman border crossing, and tightened Afghan transit trade. These measures, which drew condemnation from UN agencies and human rights organisations, have disrupted bilateral trade and restricted Afghanistan's access to essential imports.



While Pakistan's Interior Ministry defended the expulsions as a "sovereign right to regulate illegal foreign nationals", the timing suggested a calculated move to increase pressure on Kabul.

## IS PAKISTAN'S AFGHAN POLICY A FAILURE?

"Whether it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 or the US-led intervention in 2001, Pakistan could not remain neutral," a senior military official remarks when asked if the country's Afghan policy has failed, as many critics contend. "Our geographic location has never afforded us the luxury of detachment. Proximity to conflict zones involving global powers has historically required us to take sides, always to safeguard national interests," he adds.

Pakistan's longstanding policy toward Afghanistan has been a subject of intense debate, often viewed by critics as a series of miscalculations. Yet, officials in Islamabad defend their approach as a necessary response to a complex geopolitical landscape, driven by the country's unique geographic position. The Taliban's refusal to act against anti-Pakistan militants now exposes the limits of Islamabad's longstanding reliance on non-state actors.

From arming the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet Union in the 1980s to supporting the Taliban's rise in 1996, and even after its ouster in 2001, Pakistan has often viewed Afghanistan less as a sovereign neighbour and more as "strategic depth." Critics contend this policy has produced severe blowback, fuelling militancy, straining border relations and deepening Pakistan's diplomatic isolation.

Today, after four years of the Taliban's rule, Pakistan is attempting a delicate balancing act. While it extended swift recognition to the Taliban regime in 1996, its response to the Taliban's return in August 2021 has been far more cautious. Islamabad has not formally recognised the new government but has granted it de facto recognition, allowing ambassadorial work to continue. This measured approach reflects lessons learned from the international censure that followed its early recognition in the 1990s.

Islamabad is now advocating for an "inclusive" political settlement in Afghanistan, a position it shares with other regional powers such as China, Russia and Iran. This stance, which emphasises incorporating diverse ethnic and political factions, marks a strategic shift away from an over-reliance on any single group, such as the Taliban, and highlights Pakistan's effort to align its policy with international consensus.

The future of Pakistan's Afghan policy hinges on whether this new approach can navigate the intricate dynamics of internal security, regional rivalries and the push for international legitimacy.

## A TASTE OF RESOLVE

The resurgence of militant groups such as the TTP and Baloch separatists has emerged as Pakistan's most pressing security challenge in years. The threat is no longer confined to the country's peripheries, but is steadily encroaching inland.

In Punjab's Bhakkar district, authorities have warned government employees to avoid neighbouring areas of KP, amid credible kidnapping threats. In Balochistan, the suspension of

internet services until August 31 underscores the severity of the separatist threat and the daily disruption it inflicts on residents.

Four years of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan have not led to regional stability but have instead fuelled a complex web of security, political and economic challenges for Pakistan. A stark and uncomfortable comparison arises: while the Taliban, with limited resources, has managed to maintain internal control and weaken ISKP, Pakistan, despite its vast and sophisticated security infrastructure, continues to struggle with resurgent militancy.

This disparity compels an honest and critical reassessment of Pakistan's security doctrine. The question is whether the tools and strategies that served Pakistan for decades are still effective against a fundamentally changed, more fragmented and more complex threat.

With violence escalating in KP, Islamabad may soon be forced to abandon limited, intelligence-led crackdowns in favour of sustained, large-scale military campaigns. For many, ongoing peace talks between local jirgas and the TTP serve a dual purpose: proving that all peaceful avenues have been exhausted and building public support for stronger action.

Yet, success will not be measured by force alone. Rebuilding public trust, demonstrating decisive gains and avoiding the cycles of the past will be critical. The path Pakistan chooses in the coming months will not only determine the fate of this insurgent wave. It will shape the country's security trajectory for years to come.

**SOURCE: DAWN, EOS, AUGUST 17TH, 2025**

## ANP-led multiparty moot declares past policies ‘a failure’



Aimal Wali Khan addresses a multiparty conference on August 17

**ISLAMABAD: A multiparty conference (MPC) declared that past internal and foreign policies are responsible for the current instability and terrorism plaguing Pakis-tan, particularly in the Khyber Pakht-unkhwa and Balochistan provinces.**

The conference, organised by the Awami National Party (ANP), asserted that peace and development are not possible without democracy, the supremacy of the constitution, and granting rights to the provinces.

Although 20 political parties attended the conference, the PTI was absent. According to ANP sources, the PTI was invited to the conference, but no prominent leader from the party attended it on Sunday.

Attendees included Senator Aimal Wali Khan, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, PML-N's Irfan Siddiqui and PPP's Nayer Bukhari, among others.

In a joint declaration, the participants condemned all forms of terrorism and extremism, which they alleged were a result of past policies, and stressed the need for new steps to address the issues.

The declaration suggested an end to military operations in KP and Balochistan and called for the establishment of a “Truth Commission, under judicial oversight, to investigate losses”. The participants also demanded the abolition of so-called “death squads” and illegal armed groups to protect citizens.

The conference urged for the full implementation of the 18th Constitutional Amendment and suggested that non-constitutional bodies, especially the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), should be abolished.

The participants stated that the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award should be implemented as per the Constitution and that the rights of provinces over their minerals and resources must be granted.

The declaration also suggested the cancellation of land allotments in Balochistan and KP.

On human rights, the participants of the meeting called the enforced disappearances a violation of the Constitution and demanded that all missing persons be recovered and produced in courts.

They also called for the release of political prisoners, the lifting of travel restrictions on politician Sardar Akhtar Jan Mengal, and the abolition of the Peca Act to ensure media freedom.

The declaration stated that Pakistan should not participate in foreign wars and should remain neutral. It called for historic trade routes to be reopened and for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes. It also demanded an halt to the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees.

