

# Chapter III

## The Global and the Local



# Trends of Contemporary Terrorism in Pakistan

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## *Introduction*

During the last seven years, the incidents of terrorism in Pakistan have witnessed a downward trend, however, the threat of violence persists. In 2018, the country experienced approximately 262 attacks resulting in 595 casualties. Contemporary terrorism in the country, although far less intense and frequent than what it used to be almost a decade ago, is multifaceted with a number of groups subscribing to different ideologies and striking the different sets of targets in pursuit of their competing political objectives. To make sense of this complex threat landscape, I classify terrorist groups operating in or from Pakistan into four different categories; neo-jihadis (al Qaeda, TTP, IS), ethno-nationalists (Baloch Liberation Army, Balochistan Liberation Front, Sindhu-Desh Liberation Army), sectarian (Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Muhammad, Zainabyoon) and religious nationalists (Jamat-u-Dawah, Jaish-e-Muhammad). During the last one decade, Islamabad has adopted different sets of tools to counter these groups and a significant decline in frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks in the country followed. Whereas the government relied on extensive use of military force to eliminate neo-jihadi and sectarian organisations, it adopted an entirely different strategy to deal with the groups falling in the religious nationalist category. Resultantly, TTP and its allies struggled for survival after losing key infrastructure and leadership, sectarian outfits forced to seek external collaborators for their survival and JuD opted to transform into a political party, contesting the 2018 general elections of Pakistan under the banner of Milli Muslim League. While there has been a significant change in repertoire, there is a genuine fear that regional developments can reverse the trend by providing these groups new ideological impetus.

The chapter hypothesises that changes in the local, regional and global framework impact changes in the Pakistani terrorist organisations' likelihood to apply violence as political tool. Changing the framework for action affects changes in the likely usage of non-violent or violent means. I will point out that regional political developments, such as the possible withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, military escalation on the

issue of Iran and enhanced Chinese presence positively influences these organisations' abilities to recuperate ideologically and operationally from battlefield losses since 2013. Thereafter, I will show how the government's de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism measures might impact the framework conditions of violent groups for the application of strategic violence.

In the course of the paper, I will therefore look specifically into the following questions: How have country-wide anti-terrorism campaigns impacted terrorist organisations falling in neo-jihadist, religious-nationalist, sectarian and ethno-nationalist categories since 2013? How might the proposed withdrawal of foreign forces impact TTP, ISIS and al Qaeda? How likely are Shia militant outfits, such as Zainabyoon and Sipah-e-Muhammad, to respond to any military confrontation involving Iran? What are the challenges and prospects of mainstreaming Jamat-u-Dawah?

The paper draws on secondary sources and is based on a collection of data on active terrorist organisations in Pakistan. These sources include organisational publications in print and digital forms collected by the author over a period of last ten years.<sup>1</sup> Archives maintained by different national and non-governmental research institutions, too, were consulted for gathering news updates relevant to the research topic. The results presented in this paper are based on the author's interpretation of the events reported in the sources mentioned above, and his extrapolation of motivations and strategic considerations of the respective group and organisation.

### *Complex Threat Landscape*

From 2004 onwards, Pakistan waged a sustained campaign to fight terrorism that damaged the physical and ideological composition of some of the most destructive terrorist organisations, such as al Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and of lately Islamic State (IS). The country needed to confront a multi-frontal assault by terrorists of different hue and colours pur-

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1 These sources include but are not limited to all issues of *Ahya-e-Khilafat* (Restoration of Caliphate), the flagship monthly magazine of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Mufti Abu Masood Hasham, *Jihad-e-Pakistan* (Jamea Hafsa Forum 2010). 'An Interview with Hakeemullah Mehsud and Mufti Wali-u-Rehman', Omar Media, Central Broadcasting Unit of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, 20 January 2012. 'Karwan-e-Fidayan' (Caravan of Self-sacrificing holly warriors), Video released by Omar Studio, official media wing of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. 'Obtaining Parents' Permission to Participate in Jihad', *Online Islam*. 'Question and Answer Session with Mufti Abu Zar', *Jamea Hafsa Forum* (Online).

suing different sets of goals. In erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), transnational jihadists challenged the state, Balochistan was plagued with an ethno-nationalist insurgency, and the mainland was to bear the brunt of a lethal nexus between sectarian and transnational Islamist outfits. Karachi, the country's financial hub, was hit by all four distinct waves of terrorism. These non-state actors often competed for influence and resources and occasionally cooperated against a common enemy, i.e. the state and society of Pakistan. For instance, attacks claimed by ISIS in Pakistan involved significant operational support by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Similarly, in 2014 TTP approached Baloch separatists in Karachi to establish a joint front. Despite this overlapping, a simplistic view continues to prevail<sup>2</sup> that often revolves around single-factor explanation of the phenomenon conveniently ignoring how multiple factors, such as the role of state, society and regional geo-politics interact with each other at different levels to pave the way for violent and non-violent variants of extremism.<sup>3</sup>

To develop a systematic understanding of terrorism in Pakistan we can classify multiple violent organisation in four broad categories: (1) Neo-Jihadists, (2) Sectarian, (3) Ethno-Nationalist and (4) Religious Nationalists. The following section explains these categories, why they are termed as such, how groups falling in each category differ from others, how the state has dealt with them, what have been the outcomes and how developments abroad will shape the future of these terrorist organisations.

