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No. 91 April 2025

THE UNENDING CONFLICT

Dilemmas of Dealing with Sectarianism in Kurram

ASHOK BEHURIA



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्द्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	05
<i>Maps, Figure & Tables</i>	07
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
KURRAM BURNING: THE ISSUES AT STAKE	09
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
KURRAM THROUGH HISTORY: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL STUDY	20
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
HISTORY OF SECTARIAN CONFRONTATION IN KURRAM	49
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
THE NOVEMBER ATTACKS: RESPONSE OF THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY	80
<i>Conclusion</i>	
DEALING WITH SECTARIANISM IN KURRAM: HALF-HEARTED EFFORTS, NO SOLUTION IN SIGHT	103
<i>Postscript</i>	119
<i>Annexure</i>	
MAJOR SECTARIAN CLASHES IN KURRAM (1938-NOVEMBER 2024)	123

ABBREVIATIONS

APA	-	Assistant Political Agent
ASWJ	-	Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat
C&W	-	Communications & Works
CAF	-	Civil Armed Forces
CRM	-	Conflict Resolution Mechanism
CTD	-	Counter Terrorism Department
DAO	-	District accounts Office
DC	-	District Commissioner
DEO	-	District Education Office
DG	-	Director General
DHO	-	District Health Offices
FATA	-	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FC	-	Frontier Corps
ISPR	-	Inter-Services Public Relations
JUI-F	-	Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam- Fazlur
KP	-	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MNA	-	Member of National Assembly
MPA	-	Member of Provincial Assembly
MWM	-	Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen
NA	-	National Assembly

NADRA	-	National Database and Registration Authority
NDMA	-	Disaster Management Authority
PA	-	Political Agent
PML-N	-	Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
PTI	-	Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf
TDPs	-	Temporarily Displaced Persons
ToR	-	Terms of Reference
TTP	-	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

MAPS, FIGURE & TABLES

Map 1	:	Kurram District (Pakistan): Administrative Divisions.....	38
Map 2	:	Kurram Political Constituencies.....	42
Map 3	:	Kurram: Major Places.....	46
Map 4	:	Kurram: Vulnerable Areas & Key Attack Sites...	65
Map 5	:	Afghanistan Border Crossing Points: Kurram....	67
Figure 1	:	Kurram Election Results.....	41
Table 1	:	Census Data on Kurram 2023.....	37
Table 2	:	Refugee Camps in Tribal Agencies 2004.....	56

KURRAM BURNING: THE ISSUES AT STAKE

District Kurram in Pakistan has been burning in sectarian fire for a long time. While the sectarian virus has been there in this terrain since the Turi Shias assumed control over the Kurram valley and adjacent areas in the early 18th century, the frequency of clashes has increased dramatically since the beginning of this millennium, especially since 2007. The approach of the Pakistan State has been that of ‘malign neglect’ and interest shown in containing the violence has been, at the most, reactionary, and episodic. In the latest instance, after two months of indiscriminate killings in November-December 2024, with over 130 human casualties, there was a move to finally act with force to deal with the perpetrators of violence.

In fact, on 20 January 2025, the media in Pakistan reported that the Pakistan army launched an operation¹ in Kurram district to ensure peace and tranquillity after two prolonged months (November & December 2024) of violence and bloodshed there. This move came in response to the second attack on the convoys carrying essential items from Thall² to Parachinar in Upper Kurram on 16 January 2025.³ The attacks continued despite the 14-point peace agreement between the warring communities of Kurram, through a *Jirga*, on the first day of the new year in 2025.

¹ Javid Hussain, “Operation to rid Kurram of ‘spoilers’ launched”, 20 January 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886401/operation-to-rid-kurram-of-spoilers-launched> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

² Thall is also written as Thal, Tal, Tull in the media in Pakistan.

³ “Soldier martyred as aid convoy attacked in Kurram again”, *Dawn*, 17 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1885775> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

The first attack, after the agreement, was on 4 January 2025 when the vehicle carrying the Kurram District Commissioner (DC) was fired upon⁴, as he was on his way to facilitate the movement of the first convoy. The method of attack in the 4 January incident was interesting. Some 80 persons, apparently protesters, appeared on the road, when the convoy was moving past the Bagan area some 28 kms north of Thall, from which the convoy had started. The miscreants were among the protesters who shot at the convoy injuring the DC and few others.

THALL-PARACHINAR ROAD: THE DEADLIEST CORRIDOR IN PAKISTAN

The DC's vehicle accompanying the convoy was attacked near Bagan in Lower Kurram—an area close to the points where the attacks took place on 21 November 2024⁵, which started the current spate of sectarian conflict in Kurram. In the attack, which occurred simultaneously close to Uchat, Mandori, Dad Kamar, and Char Khel, 41 people, including women and children were shot down in cold blood, when unidentified gunmen opened fire on a convoy of 200 passenger vehicles carrying mostly Shias from Peshawar through Thall to Parachinar. This incident sparked off inter-sectarian (which is coincidentally inter-tribal) clashes in the district, and by January 2025 more than 130 people had been killed.⁶

⁴ Umer Farooq and Javid Hussain, “Kurram peace in peril after attack on DC’s convoy” *Dawn*, 5 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1883197> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁵ Javid Hussain and Arif Hayat, “At least 38 dead in gun attack on passenger vans in KP’s Kurram District: police”, *Dawn*, 21 November 2024 and Flora Drury, “More than 40 dead after gunmen attack passenger vehicles in Pakistan”, *BBC Online*, 22 November 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqwx18yvrndo> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶ Umer Farooq and Javid Hussain, “Operation to rid Kurram of ‘spoilers’ launched”, *Dawn*, 20 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886401> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

After the attack on the DC on 4 January 2025, the first convoy reached Parachinar on 8 January. However, on 16 January another convoy of over 100 trucks carrying food, medicine, and essentials to Parachinar was ambushed in the same Bagan area. Attackers looted goods, set trucks ablaze, killed a soldier, and injured four others, with security forces killing six militants in retaliation.

The Parachinar-Thall-Peshawar Road, a vital artery connecting the Kurram district in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province to Peshawar, has been a recurring site of violent attacks on convoys due to its strategic location near the Afghan border, sectarian tensions, tribal disputes, and militant activity. Based on available data several specific locations along this route have been identified as hotspots for such incidents.

Key attack sites along the Parachinar-Thall-Peshawar Road include Bagan, Uchat, Mandori, Dad Kamar, Char Khel, Chappari, and, to a lesser extent, Alizai. These locations, primarily in Lower Kurram, reflect a toxic mix of sectarian strife, tribal vendettas, and militancy, worsened by the road's isolation and strategic importance. Data gaps (e.g., pre-2009 incidents) limit a full historical tally, but the pattern since 2009—intensifying in 2024-2025—marks this corridor as one of Pakistan's deadliest for convoy travel.

Convoys as admission of 'loss of control'

The practice of dispatching escorted convoys along the Thall-Parachinar road in the Kurram district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, is deeply rooted in the area's ongoing sectarian and tribal strife, with a notable intensification occurring around the blockade in 2007. Although there were instances of convoys being escorted prior to 2007 as a reaction to localized violence, the organized implementation of escorted convoys as a regular practice commenced following the blockade imposed by Sunni tribes in 2007 to cut off the Shia-majority areas in Upper Kurram, which represented a significant shift in the security landscape of Kurram. As the blockade intensified, the Pakistani government—then under the military dictator, Pervez Musharraf—began deploying security forces to escort the convoys. By late 2007, military and Frontier Corps (FC) units started accompanying supply trucks and passenger vehicles to break the siege. The convoys were

then a response to ambushes, roadside bombs, and sniper attacks along vulnerable stretches like Chappari and Alizai.

Earlier instances of escorted travel likely took place during minor conflicts; however, the closure in April 2007, which lasted for several months and escalated into a prolonged crisis, required a more organized response. This blockade revealed the vulnerabilities of Parachinar, compelling the state to formalize the practice of convoy escorts to maintain access. By the years 2009-2010, this practice had become a defining feature of Kurram's security environment, with media outlets referring to these convoys as the "only safe passage" amidst ongoing sieges. As the blockade and violence intensified again in 2008-2009, with Sunni tribes and Taliban factions tightening their grip, a peace agreement in 2008 (the Murree Agreement) temporarily alleviated tensions. However, its breakdown by 2009 rendered convoys a regular necessity. The isolation of Parachinar even led to the use of helicopter airlifts and heavily protected convoys consisting of 70-100 vehicles, escorted by FC and police through the Sunni-dominated regions of Lower Kurram. The frequency of escorted convoys has fluctuated with the conflict. Subsequent blockades in 2012, 2017, and 2024 (notably the 100+ day closure in October 2024) prompted their resurgence, often involving hundreds of vehicles under stringent security—such as 718 vehicles in nine convoys by 17 February 2025.⁷ In the latest instance, the provision of security has also increased with 1,588 personnel being employed for a 225-vehicle convoy on 4 March 2025⁸, reflecting rising stakes and intensity of violence.

Thus, the systematic dispatch of escorted convoys in Kurram commenced following the blockade of the Thall-Parachinar Road by Sunni tribes in April 2007, which effectively blocked Parachinar's vital

⁷ Umar Farooq, "KP CM fears 'foreign hand' in Kurram", *Dawn*, 20 February 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1893110> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁸ "225-vehicle convoy reaches Parachinar with food supplies", *The Express Tribune*, 5 March 2025, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2532464/225-vehicle-convoy-reaches-parachinar-with-food-supplies> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

supply route and prompted the need for state intervention. The events of 2007 signified a transition to a structured and recurring practice, influenced by sectarian tensions and militant activities. This established pattern has continued to evolve in response to the fluctuating cycles of conflict in Kurram, with the most recent operations in January 2025 building upon this long-standing strategy to ensure the security of the road amidst ongoing unrest.

OPERATION LAUNCHED TO IMPLEMENT THE 14-POINT PEACE AGREEMENT

Unlike some past military operations in Pakistan— such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014, North Waziristan) or Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017, nationwide)— the efforts in Kurram, following the 1 January 2025 peace agreement, have not been assigned a distinct operational title by the Pakistani government or security forces in public statements, news reports, or official documentation accessible up to this date. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government and security officials have described the January 20, 2025, actions as a “clearance operation” or “counter-terrorism operation” targeting “miscreants” in Lower Kurram, particularly around Bagan. For instance, *Pakistan Observer* refers to a “limited counter-terrorism operation”⁹ displacing over 1,000 families, but no unique name is attached. Similarly, Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif, KP government spokesperson, called it “clearance operations” after 4 January attack on the DC’s convoy without a formal title.¹⁰ Major media outlets like *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, and *Voice of America* detail the operations— bunker demolitions, weapons seizures, and convoy security— but consistently frame them as part of implementing the 14-point peace agreement rather than a standalone named campaign.

⁹ Qurat Ul Ain, “Sustaining peace in Kurram”, *Pakistan Observer*, 15 February 2025 at <https://pakobserver.net/sustaining-peace-in-kurram/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰ Unidentified miscreants behind attack in Kurram: Dr. Saif”, *Associate Press of Pakistan*, 4 January 2025, at <https://www.app.com.pk/domestic/unidentified-miscreants-behind-attack-in-kurram-dr-saif/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

As indicated above, the ‘counter-terrorism operations’ or ‘peace and clearance operations’ commenced on 20 January 2025, in response to persistent violence despite the 1 January peace accord between the Alizai and Bagan tribes, which sought to end sectarian and tribal clashes that had claimed over 200 lives since July 2024. The agreement mandated weapons surrender, bunker demolition, and road reopening, but early breaches—such as the 4 January attack on a government convoy, and the 16 January assault on a relief convoy—prompted a more robust intervention. The KP government, backed by security forces including the Frontier Corps and police, launched this operation targeting “miscreants” in Lower Kurram, particularly in Bagan and surrounding villages like Mandori, Charkhel, and Chappari.

As of 23 February 2025, approximately 253 bunkers (117 in Lower Kurram and 136 in Upper Kurram) were demolished¹¹ in Kurram as part of the ongoing operation in the effort aimed at dismantling illegal structures and ensuring lasting stability in the region. The construction of these bunkers began several years ago. Initially, these bunkers served as defensive installations during times of increased sectarian strife and tribal confrontations. Various factions utilized them to strengthen their defences and safeguard themselves amid the turmoil. Their existence has contributed to ongoing tensions, and their removal is now regarded as an essential measure for reestablishing peace and stability in the area. Consequently, these bunkers have come to represent the persistent discord in the region. In response, the jirga resolved to eliminate this emblem of conflict by dismantling all such structures.

The peace deal also called for arms surrender and de-weaponisation. Over 100 “miscreants” were detained by early March, suggesting active enforcement. However, the scale of collected weapons remains unclear, with tribal areas historically awash in small arms.

¹¹ “Nearly 253 bunkers destroyed in Kurram under peace agreement”, *The Express Tribune*, 23 February 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2530373/nearly-253-bunkers-destroyed-in-kurram-under-peace-agreement> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

After almost 100 days of blockades, since October 2024, Thall-Parachinar Road access incrementally resumed. The convoy on 4 March 2025, carrying about 225 vehicles delivered food, fuel, and goods, ending severe shortages that had led to deaths in Upper Kurram from lack of medicine. Helicopter services, with 153 flights ferrying 4,000 people by 17 February, supplemented ground efforts, though their role has likely diminished with road reopening. The KP government set up camps for temporarily displaced persons from Bagan and nearby areas during the operation, as per a 17 January notification. By late January, displaced families began returning under the Murree Agreement's terms, though exact numbers remain unspecified. Overall, the situation appears to have stabilized and no major convoy attacks or sectarian flare-ups have been reported post-operation, contrasting with the frequent violence of late 2024, when it all started.

SCEPTICISM ABOUT SUCCESS OF THE OPERATION

Despite such early visible successes on the ground, however, the Sunni and Shia communities have mixed responses to the ongoing operation. Residents cautiously welcome peace on the ground but remain wary. While some see it as a necessary step to curb violence, others remain sceptical about its effectiveness in addressing deep-rooted sectarian tensions. Sit-ins in Parachinar and Bagan starting since December 2024, continued till late January, demanding full implementation of the terms of the peace deal — roads fully open, all arms collected, and bunkers gone. This reflects the lingering distrust in the accord's enforcement. While the operation may have quelled overt fighting, underlying tensions—rooted in Shia-Sunni divides and land disputes—persist. The situation remains complex, with both communities expressing concerns about security and the need for sustainable peace efforts.

The latest spike in violence following the November attack is one of the many such incidents in the history of Kurram which points to a disturbing reality that the managers of the state of Pakistan, both civilian and military leadership included, have not taken sufficient interest in the chronic problem that the district has faced over the years. The peace hinges on sustained enforcement. Past accords (e.g., Murree 2008) faltered due to lax follow-through, and the 23 March bunker deadline will test the commitment of the state to end all violence in the terrain.

Over 100 detainees suggest progress, but the region's armed culture may resist full de-weaponisation. Land disputes, adjudicated by a revenue commission, remain a powder keg. Kurram's border with Afghanistan, a hotbed for instability could see interference by Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), especially given Pakistan's December 2024 airstrikes straining Kabul ties.

PLEA FOR RESEARCH

The summary presented above highlights that the sectarian dynamics in the Kurram district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, adjacent to the Afghan border, have been characterized by ongoing violence between Shia and Sunni communities. The recent intensification of conflict in 2024-2025 emphasizes the intricate nature of this situation. Despite the existence of peace initiatives, such as the 14-point agreement established on 1 January 2025, and the initiation of security operations on 20 January 2025, the hostilities persist, with more than 200 fatalities recorded since July 2024. This examination underscores the necessity for further investigation to comprehend the underlying causes, assess the effectiveness of interventions, and address the humanitarian consequences, particularly given the strategic and unstable context of Kurram.

Absorption of this former tribal agency into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) as an administrative district following merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa vide 25th amendment in May 2018¹², and calling the clashes as tribal and not sectarian have not changed the conflict dynamic in the district. It is pertinent, therefore, to undertake a historical analysis of the existing situation in Kurram based on facts on the ground, identify the root causes, assess the measures taken to address the issue, and relate it to the larger social, political and security situation in the state of Pakistan.

¹² The amendment introduced by the PML-N government headed by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi facilitated the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). It was a significant step towards integrating these regions into the mainstream governance of Pakistan.

The sectarian situation in Kurram requires further research due to several interconnected factors, each necessitating deeper investigation focussing on the following:

1. **Study of the Historical Context:** It is important to understand the historical context, including Kurram's place during the times of the Mughals, the British, the Cold War, and the "War on Terror," complicating sectarian dimensions.
2. **Exploring Root Causes:** The conflict extends beyond mere religious differences, being closely linked to territorial disputes. This was evident in the clashes that occurred in July 2024 over contested land at Dandar Sehra, resulting in 46 fatalities and 200 injuries. It is essential to examine the historical, social, and economic factors that contribute to the relationship between sectarian divisions and ongoing land conflicts. Furthermore, allegations of foreign involvement, with both factions asserting backing from Iran and Afghanistan, introduce additional geopolitical complexities that necessitate a thorough investigation of external influences.
3. **Evaluating State and Societal Intervention:** Previous peace agreements, such as the 2008 Islamabad and Murree Accords, have not succeeded, and recent initiatives, including the operations conducted in January 2025, encounter significant challenges in implementation. It is essential to conduct research to understand the reasons behind the failure of ceasefires, particularly in light of the resurgence of violence observed in October 2024 following a ceasefire. The integration of the region with rest of Pakistan after 2018, which was initially praised for its potential to mainstream the region, has instead resulted in new conflicts over contested territories, necessitating an examination of its administrative consequences.
4. **Isolating External Influences:** The border between Kurram and Afghanistan, characterized as a "hotbed for instability", indicates the potential involvement of factions such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban. Ever since TTP was formed in 2007, there have been reports of attacks attributed to the TTP, alongside allegations regarding the participation of the Shia Zainabiyoun Brigade in the conflicts. This situation underscores

the necessity to analyse how cross-border interactions exacerbate conflict, particularly in light of Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghan territory in December 2024, which have further strained relations with Kabul.

5. **Assessing Humanitarian Impacts:** The conflict has displaced communities, with Sunni families since 2007 and Shias since the 1990s unrehabilitated, fuelling tensions. Recent blockades, lasting over 100 days by October 2024, caused deaths from medicine shortages, per Dawn (March 4, 2025). Research is needed to document these impacts, inform recovery strategies, and address the needs of women, children, and vulnerable groups, given the humanitarian crisis.
6. **Developing Policy Recommendations:** Alternative Dispute Resolution jirgas have been unsuccessful, and ongoing land commission efforts are ineffective. Research can provide evidence-based suggestions, such as enhancing governance, improving security posts (120 approved by KP cabinet, staffed by 407 personnel), and addressing political neglect, as seen in PTI's focus on protests for Imran Khan's release over Kurram's crisis.
7. **Gauging Media Influence:** The impact of media and social media, where rival tribes amplify victimhood claims, creating confusion, given limited pre-2018 media access, should be analysed also.
8. **Implications:** Analyse the whole gamut of data related to the central issue of persistence of sectarian conflict in Kurran and deliberate on the implications for Pakistan and the region.

KEY QUESTIONS

The key questions that are going to be answered in the study are:

1. How do land disputes evolve into sectarian violence? What are historical triggers?
2. What role do TTP, Afghan Taliban, or foreign states play?

3. Why do peace agreements fail? What impact did the 2018 FATA merger have?
4. Why dispute resolution mechanisms do not work?
5. Is Pakistan state serious and sincere about resolving the issue?

The sectarian landscape in Kurram, characterized by ongoing violence and intricate dynamics, necessitates additional investigation to understand its diverse causes, assess interventions, and alleviate humanitarian consequences. Such research is essential for formulating effective policies, promoting regional stability, and averting future escalations, particularly in light of Kurram's strategic significance and historical context of conflict.

KURRAM THROUGH HISTORY: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL STUDY¹³

Kurram is an area which can be easily located in the map for it assumes the shape of a parrot's beak, protruding into Afghanistan from the formerly tribal areas of Pakistan. The area is bounded on the north by the *Safed Koh* (also written as *Sufed Koh* or *Kob-e-Sufed*) or 'White Mountain' (in Pashto, *Spin Ghar*), which separates it from Nangarhar in Afghanistan; it adjoins Parachamkani (also written as Para Chamkani) and the country of the Masozai section of the Orakzai and that of the Zaimusht tribe on the east, with its south-eastern corner abutting on the Miranzai country of Kohat District. On the south, it borders on Northern Waziristan; and on the south-west and west it is contiguous with the Afghan districts of Khost and Paktia. The Jaji Maidan or plain and the Chamkanni country lie on its western extremity. The Kurram agency has a historically marked terrain, named after the river flowing through it, originating from Safed Koh mountain ranges and running through the entire district, North Waziristan, Bannu and joins Indus at Isa Khel in Mianwali district.

From Parachinar, a trade route leads over the Peward and Shutargardan passes to Kabul. The aerial distance from the northern tip of the district to Kabul, as the crow flies, is about 90km (56 miles). In fact, Kurram borders the Pachir Wa Agam district of Nangarhar, Afghanistan, where the infamous Tora Bora (Black Cave in Pashto) caves are located. Jaji and Tora Bora, adjacent to Kurram, served as the strongholds of Osama Bin Laden (1957-2011), who set up his training facility known

¹³ A socio-historical study seeks to examine the interplay between society and history to understand how social structures, cultural norms, and human interactions have evolved over time. It involves analysing historical events, movements, or periods within their social contexts to identify how societal factors shaped historical developments.

as Mas'ada — the lion's den— for his militants in this terrain. It is believed that following the US invasion of Afghanistan, after the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11), Bin Laden and Sufi Muhammad (1933-2019)— Pakistani Salafi cleric, jailed for sending thousands of volunteers to Afghanistan to fight the US— managed to flee through Parachinar.

Kurram district of Pakistan, earlier a tribal agency, is named after the river Kurram, which derives its name from *Krumu* (means worm) in Sanskrit, mentioned in Rig Veda (a stream mentioned twice in the Rigveda — once in the fifth book and once in the last, in the. *Nadī-stuti*, or 'praise of rivers'¹⁴). The Kurram River originates in the western extensions of the Safed Koh mountain range. It traverses Afghanistan in a circular path for approximately 40 miles before it breaches the Mandher range, which rises between 9,000 and 10,000 feet, and subsequently enters the western section of the Kurram Agency near the village of Kharlachi. For the initial 10 miles of its journey within Pakistan, the Kurram River flows directly east through an 11-mile-wide basin known as the Parachinar plateau. The segment of the Kurram Valley extending from the valley's origin to Sadda is commonly referred to as the Upper Kurram, while the area from Sadda to the Bannu Basin is typically designated as the Lower Kurram. Aside from the Kirman and Khurmana 'tois' (hill torrents), which are perennial and contribute continuous streams to the Kurram, the river lacks additional tributaries. However, it does collect rainfall runoff from the surrounding hills via numerous ravines. This nearly treeless, rocky, and ravine-laden expanse, surrounded by towering mountain ranges, presents a striking and almost otherworldly landscape, with the peaks of the Safed Koh reaching heights of 15,000 feet.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Mā vo Rasānitabhā Kubhā Krumur mā va% Sindhur ni rīramat*, *Rig Veda*. Book 5. Sukta 53.9 [which means Let not the (rivers) Rasa, the Anitabhā, the Kubhā, the Kruma, or the wide-roving ocean delay you.] and *TvaC Sindho Kubhayā GomatīC Krumum Mehatnvā sarathaC yābbirīyase*, *Rig Veda*. Book 10. Sukta 75.6c.[which means: You, Sindhu, in order to reach the swift-moving Gomatī, have united, yourself (first with the T[cmāmā; and now be united) with the Susartu, the Rasā, the Āveti, the Kubha, and the Mehatnu, in conjunction with which streams you do advance.”

¹⁵ David Dichter, *North-West Frontier of West Pakistan: A Study in Regional Geography*, Clarendon Press. Oxford, 1967, p.129

The highest peak in the Safed Koh range is Shikharam, a Sanskrit name, point to the extent of Vedic culture to and beyond this area. As per legends, the initial inhabitants of Kurram were demons who were ruled by their king, the Safed Deo, until the kingdom was overcome by two brothers, Shudani and Budani, from the north. Their descendants held sway for many centuries, until they were overwhelmed by invaders from the north. Kurram provided the passage for invaders and became an important point of retreat for rulers in modern day Afghanistan with Ghaznavid, Ghurid using it as a launching pad after suffering reverses in the battles they fought. In 12th century, when Muhammad Ghuri was on his invasion spree, he used to rest and rejuvenate at Kirman in Kurram and after his assassination in 1206, his body was taken back to Ghur through Kurram. He had appointed one of his slave generals, Taj-ud-din Yalduz, as the ruler of this area and had possibly declared him as his successor. After him, during the invasions by Mongols, by 1218, Kurram became a place where rulers from different areas in Afghanistan sought refuge.

For three hundred years hence, there is no record of Kurram, and it finds mention again during Humayun's rule in 1550s. It needs mention here that the earliest Pathan tribe to inhabit the Kurram Agency were the Bangash. After being driven out of the area around Gardez in Afghanistan by the Ghilzais in the fourteenth century, these people gradually spread by stages into the Kurram valley. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Turi tribes began appearing in the valley as nomads seeking relief for themselves and their flocks from the extreme summer heat of the Indus valley.

During the Mughal period, Parachinar, in Kurram, functioned as a summer residence for the Mughal rulers, who used to make stop over while travelling between Delhi and Afghanistan. The beauty and climate of the Kurram valley attracted the Mughal emperors of Delhi, and the remains of a garden planted by Shah Jahan is still to be seen in the valley. However, the people of Kurram, mainly Bangash, did not like Mughal rule and the valley acted as nerve centre for resistance when the Bangash followers of one Sufi saint named Bayazid Ansari (1525-1581/85) known in the tribal areas as Pir-i-Roshan or the 'Radiant and Illuminated Sufi Saint' revolted against the Mughals (Akbar) in the 16th century. Born in 1525 in Jalandhar, East Punjab, India, he had moved

with his family to Kaniguram in South Waziristan, present-day Pakistan, around 1530-31, following Babur's overthrow of the Lodi dynasty in 1526. He started the Roshania movement around 1560, which opposed tribal customs, inequality in society and Mughal rule, advocated women education and held that rulers must be chosen by merit, not birthright. This had a resonance among the Pashtuns in the tribal areas like Waziristan, Kurram, Tirah, Loya Paktia, Loy Kandahar, and Nangarhar, areas now part of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Bangash tribe ruling over Kurram by then had come under the influence of Pir-i-Roshan, asserted themselves and enjoyed relative autonomy from both the Afghans and the Mughals. With the decline of the Mughals by early 18th century, Kurram came under Afghan control, and during this time, the Turis— of Turkish origin, claiming Pashtun ethnic identity, and belonging to Shia denomination— assumed control over the terrain. According to Turi oral history, they were under Bangash domination until the 18th century when they attacked the Bangash— apparently in retaliation for an insult to a Turi woman¹⁶ – defeated them and turned them into *hamsayas* (dependants or clients) and pushed them into Lower Kurram. The Bangash population living in Upper Kurram are mostly Shias while those living in Lower Kurram are Sunnis and there is no love lost between them as their sectarian identities determine their socio-political outlook.

Elliott says that the Turis were “comparatively late arrivals on the frontier, probably came over the Pekar Kotal and drove the Bangash people from the Kurram valley somewhere about AD 1700”.¹⁷ It is not clear when the Afghans conquered the Turis but they had been making periodic expeditions every five or six years to collect revenue, until they took formal possession in 1850, appointing a governor for

¹⁶ Mariam Abou Zahab, “Unholy Nexus: Talibanism and Sectarianism” in Pakistan’s “Tribal Areas”, SciencesPo, CERI, June 2009, at [https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceci/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceci/files/art_mz.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceci/files/art_mz.pdf) (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁷ Major-General J. G. Elliott, *The Frontier 1839-1947 - The Story of the North-West Frontier of India*, Cassel, London, 1968, p.219.

