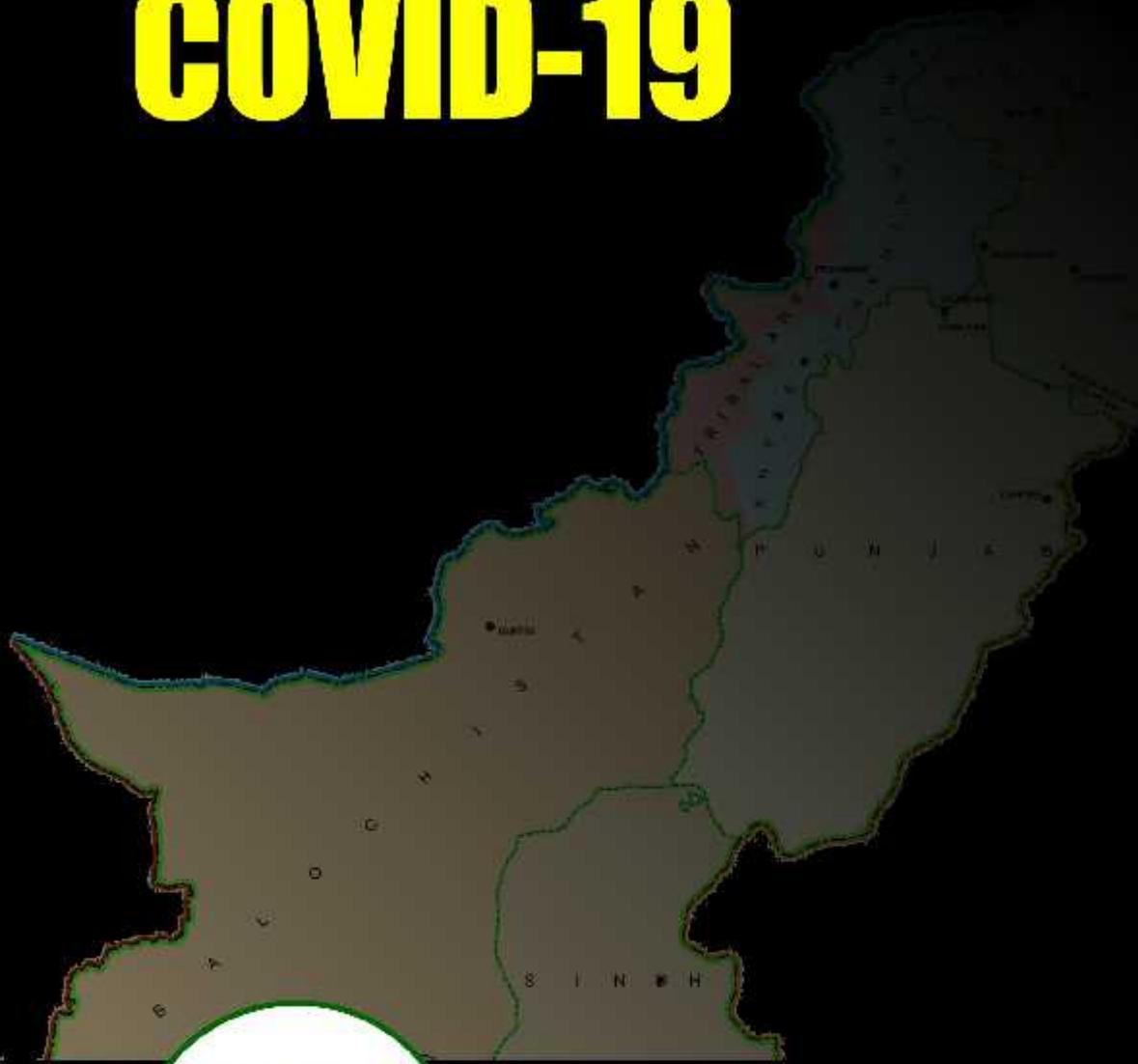
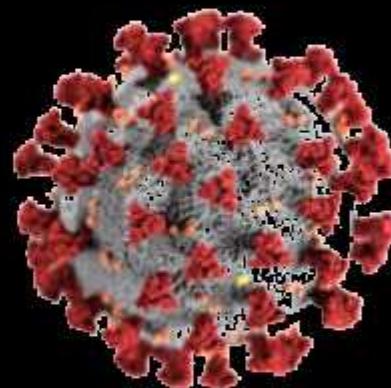


Terrorism in Pakistan during COVID-19



**NATIONAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME
PAKISTAN**

POLICY BRIEF

TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN DURING COVID-19

by Muhammad Amir Rana



This policy brief was researched and written by Muhammad Amir Rana, Secretary NIOC. Ms Samina Ahmed and Mr. Jawaid Akhtar, Advisory Board members, reviewed this policy brief and added very valuable comments. Director NIOC Tariq Khosa provided strategic guidance. This policy brief is issued after the review and approval of the NIOC Advisory Board and with the support of NIOC Secretariat.



NATIONAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME
PAKISTAN

ADVISORY BOARD

Tariq Parvez

President Advisory Board, NIOC:
Former Director General Federal
Investigation Agency

Zahid Hussain

Member NIOC AB:
Eminent journalist particularly
specializing in countering terrorism

Samina Ahmed

Member NIOC AB:
Senior Adviser Asia and Project Director,
South Asia for the International Crisis Group

Zubair Habib

Chairman CPLC Karachi, Member
NIOC AB:
For community outreach.