### *Neo Jihadists*

In this category we include Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (the organisation responsible for more than 70 per cent terrorist attacks in Pakistan during last decade), its affiliates (local groups including Punjabi Taliban, Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi etc, and international groups including al Qaeda, East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jund-ul-Khalifa etc), breakaway factions (Jammat-ul-Ahrar, Hizb-ul-Ahrar etc), and Islamic State. Neo-jihadist organisations reflect a significant theological, tactical and political departure from militant groups of the past, such as Lashkar-e-Tayaba, Jaish-e-Muhammad and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen

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2 See for example Laquer (1977), Pipes (2013), Arnett (2014).

3 For the elaboration of my argument on the multi-causality behind violent extremism in Pakistan see Iqbal (2015).

(classified as religious nationalists). For instance, unlike religious nationalist groups, Neo-jihadists abhor the idea of nation states and term it un-Islamic. This helps them justify attacks against the Pakistani state and society. Since territorial borders are deemed un-Islamic, these groups firmly believe in global *jihad*, an idea pioneered by al Qaeda. This has created fissures with Afghan Taliban, who maintained themselves as a religious nationalist force. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which once spearheaded this wave, launched a number of transnational terrorist attacks (Iqbal 2010) but interestingly Afghan Taliban have not been found involved in acts of terrorism beyond Afghanistan.

Neo-jihadism in Pakistan can be understood as an unintended outcome of American intervention in Afghanistan. Jihadi organisations existed long before the US intervened in Afghanistan in October 2001. These groups, however, rarely conducted attacks on Pakistani soil. Their primary objective was to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan. But as the US and their allies launched military offensives to target al Qaeda hideouts, a number of groups mushroomed up in the adjacent Pakistani tribal region to support their ‘Muslim brethren’ against a ‘Crusader’s’ onslaught’ (Abu Yahya Shamsheer-e-Be Nayam). Many in FATA perceived American intervention as repetition of events in 1980s, when thousands of tribesmen were mobilised by the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to fight what they regard as ‘infidels’. With similar zeal and zest clerics like Sufi Muhammad mobilised thousands of Pakistanis to wage holy war against Americans and their allies but gradually they turned inwards. There are various reasons as to why neo-jihadists came to focus more on jihad against Pakistan instead of staying committed to their initially stated cause: the “liberation of Afghanistan from foreign occupation”.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, it could have been a conscious decision by the insurgents to weaken this important knot of the American-led coalition. Under President Musharraf’s rule Pakistan had served as the most vital supply route for NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan, provided two of its airbases and extended maximum political, military and intelligence support to the US-led global war on terror. Secondly, the decision to turn their guns against Pakistan was possibly the result of serious differences between Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda. Both enjoyed cordial relations until the international coalition dislodged the former. It was then the Afghan Taliban might have realised that any hint of their global ambitions could possibly damage their cause to liberate Afghanistan from foreign forces.

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4 See for example the editorial of Ahyay-e-Khilafat (Restoration of Caliphate) (2013).

The TTP's close association with the transnational terrorist outfit made it more lethal and indiscriminate. According to several databases maintained by different Pakistani government and private organisations including National Counter-Terrorism Authority, Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies and South Asia Terrorism Portal, groups falling in this category are responsible for more than 70 per cent terrorist attacks in the country since 2004.<sup>5</sup> The majority of these attacks targeted civilians. High "collateral damage" in the TTP attacks led to decline in popular support for the neo-jihadists, who were until then perceived as legitimate holy warriors fighting to defend Muslim lands against the US and their allies. Such was the level of support in the initial few years of FATA insurrection that the people would refuse to attend the funeral of Pakistani soldiers who died in fight against TTP. This changed when Pakistanis suffered deadly terrorist attacks sparing none. By 2009, public attitude towards neo-jihadists had started to show signs of detest and disapproval. Taking advantage of this shift in popular support the government launched renewed military campaigns in Swat (Operation Rah-e-Haq), Mohmand (Operation Brekhna) and South Waziristan (Operation Rah-e-Nijat) resulting in partial success. As the terrorists came under pressure in the tribal region, they accelerated attacks in the mainland. In 2010, a slight increase was witnessed in the overall number of attacks. Militant leadership in operation-hit areas had either fled to Afghanistan or moved to North Waziristan agency, which would continue to serve as a terrorist hotbed for years to come. For a variety of reasons, ranging from lack of logistics to the fear of massive backlash in the mainland, the government avoided clearing terrorist hideouts in North Waziristan, and areas adjacent to FATA until the neo-jihadists targeted Army Public School (APS) in December 2014.

