

RESEARCH NOTE

The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations

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Abstract: The re-emergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan has caught the state off guard. This research note details the evolution of the threat posed by TTP given the shift in the terrorist organisation's ideology, strategy, and modus operandi, and highlights the differences between the present and previous waves of terrorism in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In doing so, it also brings to fore the much less explored role women often play in financing, facilitating, and – at times – carrying out terrorist activities. The new TTP leadership under Noor Wali Mehsud, as well as a different political context with the Afghan Taliban in power in Afghanistan since August 2021, once more make it imperative to focus on the twin subjects of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. In its new iteration, the revitalised TTP needs to be reviewed in a different light. In this research note, these shifts are explored in detail, including its connection with the Afghan Taliban, a new leadership and the subsequent changes in ideology, tactical evolution, willingness to form new alliances, involvement of women, and an enhanced administrative structure make the current wave of TTP extremely dangerous.

Keywords: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), militancy, terrorism in Pakistan, women in militancy, Afghan Taliban

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Introduction

Pakistan has been facing the scourge of terrorism since the 1980s, but incidents of terrorist violence reached a peak in the last two decades, corresponding with the war on terror. With regular suicide attacks targeting state institutions and public spaces, as well as perennial concerns about the war in Afghanistan and its implications, Pakistan has been a primary site of terrorist activity. Estimates of casualties vary – some reports note that more than 48,000 civilians lost their lives in attacks until 2015,¹ while others count the loss of civilian life to around 16,000.² But beyond the statistics, it is the insecurity brought about by terrorism that has added to the long-term economic and social traumas afflicting the country.

Pakistan's counter-terrorism campaign has traditionally been led by its military which carried out multiple operations in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in an attempt to rid the country of terrorist elements – most prominently the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). With the launch of the last major operation in 2017 – called *Radd-ul-Fasaad* – there began a gradual shift towards a phase of relative peace. However, there has since been a resurgence of terrorist activity, coinciding with the coming to power of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in August 2021.

This rise in terrorist incidents is due in part to the re-emergence of TTP in Swat – an area which had become central to the outfit's activities and had to undergo a major military operation for normalcy to return. The revival of TTP comes with revised ideological and operational approaches that threaten to make it a more dangerous entity than before. This raises questions about the level of preparedness in Pakistan for potentially a new age of terrorism in which TTP is rebranding itself as an alternative to the state, and in doing so, reaching out to new potential recruits, including women. This warrants further research on TTP that seeks to understand its evolved state. In this research note, the evolution of the TTP and its relationship to the Pakistani state in its post-2021 iteration will thus be explored. Using existing literature, interviews with security experts, and analysis of TTP's own literature and social media outreach, a revised understanding of the current phase of TTP will be examined – following a brief overview of the history of terrorism involving the outfit.

A History of Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: 2002–2018

TTP was established in 2007 as an alliance of several militant groups in KP that shared an ideology and a set of objectives. These included waging a defensive *jihad* against the Pakistan military and enforcing a particularly conservative understanding of *sharia*.³ Like its Afghan counterparts (the Taliban), this included strict gender segregation, prohibitions on cultural traditions and music, and regulating mosques, as well as economic policies, such as forbidding elections and interest-based banking. Emphasis on some aspect of *sharia* might change given the nature of the group or its leadership, but an overall restrictive and conservative interpretation was what gave them common ground.

This alliance under the TTP umbrella allowed militant groups to share resources, and project a force much greater than their individual capacities. But constituent groups still enjoyed vast operational autonomy and usually operated in different parts of KP. Therefore, the nature of the conflict differed from region to region. The threat was at its deadliest in the erstwhile FATA territories, which have since been merged into KP.⁴

Pakistan has traditionally pursued a two-pronged strategy to deal with terrorism in KP in the past. In addition to military operations against TTP-constituent groups – aimed at capturing and eliminating key individuals and clearing populated regions of terrorists – successive governments also pursued a policy of appeasement by negotiating peace deals. Several such agreements have been made (and broken) since 2001.

