

# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN IN 2023

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), commonly known as the Pakistani Taliban, has been on an upward trajectory since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021. The resurgent group, which ended the ceasefire with the government in November 2022, has not only presented the biggest internal security challenge to Pakistan but has also severely impeded bilateral ties with Afghanistan. Consequently, Pakistan has witnessed a sharp uptick in terrorist activities, accentuating the destabilising impact on the country. According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies' (PICSS) 2023 Annual Report, Pakistan witnessed a 70 per cent increase in attacks, an 81 per cent increase in deaths, and a 62 per cent uptick in the number of injured. The 2023 annual report of the Centre for Research and Security Studies, on the other hand, suggests that the overall fatalities marked a six-year high—the highest since 2017—with a staggering 56 per cent increase from 2022 levels. While the estimates from Islamabad-based think-tanks may vary, the key issue

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is that the majority of these attacks were waged by the proscribed TTP. This paper attempts to assess the developments concerning the TTP in 2023, as they are pivotal for gaining insights into the present trends that may carry into the year 2024.

### A MONTHLY ANALYSIS OF TTP'S MAJOR ATTACKS IN 2023

**January 2023:** On January 30, a suicide attack within a mosque in Peshawar claimed the lives of over 100 individuals and injured many more, mostly police officials. The mosque is situated within the fortified Peshawar Police Lines area, which is home to many government installations. While rumours were rife that the suicide bomber likely had internal assistance to enter a high-security compound, it was later clarified that the bomber had entered disguised in a police uniform, effectively evading the attention of guards. A TTP faction, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), claimed responsibility for the attack, stating it was to avenge the killing of Omar Khalid Khorasani, the chief of the JuA. The TTP-central spokesperson, Mohammad Khurasani, later distanced the group from the attack, saying it wasn't the TTP's *modus operandi* to attack religious places. The rebuttal indicated possible rifts within the group.

A day later, on January 31, a police station in Mianwali came under a foiled attack.<sup>1</sup> This was a marked departure from the TTP's previous pattern of targeting police stations and checkpoints in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and areas bordering Afghanistan.

Additionally, the TTP released an infographic on its January activity, claiming a total of 46 attacks, which killed 49 and injured 58.<sup>2</sup>

**February 2023:** On February 17, the TTP launched an hours-long assault on the Karachi Police Headquarters. A day later, it issued a warning, stating that "the policemen should stay away from our war

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1. Asif Chaudhry, "TTP Attack on Mianwali Police Station 'Repulsed'", *Dawn*, February 01, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1734674>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.
  2. Manoj Gupta and Oindrila Mukherjee, "Pakistan Taliban Releases Infographic on January 'Activity': 46 Attacks, Majority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa", *News18*, February, 2, 2023, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/pakistani-taliban-infographic-january-militant-activity-46-attacks-khyber-pakhtunkhwa-6973705.html>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

with the slave army; otherwise, the attacks on the safe havens of the top police officers will continue".<sup>3</sup>

Approximately a week later, a high-level Pakistani delegation led by Defence Minister Khwaja Asif, accompanied by other top officials, including Lieutenant General Nadeem Anjum, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief, visited Kabul. They met with the Taliban regime's acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Bardar, and sought to address the TTP challenge.

**March 2023:** On March 30, the TTP claimed responsibility for an attack in Lakki Marwat, KP, which killed four police officers and injured six other security forces personnel.

**April 2023:** On April 12, Khwaja Asif, in an interview with Voice of America, alluded to the possibility of Pakistan striking TTP hideouts in Afghanistan should the Afghan Taliban fail to live up to its cross-border security commitments.<sup>4</sup>

In April, the TTP announced its merger with two Baloch militant groups, led by Akram and Aslim Baloch from the Kalat and Quetta districts, respectively. This raised the number of Baloch groups operating under the TTP's umbrella to four. In 2022, Aslam Baloch from the Nushki district and Mazar Baloch from the Makran division joined the TTP.<sup>5</sup>

**May 2023:** There was a minor drop in attacks in May, as suggested by the database of PICSS.<sup>6</sup>

**June 2023:** According to the June 2023 report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the TTP's foray into Balochistan persisted, with nine instances of violence by the TTP in Balochistan during the initial six months of 2023. One of these

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3. Fidel Rahmati, "TTP Warns of More Attacks Against Pakistan After Karachi HQ Raid", *Khaama Press*, February, 18, 2023, <https://www.khaama.com/ttp-warn-of-more-attacks-against-pakistan-after-karachi-hq-raid/>. Accessed on January 6, 2023.