The Army Public School (APS) attack of December 2014 was a watershed event that forced the policy-makers to go decisively against TTP. Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which was launched a few months prior to the attack, was intensified and its geographic scope extended to the settled areas. Pakistani leadership launched renewed efforts to engage Afghan leadership and international forces stationed there to act against TTP's first and second tier leadership.<sup>6</sup> A sustained counter-narrative campaign launched by the civil society, media and government institutions further squeezed the

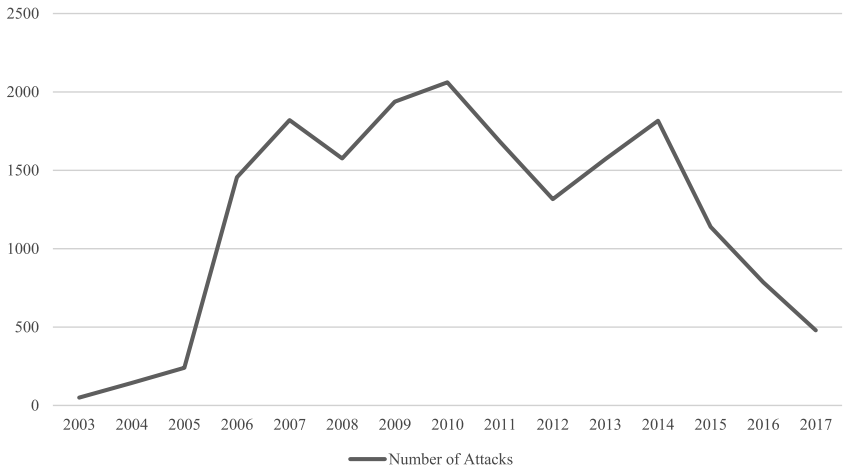
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5 This figure is based on regular monitoring of the terrorism databases mentioned in the text.

6 Kaphle. *The Washington Post*, 25 December 2014.

ideological space for terrorists. Such coordinated efforts yielded tremendous results. As the physical and ideological infrastructure of terrorists suffered heavy losses the number of terrorist incidents declined sharply. By 2017 the annual number of attacks has gone down to about 480 (mostly low-intensity) from 2,100 (mostly high-casualty attacks) in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1: Annual Number of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan



Source: based on data provided by National Counter-Terrorism Authority (2019).

The downwards trend continued in 2018, which experienced a further 29 per cent decline in attacks perpetrated by different terrorist organisations (PIPS 2019). Despite a visible decline, neo-jihadists managed to make their presence felt. Out of total 251 attacks in 2018, 171 were carried by TTP and its allies (PIPS 2019). The year 2018 also marked the elimination of top leadership, including Fazlullah, killed in a US drone strike in Kunar province of Afghanistan;<sup>8</sup> his son Abdullah was killed in a separate airstrike in March 2018 in the same area. The TTP also confirmed the death of its commander Khalid Mehsud aka Khan Said Sajna, who was hit by a missile fired by the US drone in North Waziristan.

<sup>7</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Jazeera, 15 June 2018.



In a desperate attempt for survival, many TTP fighters and second tier leaders associated themselves with Daesh<sup>9</sup>, but that failed to bring any relief to either side. During all these years, more specifically from 2015 to 2018, Daesh also suffered heavy losses in form of arrests of hundreds of its members from across Pakistan. Since its arrival in the country in January 2015 the global terrorist outfit started a recruitment campaign. Instead of radicalizing a new generation of fighters, the group drew from an existing pool of radicals, hitherto associated with other local outfits. A conservative estimate based on desk and field research puts the total numeric strength of the group in Pakistan at approximately 2,000 individuals with almost half of them migrating to neighbouring Afghanistan. Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had produced the highest number of ISIS fighters (Iqbal 2016). Punjab stood second with 54 of its inhabitants either leaving their homes to fight in Syria and Iraq or dedicating their efforts to organizing Daesh in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> A majority of IS-linked individuals in Punjab had parted ways from Lashkar-e-Tayeba. The TTP, organisationally opposed Daesh, but a number of splinter groups emerged from within to join the Baghdadi-led transnational outfit. Prominent examples included Jamat-ul-Ahrar and Jundullah-Pakistan. Many Lashkar-e-Jhangvi fighters, who have collaborated with the TTP in the past, also switched allegiance to Daesh.

With the help of local collaborators, the IS tried to take on Pakistan, but a swift response from Pakistani law enforcement and intelligence agencies foiled this attempt.

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9 Daesh is an Arabic acronym for the group's first official title "ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fi 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām", which literally translates into Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, it was later changed into Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and finally as the Islamic State (IS).