Additionally, the declaration rejected a proposal to merge the Levies Force with the police in Balochistan and the decision to merge the Frontier Constabulary with the Federal Constabulary.

It demanded that all powers in the merged districts be transferred to the civil administration and that laws like the “Action in Aid of Civil Power” be abolished.

The declaration demanded a relief package for flood-affected districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and handing over of Rescue 1122 vehicles to the provincial government.

However, PML-N and PPP refused to sign the joint declaration.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 18TH, 2025**

## Justice Minallah calls out judiciary over disappearances

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Supreme Court's Justice Athar Minallah

**ISLAMABAD:** Supreme Court judge Justice Athar Minallah stressed the need for an independent judiciary and fearless judges to address the plight of missing persons, recalling his own judicial struggles in some of the most difficult cases of enforced disappearances.

Speaking at an event on missing persons in Islamabad, Justice Minallah said Pakistan's institutions, including the judiciary and parliament, must accept responsibility for the crisis.

"Our heads should hang in shame," he admitted, "as women from Balochistan continue to march for missing loved ones".

He lamented that "those holding exalted offices have not spoken the truth in the past 77 years. The day they start speaking the truth, things will change. Everyone knows the truth, but we pretend not to."

The judge stressed that Balochistan was "of utmost importance for every Pakistani" and that the Constitution makes every judge responsible for upholding fundamental rights.

"Even after the 26th Amendment, Article 184 has not been amended. Every judge of the Supreme Court is responsible for every violation of fundamental rights that takes place in Pakistan."



Recalling the lawyers' movement, he said its real goal was never merely judicial restoration. "Let me say, that was not a movement for the restoration of the judges. It had a far greater, much bigger role. Its role was to restore democracy, to restore the constitution, and above all, to have rule of law in the country."

He noted that during the lawyers' movement, the slogan was "Riyasat sab ki maaN" (the state is the mother of all), meaning the state is expected to care for its children. However, he lamented that if the state itself is perceived to be complicit, then the courts are left powerless.

Justice Minallah also shared a personal memory from his civil service years before resigning. Speaking out in front of peers, he recalled, encouraged others to do the same, including a police officer who admitted to being informed of "an unannounced policy of extrajudicial killings" during his first posting.

Turning to his judicial career, he described enforced disappearance cases as "the most difficult" he encountered since his appointment in 2014. He recalled that his very first ruling on the issue had set a precedent.

"Fortunately, the first judgment I gave, that victim of enforced disappearance, his family, that daughter was also just like Amna's daughter," he said. "And the judgment I gave— if you read that judgment, the directions that were given, those directions then were extremely effective during the four-year period that I served as the chief justice."

He stressed that he had made his stance clear to the government. "I had made it very clear to the executive that I will not tolerate a single incident of enforced disappearance from within my jurisdiction."

Justice Minallah cited the Maira Sajid case as a landmark ruling that became a reference point for accountability. During his tenure as chief justice of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) from November 2018, he said the court functioned "round-the-clock" as a constitutional court, handling urgent petitions even at night.

"The first case that came to me— I was at home, and the Supreme Court didn't take that case up," he recalled. "Though the journalists went there, I received it in the evening. I passed an order that these are my directions in that judgment. All these officials will be held accountable if— and a separate message was sent to the authorities that there will be no tolerance at all."

Among such cases were those of a missing SECP official linked to a retired general, a young man named Hamza, and another, Munir Akram. In each instance, strict judicial orders compelled authorities to produce the individuals, sometimes within days. "But in older cases, progress was stymied by the lack of independent investigators," he lamented.

He also recalled the disappearance of journalist Mudassar Naaru, whose young son was left in the care of his grandmother after his mother's death. "One day I was in the court hearing cases and all of a sudden, I heard the sound of a child crying in the court— That was Mudassar Naaru's child. His mother had passed away, and the state had failed to at least let them know whether he was alive, he was dead, or where he was."

Seeking to "sensitise the issue," Justice Minallah ordered Naaru's son and grandmother to be taken to the then prime minister. "It's very, very difficult for the courts when the state is not cooperating with you," he said, stressing that responsibility lay squarely with the federal and provincial executives.

With "a very heavy heart," he said, he later summoned the then-prime minister Imran Khan to court. "And the prime minister did appear. Naaru's son was also there. He also assured the court and the child that his whereabouts would be known when I was in haste elevated to the SC."

Justice Minallah said the IHC had prioritised fearless judges because "for a judge or for a court, the only real test is the confidence of the people." He added that even Baloch students had approached the IHC despite jurisdictional hurdles. "I knew I didn't have the jurisdiction, but I assumed it.

The SC was there, other courts were there, but the only judgment on enforced disappearances, addressing the nature of the offence, its gravity, and the extent to which it violates human rights, was the Maira Sajid judgment. And in all jurisdictions, there is no other such precedent, because I searched extensively."

He recalled forming a commission on enforced disappearances, appointing seven eminent voices, including Afrasiab Khattak, PPP's Raza Rabbani, PML-N and JUI-F representatives, and senior lawyers Kamran Murtaza, Ali Ahmad Kurd and Masood Kausar. Academics from LUMS were also included.

"I knew they were all deeply vocal, that they had their hearts in this issue, and that they would come up with something meaningful," he said, though he admitted the fate of the report remained unclear after his elevation to the SC.

He revealed that in 2023, he had written to the chief justice flagging enforced disappearances as "the most important matter in this country," but "nothing happened."

"We are responsible to Amna Janjua, we are responsible to her children, we are responsible to every victim perceived to be a victim of enforced disappearance," he said. "I feel responsible, and I apologise to them as a judge. Yes, I do. I am responsible. We are all responsible."