Khost and Kurram, and stationing a strong garrison in the valley. The Turris, under the influence of the Afghans took Kohat area under their control for some years. By early 19th century, they were seen to be conducting armed raids in adjacent areas provoking the British to enter the area in 1856. The Afghan governor of Kurram agreed to compensation and in 1859 his Turi army joined the British expedition against the Waziris, which led to enmity between the Turis and the Waziris.

It was also said that the Turis, being Shias, did not like the Afghan rule. Most possibly after Turis dominated the area (especially the Upper Kurram) since the beginning of the 18th century, a section of the Bangash tribe, who were Sunnis, accepted the Shia faith. Therefore, one finds less Shias and more Sunnis within the Bangash tribe. Another neighbouring tribe with similar division on sectarian lines is Orakzai. The Orakzais are in majority in the district named after them, bordering Kurram. Both Kurram and Orakzai are located in Kohat division today.¹⁸

In the 1870s, there were disturbances in the region over land disputes between the Bangash tribe of Kurram and tribes in Thall. In 1877, the Turis rose in revolt against the Afghan governor and before the embers would settle down, the British entered Kurram, occupied the fort and defeated the Afghan contingent at Pekar. During the second Afghan War (1878-1880), when Sir Frederick Roberts advanced by way of the Kurram valley and Pekar Kotal to Kabul, the Turis lent him every assistance in their power, and were assured autonomy and independence in return in 1880. By then, the Turis would urge the British to free them from Afghan control. However, after the war was over, while the tribes of Kurram and other frontier areas enjoyed some degree of autonomy, there were infighting among the tribes. In 1892, the British finally took over the administration of Kurram and it was given the

¹⁸ As per 2017 census, according to Pakistani sources, Kurram is about 58 per cent Sunni and 42 per cent Shia while Orakzai is 82 per cent Sunni and 18 per cent Shia. The neighbouring Hangu district is 90 per cent Sunni and 10 per cent Shia.

status of an Agency. Needless to say, even if there were inter-tribal feuds, the Turis were regarded as pro-British. When in 1897-98, in the wake of what was called the Great Pathan Uprising of 1897-98, the Pashtuns of the region, mostly the Afridis, Orakzais, and Mohmand, rose in revolt against colonial rule, orchestrating a series of insurrections along the North-West Frontier who rose against British rule, fuelled by a mix of tribal codes, religious fervour, and resistance to British encroachments into their territories, the Turis of Kurram Valley played a unique role aligning themselves with the British. This alignment was partly due to sectarian differences with Sunnis around them, and the British strategy of leveraging local alliances to maintain control over the frontier regions. The British faced significant challenges but managed to suppress the uprising mustering substantial military resources and launching one of the largest military operations in the region, since what was called by the British, the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

THE TURIS OF KURRAM

The Turis mostly concentrated in the Kurram District and especially in majority in the Upper Kurram are the main focus of this study. It is useful therefore to trace their origin and history. Multiple accounts suggest that they may or not be of Turkic origin, but conventionally, they are regarded by most as of Turkic descent. Caroe places them as an Afghan tribe allied to the main line that draws from an eponymous Afghan hero called Qias who was said to have descended from Saul in the thirty-seventh generation (Bani Israel). Afghan lore has it that Qais led a deputation of Bani Israel from Ghor (in Afghanistan) to Medina during Prophet Muhammad's time. Qais being a Jewish name, the Prophet gave him the name of Abdurrashid and "predicted that God would make the offsprings of Qais so numerous that they would outvie all other people and their attachment to Islam would, in strength, be like the wood upon which they lay the keel when constructing a ship which seamen call *Pabtan*; on this account he conferred upon Abdurrashid the title of Pathan also".¹⁹

¹⁹ Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans 550 BC-1957*, Macmillan, London, 1965, pp.8-9.

Qias had three sons and his eldest son Sarbanr, had adopted Urmar whose progenies settled around Logar, Waziristan (Kaniguram) and Peshawar. One day, two brothers belonging to the Urmar tribe went out into the field and one of them found an iron cooking pot (*Karbai*) which was apparently left by a moving column of fighters who had possibly camped there, the previous night, while the other found a baby boy left there. Being childless, the first brother made an earnest request to the second, to exchange his iron pot for the baby. This baby was named Karlanri probably after the iron pot which was called *Karbai*. Karlanri had two sons, Koday and Kakay. Koday's second wife had four sons and one of them was Khugi who is supposed to have been the ancestor of the Turis, Khugianis, and the Jajis. From the other three sons came Afridis, Khataks, Mangals, Maqbals (also written as Muqbals) and Zardans. The Uthmankhels and Orakzais trace their origin to the sons from the first wife, while Daurs, Waziris, Ahmedzais, Mehsuds and others. It emerges from this oral history that the Turis and their close ethnic cousins are found in the same contiguous geographical space straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan along the tribal borderlands both countries share. Such close ethnic bonding notwithstanding the inter-tribal dissension has been a marked feature of power politics for centuries in this geographical terrain.

There is another theory, as per Turi folklores, that their ancestors were formerly settled in Persia, but when troubles broke out there, Toghani Turk, the common ancestor of the Turis and Jajis, fled eastward and eventually settled at Nilab on the banks of Indus in Kohat district. Yet another story says that they came originally from Samarkand to Nilab. But there is a general agreement of some sort that they had a Turkic origin. The Karlanri story, going back to Urmar, the adopted son of the eldest child of Qias, also gives some room to such belief that the origin of the tribe was non-Afghan, although the founder of the tribe was given adoption and patronage by the Pathans, so much so that they are counted as Pashtuns and speak Pashto language as well.

Almost all experts concur that the Turis do not possess pure Afghan lineage. Some assert that they belong to a Hindki ethnicity, originally comprising around sixty to seventy families who, approximately four or five centuries ago, migrated from their homeland in Punjab (across from Nilab on the Indus River) to the Kurram Valley. The Awans

from the Jhelum District, who trace their ancestry to one Kutab Shah, a former ruler of Herat, claim that both the Jajis and Turis are also his descendants, albeit through a Turkic wife.²⁰ Regardless of the tribe's origins, it is widely accepted that they were at some point settled in Nilab, likely as nomadic people who migrated annually to the Kurram Valley.

From Migration to Settled Life

During one of these migrations, in the early 1700s, a conflict arose between the tribe and the Bangash, who were the owners of Kurram at that time. The Jajis and Turis united for the first assault on the Bangash territory in the Aryob or Hariab Valley, which the Jajis successfully captured. From Hariab, the tribe advanced into the Kurram Valley; the Jajis took control of Jaji Maidan, also referred to as Zazai Maidan, located in Khost Province, Afghanistan, while the Turis secured the main Kurram Valley below Kharlachi. The Turis initially captured Burkhi, followed by Pekar, and subsequently besieged Shalozan, known for its fertile lands and abundant water resources, making it ideal for agriculture and livestock. Over time, Shalozan gained a reputation for its orchards and agricultural output, significantly benefiting the local economy. The Bangash, who were overwhelmed by the Turi-Jaji assaults, eventually reached a compromise and became Turi *hamsayas*. In fact, the Bangash residing in Turi territories have since fully integrated with the Turis in terms of their sect (as Shias) and have shared interests, to the extent that the Turis have relinquished all claims and rights over the land they once owned, with the Shia Bangash now participating equally with the Turis in all matters concerning Kurram.²¹

The founder of the Mughal State in India, Babar, writing so far back as 1506 A.D., mentions the tribe called 'Buri' which is regarded undoubtedly as a misprint for Turi, who inhabited the area surrounding

²⁰ Also see Haroon Rashid, *History of the Pathans, Vol-4*, CreateSpace Publishing, 2002, p-500.

²¹ See *Frontier and Overseas expeditions from India, Vol-2*, p-305.

Kurram when he passed through it. Turis and Jajis find mention in *Akbar-nama* by Abu Fazal, who recorded that while Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1586 AD was camping at Attock, their tribal chiefs, along with chiefs of Khalil, Mohmand, Gagyani, Sherzad, Khizr-Khel, Abdur-Rehmani and others of Ghurghust and Ghoria Khel tribes, gave representations to him complaining about the Yosufzais. The *Badshah-nama* (or *Padshah-nama*), an important historical chronicle of the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, written in Persian, and authored by several historians, including Abdul Hamid Lahori, who documented the emperor's rule in great detail, refers to different tribes which joined the Mughal attack on Peshawar and calls the Afghan tribes as 'Ulus', but the Jajis and Turis are mentioned as 'Imak'—both Turkish words; but while *Ulus* has been commonly used for the Afghan tribes, 'Imak' is never used except for the tribes of Turk descent. The distinction points to their Turkish extraction.

The five principal clans of the Turi are (i) Hamza Khel, (ii) Mastu Khel, (iii) Duperzai, (iv) Alizai and (v) Ghundi Khel.

The Turis are known for their unique cultural identity and adherence to Shia Islam, which sets them apart from many other Pashtun tribes. The Turi tribe as a whole is deeply rooted in Pashtunwali, the traditional Pashtun code of conduct, and they maintain a strong sense of community and cultural heritage. Here is an overview²² of the sub-tribes mentioned above:

(i) *Hamza Khel*

Historically referred to as “Kuchis” because of their nomadic way of life, the Hamza Khel play an essential role in the tribe's defence and agricultural progress. They are further categorized into subdivisions, including *Spinkeai*, *Mallal*, *Tarakei*, among others, and possess substantial land holdings throughout the Kurram Valley.

²² The overview is based on Dilawar Hussain, “Turi Tribe of Parachinar”, Blog, “Chinar ke Pattay”, 5 March 2024, at <https://chinarkeypattay.com/turi-tribe-of-parachinar/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

(ii) *Mastu Khel*

The Mastu Khel play a vital role in the social and cultural dynamics of the Turi community by engaging in educational and religious activities, as well as serving as mediators in tribal conflicts. They reside in regions stretching from Tezana to Jalamic, where they actively preserve the cultural heritage of the Turi people.

(iii) *Duparzai*

As guardians of the Turi's artistic and cultural traditions, the Duparzaais enhance the tribe's cultural festivities and religious observances through their craftsmanship, music, and poetry. They are instrumental in maintaining the oral histories and customs that are integral to the Turi identity.

(iv) *Alizai*

The Alizais are recognized for their leadership within the Turi Tribe. With subdivisions such as *Mir Hassan* and *Abmad Khel*, they have made significant contributions to the political and administrative framework, advocating for Turi interests in wider socio-political contexts.

(v) *Ghundi Khel*

Renowned for their proficiency in trade and commerce, the Ghundi Khels oversee trade routes and markets that are essential for the economic well-being of the Turi Tribe. Their strategically located settlements along the Kurram River facilitate economic interactions both within the valley and beyond.

The Turi tribe made its presence felt in the Kurram Valley by the 15th century. Initially a nomadic group, they traversed between the Aryob Valley in Afghanistan and the Kurram Valley in Pakistan. Through centuries of nomadic incursion into the area around Kurram valley, by the early 18th century, they had established dominance in Kurram, displacing the previously dominant Bangash tribe, as noted by Babur in his writings. It has been written about by a British author and historian in great detail:

These tribal irruptions were not simultaneous and in many cases the process of settlement was spread over long periods, sometimes over a couple of generations. Mass movements had slowed down by the time of the Mughal emperor

[Babur],.... Intermittently and on a small scale, the movement has been carried on almost to the present time. The settlement of the Turis in the Kurram is a case in point. This tribe of nomads from the Herat direction seized most of upper Kurram under the Sufed Koh from the Bangash in comparatively recent times. They were not, however, able to oust the Bangash entirely and concluded a convention with them. To this day two strong Turi clans are still nomad, living in tents in upper Kurram in the summer and moving down in the winter to warmer regions to graze their flocks and cattle, after sowing their wheat on the higher ground. The history of the Turis is an epitome of tribal movements along the North-West Frontier.²³

The strategic location of Kurram positioned the Turis as influential actors in regional politics, particularly during the Mughal and British colonial periods. Throughout the British colonial era, the Turis were recognized for their resistance and, at times, their alliances with the British, which varied according to the prevailing circumstances. Their adherence to Shia Islam distinguished them in a largely Sunni region, resulting in both collaborative and contentious interactions with neighbouring tribes.

Social Life

As regards their social life, although there is no entrenched leadership in the community and there are no mullahs holding high respect within the community like they do in Sunni Pathan groups. They respect *Turizona*, customary law in Kurram codified by the British in the 1890s, which only reflects the thinking and practices of the Turis. There are four dominant families of Sayyids, who trace their lineage to Prophet Muhammad, and each Turi is linked to one of these as a disciple. There are *matim kothas* or mourning houses in the Turi Shia villages, where on every Friday and 13 days in the Moharram all the villagers assemble, and these kothas provide the centre of their religious life.

²³ William Barton, *India's North-West Frontier*, John Murray, London, 1939, pp. 27-28

They must make, if means permit, a pilgrimage to Karbala and Mashhad, and are closely connected with Persia, On the other hand, few go to Mecca. Based on British Census of 1892, H. A. Rose's observations about the Turis are interesting:

The aims in life of every Turi are *to marry the woman he loves, murder the enemy he hates, play the swell as a malik, collect money by corruption and wash away his sins by a pilgrimage to Karbala.* In the famous battle at that place some Byzantine Christians fell on the side of the sons of Ali and that event has given a religious touch to the Turis' devotion to the British Government. Unfortunately, the Turi *though shrewd in business and above the average in intelligence is lavish in his expenditure at weddings and in bribing the jirgas.....* Formerly splendid horsemen and born moss-troopers, the Turis still make excellent irregular soldiers, but *they are litigious and saturated with party feeling which makes them utterly untruthful.* Still their *hospitality is great and the fidelity of a Turi escort or badragga is proverbial.*²⁴

Under Afghan Rule

In the cool sequestered valley of Kurram river, this ethnic group established its control over time and has tried to safeguard its interests and autonomy from attacks from neighbouring tribes as well as invaders from outside throughout history. Since Kurram provided passage to many invaders and attracted the attention of rulers for revenue as a fertile valley grew wheat, high quality rice and other such agricultural produce, the Turis inhabiting this area were perpetually under some kind of threat or other, which they had to fight for their independence.

During Dost Muhammad Khan's reign, which was a pivotal period in Afghan history, spanning two significant phases, 1826 to 1839 and 1843 to 1863, the Turis maintained a low profile and alternately aligned with the British and the Afghan ruler keeping their community interests in the foreground. For example, in 1851, the Turis seized control of

²⁴ H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province, Vol-III*, Based on Census of 1892, Aziz Publications, Lahore, 1978, pp.474-477

the fort at the Pewar pass for a duration of three months. Their insurrection concluded only when Afghan Amir Dost Muhammad Khan sent one of his sons, Sardar Muhammad Azam Khan, accompanied by a formidable military force, to the area. Three years later, a contingent of 8,000 Turis laid siege to the same pass. During the subsequent military engagement at the Pewar pass, the Turis faced a significant defeat. In March 1856, the Turis received support from the son of Sardar Muhammad Azam Khan, who was a deputy of the Afghan Amir, in their struggle against the uprisings led by the neighbouring Khostwals and Darwesh Khel Wazirs. By April 1857, an uprising by the nearby Jajis was “suppressed amicably” by the Turi maliks. A year later, Sardar Muhammad Azam Khan was aided by Malik Zarif of Pewar in addressing the rebellious factions in Baliyamin, located in the adjacent Miranzai region.²⁵

When Dost Muhammad Khan was deposed by the British in 1863 and his sons— Sher Ali Khan (reigned 1863-1866 & 1868-1879), Mohammad Afzal Khan (1866-1867), Mohammad Azam Khan (1867-1868) — assumed power, they tried to establish their control over the Turis of Kurram through their governors. During Amir Sher Ali’s second tenure, Kurram was governed by his half-brother Wali Muhammad Khan, whose mother was a Turi, from 1869 till 1876, when he was dismissed from the governorship of Kurram, due to complaints from the maliks of Kurram.

Dost Muhammad Khan’s sons were replaced by his grandsons from different sons since 1879 among whom Abdur Rahman Khan (1840-1901), son of Mohammad Afzal Khan, assumed power in Afghanistan in 1880 and had a longer tenure of about 21 years. Abdur Rahman Khan’s tenure was marked by among other things, the Shia genocide that started since late 1880s and by 1890s almost 50-60 per cent of the Hazara Shias were exterminated under his watch. Even if there is no credible account of the anxieties of the Turis of Kurram about Abdur Rahman’s rule, it would not be wrong to assume that they must

²⁵ Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan 1826-1863*, Routledge, London, 1997, p-174

have been worried about such a policy of sectarian cleansing advocated by the Abdur Rahman, who had established some control over their territory as well.

Turis side with the British

By this time, the Turis—passing through the vicissitudes of internal political and sectarian turmoil in Afghanistan, and recognising the British military superiority over Afghan forces and the ongoing Great Game in the region—must have realised that the real power was in the hands of the British and it was in their interest to align with them. During the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), which was followed by ascension of Abdur Rahman to power attested by the British, the Turis had helped Sir Frederick Roberts, a prominent British military commander, whose campaigns in Afghanistan were legendary. Roberts first gained recognition when he led the Kurram Field Force and won the Battle of Peshawar in December 1878. This battle showcased his tactical brilliance, as he outmanoeuvred Afghan forces in challenging mountainous terrain, securing the Kurram Valley for the British.

Roberts entered Afghanistan on 13 October 1879 to avenge the death of Sir Pierre Louis Cavagnari, who was killed on 3 September 1879, during the siege of the British Residency in Kabul²⁶. Roberts led his troops to occupy Kabul, restoring British control over the Afghan capital. His leadership during this period was crucial in stabilizing the region amidst widespread unrest. The Turis were much impressed with the British might and greatly gravitated towards them after the war. In the face of the sectarian genocide under Abdur Rahman in Afghanistan after 1880, the Turis wanted to stay under British command rather than getting passed on to the Afghan hand. The quintessential Turi aversion to fall under Afghan control was much in display during this period. When in 1892 the British negotiated the Durand Line and finally signed it with the Afghan Amir in 1893, the Turis must have heaved a sigh of great relief.

²⁶ M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions*, published in 1978, provides a fictionalised account of the siege.

Thus, the British *de facto* ended Afghan control over Kurram in 1879 during the second Anglo-Afghan War. The Turis extended their support to the British, welcoming them into the region. The British forces, assured of Turi support, withdrew from the valley a year or two later, and in order to further reassure the Turis of their support, informed the Amir that Kurram would be considered a British protectorate. Some observers say that “complete anarchy soon followed the departure of the British; its reactions on the Khost border led the Amir to threaten reprisals” and “the only solution of the difficulty was to re-occupy the valley and this was effected in 1892”.²⁷ A significant militia force, primarily composed of Turis, was formed in 1893.

The Turi militia consistently demonstrated loyalty to the British, earning commendation in 1897, and remained steadfast during the Third Anglo-Afghan War that started in 1919, even as many other irregular units, including the Khyber Rifles and the North and South Waziristan Militias, either mutinied or deserted. The conflict saw battles in areas like Thall, Kurram, and Spin Boldak (*literally meaning White Desert*). Both sides suffered casualties, but the British had a technological advantage. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi on 8 August 1919. The treaty granted Afghanistan full control over its foreign affairs, effectively ending British suzerainty. However, Afghanistan recognized the Durand Line as the border with British India, reconfirming absolute British control over Kurram. Barton writes that the Turis displayed their full loyalty to the British and the Turi Militia was not affected by what he categorised as “Congress propaganda”, during 1930s, when their neighbouring tribal militias like the Khyber Rifles, and North and South Waziristan Militias, “mutinied or deserted” and the tribe “as a whole, to which 3,000 -303 rifles had been issued, put up a splendid fight in 1930, when the Orakzais invaded the valley as a result of Congress propaganda”.²⁸

²⁷ William Barton, *India's North-West Frontier*, John Murray, London, 1939, pp. 52-53

²⁸ Ibid. pp.51-52

Lack of Cohesion

The next issue is of internal cohesion among the Turis. As per the assessment of British officers, “The Turis are a bold and vigorous people, still proud of the fact that they conquered their valley from their neighbours the Bangashes”.²⁹ They were known to have “*little love for rulers*”, and “*intensely democratic and, eroded by private, family, village and clan feuds and factions, always more ready to fight among themselves than with their neighbours...*” The Afghans exploited to the full this lack of unity till the whole valley was a seething hotbed of intrigue.” Therefore, one British officer writes that “before faction fighting broke out again and, when anarchy prevailed, there were signs that the Afghans, the Zaimushts and others might take advantage of this tribal weakness to move in and appropriate this rich and smiling valley” and therefore:

... the British Government decided to go to their assistance, the invaders were repelled, and in 1892 the Kurram was formally incorporated as a political agency. In the verdict of the official history ‘we appeared on the scene as impartial and irresistible peace-makers, restoring to each man his ancestral possessions and status, which he enjoyed before the struggle began’.³⁰

The other threat that the Turis faced right since the time they moved into the Kurram valley was from the neighbouring areas which periodically came under the sway of Sunni sectarian groups. Some accounts in 1898 suggested that “their tribal neighbours are almost without exception Sunnis, hence [there was] the division and inveterate animosity between the two”.³¹

²⁹ Major-General J. G. Elliott, *The Frontier 1839-1947 - The Story of the North-West Frontier of India*, Cassel, London, 1968, p.82

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 219-220

³¹ Special War Correspondent of Pioneer, *The Rising on the North West Frontier (1897-1898)*, Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1898, p. 130.

Barton goes on to underline the sectarian outlook prevailing in the region during the period:

It is worth noting that *Congress propaganda* extended as far as the Afghan province of Khost, where the *Zadran and Mangal tribes at one time planned to attack the Turis of the Kurram Valley because as Shiabs they were loyal to the British government and hated as recusants by all good Sunnis*. In Bannu itself, and on the district borders, according to the reports of local officers, there was little doubt that many of the tribesmen were only waiting for the moment when the Government was in their opinion sufficiently embarrassed for them to commence a campaign of disorder and crime on both sides of the administrative border. Conditions were similar on the Dera Ismail Khan side.³² (Italics are by the author for emphasis)

This points to the sectarian division well-entrenched in Kurram and its neighbouring agencies and political differences were being given sectarian colours even during the British period. The Pakistani contention that land disputes were central to the conflict and sectarian division is not that endemic may not be entirely true.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

The Kurram river that waters the district is its lifeline. It rises in the hills near Ahmad Khel and flows at first south-westward, and then turns sharply to the east, entering Kurram near Kharlachi. From there, it flows east to Kurram Fort and thence southward till it reaches Sadda where it turns sharply to the south until it reaches Maro Khel, whence it curves south-east as far as Thall, in Kohat District. The valley formed by the river is wide open, mostly comprising the sloping plain formed by the debris from the southern face of the Safed Koh, which descends to the Kurram river and is intersected by numerous streams, all tributaries of Kurram.

In the upper valley lie Parachinar, the headquarters of the district as well as the tehsil named Upper Kurram. Above Parachinar, the valley

³² Ibid. p. 167

attains a width of about 24 kms, however, down below, in the south, Lower Kurram, is a narrow valley although it is well-populated. For administrative convenience, the lower Kurram valley is divided into two tehsils— Central and Lower Kurram (See Map 1), with Sadda acting as the head-quarter for both. Bagan is an important town in Central Kurram, which has been the eye of the storm since November 2024. Kurram is rich in minerals such as soapstone, dim stone, rock salt, marble and coal. Soapstone is yet to be exploited even if it is available in industry feasible quantities.

Table 1: Census Data on Kurram 2023

	Area Sq. Kms.	Population	Pop ⁿ . Per Household	Density	10-yr Pop ⁿ . Growth Rate	Sex-ratio	Literacy
Upper Kurram	970	275,819	8.0	284.35	1.49	101.21	49.07 (M-65.01 F-33.26)
Central Kurram	1,470	358,670	8.7	243.99	7.79	113.22	20.97 (M-32.67 F-8.48)
Lower Kurram	940	150,945	7.8	160.58	2.02	106.16	38.15 (M-55.29 F-20.70)
Kurram	3,380	785,434	8.3	232.38	4.16	107.51	35.22 (M-49.39 F-20.65)

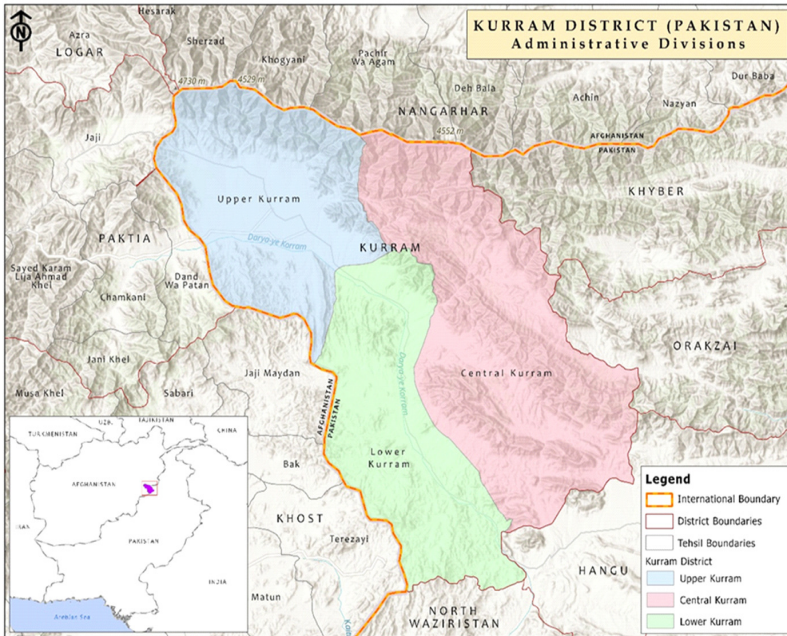
Source: Data collated here are culled from Pakistan Bureau of Statistics at <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/>

As far as the demography is concerned, as the table above suggest, the district has a population of 785,434 with an adverse sex-ratio of 107.5 males per 100 females. There has been a decennial population growth of 7.79 per cent in Central Kurram compared to 1.49 per cent in Upper Kurram and 2.02 in Lower Kurram, which points perhaps to migrations from outside the district to the central region of the district. Quite expectedly, Central Kurram is more populated than the other

two Tehsils, accounting for 45 per cent of the district's population. The district is mostly rural with only 5.79 per cent living in urban areas. In terms of religion, the district is almost 99 per cent Muslim. Shias (almost all the Turis and few Bangash) constitute 45 per cent of the total population of the district and overwhelming population of Upper Kurram.

The Shias are in majority (80 per cent) in Upper Kurram while the Sunnis dominate Central (95 per cent) and Lower Kurram (80 per cent).³³ Ethnically speaking, all of them are Pashtuns and speak Pashto language. Among them, Turis are mostly Shias who follow

Map 1



³³ “Spatial / Structure Plan for Parachinar, Kurram Agency”, Final Structure Plan Report, EA Consulting Pvt Ltd, Karachi, September 2015, at <https://urbanpolicyunit.gkp.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final-Parachinar-Report.pdf> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Ithna Ashari Shia faith (Twelver Shia sect)³⁴, while the Bangash are nearly equally distributed between Twelver Shia Muslims and Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Together with the closely associated Orakzais and Turis, the Bangash represent the only Pashtun tribes that have people belonging to the Shia sect. The Shia Bangash are primarily located in Upper Kurram and specific regions of Hangu, such as Usterzai, whereas the Sunni Bangash are predominantly found in Lower Kurram, Central Kurram, as well as in Thall and Bannu. As per British census in 1901, there were about 2000 Hindko speaking Hindus, almost all Aroras, and the number of Hindus has come down to 39 today.