Jawaid Akhtar QPM

Member NIOC AB:
Police Officer. retired as the Deputy Chief
Constable of West Yorkshire Police

Fasi Zaka

Member NIOC AB:
Communications expert. To steer the
advocacy campaign.

Tariq Khosa

Director

Muhammad Amir Rana

Secretary

Muhammad Ali Nekokara

Deputy Director

Hassan Sardar

Admin & Finance Manager

Ammar Hussain Jaffri

Communication Strategist

Kashif Akram Noon

Lead Researcher

NIOC DIRECTORATE

CONSULTANTS

Outline

Terrorism in Pakistan during COVID-19

	Foreword
<i>1</i>	Introduction
<i>2</i>	Pakistan's Security Landscape (March 1 to June 30, 2020)
<i>3</i>	The Active Terrorist Groups
<i>4</i>	Shift in Targets and Tactics?
<i>5</i>	Afghanistan and Terrorism in Pakistan
<i>6</i>	The Policy Challenges and Responses
<i>7</i>	Security Challenges during the Pandemic

Foreword

This is fifth paper of a series of policy-oriented research publications on various aspects of Organized Crime. National Initiative against Organized Crime (NIOC) Pakistan is managing and supporting this series of publications, whose main purpose is to better understand the nature of the Organized Crime including during the Coronavirus pandemic. Terrorism and counter-terrorism are one of the core themes at NIOC as it has been continuously monitoring the changes in terrorism trends in Pakistan since the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease in the country.

This policy paper has been written by Muhammad Amir Rana, who is well known for his analysis and commentaries on issues related to terrorism and extremism. He is director research at Pak Institute for Peace Studies and general secretary at NIOC Pakistan. The paper focuses the critical challenge of terrorism for Pakistan and its interface with the COVID-19 pandemic situation. He argues that although it is too early to assess the impact of the pandemic on a conflict and conflict-related situations, yet it cannot be ruled out that COVID-19 has increased vulnerabilities on the level of state and society and violent extremists could exploit those, mainly with the purpose to add to instability and insecurity by carrying out terrorist attacks.

The policy paper also provides a detailed account of different terrorist groups' activities in Pakistan since March 2020 with a view to better understand changes in their operational targets, strategies and tactics. It also focuses the Afghan Taliban's nexus with foreign terrorist groups, including Pakistani Taliban, and its implications for Pakistan. The last part looks into state responses to all emerging threats and offers an analysis of the responses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I hope this policy brief will help enhance understanding of the issue. NIOC will continue to present cross-cutting policy briefs, research papers, and reports on the themes related to Organized Crime.

Tariq Khosa

Director NIOC

July 16, 2020

Terrorism in Pakistan during COVID-19

1. Introduction

The security landscape of Pakistan has not witnessed any major shift since March this year when the coronavirus cases started to rise. The frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks, however, increased in May and June, particularly in North Waziristan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the restive southwestern province of Balochistan.¹ More recently, a violent Sindhi nationalist group launched a number of attacks against the security forces in three cities in Sindh. In June, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) building in Karachi, where law enforcement personnel were alert enough to kill all four attackers; three security guards and one police officer also lost their lives before the attack was successfully foiled. Similarly, Hizbul Ahrar, a breakaway faction of militant group Jamaatul Ahrar, has recently perpetrated two attacks in Rawalpindi district of Punjab.

However, linking this surge in terrorist attacks with the pandemic is difficult. But it certainly indicates that the terrorist groups continue to demonstrate the capacity to plan and conduct attacks from the tribal belt to Karachi, despite the government's claims of counter-terrorism successes. At the same time, terrorists could be eyeing the opportunities created by the pandemic – such as growing socioeconomic insecurities and grievances of the people and the state's failure to provide adequate social safety nets, as well as preoccupation of the state and its security agencies with the pandemic situation, which could result into a decreased focus on extremism and terrorism related issues. But, terrorists are, apparently, yet waiting to take any action in that regard. To fully reactivate their operational networks, they would have to reconnect to their support bases in the country, besides increasing recruitment and fund raising efforts.

However, there have been some recent indications that militant groups could be trying to regroup and consolidate their operational strength. These include some recently reported high-impact attacks against security forces, mainly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; the killing of the Islamic State members in south Punjab; the arrest of the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) associates in Karachi; the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) increasing activities in Waziristan and adjoining districts; and Hizbul Ahrar's targeted killing of police personnel in Rawalpindi district of Punjab. At the same time, banned sectarian groups have started their activities and fueled the sectarian hatred accusing each other of spreading COVID-19.

¹ According to the statistics provided in PIPS monthly security reports of Pakistan, compared to 8 and 11 reported terrorist attacks in April and May respectively, as many as 14 attacks happened in Pakistan in June 2020. The reports can be seen here: <http://pakpips.com/app/reports>

Though the nature of the Baloch insurgency is different from religiously motivated terrorism, the Baloch insurgent groups can also capitalize on the pandemic related opportunities. That makes it imperative for the government and the security forces to not let their guards down in the counter-terrorism campaign. In recent years, the Baloch groups have not only intensified their attacks but also expanded the outreach of their terrorist violence beyond Balochistan. The foiled BLA attack on PSX Karachi on June 29th, as cited earlier, has created the intended impact in terms of raising the group's profile and highlighting its cause. The attack was launched by BLA's Majeed Brigade, which was formed to target the CPEC and Chinese interests in the country. In a related attack in November 2018, the BLA terrorists, including one wearing a suicide vest, had attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi, but the security forces managed to kill all three attackers.²

The developments in Afghanistan could also affect the security landscape of Pakistan. Since the US and the Afghan Taliban signed a peace deal on February 29, the Afghan Taliban have gained political legitimacy without giving up their reliance on the use of force. As the intra-Afghan talks begin, their relationship with foreign militant groups, including Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, will bear security consequences for Pakistan.