Calling enforced disappearances a national shame, Justice Minallah said a society "where women from Balochistan are parading on the streets, our heads should hang in shame". But it is women like Amna Masood Janjua and Mahrang Baloch who continue to lead. They are only expressing themselves. What this country needs are independent judges and an independent judiciary."

While stressing respect for parliament, he added, "My experience has been that when they are in government, they do not want to hear that enforced disappearances are an issue. They want to pretend that it is not an issue. But it is." Justice Minallah warned that without the rule of law, judicial independence, democracy and constitutionalism, "our destiny will not be fair to our coming generations. We owe it to them. And we owe it to the youth".

**SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, AUGUST 24, 2025**

## Safety app

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THE FIA has decided to battle the menace of human smuggling with an AI-based app to reduce human sale and ease immigration. A pilot project of the freshly minted app will be launched at the Islamabad airport. The initiative is a welcome step in modernising the agency. In developed countries, AI tools are considered revolutionary in the context of deterrence as they are crucial to the identification of victims and traffickers, exploitative online content, detecting signs of trafficking as well as helping law enforcement prioritise cases according to risk assessment. For Pakistan, the danger of excessive reliance on the mechanism runs high due to limited training, poor documentation, malpractices, lack of educated police officers and more. A more prudent route to take would be using it to streamline due process through efficient investigation and speedy prosecution. This technology, however, can uncover the secret patterns of trafficking mafias.

Shorter queues cannot alleviate the root causes pushing people out of their homeland. The first goal should be to improve lives. Unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, negligible opportunities and crime force people to risk their lives for greener pastures. Among the primary drivers of illegal migration, aside from uncertainty and dispossession, is the absence of faith in those tasked with keeping them safe. The FIA, for instance, is bound by law to crack down on perpetrators and guard potential victims in human trade hubs. Unfortunately, it often finds itself mired in allegations of collusion. Such accusations, and the fact that human smuggling is a transnational business of immense magnitude and money, often lead to claims that the illegal practice has the patronage of influential quarters and the authorities' sanction in return for handsome commissions. Corruption in law enforcement hinders progress. What worsens matters is that most countries where human smuggling rings flourish are cursed with the same dilemma.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 25TH, 2025**

# Militancy's transitions and the changing mechanics of fear

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**DR KALEEM IMAM**

A decade ago, the world braced for headline-grabbing attacks on airplanes, embassies, and business hubs. Today, militancy hides in plain sight. A WhatsApp group in Lahore, an AI-generated video in Mali, or a lone attacker in Paris can carry the same destabilizing weight as a bomb in Baghdad once did. The threat has not vanished; it has mutated.

To see where we are headed, it helps to recall where we have been. Modern 'terrorism' has moved through four eras: nationalist insurgencies like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); Al-Qaeda militancy that climaxed with 9/11 and the "War on Terror"; Daesh's territorial "caliphate" that drew 40,000 foreign fighters; and today's fragmented world of lone actors, drones, and hybrid crime-terror networks.

The Global Terrorism Index 2025 makes the transformation plain. Militancy-related deaths dropped 13 percent in 2024 compared to the brutal peaks of the 2010s, but instability has only deepened. 98 percent of fatalities now occur in conflict zones, as the number of wars rose from 69 to 91 in just a year. Attacks spread to 66 countries in 2024, up from 58 the year before.

Four groups still account for 80 percent of militancy-related deaths worldwide. But the harder fight is against lone wolves radicalized online, whose attacks in the West rose from 32 in 2023 to 52 last year. Most alarming of all, one in five related suspects in Europe is now under 18.

Three shifts define 2025. First, decentralization: extremism is no longer the monopoly of Al-Qaeda or Daesh but sprouts locally, insurgents in Pakistan and Myanmar devastating border communities, Daesh remnants in Iraq and Syria slipping back into guerrilla ambushes. In Gaza, a grinding war has created fertile ground for splinter groups, a reminder that unresolved conflicts breed the next wave.

Second, technology: encrypted apps shield recruiters while doctored videos and viral clips spread propaganda faster than any checkpoint can stop. Off-the-shelf drones and cheap editing tools now make militants global broadcasters of fear.

Third, geography: the bloodiest toll has shifted to South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Burkina Faso surpassing Afghanistan as a hotspot. In Yemen, stalled peace talks leave spaces for Al-Qaeda to regroup; in Syria, the Al-Hol camp still housing thousands of Daesh-linked families is a ticking time bomb.

Pakistan shows the uneasy transition: large-scale bombings in cities have eased, but border insurgencies and online radicalization are steadily on the rise. Militants have shifted strategies,

insurgencies along the Afghan border and digital radicalization among disaffected youth are on the rise. A single viral video from militants in Waziristan today can perhaps sow more fear than a roadside bomb did 10 years ago.

Dangerous myths endure. One claims that once an area is “stabilized,” it will not relapse. In reality, violence often returns if grievances are left to fester. Nigeria’s and Pakistan’s towns relapse after the military sweeps. In Iraq, Daesh’s fall was followed by a fresh insurgency—proof that brute force alone cannot end terrorism. Ideology mutates, networks regroup, and repression often deepens the cycle.

The more dangerous illusion is to see terror as an import from outside. In reality, it often takes root at home, fed by injustice and neglect. Egypt’s Sinai is a case in point: foreign backing plays a role, but it is local grievances that keep the insurgency alive. Blaming an “outside hand” is convenient; it also blinds policymakers to the rot inside.

So, what is the way forward? Think of it less as a war to be won and more as a chronic condition to be managed. Resilient institutions, digital literacy that inoculates citizens against manipulation, and strong local governance that offers people dignity and trust are all essential. The lesson is clear: guns and laws cannot win alone; the real battle is over stories and belonging. Extremists trade in certainty and identity; governments must counter with clarity, opportunity, and hope.

