

## **SOUTH ASIA'S DIVERSE AND EVOLVING THREAT LANDSCAPE AMID RISING TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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# South Asia's Diverse and Evolving Threat Landscape amid rising tensions in the Middle East

Alongside Africa and the Middle East, South Asia remains one of the most-affected regions by insurgencies and terrorism shaped by external powers' interventions in Afghanistan, inter and intra state rivalries, sectarian fissures, governance deficits and the presence of global militant groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK). While the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan emboldened some regional groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's (HTS) success in capturing Syria by ousting the Bashar al-Assad regime has attracted mixed responses from South Asian militant groups.

Critically, South Asian groups have responded to key geopolitical events, such as the May 7-10 India-Pakistan tensions, the Gaza situation, HTS' rise to power in Syria according to their ideological worldviews and narrow operational agendas to fuel recruitment, funding and radicalisation. Their reactions underscore increasing localisation and regionalisation by appropriating external influences to their local contexts and requirements.

Hostilities between regional rivals Israel and Iran also escalated this month, with air, missile and drone strikes exchanged over 12 days. Though Tehran and Tel Aviv agreed to a ceasefire on June 24, a volatile and tense security environment persists. Any future outbreak and expansion of the Israel-Iran tensions across the Middle East will likely revive sectarian militancy in parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan across the Sunni-Shia divide. If the conflict lingers on, the anti-Iran Sunni secessionist groups like Jaish al-Adl, active in the Sistan-and-Balochistan province near the Iran-Pakistan border, view the invasion of Iran as an opportunity to step up their attacks.

The weakening of Iranian state authority and the emerging governance vacuum in border areas could turn into fertile grounds for militant groups, including ISK and Pakistani Baloch separatist movement. In retaliation, the pro-Iran Shia militias like the Fatemiyoun and the Zainabiyoun brigades could reactivate to defend Shia and Iranian interests in the region. If this were to happen, it will not only create new challenges for the regimes in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also contribute to overall regional instability and a volatile security environment.

In light of this, the current issue features four salient articles: the varied reactions of South

Asian militant groups to HTS' takeover of Syria; India's Operation Sindoor targeting "terror camps" in Pakistan following the April 22 Pahalgam attack in India-administered Kashmir; the remaking of sectarian violence in Pakistan's Kurram tribal district against the backdrop of the Iran-Israel tensions and Bangladesh's counterterrorism challenges after the ouster of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wajid in August 2024.

In the first article, **Abdul Sayed** analyses the reactions of militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan following HTS' takeover of Syria in December 2024. Among local and global jihadist entities such as the Pakistani Taliban and regional branches of Al Qaeda and Islamic State, HTS's rise to power broadly reaffirmed their jihadist doctrine and pursuit of armed struggle to achieve strategic objectives. According to the author, the messaging of the various groups regarding the HTS takeover has been related to their specific aims and objectives, underpinned by AQ and IS' adversarial stance towards its leader Abu Muhammad al Julani. The primary focus, however, remains the pursuit of local goals with minimal interest in developments beyond the region, and underscores the localised orientation of the jihadi landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Next, **Sudha Ramachandran** examines the efficacy of 'Operation Sindoor' in the deterrence of cross-border terrorism between India and Pakistan. In response to the April 2025 terrorist attack at Pahalgam in India's Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India launched a series of kinetic measures targeting terrorist camps and military bases in Pakistan. While India has faced a protracted struggle with cross-border terrorism since the first India-Pakistan war, it had mostly dealt with this issue through non-kinetic measures. The rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi in 2014, however, marked a shift towards more offensive measures. By examining India and Pakistan's shared history of cross-border conflict in J&K, the author argues that though 'Operation Sindoor' was successful in damaging terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan, it is likely insufficient in deterring future cross-border terrorism.

Thirdly, **Iftikhar Firdous** assesses the reemergence of Sunni-Shia violence in Pakistan's Kurram tribal district among rival sectarian tribes, with broader implications across the country. The case study is

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particularly relevant in the wake of the ongoing Iran-Israel conflict, which could result in a strong sectarian backlash by the Iranian proxies in the country. In this respect, Pakistan's position on the Iran-Israel conflict will shape the reactions of Iranian proxy groups, especially in Kurram. According to the author, while Kurram's sectarian strife has metastasized over the last two decades from a local to regional issue with strong links to developments in Syria, an intermingling of sectarian identities, land disputes and external interference account for the current phase of tensions. As such, local conflict resolution interventions have become somewhat ineffective.

Lastly, **Iftekhharul Bashar** explores how the impact of political instability and leadership transitions could reinvigorate the Islamist terrorist threat in Bangladesh. The breakdown in law enforcement, with mass prison escapes – including that of several high-profile militants – as well as public demonstrations, observed in the country since last year are concerning. Amidst such chaos, limited resources have contributed to a lack of focus on counter-terrorism efforts by the interim government. Extremist organisations have exploited the instability through the spread of radical ideologies and attempts to recruit more youths. The author argues that urgent measures are needed to reduce the threat of religious extremism, including community-driven efforts, comprehensive institutional reforms and a renewed commitment to inclusivity, human rights and the rule of law.

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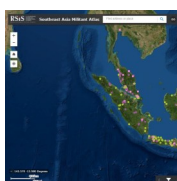
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## SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS

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Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via <https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd>

# The Reactions of Militant Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Takeover of Syria

Abdul Sayed

*In December 2024, the takeover of Syria's capital, Damascus, by a coalition of militants under the leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) chief Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and the consequent termination of the Assad family's five-decade rule following a protracted conflict, was an exceptional global development.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, HTS' rise to power marked a major event for militant groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region who had been significantly inspired by the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021,<sup>2</sup> an event that reaffirmed their jihadist doctrine and the relevance of armed struggle in achieving strategic objectives.<sup>3</sup> The jihadist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), increasingly believe that the creation of a "Syrian state" through persistence and perseverance is achievable. The militant groups from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region promptly issued statements in response to HTS' resurgence in Syria after a 13-year-long, intense conflict – an issue examined in this article.*

## Introduction

Within the militant landscape of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, two categories of jihadist groups can be identified: local and global jihadist entities. The former includes the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban, both of whom maintain agendas confined to their respective national contexts. The Afghan Taliban, following their return to power in August 2021, are undergoing a transformation from an insurgent group to a state actor. In contrast, the Pakistani Taliban comprise three principal factions: the TTP; Tehreek-e-Taliban Ghazwat-ul-Hind (TTG)<sup>4</sup> and Tehreek Lashkar-e-Islam Pakistan (TLIP). Among global jihadist groups, the Islamic State (IS) holds particular significance through its regional affiliate, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), which operates in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, and the Islamic State Pakistan group (ISP), which is active in other parts of the country. Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s South Asian branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), is also composed largely of leadership and members based in Pakistan. Although it has remained operationally inactive in terms of attacks for over a decade, it continues to be a key actor in the region's militant landscape due to its robust propaganda network. With the exception of ISK/ISP, all other groups – despite internal rivalries – maintain alliances with one another. ISK/ISP, however, consider these groups to be misguided and position themselves in direct opposition to them.

In this context, the reactions of regional branches of global jihadist networks – namely AQIS and ISK – are of particular significance, given the complex history of Julani's relationship with them. Accordingly, the two groups responded differently to Julani's takeover in Syria, a dynamic analysed in detail in this study. Similarly, the three major factions of the Pakistani Taliban – the TTP, TTG and TLIP – also expressed notable reactions to the HTS-led militants' victory in Syria. The primary objective of these messages was to mobilise their supporters in Pakistan to intensify their armed struggle against state security forces by invoking the success of militants in Syria. However, this campaign also reflects internal rivalries within the Pakistani Taliban, a dimension that is likewise addressed in this analysis.

## Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

AQIS issued two statements in early December 2024, expressing support for HTS' territorial gains against the Bashar al-Assad regime. These advances culminated in the militant takeover of the Syrian capital, Damascus, on December 8.

The first AQIS statement was released on December 2,<sup>5</sup> following a significant offensive by HTS, which broke a years-long stalemate with Assad's forces.<sup>6</sup> AQIS expressed warm gratitude over the militants' rapid seizure of significant territories and their swift advance towards Damascus. In this statement, AQIS accused Assad's forces and their allied militias of the massacre of the Sunni population in Syria. It characterised HTS' military gains as a liberation of Syrian Sunnis from the sectarian oppression imposed by Shia forces. Furthermore, AQIS called upon militants in Syria to maintain unity, continue their offensives against Assad's forces to a decisive conclusion, and remain vigilant against external conspiracies that might threaten the future Islamist governance of Syria. AQIS also expressed the hope that the capture of Damascus would serve "to strengthen the armed struggle of Palestinian militants seeking the liberation of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) from the Israeli control".<sup>7</sup>

A notable aspect of this statement was its distinct tone, marked by an explicit sectarian narrative – an uncommon departure from AQ's typical rhetoric. Historically, AQ has framed its global struggle primarily in opposition to the United States (US), while avoiding overt engagement with the Sunni-Shia sectarian discourse.<sup>8</sup> In this instance, however, the group attributed the failures of the anti-Assad militants since 2011 to the support provided to the Assad regime by Shia foreign fighters. AQIS alleged that Shia militants from across the world had gathered in Syria to support Assad, resulting in what it described as the most brutal Shia-led genocide against Sunnis in history.

In a second statement released on December 9, 2025,<sup>9</sup> AQIS compared the capture of Damascus by HTS to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, characterising it as a second historic victory for Islamic militants. However, the statement emphasised that the establishment of a *shariah*-based governance system constituted the true objective of the jihadist movement. It reminded militants that, following their seizure of power, their primary responsibility was now the implementation of an Islamic government in Syria.

A noteworthy aspect of both AQIS statements was the complete absence of any direct acknowledgment of or praise for HTS or its leader Julani, in relation to the developments in Syria. Instead, AQIS attributed Assad's downfall to the broader efforts of Syrian militants, without specifying particular actors. This omission is significant and was later underscored by AQIS' subsequent five-month silence concerning Julani's governance, during which supporters of AQIS voiced increasing criticism of his policies. This pattern of disengagement suggests a broader scepticism within AQIS towards HTS and its leadership.

The underlying causes of this scepticism likely dovetail with Julani's formal disassociation from AQ in 2016, which engendered deep-seated mistrust between the former and the broader AQ network.<sup>10</sup> AQ's indifference towards HTS stems from, among other factors, the expulsion, arrests and assassination of AQ-affiliated militants.<sup>11</sup> These developments collectively fuelled suspicions and strained relations between the two entities.