Experts agree that Covid-19 has increased vulnerabilities on the level of state and society and violent extremists could exploit those, mainly with the purpose to add to instability and insecurity by carrying out terrorist attacks. Secondly, in a way, that would also serve the militants' purpose by adding to people's anti-government grievances. Pakistan is managing a significant number of Afghan refugees as well as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), whose vulnerability to Covid-19 disease is relatively higher due to lack of available facilities in camps. Although it is too early to assess the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the conflict and conflict-related situations, yet it cannot be ruled out that militants in the past have been exploiting the grievances of the marginalized groups including those living in camps. Therefore the threat could have multiple aspects, ranging from the possibility of the spread of the disease to recruitment for the militants.

Against this backdrop, this report focuses the key challenges related to terrorism and its interface with the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The first part consists of a review of the terrorist groups' activities since March 2020 aimed at studying changes in their operational targets, strategies, and tactics, as well as how they are using the coronavirus pandemic for propaganda purposes. The second part focuses the Afghan Taliban's nexus with foreign terrorist groups and its implications for Pakistan. The last part looks into state responses to all emerging threats, and offers an analysis of the responses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

² *The News*, November 24, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/397403-terrorists-hit-chinese-consulate-in-karachi-target-friday-bazaar-in-orakzai-39-die-in-twin-terror-attacks>; *Dawn*, November 24, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1447349/attack-on-chinese-consulate-in-karachi-foiled-militants-killed>

2. Pakistan's Security Landscape (March 1 to June 30, 2020)³

A total of 43 terrorist attacks happened in Pakistan since the outbreak of coronavirus in Pakistan, or from March 1 to June 30, 2020, to be precise. These attacks caused 58 deaths and left another 88 injured. Apart from the terrorist attacks, 15 anti-militant operational strikes and four incidents of clashes between the security forces and the militants claimed in all 69 lives. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Overall Violent Incidents and Casualties in Pakistan (March 1 to June 30, 2020)

Nature of incidents	No. of incidents	Killed	Injured
Terrorist attacks	43	58	88
Clashes between security forces and militants	4	15	6
Operational attacks by security forces	15	54	6
Plot/foiled terror attempt	7	0	0
Targeted attacks [not specific if terrorist]	5	7	1
Total	74	134	101

2.1 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

Over 58 percent of the total terrorist attacks reported from across Pakistan since March 1st concentrated in KP. The highest number of terrorist attacks for any one KP district was reported from North Waziristan, where militants managed 14 terrorist attacks out of the total 25 attacks reported from the province. Rest of the attacks happened in Bajaur, Kurram and Peshawar districts.

Table 2: Violent incidents in KP (March 1 to June 30, 2020)

Nature of incidents	No. of incidents	Killed	Injured
Terrorist attacks	25	26	30
Clashes between security forces and militants	4	15	6
Operational attacks by security forces	13	46	6
Plot/foiled terror attempts	6	0	0
Targeted attack (not specified as terrorist)	4	7	0
Total	52	94	42

As many as 17 attacks in KP, or 68 percent of the total attacks recorded in the province, targeted personnel of security forces and law enforcement agencies, which caused 20 deaths and inflicted

³ Most statistics used in this report are based on PIPS database on conflict and security incidents: www.pakpips.com/app/database

injuries on 24 others. Four attacks hit civilians killing four and injuring six persons. One attack hit each of Shia community and immunization workers. (See Table 3)

Table 3: Targets of the terrorists in KP (March 1 to June 30, 2020)

Targets	No. of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security forces/law enforcement	17	20	24
Tribal elders	1		
Civilians	4	4	6
Shia religious scholars/community	1	1	0
Political leaders/workers	1		
Health/polio workers, security escorts	1	1	0
Total	25	26	30

The growing number of terrorist attacks by the TTP, mainly in North Waziristan, also implies that the militants could be trying to reestablish themselves in KP. But they are apparently facing resistance. The reported 13 anti-militant operations – in which 38 militants including some high-profile commanders were killed – also hinted at the growing presence of militants there. The government and security agencies are though vigilant of these developments, but more efforts are needed to install and strengthen political-administrative structures, including of law enforcement, in merged tribal districts of the province.

Militants may also be expanding their areas of presence and operations. For instance, the reported assault on a police station in the Orakzai district on March 19th was alarming in many ways. Orakzai was once hub of Jamaatul Ahrar, a splinter group of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. But in recent months and years, not many incidents of terrorism have been reported from there, especially when compared with the twin Waziristan districts and DI Khan, among others. First, while the TTP and other militants were trying to hit their native towns to regain the lost presence and influence, the groups like Jamaatul Ahrar could also try to regroup in their town of origin including Bajaur and Orakzai; Bajaur also faced 3 attacks in these four months and at least four terror plots were foiled there. Secondly, as militancy has largely remained confined to few districts of the province, attacks in Orakzai, Bajaur and other districts could make it a widespread phenomenon again.