Military operations can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, from 2002 to 2005, was before the formation of TTP. Called *Al-Meezan*, it included multiple land-based operations with airborne support, specifically FATA agencies. This resulted in a major blowback from militant outfits that retaliated by hitting civilian populations and urban centres across Pakistan. The country was unprepared to deal with the widespread terrorist activity, and the operation culminated in a peace deal that handed over control of Swat and surrounding territories to the militants.⁵

The second phase started in response to the Lal Masjid incident in Islamabad. Lal Masjid (or Red Mosque), a prominent mosque-*madrassa* complex, was led by two brothers who were sympathetic to the cause of extremists. In 2007, members of Lal Masjid took hostage some Chinese workers, and demanded the imposition of *sharia* in Pakistan in return for their release while also threatening violence.⁶ The then President, General Pervez Musharraf, responded by launching a military operation that ended up killing one brother and capturing the other. It also resulted in the killing of a number of *madrassa* students who were either armed or being used as human shields by militants.⁷ Militant outfits reacted to this operation, and the newly established TTP issued a *fatwa* against the Pakistan military, propelling a series of major acts of terror against the security forces including one on the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the army in 2009.⁸ The second phase of operations was a response to a significant increase in attacks against military forces. Operations *Rah-e-Raast* and *Rah-e-Nijaat* targeted militants in Swat, as well as FATA agencies. The most important offensive was in South Waziristan, which had served as the stronghold of TTP and given refuge to its leader Baitullah Mehsud. While Mehsud eluded capture, the agency was declared cleansed of militant elements as this second phase ended in 2010.

On at least eleven different occasions between 2002 and 2010, the state negotiated peace treaties with militant outfits in KP, even allowing them to control significant territory. Every time, militant outfits seized the opportunity to regroup and strengthen before violating the terms of the peace deals and relaunching attacks.⁹ At the conclusion of the second phase of military operations, violence spread across the country once again.

North Waziristan was considered the hotbed of terrorist activity and a safe haven for a host of militant outfits. But it was not targeted by the military initially; this hesitance resulted in unchecked violence for several years in multiple parts of the country. It was only after a change in military leadership that Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* was finally planned and launched in North Waziristan in 2014 as the third phase of military operations began. This also invited retaliation from TTP, most notoriously in the form of an attack on a school in Peshawar in which 144 children were killed.¹⁰ This drew massive public outrage against TTP and pushed Pakistan to announce its National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism. In late 2016, *Zarb-e-Azb* was declared successful. The Pakistani army has since engaged in Operation *Radd-ul-Fasaad* – a series of intelligence-based operations aimed at flushing the remnants of the TTP from Pakistan.¹¹ In 2019, Pakistan declared victory against TTP, claiming that the threat was neutralised. As the last few years have shown, this is far from the case.

Understanding the Revival of TTP

Following military operations, Pakistan enjoyed some years of relative peace. Several TTP leaders and fighters were killed or imprisoned in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But TTP began restructuring under new leadership, threatening to be more dangerous than before. It is now led by Noor Wali Mehsud who took over after Maulana Fazlullah was killed in a June 2018 drone strike in Afghanistan. Under Mehsud, TTP is emerging with more internal cohesion, a new ideological narrative, and a different operational and administrative plan.

The Afghan Taliban continue to be deeply analysed following their latest political setup in Afghanistan, but TTP remains relatively understudied. Anotnio Giustozzi for instance, explores TTP in the broader context of regional militancy and the Taliban's return, particularly in the way it engages with regional actors and ideologies, with even al-Qaeda aiming to influence it.¹² Giustozzi also notes that TTP's organisational dynamics are shaped by both internal and external factors, with its capacity enhanced due to support by the Taliban, greater autonomy of regional commanders, and the ability to operate more freely across the border. While not formally merging with global networks like al-Qaeda, this has reinforced TTP's independent course while maintaining ideological and operational ties with other militants.¹³