Criticism from supporters of AQIS against Julani emerged in the months following the capture of Damascus, when he broadened efforts<sup>12</sup> to establish diplomatic relations with the US, European nations and key regional powers in a bid to consolidate his authority. AQIS supporters strongly condemned Julani's announcement regarding the formation of a democratic government in Syria as well as his efforts to engage with Western countries, framing these steps as a deviation from core Islamist objectives.<sup>13</sup> Notable expressions of discontent included criticism of Julani's meeting with



German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in January 2025 and with French President Emmanuel Macron in April in Paris.<sup>14</sup>

Further criticism was directed at Julani's attempts to rebrand himself as a moderate Islamist, which AQIS supporters viewed as an ideological betrayal. This disapproval intensified following a visit to Turkey, during which Julani's wife appeared publicly with her face uncovered in her role as the "First Lady", prompting accusations that Julani had transitioned from an Islamist stance to a secularist position.<sup>15</sup>

The abovementioned grievances and critiques of Julani began to surface on AQIS-affiliated social media platforms in early March 2025 and gradually intensified over the subsequent weeks. Despite this growing discontent, AQIS maintained official silence regarding its stance on the new Syrian government during this period. This silence was formally broken on May 22, 2025, when AQIS' monthly Urdu-language flagship magazine, *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* (the *Voice of the Battle of Hind*), published a special feature on Julani's government.<sup>16</sup> This piece described the capture of Damascus under Julani's leadership as the result of a "Zionist-Crusader arrangement".<sup>17</sup> This criticism was conveyed through an interview with an Arab jihadist figure, which was translated into Urdu and published on AQIS' principal media outlet, thereby publicly articulating the group's disapproval of Julani.

The interview contended that Julani's takeover of Damascus did not constitute a genuine military victory by Islamists but was instead the product of covert agreements with the US, Europe and Israel. It stated:

The Mujahideen of Syria who are leading the governance in Damascus are under the influence of their compromise with the Zionist-Crusader, which enabled them to achieve this victory. And comparing the ruling leadership of Damascus to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is not only wrong but sheer deception.<sup>18</sup>

This publication represented a clear repudiation of AQIS' earlier position as expressed in its congratulatory press release on December 8, 2024, which had declared the militants' capture of Damascus a similar victory to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

### **Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)**

On December 11, 2024, ISK launched a media campaign aimed at undermining HTS' takeover of Damascus.<sup>19</sup> The campaign was specifically directed at ISK supporters in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, seeking to prevent them from being influenced by the rise to power of a rival group in the region of IS' birth.

ISK's first comprehensive response came through two episodes of the weekly *Arzwana (Understanding)* podcast, released by Mubarizeen Media on December 11 and December 18, 2024, both dedicated to developments in Syria.<sup>20</sup> In these 46-minute episodes, a prominent ISK figure, Abu Muhammad Khorasani, urged supporters not to be swayed by the ascension of Julani-led militants in Syria. According to Khorasani, the development did not constitute a jihadist victory but rather resulted from Julani's compromise with the US. He reiterated accusations previously levelled against the Taliban following their August 2021 takeover of Kabul,<sup>21</sup> claiming that HTS had similarly abandoned its jihadist objectives in pursuit of power and had gained control of Damascus through a negotiated settlement with the US. Khorasani drew parallels between Qatar's facilitation of the Taliban-US agreement and Julani's alleged arrangement with the US through Turkey, positioning HTS as a regional militia allegedly serving the US' interests.

To diminish the perceived historical significance of the Assad regime's fall at the hands of HTS, ISK advanced a conspiracy theory suggesting that HTS' rise to power was a consequence of the failure of

the US and its allies to eliminate IS in Syria. This narrative was primarily intended to reassure ISK supporters in Afghanistan and Pakistan that, despite HTS' success, IS remained a viable actor in Syria, and that concern over IS' future presence in the region was unwarranted. ISK's propagation of such theories appears designed to insulate its support base from external developments and to maintain the image of IS as a parallel force capable of standing against all adversaries.

A core element of ISK's response was the assertion that HTS, like the Assad regime, constituted an adversarial entity that had actively engaged in hostilities against IS since its inception in Syria. ISK reminded its audience that Julani had been a declared enemy of IS since his rebellion against IS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the subsequent establishment of a rival organisation in Syria. Julani was also accused of facilitating the deaths of both IS and AQ members on behalf of the US in the Idlib region.

ISK further argued that the policies initiated by Julani after capturing power confirmed long-standing claims by IS' founding leadership, who had labelled him from the outset as a Western agent and a traitor acting against jihadist interests in Syria.

On January 5, 2025, the fifth issue of ISK's Urdu-language flagship monthly magazine *Nida-e-Khorasan* (the *Voice of Khorasan*), which primarily targets audiences in Pakistan, published a written version of Khorasani's podcast under the title "Pharaoh's Regime Fell, But Samiri Became the Successor".<sup>22</sup> However, this op-ed was presented as a standalone article without direct attribution to Khorasani.

Subsequently, on January 9, 2025, Mubarizeen Media released a second detailed article spanning 12 pages, directed against Julani's administration in Syria.<sup>23</sup> Titled "The Current Situation in Syria Is the Second Part of the Afghanistan 2021 Drama", the article reiterated claims that HTS, like the Taliban, served as an alleged US proxy. It included additional allegations to reframe Julani's rapid diplomatic engagements following the Damascus takeover as part of a broader conspiracy rather than a political achievement. ISK asserted that Julani's abrupt rise to power was indicative of a broader US strategy to install compliant rulers in Muslim-majority countries. According to this view, after empowering the Taliban in Afghanistan, the US concluded that empowering jihadist groups as proxies, rather than supporting democratic governments, was a more cost-effective method. Consequently, Julani was brought to power in Syria to replace Bashar al-Assad. However, ISK framed Julani as an even more entrenched Western proxy and a more significant adversary of IS than the Taliban.

### **Pakistani Taliban**

The Pakistani Taliban expressed exceptional enthusiasm and issued formal congratulatory statements to HTS-led militants' victories in Syria. These statements were disseminated separately by the TTP as well as by the two other key Pakistani Taliban factions – TTG and TLIP.

These declarations not only celebrated the successes of the militants in Syria but also encouraged them to remain united in their efforts to establish a Taliban-like Islamic system in Pakistan. However, the implicit purpose of these messages was to motivate domestic supporters within Pakistan, suggesting that perseverance and escalated resistance against security forces could potentially lead to a similar seizure of power in Pakistan.

In this regard, the first statement was issued by TTG on November 30 in Arabic, expressing joy over the capture of Idlib and congratulating Syrian militants.<sup>24</sup> The TTP released a similar message on December 6 in Urdu and Arabic languages, celebrating Syrian advances against Assad's forces while simultaneously calling on the group's Pakistani supporters to intensify their efforts.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, on December 9, TLIP released a statement concerning the capture of Damascus by militants under



Julani's leadership.<sup>26</sup> On the same day, TTG and TTP also issued individual statements congratulating HTS on the seizure of Damascus and their assumption of political control.<sup>27</sup>

It is significant to note that TTG and TLIP are regional factions of the Pakistani Taliban active in the Khyber and North Waziristan areas of the Newly Merged Districts as well as in the Bannu Division. Typically, they refrain from issuing statements concerning foreign events, or even major internal political developments in Pakistan. For instance, despite their critical involvement in the Afghan Taliban's insurgency, they issued no public statement following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021. Thus, their comments on Syria represent a notable departure from their usual conduct. A key factor behind this shift appears to be the internal competition among various Pakistani Taliban factions, wherein TTG and TLIP are engaged in a struggle for survival against the TTP. Since August 2021, following the end of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, dozens of groups have merged with the TTP, significantly expanding its operational scope and increasing the frequency of its attacks.<sup>28</sup> Militants, including key commanders from both TTG and TLIP, have also defected to the TTP.<sup>29</sup> One of the major limitations of TTG and TLIP, in contrast to the TTP, has been their inactivity in the media domain. Consequently, they have initiated efforts to strengthen their media presence, with these atypical statements on Syria forming part of that strategic endeavour.

On the other hand, the TTP's initial silence regarding Syria can be attributed to its post-Doha Agreement strategy. Since the February 2020 agreement between the Afghan Taliban and the US, the TTP has sought to portray itself as a localised insurgency similar to the Afghan Taliban, seeking to communicate to the US, the international community and regional actors that their conflict is rooted in domestic grievances and not tied to external agendas.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the TTP usually refrains from commenting on international developments. It was likely in reaction to TTG's unusual statement on Syria that the TTP first released an informal message on December 6. However, following HTS' takeover of Damascus and subsequent celebratory statements by other religious factions in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, the TTP joined TTG and TLIP in issuing a formal message. Nevertheless, after this series of declarations, the governance of HTS in Syria has since ceased to be a focal point in the media campaigns of these three Pakistani Taliban factions.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, one of the primary objectives behind the reactions of AQIS, ISK and the three major factions of the Pakistani Taliban to Syria's takeover by HTS was to address their local audiences, with the aim of promoting their interests in the region. Given that Julani has historically been a long-standing adversary of ISK, the group promptly launched an aggressive campaign following the success of such a major enemy in Syria, subsequent to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The purpose of this campaign was to present an alternative narrative to the widespread media coverage of this significant transformation in Syria, portraying Julani's rise to power not as a military achievement but a result of an alleged compromise with the US, Israel and the international community. The intended message to supporters was that ISK alone was engaged in a genuine jihad for Islamic objectives, whereas Julani, similar to the Taliban, had deviated from Islamic goals and ascended to power in Syria as a proxy of the US.

Likewise, AQIS expressed strong support for the militants' seizure of power in Syria, yet remained cautious about Julani. This caution was due to the distrust stemming from Julani's 2016 separation from AQ to establish a separate group. However, after a prolonged silence of several weeks concerning Julani's post-takeover policies, AQIS voiced its discontent, characterising Julani's actions as a deviation from Islamist objectives. During this period, AQIS retracted its initial response in December 2024 and avoided framing Julani's takeover as a second historic victory following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. On the contrary, the group emphasised that comparing Julani's government to that of the Taliban was not only inaccurate but also misleading.