The situation in Afghanistan – especially after the US signed a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban – could also impact the militant landscape and militancy of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, mainly of the bordering districts (discussed below). The government and security agencies should be ready to confront and counter these and similar threats.

2.2 Balochistan

In Balochistan, Baloch nationalist insurgents perpetrated seven terrorist attacks since March this year, which caused 17 deaths and nine injuries. Baloch insurgent groups including Baloch Liberation Army, United Baloch Army (UBA) and Lashkar-e-Baluchistan (LeB) perpetrated all of these attacks. The religiously motivated militant groups, including the Pakistani Taliban groups and factions of Sunni and Shia violent sectarian groups, are still active in the province, and were responsible for three attacks from March to June this year. Thus, in all 10 terrorist attacks happened in Balochistan during these four months, which is a declining trend comparing with the first two months of the year when a combined number of eight attacks had killed 35 people. Improved security measures could be a cause for that.

Like in KP, security forces were the prime target of the insurgents and religiously motivated militants in Balochistan from March 1 to June 30. Six terrorist attacks in Balochistan, during this period, targeted personnel of security forces, which caused 18 deaths and injuries to 14 others. Four attacks hit civilians including one attack on tribal elders. (*See Table 4*)

However, in May, BLA and United Baloch Army militants carried out, separately, two major attacks against security forces, in Kech and Bolan, respectively. These attacks claimed the lives of six army soldiers, six Frontier Constabulary (FC) personnel and one civilian. Such attacks against security forces, although sporadic and less frequent, indicate that the Baloch separatists still pose a potent threat. To their operational advantage, they have also established networks in areas closer to the Pak-Iran border. Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa had recently spoken to the Iranian chief of armed forces Maj Gen Mohammad Bagheri to express his concern over the attack. Both countries are in regular contact to address border security and common terrorist threats, but no positive outcome has been seen yet.

Table 3: Violent incidents in Balochistan (March 1 to June 20, 2020)

Nature of incidents	No. of incidents	Killed	Injured
Terrorist attacks (by nationalist insurgents)	7	17	9
Terrorist attacks (by religiously inspired) militants	3	2	12
Operational attacks by security forces	1	4	0
Total	11	23	21

Apparently the provincial government of Balochistan appears vigilant of the emerging situation in the aftermath of coronavirus pandemic. According to Minister for Home and Tribal Affairs Mir Ziaullah Langove, with proper efforts by law enforcement agencies, the law and order situation in Balochistan is being maintained adequately amid the coronavirus outbreak. “Security forces, police and other departments are alert and the overall state of affairs in the province is being monitored,”

he said while presiding over a meeting held in Quetta to review security situation in the province.⁴ Still one cannot rule out the possibility of the militants' exploitation of the situation mainly in areas closer to Iranian border, where security forces are mainly focused on addressing the situation arising out of the spread of coronavirus.

Table 4: Targets of the Terrorists in Balochistan (March 1 to June 30, 2020)

Targets	No of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security forces/law enforcement agencies	6	18	14
Tribal elders	1	0	2
Civilians	3	1	5
Total	10	19	21

3. The Active Terrorist Groups

During last four months, four religiously inspired militant and seven separatist nationalist groups were active in Pakistan, and they all together perpetrated 43 terrorist attacks across the country.

Table 5: Terrorist Attacks Claimed/Perpetrated by Terrorist Groups (Mar 1 to Jun 30)

Organization	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh	Total
Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	2	15	-	-	17
Jamaatul Ahrar	-	1	-	-	1
Local Taliban	-	5	-	-	5
United Baloch Front (UBA)	1	-	-	-	1
Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)	3	-	-	1	4
Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)	1	-	-	-	1
Balochistan Republican Army (BRA)	1	-	-	-	1
Lashkar-e-Balochistan	1	-	-	-	1
Sindhu Desh Liberation Front (SDLF)	-	-	-	1	1
Sindhu Desh Revolutionary Army	-	-	-	4	4
Rival Sectarian group	-	1	-	-	1

⁴ "Security situation in Balochistan reviewed," *Dawn*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1545469/security-situation-in-balochistan-reviewed>

Organization	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh	Total
Hizbul Ahrar	-		2	-	2
Unknown militants	1	3	-	-	4
Total	10	25	2	6	43

3.1. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The TTP was the major actor of instability during last four months. The group was believed to be involved in 17 terrorist attacks, out of which 15 were reported from KP province and 2 from Balochistan. The small militant groups in KP and its tribal districts, described as the local Taliban, carried out five terrorist attacks since March 1st 2020.

3.2. Hizbul Ahrar

Hizbul Ahrar has managed to carry out two terrorist attacks in Rawalpindi district of Punjab in which one person was killed and 20 others were injured. It is also believed to be involved in target killing of at least 3 policemen in the city, which were reported by media as acts of crime. Its parent organization, i.e. Jamaatul Ahrar, also perpetrated one attack in KP.