Abdul Basit, who has also worked extensively on terrorism in the region, traces TTP's trajectory through phases of rise, decline, and resurgence in 2021. He describes the group as reinventing itself, following the Taliban's insurgency model, revamping its communications and propaganda capabilities, and shifting from indiscriminate violence toward more strategic targeting, while forging alliances with other militant factions. Basit also emphasises that the Taliban significantly shape TTP's renewed strength, and while they are distinct entities with different objectives, the territorial sanctuaries provided by the former have empowered TTP. Basit points to short-lived treaties between Pakistan and TTP in 2021 and 2022 as failing because of TTP's ideological goals and refusal to accept Pakistan's constitutional framework.¹⁴ He notes also that TTP has become "more lethal since its resurgence in 2020" and a "markedly different organization politically, strategically, and operationally," that has expanded its operations to Balochistan and Punjab within Pakistan, as it tries to transform its activism "from a tribal struggle into an urban insurgency."¹⁵ As a result, as Naveed Hussain suggests, TTP's growth is a central security challenge for Pakistan and a core point of tension in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, with the Taliban's limited willingness or capacity to constrain TTP frustrating Islamabad, and contributing to cross-border violence and periodic military escalations between the two states.¹⁶

According to some estimates, the umbrella group has only around 2,000 to 3,000 fighters, though others suggest this figure could be as high as 6,000. But the number of active fighters becomes less important when one considers TTP's impact, the possibility of its increased recruitment, and its geographic spread. Between July and October 2020, over a hundred cross-border attacks were reported to have taken place.¹⁷ In 2022, more than 150 attacks were launched by TTP across the country.¹⁸ However, statistics vary widely as it is difficult to pinpoint the source of an attack, and whether it is directly linked to TTP. It is clear however that the ecosystem of terrorism in the country is revived when TTP gains strength. According to one study, there were 151 attacks in Pakistan in the first six months of 2022, followed by 228 from July to December. In the first half of 2023, 389 people were estimated to have been killed in 271 attacks across the country, with 174 of these attacks taking place in KP. This shows a rising trend in violence, and one that does not seem to be reversing even as 236 militants were reportedly killed in the first half of 2023.¹⁹ This dangerous trend has continued since then – in 2024, Pakistan experienced 521 terrorist attacks, claiming 852 lives (primarily in KP and Balochistan),²⁰ with almost as many attacks in the first three quarters of 2025 alone.²¹

Compared to the previous waves of terrorist violence, TTP today represents a different challenge since the targets of attacks have changed. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), there were 809 terrorism-related incidents between 2002 and 2006, causing an estimated 3,531 casualties including over 43 percent citizens and almost 18 percent security personnel. From around 2007 until around 2018 – the period of TTP’s activity – SATP records 14,048 attacks and 59,422 casualties. Of these, over 30 percent were citizens, 10 percent Pakistani security forces, and over 53 percent militants. In TTP violence since 2019 until August 2023 a total of 1,234 terrorism-related incidents had been recorded. And these led to 3,301 casualties – of which 28 percent were civilians, 38 percent were security forces, and 33 percent were militants.²²

These numbers reveal two important trends. Firstly, there is a shift in the targets of attacks, with more focus now on security forces – this can be explained through the shifts in ideology, which is discussed in the next section. Secondly, militant deaths as a proportion of all casualties are much lower than those of security forces and civilians, demonstrating that the response has been inadequate given the new context.

As part of reforms initiated by Noor Wali Mehsud, TTP has followed an approach of mergers with other terrorist groups, support to the Taliban, reducing attacks against civilians, and bringing into its fold erstwhile opposing groups.²³ In the sections below, these aspects of the TTP are examined in order to understand how it has changed from the past, and subsequently, why the state needs to revise its policies as well.