Jordan’s investment in civic education to pre-empt youth radicalization, though modest, is one example of states beginning to adapt. In Peshawar, small digital-literacy workshops teach students how to spot disinformation before it spreads. In Kenya, community policing is rebuilding trust. Saudi Arabia’s Sakina and Munasaha programs, and the UAE’s Hedayah center, show proactive approaches. In Iraq, art and dialogue help reintegrate returnees from Daesh-held areas, proof that mending the social fabric is as vital as securing borders.

The future of militancy lies less in spectacular attacks than in the slow hollowing of fragile states. Whether South Asia’s borderlands, Africa’s ungoverned spaces, and Middle Eastern conflicts are lost to extremists or reclaimed by citizens will depend less on firepower than on the ability to resist fear and rebuild trust.

It is time to confront what truly drives the cycle. Research shows rights-respecting justice and prevention reduce recruitment more effectively than force. The UNDP found that in 71 percent of cases, the tipping point was not ideology but abuse often by state forces themselves. Tomorrow’s fight against militancy will not be won by fear or firepower, but by the courage to govern differently.

**SOURCE: ARAB NEWS, AUGUST 26, 2025**



## Pakistan, UK vow to counter terrorism, curb human trafficking



Screengrab showing Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi meeting with British High Commissioner Jane Marriott, Aug 28.

**ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and the United Kingdom vowed to enhance their bilateral relations and cooperation to counter terrorism, narcotics, human trafficking and to ensure border security.**

The two sides made these commitments during a meeting held between Federal Minister for Interior Mohsin Naqvi and British High Commissioner Jane Marriott at the Ministry of Interior. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to deepen Pakistan-UK relations across multiple sectors. “During the meeting, matters related to counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, border security, and human trafficking came under discussion, with both officials agreeing to enhance joint efforts and cooperation in these critical areas,” says an official press release issued by the interior ministry here. UK High Commissioner Jane Marriott, during the meeting, extended her congratulations to Mr Naqvi on receiving the prestigious Nishan-i-Imtiaz award, lauding his leadership and extending her best wishes for future endeavours. She also conveyed condolences and expressed solidarity with the people of Pakistan over the recent loss of lives caused by floods and heavy rains and expressed deep sympathy for the bereaved families. Mr Naqvi apprised the high commissioner on the loss of lives and properties and crops during the floods and torrential rains. The minister reaffirmed Pakistan’s long-standing commitment to peace and stability, stating, “Pakistan has always been an advocate of peace and strongly condemns terrorism in all its forms.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 29TH, 2025**

# Policing and CT

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**MOHAMMAD ALI BABAKHEL**

**GLOBALLY, counterterrorism (CT) is a policing function, focused on prevention, investigation and law enforcement. In Pakistan, terrorism has sectarian, ethnic and cross-border dimensions. Hence, the police cannot handle it alone.**

In high-threat environments, CT extends beyond regular policing and involves CT departments (CTDs), the military, intelligence agencies and federal institutions. At independence, Pakistan inherited a policing system based on the Irish constabulary model, operated through the Police Act of 1861. Designed to suppress dissent rather than serve communities, it trained police as a force to maintain state authority rather than a service for citizens.

The Police Act 1861 made no reference to terrorism. The Police Order 2002, a post-9/11 law, also overlooked the police role in CT. Only Article 160 mentioned terrorism research as a function of the Police Management Board. Sections 4(1-e) and 13(3-1) of the KP Police Act, 2017, later defined countering militancy and terrorism as police duties, and the need for a CTD.

The police role was notable during the Afghan war. Sectarian and ethnic violence further shaped it. In the post-9/11 era, CTDs were created to prevent terrorism, gather intelligence, investigate and prosecute terror cases. For coordination, Nacta was set up. The Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, provided the framework, while forensic labs and safe cities projects were introduced.

With their local knowledge, community interface and operational reach, police are central in preventing and responding to terrorism. They disrupt plots through surveillance, investigation, arrests, evidence-gathering, monitoring radical groups and enforcing anti-terrorism laws. They also work with communities to identify radicalisation. CTD standardisation is a part of NAP, but the provinces adopted their own models. Point 8 of NAP calls for a dedicated CT force, while point 3 of the revised NAP and Internal Security Policy 2022-2026 stresses the capacity-building of CTDs.

In Sri Lanka's 26-year war against the LTTE, police worked alongside the military. The Criminal Investigation Department and Terrorism Investigation Division collected intelligence and conducted surveillance. The Prevention of Terrorism Act empowered police to arrest and detain suspects without a warrant, while police remained actively engaged with the community and maintained the special task force's presence.

In India, the police role is multifaceted. The National Investigation Agency is central. As first responders, police engage in preventive and reactive efforts. Special branches collect local information. Through outreach, police engage youth and clerics, while some states have introduced reintegration programmes for radicalised individuals.

Compared to sophisticated terror networks, however, the police are under-equipped. Outdated training hampers CTDs, with an emphasis on physical drills and weapons handling. Training in militant tactics, forensics, cybercrime, terrorism financing and intelligence analysis remains weak.

Conviction rates in terrorism cases typically remain at 10–15 per cent, with many suspects acquitted. Weak prosecution and poor coordination within the criminal justice system favour the accused. Heavy reliance on oral testimony, rather than evidence, further hinders prosecution. The lack of witness protection in militancy-infested areas has serious consequences. Strengthening investigation and ensuring fair, timely trials are vital.

Terrorism has also transformed policing, creating a more militarised approach that increases fear and distances police from communities. The challenge is how police can operate as both law enforcers and CT agencies with a less militarised outlook. Globally, greater police involvement in CT has weakened police-public relations. Expanded profiling and surveillance through CCTV, internet and telephony have added to the distance. Community policing suffers when CT shifts the focus to intelligence and risk management, often disproportionately targeting certain groups. This weakens trust, fuels alienation and makes cooperation harder to sustain.