3.3. Islamic State (IS)

The killing of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in October 2019 was a big blow for the Islamic State (IS) and its chapters across the world including its Khorasan chapter for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Though the group had announced a separate chapter for Pakistan in 2019,⁵ but so far it has failed to show its presence in the country and has not perpetrated any attack this year. The credit for this may also go to the law enforcement agencies, who dismantled a few cells of the group during last couple of months. On May 30th, Karachi police arrested a suspected militant linked with the IS group claiming that he was allegedly involved in a recent gun-and-bomb attack on a clinic over non-payment of extortion and other crimes in the city. He was previously associated with the banned TTP but in 2019, he joined Daesh, the Arabic acronym for IS.⁶ The Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of Punjab province also claimed a success against the banned IS after killing four of its

⁵ Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Announces 'Pakistan Province,'" VOA, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province>

⁶ Dawn, May 31, 2020, https://epaper.dawn.com/print-textview.php?StoryImage=31_05_2020_113_002

suspected terrorists in an intelligence led operation in Bahawalpur district.. Three accomplices of the terrorists were reported to have escaped.⁷

3.4. AQIS

Though Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was not believed to be involved in any terrorist attack in Pakistan over the last few years, but law enforcement departments still considered it a potent threat. An appraisal by the (CTD) noted that the banned AQIS was regrouping in Karachi, apparently to carry out some major attacks.⁸ Law enforcers reportedly busted a cell of AQIS and arrested four high-profile militants during an operation in the densely populated Gulistan-e-Jauhar area of the city. According to police, the detained militants were “planning to launch terrorist attacks targeting the Pakistan Stock Exchange, city courts and other public buildings in Karachi.” Karachi has remained hub of jihadist, sectarian and criminal violence and there is a possibility that their remnants are still there (though Karachi operation has eliminated and displaced the most) and keeping a low profile. The Covid-19 pandemic has overstretched the law enforcers, yet they need to remain vigilant enough to not allow the militants any opportunity to initiate a new wave of violence in the provincial metropolis.

3.5. Baloch insurgent groups

Around seven Baloch insurgent groups are active in Balochistan but the BLA and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) are the major groups which represent the new generation of the insurgents, mainly coming from urban backgrounds. BLA perpetrated three terrorist attacks since March 2020, including two in Balochistan and one in Karachi that targeted the Karachi Stock Exchange. Meanwhile one attack was claimed by each of UBA, BLF, BRA and Lashkar-e-Balochistan groups. The UBA claimed an attack after a long time in which, according to a statement by ISPR, six FC soldiers including a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) and a civilian driver embraced martyrdom in Pir Ghaib, Mach (Bolan district) on May 19th.⁹

3.6. Sindhi insurgent groups

The terrorist activities of Sindh-based separatist groups have increased since the coronavirus pandemic started in Pakistan. They have managed five attacks since March 1st 2020. After these attacks, the Interior Ministry banned the JSQM-A, Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SDLA), and Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SDRA) under the Ant-Terrorism Act 1997, arguing that “there are

⁷ *The Express Tribune*, May 17, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223338/1-four-terrorists-killed-bahawalpur-ctd/>

⁸ Imtiaz Ali, “CTD says splinter group of outlawed AQIS reorganizing in Karachi,” *Dawn*, October 15, 2019.

⁹ *The News*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/660544-seven-soldiers-martyred-in-two-separate-incidents-in-balochistan>; *Dawn*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1558421/seven-troops-martyred-in-two-attacks-in-balochistan>

reasonable grounds to believe that the organisations are engaged in terrorism” in Sindh province.¹⁰ According to a media report, government had taken this decision a month before but because of emphasis on coronavirus pandemic it delayed the action.¹¹

The JSQM-A is one among various factions of Jeay Sindh Tehreek (JST), a self-proclaimed “non-violent movement” founded by GM Syed. Since the demise of Syed, who pioneered the Sindhi secessionist movement in 1972, the JST has split into various factions. The most prominent among them are (late) Bashir Qureshi-founded JSQM, (late) Abdul Wahid Aresar-founded JSQM-A and Shafi Burfat-led Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz (JSMM). The SDLA is an underground militant outfit linked with JSMM, the only nationalist group to have announced its planned armed struggle. In 2013, the Interior Ministry banned the JSMM for their involvement in province-wide violence and placed Burfat, who lives in Europe in self-exile, on its list of wanted people. A few years back, Syed Asghar Shah, an SDLA leader hailing from Jamshoro district, abandoned the SDLA after developing differences with Burfat over funds and leadership, and formed his own outfit, the SDRA. In the beginning, both militant outfits were carrying out attacks on law enforcement personnel, railway tracks, gas pipelines, and electricity pylons as well as undertaking targeted killing on the basis of ethnicity, according to a security official who is privy to the ongoing crackdown on the groups. “But since the start of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)-linked development projects, the group started attacking the Chinese nationals using roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the province.” Luckily, no Chinese national has died in the attacks in the province so far.¹²

4. Shift in Targets and Tactics?

A little variation has been witnessed in the tactics of the terrorists during the coronavirus pandemic, but it is difficult to directly link this variation with the changing situation. In 25 terrorist attacks, the terrorists employed IED blasts including some vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) or motorcycle blasts. Few years back that was a pertinent attack tactic employed by the Baloch insurgents. But now it seems some other groups, including the Taliban, are tending to rely on the tactic, which is apparently easier to perpetrate and involves less reliance on suicide bombers whilst having a similar impact. However all vehicle-borne bombings were of relatively low intensity. But the threat is there that militants could improvise such attacks causing significant impact in terms of casualties.