The Afghan Taliban Connection

Since the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in August 2021, TTP has found a safe haven in Afghanistan. This is described as more than just an alliance, as there is patronage of TTP by the Taliban. TTP leaders and fighters have been released from prisons and believed to have “de-facto political asylum and freedom of movement.” Moreover, Noor Wali Mehsud describes the Taliban as models to follow, and his organisation as a branch of the Taliban in Pakistan.²⁴

In a statement on 17 August 2021, TTP became the first militant group to celebrate the takeover of Kabul, hailing it as a great victory. It renewed its declaration of allegiance, and Mehsud voiced his commitment to work for the stability and survival of the Taliban. There was an immediate strengthening of TTP, as hundreds of its members and leaders were set free, and began addressing large gatherings where they publicly praised the Taliban and declared aims for a similar victory in Pakistan.²⁵

This is a primary stumbling block in Afghanistan’s relationship with Pakistan, and the Taliban have consistently argued that they are not supporting TTP. However, it is evident that there are several ways in which TTP has benefitted from the Taliban’s presence. There is a “permissive environment” for TTP, as reported to the UN Security Council by its Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.²⁶ This is defined as a state of deliberate non-interference where militants enjoy de facto immunity, freedom of movement, and administrative travel passes. This support has evolved into a sophisticated symbiotic relationship where Afghan authorities provide not just sanctuary, but active logistical and kinetic backing. This includes granting access to NATO-calibre weaponry and night-vision equipment, while facilitating the establishment of new training infrastructure in provinces like Kunar and Nangarhar. Within these camps, al-Qaeda technical experts are believed to provide specialised training for suicide operations, often conducted under the front name Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan to grant the Taliban leadership

a layer of operational deniability. There is a strategic relocation policy where TTP cadres are moved into urban centres and military compounds to shield them from cross-border strikes from Pakistan. By providing monthly financial stipends and allowing the TTP to serve as a regional umbrella for other foreign fighters, the Taliban treat the group as an ideological cause rather than a liability, prioritising “regime unity” over international security obligations, as highlighted in the reports submitted to the Security Council.²⁷

Leadership and Ideological Narrative

Under Noor Wali Mehsud, TTP has been given a new ideological narrative. Described as the “first thinking leader” of TTP by a security analyst and journalist interviewed for this study, his leadership has led to major shifts in TTP’s strategy. For instance, rather than harbouring global ambitions, TTP appears to have a more explicit focus on Pakistan.²⁸ And there is a clearer strategy of targeting law enforcement agencies and avoiding civilian casualties. In order to gain more followers and recruits, TTP is developing a narrative of victimisation and subsequent struggle for independence. It does so by presenting the Pakistani state as un-Islamic, unjust, and illegitimate and then by presenting itself as an alternative.

Coupled with TTP’s ideological shift is its enhanced communications strategy. It has invested in increased social media output and propaganda, producing texts and videos, and using multiple languages for greater outreach through its media wing.²⁹ TTP’s online presence and social media messaging, much like those of the Taliban, are indications of the group’s ability and desire to rebrand itself.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Noor Wali Mehsud’s own text published in 2017. Provocatively titled *Inquilab-e-Mehsud: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraaj tak* (Mehsud’s Revolution: From Foreign Rule to American Imperialism), the cover page of this highly evocative and widely distributed e-book reveals its intents. In addition to an image of Mehsud, there are four pictures: soldiers of the Pakistani army, a western (presumably American) army, a historical photograph of Sikh soldiers, and a military helicopter. Under this collage are the words: “History, lessons, and analysis: history is a teacher, and teaches from past mistakes in order to provide guidance in the future”. The book is dedicated to martyrs of Islam who have faced the oppression of American, NATO, and “so-called Muslim countries” after 2001, defeated their armies, and sent thousands of their soldiers to hell. This sets the tone for Mehsud’s ideological warfare.³⁰