4. Sarah Zaman, "Pakistan Will Hit Terror Hideouts Inside Afghanistan, Defense Minister Warns Kabul", *Voice Of America*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-will-hit-terror-hideouts-inside-afghanistan-defense-minister-warns-kabul/7047693.html>. Accessed on January 6, 2023.

5. Abdullah Khan, "TTP's Expansion in Balochistan: An Alarming Threat to Pakistan's National Security", Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, September 30, 2023, <https://www.picss.net/articles/ttps-expansion-in-balochistan-an-alarming-threat-to-pakistans-national>. Accessed on January 6, 2023.

6. Ikram Junaidi, "Minor Drop in Attacks, Deaths in May: PICSS", *Dawn*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1757440>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

incidents was the attack on a police vehicle in Dera Murad Jamali on June 9.

**July 2023:** On July 12, a military garrison in Zhob, Balochistan, was attacked by the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), a group claimed to be affiliated with the TTP. The group, formed in February 2023 remains, by and large, shrouded in mystery. While most analysts believe that it is a front created by the TTP to conduct attacks under the veil of deniability, TTP commanders, in conversation with *The Khorasan Diary* (TKD), did not acknowledge the group's existence.<sup>7</sup> The TJP spokesperson, Mullah Qasim, while speaking to the TKD, conveyed that the group comprises those who adhere to the Deobandi school of thought, and have previously fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet and American invasions. And, when asked about the group's affiliations, Qasim retorted that they would "support anyone who shares their cause for the implementation of *shariah* in Pakistan".<sup>8</sup> The statements don't rule out the possibility of the TJP's association with the TTP, for the TTP, too, espouses a similar genesis and line of thought. In July 2023, Asad Afridi, a leader of the JuA faction of the TTP revealed that the TJP, indeed, is a cover of the TTP.

**August 2023:** The PICSS reported that the month of August witnessed 99 attacks across the country, the highest in a month since November 2014. However, the data didn't match with that of the TTP, which claimed responsibility for 147 attacks.<sup>9</sup>

**September 2023:** On September 6, hundreds of TTP fighters, equipped with the latest weapons, attacked two military check-posts in the Kalash area of Chitral district, KP. The Chitral incursion offers a vital insight into the TTP's resurgence owing to the geostrategic location it occurred in. Chitral borders Afghanistan's Kunar, Nuristan and Badakhshan provinces, and Tajikistan through the narrow Wakhan corridor, with proximity to China's Xinjiang region. Chitral, home to the Kalash community—the smallest religious minority in

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7. Iftikhar Firdous, "Does Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) Actually Exist?", *The Khorasan Diary*, April 29, 2023, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2023/04/29/does-tehreek-e-jihad-pakistan-actually-exist>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

8. Ibid.

9. Ikram Junaidi, "Militant Attacks in August 'Highest in a Month' Since 2014", *Dawn*, September 03, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1773696>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

Pakistan—and a significant Ismaili population, has been a relatively peaceful district in KP with only occasional instances of violence. Hence, two key takeaways can be assessed from the attack: one, the TTP's renewed intent and ability to establish a territorial foothold in new regions, which increasingly challenge the Pakistani state's writ. Two, given that the region is inhabited by minority communities, it indicates the possibility of the TTP stepping up its attacks against minorities or in the regions they inhabit, and the subsequent pressure on them to convert to Islam, similar to the threat the Kalash community received from the TTP in 2014: "convert to Islam or prepare for death".<sup>10</sup>

Pakistan's caretaker foreign minister, in an unprecedented move, while responding to the attack, denied the involvement of the Afghan Taliban, stating that it was an "isolated incident", distinctly opposite to the common praxis of Pakistani leaders who lambast the Afghan Taliban for the TTP's attacks. A few weeks later, reports of the Afghan Taliban arresting 200 TTP militants returning from the Chitral attack came to the fore, the veracity of which was confirmed by the caretaker foreign minister.<sup>11</sup>