10 For an in-depth discussion of the penetration of Daesh in Pakistan see Iqbal (2018).

*Table 1: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan involving ISIS*

No	Date	Place	Target	Casualties	
				Killed	Injured
1	8 Sep 2014	Karachi	US Naval Vessel	1 Arm <sup>11</sup> 3 Mil <sup>12</sup>	-
2	4 Jan 2015	FATA	Army Soldier	1 Arm	-
3	23 Apr 2015	Karachi	HR Activist	1 Civ <sup>13</sup>	-
4	13 May 2015	Karachi	Isamili Civilians	46 Civ	12 Civ
5	6 Apr 2015	Orakzai Agency, FATA	Army Convoy	3 Arm	4 Arm
6	13 Jan 2016	Islamabad	News TV	-	-
7	16 Feb 2017	Jamshoro	Sufi Shrine	91 Civ	250 Civ
8	23 Jun 2017	Quetta	JUI-Nazriati	7 Civ, 7 LEA	21 Civ
9	05 Oct 2017	Jhal Magsi	Sufi Shrine	22 Civ	30 Civ
10	17 December 2017	Quetta	Church	9 Civ	56 Civ
11	02 April 2018	Quetta	Christians	4 Civ	-
12	13 July 2018	Quetta	Political Party	150 Civ	185
13	25 Jul 2018	Quetta	Police	25 Civ 6 LEA	75 Civ
14	27 November 2018	Orakzai	Shia Market	35 Civ	45 Civ

Source: the author.

By July 2016, hundreds of Daesh operatives were apprehended from settled areas and tribal loyalists of Daesh were forced to flee to Afghanistan. In 2018, Abu Sayed Orakzai, a top commander of the Islamic State’s Khorasan chapter and brother of ISIS founder in the region Saeed Khan was also killed in Afghanistan.

### *Sectarian Terrorism*

Sectarian groups have caused the highest number of terrorism-related casualties after neo-jihadists. Traditionally, the sectarian terrorist landscape was characterised by the dominance of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which targeted Pakistan’s Shia community and Sipah-e-Muhammad, a Shia group that would resort to retaliatory attacks against LeJ, a Sunni sectarian terrorist organisation. But in the aftermath of 9/11 sectarian militancy has also been transformed. LeJ expanded its target pool to include Barelvis (the majority sect

11 Army personnel.

12 Militant.

13 Civilian.

in Pakistan), which led to Bareilvi reassertion in political as well as militant spheres.

Following the tectonic shift in the regional security environment post 9/11, LeJ split into two wings; one wing kept its focus on sectarian terrorism, while the second aligned with transnational terrorist outfits, such as TTP, al Qaeda and most recently Daesh, to pursue international agendas. The international wing also rebranded itself as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi in 2009. How did LeJ evolved into LeJ-International? Why did the organisation opt to extend operations across the border and diversify its targets? To find out the answers, one needs to examine the post 9/11 developments in the region, which radically transformed the militant landscape of Pakistan. The country witnessed a dramatic rise in numbers of new terrorist outfits in the tribal as well as mainland Pakistan. Various jihadi outfits went rogue or experienced massive fractionalisation. The LeJ could not remain indifferent to the changing atmosphere. The group diversified its targets and made a conscious decision to work for al Qaeda along with pursuing sectarian agendas against Shias of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran (Gunnaratna and Iqbal 2012).

Soon after 9/11, the group was divided into two factions – the first led by Asif Ramzi primarily operating with al Qaeda against Western and Pakistani government targets and the second headed by Akram Lahori operating against the Shias. When members of Asif Ramzi's group were arrested by the police in 2002, they were asked why they spared arch-rival Shia sect. They claimed that the Shia are their enemies, but their picture was ideologically bigger and 'playing the international game' against US, their Allies and friends. While Asif Ramzi's group only operated in Karachi, Akram Lahori's group operated throughout Pakistan.

Following the government crackdown on LeJ in 2003, the group members dispersed in different parts of Pakistan, most of them relocating to FATA to prepare for a new round of violence against the Shias, the Pakistani state and Western targets. LeJ's central organisational structure was dismantled; as a result, the group got divide into different cells. Nevertheless, the anti-Shia agenda helped to keep these small cells united on ideological and operational grounds.

The word "al-almi" (international) in LeJ's title and agenda was first added and made public in September 2009, when during the last Friday of Ramazan, a suicide vehicle destroyed an entire market on the Kohat-Hangu Road and killed 33 people. The shops were mostly owned by Shia Muslims and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi claimed the attack. The addition of "al-almi" (international) with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's name was a clear indication of group's inclination to go global.

In the following days, LeJ-International launched deadly terrorist strikes across Pakistan. On 16 April 2010, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami claimed the bombing at a hospital in Quetta. The bomb attack was carried out while members of the Shia sect came to the hospital with the body of a bank manager, who was shot dead by unidentified armed men. The same group claimed responsibility for the back-to-back suicide attacks in Kacha Pakha area of Kohat, where, according to eyewitnesses, two burqa-clad bombers mowed down 41 internally displaced persons (IDPs), who had gathered in front of the UN offices to collect free of cost food items on 17 April 2010. The tactics used in the blasts were the same as in Quetta. The first explosion killed and injured only a few persons, but there was another, more powerful explosion when people came to help remove the bodies and shift the injured to hospital. The group was also found involved in multiple execution-style killings of Shia Muslims in Quetta in 2011. In sum, LeJ's trajectory of evolution clearly demonstrates the group's ability to recover from the loss of key leadership and capability to launch attacks at its will and choice.