Mehsud’s stated reason for writing the text is to counter propaganda and lies about TTP, and to reveal the true faces of the Pakistani military and state. After going through centuries of the history of the Mehsud tribe and its battles with outsiders, he gets to TTP’s major aims today. TTP is fighting a defensive war, he declares, and wants to create a Caliphate of Islam. This requires avoiding conflicts with other religious organisations – thus opening doors for groups that may not be ideologically aligned with TTP. After all, he notes, the Pakistani army and the US have collaborated to oppress the tribal regions, and TTP is fighting its *jihad* in order to counter their nefarious goals. This is a defensive *jihad* of an oppressed tribe that was labelled a terrorist, and TTP’s goals now are to create a Caliphate, destroy the democratic system, and carry out *jihad* to gain and preserve the independence of the tribes. Effectively, this is a war of independence from Pakistan.³¹

Tactical Evolution

In the new phase of TTP violence, the focus is on law enforcement and security agencies rather than public spaces or civilians. This shows the group’s attempt to rebrand itself as a freedom movement in the eyes of Pakistanis.

This strategy was outlined in guidelines given by Noor Wali Mehsud in September 2018. As per TTP's official policy, its list of targets includes security forces (including the armed forces, intelligence agencies, paramilitary forces and police), government-allied militias, the ruling elite, and judiciary.³² In one much publicised incident, TTP took security personnel hostages at a counter-terrorism centre in Bannu district of KP, with the military eventually killing all 33 terrorists in the operation that followed.³³ TTP has declared that the military is its primary target; in 2020 alone, as the group was beginning to reassemble, the army faced 110 attacks (73 percent of all TTP attacks), according to one estimate.³⁴

Other state agencies such as the police have similarly faced violence – such as the January 2023 attack on a mosque that killed over a hundred people in Peshawar, including mostly police personnel.³⁵ As it is, according to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), there were some 150 attacks during 2022 by TTP and affiliate groups, resulting in more than 150 deaths, a majority of them belonging to law enforcement agencies.³⁶

This also shows TTP's operational activity increasing since its revival every year since 2020. It has added more modern and sophisticated weaponry and equipment – with sniper rifles equipped with thermal scope particularly used against Pakistani security forces. And despite the increased attacks, civilian casualties have reduced significantly from the past.³⁷

Alliances and Mergers

Another major change in this regard is the geographical spread of TTP's operations.³⁸ This is due to the many mergers that the group has completed across the country since July 2020, with influential commanders and erstwhile rival and breakaway groups, which has led to an increase in the number of claimed attacks. There were an estimated 149 attacks in 2020 of which only 48 occurred before 5 July, but as the merger process began, there were an additional 101 attacks by the end of the year.³⁹ Mergers also accelerated once the Taliban returned, and became part of the reform process undertaken by Mehsud.⁴⁰ From 2020 until June 2023, some 28 mergers were officially completed.⁴¹

Mergers allow TTP to enter into different regions in Pakistan. In southern Balochistan for instance, it actively sought alliances with separatist groups,⁴² with two militant groups in Quetta and Kalat joining in April 2023.⁴³ This further strengthens the argument that TTP is rebranding itself as an insurgent group that opposes the Pakistani state, fights for independence, and presents itself as a political alternative. By allying with other disenfranchised or dissatisfied entities – with little in common geographically or in terms of the nature of grievances – it is announcing itself as more of a political force.

These alliances are a new aspect. As a prominent security analyst noted, TTP did not make any real efforts in this regard in the past, with only a desperate attempt by Baitullah Mehsud to strike a deal with al-Qaeda. There was also little functionality in an official alliance with the Punjabi Taliban. Now, with Mehsud at the helm, there are alliances with the Afghan Taliban and Baloch insurgent groups, among many others, as well as reports of possible alliances (or efforts of alliances) with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan, though the latter's animosity with the Afghan Taliban make this a difficult prospect. There are also reports of possible mergers with al-Qaeda.⁴⁴

While alliances make TTP a powerful force, they also come with challenges. The attack on a

Peshawar mosque in January 2023 that killed over a hundred people was initially claimed by a TTP-affiliate, but an official TTP spokesman later distanced his group from the attack since it was not in TTP's agenda to target mosques. It is not unlikely that groups now allied with TTP have their own approaches to expressing their intents and may not be entirely on board with Noor Wali Mehsud's directives and agenda, such as preventing civilian deaths.