In contrast, the response from the Pakistani Taliban factions was largely symbolic, with the aim of mobilising their supporters in Pakistan to intensify their fight against security forces. In this context, TTG and TLIP, in their efforts to lead the campaign, utilised it as a platform to compete with the TTP in media outreach, seeking to convey the message that they, too, were significant militant forces within Pakistan, akin to the TTP.

A key takeaway from the above analysis is that, within the militant landscape of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the primary objective of militant groups remains the pursuit of local goals, with minimal interest in developments beyond the region. This was clearly reflected in their reactions to the December 2024 capture of Damascus by militants led by Julani, where the emphasis was placed on reinforcing their narrative at the local level. This underscores the localised orientation of the jihadist landscape in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

## About the Author

**Abdul Sayed** is an independent researcher on jihadism and the politics and security of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Sayed has a master's degree in political science from Lund University, Sweden. He can be reached at X: @abdsayedd.

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<sup>1</sup> "‘New History Written’ Says HTS Leader al-Julani in Syria Victory Speech," *Al Jazeera*, December 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/8/hts-leader-al-julani-arrives-in-syrias-capital-delivers-victory-speech>.

<sup>2</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 5 (2023): 1-12.

<sup>3</sup> According to the jihadist conception, the ultimate objective of armed struggle is the establishment of Islamic supremacy across the globe. To this end, various groups engage in efforts to seize power within their respective regions and implement an Islamic system. They assert that this represents the final aim of the philosophy of armed jihad in Islam, which they claim is an obligation upon every Muslim. In this context, a notable work is *Shamsheer Be Niyam (Naked Sword)* by Al-Qaeda's senior religious figure, Abu Yahya al-Libi, which advocates for armed jihad to seize power in Pakistan. For details, see Abu Yahya al-Libi, *Shamsheer Be Niyam* (in Urdu) (Hitten Publications, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, "Message of Congratulations on the Conquests in the Levant," Statement: 00\_125\_AQS, press release, December 2, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Fabrice Balanche, "Idlib May Become the Next Gaza Strip," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Watch 3288, March 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/idlib-may-become-next-gaza-strip>.

<sup>7</sup> AQIS, "Message of Congratulations."

<sup>8</sup> Cole Bunzel, *Jihadism on Its Own Terms: Understanding a Movement* (Hoover Institution, 2017), [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/jihadism\\_on\\_its\\_own\\_terms\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/jihadism_on_its_own_terms_pdf.pdf).

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<sup>12</sup> Chantal Da Silva et al., "He Toppled a Dictator and Traded Fatigues for Suits – Syria's New Leader Tries to Reassure the U.S.," *NBC News*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-sharaa-jolan-reassure-no-jihadi-rcna184478>.

<sup>13</sup> Author's monitoring of AQIS supportive channels on social media platforms from January to May 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Clare Richardson and Matthew Moore, "Germany's FM Baerbock on Surprise Visit to Syria," *Deutsche Welle*, March 1, 2025, video, 5 min., 37 sec., <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-fm-baerbock-on-surprise-visit-to-syria/video-71209257>; "Syrian Leader al-Sharaa Arrives in Paris to Meet Macron on First European Visit," *France24*, May 7,

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<sup>16</sup> Ustadh Abu Usama Abdul Aziz al-Hallaq, "The Future of Jihad in Syria," *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind* 18, no. 3 (2025): 96-102.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Sayed and Riccardo Valle, "How Did ISKP React to the HTS Victory in Syria?" *The Diplomat*, January 20, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/how-did-iskp-react-to-the-hts-victory-in-syria/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ustad Abu Muhammad Khorasani, "The Recent Crisis in Syria (Political, Historical, and Religious Analysis), Part 1," December 11, 2024, in *Arzwanah (Understanding)*, by Mubarizeen Media, podcast, Pashto, 24 min.; Ustad Abu Muhammad Khorasani, "The Recent Crisis in Syria (Political, Historical, and Religious Analysis), Part 2," December 18, 2024, in *Arzwanah (Understanding)*, by Mubarizeen Media, podcast, Pashto, 22 min.

<sup>21</sup> Abdul Sayed et al., "Making Sense of the Islamic State's War on the Afghan Taliban," *Hudson Institute*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/node/44711>.

<sup>22</sup> "The Rule Became of Pharaoh, But the Successor Turned Out to be Samiri," *Niada-e-Khorasan* 1, no. 6 (2025): 15-31. The Quran recounts the story of Samiri, a member of Prophet Moses' community who led his followers astray. The apparent purpose of equating Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Samiri in the discourse of ISK is to draw a parallel: just as Pharaoh was a great oppressor for the people of Moses – represented here by Bashar al-Assad – his removal did not bring salvation, as Samiri (now symbolised by al-Julani) rose to power in Syria, misleading the people and leading them towards destruction. This comparison is used by ISK to portray both Bashar al-Assad and al-Julani as distinct but equally dangerous threats to their cause, framed as a warning to their followers.

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Badr Waziristani (spokesperson for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Group), "Congratulations to the Mujahideen of Aleppo on the Victory," November 30, 2024.

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<sup>28</sup> Sayed and Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," 1-12.

<sup>29</sup> Based on the author's personal observations.

<sup>30</sup> Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, August 16, 2022, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/tehrick-e-taliban-pakistan-posture>.

# **‘Operation Sindoor’: Will India’s Military Strikes in Pakistan Curb Cross-Border Terrorism?**

**Sudha Ramachandran**

*A recent terrorist attack at Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir targeting tourists prompted India to launch drone, missile and airstrikes on terrorist camps and military bases in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The strikes marked a significant escalation from the kinetic operations India launched in 2016 and 2019 in response to Pakistan-linked terrorist attacks in India. This article explores the impact of the latest strikes on cross-border terrorism.*

## **Introduction**

On April 22, a terrorist attack at Pahalgam in India’s Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) left 26 people dead. It evoked widespread outrage in India as those killed were unarmed civilians and mostly tourists. They were reportedly targeted for being Hindu; non-Muslim men were singled out and shot dead at point-blank range before their wives and children.<sup>1</sup> This was the deadliest terrorist attack on civilians in India since the attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 that claimed the lives of 166 people, and the most lethal in Kashmir since the February 2019 suicide attack by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) on a vehicle carrying paramilitary personnel at Pulwama that left 40 soldiers dead. A little-known terrorist group, The Resistance Force (TRF), claimed the attack but subsequently retracted.<sup>2</sup> TRF is said to be an affiliate of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), or an amalgam of LeT, JeM and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen remnants in J&K.<sup>3</sup> India banned TRF in January 2023 and, following the Pahalgam attack, efforts are underway to get the outfit proscribed by the United Nations Security Council.<sup>4</sup>

The Indian government’s response to the Pahalgam attack was swift. It drew attention to the “cross-border linkages of the terrorist attack” and blamed Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan denied involvement in the attack and asked for an independent inquiry, which India refused.<sup>6</sup> Hard-hitting speeches by Indian leaders indicated that India would respond with force. “India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backers. We will pursue them to the ends of the earth,” India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at a public rally two days after the attack.<sup>7</sup> Although Modi did not name Pakistan in his speech, it was evident that he was referring to ‘terror havens’ in Pakistan. Two weeks later, India launched military strikes on ‘terrorist camps’ in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Against this backdrop, this article examines ‘Operation Sindoor’, India’s punitive and pre-emptive military strikes on targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir in response to the Pahalgam attack. The strikes are not the first time that New Delhi has resorted to kinetic operations against Pakistan in response to Pakistan-linked terrorist attacks in India. The article will look at how Operation Sindoor marks a new chapter in India’s strategy to fight cross-border terrorism. It will argue that the military strikes, while degrading terrorist infrastructure, may not deter Pakistan from continuing to support anti-India terrorist groups.

## **India’s Cross-Border Terrorism Problem**

Contrary to the perception that India’s problem with cross-border terrorism is a post-1989 phenomenon, Pakistan’s use of armed non-state actors to further its territorial ambitions against India

can be traced back to the first India-Pakistan War of 1947-48, when it infiltrated tribal militias in the then princely state of J&K. Since then, Pakistan has pushed ‘irregulars’ across the Line of Control (LoC), a border demarcation that divides Kashmir into Indian- and Pakistani-administered parts, into J&K to foment unrest – even an uprising – as in 1965 during Operation Gibraltar.<sup>8</sup>

In 1989-90, a powerful anti-India insurgency erupted in J&K, and thousands of Kashmiri youth crossed the LoC into Pakistan-administered Kashmir, where they were provided with arms and training by Pakistan’s military establishment and infiltrated back into J&K.<sup>9</sup> The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) set up scores of militant groups, including the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). Predominantly Kashmiri in composition, HM was Islamist in ideology and owed its allegiance to Pakistan, and therefore served as the Pakistani establishment’s main sword arm – not only to weaken the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF),<sup>10</sup> but also to bleed the Indian Army in J&K. Since 2000, the predominantly Pakistani-Punjabi LeT and JeM, which are jihadist but not anti-Pakistan, have emerged as the main executors of the Pakistani establishment’s anti-India strategy, carrying out attacks not only in J&K, but also other parts of India.<sup>11</sup>

So, how did India respond to Pakistan-linked terrorist attacks? India’s approach to insurgencies elsewhere in the country was guided by the perception that, as these were “political problems that require a political solution”, the use of “military force” would be “limited to creating the conditions for the political process to resume”.<sup>12</sup> This was not the approach to the Kashmir militancy. Perceived by the Indian state as a ‘proxy war’ being waged by Pakistan, it was dealt with by deploying higher levels of coercive – even military – force.<sup>13</sup> Still, in the 1990s and 2000s, India relied more on non-kinetic measures to deal with cross-border terrorism, including “diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally, economic penalties related to terror financing, and pressure on Islamabad to crack down on terror networks”.<sup>14</sup> Even after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, India focused on building dossiers on the LeT and the Pakistani establishment’s role in the attacks to get terror outfits and their leaders included in the United Nations (UN)’s blacklist, and convincing the international community to pressure Pakistan to shut off support for terrorists. While the measures India took in this period were largely non-kinetic, the Indian Army was said to have carried out “limited-calibre, target-specific, counter-terrorist operations” across the LoC.<sup>15</sup> However, India avoided *overt* military retaliation against cross-border terrorist attacks.