The Turis follow an intra-tribal social customary code *Turizōna* among themselves and *Islamzōona* in their interaction with neighbouring Sunnis. Alongside, the Turis also observe Pashtunwali, which is followed by major Pashtun tribes like Mangal, Maqbal, Ghilzai, Bangash, Orakzai, Utmanzai Wazirs and Dawar surrounding the Turi-inhabited areas of Kurram.

As far as its geolocation is concerned, Upper Kurram used to attract tourists from all over the region at one point in time. It is mentioned in *Imperial Gazetteer of India Vol XIV* published in 1908 that “...in Lower Kurram, the scenery is dreary and barren, only relieved by the narrow strips of cultivation along the river banks; but Upper Kurram is one of the most beautiful valleys in the Province, the encircling hills being well wooded and many of the villages picturesque...In the winter, even Lower Kurram is very cold and a bitter wind prevails, while in the summer it is hot and dry. Upper Kurram is never unpleasantly hot even in summer, while in winter snow covers the ground for weeks.”

³⁴ The Ithna Ashari Shia, also known as Twelver Shia, form the largest branch of Shia Islam. They believe in a line of twelve divinely appointed leaders, known as the Twelve Imams, who are considered the spiritual and political successors to the Prophet Muhammad. The Twelfth Imam, Imam al-Mahdi, is believed to be in occultation and will reappear as the promised Mahdi. Twelver Shia theology emphasizes the infallibility of the Imams, their divine selection, and their role in preserving and interpreting Islamic law and the esoteric meanings of the Quran. This branch of Islam is predominant in countries like Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan, and has significant communities in other regions.

Among other places in Kurram, Parachinar, which is regarded as being as beautiful as Kashmir attracts maximum visitors. With an elevation of 1,726 meters (5,663 feet) above mean sea level, it ranks as the fourth coldest area in Pakistan. It is located 74 kilo meters from Thall via the Thall-Parachinar Road, 180 kilometers from Kohat, and 248 kilometres from Peshawar. The town is uniquely located³⁵ on a projection of Pakistani territory that juts into Paktia Province in Afghanistan, also referred to as the Parrot's beak. It was not surprising that given Kurram's history of having provided a passage to invaders coming from Afghanistan, it became a "launching pad for the mujahideen into Afghanistan in the 1980s".³⁶ As has been stated earlier Jaji and Tora Bora, bordering Kurram, remained the headquarters of Bin Laden for his fighters and it served as a route for Pakistani fighters voluntarily joining up with the Taliban against the US forces in Afghanistan.

Electoral Scenario

As far as Kurram's experience of electoral politics is concerned, at the moment, there is one National Assembly constituency (NA-37) and two Provincial Assembly Constituencies (PA-95, Kurram-I and PA-96, Kurram II) and the delineation of the constituencies were done in 2023, prior to the February 2024 elections. From 2018, the whole of Kurram district is considered one national assembly constituency, while earlier there were two constituencies, more or less reflecting the sectarian demography of the terrain. However, whole of Kurram is now has a single representative. In the last election, in February 2024, NA-37

³⁵ Jeffrey Dressler and Reza Khan in their research report in 2013 titled "The Haqqani network in Kurram: The Regional Implications of a Growing Insurgency" discussed that Kurram is a region of special strategic importance to Afghanistan-focused insurgents. It served as a base to the Afghan Mujahideen during the war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Kurram is still a popular place to provide access to many Afghan provinces and it is also connected with the Kurram. Available at https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Haqqani_Network_in_Kurram_web.pdf (accessed on 22 March 2025)

³⁶ Sohail Habib, "Kurram Carnage", *Dawn*, 28 November 202 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875263> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

(Kurram) returned a Shia, Hameed Hussain, belonging to the Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM) Pakistan (MWM). He was the only MWM candidate to have won the election for the National Assembly securing 58,650 votes and he defeated a Shia, Sajid Hussain Turi, of the Pakistan Peoples' Party Parliamentarians (PPP), who received 54,384 votes. Sajid Hussain had won from Kurram banking on votes mainly from Upper Kurram earlier, when there were two NA constituencies in the district. The MWM candidate won because it was regarded as an ally of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), which had a substantial appeal in the area. In the two provincial assembly seats, the sectarian dynamics was visible again. From PK-95 (Kurram-I), dominated mostly by the Sunnis, Muhammad Riaz of JUI(F) won, while PK-96 (Kurram-II) went to Ali Hadi from PTI, signalling influence of PTI.

Figure 1

(See Map 2)

KURRAM ELECTION RESULTS

National Assembly Election Results 2024:

NA-37

Member of National Assembly (MNA): Er Hameed Hussain of MWM (58,650 votes, 38.18%) beat three-time MNA Sajid Hussain Turi of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) (54,792 votes, 35.66%), Margin: 3869, Voter Turnout: 31.77%

Provincial Election Results (2024):

PK-95: Kurram 1-

Tehsil Central and Tehsil Lower Kurram (Excluding Patwar Circle, Hasan Ali, Ibrahimzai, and Ramki of legislation Alizai). The population of this constituency is 4,79,700.

Member of Provincial Assembly (MPA):

Muhammad Riaz, JUI(F) (29,379 votes, 51.23%), beat Imran Khan, PTI (23,059 votes, 40.21%), Margin 6,320, Turn out: 29.38%

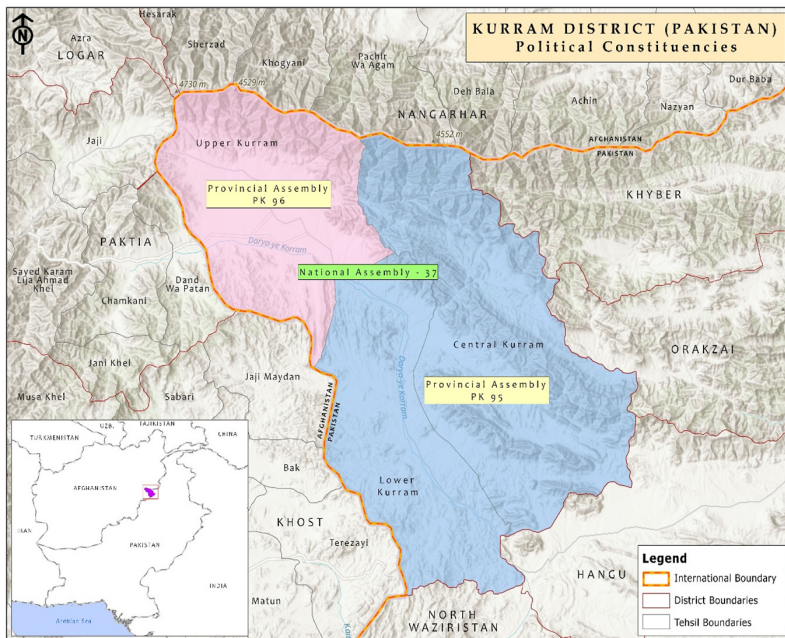
PK-96: Kurram II-

Patwars of Hasan Ali, Ibrahimzai, and Ramki (part) of Alizai of Tehsil Lower Kurram apart from Tehsil Upper Kurram. The population here is estimated to be 3,05,734.

MPA: Ali Hadi Independent-PTI (38,593 votes, 40.26%) beat Wasi Syed Mian, Independent (24,874 votes, 25.95%) Margin 13,719, Turn

There is a general perception that in this constituency, the Shias are more educated and aware of their electoral rights, which explains higher voting ratio among them and their domination in the constituency, even though they are in overall minority (42-45 per cent) in the entire district.³⁷ Before 2024, when there were two NA constituencies, the constituency covering lower and central Kurram had a troubled history. In 2013, election could not be held due to adverse security situation in the constituency. The polls were initially postponed after the election rally of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl candidate Munir Khan Orakzai (elected in 2002 and 2006) was attacked by terrorists in Parachamkani on 7 May 2013.³⁸ The bomb explosion at the election rally had left 25 people dead while over 70 others had suffered injuries.

Map 2



³⁷ Muhammad Faheem, “Political shifts in tribal districts: Kurram’s unease over reduced representation in National Assembly”, at <https://loksujag.com/story/district-kurram-delimitation-eng> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

³⁸ Zulfiqar Ali, “ECP, admin fail to hold polls in Kurram even after one year”, *Dawn*, 29 September 2014, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1135028/ecp-admin-fail-to-hold-polls-in-kurram-even-after-one-year> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Following the incident, security forces launched operation in Parachamkani, east of Parachinar to clear the area of militants. Pakistan military had launched several military operations³⁹ during 2011 and 2012 against TTP militants who had established their control in the terrain since 2009 leading to displacement of about two million people in central and lower Kurram. These operations aimed to secure the Thall-Parachinar transit route and eliminate militant hideouts; however, they had destabilised the entire population, the bad effects of which are continuing till date. In fact, between 2013 and 2018, for five long years, there were no elections in the NA constituency in lower Kurram (the NA-38). In 2018, the same constituency (then NA-45) returned Munir Orakzai of JUI-F, who died in 2020. This seat was won by PTI candidate Fakhar Zaman Khan Bangash in February 2021 by-election.

Sectarian Demography

The sectarian demography of Kurram is interesting. The way the settlements have come about over the centuries, the Kurram River divides the region along sectarian lines. Up to Sadda, there are Shia communities on both sides; however, after Sadda, up to Bagan (8 km away), there are Shia villages on the southern bank and Sunni villages on the north and eastern bank. With the exception of the whole Central Kurram in the east, Sadda is solely Sunni. After that, Central Kurram becomes part of Orakzai District. The town of Hangu and beyond are included in this Sunni belt. With a sizable Shia minority and a Sunni majority, Hangu (Kohat District) stretches far north and northeast into the Orakzai District. Another Shia enclave can be found halfway between Hangu and Kohat in the Usterzai villages of Bala and Payan. Both communities are free to block roads to each other whenever they choose. Since 1980s, different pockets have come with exclusive sectarian identities. For example, Sunnis from Parachinar (mostly Bangash) were

³⁹ These operations were: Operation Rah-e-Nijat or Path to Salvation (2009), Operation Khwakh Ba De Sham (March 2010 - January 2011), Operation Koh-e-Sufed or White Mountain (4 July 4 – 18 August 2011).

pushed out in different phases. The border areas of Teri Mangal, west of Parachinar, are inhabited by Sunni Mengal and Maqbal Tribes. From Parachinar, till Sadda, which is about 36 kms away, the northern side of the road has overwhelmingly Shia population including in the Shalozan area while on the southern side, Boshera and Balashkel villages are predominantly Sunni. Many of them are displaced Sunnis from Parachinar, now settled in Sadda and Bagan areas.⁴⁰ Lower Kurram has minority Shia population. The demography has changed vastly in favour of Sunnis since the 1980s, when there was massive refugee influx into the region following the Soviet invasion of December 1979.

Such sectarian demography, together with the history of periodic violent interaction between Sunnis and Shias has had an impact on the way administrative arrangements have been worked out in the district over the years. In fact, the district is virtually run as two separate units, one encompassing Upper Kurram and the other combining both Lower and Central Kurram. Both these units have separate departmental offices— District Education Office (DEO) and District Health Offices (DHO), District accounts Office (DAO), National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) office, and Communications & Works (C&W) offices— so that people from these two separate areas do not have to go to areas dominated by rival sectarian population. Such is the sectarian animus that it is difficult for a candidate from Lower and Central Kurram to move to Upper Kurram, as much as it is difficult for any candidate from Upper Kurram to go to Lower Kurram for electoral campaigning. In such a case, having one candidate for the entire NA-37 and making him cater to the needs of both sects has its own problems.

⁴⁰ These displaced Sunnis nurture a sense of revenge vis-à-vis the Shias of Parachinar. They dominate the road between Thall and Parachinar around Sadda and Bagan area. Their likely collusion with TTP and IS-K (in Central Kurram), makes the Shia road travel from Parachinar to Bagan dangerous.

ADMINISTRATION AND LAND SETTLEMENT

The British started land settlement in 1893-94, but admittedly a “brief and incomplete record of land rights was prepared, [while] some of the complicated tenures were left undecided”.⁴¹ During the British period, Kurram was an agency in the unsettled tribal areas and was divided into two administrative units, i.e., Upper and Lower Kurram. Today, there are three Tehsils with Central Kurram emerging as yet another unit. Land disputes in the districts emerge from undecided land rights and have led to conflict episodically ever since. Even after a century, the situation is not vastly different; the population has grown manifold and pressure on land has vastly increased leading to frequent inter-group clashes on issues relating to land rights. As has been outlined above, in 1901, the British had the first land settlement done and it was updated in 1943-1944. However, these settlements did not quite resolve all the land disputes, and these issues prolong to this day. The Sunnis who are in majority in the district alleged that they were given ownership over less land compared to the Shias, who were in minority. Apart from this there were some lands, which were not allocated to either of the groups.

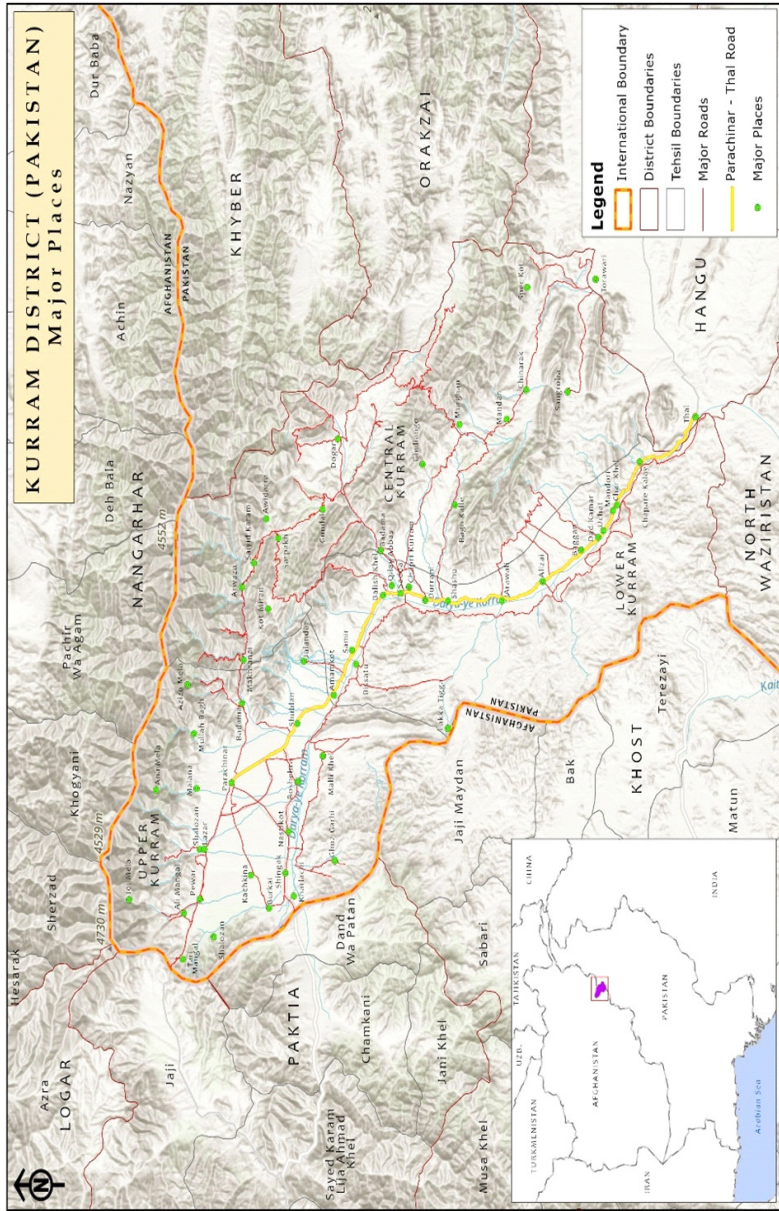
Chronic Land Disputes

The areas where the land disputes have persisted are (See Map 3 and Map 4): Tor Ghar (Black Mountain), Gurgutan Mountain, Kutri, Syed Mehmood Forest, Mitta Khan Hill, Shamilat adjacent to Sunni village Boshera in Upper Kurram, Sateen Shamilat, Shorko Kass, Parachinar Eidgah, Mauza Alizai, Sehra (Parachinar plateau - about 70,000 acres), Gavi to Speen Thai (on the right bank of the Kurram River) and Shamilat in Maidan-Shoorki, Shna Darga.⁴²

⁴¹ *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol 16, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908, p.59

⁴² For a detailed account of the disputes please see the Annex II: Tribal land disputes in Kurram agency at <https://farhattaj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Annex.briefing-paper-kurram-annexes.pdf> which is part of the Briefing Paper, “Can Shi’a and Sunni overcome the sectarian divide? Displacement and negotiations in Kurram, 2007-2011”, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, May 2011, available at <https://farhattaj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/briefing-paper-kurram.pdf> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Map 3



© GIS Section, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses. Map not to scale.

In Kurram, there are disputes around the existing “*Shamilat*”, which typically refers to land that belongs to the village or tribal collective rather than individual owners. It is not privately held but is instead reserved for communal use, such as grazing cattle, gathering wood, or other shared activities essential to rural life. The term is derived from the Urdu and Persian word “*shāmil*” (meaning “included” or “shared”), reflecting its collective ownership. In Pashto, the language spoken by 99.19% of Kurram’s population (2023 census), it may be adapted phonetically as “*Shamilat*” or a close variant, though the concept remains consistent with its legal and cultural definition across Pakistan. The *Shamilat* land is jointly held by the proprietary body of the village or tribe (e.g., “*Ala Malik*,” or original owners, as noted in Pakistani land revenue terminology). It serves common purposes like grazing, forestry, or water access, reflecting the pastoral and agrarian economy of Kurram. For example, disputes often arise when one group encroaches on “*Shamilat*” for construction or cultivation, as seen in the 2020 Balishkhel clash and other such recurring issues in Parachamkani and Boshera among others, in recent history. In Punjab, Pakistan, under laws like the Punjab Land Dispositions (Saving of *Shamilat*) Ordinance, 1959, “*Shamilat Deh*” is defined as land recorded in the Record of Rights for common use, distinct from private holdings. While Kurram’s tribal history differs from Punjab’s settled agrarian system, the core idea—land for communal benefit—remains the same. In Kurram, its management is often governed by tribal customs (e.g., *jirgas*) rather than formal deeds, a legacy of its former FATA status.

In 2021, the KP government established a Land Commission tasked with resolving disputes related to unmeasured common land known as *Shamilat* in the villages of Gido (Sunni dominant), Pekar (Shia dominant), Boshera, Dandar, and Ghoz Gari (Sunni dominant), Kunj Alizai (Shia dominant) located in Upper Kurram. Additionally, the areas earmarked for settlement in Lower Kurram comprise Balishkhel, Shurko, and Satta *Shamilat*. By December 2024, a total of 500,000 kanals across 33 mouzas had been reportedly settled and digitized,

with the resulting report submitted to the provincial government for further action.⁴³

The State of Pakistan has not been sincere about settling the land disputes even if it has regarded it as the root cause (and not trigger) of the ongoing conflict in Kurram. This reflects badly on the administration because the deep-seated sectarian feelings in the district, which appears to be prevalent there for centuries, have been easily aroused by incidents the point to unresolved ownership issues pertaining to land in many areas where the people belonging to the two sects live in close proximity. These land disputes have been aggravated by the pre-existing sectarian division that has deepened with the hardening of Sunni Islamist sentiments in the entire Pakistan-Afghanistan region in general and in Kurram in particular. In the next chapters, this issue will be explored in more detail.

⁴³ Dr Syed Akhtar Ali Shah, “What disturbs the peace in Kurram?”, *The Tribune*, 05 January 2025. Available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2520101/what-disturbs-the-peace-in-kurram> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

HISTORY OF SECTARIAN CONFRONTATION IN KURRAM

The sectarian confrontation between Sunnis and Shias of Kurram goes back to the time of Turi settlement in Kurram in the late 17th and early 18th century. The Turi Shias dislodged the Sunni Bangash who were earlier a dominant force in the area which persists in collective memories on either side giving rise to inter-sectarian differences that have taken violent form from time to time. However, since 1980s, in the wake of mass population movements in the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier regions, the sectarian demography changed in Kurram challenging Turi-Shia dominance in the region. As discussed above, the Turi Shias enjoyed the patronage of the colonial rulers in return for their loyalty to the British Raj and the land records finalised during the period reflected the prevailing dominance of the Turis over the land resources. With the influx of Sunni Afghan refugees, who were provided land for setting up camps all over the tribal agencies including in Kurram, the relatively under-privileged majority Sunni population in Lower and Central Kurram became increasingly assertive, and saw in the evolving strategic environment favouring jihadi militancy, an opportunity to enhance their material fortune by holding on to the land offered to them on temporary basis to set up camps for the refugees. On the other hand, sensing collusion of the state in the Sunni assertion, the Turis reacted to it violently by taking their anger out by pushing out Sunni population in Shia majority areas. Since 1980s, sectarian clashes have become more frequent day by day. In the following sections, an attempt has been made to provide an analytical perspective on the sectarian violence in Kurram through study of various incidents in a chronological manner.

THE SECTARIAN SITUATION

The first recorded sectarian clashes occurred in Kurram in 1938 as a reaction to clashes in Lucknow in undivided India. The Turi Shias of Kurram wanted to join their Shia brethren in their fight against the Sunnis in Lucknow, but the Sunnis of Lower Kurram, through which the route passed, would not allow them to move through their area, which led to violent clashes. In 1961, sectarian clashes took place at Sadda when Bangash Shias took out a procession on the occasion of Muharram, which was possibly the first of its kind in the region to publicly demonstrate their faith. The Sunnis from Sadda attacked the Shia Muharram procession. As the news of the attack spread, Shias from Parachinar, 36 kilometres away, rushed to Sadda to come to the rescue of their Shia brethren and the fighting started. The local Kurram Militia reportedly fired directly at the crowd and in the clashes 87 people lost their lives. After this incident, the Shias were temporarily forced to leave Sadda but returned later to recover their properties after a jirga agreement between the parties was reached. In the very same year, the Sunni Central mosque in Parachinar was reconstructed with a 150-foot-high hollow minaret, which raised the suspicion of the Shias, who thought that the mosque was being fortified keeping in mind future conflict with the Shias. In fact, this central mosque has been at the heart of many conflicts in Parachinar with Shias alleging that Taliban and Al Qaeda elements have used its basement as a place of refuge.

In 1971, a conflict erupted when the Sunnis of Parachinar initiated the building of the minaret at the local Jama Masjid, which prompted objections from the Shia community. They argued that the minaret could be used strategically during potential sectarian confrontations. This dispute escalated sectarian tensions, ultimately leading to widespread Sunni-Shia violence that resulted in numerous casualties and injuries on both sides. In response, a local jirga intervened and facilitated a ceasefire between the conflicting parties. Despite the tensions, the construction of the minaret continued and was completed during this period. In 1973, an attack on the Imam of a Sunni mosque had sparked sectarian clashes. With the coming of Zia-ul-Haq, who launched his Islamisation efforts to legitimise his rule, public display of belief was actively encouraged, and public processions were encouraged. Public gatherings like Eid celebrations, Muharram

processions, and Milad-un-Nabi (Prophet Muhammad's birthday) were not only allowed but supported as expressions of state-sanctioned piety. Milad-un-Nabi became a national holiday in 1977, with state-sponsored processions and rallies. Sunnis of Kurram started taking out processions on the occasion of Milad-un-Nabi, while Shias were not to be left behind in the act, which was not the practice earlier for both communities. Sunni celebrations in mixed areas of Kurram were private until the Zia administration provided official endorsement to public gatherings. It is said that local leaders in Kurram requested to be exempted from the celebrations, but their requests were rejected by the local Political Agent's office. In Parachinar, Kurram, to avert sectarian encounters, a compromise was reached between the Sunnis and Shias and religious processions were limited to: (i) Muharram (for Shias), (ii) Chehlum⁴⁴ (for Shias) (iii) Yumul Quds (for Shias, which was initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini to express solidarity with Palestinians) and (iv) 12th Rabiul Awal or Milad-un-Nabi (for Sunnis).

Iranian Revolution and Afghan Jihad deepen sectarian animus

The success of Iranian revolution in February 1979 boosted the morale of the Shias of Kurram while the Afghan Jihad that started in December 1979, sponsored by the Saudis and the Americans, offered moral and material support to the largely Deobandi Sunni Afghan Mujahideen, who came under the influence of more conservative Wahabis over the next decade, sharpening the sectarian differences in the entire Af-Pak region, especially so in Kurram. Notably, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which resulted in the ousting of the Shah and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This rivalry has significantly influenced the Sunni-Shia conflict across Muslim nations, exacerbating pre-existing sectarian tensions and contributing to societal instability in various countries.

⁴⁴ *Cheblum*, also known as *Arbaeen* or *Cheblum-e-Imam Hussain*, is observed 40 days after Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE.

In the 1980s, Kurram became a launching pad for the mujahideen into Afghanistan and it provided the route for them to escape the attack of Soviet-Afghan forces into Pakistan. Entry of Sunni Afghan mujahideen into Kurram played its role in adding to numbers of the Sunni population and accentuating the Sunni-Shia divide in the terrain. In 1981, a Shia in Sadda, headquarters of the Lower Kurram tehsil, named Haji Hussain Ghulam Abbas started constructing an Imambargah with donations from local Shias and Sunnis, on a land which rightfully belonged to him. As it is, 75 per cent of the land in Sadda belonged to the Shias as per government records. However, Sunnis from Orakzai district bordering Kurram raised a lashkar from Central Kurram tehsil to demolish the structure. At this juncture, Afghan Shias who had been allowed to stay in camps set up by the government in Sadda jumped into action in support of the Orakzai Sunnis. In the ensuing violence, Shias were targeted and killed. The violence continued as the military government of Zia-ul-Haq remained a mute spectator to the Shia carnage in Sadda. In 1982, sectarian violence assumed dangerous shape displacing over some 60 Shia families to Parachinar. By then Sadda had become a Sunni majority town with Shias owning vast majority of the land. In 1983, Sunni lashkars attacked Haji Hussain Ghulam Abbas and his family members and they had all sought shelter in the house of a local Sunni. The locals sought the help of the local administration which refused to step in. Haji and 14 members of his family were murdered in cold blood. Rest of the Shia fled Sadda and sought refuge in Upper Kurram. The entire town was cleansed of Shias.

Later, a tribal council agreed in 1990 to facilitate the return of the displaced Shias from Sadda; however, the decision was never implemented. The Shias of Sadda collectively resolved not to sell their land to the Sunnis to safeguard their ownership and prevent Sunnis from asserting claims over their territory. In 1984-1985, the Shias established the Alamdar Federation, and the Sunnis established the Al-Badr Federation, both of which promoted sectarian division. Later, this division was exploited by local branches of Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba and Shia Sipah-e-Mohammad— declared opponents of each other— to polarise the sectarian environment further, in Kurram. It is also true that sectarian organisations like Anjuman-e-Hussainia of the Shias and Anjuman-e-Farooqia of the Sunnis have tried to bring about inter-sectarian harmony. However, the sectarian situation was exacerbated

by the way jihad was forged into the anti-Soviet efforts in the 1980s and the predominance of Sunni jihadi organisations in the Afghan theatre.

In 1986, clashes between the Shia population and Afghan Mujahideen fighters began when the former barred the latter from passing through their land to enter Afghanistan. This led to hundreds of deaths on both sides and forced further displacement of Shia families from Sadda to Parachinar. In 1986, the local political agent (PA), Masud-ur-Rahman, a Sunni, appointed by the military government in Islamabad, even refused to stop the massacre of Shias and convene a Shia-Sunni jirga to bring peace to Sadda. Under his watch, the Imambargah raised by the Haji, who was killed by then, was demolished in Sadda.

