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Issue Brief

Calling TTP by Another Name: Would It Diminish the Threat It Poses to Pakistan?

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S*ummary*

On 26 July 2024, the Pakistan Interior Ministry issued a notification declaring the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as Fitna al Khawarji, or people beyond the pall of Islam. Pakistan's attempt to use a historical Islamic reference to delegitimise TTP originates from the fear that it might acquire a wider social base and challenge the monopoly of the all-powerful security establishment.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ever since its emergence as an umbrella organisation in 2007 under Baitullah Mehsud’s leadership, has been one of the most important sources of internal security threats to Pakistan. The TTP, over the years, not only strengthened its position in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan but also emerged as a formidable foe of law enforcement agencies in the country.

Due to large-scale violence and precise attacks perpetrated by TTP, internal security became the top priority of the security establishment under Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. It was under Kayani’s watch that Pakistan Army’s official publication ‘Green Book’ recognised internal threats as the greatest risk to Pakistan’s security. It was a complete, yet a temporary, departure from the official Pakistani narrative where India occupies the position of centrality and is portrayed as the ‘enemy number one’ and ‘an existential threat’ to the nation.

Coercive Approach

To deal with internal security challenges, the Pakistani state resorted to sophisticated coercive measures often interspaced with attempts to win over some of the groups. The large-scale military operations and precise Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs) did reduce the number of attacks and casualties to a significant extent but failed to bring a lasting solution to the problem *per se*. Besides, these operations lost their credibility in the eyes of the general public that suffered heavily due to collateral damage that ensued with each round of operation carried out by the security forces against the TTP.

Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* (Sharp and Cutting Strike or Sharp Strike by the Prophet’s Sword), launched in June 2014 led to millions of Pakistanis in the tribal areas getting internally displaced and ending up in various relief camps.¹ The coercive approach has not worked in favour of Pakistan as the war against the TTP failed to achieve its strategic objectives. Instead, as Amir Rana argues, it eroded the societal fabric, destroyed the economy, and pushed the country close to becoming a fragile state.²

Relocation of TTP

It is important to note that Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* was one of the most successful operations launched by the security establishment against the terror outfits that had declared a war against the Pakistani state itself. It undoubtedly curtailed TTP’s

¹ Kakakhel and Umar Farooq, “[Pakistan’s War and Loss of Hope for Those Displaced](#)”, *Al-Jazeera*, 15 June 2015.

² Muhammad Amir Rana, “[No Talks with TTP](#)”, *Dawn*, 16 June 2024.

operational capabilities initially and largely dismantled its organisational structure. However, in the long run, it failed to break the proverbial back of terrorism in the country, as claimed by the politico-security establishment several times. In the wake of these operations, TTP changed its strategy. Its top leadership along with their fighters and most of the active foot soldiers shifted base from Pakistan’s tribal areas to the rugged and lawless terrain in bordering Afghanistan.

Despite Pakistan’s repeated requests, warnings and occasional threats, their ideological twin—the Afghan Taliban (hence referred as Taliban)—is believed to have helped them settle in the border areas without much difficulty. TTP continued its activities and operations against the Pakistani State, more specifically against the armed forces and law enforcement agencies. As the infamous phrase ‘You have watches, we have time’ started becoming a reality with US exploring options to honorably exit from Afghanistan, the Taliban got emboldened. So were their Pakistani twin, the TTP.

Taliban 2.0 and Changing Dynamics

With the final US exit, the return of Taliban 2.0 at the helm in Kabul was initially welcomed by Pakistan. Imran Khan, then Prime Minister, praised Taliban for breaking “shackles of slavery” soon after they forcefully took over presidential palace and forced embattled President Ashraf Ghani to flee.³ Later, it turned out to be a bane not a boon for Pakistan as two ideological twins—the Taliban and TTP—helped each other to get close to their objectives.

When Taliban were an insurgency, they desperately needed Pakistan’s help and support to sustain themselves against the American juggernaut. The Pakistani security establishment viewed the Taliban as an effective counterweight to the US-backed government in Kabul. However, in changed circumstances, Pakistan seems to have lost what many term as the ‘Strategic Depth’ in Afghanistan and ended up providing ‘Reverse Strategic Depth’ to forces like TTP, sworn enemies of the Pakistan State.

Re-emergence of TTP

That the TTP got emboldened again was visible everywhere after the Taliban took over Afghanistan. The Taliban, on their part, released a large number of TTP leaders and other terrorists incarcerated in various jails throughout the country, many of

³ [“Afghans Have Broken ‘Shackles of Slavery’: Pakistan PM Imran Khan”](#), *The Hindu*, 16 August 2021.

whom ended up re-joining the outfit with much more enthusiasm and vigour. It is no secret that the TTP wants to replace the Pakistani state and system with an Islamic Emirate emulating the one in place in Afghanistan.

With new found confidence and strength, the TTP unleashed a reign of terror against the security establishment in Pakistan. As per the data of South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Pakistan witnessed a total 425 terror related incidents which increased to 630 in 2022 and 920 in 2023.⁴ In 2024, the recorded terror incidents have reached up to 738 and if the trend continues, it will surpass last year’s tally. This is not to suggest that the TTP was exclusively involved in all these incidents; however, it definitely had its mark in majority of these attacks.