Since LeJ was going global and found involved in quite a significant number of attacks in the mainland, Pakistan took several counter-terrorism measures, hard and soft, to pacify the group. Law enforcement agencies squeezed the group in urban areas, especially Karachi, through coordinated intelligence-based operations. At one point, when hundreds of LeJ fighters were switching allegiance to al Qaeda and becoming even more lethal, the court released Malik Ishaq, one of the three founding members of LeJ. Some security experts speculated that the release was aimed at preventing further splintering of the group and mainstream the fighters through political process. The idea, however failed, as the leadership of Ahl-e-Sunnat Waljamat (formerly known as Sipah-e-Sahaba) refused to accommodate Malik in a leadership position. This forced Malik Ishaq to look for new violent allies, including Daesh. It was only after he established communication with the Daesh leadership in the Middle East and Afghanistan that the law enforcement realised the futility of their plan. In July 2015, Malik Ishaq alongwith his two sons was killed in a police encounter in Muzaffargarh (Gabol 2015). Killing Malik failed to disrupt operational linkages with Daesh. Till today, most of the attacks claimed by Daesh in Pakistan are conducted by LeJ fighters.<sup>14</sup> Although there has been a significant decline in sectarian attacks perpetrated by LeJ on its own

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14 Interview with Zahid Mehmood, a counter-terrorism researcher belonging to Quetta. Interview conducted by the author in Islamabad, 15 October 2019.

or on behalf of Daesh, the group continues to pose a serious threat because of its transnational linkages. Based on the above considerations, I understand that events in the Middle East can potentially revive LeJ and further strengthen its nexus with the IS.

The war in the Middle East, which I consider to be commonly agreed upon as an Arab-Iran proxy war, has profoundly shaped sectarian militancy in Pakistan. As stated above, Shia groups were reactionary in nature but their recently acquired battle-field experience under the alleged tutelage of Iranian intelligence can make them more aggressive. In pursuit of its geo-strategic objectives, Iranian government has deployed several proxy forces in the Middle East. Over the last eight years approximately 5,000 Pakistani men under the banner of “Zainabyoon” have participated in a war I claim to be completely orchestrated by Iranian intelligence (Azam and Iqbal 2017). The name Zainabyoon, meaning the followers of Zainab, was chosen for religious reasons. The group's stated purpose is to defend of the shrine of Hazrat Zaynab bint Ali, the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad and other Shia holy sites in Syria (Zahid 2016). This was also the rallying cry of Al-Zainabyoon “Kuluna Abbasika Ya Zainab”, which literally means “O Zainab, We are all Abbas”.<sup>15</sup> Historically, Abbas is considered to have defended Zainab, the daughter of Ali (the fourth caliph of Islam and cousin of the founder of Islam, Prophet Muhammad) against Yazid's lashkar. Practically, however, the group's role is not only limited to defense of what they consider a holy shrine. The group has actively participated in numerous offensives against anti-Asad forces.

Pakistani Shiite jihadists were apparently latecomers to the Syrian theatre of war. The first signs of their participation in the conflict on the Syrian state side appeared in 2013, after a rocket attack on the shrine of Zainab in Damascus. The initial recruitment seems to have taken place at local levels in Shiite-dominated areas of Kurram Agency's Parachinar town and Hangu with over seven people travelling to Syria via Iran. According to local a source, approximately 1,150 individuals were recruited from Parachinar, out of which 196 were killed, 800 returned home and the rest chose either to continue fighting in Syria or settle in Iran.<sup>16</sup> Initially, Pakistani Shias fought as part of a unit of Afghan fighters, called the “Fatimeyoun.” However, the numbers swelled over time as more organised recruitment methods, such as pilgrimage tours to Iran, were utilised, and a separate

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15 Translated by the author.

16 Interview with Arshad Bangash, a native of Parachinar. Interview conducted by the author in Islamabad, 31 October 2019.

unit called “Liwa Zainabyoun” was raised under Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (I.R.G.C.). This development was seen as Iran’s effort to expand a regional network of Shiite militia-type organisations on the model of Hezbollah. The I.R.G.C.-affiliated Fars News describes the unit as 5,000-strong (Nadimi 2016), but certain Western news agencies estimated the numerical strength of the group at no more than 1,000. Regardless of their number, it is clear that the Shiite jihadists in the Iraqi and Syrian theatre greatly outnumber Western and Pakistani ISIS fighters. Initially, the number of recruits was too small to be called a brigade, however, in early 2015 the organisation successfully hired more than 1,000 fighters from Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> In a BBC report, the total number of Zainabyoon fighters was somewhere around 2,000.<sup>18</sup> Pakistani intelligence sources, however, put this number at approximately 5,000 individuals. Hundreds of them have been killed in action and many more continue to return home after successfully defending the Assad-regime. Some of these returnees have been apprehended.