During the late 1980s, Boshetra and Mata Sangar emerged as areas where Haqqani Network and Al Qaeda strengthened their alliances with local Sunni population. A camp for Afghan refugees was established in Margai China in Balishkhel, a Shia-majority neighbourhood in Lower Kurram, in the 1980s. These are areas where Sunnis are locally surrounded by the Shias. Many Afghan refugees—all Sunni, from Afghan provinces of Logar, Paktika and Khost—settled on communal land (*Shamilat land*) owned by the Shias in many areas of the district (both in Upper, Central and Lower Kurram) and began cultivating their land as *Hamsayas* [peasants].⁴⁵ This has emerged as a fault-line for conflict as in many cases, the Sunnis have claimed these lands leading to intractable disputes. (The inter-sectarian situation would worsen further in the wake of the refugees pouring into Kurram following the US attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, which will be dealt with later.)

On 24 July 1987, an individual from the predominantly Sunni village of Boshera, located near Parachinar, was abducted. The abductor, who identified himself as a Shia, insisted that he would release his captive only if his missing brother (suspected to be abducted by the Sunnis) was returned to him. Efforts by the elders from both sects to

⁴⁵ Zia Ur Rehman, “The Roots Of Kurram’s Cycles Of Bloodshed”, *Dawn*, 1 December 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875953> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

mediate the situation proved unsuccessful. While attempts to resolve the matter were ongoing, an armed confrontation erupted between the Sunni and Shia communities from neighbouring villages. These clashes were exacerbated by the 'Turis' refusal to permit the Afghan Mujahideen passage into Afghanistan through Upper Kurram. The conflict escalated to the use of heavy weaponry, resulting in significant casualties and property damage, including the destruction of numerous homes. The situation became so critical that military intervention was necessary to restore order, leading to the imposition of a curfew that lasted several days. This conflict resulted in substantial losses for both sectarian groups.

Shias mainstreamed into sectarian politics in Pakistan

As far as the Shias of Kurram were concerned, they had limited involvement in broader Shia politics in Pakistan. However, in the 1980s, under the leadership of Arif Al-Hussaini (25 November 1946 – 5 August 1988)— who hailed from Pewar village in Kurram and was assassinated in Peshawar by Sunni militants belonging to Sipah-e-Sahaba— they emerged as active participants in the sectarian politics of Pakistan, staying engaged through political platforms such as the Imamia Students Organisation (ISO), across the country. Arif al-Hussaini was a vocal critic of Gen. Zia-ul- Haq, the military dictator, who was seen by Shias as a promoter of Sunni supremacy in Pakistan. Interestingly, 12 days later, Zia died in a mysterious plane crash and speculation were rife that the political instability following Al-Hussaini's death might have led to or been part of a broader political upheaval, potentially affecting security measures around Zia. There are unsubstantiated conspiracy theories suggesting that Zia's death was retribution for his policies or actions against Shia leaders like Al-Hussaini, whose efforts to connect local struggles with broader Islamic movements, particularly the Iranian Revolution, had a lasting impact on Shia political consciousness in Pakistan in general and among the Shias of Kurram in particular.

Al-Hussaini was instrumental in founding the 'Shaheed Foundation' to support the families of martyrs, highlighting his commitment to community welfare and the Alamdar Foundation, comprising local youths, to protect their community, showcasing his direct involvement in safeguarding Shia interests. Among these, the latter organized local youth to defend their neighbourhoods against external threats, which became especially crucial during periods of sectarian violence. This

group was vital in safeguarding Shia villages and routes during the frequent clashes. Apart from this, it was involved in community welfare, including education and support for the families affected by violence. Thus, a sense of Shia solidarity came up in Kurram during this period, which was primarily defensive in character but instilled a sense of militancy among the local Shia population that aggravated the inter-sectarian relationship in Kurram as a whole.

The 1990s

The subsequent violent clash between Shia and Sunni communities in Kurram occurred in 1996, resulting in the deaths of over 200 individuals. The underlying issue stemmed from an incident at Government High School in Parachinar, where some students wrote some anti-Shia remarks on the classroom blackboard. Following a backlash from Shia students, the matter was escalated to the headmaster, who subsequently informed the Assistant Political Agent (APA) of Parachinar. Initially, the APA recommended the closure of the school but later suggested that it remain operational. On 10 September 1996, agitated students from both sects engaged in a confrontation, despite the headmaster's efforts to de-escalate the situation. Unidentified individuals opened fire at the school, triggering widespread sectarian violence across the Kurram district, resulting in significant human and material losses for both factions. Attempts by the jirga to broker a peace agreement ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The circumstances in Kurram improved somewhat with a reduction in sectarian conflicts over the subsequent decade. However, the situation deteriorated once more following the United States' military intervention in Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York (popularly referred to as 9/11). As stealth bombers began to target Al Qaeda camps and Taliban forces, Kurram once again became a transit route for militants fleeing into Pakistan across the Durand Line. Numerous Taliban fighters, including members of the Haqqani network, sought refuge in the same predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods in Kurram that had previously sheltered them during the armed resistance of the 1980s. Consequently, the sectarian tensions in the region reverted to their previous state of discord. The Turi Shia community expressed dissatisfaction with the presence of Sunni Taliban militants in the district, who were once again meddling in inter-sectarian matters.

9/11, War on Terror and the Aftermath: 17 full-blooded operations going nowhere

Initially, after 9/11, the government of Pakistan, smarting under pressure from the US to join the War on Terror against the Taliban, overlooked the steady stream of refugees from Afghanistan on the one hand, and the movement of Islamist fighters from Pakistan to join the Taliban against the US, on the other. Among various routes, the passage through Kurram was used often for such to-and-fro movement. Moreover, the refugees from Afghanistan were settled in camps in all the tribal agencies including in Kurram. According to data provided in an empirical study brought out in 2004, by Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, out of 96 refugee camps set up in the tribal agencies, 34 were set up in Kurram which accounted for 50,785 families with a refugee population of 347,746 or 40 per cent of the total refugee population in the seven agencies.⁴⁶ This figure suggests that Kurram might have been used as the most favoured place for hosting the refugee population fleeing Afghanistan after the US attack in October 2001.

Table 2: Refugee Camps in Tribal Agencies 2004

Agency	Camps	Total Pop.	Male	Female	Children	Families
Bajaur:	25	198612	47096	58544	92972	28575
Kurram:	34	347746	97000	99690	151056	50785
Malakand:	3	55197	7646	14436	33115	7942
Mohmand:	2	15589	3354	4127	8108	2588
N. Waziristan:	24	183531	48257	43997	91277	26130
Orakzai:	2	13418	2693	4943	5782	1983
S. Waziristan:	6	57884	11895	14220	31769	9170
Total:	96	871977	217941	239957	414079	127146
Total NWFP:	251	2242127	535917	585465	1120745	360928

Source: Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat, *From Mubajir to Mujahid: Politics of War through Aid*, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, 2004, p. 27.

⁴⁶ See Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat, *From Mubajir to Mujahid: Politics of War through Aid*, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, 2004, p. 27.

If the population of Kurram was 448,310 as per the 1998 census and the Shias constituted about 40 per cent of the population of Kurram, by 2004, the refugee population of 347,746 changed the sectarian demography of Kurram in a manner that put the Turi Shias in a clear numerical disadvantage. Going by the assertive behaviour of the Sunnis in Kurram in the aftermath, it is logical to conclude that the demographic change that came about in the early 2000s must have contributed to worsening of inter-sectarian relations in the tribal agency that was later designated as a district in 2018.

By 2005, especially after attacks on the then military dictator, Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), there was a realisation that the tribal borderlands (including Kurram) were posing a critical security challenge for Pakistan. Hence, in 2005 Pakistan started expelling Afghan refugees. While there are differing accounts of Pakistan's sincerity in conducting these operations and the American Generals were particularly caustic in their remarks about it⁴⁷, Pakistan did maintain a façade of operations in the tribal agencies starting with *Al-Mizān* (Op. Justice) during 2002-2006 in North Waziristan and now continuing with Operation *Azm-e-*

⁴⁷ Admiral Mike Mullen (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) accused the Haqqani Network of being a “veritable arm” of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Gen David Petraeus, during his tenure as CIA Director, often alluded to the complexities of US-Pakistan relations in the context of terrorism and in private discussions and assessments, expressed his concerns about “double game” being played by Pakistan. In 2010, while he was the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, he described the Pakistani mindset regarding terrorism as “schizophrenic” in the context of Pakistan’s apparent dual strategy where they were seen to be fighting some terrorist groups while allegedly supporting or tolerating others, notably the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. General James Mattis, as commander of US Central Command, was quoted saying in congressional testimony, “We have to recognize that Pakistan has been playing this dual role. They’ve provided us with some very good intelligence that’s helped us in some areas, but they’ve also harbored terrorists in others.” In 2017, General John Nicholson, as commander of US forces in Afghanistan, said, “We believe that Pakistan has the ability to do more to prevent the Taliban from using their territory”. General Austin Scott Miller, who succeeded Nicholson, said in 2020, that the Taliban had “safe havens” in Pakistan.

Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) since 2024, with 15 other operations in between, which have not managed to root out terror/militancy in the tribal terrain. Out of these 17 operations, there were two operations during 2009-2011, which were particularly focussed on Kurram— Operation Khwakh Ba De Sham (I will teach you a lesson) which extended from September 2009 till 21 January 2011, and Operation Koh-e-Sufed that lasted from 4 July 2011 till 18 August 2011. These operations, half-hearted at best, might have succeeded in bringing temporary respite but failed to make their impact on a long-term basis.

By this time, sensing the growing involvement of refugees in incidents of violence at the local level, Pakistan started expelling Afghan refugees. The Sunnis of Kurram feared that this sudden policy shift could restore Shia dominance in the area. Taking advantage of the situation, the Shia groups also called for resettlement of families displaced from Sadda during the 1982 violence, which reinforced Sunni sense of fear, reigniting old grievances. During this time, Sunni militants from Pakistan, buffeted by the presence of Jihadi and pro-Taliban resident groups, started announcing their presence. Needless to say, in the post-9/11 phase, the military of Pakistan under Musharraf's leadership had banned Jihadi groups from Punjab operating in Kashmir and many of these elements had migrated to the tribal areas and settled down there. Together with the Afghan Taliban elements these groups formed a formidable force often coordinating with each other and taking on the Pakistani military. A local Taliban faction in Kurram led by Fazal Saeed, a resident of Uchat Killay village, became active in the region during this period. The group later called itself Tehrik-e-Taliban Islam. In 2006, when the Afghan refugee camp was vacated from Margai China and Balishkhel, the Parachamkani Sunni tribe in the nearby area tried to occupy the land. Shia tribes resisted it because they claimed that they had allowed the Afghan refugees to camp in that common land over which they had their control. The state did nothing to settle the issue. In Balishkhel, this issue has sparked sectarian clashes ever since.

Sectarian Clashes in Kurram since 2007

As the War on Terror gathered momentum across the Durand Line in Afghanistan, there was a spontaneous rise of sentiments favouring Taliban in the tribal areas (former Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA) which changed the power dynamic in the entire region

including in Kurram. In fact, a loose group of Pakistani pro-Taliban elements in the tribal areas, called Pakistani Taliban by the media and experts, established itself in the Sunni majority Lower Kurram and obstructed movement of Turi Shias through this terrain controlled by it. The earlier signs of Pakistani Taliban asserting itself in this space were quite visible since 2005-2006. By 2007, the Pakistani Taliban had started asserting themselves in Kunar in reaction to the resistance shown by the Turis to movement of the Taliban through their territory.

On 31 March 2007, the Sunnis took out a procession on the occasion of Milad-un-Nabi and Shias alleged that anti-Shia slogans were raised. It was then the turn of the Shia to take out their procession on 6 April 2007, celebrating Milad-un-Nabi in Parachinar city, which, the Sunnis alleged, was in contravention of the agreement in the 1970s, whereby the Shias were not permitted to bring out Milad-un-Nabi processions. An unidentified gunman fired at the procession leading to exchange of fire from both sides leaving many people killed and injured. The situation escalated and both the groups, without going for any investigation, engaged in indiscriminate firing, using heavy weapons such as mortars, launchers and machineguns. A day later, on 7 April 2007, inhabitants of predominantly Shia village, Balishkhel, and the Sunni dominant Sadda (3 kms apart) engaged in clashes at a large-scale, which engulfed whole of Kurram, resulting in loss of precious lives on both sides. As per a military official posted in Kurram those days (and served as major general)—who has written extensively in the media about his experiences in Kurram⁴⁸—both sides employed a variety of weapons, such as land mines, mortars (primarily the lethal 82 mm), 12.7 mm Dashaka heavy machine guns, ROB 107 rockets, RPG-7 rockets with their high explosive cone perforated and filled with gasoline to make them incendiary on impact, and more. The majority of these weapons were either rented from the weapon merchants in the former tribal belt or were a part of the *qaumi asliba*,

⁴⁸ Inam Ul Haque, “Kurram- burying the undying demons”, *The Express Tribune*, 28 November 2024 at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2512326/kurram-burying-the-undying-demons> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

or tribal arsenal. For ‘deterrence’, the State’s only superior assets were artillery and combat aviation. The weapon traffickers from Afghanistan supplied the munitions to both sides, but at inflated prices. Religious organizations and their international supporters, expatriate residents in the Gulf states, and “levy” of local donations have all contributed to and continue to sustain the recurring sectarian conflicts. The rioters on both sides were not only heavily armed and funded; they also used communication devices and occasionally obstruct military communications. Both sides, in these sectarian battles of hatred and ethnic cleansing, have access to a large number of former military and Civil Armed Forces (CAF) veterans who can plan, advise, and carry out military-style operations currently covered by drones. The clashes continued for next six days and finally the paramilitary forces and army were called upon to control the situation. The curfew was imposed which lasted for many days. On 2 May 2007, an agreement was concluded between the parties for a ceasefire.

This ceasefire was, quite expectedly, short-lived. Following a few months of relative calm, hostilities resumed in November 2007. In early November 2007, Syed Amjid Hussain, a young Shia policeman serving in Hangu was kidnapped and his dead body was found days later in Thall on 13 November. Following this the sectarian situation became very tense in the entire district with violence escalating beyond previous levels and spreading to other areas in the district. On 15 November 2007 in Parachinar, an unidentified assailant fred upon Sunni worshippers in the Central Mosque killing two and later another assailant targeted Sunni shopkeepers in Parachinar during the night, resulting in numerous casualties. The Sunni community suspected that Shia individuals were responsible for the attack and the following day, on 16 November, as worshippers exited their places of worship—specifically the Imam Bargarh and mosque— an unknown individual launched a hand grenade in Parachinar city, causing further fatalities and injuries, which reignited sectarian violence throughout the agency, engulfing various parts of Kurram. Both communities retaliated, leading to a cycle of revenge attacks, which included ambushes, bombings, and targeted killings, which have historically been characteristics of sectarian violence in the region. The use of heavy weaponry like rockets was noted, which exacerbated the situation, leading to more casualties and destruction.

The escalation was fuelled by long-standing tribal and sectarian rivalries, competition for land and resources, and the influence of external actors exploiting these divisions. The violence was part of broader sectarian strife in Pakistan, where Kurram has been particularly prone due to its unique demographic composition, with a significant Shia population in a predominantly Sunni country. This pattern of violence highlighted the complex interplay of tribal, sectarian, and political dynamics in Kurram, often exacerbated by historical grievances and the presence of militant groups.⁴⁹ Finally, a local jirga managed to negotiate a ceasefire between the conflicting sectarian factions. Even then, the primary Thall-Parachinar Road remained closed for a duration of four years, from 2007 to 2011.

The Enigma of TTP's Arrival

The primary catalyst for the heightened activity of the Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban in Kurram was the longstanding resistance of the Turi Shia tribes to the Taliban's incursion and presence in their region. When the Taliban sought to enter Kurram in 2007, they faced opposition from the Shia tribes. In retaliation, the Taliban enlisted local Sunni tribesmen, capitalized on sectarian rifts, and exacerbated existing disputes over land and resources, effectively turning the local Sunnis against the Shias. Over the next four years, more than 60 villages were set ablaze, resulting in the displacement of over 10,400 families.

Amid all this, the Pakistani Taliban groups came together to form Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on 14 December 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. The Sunni TTP militants, marked by their sectarian anti-Shia orientation, restricted the movement of vehicles from Turi Shia areas through regions under their control, effectively isolating Upper Kurram from the remainder of Kurram district and other districts within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistan. The

⁴⁹ Watch “*Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ke sautelay bachbe*”, TV show anchored by Absar Alam on 1 December 2024, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5XkhppFD68> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

government responded by organising escorted convoys to travel and transport essential goods to Shias in Upper Kurram, which was too little too late. Attacks on convoys became a routine affair making it difficult for the Shias in Upper Kurram to access essential items like food and medicine. As far as the sectarian situation in Kurram is concerned, immediately after the formation of TTP, a contingent of Sunni militants were sent from Waziristan, to fight with the Sunnis against the Shias in Kurram. TTP named Faqir Alam Mehsud as the leader of the Mehsud Taliban in Kurram in April 2008. According to Taliban fighters under his command, Faqir Alam, a Manzai tribesman who was about 25 years old at the time and known for his special savagery, personally decapitated at least 70 Shia from Kurram and a few Sunnis whom he suspected of working with the Shias. Faqir Alam led the Taliban in Kurram for a year before being fired due to allegations of mental instability made by a number of his former commanders, because he had spent a month in a Peshawar hospital.⁵⁰ There were also instances of Sunni Lashkar-e-Islam led by Mangal Bagh sending Sunni fighters to Kurram from Khyber to take revenge on the Shias of Kurram.⁵¹

Shias rise in Self-defence

In June 2008, Shias from Kurram staged a protest in Islamabad urging the federal government to come to their rescue in the face of recurrent attacks on them by the Sunni militants. There was no visible response from Islamabad. In July 2008, some Sunni militants escaped from Satta prison and targeted convoys of trucks carrying goods to Parachinar and beheaded many truck drivers. In August 2008, the local elders of the Turi tribe resolved that if the military was unwilling to confront the Taliban, it was imperative to form a tribal militia and directly assault the militant strongholds. The Turis engaged in a significant confrontation with the Taliban in the vicinity of Alizai.

⁵⁰ Mansur Khan Mahsud, "The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kurram", Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New America Foundation, April 2010, p.5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

They displayed remarkable bravery and managed to push back the Taliban in several regions, particularly in the Bugzai area, located across the Kurram River from Alizai. In retaliation, the Taliban prohibited the Turis from traversing through Sadda to reach Peshawar and other parts of Pakistan. This blockade resulted in substantial financial losses for the Turis, as their trucks were targeted by bombings and their drivers were executed. Following the capture of Bugzai by the Turis, the Taliban made two offers to ensure the safety of the route from Kurram to Peshawar, seeking permission for their militants to pass through Kurram *en route* to Afghanistan. This did not materialise.

By the close of 2008, the Shias in Upper Kurram were forced to travel through Afghanistan to approach Peshawar. This detour, via Paktia, Gardez, Kabul and Torkham, transformed a typical 250 km long five-hour journey (from Parachinar through Thall to Peshawar) into a gruelling 20-hour ordeal. By 2010, the Shia community constructed a 14-kilometre-long 'Defence Road', across Kurram river, on communal land, connecting Shia villages near Alizai and other areas in Lower Kurram to Parachinar bypassing the Sunni town of Sadda after three years of inconvenience caused to them by Sunni militants from Lower Kurram. This was called the Shurko road and Shia community volunteers manned checkpoints and also guarded the region's airport in Parachinar.

Islamabad and Muree Accords of 2008

The sectarian violence in September 2008 was particularly intense, part of a series of skirmishes that year. The culmination of these clashes led to a significant intervention by authorities, resulting in the "Islamabad Accord" signed on 26 September 2008. This accord was a ceasefire agreement aimed at stopping the violence that had spread across Kurram. It was brokered through negotiations involving tribal elders, government officials, and was intended to restore peace by:

- (i). Ceasing hostilities between the warring factions.
- (ii) Dismantling fortifications and bunkers built by the conflicting groups.
- (iii) Surrendering weapons to the government.

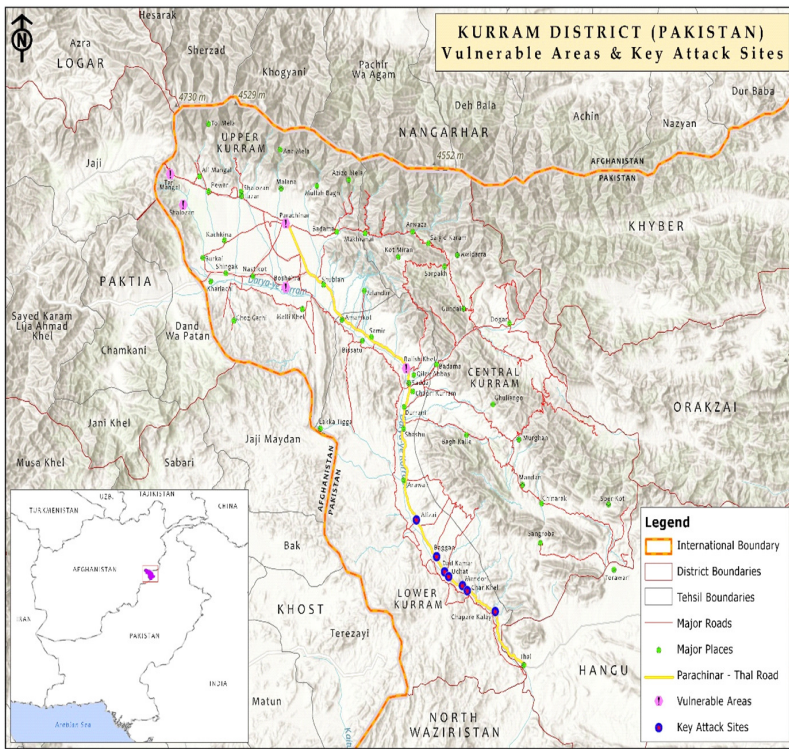
However, this accord could not stop the attack on Shia dominant village of Pekar by militants using heavy armaments few days later, on 1 October 2008. In retaliation, Shias attacked the Sunni dominant village of Mangalan with heavy weaponry. These attacks pushed the whole Kurram into sectarian clashes. Efforts to stop the conflict resulted in the Murree Agreement of 16 October 2008. The agreement was the culmination of a process of dialogue of reconciliation that involved multiple meetings facilitated by the Pakistani government and military to encourage peace, aiming to restore stability in the region. Permanent Peace Declaration: Both tribes signed a declaration for permanent peace. The Murree agreement imposed the following terms and condition on the warring tribes:

- (i) *Vacation of Bunkers*: The tribes would vacate occupied bunkers and return to their respective areas.
- (ii) *Penalties for Violation*: In case of any violation of the agreement, the offending tribe would be liable to pay a fine of sixty million rupees.
- (iii) *Reopening of Roads*: Roads that had been closed due to the conflict for the last one and a half year were to be reopened.
- (iv) *Control of Bunkers*: All bunkers were to be controlled by the Frontier Constabulary.
- (v) *Exchange of Bodies*: The agreement included provisions for the exchange of dead bodies between the tribes.
- (vi) *Establish peace committees* to monitor the situation
- (vii) *Provide compensation* for victims of violence.
- (viii) *Rebuilding* of damaged infrastructure and homes

These two accords are important reference points for subsequent agreements and were part of a series of peace efforts in Kurram, reflecting the cyclical nature of peace agreements and subsequent breakdowns in the region. The Murree agreement, in particular, aimed at not only ceasing hostilities but also ensuring that mechanisms were in place to maintain peace, with clear penalties for any breach, thus providing a structured approach towards conflict resolution in the region.

Despite the accord, peace remained elusive, with subsequent years witnessing further outbreaks of violence (See Map 4 for vulnerable areas and places of attack), showing that the underlying issues were far from resolved. In December 2008, an Imambargah (named *Saray-e-Alamadar-Karbala*) in Peshawar known as ‘Parachinar Imambargah’ was targeted killing about 34 and wounding over 20, mostly from Parachinar. In May 2009, it was interesting to see even NATO and Afghan forces trying to mediate Sunni-Shia differences in Kurram, after Sunni elders had complained that Turis of Kurram were blocking supply of food to Sunni refugees.⁵²

Map 4



⁵² Mentioned in Mariam Abou Zahab, “It’s just a Sunni-Shiite Thing: Sectarianism and Talibanism in the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) of Pakistan”, in Brigitte Marechal and Sami Zemni, eds, *The Dynamic of Sunni Shia Relationships, Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media*, Hurst, London, 2013, p. 186.

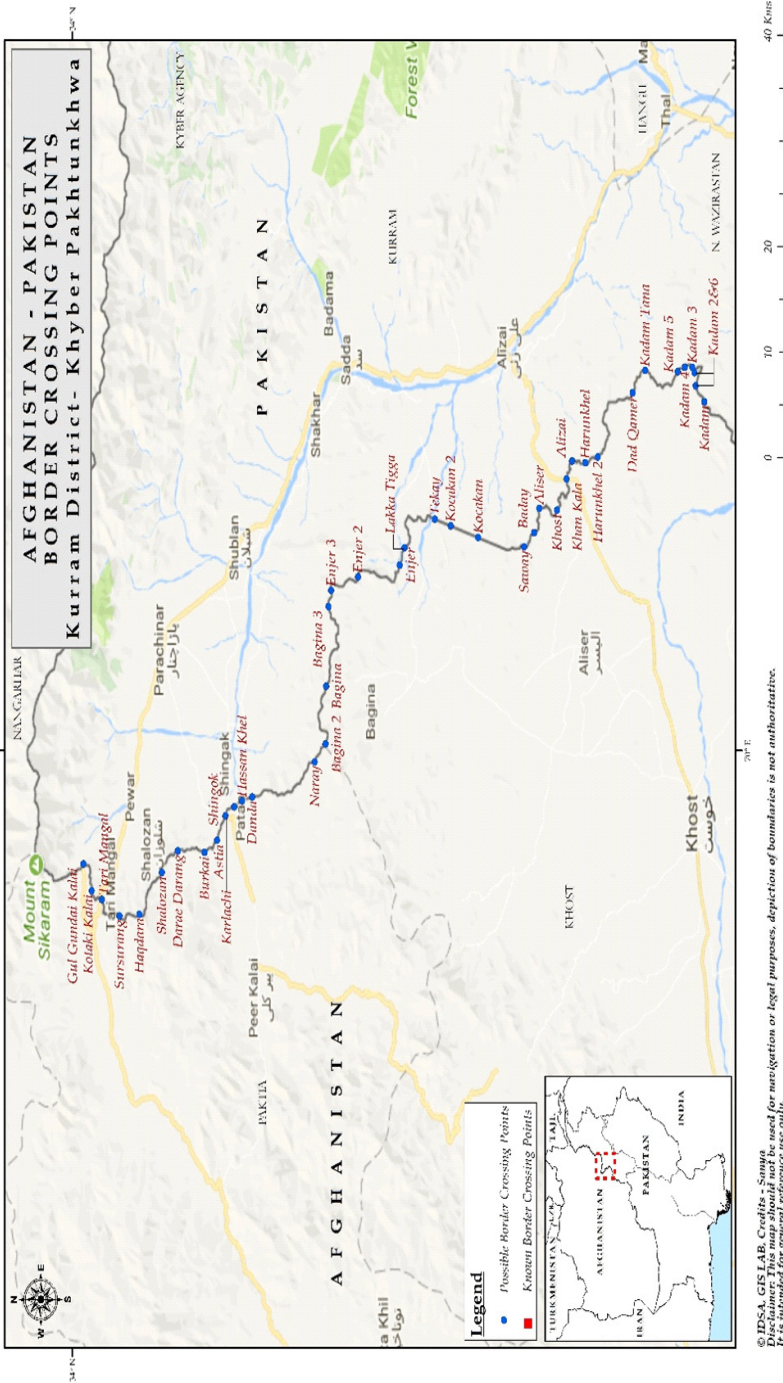
On 16 June 2009, the sectarian groups started fighting over the constructions of bunkers in Khar Kali and Balishkhel. The clashes spread to whole of the Agency and lasted for 12 days. On 29 June 2009, a jirga of elders concluded a ceasefire agreement between the parties. This did not deter Sunni militants from attacking a convoy of vehicles heading for Peshawar from Parachinar, escorted by security forces, near Char Khel village, 1 km from Mandori on 17 July 2010, barely a year later. The last two vehicles in the convoy were attacked with automatic weapons killing 18 people. Two months later, on 15 September 2010, the Shia dominant village of Khaiwas was allegedly attacked by Sunnis of Mangalan village. As a counterattack, Mangalan was attacked three days later on 18 September allegedly by the Shias. In these attacks, the Mangalan village was burnt to ashes and Khaiwas was recaptured by the assailants.