Pakistan must consider a unified CT command, integrated intelligence-police databases, modernisation, better training, enhanced coordination, stronger community policing, standardised CTDs, joint trainings with federal agencies and the use of AI and big data for early warnings.

The real challenge is how to achieve these ideals in the post-18th Amendment era. Countering terrorism without understanding its root causes may result in a waste of resources and time. Therefore, it is essential to review the CT efforts afresh.

**SOURCE: DAWN, AUGUST 30TH, 2025**

## Govt slammed over inaction on enforced disappearances



A missing person's family member, accompanied by Amina Masood Janjua, Afrasyab Khattak and Tahira Abdullah, addresses a presser.

**ISLAMABAD:** Leading human rights and civil society organisations in a joint press conference condemned government's failure to put an end to the practice of enforced disappearances, calling it a deeply entrenched tool of repression that continues to devastate many families.

The groups, including Amnesty International, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Defence of Human Rights (DHR), voiced collective alarm over what they described as a systemic failure to deliver justice, truth or reparations to victims and their families.

"A flawed system of accountability and official data from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIOED) reveals the scale of the problem but also the system's failure to provide meaningful justice," chairperson of Defence of Human Rights (DHR) Amina Masood Janjua said.

Ms Janjua noted that state institutions have practised enforced disappearances with utmost impunity for over two decades.

Other groups involved in the conference were the Baloch Yakjehti Com-m-ittee (BYC), Pashtun Tahafuz Move-ment (PTM), Voice for Missing Per-s-o--ns of Sindh (VMPS), Sindhian Natio-nal Congress, and the Asian Federation Against Involuntary and Enforced Disappearances (AFAD).

Speakers highlighted that since 2010, the commission has documented 10,592 cases, including over 3,000 submitted by the DHR. They added that 140 new cases were reported this year alone.

The DHR chairperson said the commission has never ordered a prosecution against a single perpetrator, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

“In a handful of cases where this Commission has issued production orders, it failed miserably to get them complied,” Ms Janjua said.

“Our demands, ironically the same for the last 20 years, are to immediately disclose the whereabouts of all forcibly disappeared individuals and hold perpetrators accountable throu-gh independent, impartial investigations and fair trials,” she added.

The speakers, including rights act-i-v--ists Afrasiyab Khan Khattak and Ta--hira Abdullah, also noted that a re--cent amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Act that allows security forces to detain individuals for up to three months is evi-dence that the tightening of the noose around citizens’ necks was on the rise.

## Truth, Reconciliation Commission

Ms Abdullah called it “deplorable” that while the National Judicial Policy Making Committee has announced a committee to address the issue of enforced disappearances, results are still awaited.

She called for either reforming the COIOED or establishing a new, victi-m-centred “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” with representation from the families of the disappeared.

Later, the groups released a joint statement highlighting that authorities intentionally use disappearances as a tool to suppress political activists, ethnic minorities, journalists, and human rights defenders.

The BYC reported 546 cases this year, the PTM recorded 133, and the Voice for Missing Persons of Sindh noted 40, with more than 1,300 people still missing.

The statement criticised authorities for their continued reliance on laws that enable arbitrary detentions, such as the Army Act, the Official Secrets Act, and the Actions (in Aid of Civil Power) Regulation of 2011. These laws, it said, limit judicial oversight and allow for prolonged incommunicado detentions under the pretext of national security.

The organisations said Pakistan is obligated to protect against arbitrary detention and torture. They deman-ded that the county must ratify the International Conven-tion for the Pro-tection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

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# Terrorism prosecution in Pakistan: a follow-up

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BY MANZAR ZAIDI

**KARACHI:** In 2016, I authored the report *Terrorism Prosecution in Pakistan* (open-source, accessible via Academia and ResearchGate), which critically examined Pakistan’s anti-terrorism prosecution system through an empirical review of Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs) judgments and focus group discussions with police, prosecutors, and judges. That study highlighted systemic flaws: over-reliance on eyewitness testimony, neglect of forensic evidence, proliferation of tangential litigation, weak case management, and the pervasive “fear factor” discouraging witnesses from testifying.

Nearly a decade later, Pakistan has traversed a turbulent trajectory in its fight against terrorism. While large-scale military operations after 2013 displaced militant groups from the tribal areas into Afghanistan and temporarily reduced attacks, recent years — especially post-2021 — have witnessed a steady resurgence of terrorist incidents, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. As I ponder writing a follow-up to the 2016 study, against this backdrop, it is crucial to ask: has terrorism prosecution through the rule of law kept pace with the changing threat?

## Case flows and regional variations

When I wrote the first report, I expected that the heavy case backlog in ATCs would begin to ease as terrorism incidents declined after 2013. Indeed, Punjab and Sindh saw a significant reduction in attacks, and one might have anticipated a corresponding decrease in ATC caseloads in those provinces. Yet in KP and Balochistan — frontline regions where attacks have again been rising especially since 2021 — the flow of cases may be increasing once more. The key question is whether ATCs in these provinces have rationalized case management, or whether they remain overburdened as they were when first examined in 2016?

Back then, my report found that KP ATCs were already struggling with the aftermath of the Swat insurgency, carrying a heavy backlog of cases dating from 2007 onwards. Judges often granted repeated adjournments, investigations were weak, and prosecutors lacked the tools to withstand intimidation. Although the province was formally rationalizing case flows (for example, by clustering terrorism cases in certain ATCs), the sheer number of residual cases combined with witness fear meant acquittals remained the norm.

Balochistan presented a slightly different challenge even in 2016. My first study observed that while Punjab and Sindh were often clogged with tangential litigation, (ordinary violent crimes framed under terrorism charges) in Balochistan the problem were genuine terrorism cases piling up, without resolution. Witnesses were far fewer, prosecutions weaker, and the intimidation factor

even greater, because insurgent and sectarian groups wielded more direct control over communities.