The emergence of Zainabyoon indicates three alarming trends: firstly, Shia militants can possibly confront the Deobandi LeJ head-on, instead of sticking to their traditional reactive and selective *modus operandi* (Azam and Iqbal 2017); secondly, in case of direct military confrontation with the US, Iran can remobilise these thousands of fighters to target American interests in Pakistan. In such a scenario, Pakistan will come under severe international pressure to act against Iran-backed elements in the country; thirdly, a number of protests were organised by various Shia organisations across Pakistan for the release of Zanabyoon fighters. Such a widespread support for a terrorist group among Pakistani Shias and their approval of Iran’s actions in the Middle East can complicate the government’s actions to act decisively. In my personal interactions with educated Shias in Pakistan during the last five years a majority justified the fighters’ ‘voluntary’ participation as the need to defend the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab against assaults by the Islamic State.

### *Ethno-Nationalist Militancy*

Ethno-nationalist insurgency in Pakistan is mainly divided into two theatres: Balochistan and Sindh provinces. Prominent Baloch militant groups

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17 Tribune, 11 December 2015.

18 Kirmani. BBC Urdu, 31 May 2018.

include Baloch Liberation Army, Baloch Liberation Front, and Baloch Republican Army. In November 2018, these groups came together to form Baloch Raaji Ajoji Sangar (Baloch National Freedom Front). There are two known Sindhi nationalist militant groups including Sindhu Desh Liberation Front and Sindhu Desh Liberation Army. Sindhi nationalist groups have thus far failed to conduct any major attack. Their target selection usually includes government infrastructure, such as railway tracks, gas pipelines, and political opponents, such as pro-federation Pakistan Peoples' Party, and religious groups thought as doing the government's bid.

According to Pakistan Security Report 2018 published by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), ethno-nationalist insurgents, mainly Baloch, have been found involved in more than 32 per cent of all attacks recorded during the year. Increased Chinese economic involvement has provided a new impetus to the Baloch insurgency, which in the past purely targeted the central government. The contemporary Baloch separatist narrative equates Chinese projects with Pakistani imperialism and declares them both the enemy of Baloch land and resources.<sup>19</sup>

Although the insurgency dates back to 1948, the recent wave that started in 2005, has demonstrated some new trends. Historically, the leadership of the Baloch insurgency and polity has resided with the tribal elite, but the post-2005 militancy in Balochistan has witnessed the emergence of a new educated middle class, which now forms the majority in groups like BLF, whose central leader Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch also comes from a middle-class background. Such changes have also impacted the tactics and target selection of the Baloch militants. Traditionally, Baloch insurgents largely targeted combatants, including personnel of armed forces and law enforcement agencies, symbols of the state and energy infrastructure. Aversion to targeting non-combatants brought legitimacy to their cause, which ultimately resulted in cross-sectional support from the society, including non-Baloch. In the past, ranks and files of Baloch separatists also included left-wing activists. But during the last decade or so Baloch organisations have indiscriminately targeted civilians in and outside Balochistan, which deprived them of popular support, considered to be one of the most important factors to wage a successful insurgency (Galula 1964). This attitude towards the non-Baloch population of Balochistan also shows a paradigm shift in the separatists' policies and objectives when put in the context of past insurrections of 1948 and 1970s.

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19 ANI News, 25 November 2018.

Similarly, the organisations have now adopted tactics that result in higher collateral damage. From ambushes on security forces and attacks on power pylons/gas pipelines, the choice of tactics now also includes suicide bombings. The BLA has formed a specialised suicide squad called “Majeed Brigade” to target Pakistani security forces and Chinese interests in the country. This wing was created in 2010 and named after two top commanders of BLA who were killed at different locations and times. The first Majeed Baloch died in 1970 while he was trying to assassinate the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in Quetta. The second commander named Majeed was killed by Pakistani security forces in 2010. The BLA named its anti-China wing in memory of these two commanders (PICSS 2018).

In the past carefully selected tactics and targets won the Baloch insurgents international acclaim and legitimacy, two of the most crucial elements for waging successful guerrilla warfare. But the use of human bombs, advertent and inadvertent targeting of civilians cost them both. In July 2019, citing some recent suicide attacks against Chinese and Pakistani civilians, the United States officially declared BLA a global terrorist organisation. The declaration came as a massive blow to the insurgency. According to my evaluation, it was seen as a reciprocal measure from the US in response to Pakistan’s constructive role to bring Afghan Taliban to the table. It might be speculated that the ban was the result of joint Pakistan-China diplomatic efforts after the group accelerated attacks in 2018.

### *Religious Nationalist Militants and Organisational Mainstreaming*

Kashmir-centric groups, such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Harkatul Mujahideen and Harkatul Jihad e Islami, are included in this category. Many of these groups are considered the by-product of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad. They are termed religious nationalist because of the primacy of religion for their cause with strong believe in the idea of nation-states. Unlike neo-jihadists, religious nationalists strongly oppose anti-Pakistan jihad. Therefore, the top leaders of LeT, JeM, HuJI and HM including Hafiz Saeed, Massod Azhar and Fazl-u-Rehman Khalil have all condemned the TTP and issued religious decrees against the group. These differences have led to violent clashes between LeT and TTP in the past.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Notable occurrence includes the 2008 clashes between the two groups in Mohmand district.