Military's role questionable

Under pressure from the US as well as because of their own frustrations with the Taliban, the military of Pakistan supported the Turi Shias in their efforts to restrict the movement of Taliban and TTP militants during 2006-2007. But by October 2010, the military changed its tack. The Turi Shias suspected that the government was pressurising them to meet Taliban demands to provide them overland access to Afghanistan through their land.⁵³ The military went on to shut down five border crossing points at Tarimangal (also written as Teri Mangal), Spina Shaga, Kharlachi, Burki and Shahidano Dand (See Map 5 for possible crossing points) with the pretext that it did not want Taliban miscreants to come from Afghanistan side and wreak havoc by joining the TTP and other Sunni militant groups in the ongoing sectarian conflict in Kurram.

⁵³ "Pakistan army blockades anti-Taliban tribe in Kurram", BBC Online, 26 October 2010, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11625216> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Map 5



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 Disclaimer: This map should not be used for navigation or legal purposes, depiction of boundaries is not authoritative.
 It is intended for general reference use only.

The blockade meant that the Turis could not access Peshawar through Afghanistan and were sandwiched by the military on one side and by the Taliban on the other. Needless to mention, the same Turis were encouraged to beat the militants out of the area during a major battle in September 2008. All this was going on when the military was conducting its Operation Khwakh Ba De Sham (I will teach you a lesson) in Orakzai and Kurram. The operation involved Pakistan Army troops, the FC, and local tribal militias, supported by helicopter gunships and fighter jets for air support. It was aimed at countering the growing influence of the TTP in Orakzai and Kurram, and ‘teaching a lesson’ to their leader, Hakimullah Mehsud. The military used a combination of ground offensives, air strikes, and cordon-and-search operations to dismantle TTP hideouts and disrupt their operations. By 1 June 2010, even if the Pakistan Army declared the operation successful, fighting continued in some areas and parts of Upper and Central Orakzai were still under TTP control. Similar operations in Kurram were reported to have cleared about 80 percent of the agency from TTP control by 6 July 2010, though skirmishes persisted. The military seemed to be in a hurry to declare victory and announce end of the operation.

Operation Koh-e-Sufed: Military chasing the TTP as Sectarian clashes continue

Against this backdrop, on 4 February 2011, another peace deal was struck through a jirga involving 220 members of both sects. There was a break in attacks for few months and during this time the military of Pakistan decided to go after the TTP militants and launched its Operation Koh-e-Sufed (White Mountain) and secure the Thall-Parachinar highway that was under TTP’s control since 2007. Starting on 4 July 2011, the operation lasted for about 45 days and focused on dismantling Taliban structures and their control over the area, clear out militant hideouts, secure the Thall-Parachinar road, and to restore government control over areas dominated by insurgents. According to military briefings, around 700 militants were killed, and 75 Pakistani security personnel lost their lives during the operation. The operation also led to the displacement of many civilians. While the operation achieved short-term tactical gains, its long-term success in bringing lasting peace to Kurram was questioned.

Hardly two months later, sporadic sectarian clashes took place in Pewar (Shia dominant village) and Pewar Tangi (Sunni dominant village) in October 2011 leading to yet another peace agreement between the parties in which Rs. 8 lakh was fixed as a fine for the violators. While the Thall-Parachinar route was partly opened in 2011 after the operation, it remained vulnerable to attacks by Sunni militants who continued to announce their presence in the terrain. The sectarian animus continued to simmer underneath and lying in wait for potential triggers to surface again in the terrain.

To shift to the geopolitical theatre in the neighbourhood, in March 2011, the Syrian Civil War started as part of the wider Arab Spring protests, with popular discontent against the Ba'athist regime led by President Bashar al-Assad. The government's violent crackdown on protesters escalated into a full-scale civil war involving multiple factions, including the Syrian government (supported by Russia and Iran), various rebel groups (supported by Western and regional powers), and extremist groups like the intensely sectarian Islamic State (IS) entered the scene from 2014 onwards.⁵⁴ There was a clear divide between Shia and Sunni groups in Syria with the Syrian government perceived as Shia and the opposition to it, as predominantly Sunni. As was evident later, the Syrian theatre of war acted like a magnet for Shias from many regions including Kurram. As the civil war in Syria intensified, many Kurram students receiving education in Iran gradually fell into the Iranian trap (of recruiting Shias for joining Syrian government's efforts). From here on, the tales of Kurram Shias participating in Syrian civil war came to the fore raising the sectarian temperature in the region.

On 17 February 2012, a suicide bomb attack in the market in Parachinar killed 26 and injured 50 others. Three more people died when security forces fired on crowds protesting the attack. On 10 September 2012, at least 12 people were killed and dozens injured after a car bomb exploded at a market in Parachinar. The car detonated as a security convoy passed by the market.

⁵⁴ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh announced its presence on 29 June 2014. On this date, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the formation of a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq

Few months later, next year, on 13 March 2013, a Sunni Punjabi soldier named Anwar Din accused of having an affair with a local Shia woman was stoned to death on the orders of tribal elders in Parachinar.⁵⁵ The girl was taken into custody and the boy was taken to the local graveyard where he was stoned to death and buried. About 30 shops were destroyed and 50 damaged in the busy commercial area in the clashes following this incident. On 27 July 2013, at least 57 people were killed and 154 injured after two bombs exploded close to two different mosques in Parachinar. One of the bombs was believed to have been planted on a motorcycle.

Military's Ambivalence?

Analysts in Pakistan had started blaming the all-powerful military for adopting an “ambivalent attitude” towards the Sunni militant groups and were keeping the options open for using them “as a second line of defence” to withstand international pressures on them to do more against the Taliban. In fact, these groups were allowed to form an alliance called, the ‘Defence of Pakistan Council’,⁵⁶ to put pressure on the Pakistani civilian rulers not to reopen the Nato supply routes through Pakistan and perhaps to show it to the US that there was lot of internal pressure on Pakistan not to take on Taliban. As far as their influence was concerned, there was a view that “the geographical spread of anti-Shia outfits [was] unprecedented in terms of both their striking capability and their ability to paralyse life” in areas they held their sway.⁵⁷ As Sunni militancy was gathering momentum, the state was not doing enough to reverse the tide. Such ‘look-away’ policy had a deleterious impact on Kurram.

⁵⁵ “Pakistan soldier ‘stoned to death for affair’ in Kurram”, *BBC News*, 13 March 2013 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21770539> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁵⁶ M Ilyas Khan, Formidable power of Pakistan’s anti-Shia militants, *BBC News*, 12 January 2013, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20983153> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁵⁷ M Ilyas Khan, “Formidable power of Pakistan’s anti-Shia militants”, *BBC Online*, 12 January 2013, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20983153> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

On 4 February 2014, Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba militants struck near Park Hotel in Peshawar, frequented by Shias from Kurram. On 28 November 2014, the funeral of murdered Shia cleric Allama Nawaz Irfani aroused sectarian passions leading to clashes in Parachinar. Allama Irfani hailing from Gilgit had lived in Parachinar for 14 years and was a noted member of the MWM. He was shot dead in Islamabad on 26 November 2014. His assassination was widely condemned, and a large number of people attended his funeral, which was held at the central Eidgah in Parachinar. The local tribes of Kurram Agency announced a 40-day mourning period over his killing.

Kurram seething under ISKP's influence

The formation of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—the IS's local chapter—on 26 January 2015 by disgruntled TTP members from Kurram and neighbouring Orakzai amplified violence against Shias in the region. ISKP with its intense anti-Shia outlook approached the sectarian issue in Kurram with vehemence. In subsequent months, as the threats from ISKP against the Shias grew in Kurram, the government's approach to them raised the eyebrows in Pakistan. While the government started imparting special arms training to male and female teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of the adjoining tribal region, the law-enforcement agencies in Kurram Agency asked people to surrender weapons adding to the sense of insecurity among the Shias.

On 21 January 2017, 25 persons were killed and more than 87 injured in a bomb explosion at the Sabzi Mandi (vegetable market) area, again in Parachinar town, in the morning when the market was crowded with retailers buying fruits and vegetables. The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi-al-Alami claimed that it had carried out the attack along with the TTP splinter, Shehryar Mehsud group. In a separate statement, the spokesman for TTP, Mohammad Khurasani, declared, that Saifullah alias Bilal “attacked the headquarters of enemies of Islam, who are involved in extrajudicial killing of our suppressed associates” and avenged murders of Malik Ishaq, Noor-ul Amin, Asif Chhoto and many other associates, who were killed in fake police encounters. Among these, Malik Ishaq, a prominent Pakistani militant and leader of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi

(LeJ)—implicated for, among others, plotting multiple bombings targeting the Hazara Shia community in Quetta in 2013, resulting in over 200 deaths, and Ashura bombings of 2011 in Afghanistan that resulted in at least 50 deaths—was killed in a police encounter on 29 July 2015, along with his two sons and his deputy. He had allegedly There were five suicide attacks in Parachinar during the year and residents, mainly Shias, demanded a military checkpoint to prevent outsiders from entering the town without a resident guaranteeing their identity. By this time, it was noticed that as Pakistan based Sunni sectarian militants were getting involved in anti-Shia attacks in Pakistan and outside, a sense of Shia solidarity and consciousness spread in different parts of Pakistan and outside.

The sectarian clashes continued during the year 2017. On 31 March 2017, a suicide bombing at an Imambargah in the Noor market area of Parachinar resulted in the deaths of at least 24 individuals and left 100 others injured. The explosion occurred as worshippers were assembling for Friday prayers near the women's entrance of the Imambargah. Security personnel were conducting checks on attendees when an unidentified individual parked a vehicle adjacent to the building, which subsequently detonated. The attack was claimed by the Jama'at-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a faction of the TTP. According to the group's statement to the media, this incident was part of TTP's "Operation Ghazi," specifically targeting the Shia community. Two months later, on 23 June 2017, a series of explosions in the Turi Bazaar area of Parachinar resulted in the deaths of at least 67 individuals and left over 200 others injured. The blasts occurred during a busy period as the market was filled with shoppers preparing for Iftar and Eid celebrations, Bombings on Jumu'atul-Widaa, the last Friday of the Muslim month of Ramadan before the Eid al-Fitr. The al-Alami (International) faction of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ) took responsibility for the attacks, stating that their intention was to target Shia Muslims and issued threats of further violence in response to "Pakistanis engaging in combat against Sunni militants in the ongoing civil war in Syria." Pakistan army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Parachinar in June and acknowledged that till that month 126 brave soldiers of FC, KP alone had laid down their lives and 387 were injured while performing security duties in Kurram Agency only and dismissed the incidents as 'sectarian' and assured that those

responsible for Parachinar incidents shall be brought to law and victims will be compensated without any discrimination. He said:

Army is closely following the sectarian and ethnic colour being deliberately given to recent spate of incidents in the country [read Kurram] by hostile intelligence agencies/sponsored anti-state elements. Having failed to divide us through terrorism, our enemy is now trying to target and fragment us along sectarian/ethnic lines which merit a unified national response”.⁵⁸

Shias in Syrian Theatre

In 2017, the story of Wajid Ali, a 16-year-old madrassah student from Parachinar, emerged following his death in Albu Kamal, Syria, while he was engaged in combat against the Islamic State. A Persian booklet entitled, *Hum Teray Abbas Ya Zainab*, which commemorated Wajid for his ultimate sacrifice, was translated into Urdu and distributed in Kurram. Wajid had abandoned his studies to enlist in the Zainabiyoun Brigade, a faction established to safeguard the shrine of Zainab bint Ali, the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad and sister of Hussein. This brigade was associated with Shia fighters who supported the former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Wajid’s mother endorsed his choice, perceiving it as a religious obligation. The Pakistani intelligence was aware of such cases and was trying to apprehend returnees from Syria.

In 2016, the government banned Parachinar-based little-known Shia outfit *Ansar-ul-Hussain* and in 2020, its offshoot, *Khatam-ul-Anbia*, under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, for recruiting Shia youth for the Syrian war.⁵⁹ In 2018, reports in the media suggested that there could have been about 1000 Shia youth from Pakistan, who might have joined the

⁵⁸ “Securing Pak-Afghan International Border”, *Hilal*, July 2017, at <https://hilal.gov.pk/view-article.php?i=557> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁵⁹ Zia-ur-Rehman, “Pakistan’s Shia mercenaries return from Syria, posing a security threat”, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/pakistan-s-shia-mercenaries-return-from-syria-posing-a-security-threat-44655> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

war in Syria some of whom were from Kurram. It was also reported that about 100 recruited from Pakistan died in Syria and received reparations from Iran.⁶⁰ *Zainabiyoun Brigade* also known as *Lima Zainabiyoun* was banned much later in April 2024. Unmistakably, the Shias of Kurram had developed an affinity for global Shiite movements and especially for Iran as was visible on the streets of Kurram, noticed by journalists later in 2024. They found Images of Allama Arif Hussain Al-Hussaini (assassinated in 1988) displayed prominently alongside portraits of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian Gen Qasem Soleimani (killed in US drone strike in 2020) and Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (killed in Israeli airstrike in 2023).⁶¹

Govt. seeking to address Land Disputes: Lack of Sincerity

It was recognised much earlier that disputes around land, water and forest often led to sectarian conflict in Kurram and some tentative steps were taken to address the issues. The land disputes were there in Pewar (Shia dominant) and Gido (Sunni dominant); Ghaz Garhi (Sunni) and Kunj Alizai (Shia) and in Boshera (Shia dominated) between the Shia Malikhel (also written as Maleekhel) tribe and the Sunni Madgi Kalay tribe (in Dandar Shera).⁶² There was water dispute between the Kharoti (Sunni) and Pewar (Shia) villages and dispute over forest land

⁶⁰ Secunder Kermani, “The story of Pakistan’s ‘disappeared’ Shias”, *BBC Online*, 31 May 2018, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44280552> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶¹ Zia Ur Rehman, “The Roots Of Kurram’s Cycles Of Bloodshed”, *Dawn*, 1 December 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875953> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶² Farmanullah, Shahbaz Khan, Syed Jafar, Muhammad Ayaz, Irfan Ullah, “Sunni-Shia Conflict In Kurram, Pakistan: Genesis, Factors And Remedies”, *Elementary Education Online*, 2021; Vol 20 (Issue 5): pp. 7629-7640, at <https://www.bibliomed.org/mnsfulltext/218/218-1622180930.pdf?1733856579> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

between Badama (Shia) and the Parachamkani (Sunni) villages.⁶³ In 2021, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government initiated the formation of a Land Commission aimed at resolving the unmeasured disputed lands (*Shamilat*) in regions such as Gido, Pekar, Boshera, Dandar, and Ghaz Gari within Upper Kurram. Additionally, the settlement efforts in Lower Kurram encompassed areas like Balishkhel, Shurko, and Sadda Shamilat. By 2024, it was reported that 500,000 kanals (equivalent to 62,500 acres) across 33 mouzas had been settled and digitized, with the findings submitted to the provincial government for further action.⁶⁴

During the government-initiated land settlement process, sectarian violence persisted in the region, highlighted by a suicide bombing claimed by ISKP at the Shia Mosque, Masjid Asna-e-Ashari, located in Peshawar's Qissa Khwani Bazaar on 4 March 2022. This tragic incident took place during Friday prayers, resulting in the death of 63 individuals and causing injury to 196. The mosque served as a frequent place of worship for Shia Muslims from Kurram, situated in a predominantly Shia area. Two months later, on 4 May 2023, Muhammad Sharif, a Sunni school teacher, was shot and killed by unidentified assailants while traveling on Shalozan Road, apparently in reaction to which, armed Sunni individuals stormed Teri Mangal High School, killing six teachers and a staff member, all affiliated with the Turi Bangash tribe, who were engaged in examination duties at the time.⁶⁵

On 7 July 2023, construction on a disputed *Shamilat* by Sunnis in Dandar Sehra led to sectarian clashes with Shias from Boshera. The violence

⁶³ Zia Ur Rehman, "The Roots Of Kurram's Cycles Of Bloodshed", *Dawn*, 1 December 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875953> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶⁴ Sohail Habib, "Kurram Carnage", *Dawn*, 28 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875263/kurram-carnage> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶⁵ Mehdi Hussain, "Eight teachers gunned down in Kurram", *The Express Tribune*, 4 May 2023, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2415082> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

spread to other sensitive areas like Khar Kalay, Sadda, Balishkhel, Peward, Gido, Teri Mangal, Muqbal, Nastikot, Kadman Parachamkani and Kunj Alizai, and the fighting raged on. By 12 July, about 12 people had died.⁶⁶ KP Government press statement acknowledged that “there [were] eight different land disputes going on in central, lower and upper areas of district Kurram most of which date back to pre-independence time”. A 12-member Jirga including elders of Kurram was constituted by the district administration to resolve the land disputes and carry out negotiations with both tribes assisted by a Revenue Commission constituted earlier on 25 December 2021 to resolve the land dispute.

Media reports suggested that they were successful in demarcating the land of Gido. Another 30-member Jirga from Kohat, Orakzai and Hangu moved to Kurram to bring an end to the clashes. The intervention by the Jirgas did not stop the clashes entirely. There were attacks on convoys in Charkhel. On 28 Oct 2023, two religious groups in Khar Kalay and Balishkhel continued to exchange fire. After six days of clashes, the tribal elders from central and lower Kurram agreed to a peace deal and led to power blackout and shutting down of internet. Vehicular traffic stopped in 70% area of Kurram. On 26 November, a bus bound for Parachinar from Peshawar was attacked in Hangu (112 kms from Peshawar), resulting in the tragic death of two individuals and injuries to four.⁶⁷

Enter 2024: Yet Another Spike in Violence

The year 2024 witnessed a sharp rise in violence in Kurram. It is pertinent to mention here that Pakistan witnessed yet another controversial election early in the year on 8 February which threw up Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) as the leading political force securing largest number of seats but far short of majority. This led to forces opposed to him

⁶⁶ “Army, FC deployed in Kurram as land disputes escalate”, *The Express Tribune*, 12 July 2023, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2425882> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁶⁷ “Van attack sparks outcry in Parachinar”, *The Express Tribune*, 29 December 2023, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2451378> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

led by Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML–N) coming together to form the government in March. This coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif was referred to as “Pakistan Democratic Movement–II or PDM–II” in political discussions— more or less, a continuation of the previous government that succeeded Imran Khan’s government in April 2022, when it lost its majority in the house, which was blamed on the army taking back its support from it and allowing the PTI-led ruling coalition to collapse.

Quite expectedly, the PTI won a landslide at the provincial level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) with Ali Amin Gandapur as Chief Minister. Gandapur was seen to be spending more time, energy and resources in organising political demonstrations and marches aimed at release of Imran Khan who was in prison since 9 May 2023. In March 2024, PTI protested across many cities alleging widespread fraud, particularly tampering with Form 47s, demanding fair elections and Khan’s release. On 8 September 2024, Gandapur led a protest march in the Sangjani locality (margins of Islamabad), which saw multiple caravans making their way to the capital despite roadblock. Following this, as TTP attacks increased in intensity by September, in a bid to challenge the federal authority, Gandapur was heard threatening to talk to the Taliban as escalating violence in KP was attributed to perceived federal inaction over allegations of Taliban sheltering the TTP.

Amid all this, with TTP threat rising in the face of both provincial and federal governments engaged in trading allegations against each other, in Kurram, on 8 June 2024 unidentified terrorists attacked security forces check post leaving seven personnel injured.⁶⁸ On 16 June 2024, an explosion on Koram Road in Kurram led to two fatalities. Such assertion by TTP and its allied forces in Kurram was bound to take a sectarian turn soon. On 24 July 2024, the land dispute in Boshera, long

⁶⁸ Ramzan Semab, “Nine injured in terrorist attacks in DI Khan, Kurram”, *The Express Tribune*, 9 June 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2470532> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

festering, erupted again and the sectarian clashes spread to other parts of district. As anticipated, rival tribes in villages including Boshehra, Malikhel, Dandar, Pekar, Tari Mangal, Muqbal, Kunj Alizai, Nastikot, Parachamkani, Karman, Khar Kalai, Sangina and Balishkhel started targeting each other with small and medium range weapons including rocket launchers, mortars and small range missiles.⁶⁹

The primary tribes engaged in the conflict in Boshehra are the Shia-majority Malikhel tribe and the Sunni-majority Madgi Kalay tribe. The historical context of inadequate governance in the region and lack of sufficient attention to recurring conflicts like the one in Boshehra has resulted in ambiguous land ownership. This situation heavily depends on tribal customs instead of formal documentation, leading to ongoing persisting disputes regarding land, water, forests, and grazing rights. The clashes following the dispute in Boshehra led to 49 casualties within a week.⁷⁰

In July 2024, a local jirga successfully managed the violence, leading to a temporary sense of relief that sectarian tensions would not escalate again in the near future. However, on 20 September, unrest erupted in Boshehra as Shia individuals attempted to construct bunkers on communal land claimed by the neighbouring Sunni Ahmadzai tribe. The main Parachinar highway and other local roads were closed to traffic due to the disturbances, and all educational institutions were shut down. On 27 September, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur declared a ceasefire, but it failed to take effect on the ground. By 28 September, the death toll had risen to 46, with 91 individuals reported

⁶⁹ The sectarian conflict started in Boshehra but soon escalated into sectarian conflict spreading over several other areas including Pekar, Tari Mangal, Bughaki, Budama, Graam, Muqbal, and Shingak in upper Kurram to Khar Kalai, Balishkhel, and Sangeena villages of lower Kurram. Ali Hussain, “35 killed as tribal feud sparks sectarian fighting in Kurram”, *Business Recorder*, 29 July 2024, at <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40314823> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁰ Javid Hussain, “Tribal clashes in Kurram come to halt after claiming 49 lives within a week: DC”, *Dawn*, 30 July 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1848952> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

injured in clashes in Balishkhel, Sadda, Khar Kallay, Pewar, Maqbal and other areas.⁷¹ Gandapur said playing down the sectarian aspect of the clashes that the current conflict in Kurram tribal district was related to some groups and the provincial government was taking steps to resolve the issue peacefully and permanently.⁷² However, Gandapur's assurances were not followed by concrete efforts on the ground.

On 12 October 2024, it was the turn of the Sunni Maqbal tribesmen to attack Shia tribesmen from Kunj Alizai and soon afterwards, the clashes spread to several parts of the district. Shia miscreants attacked passenger and other vehicles and as a result, 15 persons (Sunni), including two women and one child, were killed in these attacks.⁷³ During this month, earlier, on 6 October, seven Frontier Corps (FC) personnel were killed and two others sustained injuries while they were trying to fetch water from the Barani river area in Central Kurram.⁷⁴ On 29 October, two FC men were killed by unidentified gunmen when they opened fire on Thal Scouts in the Char Khel area.⁷⁵ The attackers reportedly belonged to the TTP, which indicated the deeper malaise haunting the terrain, and as per the above-mentioned editorial it added “a new layer of violence”, where “sectarian and tribal differences often combine, creating an explosive mix”. The daily *Dawn* in its editorial⁷⁶ on 31 October urged the state not to abandon Kurram, but to “take proactive steps to permanently resolve local disputes” and held that “Kurram's people need the state to enforce its writ so that they can live in peace”.

⁷¹ Reported *Dawn*, 26 September 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1861143> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷² Reported *Dawn*, 27 September 2024. (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷³ “15 killed, 7 injured in fresh Kurram clashes”, *Dawn*, 13 October 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1864875> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁴ “Lt Col among 13 personnel martyred in Waziristan, Kurram”, *Dawn*, 6 October 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1863352> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁵ Javid Hussain, “Two FC men martyred in Kurram”, *Dawn*, 29 October 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1868366> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁶ “Kurram Violence”, Editorial, *Dawn*, 31 October 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1868827> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

THE NOVEMBER ATTACKS: RESPONSE OF THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Hardly had the embers cooled after the sectarian clashes in July and October 2024, when on 21 November 2024, all hell broke loose in Kurram again. On that day, at around 1.20 pm, a large convoy of about 200 vehicles carrying Shia Muslims from Peshawar to Parachinar was ambushed near Mandori Uchit area of Lower Kurram, 71 kilo meters short of Parachinar. About 10 unknown gunmen descended from a vehicle and opened indiscriminate fire targeting both the passengers and the police escort vehicles assigned to protect them. The assault went on for approximately 40 minutes, resulting in the deaths of 39 people and injuring 28 others, with 16 in critical condition.⁷⁷ *Dawn* wrote editorially on 22 November that it was “the biggest single mass-casualty attack” in 2024 and said that “militancy, tribal disputes and sectarianism, which has claimed both Shia and Sunni lives, have created a powder keg” in Kurram.⁷⁸

The 21 November attack, according to reports⁷⁹, was a revenge attack, in response to the 12 October attack on Sunnis, mentioned earlier. There was widespread condemnation of such a massive attack. This

⁷⁷ Javid Hussain and Umer Farooq, “39 killed in Kurram convoy bloodbath”, *Dawn*, 22 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874037> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁸ “Kurram atrocity”, Editorial, *Dawn*, 22 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874028> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁷⁹ Javid Hussain and Umer Farooq, “39 killed in Kurram convoy bloodbath”, *Dawn*, 22 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874037> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

attack had come weeks after chief minister Gandapur has said that the current conflict in Kurram tribal district was related to some groups and the provincial government was taking steps to resolve the issue peacefully and the provincial government was working to resolve the problem permanently. Two days later, in what appeared as a revenge attack, the situation further escalated when markets in Bagan, Lower Kurram, were set on fire, resulting in 16 casualties.

As Kurram was witnessing one of the bloodiest attacks carried out by sectarian terrorists in cold blood, in broad daylight, the Chief Minister of the province was busy planning for the 24-27 November protest march in Islamabad, demanding Imran Khan's release and protesting alleged election rigging. His government in Peshawar was trying to take rudimentary action, but it was not sufficient. Bilawal Bhutto, leader of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) which had its member representing Kurram in the last National Assembly, called out Gandapur government in KP and said that while "Kurram district is burning in the fire of unrest", the KP government "is absent from the scene...PTI-led provincial government has failed to protect the lives and property of the citizens". He went on to say that the KP government's "silence during this turmoil is tantamount to being an ally of the terrorists".⁸⁰ Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, whose party has an MPA from lower Kurram in KP Assembly, also expressed his sorrow over the killings and called the incident a failure of both "federal and provincial governments, institutions and law enforcement agencies, lamenting their inability to maintain law and order".⁸¹ Shehbaz Sharif condemned the attacks and said: "The malicious elements involved in the incident will be identified and given exemplary punishment... The saboteurs cannot demoralize the brave Pakistani nation with such cowardly actions... The evil elements who

⁸⁰ Reported *Dawn*, 24 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874528> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁸¹ Reported *Dawn*, 23 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874037/39-killed-in-kurram-convoy-bloodbath> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

shed the blood of innocent citizens are not even worthy of being called human beings, let alone Muslims.”⁸² The steps taken by the central government to keep the situation under control were not visibly impressive even if the interior minister made some jaunts to the province and discussed the issue with the government there.