This changed after the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi came to power. In September 2016, when JeM militants attacked the Indian Army brigade headquarters at Uri, killing 18 soldiers, commando teams were dispatched across the LoC to carry out “surgical strikes” – these were more in the nature of raids – on terrorist “launch pads” in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.<sup>16</sup>

Then, in 2019, following the attack at Pulwama, an Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft targeted a JeM camp at Balakot in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. While the outcome of the Balakot strike was questionable, it marked a significant escalation in India’s response to Pakistan-linked terror attacks. If in 2016, commando teams crossed the LoC, in 2019, an Indian fighter aircraft crossed the international border (IB). For the first time since the 1971 India-Pakistan War, India used airpower inside undisputed Pakistani territory, signalling escalation.<sup>17</sup> The 2016 strikes indicated New Delhi’s “clear political intent” to respond militarily in the face of terrorist attacks. The 2019 strikes “raised the stakes, further reinforcing the political intent in New Delhi to abandon strategic restraint”.<sup>18</sup> Operation Sindoor marks the next stage of escalation in India’s military response to cross-border terrorism.

### **India’s Operation Sindoor**

India’s immediate response to the Pahalgam attack consisted of a string of non-kinetic, punitive measures against Pakistan. These included holding “in abeyance with immediate effect” the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), visa cancellations, border closures and scaling down Pakistan’s diplomatic staff in New Delhi.<sup>19</sup> Then, on the night of May 6-7, India launched Operation Sindoor. Indian airstrikes

and missiles hit nine terrorist camps, including the headquarters of LeT and JeM, in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.<sup>20</sup>

Pakistan hit back, inflicting heavy losses on the IAF and striking at targets in Indian territory.<sup>21</sup> For four days thereafter, India and Pakistan engaged in escalating military exchanges involving drones, loitering munitions, missiles, artillery and fighter aircraft, until they agreed to a ceasefire on May 10. Unlike the strikes on May 6-7, which India said had targeted only terrorist infrastructure, its strikes on subsequent days hit the Pakistan Air Force's nine bases.<sup>22</sup> The IAF struck across not only the LoC and IB to hit terrorist camps deep inside Pakistan – JeM's Bahawalpur headquarters is around 100 kilometres from the international border – but also targeted them in the politically important Punjab province. Significantly, the IAF hit the strategic Nur Khan airbase, located near the headquarters of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division, which oversees and protects the country's nuclear arsenal; Rawalpindi, where Pakistan's military is headquartered; and Islamabad, Pakistan's capital.

Operation Sindoor thus marks a major escalation in India's military response to cross-border terrorism. Its missile strikes on Pakistan have grown in scale, crossed new thresholds, expanded into more geographies, used new technologies, and triggered new and larger cycles of violence and counterviolence.<sup>23</sup> It brought the two nuclear-armed countries to the brink of war.

### **Objectives of Operation Sindoor**

Political considerations played a role in the BJP government's decision to opt for overt military strikes in response to the Pahalgam attack. The BJP and its fraternal organisations have always adopted a muscular posture on the Kashmir issue and Pakistan. They have often derided the opposition Congress Party for its "weak and soft" approach when in power during the 1990s and 2004-2014 in dealing with cross-border terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Following the Pahalgam attack, the BJP government had to prove its "nationalist" credentials and "tough on terrorism" claims.<sup>25</sup> Also, the post-Pahalgam strikes had to be more muscular than the 2016 and 2019 strikes in order to "energize" the BJP's nationalist support base.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, there were counter terrorism objectives to be achieved as well. Following Operation Sindoor's launch, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said that although a fortnight had passed since the Pahalgam attack, Pakistan had taken "no demonstrable step" to dismantle "the terrorist infrastructure on its territory or on territory under its control". Indian "intelligence monitoring of Pakistan-based terrorist modules indicated that further attacks against India were impending. There was thus a compulsion both to deter and to pre-empt."<sup>27</sup> After the May 10 ceasefire, the Indian government said that Operation Sindoor was "conceived to punish perpetrators and planners of terror", and "destroy terror infrastructure across the border".<sup>28</sup>

An important component of Operation Sindoor was the signal to Pakistan and the international community on India's response to future attacks from Pakistan-based terrorist groups. Delhi would carry out military strikes on an increasing expanse of Pakistan "regardless of the consequences", and even "without consulting or convincing the international community".<sup>29</sup> Besides, India did not feel the need to provide irrefutable evidence of Pakistan's role in the terrorist attack. "Insofar as there are terrorist organisations in Pakistan that have attacked India – which have not been brought to justice by Islamabad – that is evidence enough for establishing Pakistani complicity."<sup>30</sup> Finally, India said that any future "act of terror" emanating from Pakistani soil would be considered an "act of war" against India, and would be responded to accordingly.<sup>31</sup>

Broadly, then, the strikes were to punish terrorists who planned and carried out attacks in India, to eliminate terrorists and to destroy terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. This was to weaken their capacity for future attacks. The messages from the strikes, which

underscored Delhi's resolve to respond militarily, were aimed at deterring terrorists and, more importantly, the Pakistan military, from carrying out or enabling future terrorist attacks.

### **Deterring the Pakistan Military?**

Dissuading Pakistan's military establishment from supporting anti-India terrorism is an objective that is not – as India has known for decades – possible to achieve whether through non-kinetic or kinetic measures. Pakistan's use of terrorist proxies as a foreign policy tool against India is rooted in its state.<sup>32</sup> Analysts have pointed out that “for the Pakistan Army and its terrorist partners, violence against India is not a rational instrument of policy, but a core organising principle, foundational to their identity and political legitimacy. They will persist with the campaign of sub-conventional provocations regardless of – or in some cases, even enticed by – the prospect of Indian retaliation.”<sup>33</sup>

Reforming the Pakistani state cannot be achieved through Indian military strikes, or even a military defeat. Following the 1971 war, the Pakistan military's image was in tatters, having lost half of the country's territory to Bangladesh and losing the war to India. Yet, within years of that blow, the military was back in the saddle after staging a coup. The military's grip over the state in Pakistan can be loosened, but that is a project for the Pakistani people and political parties, not India.

Operation Sindoor, especially the strikes on key Pakistani military installations and sites, may have rattled the military. Its defensive and offensive capabilities against India have been undermined. However, it has emerged from the strikes with its stature and popularity enhanced in Pakistan. Military nationalism is on the upswing in Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> The military can be expected to use the recent India-Pakistan face-off to justify enhanced budgetary allocations to the forces.<sup>35</sup> It could embolden the military to persist with its patronage of cross-border terrorism.

### **Impact on Terrorist Infrastructure**

As for the damage on and destruction of terrorist infrastructure, India claimed that around 100 terrorists were killed on the night of May 6-7, including high-value terrorists who had masterminded major terror attacks in India.<sup>36</sup> JeM's chief Masood Azhar confirmed he had lost 10 family members in the strikes.<sup>37</sup> Satellite images of terrorist camps, including the LeT's Muridke headquarters, revealed “extensive structural damage”.<sup>38</sup> Several camps that suffered damage had played a role in training and planning attacks in India. For example, terrorists who carried out attacks at Sonamarg and Gulmarg in 2024, and at Pahalgam recently, were trained at the Sawai Nala camp. Facilities like the Syedna Bilal Camp and the Barnala Camp provided weapons, explosives and jungle survival training. The LeT's Muridke headquarters was where terrorists who carried out the 2008 Mumbai attacks were trained.<sup>39</sup> By targeting these camps, the Indian security forces were able to avenge some past terrorist attacks, eliminate terrorists and damage infrastructure at these camps.

However, terrorist numbers may not have fallen much because of the strikes. Anticipating the Indian strikes, terrorists were reportedly vacated from launchpads near the LoC.<sup>40</sup> It is unlikely that senior leaders and strategists would have remained in known terror hubs and headquarters; rather, they would have moved to safe houses in crowded civilian areas in cities. Losses in terms of leaders and cadres would therefore not debilitate the terror groups targeted. Besides, the damage caused by the strikes is “unlikely to have any lasting impact”.<sup>41</sup> They can be expected to regroup and rebuild in a few months. In fact, India's military strikes on terrorist camps can be expected to boost recruitment of fighters. Terrorist leaders have already stepped up anti-India propaganda.<sup>42</sup> This will not only boost cadre morale but also draw youth to pick up arms.

### **Increase in Terrorist Attacks**



India's previous military strikes did not prevent terrorist attacks. The 2016 'surgical strikes' did not prevent the Pulwama attack and the 2019 Balakot airstrike did not deter terrorists or their handlers from massacring civilians in Pahalgam. Besides these high-profile terror attacks, there have been hundreds of small and major terrorist attacks on Indian security forces, security installations and civilians in the intervening period. This has prompted some analysts to argue that India's escalating military strikes are not a deterrent.

Indeed, terrorist attacks can be expected to increase in the coming months. Terrorist leaders will seek to project their groups' continuing relevance and capabilities to impress their financial backers and to boost the morale of cadres. They have reportedly already promised revenge, and "at least some will act on these threats".<sup>43</sup> In the past, when the Pakistan military and its intelligence suffered defeats and loss of face, as after the Kargil conflict of 1999, there was a surge in attacks on security forces; 763 military and police personnel were killed in J&K in 1999, another 788 in 2000 and 883 in 2001.<sup>44</sup> On November 29, 2016, JeM carried out a suicide attack on the Indian Army's Nagrota camp in Jammu. It was the "seventh targeted attack on the security forces in J&K" in the period after the 'surgical strikes'.<sup>45</sup>

Attacks on civilians, especially Hindus, in J&K and other parts of India, can be expected in the coming months. Since its formation in late 2019, TRF has targeted security forces and also civilians, including Kashmir's religious minorities – Hindus and Sikhs – and non-Muslim migrant labourers from other parts of India.<sup>46</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Pahalgam attack targeted Hindu men. Following the incident, the Indian government claimed that the attack was carried out with "an objective of provoking communal discord, both in J&K and the rest of the Nation".<sup>47</sup> In the days after the attack, Hindu extremists and trolls demonised India's Muslims, especially Kashmiri Muslims living outside J&K, in mainstream and social media, and violently attacked, even killed, some on the streets. The government took no action against the violence and vilification campaigns.<sup>48</sup> This could serve to validate the narrative of anti-India groups and could prompt TRF and other groups to replicate the Pahalgam strategy to fuel Muslim radicalisation in India.