Organisationally, religious nationalists have not been found involved in anti-Pakistan militancy, mainly due to cordial relations with the country's powerful security establishment. But break-away individuals of these outfits have joined neo-jihadist organisations and assisted them expanding battlefield from the tribal region to mainland Pakistan. There were two major waves of factionalism within the religious nationalist militant segment; first, when India and Pakistan started a composite dialogue in 2005; and the second was Operation Sunrise against Lal Masjid (2007). Both events had severe impacts on the ideology of thousands of erstwhile religious nationalist elements, they parted ways from their parent organisations, moved to FATA, where they imparted all their fighting skill to the neo-jihadists. Punjabi Taliban, Abna-e-Hafsa and Ghazi Brigade were some of the groups, which purely consisted of break-away factions of religious nationalists. They proved more destructive than the tribal fighters (Iqbal 2015).

Transnational terrorist organisations like al Qaeda and Daesh have also tried to prey upon militants associated with LeT and JeM. Many Daesh-linked individuals from Punjab were previously operating under LeT's banner. Such was the fear of losing hundreds of its fighters to Daesh that JuD (formerly LeT) published more than twenty booklets against the *takfiri* ideology of ISIS. In these they proclaimed that some groups of Muslims are moving away from the tenets of Islam. These booklets are also available in the national language – Urdu – and are written by Saudi intellectuals (Rana 2017).

### *De-Radicalisation and Rehabilitation of JuD Fighters*

Given the severity of the challenge, the state has tried to deal with religious nationalists through soft counter-terrorism involving de-radicalisation and rehabilitation. Since Punjab served as the main recruitment hub for religious nationalist militants, most of the government's counter-measures were focused there. In 2010, the Punjab government initiated the de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of former jihadi militants. Punjab police's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) and Technical and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) jointly ran this programme. The Punjab government's programme targeted former jihadi militants, willing to undergo rehabilitation to bring them towards normal life, help them with alternative livelihood opportunities and engage them in different trades. In 2012 to 2013, the Punjab Government approved the Financial Assistance Scheme allocating around Rs.9.33 million along with service charges

(Rs. 0.653 million).<sup>21</sup> The financial assistance was given in collaboration with Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) to the technically trained militants/jihadi persons, who belong to different defunct jihadi organisations and remained involved in militancy/jihadi activities etc.. A Maximum amount of PKR 30,000 (equivalent of 300 USD during that particular time period) was given to the identified successful trainees as interest free loan for starting up a business. Loans were disbursed by Punjab Small Industries Corporation's (PSIC) regional offices through concerned Regional Director, concerned District Development Officer, PSIC and representative from TEVTA/PVTC.

By June 2016, three batches of 311 participants had completed training. These trainings and rehabilitations were organised at various regional and district headquarters to make it convenient for participants to attend. After completion of training, field formations of CTD monitor the activities of participants to oversee and reduce the chances of recidivism.

Table 2: Number of Militants Rehabilitated in Punjab

S. No	District	No. of Rehabilitated Militants
1	Rajapur	16
2	Bahawalpur	48
3	Lahore	15
4	Rawalpindi	10
5	Chakwal	6
6	Faisalabad	14
7	Khanewal	8
8	Multan	7
9	Sahiwal	19
10	D.G.Khan	16
11	Rahim Yar Khan	19
12	Gujranwala	8
13	Attock	14
14	Mianwali	20
15	Bhakkar	11
		<b>Total 231</b>

Source: the author.

As per the criteria laid out by the Punjab government monitoring the impact of trained and rehabilitated was measured and monitored after six months. Considering global best practices in de-radicalisation and rehabilitation of former combatants, six months' time appears to be sufficient to evaluate whether the programme is delivering positive results or not. After

21 All information above are based on multiple visits to TEVTA in 2017.

the completion of the rehabilitation programme, the detainee would attend a three-week regular rehabilitation programme in which the entire family of the detainee was also involved in order to sensitise them about the importance of follow-up counselling sessions. After the rehabilitation, the government makes it compulsory for the rehabilitated militants to stay in touch with the police station in their region for next six months.