If we compare that baseline with today's rising wave of terrorism in KP and Balochistan, several questions emerge: -

Has KP's rationalization experiment endured? Or have new spikes in violence post-2021 overwhelmed ATCs again, reversing whatever gains were made in backlog reduction after the Swat crisis?

Is Balochistan still seeing primarily 'real terrorism' cases in ATCs, and if so, are conviction rates still as low as they were, when the first report highlighted pervasive acquittals due to fear and poor evidence?

Have the systemic issues flagged in 2016 — over-reliance on ocular evidence, intimidation of witnesses, tangential case inflows, weak forensics — been meaningfully addressed in these provinces, or are courts reliving the same cycle of overburden and collapse?

This raises a critical set of questions for provinces relatively less affected by terrorism for a follow-up study, i.e. **how have declining caseloads affected the functioning of ATCs in Punjab and Sindh?**

Has the relative breathing space created by lower case inflows given the judicial system an opportunity to reinvent itself, to experiment with stronger evidence standards, and to adapt procedures to the evolving nature of terrorist threats?

Things may look better in Punjab compared to KP or Balochistan — but is this relative stability producing ripple effects and spillover benefits across the wider criminal justice system, strengthening prosecutors, police, and judges beyond just terrorism cases?

In short, while Punjab's reduced caseloads might provide space for procedural innovation, KP and Balochistan are once again testing whether Pakistan's criminal justice system has learned the lessons highlighted in the 2016 report — or whether the weaknesses then diagnosed being replicated in today's more complex security landscape. Even more important, are all the Anti-Terrorism Courts in the country learning lessons from each other?

### **'Tangential' Cases**

My first report found that ATCs were clogged with non-terrorism cases — kidnapping for ransom, extortion, violent crimes — often prosecuted under terrorism charges, despite lacking any nexus with organized militancy. This tangential litigation drained time and resources from 'genuine' terrorism prosecutions.

In my 2016 report, one of the most striking findings was that ATCs were being misused as catch-all forums for ordinary violent crimes. Offences such as kidnapping for ransom, extortion, land disputes, honor killings, even violent protests and acid attacks, were frequently prosecuted under Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act(ATA), despite lacking any direct nexus with organized militancy or terrorism.

This practice created two critical distortions. The first was by overburdening of ATCs: by diverting large volumes of ordinary violent crime into ATCs, the system clogged itself, delaying the very ‘fast-track’ terrorism cases for which the courts were created.

Secondly, higher acquittal ratios resulted from this backlog. Since ATCs apply a much higher evidentiary burden than ordinary courts (proof beyond shadow of doubt, rather than balance of probabilities) many of these ‘non-terrorism’ cases also ended in acquittals, frustrating both justice and deterrence.

A follow-up empirical study would need to test whether this under-utilization of ATCs has decreased. Probable outcomes suggest three possible scenarios: -

**Continuation of Tangential Litigation-** Police and local administrations may still prefer to apply Section 7 ATA as a tool of expediency, both because it carries heavier punishments and because it makes bail harder to secure. If this continues, ATCs will remain clogged with non-terrorism disputes, undermining their credibility and limiting their ability to handle genuine terrorism cases effectively.

**Partial Rationalization-** In provinces like Punjab, where terrorism incidents declined significantly after 2013, and to some extent in KP, reduced inflows of ‘real terrorism’ cases may have created breathing space for ATCs. If prosecutors and judges have used this space to sift out tangential cases and re-channel them to sessions courts, ATCs may have started to re-focus on core terrorism trials. This would reflect an improvement.

**Reversal under rising violence-** In KP and Balochistan, where terrorism has resurged since 2021, the temptation to label ordinary violent crime as terrorism may be increasing again. This allows authorities to signal toughness, but at the cost of repeating the cycle of 2016: clogged ATCs, poor case management, and acquittals.

If tangential litigation continues unchecked, conviction rates will remain lower. Genuine terrorism cases will slip through the cracks as courts drown in unrelated disputes. Public trust in ATCs will erode as communities will view them as politicized instruments rather than specialized forums for counter-terrorism.

Furthermore, resource misallocation will persist. Forensics, witness protection, and prosecutorial energy will be wasted on cases that could have been disposed of in regular sessions courts.

Last but not the least, backlogs will rise disproportionately in conflict provinces. KP and Balochistan will see ATCs once again overwhelmed by both real terrorism and misclassified cases, leading to systemic paralysis.

On the other hand, if rationalization has gained traction, and there were signs that case flow management was being emphasized even in 2016, then specialization will have improved. ATCs would be finally focusing on core terrorism cases, building expertise and consistency in rulings. The ripple effects may have spread, as improved case management in ATCs could have pushed police and prosecutors to refine charging practices, indirectly strengthening the wider criminal justice system.

Importantly, conviction ratios might have improved significantly. With fewer tangential cases and clearer evidentiary focus, prosecutors may be presenting stronger files and securing more convictions in genuine terrorism cases.

The future of terrorism prosecution in Pakistan may hinge less on drafting new laws — the ATA has already been amended repeatedly — and more on jurisdictional discipline. If ATCs remain overrun with tangential cases, history will repeat itself: clogged dockets, weak prosecutions, and systemic failure. If, however, provinces can enforce a tight filter on what qualifies as “terrorism” under Section 7 ATA, then ATCs may have already evolved, or might yet evolve into the specialized courts they were originally intended to be.

## Forensic and modern evidence

In my 2016 report, I documented how Pakistan’s criminal justice system overwhelmingly relied on ocular testimony, with forensic evidence serving at best as a supplementary tool. The typical pattern was that police “created” witnesses to patch evidentiary gaps, while forensic reports — chemical examiner certificates, ballistics, or post-mortems — were treated as peripheral add-ons rather than central proof.