Role of Women

In the context of Pakistan, and especially KP, female militants present a complex security problem due to their ability to bypass security check-posts usually manned by male police, as suicide jackets are easily disguisable under loose flowing fabric and modest religious clothing. There are perceptions of violence being a masculine domain, and men may be reluctant to verbally confront or conduct rigorous security checks when it comes to women. This can be exploited by militant groups as women can be employed as shields for transporting weapons, with cultural modesty norms granting them easier security clearance.

Former TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah also incorporated females suicide bombers in his organisation's ranks. Consider the case of two sisters who were assigned a suicide mission but were apprehended by security agencies in Swat in 2009.⁴⁵ Swat also became known for Mullah Fazlullah using the radio – and hence his popular moniker 'Radio Mullah' – to address women, which resulted in financial contributions to his organisation by women in addition to gaining their ideological support that then permeated into households.

This history can be extrapolated to the current context, with efforts focused on women – such as the launch of the magazine *Sunnat-e-Khula* – meant to increase the appeal of TTP to women. Given the ideological and operational developments he has spearheaded, it is plausible that Noor Wali Mehsud will be more proactive in recruiting women. TTP has been reaching out to women through the English language *Sunnat-e-Khula* that has since 2017 sought to appeal to educated and working-class Pakistani women. Contrary to patriarchal norms, it compels its readers to disobey male relatives in the name of righteous *jihad*. And while the text uses Pakistan's official historical and security narratives by presenting India and Pakistan as enemies, it also censures the Pakistan government and army for deceiving Afghan and Pakistani Muslims. In doing so, it declares the Taliban as Pakistan's last hope.

Conclusion: Pakistan and the TTP

With the revival of TTP, Pakistan initiated a policy of talks as the primary means of countering this re-emerged threat, with the Taliban touted as mediators. At the time, Pakistan offered general amnesty to militants if they laid down arms and returned to normal life in the country – an offer that was rejected by TTP.

Negotiations began in November 2021 despite TTP's reluctance, and a month-long ceasefire was announced in the first phase of talks. As meaningful progress did not take place, TTP began attacking Pakistani security forces once again by the end of the year. The next round of talks began in May 2022 and led to another temporary ceasefire. At the time, TTP compromised by limiting the demand of enforcing *sharia* to just the tribal districts rather than all of Pakistan, but insisted on making the erstwhile FATA a semi-autonomous region once again and demanded limited control of certain regions. The negotiation process ended with the killing of al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022, for which Pakistan was also blamed by TTP. A month later, attacks on Pakistan resumed with the ceasefire officially ending on 28 November 2022.⁴⁶

Since then, Pakistan has categorically rejected any prospect of talks, leading to tremendous friction in the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship due to TTP violence.⁴⁷

This has led to some of the worst border clashes in 2025, and Pakistan calling for “concrete, verifiable, and time-bound steps” from the Taliban to end TTP support.⁴⁸ There have also been targeted cross-border operations and air strikes against alleged TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan, further straining diplomatic relations.⁴⁹

But this approach remains inadequate when it comes to addressing the challenge of TTP, which represents arguably the most immediate and serious concern for Pakistan. And as this research note has demonstrated, it is a concern that requires a new and multidimensional approach to the group. Noor Wali Mehsud represents a different kind of leader, keen on exploiting the state’s narrative and failures when it comes to other parts of the country – such as Balochistan. In doing so, TTP adds new recruits, attempts to gain more followers, becomes more akin to an insurgency rather than just a terrorist outfit, and develops a political narrative in which it is a valid political actor against the Pakistani state. As a result, TTP’s thinking leadership necessitates a serious re-examination of existing notions about the terrorist outfit – not just by the Pakistani state but the international community as well. After all, as history has shown us, terrorist outfits can evolve quickly – a more localised focus at one time does not mean that regional or global ambitions are precluded from any future iterations. And as Noor Wali Mehsud has shown, new narratives can be utilised to rebrand even a terrorist outfit.

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