Besides individual de-radicalisation and rehabilitation, the group has attempted to reorient itself as mainstream political party. In August 2017, many leaders of JuD announced a new political party under the banner of Milli Muslim League. The transformation of militant outfits is a frequently practiced method for de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism. It is a process through which armed groups come to shun violence to become a part of political or social mainstream. Historical antecedents prove that the political mainstreaming of militant outfits can bring about major shifts in their ideologies that eventually become non-violent. Although militants' transformation into a political party is not unprecedented, JuD's decision met with stiff internal and external resistance for valid reasons. The attempt to transform failed mainly due to non-adherence to some of the guiding principles of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR). There is a widespread consensus among the scholars of DDR that such a programme may work well if all the key actors involved have a shared vision for the outcome (Berdel and Ucko 2009). But in this case, there was simply no attempt by the organisation to take into confidence the key stakeholders within and outside the country. Hence, no political party in Pakistan came to support JuD's decision to rebrand itself as a political party nor did the state institutions. In September 2017, based on recommendations from intelligence agencies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior Ministry of Pakistan asked the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) not to register MML.<sup>22</sup> Within next two weeks, the ECP rejected MML's plea to register as a political party. United States saw this development as an effort by Lashkar-e-Taiba 'to circumvent sanctions and deceive the public about its true character' (Anwar 2018). Critics of the whole process saw it as an ISI ploy to mainstream its former proxy with a view to expand the popular support base of the group. This attempt was also intended to channelise their activities towards charity and political work. In sum, the sceptics interpreted the formation of Milli Muslim League not as demobilisation, but remobilisation through other means.

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22 The News, 27 September 2017.

Few, who favoured transformation, argued that the mainstreaming of these organisations will render them obsolete in the long run<sup>23</sup> as Pakistanis have hardly voted for religious parties in the general elections. One exception was the general elections held under the military regime in 2002, which led to the formation of MMA government, an alliance of five religious parties. This was, however, what I consider to be an engineered victory intended to appease the charged religious sentiments in the wake of the American-led intervention in neighbouring Afghanistan. Thus, in view of historic trends of electioneering in the country, the best way to deal with the religious nationalist militants seems to be to let the nation decide its fate. The rationale behind the usefulness of political mainstreaming is that the religiously driven groups have to broaden their appeal to seek electoral power. In order to get votes in elections such organisations must abandon their radical ideas, and pursue a developmental agenda to win over electoral constituencies.

The failed attempt of rebranding itself from a militant organisation into a political party might also be driven by some indigenous factors. The international environment changed dramatically after the US launched their global war on terror and became less conducive for terrorist organisations to maintain their physical infrastructure and international financial networks. JuD was not an exception. It relied heavily on a network of local and international charities to generate funds for its operations inside Pakistan and beyond. In the aftermath of GoT, the US, their allies and international multilateral bodies banned a number of international charities including the al Harmain Foundation, which was instrumental in disbursing funds to global jihadi organisations. Financial constraints aside, the excitement of jihad and the prestige of membership of jihadi organisations had worn off mainly due to death and destruction unleashed by neo-jihadist organisations in the name of jihad. Hafiz Saeed categorically condemned groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and opposed their anti-Pakistan jihad. Staying relevant in view of changing international and domestic conditions was an uphill task and electoral politics offered an easy way out to, as you might put it, ‘live to fight another day’.

The so-called transformation, however, was halted as abruptly as it had started. Following a humiliating defeat in the general elections of 2018, the JuD cum MML disappeared from public and media discourse. The extremely controversial “transformation” whether externally exposed or internally decided, experienced an odd end, which has left thousands of JuD

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23 Jamal. *The Diplomat*, 8 August 2017.

members neither as political workers nor proper jihadists. It is still not clear whether the group has actually endorsed democracy through contesting the general elections of 2018, but this step does reflect the group's intention to be a part of democratic process. Mere participation in electoral politics would not confer any legitimacy to JuD unless it categorically renounces violence and demonstrates commitment to democratic values. Equally important is to evolve national, regional and international consensus on transforming a group, known for its links with global terrorist networks. Unless, there is a rapprochement between India and Pakistan, generating this consensus could be an uphill task.

### *Conclusion*

The evaluation presented above establishes that the threat of terrorism in Pakistan is multi-dimensional, it is continuously evolving, the state has adopted different sets of policy interventions to deal with various militant organisations, which I consider to have been largely successful as appears from the quantitative decline in the incidents of terrorism in the country. These counter-measures have doubtlessly dented the operational capabilities of terrorist organisations but these partial successes must not lead to counter-terror triumphalism given the volatile regional environment.

South Asian region is set to brace the fallout of the possible drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. As the US and its allies prepare to withdraw, a number of possible scenarios may emerge with regards to militancy in Pakistan, which can possibly impact the China Pakistan Economic Corridor or vice versa. Multiple militant organisations falling in the neo-jihadist category have previously sought legitimacy from the US presence in Afghanistan, using it as a *raison d'être* to justify their existence (Iqbal 2015). But structural changes in the regional politics, such as the American policy of retreat from conflict zones, coupled with an enhanced focus on containing China will certainly impact the ideological outlook of terrorist organisations. There is a possibility of the revival of Cold War era paroxysm, in which terrorist groups operating from Pakistan could be co-opted or coerced by certain powers to replace the US with China as the enemy of either Islam or Baloch land and resources. The arrest of Kulbhoshan Yadav (March 2016) and the attack on Chinese consulate in Karachi (November 2018) also indicate what I see as how *proxyism* has come to overshadow ideological terrorism. As the regional security environment is likely to witness tectonic shifts in form of possible US drawdown from Afghanistan and increased US-Iran tensions, there is a strong need to analyse how these

developments will affect Pakistani militants of different ideological orientations.

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