¹⁰ Azaz Syed, daily *Jang*, May 08, 2020, <https://e.jang.com.pk/05-08-2020/pindi/pic.asp?picname=510.png>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ziaur Rehman, “The crackdown intensified,” *The News on Sunday*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/668374-the-crackdown-intensifies>

Target killing in North and South Waziristan is also on the rise. While there is no evidence to say these killings are terrorist attacks, yet locals suspect that some militant groups could be involved in these incidents with an aim to make a comeback. In a high profile such killing, on May 1st, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) leader Arif Wazir received bullet injuries when unidentified persons opened fire on him near his house in South Waziristan. A day after he succumbed to his injuries at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in Islamabad.¹³

5. Afghanistan and Terrorism in Pakistan

The Afghan Taliban surprised the world when they said that Al-Qaeda did not exist in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The statement seems political, but contradicts the commitments the Taliban had made with the US on February 29th this year. The Taliban have a history of employing the 'denial' as a war tactic, but denying the presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan reflects on the Taliban's political compulsions, which may bring them at a crossroad. Reacting to the Taliban statement, the US Central Command's top general, Marine Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, had warned that he would not recommend a full withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan unless the Taliban demonstrate that they no longer support Al-Qaeda forces there.¹⁵

As far as the denial strategy of the Taliban is concerned, they have mastered this art and have been using it effectively against friends and foes since they first came into power during the late 1990s. It was the time when Afghanistan had become a haven for the international jihadists, including the Pakistani terrorists, who were involved in sectarian killings in Pakistan. For one, it was an open secret that the terrorists of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) were running their training camps in Afghanistan. However, quite surprisingly, whenever Pakistan demanded the extradition of these terrorists, the Taliban denied their presence on the Afghan soil. This is a reference from their past, but even now the Afghan Taliban do not publicly acknowledge their close bond with the Pakistani militant groups including the TTP. A recent report from the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team has indicated that Pakistani militant groups, mainly the TTP, are operating inside Afghanistan with the permission and support of the Afghan Taliban. In many instances, they remain reluctant to take action against the TTP and its affiliates despite Pakistan's apprehensions. The same report claimed that the Afghan Taliban regularly consulted with Al-Qaeda during negotiations with the United States, and Al-Qaeda gave a nod to the deal.

The Taliban have also given the impression that severing ties with Al-Qaeda is in process, but there is no proof of it. The Taliban have no political compulsions to continue their relationship with Al-

¹³ *The News*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/653594-ptm-leader-arif-wazir-dies-from-injuries>

¹⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "Taliban falsely claims Al-Qaeda does not exist in Afghanistan," *The Long War Journal*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/taliban-falsely-claims-al-qaeda-doesnt-exist-in-afghanistan.php>

¹⁵ "US Gen: If Al-Qaeda Remains, US Troops Should Not Fully Withdraw," *Tolo News*, June 11, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-gen-if-al-qaeda-remains-us-troops-should-not-fully-withdraw>

Qaeda; nor do they have any financial needs to do so because the Taliban have developed their independent sources of revenue and funding. Five hundred to 600 members of Al-Qaeda are known to still be in Afghanistan, and have become a strategic burden for the Taliban, who believe they have secured the best possible deal with the US. The deal would be considered a unique phenomenon in contemporary counterinsurgency history as a world power has agreed to a deal with insurgents on weaker terms. Many experts believed that the Taliban's insistence – despite their public posturing to the contrary – on continuing their ties with Al-Qaeda could sabotage the peace process. Three points need to be considered. If the Taliban have consulted with Al-Qaeda during their talks with the US, it is not possible that the US would not have been aware of it. If Al-Qaeda guarantees that it has no intention to launch terrorist assaults on NATO members, the US can tolerate the group though it would be difficult to guarantee this. Inside stories of the negotiations between the Taliban and the American team have not been revealed yet, but these may help to understand the context of such possibilities.

Second, the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001 because of Al-Qaeda, and it may be considered against their political and ideological code to disconnect with the group for whom they had sacrificed their government and fought a long war. Breaking with Al-Qaeda may cause an internal crisis within the rank and file of the Taliban. However, the most important factor is that Al-Qaeda is so entrenched within the Taliban movement that it is impossible to separate the two. This alliance is not only about joint training, fighting together shoulder by shoulder; both have built strong family bonds through inter-marriages.

In that context, denial seems a good option for the Taliban, but their similar attitude towards the TTP and other Pakistani militant groups may have other factors behind it as well. Apart from the prevailing theory that the TTP is a strategic tool in the hands of the Afghan Taliban against Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban have engaged Pakistani Taliban in their war. The fact that the TTP has carried out terrorist activities in Pakistan may cast doubt on such observations. However, when it comes to power-sharing in Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban might be seen as contenders too as they served during the Taliban regime in the 1990s. If that happens, Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban will become prime attractions for madressah graduates in Pakistan, particularly in the country's border regions. Such convergences will be a nightmare for Pakistan, which could push Pakistan further deep into problems of religious extremism and violent sectarianism. It could be simply interpreted as the victory of Al-Qaeda and TTP as their ambitions have always been to throw Pakistan and Afghanistan into deep chaos from where they can rebuild a new system according to their vision.¹⁶

¹⁶ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Afghan Taliban's strength," *Dawn*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1565703>