Even the establishment of the Punjab Forensic Science Agency (PFSA) — a landmark institution by regional standards — had not shifted courtroom culture. Judges often preferred witness testimony, prosecutors rarely used forensic findings proactively, and defence lawyers were the ones exploiting forensic reports to create doubt. The result, as my first report showed, was a system structurally biased toward witness fabrication and systemic acquittals.

Nearly a decade later, Pakistan stands at a crossroads. Three possible trajectories emerge for the use of forensic science in terrorism prosecutions: -

**Status Quo Persistence-** If court culture has not shifted still; forensic reports will remain a ‘decorative’ supplement rather than decisive evidence. Police will continue defaulting to creating eyewitnesses, and ATCs will keep acquitting on the basis of contradictions in testimony. This would mean that, despite billions invested in forensic labs, the eyewitness based, acquittal-heavy pattern noted in 2016 will persist.

**Gradual Integration of Forensics-** In provinces like Punjab, where PFSA is established and case inflows may have declined, ATCs may finally begin relying more substantively on DNA, ballistics, digital evidence, and crime scene analysis. If prosecutors have received sustained training, and if courts have started to demand scientific corroboration, forensics could have slowly moved from a supporting role to a co-equal evidentiary stream alongside testimony. This could have improved conviction ratios in genuine terrorism cases, and reduced dependence on vulnerable or hostile witnesses.

**Transformational Shift-** If Pakistan’s Fair Trial Act (allowing admissibility of intercept and surveillance evidence) has been operationalized in tandem with forensic science, Pakistan’s ATCs could have already made the leap from witness-driven trials to intelligence admissible and science-driven trials.

Forensic and intelligence-based prosecutions would have already lessened the crippling impact of fear on witnesses — a central weakness identified in 2016. Such a shift would not only have modernized terrorism prosecution but would have also rippled outward, strengthening ordinary criminal justice by embedding forensic reliance as a norm.

The real challenge is not infrastructure — forensic facilities exist — but judicial and prosecutorial culture. Till around 2016, judges often dismissed forensic findings as secondary, while prosecutors lacked the confidence or skill to build cases around them. Unless the courts are re-oriented to place weight on scientific evidence, Pakistan risks repeating the past: laboratories producing reports that gather dust, while trials continue to revolve around fallible or fabricated witnesses.

If nothing changes, ATCs in 2030 may look much as they did in 2016: clogged, dependent on discredited testimony, with conviction rates hovering on lower side. But if courts and prosecutors shift or have already shifted toward forensic-anchored prosecutions, Pakistan could finally address one of the structural weaknesses diagnosed in the first report — and move or be moving towards a system where the science of crime replaces the artifice of manufactured witnesses.

The Fair Trial Act aimed to make intelligence-derived evidence (intercepts, surveillance, human intelligence) admissible in ATCs. In 2016, however, such evidence had yet to surface meaningfully in prosecutions. A critical part of any follow-up study would be to determine whether intelligence evidence is now admitted and relied upon in terrorism cases, or whether Pakistan's ATCs still ignore this vital evidentiary stream?

## Witness protection and the fear factor

The report identified fear as the single most corrosive factor in terrorism prosecutions — witnesses routinely turned hostile, resiled, or refused to testify due to intimidation. Although Section 21 of ATA provides for anonymity and witness protection, it was never widely operationalized. The question for this follow-up is whether subsequent witness protection initiatives (federal and provincial) have had any impact, and whether more witnesses are now willing to depose in ATCs?

**Federal Level-** Pakistan enacted **The Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act, 2017**, aiming to provide anonymity, relocation, identity change, and protection for witnesses in heinous and terrorism-related cases. However, **implementation has been weak nationwide**. Reports(anecdotal) highlight that federal and provincial schemes 'have performed poorly due to lack of proper implementation'.

**Provincial Legislation-** Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) passed the KP Witness Protection Act, 2021, which establishes a Witness Protection Board and Unit. Its provisions allow for anonymity, safe housing, identity change, video link testimony, restricted courtroom entry, and protection orders covering witnesses in terrorism and other heinous cases.

**Punjab** enacted the **Punjab Witness Protection Act, 2018**, also establishing similar protections for witnesses in terrorism and serious criminal cases—such as prohibiting cross-examination by the accused, and mechanisms for anonymity and protective orders.



However, if despite these legal instruments, if implementation has remained merely aspirational, the reasons may not require even too much brainstorming; the usual ‘suspects’ would be there to hinder implementation. I can make an ‘uneducated’ guess and be correct on all accounts. Typically, these would be; provincial systems lack resources, lack of public awareness, operational capacity, and institutional coordination—hindering real-world protective outcomes.

**If there has been significant difference made, it might be unevenly distributed.** KP and Punjab now have adequate legal frameworks in place. Yet, effectiveness might remain limited due to resource gaps and weak execution, even more when Balochistan is compared to Punjab and KP. Witness trust in the system most likely remains fragile—compliance and willingness to testify may not have improved notably, without visible success stories.

**However, if** operational witness protection—via anonymity, relocation, and secure testimony (e.g. through video link)—has somehow significantly reduced witness turnarounds and bolstered conviction rates, even partial improvements in KP or Punjab could have created tremendous **spillover benefits. This might have** encouraged police, prosecutors, and judges to rely more on testimonial evidence, reinforced by protective guarantees.

Successfully implemented, witness protection could be on the way to becoming a model for broader criminal justice reform—strengthening investigative credibility, enabling more robust prosecutions, and narrowing reliance on coerced or fabricated testimony.

Whether all this has happened, substantive research will tell, in the years to come.