The response from Gandapur came on 30 November and he visited the neighbouring district of Kohat and attended the meeting of a grand jirga constituted by the provincial government to address the violence in Kurram district. The jirga had started its meeting following the violence since 24 November, against the backdrop of sectarian clashes continuing in Kurram despite the government shutting down cellular network and internet services; and despite Gandapur, reportedly, having ordered security forces to dismantle the bunkers and requested the federal government to deploy additional platoons of paramilitary Frontier Constabulary to maintain peace, as per a statement released by Mr Gandapur’s office.⁸³ The same statement had also said: “In line with [Pakhtun] traditions, we are making every effort to resolve this issue peacefully through a jirga” and urged the warring parties to cooperate with the administration and jirga to ensure sustainable peace, which was “in the best interest of the region and the government”. As the process unfolded, it was seen that on behalf of the provincial government, Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif, advisor to Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Ali Amin Gandapur on Information and Public Relations was involved in the process of reconciliation from the very start of the negotiations through the Jirga.

ISPR reacts

A month later, Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Director General (DG) of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) made its views

⁸² PTV News Post on X, at <https://x.com/PTVNewsOfficial/status/1859567038710284484> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁸³ Reported *Dawn*, 1 December 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875862> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

explicit in an end-of-the year address to the media. He dwelt on the rising graph of terrorism in KP (and Balochistan) and pointed to lapses in the government's approach. He emphasised the need for "a civilian-led resolution to the escalating violence in Kurram district", asserting that "the conflict is not rooted in terrorism but stems from a long-standing tribal land dispute". Indicating that there was, at the root of it, political mismanagement and lack of good governance, he said:⁸⁴

When you examine the illegal spectrum in the country closely, behind it you will see *political backing everywhere*, which, for its *narrow-minded political and financial gain, is obstructing all the necessary steps* that are required under the Revised National Action Plan, Azm-i-Istehkam, and other steps that are to be taken to break this illegal spectrum. . . . Terrorism will end when *justice is established in those areas when there is education, health, administration, good governance, and uniformity in the education system and madrasas*. . . We are *filling these gaps in governance with the sacrifices of our martyrs* on a daily basis.⁸⁵

Gandapur defensive

Gandapur said on the same day, perhaps in response to statement by the DG, ISPR, that the provincial government was aware of the challenges facing Kurram residents and was utilising all available resources to mitigate their hardships and that "ensuring the safety of people's lives and property, as well as maintaining law and order are

⁸⁴ He gave out figures as well. In 2024, Pakistan suffered a staggering 1,200 terrorist attacks, resulting in the loss of over 2,000 lives, including 383 military personnel, despite counterterrorism efforts. According to the military, 925 militants have been killed in counterterrorism operations, and 59,779 intelligence-based operations have been conducted in the past year alone. See Report by Baqir Sajjad Syed on *Dawn*, 28 December 2024, at https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=28_12_2024_001_005 (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁸⁵ Ibid.

the provincial government's top priority and responsibility".⁸⁶ He said that keeping in view the problems faced by Kurram residents, especially those caused by road closures, the provincial government launched a helicopter service to airlift the people from Kurram and a total of 613 individuals had so far benefitted from the service of the government-owned MI-17 helicopter. Gandapur's brother, and fellow MNA Faisal Amin Khan that DG, ISPR was not right in saying that there was a failure of governance and the government was everything possible to ameliorate the situation and had airlifted 12.8 tons of medicines to Kurram hospitals in its choppers, with hundreds of patients flown out of the restive tribal district. In a bid to soften up the army, he also stated that his government "provided the Shaheed Package to all soldiers and officers of security forces, including employment for their children and free plots for Shuhada's families".

Such exchange of words did little to assuage feelings on the ground, however. While the jirga convened its sessions, violence persisted along the Thall-Parachinar road. In a particularly brutal incident, two Shia individuals, Ishaq Hussain and Waseem Hussain, who were residents of Parachinar and had recently returned from abroad, were ambushed by assailants during their journey back home. They were tragically shot and decapitated. The government failed to adequately secure the main highway during the ongoing peace negotiations.⁸⁷ On December 19, the provincial Apex Committee⁸⁸ of the KP government,

⁸⁶ Reported *Dawn*, 28 December 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1881510> (accessed on 22 March 2025).

⁸⁷ Reported *Dawn*, 24 December 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1880731> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁸⁸ This Committee typically included a mix of civil and military officials: the Chief Minister of KP, who chairs the committee, Federal Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, Provincial cabinet members (Aftab Alam, Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif, and Muzammil Aslam), Corps Commander Peshawar (Lt. Gen. Omer Ahmed Bukhari), Chief Secretary of KP (Nadeem Aslam Chaudhry), Inspector General of Police (Akhtar Hayat Khan Gandapur), Additional Chief Secretary-Home (Muhammad Abid Majeed) and Other senior civil and military officials.

comprising both civilian and military officials, convened to assess the situation in Kurram and to determine the next steps. The Committee acknowledged that the presence of bunkers presented a significant challenge to peace, asserting that only through their removal and the collection of weapons could the situation improve. Both the federal and provincial governments reached a consensus to collaboratively implement measures to improve the situation.⁸⁹

By 24 December the roadmap for peace emerged out of the talks, which were reported for the first time in the media. The KP government mulled that it would raise a special force to secure the Parachinar highway on which temporary checkpoints will be established, followed by permanent posts. It also contemplated raising the number of security personnel, confiscation of all illegal weapons, creation of a special desk at the provincial home department for the issuance of arms licences on a need basis, crackdown against people using social media sites for incitement, and demolition of all bunkers in Kurram.

It was interesting to see Gandapur talking in the same wavelength as DG, ISPR when he said that Kurram's issue was a conflict between two groups and not militancy and that the locals wanted peace but some elements were trying to destabilise the situation by spreading sectarian hatred.⁹⁰ The sectarian violence in Kurram was thus being projected as not only about religious differences but also deeply intertwined with land disputes, socio-economic issues, and the strategic importance of the area due to its proximity to Afghanistan. Basically, in all this, there was an attempt made by all concerned to hide the sectarian angle and portray it was group rivalry. By then in about a month 130 lives had been lost to sectarian violence in Kurram, and instances of decapitation came to fore demonstrating the worsening level of sectarian animosity between Sunnis and Shias in Kurram.

⁸⁹ Reported The Express tribune, 20 December 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2517257/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁹⁰ Reported *Dawn*, 28 December 2024

Not to be left behind, the federal government also ensured supply of medicines to Parachinar hospitals as per its message posted on X on 27 December: “The sick brothers and sisters were transported to Islamabad in the same helicopters in which medicines were delivered by National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). So far, 1,000 kilograms of medicines have been delivered to Parachinar.”⁹¹ Ex-MNA from Kurram and ex-federal minister Sajjid Hussain Turi put the number of children who had died, at 128, because of the forced blockade of the highway for 85 days by 27 December.⁹² The daily wagers were the worst hit by this crisis and the entire district, especially upper Kurram was in ‘complete ruin’.⁹³

At this juncture independent observers took the provincial government, especially Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif to task for not doing enough:

The ongoing crisis in Kurram has *revealed glaring failures in governance*, with Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif’s *tone-deaf leadership* facing sharp criticism. For over 84 days, the people of Kurram have endured *a relentless siege, mounting deaths, and collapsing healthcare*. This humanitarian disaster underscores the consequences of detached and ineffective leadership. Barrister Saif’s handling of the crisis demonstrates *a troubling disconnect between rhetoric and reality*, with devastating consequences for the region.⁹⁴

⁹¹ See post on X at <https://x.com/GovtofPakistan/status/1872608672955666741> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁹² See report Nadir Guramani, 128 children dead in Parachinar since conflict started due to lack of resources: ex-minister”, in *Dawn*, 28 December 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882031> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁹³ Javid Hussain, “100 days of Solitude: Hunger, strife and despair in Parachinar”, *Dawn*, 15 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1884905> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁹⁴ Humera A, “Kurram in Crisis: The High Cost of Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif’s Tone-Deaf Leadership”, *The Voice of Pakistan*, 31 December 2024, at <https://thevoice.pk/kurram-in-crisis-the-high-cost-of-barrister-muhammad-ali-saifs-tone-deaf-leadership/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Barrister Saif is accused of having misrepresented the crisis, failure to address the basic needs of the aggrieved people, lack of accountability for continuing violence, offering oversimplified solutions, excluding key stakeholders (like the Grand Jirga which had mattered in the past), lack of effective communication with the victims of violence and inability to control propagation of hatred that leads to violence.⁹⁵ Therefore, one commentator has called him a ‘tone-deaf’ leader, which typically refers to leaders who are perceived as being out of touch with the concerns, emotions, or realities of the people they serve or lead. These leaders may fail to listen actively, empathize, or adapt their actions to suit the context or needs of their audience. This often results in decisions or statements that appear insensitive, inappropriate, or disconnected from the situation at hand. As a tone-deaf leader, that he is made out to be, he made celebratory remarks during the crisis, did not pay due heed to urgent feedback and implemented policies that do not address pressing issues effectively.

Peace Agreement Signed

Amid criticism of Saif by some observers, finally, on 1 January 2025, after 41 days of the attack and three weeks of rigorous discussions, the Jirga came out with a seven-page 14-point peace agreement between 45 representatives from the each of the warring tribes from Alizai and Bagan⁹⁶. The peace talks, held under the supervision of GOC 9 Division Major General Zulfiqar Bhatti.

It was decided in the agreement that both sides shall surrender heavy weapons. No weapons will be kept by anybody without due licence. Anti-aircraft guns and RPGs will not be used. Open display and use

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “14 Proposed Points of Kurram Peace Agreement and KPK Govt’s important Role, Mehr Bokhari’s Analysis”, *Dunya News TV*, 1 January 2025, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hve_oEMrhFE (accessed on 22 March 2025)

of weapons will be fully banned. Collection of funds for buying weapons will not be permitted. All heavy weapons will be surrendered to the district police within one month. The government will be responsible for collection of these weapons. The peace committee will act against those villages using heavy weapons. The bunkers and fortifications built by both sides and used for carrying out attacks will be demolished. Security of the route shall be ensured by the government. If there will be any unpleasant incident in any locality, the local peace committee will immediately reach there, and the other party shall not create any hurdle in its activities. If local peace committees fail to perform their tasks, district peace committees will jump into action and in case the district committee fails to perform its task, the grand jirga, the government, and the law enforcement agencies will intervene. It was also agreed that if any attack takes place in any place, the nearby villages will be held responsible for the attack. Some factions disagreed with this provision initially, but later, there was a consensus on this issue with a rider that if concerned villagers can prove their innocence then no action will be taken against them. The jirga recognised that land disputes often led to sectarian conflicts in the region and there are eight such unresolved disputes. Long standing land disputes in Gedu, Pekar Alizai, Balishkhel, Dandar, Ghaz Ghari, Nisti Kot, Kunj Alizai, Shorko, Sadda and Bagan Alizai would be resolved in the light of revenue record, local traditions and the terms of reference provided by the land commission.

It was also agreed that any dispute between individuals or villages, will not be given a sectarian colour. If there are conflicts between two villages, it will not be allowed to lead to sectarian conflict. No tribe shall provide refuge/shelter to anybody who violates the terms of this agreement. The dead bodies shall not be disrespected. The jirga members recognised all previous agreements and recommended their continuation. The government agreed to take strong action against anybody violating the peace of the highways. In view of mass displacement of population from both communities in the past, all displaced population in Kurram shall be rehabilitated in their own land. There will not be any restrictions on such rehabilitation efforts. Ceasefire

will be enforced and will be made permanent. which included commitments to dismantle fortifications and surrender heavy arms.⁹⁷

The summary of the 14 points outlined in the peace agreement signed on 1 January 2025 is given below:⁹⁸

1. All prior collective agreements, including the Murree Agreement, along with their resolutions and tribal customs, shall remain in effect.
2. Members of the Kurram Peace Committee are obligated to restore peace and enhance the effectiveness of all agreements for the benefit of the residents of district Kurram.
3. The government must implement punitive measures against any individual(s) engaging in subversive activities on government roads.
4. The village peace committees situated along the road are required to collaborate with the government and other organizations. In the event of any unfortunate incident in any area, the local populace will demonstrate their innocence in accordance with established customs and laws, otherwise action will be taken against them. Furthermore, any individual(s) providing refuge to unscrupulous elements will be considered guilty under the existing legal framework.

⁹⁷ These points have been collated from media reports available at “Peace brokered in Kurram as warring sides sign agreement: KP govt spokesperson”, Manzoor Ali, Arif Hayat, Javid Hussain, “Peace brokered in Kurram as warring sides sign agreement: KP govt spokesperson”, *Dawn*, 1 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882460> (accessed on 22 March 2025), “Kurram tribes say farewell to arms”, *The Express Tribune*, 2 January 2025, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2519581/kurram-tribes-say-farewell-to-arms> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

⁹⁸ These points reflect the core elements consistently reported across sources like *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *Pakistan Today*, reports in the electronic media in TV channels like *Geo*, *ARY* and *Dunya*. and others, which detailed the agreement’s signing by representatives of the Alizai and Bagan tribes.

5. In accordance with the Murree Agreement, all displaced families will be resettled in their original areas without any obstacles to their relocation. A committee will be established to assist these displaced families.
6. The land disputes within the Kurram district will be addressed in accordance with the Terms of Reference (ToR) established by the Land Revenue Commission. The commission will commence its operations promptly, with the Kurram Peace Committee and local authorities providing their full cooperation to resolve any pending issues.
7. The public display of weapons will be strictly prohibited, and no authorization will be granted for the collection of funds intended for the purchase of arms.
8. Individuals are prohibited from framing personal disputes as sectarian conflicts. Organizations that promote sectarian animosity will not be permitted to establish offices, and legal measures will be enforced in the event of noncompliance. There will be no hindrance to roads and communication pathways.
9. All government employees, including educators, are expected to carry out their responsibilities in the Kurram district without any interference or fear.
10. Individuals engaging in the dissemination of content on social media that offends any party, or sect will face punitive measures. Those who provide support to such individuals will be considered equally culpable in the offence.
11. The peace committees will be instrumental in maintaining order should any unfortunate incident arise in any locality, with the opposing party choosing to abstain from retaliatory actions. Members of the village committees will actively engage in managing the circumstances.
12. In the event of a dispute between two villages, no third village will exacerbate the situation; instead, the peace committees from other villages will strive to mend the division between the conflicting parties.

13. There will be an absolute prohibition on the construction of all types of bunkers. Furthermore, all existing bunkers will be dismantled within a month.
14. A ceasefire will be implemented and established as a permanent measure.

The emphasis on disarmament, infrastructure restoration, and dispute resolution addresses the immediate triggers of the conflict—such as the November 2024 convoy ambush—and its deeper roots in decades-old land and sectarian tensions. While specific wording may vary slightly, this list captures the agreement’s intent and scope as of the signing on 1 January 2025. Implementation remains a critical challenge, with local protests continuing until full compliance is demonstrated. In fact, in a heart-rending case, on the very same day that the agreement was signed and announced to the world, social media posts emerged showing Sunni extremists in Sadda playing football with the severed head of a person called Nadeem Hussain from Peshawar⁹⁹ on the suspicion that he might have been a Shia (however, later report suggested that he was a nomad¹⁰⁰ and a Christian)¹⁰¹. The incident even struck a chord in Jammu and Kashmir in India.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ See post by Shakir Abbas Khan Turi @shakirturi3 at <https://x.com/shakirturi3/status/1874161676322525372> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰⁰ “Nomads Protest Brutal Killing in Kurram: “We Are Wanderers, Not Part of Tribal Conflicts”, *Tribal News Network*, 1 January 2025, at <https://www.tnnenglish.com/nomads-protest-brutal-killing-in-kurram-we-are-wanderers-not-part-of-tribal-conflicts> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰¹ Videos circulating online showed his severed head being passed around like a trophy, a chilling display of barbarity that defies humanity and the values of any religion. See report on <https://www.documentingreality.com/forum/f166/pakistan-man-decapitated-mistake-aftermath-258771/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰² See post by Javed Beigh @JavedBeigh, <https://x.com/JavedBeigh/status/1874498041941565657> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

The peace agreement stated, nevertheless, that keeping in view the post-merger realities, members of the Kurram Peace Committee and both sides would be bound to uphold the Muree Agreement 2008 and all other agreements for the benefit of locals and establishment of peace. The agreement aimed to establish a lasting ceasefire and restore stability in the conflict-ridden district.

Post-Peace Agreement Scenario: Violence Persists

Following the peace agreement, the government set out to implement it on the ground and it soon found out that securing an agreement was not enough. As the government readied the first convoy for transport of essential items like medicines and food, on 4 January miscreants attacked Deputy Commissioner of Kurram, Javedullah Mehsud in Bagan area, while he was coming down from Parachinar with his security detail to receive the convoy from Thall. Some 80 persons, apparently protesters, appeared on the road as the DC was approaching Bagan area and the miscreants hiding among the protesters fired at his car. The KP chief minister held an emergency meeting in which it was decided that after the peace agreement, the area residents were responsible for the attack and hence they should be asked to turn in the attackers. The government also decided to announce head money for the capture of the militants and elimination of those involved in the attack.

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif strongly condemned the firing. KP Governor Faisal Karim Kundi laid the blame on Gandapur and said that “firing on an aid convoy is clear proof of incompetence and failure of the provincial government”.¹⁰³ The government sprung up to action and enhanced the security of the convoys, but still on 16 January a convoy of 35 vehicles from on its

¹⁰³ Umer Farooq & Javid Hussain, “Kurram peace in peril after attack on DC’s convoy”, *Dawn*, 5 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1883197> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

way to Parachinar came under fire again in the Bagan area¹⁰⁴ killing two soldiers and injuring five. Retaliatory action by security forces left six attackers dead and 10 injured. Out of 35 trucks in the convoy, only two made it back to Thall, while more than 10 trucks were looted and set ablaze. Police recovered the bodies of four drivers with their hands tied while five of the drivers went missing. The drivers were Shias, as could be assessed from their names.¹⁰⁵

The attack on 16 January prompted the government to initiate operations against militants in Kurram, which were not officially given any specific name but referred to as “clearance operations” in government statements. Ahead of these operations the KP government did take into consideration possible displacements from areas to be targeted. It was calculated that 866 families and 9,685 households from Bagan, 466 families and 5,245 households from Mandori/Uchat/Charkhel, and 547 families and 2,494 households from Chapri Paraw and Chapri would be affected. More than 1,000 families would be relocated under the plan, it was said.

The letter proposed four sites in Thall for the Temporarily Displaced Persons (TDPs) to “ensure safety and support of the affected population during the expected operation”, including Government Boys Degree College, stated as having 25 rooms and two halls. According to media reports, gunship helicopters targeted the hideouts of miscreants in the Bagan, Uchat, Charkhel, and Dadkhel regions of Lower Kurram, as well as in Zarana and other central Kurram areas.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Reported *Dawn*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1885634> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰⁵ The names provided in the newspaper were: three of the deceased were identified as Imran, Hasan Ali and Shahid Ali, residents of the Kurr-am district. Reported *Dawn*, 18 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1885970> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰⁶ Report in *Dawn*, 22 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886930> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Additionally, a door-to-door search operation was carried out in Bagan and surrounding areas. The local police were assigned the responsibility of maintaining the ceasefire within the district and managing the movement of convoys from Thall to Parachinar. These clearance operations continued until 22 January 2025, resulting in the destruction of numerous bunkers and the seizure of a significant quantity of weapons.

Barely nine days later on 31 January, the Assistant Commissioner (revenue) of Kurram, Saeed Manan Khan was attacked (shot in the stomach) while he was visiting the Boshehra area¹⁰⁷, accompanied by police, for implementing the ceasefire. The *Dawn* wrote editorially:

The state has *made several*— *some would say belated*— *attempts* to quell the violence, the most significant coming in the form of a peace deal hammered out on New Year’s Day. But clearly, *it will take full commitment by all state institutions, as well as the earnest cooperation of local tribes*, to make the agreement work.¹⁰⁸

The latent scepticism and caution in the editorial titled ‘Kurram Fragility’, proved correct as two weeks later on 17 February 2025, more than 30 trucks transporting food supplies to Kurram were subjected to looting, with 19 trucks subsequently set ablaze following an attack on the convoy in the Bagan, Charkhel, Uchat, and Mandori regions. The incident resulted in the loss of several lives, including those of security personnel and drivers. The assailants not only stole goods but also torched 19 vehicles. While nine vehicles successfully reached Parachinar, 33 others were returned to Thall, most of which had been plundered. Additionally, a convoy belonging to the Commandant of the Kurram Militia was targeted in Mandori, leading to casualties among security personnel.

¹⁰⁷ Reported *Dawn*, 31 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1888853> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁰⁸ “Kurram fragility”, Editorial, *Dawn*, 3 February 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1889442> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Colonel Haider, commander of Kurram militia, however, remained safe. The looting of supplies intended for the holy month of Ramazan has created significant challenges for the local population in fulfilling their daily needs, prompting traders to urge the government to provide an emergency relief package for the 500,000 individuals affected.¹⁰⁹ The occurrence of such attacks, despite the demolition of 194 bunkers, underscores the persistent threat posed by sectarian elements that continue to challenge the authority of the government.

Engineer Hamid Hussain, an MNA from Kurram affiliated with MWM, expressed his disappointment regarding the ongoing breaches of the peace agreement and the government's lack of response. He called upon the government to take swift measures against those accountable for the violence, to safeguard the lives and property of citizens, and to reopen all roads in the area. During a press conference held in Parachinar, members of the peace jirga, including Haji Nazir Ahmad and Haider Abbas, reported that one of the two conflicting factions, specifically the Sunni group, had contravened the peace agreement on 18 occasions over the past two months, yet the government had not taken any action in response.¹¹⁰

The First Information Report (FIR) filed following the attack listed 57 individuals from various areas within Kurram, including Ghuz Ghari, Pir Qayyum, Sadda, Central Kurram, Bagan, Charkhel, Mandori, Dad Qamar, Makhрани, Badamah, Kocha, Gogani, Durani, Satain, Tizi, Tando, and Pushtoni. Some of these individuals were previously named in the FIR related to the November 21 attack, which marked the beginning of the current wave of violence in Kurram.¹¹¹ During operations in the Bagan, Charkhel, Uchat, and Mandori areas, police

¹⁰⁹ Reported *Dawn*, 21 February 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1893250> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹⁰ Reported *Dawn*, 19 February 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1892841> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹¹ Reported *Dawn*, 21 February 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1893250> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

recovered a cache of weapons, including 81 submachine guns, 2 heavy machine guns, 2 light machine guns, Kalashnikov rifles, 12-bore shotguns, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition¹¹², indicating how well-armed the militant groups are in Kurram and how difficult it is going to be for the security forces to enforce peace and tranquillity in this disturbed terrain.

Reaction among the Shias in rest of Pakistan

The assault on passenger vehicles in Kurram has ignited nationwide protests, with demonstrators belonging to Shia denomination calling for the immediate apprehension of those responsible. In Karachi, thousands, under the leadership of Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM), organized protests at various sites. At the Khajeh Ithna Ashari Mosque in Kharadar, Allama Ahmed Iqbal Rizvi expressed his discontent with the government, judiciary, security forces, and media for their lack of response to the tragedy. Protesters denounced the attack as a calculated act of terrorism, emphasizing the tragic loss of women, children, and infants in the incident. They also urged for the prompt recovery of the missing passengers. The protests in Karachi caused significant traffic disruptions, with key roads being blocked and commuters facing difficulties. Pitched battles between police and groups of youth broke out at multiple spots in Karachi on 31 December 2024, with six cops among at least 11 people injured, as law enforcers fired tear gas to remove protesters staging sit-ins against the blockade and killings in Parachinar.

The banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) started counter-protest sit-ins at 14 places, as roads remained closed for traffic at 18 locations for ninth consecutive day across the city raising the spectre of another Shia-Sunni clash in Karachi itself.¹¹³ In fact, ASWJ held a press conference

¹¹² Reported *Dawn*, 24 February 2025 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1893898> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹³ Reported *Dawn*, 1 January 2025, “MWM chief calls off sit-ins following peace agreement between Kurram factions” at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882426/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

in Peshawar on 31 December 2024 in the presence of Anjuman-i-Farooqia leaders and highlighted the displacement of 3,000 Sunni families from Parachinar, the suffering of women, children, and the elderly, and the destruction of Sunni mosques and homes in Kurram. They criticized the provincial government's inaction during these tragedies, accusing it of failing to provide assistance, even in the form of helicopters, while houses and markets were set ablaze and condemned the attack on 12 October 202 in Kunj Alizai, in Kurram, which led to the killing of many Sunni women, children, and religious scholars.¹¹⁴

A rally was held in Gilgit, moving from Imamia Mosque to Benazir Shaheed Chowk, while a similar demonstration occurred in Skardu. In Kohat, protesters obstructed the Kohat-Hangu Road, demanding justice, and similar actions were reported in Bannu. Protests also erupted in Sindh, with gatherings in Jacobabad, Sujawal, and Nawabshah, where demonstrators blocked the Hala National Highway in Matiari. In Punjab, rallies took place in Bahawalpur and Bhakkar, where participants vehemently condemned the violence and called for accountability for the offenders.¹¹⁵

Social media has been used widely by Shias of Parachinar to ventilate their helplessness and frustration. The people have raised the call of “*Hal-Man Nasir Yansarna*” (Is there anyone who will come to our aid?) from the modern-day Karbala. Then comes the exhortations to fight it out to the finish:

O Shia people, do not leave your brothers alone. How long will you remain silent? Come out of the ranks of the Kufis

¹¹⁴ “Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat demands action against armed groups in Kurram”, *LeadPakistan*, 1 January 2025, at <https://leadpakistan.com.pk/news/ahle-sunnat-wal-jamaat-demands-action-against-armed-groups-in-kurram/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹⁵ “Violence Erupts in Kurram as Clashes Leave 18 Dead, Protests Sweep Pakistan After Massacre”, *Tribal News Network*, 23 November 2024, at <https://tnnenglish.com/violence-erupts-in-kurram-as-clashes-leave-18-dead-protests-sweep-pakistan-after-massacre> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

and join the lovers of Hussain (AS). This is the time to say
“[*Labaike*] *Ya Hussain (AS)*”.¹¹⁶

Interestingly, MWM General Secretary Syed Nasir Abbas Shirazi and other party leaders while criticising the provincial and federal governments for failing to protect civilians, took a quiet dig at the security forces. Shirazi was clear in his deliberation: “The responsibility for the blood of these innocent passengers lies with law enforcement agencies...Decisions to launch operations are made every day, but terrorism is not under control now”.¹¹⁷

Allama Raja Nasir, head of MWM sounded even more resolute about standing up for the Shia cause in entire Pakistan particularly keeping the interests of Kurram Shias at the centre of Shia protests: “We will end our protest after all roads towards Kurram are opened. We do not want anything from the government. We demand the right to live for our people. The situation in Kurram has turned into a catastrophe and we all need to stand in solidarity with the people of the region”.¹¹⁸ On 28 December 2024, a video, circulated in X where Advocate Syed Rashid Rizvi, a Shia leader was heard saying:

Even if Shias of Gilgit Baltistan, Karachi, Quetta and Peshawar speak different languages, they belong to the same religion, same Quom or community. Whenever the Shias (the lovers of Ali) have come together, they have upset the governments

¹¹⁶ @Ashhal313 posted a video on 24 December 2024, where a leader of Anjuman-e-Hussainia Parachinar is urging Shias to unite. <https://x.com/i/status/1871491520601395207> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹⁷ Cited in *Dawn*, 22 November 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1874037/39-killed-in-kurram-convoy-bloodbath> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹¹⁸ “Pakistan: Peace agreement signed between Shia-Sunni tribes in Kurram”, *Siasat.com*, 1 January 2025, <https://www.siasat.com/pakistan-peace-agreement-signed-between-shia-sunni-tribes-in-kurram-3157972/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

in the past. Raisani's government in Balochistan¹¹⁹ was brought down by them and now if they would come together, they could bring down the government of Ali Amin Gandapur.