## **Conclusion**

India's Operation Sindoor is likely to have mixed implications for India's efforts to curb cross-border terrorism. While it has damaged terrorist infrastructure and eliminated terrorists, these are not difficult to replace or rebuild. Additionally, the gains of the strikes – damage to terrorist capabilities – are far outweighed by the costs the strikes have inflicted on India, in terms of loss of fighter jets and damage to military and civilian infrastructure and lives. Operation Sindoor also resulted in the United States (US) brokering the ceasefire agreement, a setback to India's long-standing opposition to third-party involvement in the Kashmir issue. If damage to infrastructure was the main gain of Operation Sindoor, such damage can be achieved through other kinetic means, such as covert operations. Such operations may not enthuse the BJP's hawkish supporters, but they would serve to reduce the costs of military strikes for India. Frustrating as it is, India will have to work with the international community to put pressure on Pakistan. Global powers, even India's friends, have not been reliable or robust partners in India's fight against cross-border terrorism. Yet, India will need to persist with diplomacy and dialogue.

Importantly, India must address the political and domestic roots of militancy in Kashmir by addressing Kashmiri alienation from the Indian state and restoring their confidence in democracy and India's secular constitution. In the weeks after the Pahalgam attack, Kashmiris came out in large numbers to protest against Pakistan-backed terrorism. This opens space for India. It must shift away from its collective punishment of the Kashmiris to win Kashmir.

## About the Author

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<sup>11</sup> Based in Pakistan's Punjab province and predominantly Punjabi, these groups profess a jihadist ideology and goals. The LeT wages jihad not only to liberate Kashmir, but also to restore Islamic rule across India. It has carried out attacks in J&K and New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Varanasi, etc. "Lashkar-e-Taiba," South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed May 15, 2025, [https://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist\\_outfits/lashkar\\_e\\_toiba.htm](https://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/lashkar_e_toiba.htm).

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# The Remaking of Sectarian Fault Lines in Pakistan: Why Violence in Kurram Tribal District Matters?

Iftikhar Firdous

*In 2025, Sunni-Shia violence has re-emerged in Pakistan's Kurram tribal district, triggering tit-for-tat attacks from rival sectarian tribes. However, the current spate of violence in Kurram is qualitatively different from its previous iterations and warrants closer scrutiny. Kurram is one of the seven Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which were incorporated in 2018 following the 25<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. A case study of sectarian dynamics in Kurram offers critical insights into the future trajectory of the overall Sunni-Shia conflict in Pakistan, especially in the wake of the Iran-Israel conflict, which could result in a strong sectarian backlash by the Iranian proxies in the country. Pakistan's position on the Iran-Israel conflict will shape the reactions of the Iranian proxy groups, especially in Kurram.*

*Over the past two decades, Kurram's sectarian conflict has metastasised from a local to a regional issue, with strong links to developments in Syria. Though history is an important marker for the genesis of the sectarian conflict in Kurram, it is no longer the sole factor to understand the current spate of violence. In Kurram, sectarian identities, land disputes and external interference coincide to account for the current phase of tensions. Hence, local conflict resolution interventions revolving around efforts to foster peaceful co-existence amidst recurrent violence with its attendant internal and external catalysts have become somewhat ineffective.*

## Introduction

Kurram district is a lush green valley that takes its name after the Kurram River which passes through it, sharing a border with Afghanistan on three sides.<sup>1</sup> It is surrounded on the north and west by Afghanistan's Nangarhar, Khost and Paktia provinces, on the east by Orakzai and Khyber districts, on the southeast by Hangu district and on the south by North Waziristan district. The Spin Ghar (Koh-e-Safaid, or White Mountain) in the north separates Kurram from Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

There are two major tribes in Kurram: Turi (Shia) and Bangash (Shia and Sunni). Besides these two tribes, other small tribes settled in the area are Jajjis (Sunni brethren of Turi), Orakzai, Parachamkani, Alisherzai, Zaimusht, Mangal, Syeds, Zadran and Muqbils. The Turi tribe owns about 70 percent of the cultivated fertile land in Kurram and had political influence in local as well national politics before the 1979 Afghan War.<sup>3</sup>

Kurram is divided into three subdivisions, i.e., Upper Kurram – where the district headquarter Parachinar is also located – Lower Kurram and Central Kurram. Shias dominate the upper parts of the Kurram valley and Parachinar; Sunnis inhabit mountainous Central Kurram; while Lower Kurram has a mixed Shia and Sunni population.<sup>4</sup>

## History of Sectarian Conflict

The existence of feuds and hostilities in Pashtun society due to land and property matters is a well-known fact, and Kurram is no exception to the norm. Kurram's landed aristocracy always had problems with the Afghan kings and paying revenues to the latter.<sup>5</sup> In the past, there was the *Islamzona* (puritans) force, which was formed by the Orakzai of Tirah to oust the landed Shia Turi from Kurram, and which used religion as an excuse and the strategy of *chur* (i.e., massive pillaging which takes place once an area has been taken over by a tribe, forcing local communities to leave

their houses and businesses). Chur was also used against the Sikhs in Kurram and Tirah to loot them. According to the elders of Kurram from both Shia and Sunni sects, the skirmishes in 1938 were part of a “British conspiracy” to weaken the tribes to keep them under colonial control. In 1961 and 1971, there were sporadic incidents of violence,<sup>6</sup> but mostly regarding water, forest, mountain or land issues.<sup>7</sup>

### **Iranian Revolution – Afghan Jihad and Sectarian Proxy Warfare in Kurram**

The sectarian conflict in Kurram has its origins in two important developments: the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which ushered Shia (followers of Twelver) clergies into power;<sup>8</sup> and the Afghan Jihad (predominately involving Sunnis/Wahhabis).<sup>9</sup> These two important events changed the politics, demographics and nature of local conflicts in Kurram. The Iranian Revolution opened confrontational blocs in the Middle East for the then superpowers, and Kurram consequently became a focus of attention in the Afghanistan-Pakistan context.

Besides, a new tussle started in Afghanistan, dislocating more than three million Afghan refugees into Pakistan. Meanwhile, the recruitment of “jihad volunteers” from across Pakistan resulted in a fundamental demographic and power shift in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This recruitment was done in Sunni seminaries or *madrassas* specifically established in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal belt during the 1980s to train, ideologise and recruit militants.

In Kurram, the Shia community got closer to Iranian clergies and established several *madrassas* to counter their Sunni counterparts. The non-participation of Kurram Shias in the Afghan War also irked the powers involved in the conflict; hence, propaganda was initiated about the Kurram Shias demanding a separate province and a state.<sup>10</sup> Although it was not a demand for a separate state, noted Shia scholar Arif Hussain Al Hussaini started a movement and the political party Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafria (TNFJ) to protect Shia interests.

### **Arif Hussain Al Hussaini – Political Islam and International Politics**

In the 1960s, after completing his elementary and religious schooling, Hussaini went to al-Hawza al-Ilmiyya in Najaf, Iraq, where he met Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, popularly known as Imam Khomeini, the spiritual leader of the Iranian Revolution. Hussaini attended Khomeini’s lectures and prayed after him. Due to his involvement in Khomeini’s political struggle in Najaf, he also faced continuous harassment by and detention at the hands of Saddam Hussein.

In the late 1970s, Hussaini emigrated to Qum, Iran, with a *Wikalat Nama* (a letter of Imam to issue *fatwas* and collect *khums* – a religious tax that requires Shia Muslims to pay one-fifth of their profits to various beneficiaries – in his name). He started rallying support for Khomeini. Due to his political activities, he was arrested, threatened and tortured by the Shah’s government. However, the Shah’s monarchy and government fell in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution took over.<sup>11</sup>

After returning to Pakistan, Hussaini started his political struggle as a representative of Khomeini.<sup>12</sup> He was elected as the leader of TNFJ and Peshawar became his party’s headquarters.<sup>13</sup> Hussaini’s speeches against the then military dictator and army chief General Zia-ul-Haq and the United States (US)<sup>14</sup> paved the way for sectarian violence across Pakistan. However, Kurram became the hub of this sectarian proxy war due to its geography and long-standing Sunni-Shia tribal enmities on land and resource issues. During the 1980s and 1990s, tribal people faced violence sponsored by different proxies, which created unbridgeable gaps between Sunni and Shia Pashtuns living in Kurram, apart from escalating levels of violence. The détente period in Kurram sectarian violence came after the assassination of Hussaini and the disintegration of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).<sup>15</sup>

### **Pashtuns – Land Disputes and Identity**

Prior to the US-led global war on terror, in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, feuds between clans, families, tribes or sectarian groups were viewed from a cultural and land disputes prism only.

In the absence of a formal justice system, an alternate dispute resolution mechanism, popularly known as *jirga*, was used.<sup>16</sup> However, in current circumstances, such tribal disputes are becoming more noticeable and are quickly being tagged as terrorism, thus instilling more fear and uncertainty. A case in point is the killing of teachers in Parachinar on May 4, 2023.<sup>17</sup> In border districts, land ownership rests with the entire tribe, with no formal records kept. Most of the time, the boundaries are not marked, thus creating ownership disputes between various subclans of the tribes in the area. Often, when a dispute arises, each tribe has its own side of the story and old documents (mostly British colonial-era records) to support its claims. In 2018, with the 25<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, the FATA was merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and it was expected that, through revenue records, land would be formally and legally distributed between tribes and then individuals.<sup>18</sup> This spurred activity towards possession and land grabbing of unaccounted-for lands in all districts in the FATA region.

In Kurram, land possession amongst Pashtuns is not only viewed as material wealth but also considered part of their identity and honour. Each dispute has centuries-old history and in each case skirmishes have occurred dozens of times, causing casualties and deaths. These disputes have triggered the *ghairat-badal* (honour-revenge) aspect of Pashtun tribal culture. In many cases, a dispute arises from a violation of the last agreed-upon arrangement; one party violates the arrangement, thus instigating the other party, who then opts for violence as part of *ghairat-badal*.<sup>19</sup>

In the settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, since formal accounts of land ownership do not exist, any property dispute is settled in the court of law based on the Revenue Department's records. In border districts, barring some exceptions, only vague ownership exists amongst the tribes, with no official records and unmarked boundaries, creating persistent land disputes. The absence of a formal justice system further complicates this issue.<sup>20</sup> Following the ex-FATA's merger, even after Pakistan's judicial system was extended to these areas, the courts are not fully functional. In the case of a dispute, the judge is unable to give a verdict as no formal record is held by the Revenue Department. Even in cases where verdicts are given, they cannot be implemented due to the absence of effective policing in these areas.<sup>21</sup>

### **Post 2001 – Violent Extremist Actors and Sectarian Conflict in Kurram**

The nature of sectarian conflict completely changed in Kurram district with the involvement of Al-Qaeda (AQ); Sunni extremist groups such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); and the Afghan Haqqani Network. In 2001, Kurram's Shia Turi tribe refused to give sanctuary to AQ and the Taliban, while the Sunni Bangash and Orakzai tribes provided full support to these groups.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the strategic importance of Parachinar both in terms of demography (a Shia-dominated area with small pockets of Sunnis) and geography (the geospatial information systems of US drones did not work due to the mountainous and rugged terrain and unpredictable weather patterns), has remained the focal point of all militant groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Of these, the Haqqani group of the Taliban has remained an unavoidable influence in Kurram for two key reasons.