## Police and prosecution reforms

By 2016, police investigation remained weak, marked by poor forensic collection, defective FIRs, and over-reliance on ‘padding’ cases with dubious witnesses. Prosecutors often adopted a laissez-faire attitude, while courts dismissed cases perfunctorily. Since then, there has been investment in Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs), training, and induction of graduates as corporals into counter terrorism investigation cadres. Any follow-up study might empirically test whether these reforms have translated into stronger prosecutions, or whether the systemic weaknesses identified in 2016 persist?

When I wrote the first report in 2016, the picture of Pakistan’s terrorism prosecution system was not rosy. Investigations were weak and fragmented. Crime scenes were rarely processed scientifically, forensic evidence was perfunctorily collected, and FIRs were riddled with defects. Most tellingly, police officers routinely ‘padded’ cases with dubious or ‘created’ witnesses to cover gaps, knowing full well that prosecutors often turned a blind eye, or could not force cops to rectify defects in their cases.

Prosecution services themselves appeared to adopt a laissez-faire attitude, letting poorly built cases trickle into ATCs. Judges, confronted with contradictory testimonies and absent scientific support, usually dismissed these cases in perfunctory orders, adding to an already dismal conviction ratio.

In the years since, the state has invested heavily in strengthening CTDs. A major innovation has been the induction of corporals — graduate-level recruits, relatively young, digitally literate, and more professionally trained than the traditional police cadre. The idea was to inject fresh talent into the investigative system, people who could gather and analyze evidence with discipline and rigour, and who would be less bound by the inertia of legacy policing practices.

These corporals were trained in modern methods, given exposure to forensic institutions like the Punjab Forensic Science Agency (PFSA), and in some cases even provided modules on digital intelligence, social media analysis and cyber forensics.

Yet, as with so many reform efforts in Pakistan’s criminal justice system, ambition has collided with structure. Corporals, despite their potential, found themselves caught in an uncertain service framework. Their status, promotion tracks, and long-term retention policies remain poorly defined. Attrition has already become a concern as corporals seek alternative careers when upward mobility is blocked. What was meant to be a permanent professional cadre risks becoming a revolving door of trained, but departing young officers.

Parallel to these police reforms, prosecution departments were also supposed to be strengthened. A lesson of the 2016 report was that police and prosecutors worked in silos, with little meaningful coordination. The ATC case file — the challan — was often prepared without prosecutorial input, and the prosecutor’s role was reduced to presenting in court whatever the police brought, however weak.

The concept of prosecutorial gatekeeping — where prosecutors vet and refine cases before trial, filtering out weak or tangential cases — was almost entirely absent. This meant that ATCs were flooded with cases, many of which should have been diverted back to regular sessions courts.

In theory, corporals could have been part of the answer here (or maybe they already are). If CTD corporals worked closely with prosecutors from the very start of an investigation, weak evidence could be flagged early, and cases could be strengthened before reaching the ATCs.

Instead of seeing prosecutors as last-minute courtroom presenters, the system could embed them as partners in investigation, exercising gatekeeping functions that reduce the burden of tangential litigation. But this requires cultural change on both sides: police must accept prosecutorial oversight, and prosecutors must step up from their passive role to actively shape case preparation.

Looking forward, the picture could evolve in several ways. In the optimistic scenario, corporals might have become institutionalized within CTDs, their service structures regularized, and their careers stabilized. With training, they might have started to rely more on forensic science and digital evidence, reducing dependence on fragile eyewitness testimony.

Prosecutors, emboldened by clearer legal mandates and better liaison mechanisms, perhaps now exercise stronger gatekeeping functions, screening out weak cases and ensuring only those with prosecutable evidence reach the ATCs. The result would be a leaner, more credible terrorism docket and higher conviction ratios. In the pessimistic scenario, however, corporals remained marginalized, their attrition rates rising as frustration with stagnating careers pushed them out.

Prosecutors continued their laissez-faire posture, reluctant or unable to challenge investigative defects, and the courts continued to dismiss terrorism cases for lack of credible evidence.

In this version of the projected future, the same systemic weaknesses I identified in 2016 persist, only now with added disillusionment among a younger cadre that had once promised reform.

More likely is a mixed scenario, where Punjab, with PFSA and the largest CTD, shows measurable improvement, while KP and Balochistan — under greater security stress and resource scarcity — lag behind. Sindh may remain caught in between, its ATCs still clogged with politically-tinged cases and tangential litigation. Ultimately, the real test of reform lies not just in numbers — how many corporals were recruited, or how many new training modules were delivered — but in whether the culture of investigation and prosecution has shifted.

If corporals are empowered and retained, if prosecutors act as genuine gatekeepers rather than passive conduits, and if courts begin rewarding forensic-anchored prosecutions, then the weaknesses identified nearly a decade ago might finally give way to a more resilient system. Without such shifts, however, the cycle of weak investigations, padded witnesses, and perfunctory acquittals will continue, regardless of how many corporals or prosecutors Pakistan hires.

### **Compromise and coercion**

Finally, my first report noted that compromise — whether through private settlements, coercion, or intimidation — routinely undermined prosecutions. Terrorist organizations often coerced families into silence, while victims of kidnapping for ransom negotiated directly with abductors. This follow-up aims to assess whether such coercive settlements remain prevalent, or whether the state has strengthened its writ in terrorism prosecutions?

### **Towards a “second report”**

This article represents a study in progress — first thoughts, for a second report following up on my 2016 baseline. Then, the evidence showed a prosecution system plagued by dependence on eyewitnesses, neglect of modern evidence, tangential litigation, fear, and weak institutional capacity. Today, as terrorism resurges, the pressing question is whether the rule of law response has evolved or stagnated, if Pakistan’s criminal justice system has moved beyond the structural weaknesses identified nearly a decade ago, or whether the same challenges — unaddressed — continue to compromise terrorism prosecution. Kudos to the policymakers who have made it happen if things have moved forwards, and a moment of introspection, almost a decade later, if they have not.

**SOURCE: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, AUGUST 31, 2025**