He also raised slogans like: *Labaik ya Hussein, Hussainiyah Zindabad, Yazidiyat Murdabad, Hain humari darsiga: Karbala Karbala, Ab Kashida rasta: Krabala, Karbala*. This suggests that prolonged suffering of Shias in Kurram, like oppression on Shias in other pockets of Pakistan is no longer taken as isolated incidents to be ignored. Rather these incidents are emerging as rallying points for Shias consolidating their sectarian identity in Pakistan today.

Editorial in *Dawn* wrote¹²⁰:

.....the sectarian dimension of Kurram's disputes has the potential to disrupt communal harmony in other parts of Pakistan. Sit-ins in solidarity with Kurram were held in other cities, particularly Karachi, and matters threatened to get out of hand when Shia demonstrators and the police came face to face at the main protest at Numaish.

The Shias of Parachinar have, through hashtags— like #ParachinarBleeds, #parachinarundersiege, #parachinarwantpeace, #ParachinarCrisis, #پاراچنار, #StopShiaGenocide, #Pakistan—circulated pictures and messages pertaining to Sunni militants using mosques for launching attacks on innocent Shias. It was through such social media campaign that the Kazim group was identified as having played a notorious role in the 21 November attacks.

¹¹⁹ In January 2013, the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama'at (former Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan) attacked the Hazara Shia Community in Quetta, but Raisani's government did nothing to calm down the protestors. In the ensuing controversy he had to resign in February 2013.

¹²⁰ "Kurram peace deal", *Dawn*, Editorial, published 3 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882774> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Reverberations outside Pakistan

This social media campaign had its reverberation among Shais of India as well. Syed Saif Abbas Naqvi, a Twelver Shia Muslim cleric from India and president of the office of Shia Markazi Chand Committee in Lucknow came out with a protest against tragic Shia killings in Pakistan 5 January 2025, at Chhota Imambara in Lucknow.¹²¹

This also indicates that there is a tendency now in the hyperactive and interconnected world of media today to excite sectarian passions beyond state frontiers. In this context, support coming from any sources has been welcome by the people of Kurram. For example, in 2007 when the Shias faced the brunt of Pakistani Taliban attack, and the state of Pakistan did not come forward to protect the Shias, the voice of concern coming from Iran was reassuring. In 2007 for example, In 2007, Grand Ayatollah Gulpaygani, a prominent cleric based in the Iranian city of Qom, famously announced that in Parachinar they “cut heads and limbs off the Shia and no one utters a word.”¹²² Ayatollah Gulpaygani’s statements regarding the brutal massacre of Shias in Parachinar demonstrated that as a Shia majority state, Iran felt it necessary to raise its voice over repression of the Shias in Kurram.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian condemned the attack on 21 November 2024, expressing his condolences to the government Pakistan and the families of the victims. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi wrote on his X account, “Our condolences to the victims’ families and the people and government of brotherly Pakistan. We ask Almighty Allah for the speedy recovery of those injured. We spare no effort in strengthening bilateral and multilateral coordination and cooperation to uproot the scourge of terrorism”.¹²³

¹²¹ @SaifAbbasNaqvi, at <https://x.com/SaifAbbasNaqvii/status/1875430702864580724> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹²² Mashal Saif, op. cit. p. 204

¹²³ “Pezeshkian, Araghchi condemn terrorist attack in Pakistan”, *Mehr News Agency*, 22 November 2024, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/224737/Pezeshkian-Araghchi-condemn-terrorist-attack-in-Pakistan> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

As has been indicated in the previous chapters, there is a lurking suspicion in the Sunni-dominant state agencies of Pakistan that Shias of Pakistan and especially from Shia-dominant pockets like Gilgit and Baltistan, Kurram and Quetta are drawing inspiration and sustenance from Iran.¹²⁴ In a well-researched and discursive paper on Shias of Pakistan, published by Hudson Centre on 1 June 2012, it was mentioned that in the backdrop of the killing of Shias in Kurram in 2007, some of Iran's state-run media began to describe Parachinar—which used to be fondly called 'Little Iran' by some Shiites in Iran—as a “Second Gaza” and lamented the situation of the “500,000 inhabitants under siege.” However, the article also points to the fact that the “silence of Iran's officialdom with respect to the plight of Pakistan's Shia is conspicuous and openly criticized by the wider Iranian public”.¹²⁵ It is true that while at certain levels empathies for Shias of Kurram reigns supreme (as was in the case of a senior Iranian diplomat to Pakistan, who described Iran's earliest hopes for Parachinar as a “springboard” for Iranian influence into broader Pakistan), the Iranian state has maintained a studied silence over the issue and has not gone beyond expressing its concerns when there is a dramatic event, while smaller incidents are largely ignored. Nevertheless, the influence of revolutionary Iran had greatly galvanised Shia consciousness among the Shias of Kurram. Syed Arif Hussain Al-Hussaini, a native of the Parachinar, was known for his political activism in Pakistan for which he was assassinated by Sunni militants in August 1988.

As argued earlier, Zia-ul Haq's aggressive stance against Kurram Shias was a response to both their support for his political nemesis Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Arif Hussain's militant Shia rhetoric, which he took as

¹²⁴ See Zia ur Rahman, “Pakistan's Shia mercenaries return from Syria, posing a security threat”, at <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/pakistan-s-shia-mercenaries-return-from-syria-posing-a-security-threat-44655> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹²⁵ Alex Vatanca, “The Guardian of Pakistan's Shia”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, 1 June 2012, at <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-guardian-of-pakistan-s-shia> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

an affront against his rule. The Imamia Students Organisation (ISO), a Shia activist group, considered Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei as its spiritual mentor became very active during the 1980s. However, despite the inclination of the Kurram Shias towards Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian spiritual leader succeeding Khomeini in 1989, has chosen to be very cautious in his pronouncements on Pakistan taking absolute care not to upset Islamabad at any cost. Among other countries, Iraq and Syria act as magnets for some Shias in Pakistan and especially Kurram.

It has been established that quite a few Kurram youth had joined the civil war in Syria on the side of Bashar al Assad, who was a close ally of Iran and they had possibly joined the war out of their sectarian feelings to protect Shia religious places like Zainab's tomb cum shrine against attacks by Sunni extremists, especially Daesh or ISIS. Those from Kurram who returned from this theatre were often interred by the security forces and tailed even after they were allowed to go back to Kurram. The emotional and sentimental connect of the Kurram Shias with Iran and the Shias of Syria is a given and in spite of the contention in the media by Pakistani commentators, moral and/or material support of Iran behind Shia militancy in Kurram— which the Shias of Kurram regard as defensive and Sunnis of Kurram consider aggressive— has not yet been established by security agencies of Pakistan, apart from the linkage of a small section of the Shia youth in Kurram with Shia armed resistance in foreign theatres which signals connections at a very personal level, with the likelihood of fringe Shia extremist organisations establishing their hold over the Shais in Kurram. It is against this backdrop that overall analysis of the ground situation in Kurram shall be attempted in the concluding chapter.

DEALING WITH SECTARIANISM IN KURRAM: HALF-HEARTED EFFORTS, NO SOLUTION IN SIGHT

"[The rise of sectarian politics.....from Quetta to Kurram agency and Kohat, to Northern Areas.. is located firmly within the ideological paradigm of Pakistan and its logical progression towards a hardline Sunni State"

Khaled Ahmed¹²⁶

The discussion in the previous chapters yields certain conclusions that are outlined by many commentators in Pakistan as well as outside, focussing on the issue of Shia distress in Kurram—a terrain where the majoritarian advantages accruing to the Shias in Upper Kurram and in exclusive Shia pockets in lower and central Kurram are offset by the fact of them being surrounded by Sunnis all around. The situation is further complicated by the changing socio-religious dynamic in the area since the 1980s which has induced a belligerent radical and conservative strain among the Sunnis. It is also a historical fact that the Shia enthusiasm in Pakistan after the success of Islamic revolution in Iran greatly annoyed the Sunni-majority state leadership of Pakistan at a time when Islamisation (of the Sunni variety) was sponsored and promoted by the state run by a military dictator. When Shias started asserting their presence and forced Zia-ul Haq to roll back his Zakat ordinance, there was a Sunni reaction from the majority Sunni

¹²⁶ Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni Shia Violence and its Linkage to the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 117

population that was backed by the state (both through omission and commission).

The context of the Afghan Jihad and flow of dollars to inject militantism into the Sunni mujahideen army supported by US and Saudi Arabia legitimised the growth of Sunni militant organisations like Sipah-i-Sahaba and later Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and multiple India-focused Jihadi organisations like Harkat-ul-Ansar (later Ansar gave way to Mujahideen), Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad etc. The Shias of Kurram felt threatened as the Sunnis grew in number as the refugees from Afghanistan were settled in Shia *Shamilat* lands, who either disregarded Sunni ownership over the lands they used or handed the lands over to fellow Sunni tribes in the vicinity upon their return to Afghanistan, triggering Sunni-Shia conflict in the district. The divide between the two sects deepened further when external help came in hardening sentiments on both sides and nullified the age-old local reflex to ‘live side by side in ‘enforced’ peace as an existential imperative’.¹²⁷ The underlying causes of the conflict are complex and include historical sectarian animosities, the influence of regional conflicts (like the Soviet-Afghan War and the situation in Afghanistan), the rise of extremist groups, and a lack of trust between the communities.

‘Militantisation’ of the terrain: Local equations dying out

The war on terror since October 2001 intensified the process of ‘*militantisation*’ of the tribal belt of Pakistan. Kurram with a significant Shia population suffered at the hands of Sunni jihadi Taliban who used the district as a passage to conduct their raids on US forces in Afghanistan. Upon being resisted by the Shias, they resorted to indiscriminate violence. It is fair to conclude that Shia militancy came in

¹²⁷ TTP on the side of the local Sunnis and Zainobiyon Brigade on the side of the Shias are fighting a proxy war according to many observers. See Inam Ul Haque, “Kurram — burying the demons of divide”, *The Express Tribune*, 5 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2513809/kurram-burying-the-demons-of-divide> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

as a response to this, initially as a defensive strategy but soon became a tool of sectarian politics that characterised inter-sectarian interaction in Kurram. Most observers point to the presence of intensely sectarian TTP and the Haqqani group who expanded their presence and influence in the entire tribal belt in general and in Kurram in particular. From the 1980s, sectarian confrontations became more common in Kurram, although it was present in a latent form in Kurram society prior to the advent of the Taliban in this area. The formation of TTP in 2007 marked a departure point for Sunni militancy in Kurram. The fact that there was a marked intensification of Sunni-Shia conflict in 200 leading to closure of the Thall-Parachinar Road for four long years practically shutting Parachinar out of Pakistan. The fact that the compromise in 2011 came about only after the Haqqani group of Taliban mediated the process of dialogue, demonstrated its strength in the district and its neighbourhood. The TTP backed by the Haqqani group has also made its presence felt in the area ever since and spoilt the inter-sectarian equation to a large extent.

For example, prior to the advent of Taliban and TTP, the local Shias and Sunnis had developed their own equations and sorted out their differences through dialogue disallowing any difference to snowball into a major conflict. There were instances, even through the years of violence especially since 2007, where local Sunnis and local Shias have resisted retributive action by militant groups from either side. Such voices of sanity are disappearing fast as violence is fast becoming a way of life in Kurram.

External factors

Here in comes the external factors that give a fillip to internal dissension— the influence of Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia among the Sunnis and that of Iran, among the Shias. The hardening of sectarian positions can be attributed to the Saudi-Iran rivalry in the West Asian theatre at one level and the newfound zeal among a new generation of vocal advocates from each of the sects to define their respective identities in exclusive terms taking the other as a major reference point. Each of the sects regards the other as heretical. Even if at an ideological level, the Al-Qaeda-influenced Haqqani group has changed its anti-Shia outlook to some extent, many of its cadres as well as influential sections within TTP, who are regarded as proteges of the Haqqanis, are virulently

anti-Shia and many of these, operating in Kurram, consider physical elimination of the Shias as an article of their faith.

This is where the persisting disputes over land and water resources between Sunni and Shia tribes come in. It is true that sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s, particularly during Muharram or Nowruz (the Iranian New year as celebrated by the Shi'a). However, the massive influx of Afghan refugees in the 1980s caused a distortion in the demographic balance of the area and changed the complexion of land-rights in Kurram. Afghan refugees were settled in many places where the land belonged to Shias, but when they decided to move back to Afghanistan, the local Sunni population in the neighbourhood, often egged on by the returning Sunni Afghans, would lay their claim to such land. This has triggered sectarian confrontation, and both Sunnis and Shias have been equally brutal in displaying their might in inflicting pain on each other.

In the Sunni-dominant tribal ecosystem, the Pashto-speaking Kurram Shias have faced discrimination and persecution, especially since 1980s. Used to an insular lifestyle in the lap of the Kurram valley, where they are in majority, there was a conscious decision by some of the Shias to venture into Kohat and Dara Adam Khel regions where the Taliban maintained a presence since early 2007. However, those who afforded such migration frequently faced abduction and attacks. Reports indicate that the radical Sunnis in these areas “stop every vehicle, ask the passengers to remove their shirts [to identify Shi’as by the marks left on their back by Muharram flagellations] and also check their ID cards”.¹²⁸ Even Shia paramilitary forces were frequently at risk of abduction; Sunni personnel were usually set free, whereas the Shia ones were often executed (mostly beheaded).¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Reported *Dawn*, 6 September 2008

¹²⁹ Mariam Abou Zahab, “Sectarianism in Pakistan’s Kurram Tribal Agency” *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 7, Issue: 6, March 19, 2009, at <https://jamestown.org/program/sectarianism-in-pakistans-kurram-tribal-agency/> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

Kurram Agency is perceived to possess a unique form of militancy characterized by persistent sectarian violence. Both the Shia and Sunni communities within the region have been making efforts to eliminate this militancy; however, they contend that a ‘third force’ has obstructed the peace process. This third force is commonly recognized as the Taliban and various other militant organizations that receive external funding.¹³⁰ Some researchers have identified the entry of Taliban and TTP since 2006-2007 as an important factor worsening the sectarian situation in Kurram. Some would also conclude that before 2007, the sectarian conflicts in the region were limited to minor skirmishes and ideological debates. However, after the inclusion of Taliban and transnational militants, minor conflicts often transformed into a full-scale war.¹³¹ During this period, the Turi Shias played a vital role in blocking the influx and outflow of Taliban to and from Afghanistan via Kurram and since 2007, the local Taliban have played a role in provoking sectarian hatred in the terrain and used local Sunni population to block the movement of Shias to rest of Pakistan through Sunni areas in central and lower Kurram.

Between 2007 and 2011 when the Thall-Parachinar Road was closed for four years, it was held that “there were elements within and outside the agency, including the Taliban, who never wanted [any] accord to be implemented”.¹³² The opponents of the Murree accord were finally

¹³⁰ Sharafat Ali Chaudhry & Mehran Ali Khan Wazir, “Peacebuilding in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan: Conflict Management at State Level”, *Tigab, A Journal Of Peace And Development* Volume: II, December 2012, FATA Research Centre, Islamabad, <https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/81.pdf> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹³¹ Farooq Yousaf and Syed FurrukhZad, “Pashtun Jirga and prospects of peace and conflict resolution in Pakistan’s ‘tribal’ frontier”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 41, No 7, 2020, p. 1210, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1760088> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹³² Asad Munir, Ghouls And Ghosts, *Dawn*, 23 July 2017 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1346711/ghouls-and-ghosts> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

brought on board after the government and civil society undertaking a massive effort leading to opening of the Thall-Parachinar Road in 2011. However, it was realised in the succeeding years that the fundamental interests of those opposing the opening of the road remain negatively aligned with the interests of local Shias, which means that there is a rising level of inter-sectarian distrust and ill-will which are at the heart of the problem. Sectarian tension is pervasive and looking for triggers every now and then to manifest itself in violence. The longer this wound is allowed to fester, the more complicated it becomes. A whole new generation of youth fed with stories of atrocities perpetrated on them by the ‘other’ neighbouring sect is not ready to give peace a chance before fighting it out on the streets in youthful excitement buoyed with crusaders’ zeal borrowed from foreign theatres brought to Kurram and rest of Pakistan through social media.

As far as external factors are concerned, the role of Iran is often cited as a reason for Shia militancy in Kurram (Iranian involvement has been discussed earlier also). There were reports of Kurram Hizbullah connected ideologically to Iran and Mahdi militia¹³³ with their links to Iraq’s Moqtda Al-Sadr group operating in Kurram known for their militant views. Zainabyuon Brigade fighting in Syria had recruits from Kurram and was also often cited as an example of Shia radicalisation sponsored by Iran. This had allegedly exacerbated the sectarian situation in the district. According to estimates about 800 Shias from Kurram had travelled to Syria to fight with the Syrian government and many of them died in the war. Those who returned are consumed by the sectarian flame in Kurram. While Zainabyuon Shias are drawing much media attention, there is less discussion on the vast number of Sunnis who have gone from Kurram to fight with the Daesh/IS in Syria and elsewhere and those battle-hardened youth returning from these theatres are also making the area even more volatile.¹³⁴ Similarly the links of

¹³³ Mansur Khan Mahsud, “The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kurram”, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New America Foundation, April 2010, p.6.

¹³⁴ Farhat Taj, *The Real Pashtun Question*, Kautilya Publishers, Delhi, 2017, p. 58

TTP, Lashkar-e-Islam, Ansar-ul Islam, Sipah-e-Sahaba with Sunni sectarian groups outside Pakistan are not given as much attention by commentators focussing on the Kurram situation.

Ghettoisation & Shia radicalization

In the face of such attacks, Shias have tried to defend themselves from attacks by Sunni sectarian forces, whose number has increased over the years since the start of the Afghan Jihad in 1979. There is a considered view by a scholar that “the materiality of the state is largely absent from their region, and basic services such as security and law enforcement are non-existent. Addressing this vacuum, over the years Shia militiamen have assumed state-like responsibilities, such as manning security check posts in Parachinar and targeting, what they perceive as, Sunni militants.”¹³⁵ Regular attacks on the local Shia population led them to organise in self-defence and the Mahdi Militia came up to counter Sunni militants. It enjoyed local support among the local Shia tribes. With the formation of the Mahdi Militia, clashes between the group and Sunni groups (such as the TTP and Haqqani network) escalated because the Sunni militants were of the view that the Militia was being supported by Iran and Shia groups in Iraq.¹³⁶ Their own debt to forces in the neighbourhood as well as to dominant Sunni state system in Pakistan, which is much more substantial, is often forgotten. Easy availability of lethal weapons has made matters worse with both groups raising their own armies.

Another important factor is that both these communities, affected by years of violent confrontation between them, have learnt to leave apart and are comfortable in their own ghettos. The only issue is the geographical advantage that Sunnis have because of their control over the main communication line that runs through lower and central

¹³⁵ Mashal Saif, *The Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 203.

¹³⁶ Zia-ur-Rehman cited in Farooq Yousaf, *Pakistan, Regional Security and Conflict Resolution: The Pashtun 'Tribal' Areas*, Routledge, London, 2020, p.195

Kurram, cutting off Upper Kurram entirely from rest of Pakistan. The quest for a detour through Afghanistan which is tediously long and expensive has not been a healthy alternative primarily because of the same sectarian question, because the entire route runs through a terrain where the Islamic State, wedded to the idea of extermination of the Shias, holds its sway. Similarly, Sunnis of Tarimangal, blocked by Shias and unable to access rest of Pakistan through Thall-Parachinar Road go across to Afghanistan and travel through Khost and re-enter Kurram through Kharlachi in lower Kurram and then access other areas of KP. Such detours cause a lot of inconvenience to both Sunnis and Shias and has contributed to sectarian disharmony over time.

State losing monopoly of violence.

The entire eco-system, manufacturing inter-sectarian hatred and engineering violent conflict, has been allowed to perpetuate by the Pakistani state, which is dominated by a predatory military. While the political forces, after long years of deliberation and brainstorming, brought the erstwhile FATA into the political mainstream in May 2018, the military of Pakistan has still not played its role in establishing the state's writ by ensuring that the state has the 'monopoly of violence' in the terrain. It has clearly allowed local groups to acquire weapons and use them both to protect themselves, and to launch attacks against each other, at the slightest pretext, if they perceive anything going against their group interest. In reality, the military, by remaining ambivalent and aloof, has created a climate of impunity and a conducive environment for growth of a culture of violence that threatens to leap out of the fastness of the Safed Koh and take entire tribal belt by storm. The attacks on Orakzai Shias and Kurram Shias in other parts of KP also betray another grim reality that the Pakistani state may have reached a stage where it is emitting unmixed Sunni impulses that takes atrocities on Shias as natural and hence the response of the state to such violence has not been as serious as it could have been.

PTI's politics

At another level, the compulsions of democratic politics have also played havoc with the way political parties have approached this issue. The stance taken by PTI, which is in power in the province, has not, through its behaviour, led the Shias of Kurram to think that it is serious

about ameliorating their condition beyond a point. It was interesting to see Syed Faisal Raza Abidi, a self-professed Bareilvi and ally of the Shias, ex-PPP senator and known for his sympathies for the armed forces, making an interesting statement in social media that *Kurram Agency aman kharab karne mein takfiri dehsbatgard Taliban aur lashkar-e-Jhangvi mulabbas hai. Yah PTI ka paidaوار hai, MWM unse Ittehad khatm kare ya awam ko bewakoof banana chhod de*¹³⁷ [Takfiri¹³⁸ Terrorist Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are responsible for destroying peace in Kurram. These outfits are backed by (or created by) PTI. Hence, MWM should stop its alliance with PTI and stop making fool of the people of Pakistan]. As a pro-army politician, his statement tears into the PTI government's approach to the ongoing violence in Kurram.

A seasoned commentator in Pakistan and a retired major general, Ikram Ul Haque, who has served in Kurram in 2007-2008, was unsparing in his column in a newspaper about the way the PTI leadership was conducting itself in KP:

...one hopes that the politically amateur, agitational and protest-laced dispensation in KP would find the time and 'permission' to focus on the province's myriad problems, Kurram being one. 'Lament' will lead nowhere. Mr Gandapur, rather than persisting with his useless and politically suicidal *yalghars* against

¹³⁷ See Face book post by Tahir Raza Rizvi <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1102023478338514&id=100055926156261&set=a.205356124671925> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹³⁸ A *Takfiri* (derived from the word *Kafir*) is one who accuses another Muslim of being an apostate or unbeliever and excommunicates him/her from the fold of Islam. This idea has historically been linked to the Kharijites, who used it as an excuse for rebellion against the early Islamic caliphates. Takfiri philosophy has been embraced by extremist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the modern era to justify violence against Muslims and leaders they believe to be too secular. The damaging and polarizing nature of this philosophy is extensively denounced by mainstream Islamic scholars.

Islamabad, needs to grow up, find time, resources and the courage to face up to the problems and people of Kurram.¹³⁹

There is also the case of the military and federal government today, which are opposed to PTI, trying to pass on the buck to the local government and give it a bad name. The coordination among them does not inspire the confidence of the Kurram Shias as some of them put out fresh pictures on social media everyday adding an extra number to the days of siege of Parachinar reminding everybody that the operations undertaken by the state and the military have not succeeded.

Dwindling Jirga System

Another important issue flagged by some observers is the way the jirga system has lost its respect and relevance today, thanks to the way the government has handled it. They would point to a nuanced understanding of the jirga process which might explain why “the peace deal is already showing cracks”.¹⁴⁰ According to figures given by Munir Bangash of Anjuman-i-Farooqia, during the last few decades, almost 1800 jirgas have been held in the tribal areas without any significant success. According to Ikram Ul Haque quoted just above, who served in the terrain:

Half-hearted truces, cobbled together by tribal jirgas and imposed on exhausted belligerents, only provide temporary reprieve from violence, and cannot address the complex and intractable root causes. Some 64 such agreements to date, served as regrouping pauses before the next showdown.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Inam Ul Haque, “Kurram — burying the demons of divide”, *The Express Tribune*, 5 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2513809/kurram-burying-the-demons-of-divide>. (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁴⁰ Ghazan Jamal, “Failing Kurram Peace Deal”, *Dawn*, 18 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1886037/failing-kurram-peace-deal> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

¹⁴¹ See Inam Ul Haque, “Kurram — burying the demons of divide”, *The Express Tribune*, 5 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2513809/kurram-burying-the-demons-of-divide> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

In government-sponsored jirgas, there is a likelihood of the government coercing its members to accept a certain view which might not suit the situation. The government's perceived emphasis on the use of overwhelming force episodically without demonstrating its inclination to stay the course has pushed the people into the lap of the militant groups who have demonstrated their staying power and competed with the state in terms of their ability to establish their control among the people from whom they draw their strength. Some researchers would say that even if jirgas are being organised, traditional structures and agents of conflict resolution are either ignored or are sidelined, which leaves the people and the region prey to forces of disorder and violence. In such a situation, "[s]ustainable peace is achievable if traditional institutions and mechanisms are invoked within the local cosmologies and cultural rationalities of the concerned milieu and with their significant inclusion in conflict resolution and peace-building processes". The argument here is that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are not being utilised to their full potential by the state, which is tinkering with the jirga system by either disabling or undermining the local tribal elders and interfering with the way the jirgas have been organised and the way they function.¹⁴² Ikram Ul Haque would argue that the state, especially after the incorporation of the FATA into KP, has to play a predominant role:

Jirgas... can be 'complementary tools' in the [Conflict Resolution Mechanism] CRM in our tribal context for some time, [while it has to be recognised that] they weaken the modern state". The way the state has evolved mandates that "Modern Administration' must be in the driving seat squarely, firmly and effectively....Jirga today is at best a talk shop, good for venting out, opinion mobilization and 'local' dispute resolution

¹⁴² See Farooq Yousaf & Syed FurrukhZad, op cit.

(as cited), but never an alternative to the modern State apparatus, especially in dealing with complex and intractable issues like militancy and sectarian wars.¹⁴³

From a reactive to a proactive State

Overall, the strategy employed by the Pakistani government in addressing the Kurram conflict has been marked by inconsistency, characterized by reactive security measures that do not tackle the underlying issues, including sectarianism, political exclusion, and underdevelopment. The aim of incorporating FATA into KP was to assimilate the region into the national structure and pave the way for stability. Nevertheless, the government's failure to uphold the commitments made during the merger—such as the extension of legal and economic frameworks—has resulted in widespread disillusionment among the local populace.

In view of the above, the administration, including police and security forces, must operate in a manner that they inspire the trust and confidence of the people and are perceived to be impartial and well-meaning, committed to protect their life, property, and honour. The state should do everything possible to establish its monopoly over violence and bring all non-state actors under its control and make them accountable. If the state makes its presence felt, then there will be confidence among people to shed their weapons.

History of Kurram is witness to the fact that truces worked out through jirgas do not last. These agreements need to be enforced and implemented by the state machinery as the enforcement mechanisms used by tribal jirgas in the past like *Lashkar* and *Chalwesti* are no longer

¹⁴³ See Inam Ul Haque, “Kurram — burying the demons of divide”, *The Express Tribune*, 5 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2513809/kurram-burying-the-demons-of-divide> (accessed on 22 March 2025) He would even say: “We are past the state of tribal-based decision-making in our social and political evolution. Even in the tribal universe, *riyat* (State) is considered as a formidable ‘mother institution’.”

effective. Therefore, it has been suggested¹⁴⁴ by some that the state has to beef up security in the district along the vulnerable sections of the Thall-Parachinar road and other areas where sectarian clashes have occurred frequently, and station reserve forces and air-assets in the area to respond to any emergency situation arising out of sectarian conflict which has become endemic in Kurram and does not seem to go away anytime soon.