First, due to Kurram's proximity to the Haqqani Network's base in North Waziristan at the time, the Taliban were provided a protected route to the predominantly Sunni-populated areas of Kurram. Second, Kurram is 60 miles from Kabul, along the shortest route from the Loya (Greater) Paktia region of Afghanistan that includes Khost, Paktia and Paktika provinces. During the 1980s, Paktia hosted AQ's founder Osama bin Laden and his cadre of Arab fighters. They used Kurram to move between Paktia and Jalalabad, building roads to facilitate easy access. In Paktia's Jaji district, bin Laden constructed his sanctuary, which eventually became a cave complex that served as the forward-deployed base for foreign fighters assisting in the anti-Soviet jihad.<sup>23</sup>

The Spin Ghar in the Kurram region is also a recurring theme in the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)'s literature.<sup>24</sup> In 2014, two decades after Paktia hosted bin Laden, ISK built its first *tamkin* in Nangarhar, announcing its presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tamkin is central to IS' method



of insurgency and refers to power consolidation by the group and the establishment of a state-like governing authority (*khilafah*) over a territory.<sup>25</sup>

In Kurram, the TTP emerged in 2007, stoking a sectarian war in the region, where the TTP and the Haqqanis were closely allied. Many believed that the Haqqanis were simultaneously the instigators, arbiters and, ultimately, benefactors of this conflict. The TTP exploited the issues of land and water between the Shias and Sunnis in Kurram and transformed them into a deadly sectarian war. There were major clashes in 1996 after the murder of a college principal by Shia activists in Parachinar; over 200 Sunnis and Shias were killed.<sup>26</sup> In October 2007, the TTP's founder Baitullah Mehsud sent a group of 400 Taliban members to purge Kurram's Shia Turi tribe. According to an official report, between 2007 and 2009, as many as 1,500 people died and 5,000 injured in this sectarian war. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 17,000 people, including women and children, fled to Afghanistan in January 2008.<sup>27</sup> Later, the 2008 Murree Accord<sup>28</sup> was signed between the warring groups to end the sectarian conflict and to open the blocked Thall-Parachinar highway.<sup>29</sup> However, the closure of roads and various sectarian skirmishes multiplied Shia and Sunni militant groups in Kurram.

### **The Zainabiyoun Brigade**

After 2008, many of the educated and skilled youth of Kurram migrated to different parts of Pakistan. At the same time, the more affluent ones emigrated to Europe, Canada and Australia. However, those from the lower strata of society moved to Iran to earn a living.<sup>30</sup> It is pertinent to mention that Hussaini's sons, after his assassination in 1988, formed a network of seminaries all over Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> After completing their basic education, the brilliant students from this madrasa network were sent to Iran to pursue higher studies; some returned to Pakistan while others stayed in Iran.<sup>32</sup>

Of these Pakistani madrasa students, some were recruited, trained and funded by Iran to form the Zainabiyoun Brigade. Iran promised them employment. Iran also exploited their shared Shia faith as a tool, such as by laying emphasis on the protection of religious shrines and graves targeted by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.<sup>33</sup> Most of the members of the Zainabiyoun Brigade hail from Shia-dominated Parachinar, the capital of Kurram district, where Pakistan's government control is weak.<sup>34</sup>

The Iran-backed Zainabiyoun Brigade could become Pakistan's new internal security challenge if Pakistan is forced to maintain neutrality in the event that the US joins the Israel-Iran conflict to destroy the latter's nuclear facilities.<sup>35</sup> Pakistan has a complex relationship with Iran, marked by mutual suspicion, mistrust and sectarian rivalry as well as episodic cooperation and aligned interests on certain issues such as Afghanistan. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of Sunni-majority Pakistan's population are Shia Muslims who look towards Iran for spiritual guidance. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has maintained a semblance of neutrality in the Iran-Saudi sectarian tensions to ensure sectarian harmony at home.<sup>36</sup>

Presently, Al-Mustafa Institute in the Iranian city of Qum is a recruitment centre for Pakistani youth to join the ranks of the Zainabiyoun Brigade.<sup>37</sup> Thus, very easily, with the right training and networks, Iran has recruited segments of the marginalised population from Pakistan for the Zainabiyoun Brigade, which was used in the Syrian civil war.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that neither Hussaini's seminaries nor his Shaheed Foundation Pakistan has come under any scrutiny, but the lesser-known, Parachinar-based Ansar-ul-Hussain and Khatam-ul-Anbiya were banned for their links with militants in Syria.<sup>39</sup> The Pakistani government's policy in dealing with sectarian outfits has mostly revolved around low-key actions without much public acknowledgement, for fear of a sectarian backlash.

### **Trajectory of Conflict Building in Kurram Post-2021**

After 2007's deadly clashes, Kurram is once again embroiled in sectarian clashes. Three incidents are of particular note with reference to Kurram's recent sectarian crisis. First, on November 21,

2024, the large-scale sectarian attack on a convoy of Shia passengers in the Bagun area of Kurram, instigating a full-fledged Shia-Sunni battle.<sup>40</sup> Second, on December 8, 2024, the fall of Syria to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,<sup>41</sup> evicting Iranian militias, including the Zainabiyoun Brigade. Third, on December 11, 2024, the assassination of Haji Khalil Haqqani by ISK through a suicide bombing in Kabul.<sup>42</sup> Khalil Haqqani had played a key role in the 2008 Murree Accord, which brought peace in Kurram.

Due to the perpetual nature of disputes amongst tribes in Kurram, a propensity to stock weapons exists. These caches of weapons are known as *qoumi aslaha* (tribes' ammunition) and are used against each other in the event a dispute erupts. Each incident further compels the tribes to hoard more weapons.<sup>43</sup>

This tendency to acquire arms provides an opportunity to militants to access weapons. At times, militant groups at the lower level get physically involved in the killings of opponents to settle scores for the honour of their tribes. Such disputes tarnish the image of law enforcement agencies and allow militants to utilise such events to further their agendas by creating chaos and fear.<sup>44</sup> In most cases, a tribe would look towards its outlaws, criminals and even globally designated terrorists to come and play their part as a tribal obligation to retaliate against its rivals. Thus, a normal land dispute or even an individual fight may eventually pit an entire district, clan or tribe against each other. This phenomenon is not restricted to the local level, as any action against a Shia or Sunni community gets immediate attention at the national level, spurring a reaction in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

The Israel-Iran war will have serious repercussions for the Shia-Sunni conflict in Pakistan, especially in Kurram and other sectarian flashpoints, if the conflict persists and the US joins the fray. The persistence of Iran-Israel tensions will present Pakistan with a catch-22 situation. On the one hand, siding with Iran at the diplomatic level would alienate its Sunni Gulf allies and the US. On the other, a neutral position grounded in demands for a politically negotiated settlement could trigger a strong sectarian backlash from the Iranian proxies in the country for more to be done. So far, Iran has not employed religious symbolism and language while fighting Israel. However, if Tehran gives a call to Shia Muslims around the world to defend Shia interests against Israel, Pakistan would be confronted with a difficult situation both locally and regionally. At the same time, a regime change or a weakening of Iranian state authority would embolden the Baloch separatist groups along the Iran-Pakistan border.

Separately, at the local level, in 2019, the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa initiated a host of measures to bring the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) on par with the rest of the districts in the province. However, due to the absence of government architecture and state apparatus, the process remained painfully slow. As a result of numerous meetings and consultations, a blueprint for the development of the erstwhile FATA was approved, which involved instituting a mechanism to plan and steer decision-making. Several guidelines were adopted for a stage-wise transition to introduce constitutional, political, financial and administrative initiatives, followed by judicial reforms. However, the serious issue of land and revenue records was intentionally put on the back burner, as it would open the floodgates to disputes for which the district administration is neither equipped in terms of legal and law enforcement resources nor competent enough to handle.

It seems the authorities have decided that they would take up the issue of land reforms after state organs are fully developed in the NMDs. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government tried land reforms and hired the services of international firms, but the project was eventually shelved due to security reasons and lack of funds. Although the alternate dispute resolution mechanism, or jirga, has been kept intact, it is not adequately equipped to deal with land disputes which involve militants and other non-state actors. Practically speaking, things are heading nowhere in peace-building in Kurram, and it means the political rhetoric and blame game will continue with more devastation and hate.

## About the Author

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<sup>25</sup> Amira Jadoon with Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Mariam Abou Zahab, *Unholy Nexus: Talibanism and Sectarianism in Pakistan's "Tribal Areas"* (Sciences Po Center for International Studies, 2009), [https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/sites/sciencespo.fr/cei/files/art\\_mz.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/sites/sciencespo.fr/cei/files/art_mz.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Times*, January 2, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> In 2008, the Bangash and Turi tribes of Kurram signed a written declaration for permanent peace in Murree. The rival tribes agreed they would vacate occupied bunkers and return to their respective areas. In the case of a violation of the agreement, the offending tribe would have to pay a fine of 60 million rupees.

<sup>29</sup> "Kurram Groups Sign Accord to Open Key Highway," *Dawn*, October 9, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/665032/kurram-groups-sign-accord-to-open-key-highway>.

<sup>30</sup> Author's recorded minutes with people of Kurram district.

<sup>31</sup> Author's recorded minutes with a member of Anjuman-e-Hussainia Kurram.

<sup>32</sup> Author's recorded minutes with social activists from Upper and Lower Kurram.

<sup>33</sup> See various local and international news reports on the Islamic State (IS), which mention recruits from Parachinar, Kurram.

<sup>34</sup> Aydin Guven, "ANALYSIS – Iran-Backed Zainabiyoun Brigade Could Become Pakistan's New National Security Problem," *Anadolu Agency*, February 25, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-iran-backed-zainabiyoun-brigade-could-become-pakistan-s-new-national-security-problem/2033585>.