Pakistan’s Response

In order to deal with a resurgent TTP, Pakistan first requested Afghanistan to help it reign the group and reduce the number of attacks taking place within the territory of Pakistan. When the repeated requests went unheeded, it resorted to open threats and cross-border attacks. Certain stretches of the border between the two countries were also fenced by Pakistan to stop infiltration. All this did not go down well with the Taliban who warned Pakistan of severe consequences for violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This was followed by large-scale deportation of Afghan refugees, living in Pakistan for the last several decades, to their original country. This too did not result in a favourable outcome.

The TTP, in its reincarnation post-US exit from Afghanistan, has gained significant foothold in Pakistan where religious radicalisation and extremism have reached new heights with every passing day. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan were the hardest hit in 2023 as about 84 per cent attacks and 90 per cent deaths took place in these two provinces.⁵ Instead of evolving an effective mechanism, the state went on blaming it on outside support to TTP and Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) aimed at destabilising Pakistan.

The PTM, ironically, is a non-violent movement that demands rights for the Pashtuns. The security establishment considers PTM a proxy of foreign intelligence agencies, a reference particularly to Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Pakistan has a history of not allowing mainstreaming of non-violent political dissent at home. It always brands them as anti-State Indian agents and launches a violent crackdown to suppress their voices.

⁴ [“Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Year Wise”](#), South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), 31 July 2024.

⁵ [“Terrorism Surge”](#), *Dawn*, 3 January 2024.

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam

To deal with a resurgent TTP, Pakistan recently announced the launch of a new military operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability). However, some also link it with Chinese officials expressing displeasure over the deplorable security situation for Chinese workers and projects related to China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). On 22 June 2024, the Apex Committee of National Action Plan under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved the operation with the intent to eliminate terrorism and extremism across the country.⁶

Given the history of counter-terrorism operations from Al-Mizan, Rah-e-Raast, Rah-e-Haq, Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azb, Rad-ul-Fasaad that achieved tactical successes, one is not quite hopeful about the Azm-e-Istehkam either. Many opposition political parties including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and Awami National Party (ANP) fear that the operation will bring misery in the form of collateral damage and internal displacement. In KP, PTM has come out openly against the launch of the operation. On 25 June 2024, it held a massive rally in Khyber district which was attended by thousands of the people.⁷

Renaming TTP

As Azm-e-Istehkam attracted criticism from opposition including mainstream religious political parties, Pakistan decided to use religion to counter growing religious extremism and religiously oriented terror outfits. Contrary to a secular minded PTM, TTP uses Islamic ethos and ideology to widen its influence in the Pakistani society. This has somewhat rattled the Pakistani state, more specifically its security establishment that believed it had a monopoly to use different religious and radical outfits for political and other purposes. It is in this context that the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) on 27 June 2024 convened a meeting of Committee of Experts at its headquarters in Islamabad to explore ways to promote national narrative and counter the growth of extremist ideologies in the country.⁸

In less than a month, NACTA added two more groups to the list of proscribed organisations—the Majeed Brigade (MB) of Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) on 18 July 2024 and Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group linked to TTP on 25 July 2024 bringing the total

⁶ Khalid Mehmood, [“Pakistan Launches ‘Operation Azm-e-Istehkam’ to Eradicate Terrorism”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 22 June 2024.

⁷ [“Pashtun Tahafuz Movement Holds Massive Rally to Protest Military Operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”](#), *The Print*, 25 June 2024.

⁸ [“NACTA Convened a Meeting of Committee of Experts”](#), National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), 27 June 2024.

number of proscribed organisations to 81 under section 11-B-(1) r/w Schedule-I, ATA 1997.⁹

On 26 July 2024, the Interior Ministry issued a notification declaring TTP as *Fitna al Khawarji*, which literally means people who are beyond the pall of Islam and creating trouble or chaos in the country. The notification categorically stated that TTP’s activities were detrimental to Islamic faith and were in contradiction to the true teachings and essence of Islam.¹⁰ The notification also stated that all the honorific religious titles such as Mufti and Hafiz will not be used while describing the TTP leaders and instead their names will be prefixed with the title Kharji.¹¹ This is for the first time in history that a State has renamed a Non-State Actor and sought to project it as an enemy of Islam.

Conclusion

Instead of evolving an effective mechanism to deal with internal security challenges and threats, Pakistan appears to be confused and is going ahead with its old policy of using religious outfits to build a suitable narrative for itself and counter similar tactics of other outfits. It is also not ready to abandon its approach to use certain extremist organisations and terror outfits as strategic assets, paramilitary arms, and foreign policy tools to achieve regional objectives.

It is ironical on its part to address TTP as *Fitna al Khawarji*. Historically, Khawarjis were extremists who were named as such for their opposition to any arbitration (undertaken by Ali to settle differences with Muawiya) and responsible for what is called the first *fitna* (656-661) in the Islamic history. Such efforts by the state underlines the desperation of the Pakistani state in its dealing with the TTP and it will neither delegitimise TTP nor diminish the threat it poses. Pakistan’s attempt to use a historical Islamic reference to delegitimise TTP originates from the fear that TTP might acquire wider social base and growing acceptance within the society that could challenge the monopoly of the all-powerful security establishment in Pakistan.

⁹ [“81 Organizations Proscribed by Ministry of Interior”](#), NACTA, 25 July 2024.

¹⁰ [“Pakistan Labels TTP as 'Fitna al-Khawarij' to Expose Its True Ideology”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 1 August 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

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