Make agreements public and transparent

All agreements arrived at through jirga or consultations among different stakeholders within the government must be made available to the public. These agreements are rarely published and circulated in the media. There are also not uploaded in any government sites. The details are not available and the summaries of the agreements in the media are not much reliable. The fine print in the agreements pertaining to measures being taken to deal with violence or fines being imposed for con-compliance, the groups involved in the decision making, the agencies involved in implementing the agreement are not there in the public domain. Transparency in these matters would help public monitoring of the process and this could also act as a check on the miscreants.

It is reported that the Land Commission established by the government had come out with solutions in some of the cases, but they have not yet been implemented. There is no document available in public about the solutions being proposed. In the absence of any clue about the proposed solutions by the government the whole issue remains in a cold storage aggravating the sectarian situation further. Making such efforts public would pressurise the government to take it forward rather than dragging its feet on the issue. Without sincere efforts on the part of the government to arbitrate long-standing disputes over land,

¹⁴⁴ See Inamul Haque, "Kurram - coexistence and cooption", *The Express Tribune*, 12 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2513809/kurram-burying-the-demons-of-divide> (accessed on 22 March 2025)

mountains, and watercourses involving respected elders from both sects with the authority to mediate and resolve conflicts, there cannot be sustainable peace and coexistence.

Autonomous social media playing havoc

The social media space, where sectarian venom is spewed with alacrity, is largely autonomous. Some monitoring of this space must be accompanied by identification of those using it to propagate hatred and due action must be taken to restrain such forces. Speeches of all sermon leaders and other firebrand speakers should be monitored. Those using words injuring the sentiments of others should be immediately persecuted. There should be strict ban on wall chalking. Insecure areas should be covered by deployment of forces on roads and vantage points.

Other issues of State's complicity

A recent work by a known Pakistani scholar, Farhat Taj, who has studied the sectarian problem in Kurram very closely and has done significant field survey in the district has identified many pertinent issues that plague the Pashtun society in general and Sunnis in particular in Kurram. She writes that the Sunnis have given themselves up to “religiosity, to a culture of Deobandi Tableeghi [Islam] spreading like cancer.... proliferating religious intolerance and sectarianism in the society”. The mainstream Pashtun political parties like Awami National Party (ANP), Pashtun Milli Awami Party (PMAP) the liberal federal party PPP and PTI are either not taking the issue seriously or doing enough to curtail this menace. According to her, PTI is engaged indirectly in the “forced Sunnification of Kurram” with active role played by its leader, Imran Khan, in exalting the role of Taliban in the region.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ See Farhat Taj, *The Real Pashtun Question*, Kautilya Publishers, Delhi, 2017, p. 56.

She would hold the state responsible for the sectarian situation in Kurram and argue that the mountainous Sunni Pashtuns of Kurram “deserve mitigation of their poverty and overall human development” and they would not have “eyes Shia lands if Pakistani state had been a pro-people state committed to their development (education, health, communication, water supply and sanitation)” and regard Pakistan’s adoption of the so-called ‘strategic depth policy’ as the main reason for the state leaving these areas unattended so that they could get easy recruits and foot-soldiers for proxy jihad they would use as strategic tool against neighbouring countries. It is indeed logical for her to say that when Shias of Kurram are left to themselves at the time of their tribulation, it is natural that they would reach out to whatever help comes from external sources to survive.

Core Sectarian issue has to be addressed

The violence in Kurram is fundamentally rooted in the state’s inability to tackle the underlying issues that fuel tensions. Given Kurram’s strategic location adjacent to Afghanistan, sectarian violence in the region poses a risk of spilling over into neighbouring districts and neighbouring regions as well. Therefore, the state must adopt a proactive stance in its peace-making efforts in Kurram as a first step towards addressing the Shia-Sunni sectarian question in broader socio-political context in Pakistan.

There is a reflexive attempt by state agencies and political leadership to brush aside the sectarian component of the conflict as secondary and inconsequential and disputes over land, forest and water resources as primary causes of the conflict. In the process, by resorting to the strategy of denial, the managers of the state are turning a blind eye to the social reality that is staring them at their face. Overemphasis on religion has made the sectarian fault-lines erupt with great force and created a context where every denomination is claiming its own version as the most authentic and that of the rest as heretical.

While there are suggestions in Pakistani mediascape about the way the sectarian situation can be managed, there is little attempt to decipher the root cause of the conflict. It is related to the way the state of Pakistan is conceived and its Deobandi-Sunni-Islamist orientation which is creating the hazardous socio-political context in which the Shias of

Kurram find themselves. The State of Pakistan, dominated by a Praetorian Army, more occupied with its own survival and perpetuation of its position in the power-hierarchy than resolution of social conflicts, has sought to deal with the symptoms and not the cause of the problem. In its efforts to undermine genuine democratic political processes in the country, which could have led to engagement of different groups and factions in a healthy competition for influence, the powerful army has ended up pushing an Islamist agenda that defines internal politics in Pakistan and its foreign policy outlook.

Regional geopolitics, since the 1980s, has given a fillip to Deobandi-Islamist-Jihadism of the most virulent kind with the success of the mujahideen in expelling the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and forcing the American forces to leave Afghanistan in 2021. This has prodded Pakistani army to use the same form of Jihadism as a tool against India even when political leadership has flagged it as suicidal and urged it to desist from using such tactic in the past. It is hardly acknowledged in Pakistan that the TTP, which has modelled itself after the Taliban of Afghanistan and aims to defeat the Pakistan army to turn Pakistan into an Islamic Emirate (like Afghanistan) is a Frankenstein's monster enabled by its security apparatus. The way the state has conceded ground to conservative forces who define the 'political sphere' in Pakistan today, it is vastly unlikely that the problem faced by the Shias of Kurram will ever be resolved in future. What Kurram requires is a vastly pro-active state investing in security and enforcing peace and creating a conducive atmosphere to undertake a massive process of "healing of hearts and minds"¹⁴⁶, never before attempted in these tribal areas. What is most probable, instead, is episodic state action to manage sectarian conflict in Kurram that is likely to become ever more frequent. It is not unfair to conclude that the Shias of Kurram have a bleak future ahead.

¹⁴⁶ Manzar Zaidi, "The Kurram conundrum", *The Daily Tribune*, 15 December 2024, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2516119/the-kurram-conundrum> (accessed 22 March 2025)

POSTSCRIPT

While this monograph was being finalized after receiving comments from the referees, yet another peace agreement was signed in Qila Abbas Saddar, Kurram, on 29 March 2025, just before Eid-ul-Fitr (on 31 March), aiming to end sectarian violence in the district. The key signatories involved elders from the Alizai Shia and Bagan Sunni tribes. The statement issued after the completion of the peace deal said that the warring factions “agreed to a peace treaty to restore peace and establish tolerance in the area through mutual consultation. . . .*for a period of eight months* to prevent any kind of conflict in the area and to try to improve the situation.”¹⁴⁷

The primary objective of this agreement has been to ensure the security of the Thall-Parachinar Highway and over the next eight months, address the causes of the escalating conflict, particularly since November 2024, which has claimed over 200 lives and disrupted daily life with road blockades and shortages. The jirga that struck this fresh deal called the agreement “a new message of hope” for Kurram and said that an attempt would be made “to create an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity in the region”.¹⁴⁸

Media reports said that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government, which drew lot of criticism for its indifference, mediated the deal. The negotiations were led by Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif, the aide and spokesperson of Chief Minister of KP, Ali Amin Gandapur, who

¹⁴⁷ See Arif Hayat, “Kurram tribes come to terms on 8-month peace deal ahead of Eidul Fitr”, 29 March 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1901115/>, and “Saif hails CM for new Kurram peace deal”, *The Express Tribune*, 31 March 2025, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2537296/saif-hails-cm-for-new-kurram-peace-deal> (accessed 4 April 2025)

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

was reportedly overseeing the development personally. The KP government committed itself to provide security and development support, according to Saif.

However, it is useful to add that the present truce is at best an adjunct to the 14-point agreement on 1 January 2025, which had failed to secure peace as attacks on government officials and security personnel continued weeks after the deal was signed. Over the next two months, starting 20 January after the second attack was carried out by miscreants on the escorted convoys carrying essential items to Parachinar (on 16 January), security operations were undertaken aimed at destroying the bunkers and arresting trouble makers to give peace a chance.

On 26 January, the KP government had resolved to implement the 14-point Kurram peace agreement “in letter and spirit, with no concession granted to anyone”.¹⁴⁹ The decision to implement the agreement was taken by yet another jirga after thorough discussions by members of the KP government, senior military officers including General Officer Commanding of the 9th Division, Major General Zulfiqar Ali Bhatti, Kohat commissioner Syed Motasim Billah Shah, former parliamentarians, jirga members and elders, provincial police chief Akhtar Hayat Khan, Kohat DIG Abbas Majeed Marwat, Kurram deputy commissioner Mohammad Ashfaq, Kohat deputy commissioner Abdul Akram, and other relevant officers. The chief secretary of the KP government, Nadeem Aslam Chaudhry, called the jirga a “silent soldier” and appreciated its efforts and support for the restoration of peace in Kurram.

In the following weeks, till 31 March 2025, 900 bunkers were destroyed¹⁵⁰ and even after striking the eight-month truce, the demolition

¹⁴⁹ “Kurram peace accord to be fully enforced?: KP chief secretary”, *The Dawn*, 26 January 2025, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1887669> ((accessed 4 April 2025))

¹⁵⁰ “Efforts to bring peace to Kurram yield result, says Saif”, *The News*, 31 March 2025 at <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1297019-efforts-to-bring-peace-to-kurram-yield-result-says-saif> (accessed 4 April 2025)

of bunkers continued. By 5 April 2025, media reports quoting government sources indicated that 988 bunkers were destroyed out of which 635 bunkers had been demolished in Upper Kurram and 353 in Lower Kurram.¹⁵¹ Apart from this, the government committed PKR 2 billion for CCTV cameras and security pickets along key routes and ensured that aid convoys (153 helicopter trips, 718 vehicles) reached affected areas. In a separate report, the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) of KP announced head money ranging from of PKR 3 million to 30 million on 14 terrorists involved in the recent violence in the Kurram district. The CTD claimed the accused were involved in the assassination of over 200 people, adding that all the terrorists were associated with the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹⁵²

It appears that the KP Government's commitment to security enhancements and efforts to rope in military support could sustain the momentum. The new deal secured through tribal buy-ins and reinforced by Eid's conciliatory timing, indicates that there may be a precipitate willingness on the part of the elders of the communities to de-escalate. However, challenges remain. There are historical precedents (e.g., Murree Accord 2008, Kohat Accord of 1 January 2025) that such agreements collapsed due to weak enforcement and determination of the militants to continue with their sectarian agenda, underscoring vulnerability of such deals. Gandapur's claim of foreign weapon supplies and TTP presence near Afghanistan's border pose significant risks ahead. Delays in road reopening and disarmament, key to trust building in the area, only add to popular dismay and scepticism about the government's long-term commitment to enforce and sustain peace in Kurram.

¹⁵¹ "Bunkers demolition continues in Kurram as per peace deal", 05 April 2025, at <https://www.nation.com.pk/05-Apr-2025/bunkers-demolition-continues-in-kurram-as-per-peace-deal> (accessed 6 April 2025)

¹⁵² "Kurram warring tribes reach 8-month peace agreement", *Daily Times*, 30 March 2025, at <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1281526/kurram-warring-tribes-reach-8-month-peace-agreement/> (accessed 6 April 2025)

Although the eight-month deal provides a window for stability, its success would depend on the government's continued efforts and commitment, tribal adherence, and tackling underlying issues such as Pakistan's growing sectarian divide, lingering land disputes in Kurram that serve as catalysts for armed sectarian conflicts, and militant threats arising from the TTP's consolidation of control in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands. On the ground, things are more tranquil but still precarious; there have been occasional reported attacks and continuous efforts to reopen highways. Given the chances of relapse due to past difficulties, the future hinges on continued government enforcement and participation of the tribes.

As the discussion in the main body of this work suggests, it is not the first time that security forces have tried to use overwhelming force to bring the situation under control in Kurram. In the past too in the wake of the operations in 2010 and 2011, the army had organised media trips to Kurram to present their case that they had done everything possible to bring peace and tranquillity to the terrain, only to be proved wrong in the subsequent days. The sectarian animus runs so deep that even if one were to address the 'symptoms of the disease' in the shape of fight over unresolved land disputes, which many in Pakistan cite as the root cause of the violence in Kurram, the problem of sectarian conflict is going to be there for a long time. The sectarian issue in Kurram is linked to the overall sectarian issue in rest of Pakistan which is exacerbated by the violent assertion of militant Sunni Islamist groups against Shias in different parts of Pakistan.

Back in 2010s, the army's operations failed because the security dynamic of the region was soon left to the mercy of local sectarian elements affiliated to TTP, who continue to hold sway in the region even today. Even if the forces within the TTP do not, perhaps, have the wherewithal to overrun the Pakistan state, they have made the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands their home and challenged the writ of the state in this terrain. The sectarian dynamic in the entire region in general, and in Kurram in particular, is likely to worsen in the days to come with factions within the TTP gravitating towards the rabidly sectarian Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and the Pakistani state appearing helpless in containing their activities and establishing its control in the terrain.

MAJOR SECTARIAN CLASHES IN KURRAM (1938-NOVEMBER 2024)

S. No.	Date	Details
1.	1938	Sectarian clashes erupted in Lucknow. Turi Shias wanted to join Shias of Lucknow, but were stopped from moving out of the district by local Sunnis, leading to clashes.
2.	1961	Sectarian clashes at Sadda. Shia Muharram procession attacked leading to clashes. In the same year, the Central Sunni Mosque in Parachinar, 160 metres away from the Imambargah of the Shias, was reconstructed with a 150 ft high hollow minaret, which raised suspicions of the Shias that this could be used by Sunni radicals in times of riots.
3.	1971	Clashes took place over the construction of a mosque minaret in Parachinar.
4.	December 1979	USSR invades Afghanistan. Flight of mujahideen into Pakistan. Kurram becomes a natural choice because of its proximity. Refugee camps come up in Kurram. 30 refugee villages in Lower Kurram, three in Upper Kurram.
5.	1980s	Kurram became a launching pad for the mujahideen into Afghanistan in the 1980s.

6.	1981	A local Shia in Sadda, headquarters of Lower Kurram, named Haji Hussain Ghulam alias Dadoo starts construction of an Imambargah. Local Sunnis do not object. 75% of land in Sadda belonged to Shias as per Government records (<i>Kagbzat-e-Mal</i>). Even contribute to the funds. Sunni Akhunzada family from Orakzai raised a lashkar and threatened to demolish it. Afghan refugees support the move. Serious sectarian clashes occur. Many, mostly Shias, are killed. The state does not intervene. Later a jirga comes out with the Kohat Agreement. Clashes continue.
7.	1982	Sectarian violence erupted in Sadda, displacing over some 60 Shia families to Parachinar. Although, later in 1990, a tribal council agreed to facilitate their return, the decision was never implemented.
8.	1983	Dadoo family attacked by Afghan refugees, while taking refuge in a local Sunni family. All 14 members of the family mercilessly killed. State security forces reduced to silent spectators. Shias massacred. Flee to Upper Kurram. Sadda is nearly cleansed of Shias. Becomes a Sunni majority place
9.	1 October 1986	Shia Massacre in Kurram Clashes between the Shia population and Afghan Mujahideen fighters, when the former barred the latter from crossing their land to enter Afghanistan. Led to hundreds of deaths on both sides and forced further displacement of Shia families from Sadda to Parachinar.

10.	24 July 1987	In the Sunni majority Boshera, a Shia person went missing. His brother kidnapped a Sunni and refused to let him go till his brother's return. Elders fail to stop riots.
11.	September 1996	Some students wrote anti-Shia slurs on the black board in a school in Parachinar. Shia students resented it. Headmaster reported the case to Assistant Political Agent who fails to calm things down. Jirga fails too. Riots lead to 200 casualties.
12.	May 2001	13 people were killed when two sects exchange rocket fire. January in Orakzai, March in Kohat
13.	2005	Expulsion of Afghan refugees. Sunnis feared it could restore Shia dominance. Shia groups called for the resettlement of families displaced from Sadda during the 1982 violence, reigniting old grievances.
14.	2006	Afghan refugee camp in Margai China in Balishkhel area, vacated in 2006. Nearby Para Chamkani, a Sunni tribe, tried to occupy the land. Shia tribes resisted it.
15.	March 2007	Sunnis bring out a procession on the occasion of Millad un-Nabi in Parachina. Anti-Shia slogans raised leading to firings from rival groups.
16.	6 April 2007	An unidentified gunman fired at a procession taken out by the Shias in Parachinar city celebrating Milad un-Nabi leaving many people killed and injured. The situation escalated into a deadly riot where heavy weapons such as mortars, launchers and machineguns were used. The paramilitary forces and

17.	2 nd May 2007	army were called upon to control the situation. An agreement was concluded between the parties for a ceasefire. However, this truce proved short-lived.
18.	15 November 2007	In Parachinar, some unknown person fired at Sunni shopkeepers in the night, killing and injuring many persons. A day later, a hand grenade thrown at Shias coming out from their mosque after offering Friday prayers, killing and injuring many people reigniting sectarian clashes. The main Thal-Parachinar road remained closed for four years (2007-11). Government responded by organising escorted convoys to travel and transport essential goods to Shias in Upper Kurram.
19.	14 December 2007	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) formed in in then South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).
20.	2008	Shias forced to travel through Afghanistan. This detour, via Paktia, Gardez, Kabul and Torkham, transformed a typical five-hour journey into a gruelling 20-hour ordeal. The Shias constructed the 'Defence Road' on communal land, connecting Shia villages near Alizai and other areas in Lower Kurram to Parachinar.
21.	26 September 2008	A ceasefire agreement was concluded between the parties in Islamabad on 26 th September 2008, which is popularly called as 'Islamabad Accord'.
22.	1 October 2008	Shia dominant village (Pewar) was attacked by militants with heavy

23.	15 October 2008	armaments. In same way, the Sunni dominant village (Mangalan) was attacked by fanatics with heavy weaponry. These attacks pushed the whole Kurram into sectarian clashes. Efforts to resolve the conflict led to peace agreements, known as the Murree Agreement.
24.	16 June 2009	The sectarian groups started fighting over the constructions of bunkers in Khar Kali and Balishkhel. The clashes spread to whole of the Agency and lasted for 12 days.
25.	29 June 2009	A jirga of elders concluded a ceasefire agreement between the parties.
26.	17 July 2010	Militants attacked the last two vehicles in the convoy heading for Peshwar from Parachinar escorted by security forces with automatic weapons near Char Khel village, 1 km from Mandori, killing 18 people.
27.	15 September 2010	The Shia dominant village (Khaiwas) was allegedly attacked by Sunnis of Mangalan village. As a counterattack, Mangalan was attacked three days later on 18th September allegedly by the Shias. In these attacks, the Mangalan village was burnt to ashes and Khaiwas was recaptured by the assailants.
28.	26 October 2010	Many in Kurram suspect the government is pressurising the Turis to meet Taliban demands to cross their land. The military blockades Kurram agency in response to Turi reluctance to allow Taliban passage through their land. The blockade means that the Turis are hemmed in by the military on one side and by the Taliban on the

29.	3 February 2011	other. The tribe beat the militants out of the area during a major battle in September 2008. Landmark peace deal in February 2011. 220 member Jirga of both sects entered into a peace truce which was decided to come into effect on 5th February. Roads reopened.
30.	26 March 2011	the Taliban attacked three vehicles heading from Peshawar to Parachinar and kidnapped 22 Shias, and the road was closed again. Hakeemullah wanted these prisoners to be handed over to him so that he could receive ransom money in exchange for their release. Noor Mohammad, Fazal Saeed Haqqani's deputy, refused — he also killed eight of the hostages. Hakeemullah removed Fazal Saeed Haqqani from the command, Noor Muhammad was killed and a man by the name of Siraj Quraishi was made commander. In retaliation, Fazal Saeed Haqqani formed the Tehreek-i-Taliban Islami Pakistan and severed all contacts with the TTP.
31.	October 2011	Sporadic sectarian clashes took place in Pesar (Shia dominant village) and Pesar Tangi (Sunni dominant village).
32.	24 October 2011	Peace agreement concluded between the parties in which Rs. 8 lakh was fixed as a fine for the violators
33.	17 February 2012	A suicide bomb attack on a market in the market in Parachinar killed 26 and injured 50 others. Three more people died when security forces fired on crowds protesting against the attack.

34.	10 September 2012	At least 12 people killed and dozens injured after a car bomb exploded at a market in Parachinar. The car detonated as a security convoy passed by the Market.
35.	13 March 2013	A Sunni Punjabi soldier named Anwar Din accused of having an affair with a local Shia woman. The girl was taken into custody and the boy was taken to the local graveyard, stoned to death and buried. About 30 shops were destroyed and 50 damaged in the busy commercial area.
36.	27 July 2013	At least 57 people were killed and 154 injured after two bombs exploded close to two different mosques in Parachinar. One of the bombs was believed to have been planted on a motorcycle. Military helicopters and artillery guns shelled suspected militant hideouts.
37.	4 February 2014	Park Hotel in Peshawar, close to Imambargah Alamdar in Kucha Risaldar, frequented by Kurram's Shias bombed.
38.	28 November 2014	Shia cleric Allama Nawaz Irfani murdered in Islamabad, Thousands attend funeral in the Kurram tribal district of north-west Pakistan. He had led a successful armed campaign in 2008 to evict Taliban militants from Kurram.
39.	26 January 2015	The formation of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) — the IS's local chapter — by disgruntled TTP members from Kurram and neighbouring Orakzai in 2015 amplifies violence against Shias in the region.

40.	15 Feb 2015	Government started imparting special arms training to male and female teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of the adjoining tribal region. However, law-enforcement agencies in Kurram asked people to surrender weapons.
41.	21 January 2017	25 persons killed and more than 87 injured in a bomb explosion at the Sabzi Mandi (vegetable market) area, in Parachinar town, in the morning when the market was crowded with retailers buying fruits and vegetables. LeJ-al-Alami claimed responsibility. Along with the TTP splinter, Shehryar Mehsud group, LeJ carried out the attack. Five suicide attacks in Parachinar during the year.
42.	31 March 2017	At least 24 persons were killed and 100 were injured in a suicide car bomb attack on an Imambargah in the Noor market area of Parachinar when people gathered for Friday prayers near the women’s entrance of the Imambargah. TTP faction Jama’at-ul-Ahrar (JuA) claimed responsibility, said it was part of TTP’s “Operation Ghazi” targeting the Shias.
43.	23 June 2017	At least 67 persons killed and more than 200 injured in back-to-back explosions in the Turi Bazaar area of Parachinar, when the market was crowded for Iftar and Eid shopping on account of on Jumu’atul-Widaa’, the last Friday of the Muslim month of Ramadan before the Eid al-Fitr. The LeJ al-Alami claimed and threatened more attacks over “Pakistanis fighting

44.	30 January 2018	against Sunni militants in Syria's civil war". An Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion has killed eight people including three women and a child at Maqbal area of Kurram Agency
45.	15 April 2018	Pakistan FC troops fired upon from Khost province of Afghanistan while on "routine surveillance along Pak-Afghan border plugging gaps and making necessary preparations for starting fencing in that area.
46.	16 April 2018	Afghan Forces return bodies of 5 FC men killed by Taliban. Blocked the supply route near Durand Line for Taliban militants between Kurram and Dand-e-Pathan in Paktia Province of Afghanistan
47.	2 September 2018	FC personnel killed when militants from Afghanistan opened fire at the post at Khataka Post, three kilometres south east of Bezo Sar, Kurram
48.	2 May 2019	Weapons and explosives found during a search operation in Karakhel area of Kurram
49.	29 October 2019	A bomb exploded in the Jamal Mela area injuring children playing there.
50.	9 May 2020	Blast in an imambargah in Shoorki area of Kurram. The building collapsed from the impact of the explosion. Caretaker injured.
51.	23 July 2020	At least 20 persons, including a child, were injured in an explosion in Turi Bazaar of Parachinar. Improvised Explosive Device (IED) that had been fitted inside a vegetable cart.
52.	26 June 2021	Militants abducted labourers setting up cell phone towers in Kurram.

53.	29 Jun 2021	At least 10 persons killed and eight others injured when a landmine explosion struck a van in the Godar area of Kurram.
54.	6 July 2021	Militant abducted five labourers from in Zaimokhet area of central Kurram Tehsil while installing a cellular tower
55.	25 December 2021	The KP government established a Land Commission for the settlement of the unmeasured disputed land (<i>shamilat</i>) in Kurram.
56.	4 March 2022	Suicide Bombing at Masjid Asna-e-Ashri in the Qissa Khwani Bazaar area of Peshawar, often visited by Kurram's Shia population, killing over 60 people. ISKP claimed responsibility.
57.	4 May 2023	Muhammad Sharif, a Sunni school teacher, killed after unknown persons opened fire on a moving vehicle on Salozan Road. Sunni armed men enter the Tari Mangal High School and kill six schoolteachers and a staff member while performing examination duties; all of them belonged to the Turi Bangash tribe.
58.	7 July 2023	Trouble starts over construction on disputed Shamilat Land (community land of about 12.5 acres or 100 kanals) at Boshera Dandar Sehra, Upper Kurram; seven killed and 37 injured. Later a scandalous video of an arrested accused adds fuel to fire. Very tense situation continued to prevail in Sada, Balishkhel, Piwar, Tarimangal, Muqbal, Nastikot, Kadman Para Chamkani and other areas, as fighting raged.

59.	12 July 2023	The violence spreads to several neighbouring areas, including Khar Kallay, Baleshkhel, Pewar, Gidu, Teri Mengal, Kamran Para Chamkani, Maqbal, and Kunj Alizai.
60.	27 Oct 2023	Two vehicles being escorted by police came under attack in Charkhel area
61.	28 Oct 2023	Shias of Parachinar's Khar Kalay village and Sunnis of Balishkhel -exchange fire.
62.	29 Oct 2023	Highly enraged residents of Upper Kurram stage a protest against the killing of eight people
63.	26 December 2023	Attack on a Parachinar-bound bus from Peshawar (251 km distance) at Hangu (112 kms from Peshawar), resulted in deaths of two individuals and left four critically injured.
64.	April 2024	Pakistan officially banned the Zainabiyoun Brigade also known as Liwa Zainebiyoun.
65.	8 June 2024	Unidentified terrorists attacked security forces check post in the Kurram tribal district leaving seven personnel injured.
66.	16 June 2024	At least two fatalities were reported and five sustained injuries in an explosion on Koram Road in Kurram district
67.	26 July 2024	Two people killed and around 40 injured when armed clashes between Boshehra and Maleekhel tribesmen began over a land dispute. Rocket shells fired in the Tari Mangal and Pewar areas
68.	21 November 2024	Civilian passenger convoys going from Parachinar to Peshawar attacked near in Mandori and Ochit. Indiscriminate firing for 40 minutes killing 44 people, including eight women and three children, and injured over 30 others. Riots rage on.

The monograph focusses on the unending sectarian conflict in the Kurram district in Pakistan. It traces the history of Kurram, the origin of the Turi Shias and chronicles major incidents of sectarian conflicts in the district. It argues that sectarian violence in Kurram, Pakistan, between Shias and Sunnis is deeply rooted in historical animosities, exacerbated by the state's Sunni-Islamist orientation and external influences like the Afghan Jihad and Saudi-Iran rivalry. It highlights the 'militantisation' of the region since 2001, with Sunni groups like Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Haqqani Group of Afghanistan intensifying conflict, countered by Shia militias acting in self-defence. The state's failure to establish monopoly over violence, coupled with a weakening jirga system, denial of the fact that the sectarian animus is driving the conflict, and ambivalence of the Pakistan Tehrik Insaf (PTI) which is in power in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), perpetuates unrest. Land disputes and radicalization, fuelled by external actors, deepen the divide, with the author concluding that Pakistan's half-hearted efforts offer no lasting solution, predicting a bleak future for Kurram's Shias.



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