<sup>35</sup> Saeed Shah, "Pakistan Fears Militants Will Thrive on Restive Border If Iran Destabilised," *Reuters*, June 19, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/pakistan-fears-militants-will-thrive-restive-border-if-iran-destabilised-2025-06-19/>.

<sup>36</sup> Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan Fears Risk of Spillover from Iran-Israel Conflict," *Nikkei Asia*, June 18, 2025, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Iran-tensions/Pakistan-fears-risk-of-spillover-from-Iran-Israel-conflict>.

<sup>37</sup> Author's recorded minutes recorded with a son of Hussaini's close associate. Many international news agencies have also reported about Al-Mustafa Institute.

<sup>38</sup> Farhan Zahid, "The Zainabiyoun Brigade: A Pakistani Shiite Militia Amid the Syrian Conflict," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 11 (2016), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/>.

<sup>39</sup> Author's recorded minutes with social activists in Lower and Upper Kurram.

<sup>40</sup> Author's recorded minutes with local people of Parachinar, Kurram.

<sup>41</sup> "Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war>.

<sup>42</sup> "Taliban Leadership Tracker," Middle East Institute, 2024, <https://talibantracker.mei.edu>.

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with the Deputy Commissioner of Kurram tribal district, November 15, 2024, Parachinar.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

# Bangladesh's Evolving Security Crisis: The Rise of Religious Extremism Amid Political Transition

Iftekharul Bashar

*From January to May 2025, Bangladesh witnessed a rise in religious extremism, worsened by ongoing political instability. This has increased intolerance towards minorities, secular voices and women's rights. The growth of hardline groups and mob violence targeting those seen as "un-Islamic" signals a worsening security situation. The interim government, facing leadership challenges, has struggled to effectively counter radicalisation. There is also growing concern about Bangladeshi youth being radicalised, including online, by transnational extremist groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Experts warn that without stronger surveillance and more inclusive governance, Bangladesh risks deeper societal divisions, with wider implications for regional instability.*

## Introduction

Bangladesh went through significant political upheaval in 2024 that led to the overthrow of the then ruling Awami League<sup>1</sup> regime led by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The resulting security vacuum led to widespread chaos, including public demonstrations, mass prison escapes, looted weapons and a breakdown in law enforcement. Local media, for example, reported that police stations were deserted in the upheaval, and subsequently attacked and ransacked by mobs. Strikingly, over 5,800 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition were looted from police stations in Bangladesh. Extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and local actors such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) have also swiftly exploited this disorder, spreading radical ideologies, targeting youth and inciting violence against minorities. At least 70 militants were among the 2,200 prison escapees.

In the aftermath, religious extremism has regained traction.<sup>2</sup> Many previously arrested terrorists are currently active online, including on platforms like Facebook (Meta) and YouTube. Some have claimed that law enforcement agencies under the previous administration detained them illegitimately for political reasons and subjected them to harassment.<sup>3</sup> This narrative has been amplified by many individuals in the current political and administrative spheres, who have also purported that the arrests of many previously apprehended terrorists were fabricated. Taken together, this situation has undermined public trust in law enforcement and the justice system, potentially emboldening extremist groups and complicating future counter terrorism efforts.

While there have been no major terrorist attacks, the concerning surge in mob violence<sup>4</sup> has been accompanied by threats against minority groups and secular voices and the overt display of extremist symbols.<sup>5</sup> Banned hardline organisations like HT and Ansar al Islam are reportedly reassembling, with many of their leaders now released.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the renewed push to recruit Bangladeshi youth by transnational terror groups has led to a rising number aligning with groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>7</sup> In their outreach efforts, these groups are leveraging digital platforms to target vulnerable youth.<sup>8</sup>

This article posits that extremist groups are effectively exploiting weakened counter terrorism efforts by state actors, driven by leadership transitions, institutional weaknesses and a critical lack of focus within counter terrorism agencies. Drawing from publicly available sources, this analysis concludes that without immediate, community-driven prevention efforts and a stronger institutional focus, Bangladesh risks deepening societal polarisation and long-term security instability.

## Key Trends in Religious Extremism

Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in 2024, Islamist political groups have re-emerged with renewed vigour. They include Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (HIB), an influential hardline organisation of Qawmi *madrassa* teachers and students.<sup>9</sup> These groups are now positioning themselves to enter parliament in the 2026 elections, advocating for the implementation of *shariah* law, including the death penalty for blasphemy.<sup>10</sup> A massive rally organised by HIB on May 3, 2025, in Dhaka, which drew thousands of attendees, demonstrated their expanding influence and signalled a more significant role for these hardline groups in Bangladesh's political future. This event, described as one of their largest public shows of strength in years, demonstrated their mobilisation capabilities and renewed assertiveness.

Their rise has raised alarm, especially among women,<sup>11</sup> religious minorities and secular communities, who fear efforts to suppress cultural activities and remove secular literature. In April 2025, a theatre performance of *Shesher Kobita*, a famous novel by Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, was cancelled in Dhaka after an Islamist vigilante group called Tawhidi Janata made threats.<sup>12</sup> A similar incident happened on May 19, 2025, in Madhupur, Tangail – a folk festival honouring Lalou, a well-known Bengali mystic and musician, was cancelled after HIB said Lalou's beliefs were against Islam. Despite the organisers providing assurances that no controversial songs or messages would be featured, the event was still cancelled to avoid violence.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, these hardline groups are aligning with other opposition forces like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, creating a potentially formidable bloc in the lead-up to the 2026 national elections. Their growing influence signals a potential shift towards a more conservative and religiously governed state, with possible further implications for freedom of expression, minority rights and gender equality. Additionally, the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has struggled to mount an effective counterresponse, and local leaders have begun imposing restrictions such as blocking women's soccer games. Jamaat-e-Islami is also aiming to capitalise on public disillusionment with secular politics, presenting itself as a viable alternative.<sup>14</sup>

### “Moral Policing”

During Ramadan 2025 in Bangladesh, several incidents of "moral policing" occurred where individuals and food vendors were harassed, shamed or forced to close their businesses for operating during daylight hours.<sup>15</sup> These actions, often captured on video and shared online, have been linked to members or sympathisers of Islamist political groups, such as Islami Andolon Bangladesh and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, though the parties have denied involvement. Human rights groups and Islamic scholars have condemned these acts, stating they spread fear, misrepresent religious teachings and infringe on basic rights – especially for non-Muslims, the elderly and the ill. Despite public outcry, law enforcement has largely failed to take firm action, leading to criticism of administrative inaction and growing concern over individuals taking the law into their own hands.<sup>16</sup>

### Normalisation of Extremist Narratives

Since the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, there has also been a noticeable increase in the public display of symbols linked to internationally designated terrorist groups, including flags of the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ). Protesters have also carried images of extremist leaders, such as Osama bin Laden, portraying them as heroic figures.

A notable instance occurred during a rally in Dhaka on April 7, held in protest against Israeli actions in Gaza, where IS flags and a portrait of bin Laden were prominently displayed.<sup>17</sup> These incidents reinforce concerns of radical elements exploiting both domestic political shifts and international grievances to gain visibility and legitimacy. While the public display of terrorist symbols by some

protesters does not signify widespread national acceptance of extremist narratives, it risks normalising these ideologies and making them more accessible to a wider audience.

### **Controversial Bail Releases of Terrorism Suspects**

In another blow to public confidence in the country's security and legal apparatuses, over 300 individuals accused of terrorist and extremist activities in Bangladesh have been released on bail since last August, sparking mixed reactions.<sup>18</sup> While some argue that many were 'wrongfully' detained under the previous government, others believe that hardline extremists have exploited the situation. Among the released are members of banned groups like Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), with Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, who is accused of leading the latter, claiming that the group "never existed".<sup>19</sup> Families of victims have expressed dismay, highlighting the emotional and social toll of these releases. Politically, the government faces criticism for being lenient on terrorism, and the releases may tarnish Bangladesh's international reputation if extremists regain influence.

### **Evolving Alliance of Educated and Traditional Hardline Figures**

Extremism is evolving, marked by a notable collaboration between traditional religious figures and mainstream educated hardliners who are increasingly spreading its messages.<sup>20</sup> This trend is supported by earlier observations from various counter-extremism bodies noting an uptick in individuals with mainstream educational backgrounds engaging in propaganda and radicalisation efforts.<sup>21</sup> These actors use their academic credentials, digital platforms and emotionally charged global issues – such as the Palestine conflict – to frame violent ideologies as moral imperatives. By presenting radical views through the language of intellectual discourse, they are able to engage younger, urban and educated audiences who might previously have been considered less vulnerable to such influence.

This shift reflects a more sophisticated and adaptive form of extremism, expanding its reach and complicating traditional approaches to detection and prevention. Bangladeshi observers note that while mainstream educated students and young professionals have been active for more than a decade, under the previous administration they were operating in isolation or in silos. Since the regime change in August 2024, however, these individuals have been coming together and forming alliances on common platforms, with SEAN Publication being a prominent example.<sup>22</sup>

### **Re-Emergence of Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB)**

Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB), banned since 2009, is rapidly regaining influence by recruiting youth through social media and educational institutions, exploiting grievances such as high unemployment and political instability. A large rally in Dhaka in March 2025, attended by over 2,000 supporters, showcased the group's bold defiance of state authority and its call for an Islamic caliphate.<sup>23</sup> Despite the ban, HTB continues to grow, spreading extremist ideology and attempting to infiltrate the military and state institutions. The group's activities have come under scrutiny, particularly as it promotes jihadist narratives like Ghazwatul Hind.<sup>24</sup> HTB's presence in Bangladesh has expanded considerably in recent years, particularly among youth. The group now has an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 members in the country.<sup>25</sup> While it originally concentrated on recruiting university students, it has since broadened its focus to include high school and junior college students. HTB actively engages with young audiences, leveraging social media to promote extremist ideologies and attract new members by playing on emotions and misrepresenting Islamic history.