6. The Policy Challenges and Responses

6.1 Amnesty for TTP?

The government is also facing the dilemma about what to do with the Pakistani Taliban militants who are sheltered across the border and may want to relocate to their native towns in tribal districts. One media report claimed that such requests had been made by some elements of the Pakistani Taliban currently hiding in Afghanistan. A BBC report quoted the defense analyst Brigadier (Retd.) Mehmood Shah to claim that about 9,000 Taliban militants wanted to come back to their native towns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after seeking a forgiveness and promising to quit violence. Local accounts from North and South Waziristan have been claiming that they have seen some of those in their areas who had remained in the past attached to militant groups.¹⁷ Most of them however are living discreetly in bordering areas and are avoiding public appearance. According to Mehmood Shah, some of these militants from North and South Waziristan have been provided a pardon by the government, but the tribesmen are not willing to accept them back.¹⁸ As revenge is a strong tribal tradition, people see the militants' reintegration into society a difficult task even if government develops a pardon and reintegration plan. Not all the Taliban in these areas, however, were attached to the TTP; nor the Taliban are currently so strong to challenge the writ of the state as they used to do before the operation Zarb-e-Azab was launched in 2014. Still, the government and local administration will have to develop a policy on how to deal with the militants, including those operating discreetly in tribal districts and those living in Afghanistan and willing to come back.

6.2 FATF and curbing terror financing

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in June 2018 put Pakistan on its 'grey list', or in list of countries described by FATF as the ones with inadequate control over curbing money laundering and terrorism financing. Pakistan is currently working with the global money laundering and terrorist-financing watchdog to comply with 27-points Action Plan. A media report in March this year claimed that Pakistan still had to comply with almost half of the remaining points, including those linked to prosecution and conviction of banned outfits and proscribed persons, madrasah regulations, and curbing funding of banned groups, among others.

However, the coronavirus pandemic has provided some relief to Pakistan in fulfilling the provisions of the Action Plan it has agreed with the FATF. FATF indeed gave Pakistan an extension in submitting its compliance report for three months up to September from earlier June 2020 due to the outbreak of COVID-19 virus.

¹⁷ BBC Urdu, April 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-52305891>

¹⁸ Ibid.

Separately, the Foreign Office said on June 26th that Pakistan will remain on the FATF grey list till October this year as its case was not taken up at FATF's last meeting held in Paris on June 24, 2020. Therefore, the decisions taken at the FATF's plenary held in February would remain in effect, it said. Pakistan was given a six-month extension (till June 2020, as cited earlier) on the grey list for meeting the remaining requirements of its action plan with a warning that action would be taken against it if it did not show "significant and sustainable progress."¹⁹

In one of his briefings to the Prime Minister, Federal Interior Minister Ijaz Shah claimed that Pakistan has met most of the conditions set by the FATF.²⁰ According to media reports, Interior Minister in his presentation stated that the ministry froze 976 movable and immovable properties of proscribed outfits, while took over several schools, colleges, hospitals, dispensaries, ambulances etc., of the proscribed organizations into government's control. The minister also informed the PM that amendments have also been made to the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 (ATA) in line with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Act.

The Pakistan government has taken two initiatives to meet the requirements of the FATF. First, Federal Interior Ministry has set up a single-template database to curb money laundering and terror financing, which will also facilitate the provincial efforts for countering terrorism and terror financing. Second, an Interior Ministry cell, which was established to implement the FATF recommendations, has been activated again. The cell functions were temporarily suspended because of the coronavirus.

On the other side, the anti-terrorism courts have sped up the process of hearing the terror financing cases. An anti-terrorism court (ATC) in Lahore sentenced the top Jamaatud Daawa (JuD) leadership including its head Hafiz Saeed and sent them to jail. Announcing the verdict, the ATC sentenced at least four JuD operatives and senior leaders to jail, after they were found guilty of money-laundering and terror-financing charges. As per the orders of the court, Abdul Rehman Makki, brother in law of Hafiz Saeed and senior leader of JuD, along with Hafiz Abdul Salam were to serve the sentence to at least one-year imprisonment, while Professor Zafar Iqbal and Yahya Mujahid were sentenced to at least five-year imprisonment. In addition to the one year prison sentence the the court also imposed a fine of at least Rs 20,000 and and Rs 50,000, respectively²¹ These sentences to JuD top leadership demonstrate Pakistan's resolve to fight against the terror financing. It is essential that these actions against banned groups are sustained and develop into a strong resolve of the state because they don't merely relate to FATF provisions but are indeed integral to Pakistan's national security interests.

¹⁹ *Dawn*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1565473/pakistans-case-not-taken-up-at-fatf-meeting-fo>

²⁰ *The Express Tribune*, June 11, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2240041/1-pakistan-meets-major-fatf-conditions-shah>

²¹ *The Nation*, June 19, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/E-Paper/islamabad/2020-06-19/page-12/detail-6>

Meanwhile, according to a media report, the government is also going to introduce amendment in Customs Act 1969 through a financial bill to increase the punishment of smuggling goods by five fold under the instruction of FATF.