Bangladeshi observers anticipate a surge in activities by HTB, particularly around the 2026 elections.<sup>26</sup> While HTB primarily advocates for the establishment of a caliphate through non-violent means, its heightened presence and rhetoric during a politically charged period could significantly impact the environment. Its ideological campaigning could contribute to the radicalisation of individuals, even if it does not directly endorse violence. The group might leverage the electoral environment to amplify its message of political and social change, potentially attracting new



followers. For some, exposure to HTB's ideology might even serve as a stepping stone to involvement with violent extremism.<sup>27</sup> While HTB has not resorted to violence (at least not in the way terrorist organisations do) to achieve its goals, some of its members have shown a willingness to use violence if necessary, even supporting the idea of punishing or killing those they see as blasphemers.<sup>28</sup>

### **Foreign Fighters and Transnational Radicalisation**

An investigative report published by Bangladeshi digital outlet *The Dissent* on May 15, 2025, revealed that several Bangladeshi youths have joined the TTP and are actively engaged in militant activities along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>29</sup> Among them, a 22-year-old youth was reportedly killed during a Pakistani military operation in North Waziristan, having reached Afghanistan via Saudi Arabia after participating in missionary work through Tablighi Jamaat. His death was confirmed through anonymous calls to family and social media posts from TTP-linked accounts, which also attracted interest from other Bangladeshi users expressing a desire to follow the same path.<sup>30</sup> Another Bangladeshi fighter claimed in an interview to be based in Kabul, stating that at least eight nationals are currently active with the TTP, with three already having been killed. The Bangladeshi authorities acknowledged a lack of updated intelligence on these individuals, underscoring how online radicalisation and transnational networks continue to exploit gaps in surveillance and counter terrorism focus.<sup>31</sup>

This development further highlights the need for Bangladesh to strengthen digital monitoring, community engagement and regional cooperation to prevent the outflow of vulnerable youth into global extremist movements. It is noteworthy that back in 2023, the Italian police arrested a Bangladeshi man in Genoa (northwest Italy) suspected of links to the AQ-linked TTP, accusing him of promoting jihadist violence online and preparing for militant combat.<sup>32</sup> Sources within the Bangladeshi security services have indicated that some Bangladeshi pro-AQ extremists are in communication with the TTP.

### **State Response**

While the interim government upholds a zero-tolerance policy and continues to monitor released individuals, law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh have been slow to respond effectively. Key counter terrorism units, such as the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) Unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police and the Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU), have faced challenges due to shifts in priorities, resource constraints and a focus on conventional crimes over extremist threats. The reassignment of experienced officers and internal coordination issues have further compromised their capacity to address the rise in extremism. Security analysts warn that this complacency could pave the way for more serious threats. Public confidence in the government's anti-terrorism efforts is waning, especially as past operations are increasingly seen as performative.<sup>33</sup> The perceived lack of transparency in law enforcement and judicial processes, combined with a weak institutional response, has further exacerbated the issue.

### **Conclusion**

Bangladesh's ongoing political instability, coupled with weakened counter terrorism capacities, has created a conducive environment for the resurgence of religious extremism. The increasing influence of hardline groups, the growing involvement of Bangladeshi youth in transnational extremist movements and the normalisation of extremist rhetoric, particularly online, are indicators of a deeper security concern. If the interim government fails to implement swift and decisive measures to strengthen institutional frameworks, enhance counter-radicalisation efforts and foster community-based engagement, the country risks further societal fragmentation and the entrenchment of violent extremism. The preservation of Bangladesh's democratic and pluralistic values hinges on comprehensive institutional reforms and a renewed commitment to inclusivity, human rights and the rule of law. Without these, Bangladesh may face prolonged instability with implications for both national and regional security.

## About the Author

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## Citations

<sup>1</sup> The Bangladesh Awami League, the nation's oldest political party, was instrumental in Bangladesh's gaining of independence from Pakistan in 1971. In May 2025, Bangladesh's interim government banned the Awami League and its associated organisations, citing national security, a move the party disputes as illegitimate.

<sup>2</sup> Iftekhharul Bashar, "Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 17, no. 1, (2025): 54-58,

<https://rsis.edu.sg/cta-newsarticle/bangladesh-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Sacked Major Zia Applies for Withdrawal of Cases," *The Daily Star*,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/sacked-major-zia-applies-withdrawal-cases-3792041>.

<sup>4</sup> On April 7, 2025, protests erupted across Bangladesh condemning Israeli actions in Gaza. Demonstrators targeted Israeli-linked businesses like Bata, KFC and Pizza Hut, vandalising storefronts in cities including Bogra, Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong. Protesters called for a boycott of Israeli products and urged action from the government and the United Nations (UN). For details, see "Mobs Target KFC, Bata as Nationwide Protests Condemn Israeli Aggression," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 7, 2025,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/378099/nationwide-protest-condemn-israeli-aggression-mob>; "Gaza Protests: Demonstrators Attack Bata, KFC Outlets in 6 Districts in Bangladesh," *bdnews24.com*, April 7, 2025, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/c72cace94142>.

<sup>5</sup> Mukimul Ahsan, "Who Is Marching with the Black Flag Inscribed with the Kalema?" *BBC News*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/bengali/articles/c748wqp9d29o>; Nuruzzaman Labu, "Marches with ISIS and Al-Qaeda Flags Tarnish Image," *Bangla Tribune*, April 11, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3c94uzab>.

<sup>6</sup> Nuruzzaman Labu, "Marches with ISIS and al-Qaeda Flags Tarnish Image," *Bangla Tribune*, April 11, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3c94uzab>.

<sup>7</sup> Hasan Al Mahmud, "Bangladeshi Youths Are Fighting on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border for the Taliban," *The Dissent*, May 15, 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=122113173014843347&id=61575300411283&mibextid=wwXlfr&rdid=eln21VVm2JH3dKxA#](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=122113173014843347&id=61575300411283&mibextid=wwXlfr&rdid=eln21VVm2JH3dKxA#).

<sup>8</sup> In Bangladesh, the current wave of online radicalisation uniquely targets tech-savvy, often educated youth through localised, emotionally charged narratives on mainstream and encrypted platforms, exploiting socio-political grievances and a desire for purpose. Extremist groups leverage the ubiquity of Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp to disseminate highly professional propaganda, making their messaging resonate deeply with vulnerable segments of the population.

<sup>9</sup> Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (HIB) is a hardline outfit comprising Qawmi *madrassa* teachers and students. The Manhajis, a pro-Al-Qaeda Islamist cleric group, have allegedly embedded themselves within HIB.

<sup>10</sup> "Islamist Parties Seek Unity Before Election to Enforce Sharia Law," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 4, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3cbnutnv>.

<sup>11</sup> Zia Chowdhury and Jesmin Papri, "Hardliners Increasingly Target Bangladeshi Women for Attire, Playing Sports – and Riding Motorcycles," *Benar News*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/moral-policing-of-women-rises-in-bangladesh-03272025145130.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Even though the organisers had all the required permits, they cancelled the show because the authorities could not guarantee their safety. See "'Tawhidi Janata' Sends Letter to Stop Theatre Performance at Mohila Samiti Stage," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 13, 2025, <https://bangla.dhakatribune.com/entertainment/95171>.

<sup>13</sup> These cases point to a disturbing pattern: extremist groups are using threats to control what types of art and culture can be shared, and the government is not doing enough to stop it due to fears of public backlash. Calling music, plays or festivals "un-Islamic" is becoming a common way to silence different voices. The concern is that extremist ideas are gaining power in public life and limiting freedom of expression in the country.

<sup>14</sup> Mujib Mashal and Saif Hasnat, "As Bangladesh Reinvents Itself, Islamist Hard-Liners See an Opening," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/world/asia/bangladesh-islam.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Eating at a Hotel During the Day Results in the Punishment of Holding One's Ears and Doing Squats," *Samakal*, March 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2ut7np38>; Tarikuzzaman Shimul, "Who Are the Ones Engaging in 'Moral Policing' in the Name of Protecting the Sanctity of Ramadan?" *BBC News*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/bengali/articles/cx20yd5d1q3o>.

<sup>16</sup> Shimul, "Who Are the Ones Engaging in 'Moral Policing'."

<sup>17</sup> Labu, "Marches with ISIS and Al-Qaeda Flags."

- <sup>18</sup> Abul Kalam Azad, "Jihadism Accused Released on Bail, 'Many Have Repented after Misunderstanding', Says Rahmani," *BBC News*, April 11, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/bengali/articles/c3v95kqvq2no>.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Author's interview with a Bangladeshi security official, June 2025.
- <sup>21</sup> Author's field research in Bangladesh, April 2024.
- <sup>22</sup> Established in 2013, SEAN Publication produces books and organises public events, among other activities, to propagate radicalism with the primary goal of engaging educated young audiences in *dakwah* activities across various platforms. Among those it has published are radical individuals with post-graduate credentials who also operate outside of Bangladesh, as observed by the author.
- <sup>23</sup> "Police Tell Court, 'Hizb ut-Tahrir Wants to Destroy the Democratic Government and Establish Extremism'," *Kalbela*, March 8, 2025, <https://www.kalbela.com/court-law/170156>.
- <sup>24</sup> In some extremist interpretations, Ghazwatul Hind (or "Battle of Hind") refers to an apocalyptic holy war prophesied in certain Islamic texts, which envisions a final, decisive battle between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. It is often invoked by jihadist groups to promote violent conflict and justify attacks in the region.
- <sup>25</sup> Iftekharul Bashar, "Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh: A Growing Threat and the Need for Action," *RSIS Commentary* no. 62 (2025), <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CO25062.pdf>.
- <sup>26</sup> Author's interview with a Bangladeshi security analyst, June 2025.
- <sup>27</sup> "Farabi Gets 7yr Jail in ICT case," *Somoy News*, January 30, 2023, <https://en.somoynews.tv/news/2023-01-30/farabi-gets-7yr-jail-in-ict-case>.
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- <sup>29</sup> Al Mahmud, "Bangladeshi Youths Are Fighting."
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- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> "Bangladeshi Arrested in Italy on Suspicion of Al-Qaeda Links," *The Daily Star*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/europe/news/bangladeshi-arrested-italy-suspicion-al-qaeda-links-3460881>.
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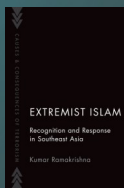
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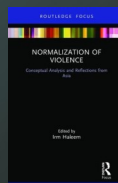


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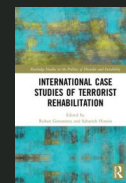
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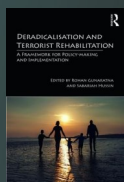
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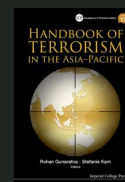
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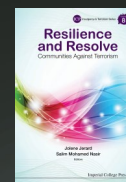
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