The Punjab government has also taken control of the religious seminaries, or madrassahs, of the banned militant organizations and allocated 1.3 billion rupees for their administration in upcoming provincial budget.²²

In a related development on curbing terror financing, the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) took control of five properties of Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour in Karachi, who was killed in a drone strike along the Pakistan-Iran border on May 21, 2016, and had purchased these properties, including plots and houses.²³ The FIA had booked Mullah Mansour in a case lodged under Section 11H (pertaining to fundraising and money laundering) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, in addition to Pakistan Penal Code sections on cheating and forgery. Mullah Mansour,

There are multiple areas and factors, which make Pakistan vulnerable to terrorist financing such as the country's long border with Afghanistan, one of the world's largest producers of the opium poppy, a largely undocumented economy, weak regulations for the public and private sectors, and problems in the legal framework governing the terrorism financing. At the same time, there are challenges related to governance and law enforcement, which affect the state's responses to curb terrorism financing. These challenges and vulnerabilities, both transactional and structural, raise the risk profile of Pakistan. They have also "led [among other factors] the FATF to put Pakistan on 'grey list'; [and] the country also holds the critical risk of being blacklisted."²⁴ Experts assert that the "approach and plan of eradicating terrorist financing needs to be developed beyond FATF," and should entail sustained policy endeavors.²⁵

7. Security Challenges during the Pandemic

Pakistan's internal security landscape is complicated due to both internal and external threats. The internal security dimension not only includes threats from hardcore radical and sectarian terrorist groups but also from groups that promote religious extremism and intolerance. The latter pose a different sort of critical challenge, because such groups can mobilize their support bases to cause more damage to the economy, social cohesion of society and global image of the country.

²² Daily *Dunya*, June 19, 2020, https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2020-06-19&edition=LHR&id=5226863_30445907

²³ Naeem Sahoutra, "Court seizes slain Taliban chief's properties for auction," *Dawn*, May 08, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1555423/court-seizes-slain-taliban-chiefs-properties-for-auction>

²⁴ National Initiative against Organized Crime (NIOC) Pakistan, "Strategic policy options to curb terrorism financing in Pakistan," June 17, 2020, <https://nioc.pk/article/777>

²⁵ Ibid.

The pandemic has created space for sectarian and radical groups, who tend to spread hate. Extremism manifests itself in many forms ranging from vandalism against minorities and oppressed people to target killing of the sane, rational voices who oppose their extremism. The phenomenon of religious intolerance has its own dynamics but in recent years it has grown through its connectivity with larger extremist discourses fanned in cyberspaces.

The pandemic has also provided opportunities to banned sectarian groups to fuel sectarian hatred. For one, while Sunni extremists and activists blamed the Shia pilgrims returning from Iran for the spread of the Covid-19 infection in Pakistan whilst the Shia activists accused the Tablighi Jamaat tours and gatherings for the spread of the virus. Posts and messages rife with sectarian hate speech also went viral on social media platforms.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) recently reported about the removal of significant number of names of suspected violent actors from the terrorism watch list maintained by the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) of Pakistan. Pakistan Annual Security Report 2019, prepared by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), had also highlighted the need for developing a National Databank (NDB) synchronized with the police departments of the country, National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), NACTA, FIA and State Bank of Pakistan. The report recommended that the Databank should have following features:

- A synchronized National Red Book, containing updated information about the wanted, suspected and arrested terrorists and their groups.
- The national databank could be divided into two categories, one for public consumption, which would include details about terrorists and their activities and second dedicated for the police and law enforcement agencies containing details of bank accounts, financial transactions data, property and other assets of the suspected and active terrorists whose names had been placed under the Fourth Schedule.
- A common website can be developed under the supervision of NACTA and all police and relevant authorities could be bound to provide updates/information on weekly or monthly bases.
- There is a need that all provinces have their forensic labs linked with National Forensic Laboratory (NFL) in Islamabad.
- Capacity building training programs for the Counter Terrorism Departments needed to be developed and they must know the best practices around the world to avoid any mishandling of the sensitive issues.

In short to medium terms, these initiatives would help to build the effective countering terrorism mechanism. These measures are much needed now to discourage any efforts by the extremist and terrorist groups to exploit the situation. As noted earlier in the report, Covid-19 has increased vulnerabilities including those of people in terms of provision of health, shelter, food and other

amenities of life. Similarly, a sense of insecurity could increase due to economic deprivation and the state's failure to provide adequate social safety nets; preoccupation of the security, particularly due to police force's pandemic-related duties; and restriction of mobility to maintain demand and supply of things, etc. Violent extremists could try to exploit these vulnerabilities, mainly with the purpose to add to instability and insecurity by carrying out terrorist attacks. In a way, that would also serve the militants' purpose by adding to people's anti-government grievances.

The government will have to adopt a clear policy not only against non-violent extremist groups including propagators of hatred, but also against the terrorist groups in the country, and take legal and administrative measures to restrict their activities. The National Action Plan (NAP) had put some pressure on religious extremists including those propagating hate speech, but in recent years, its implementation has been faltering. As of now, it appears as the government has abandoned the country's first counterterrorism and counter-extremism plan. The government should revamp its focus on NAP besides enhancing counter-terrorism vigilance and action.



About NIOC

National Initiative against Organized Crime (NIOC) is the first-ever initiative in Pakistan, which was launched in November 2019 in collaboration with the Global Initiative's Resilience Fund. It is led by a group of committed professionals and experts with law enforcement, media and other public service backgrounds. Through developing an empirical evidence-base and conducting hand-on consultations, NIOC aims to build community resilience and influence public policy to combat organized crime including terror financing, drug trafficking, human trafficking and cybercrime. With a complex governance structure having multiple layers of stakeholders, the criminal justice system and law enforcement apparatus require better coordination and capacity building. NIOC tries to identify the gaps and suggest improvements in the system.



www.nioc.pk



[niocpk](https://www.facebook.com/niocpk)



[niocpk](https://twitter.com/niocpk)



[niocpk](https://www.linkedin.com/company/niocpk)