**October 2023:** On October 1, the TTP attacked the Kundal police post in Mianwali, Punjab, in which one police officer was killed. One of the terrorists was identified as Zubair Nawaz, brother of Arshad Nawaz, the emir of the 'Tipu Group' of the TTP, the faction also responsible for the January 31, attack in Mianwali.<sup>12</sup>

On October 3, the Pakistani government unveiled its Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, aimed at expelling more than 1.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees. This development was primarily seen in the context of the Pakistani establishment putting pressure on the Afghan Taliban to take concrete action against the TTP.

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10. Rajat Ghai, "Save the Kalash!", *Business Standard*, February, 17, 2014, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/save-the-kalash-114021700863\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/save-the-kalash-114021700863_1.html). Accessed on January 5, 2023.

11. Iftikhar A. Khan, "Caretaker FM Confirms Arrest of 200 'TTP Fighters' in Afghanistan", *Dawn*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1778487>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

12. Imran Gabol, "Policeman Martyred, 2 Terrorists Killed in Attack on Patrolling Post in Mianwali", *Dawn*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1778735>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

**November 2023:** On November 4, the Mianwali Training Air Base of the Pakistan Air Force, located in Punjab, was attacked by the TJP. While the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Pakistani military's media wing, claimed that the attack had caused damage to three non-operational aircraft, sources say that the actual loss amounted to 14 aircraft and 35 military men.<sup>13</sup> This act of terror was also viewed as a response to the mass, forcible deportation of Afghans, which had activated sleeper cells.<sup>14</sup>

**December 2023:** On December 12, the TJP attacked a security forces' checkpoint in Daraban, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, in which 23 soldiers were martyred, making it the highest single-day death toll for the military in 2023. The TJP spokesperson revealed that the four suicide bombers involved in the attack belonged to the Lakki, Dera Ismail Khan, Swat and Mardan districts.<sup>15</sup> In revealing the provenance of the suicide bombers, the group aimed to counter the narrative peddled by the Pakistani establishment in recent months regarding the involvement of Afghan refugees in suicide attacks. Pakistan's Foreign Office delivered a strong demarche to the Afghan *charge d'affaires*, asking the Afghan Taliban to take stern action against the perpetrators of this attack and hand them over, along with the TTP leadership in Afghanistan, to Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Zabihullah Mujahid, the Afghan Taliban's spokesperson, in a rejoinder, said that "every incident in Pakistan shouldn't be linked to Afghanistan...."<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) issued a statement condemning the attack, affirming the TJP's affiliation with the TTP

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13. Ayesha Siddiq, "Pakistan Army Should Leave Politics and Get Back to Security: An Airbase was Just Attacked", *ThePrint*, November 07, 2023, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pakistan-army-should-leave-politics-get-back-to-security-an-airbase-was-just-attacked/1835218/>. Accessed on January 4, 2023.

14. "Who is TJP, the Group Behind the Pakistan Air Force Base Attack, and Why is it a Concern for Pakistan?", *The Economic Times*, November 5, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/how-to/who-is-tjp-the-group-behind-the-pakistan-air-force-base-attack-and-why-is-it-a-concern-for-pakistan/articleshow/104983146.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

15. Iftikhar Shirazi, Zahid Imdad, and Ismail Khan, "25 Soldiers Martyred, 27 Terrorists Killed in Separate Incidents in Dera Ismail Khan: ISPR", *Dawn*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1797238>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Nazir Shinwari, "Attack in Pakistan Not Related to Afghanistan: Mujahid", *TOLONews*, 13 December, 2023, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-186472>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

while urging all states to actively cooperate with the Government of Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

During the attack, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Asim Munir, was in Washington to reset ties with the US, particularly to ratchet up the security aspect of the relationship, when the US appears determined to enhance collaboration on the non-traditional front. Munir strove to convince the US leadership that the TTP is not just a regional security threat impacting Pakistan but also a global one that could endanger US security interests.<sup>19</sup>

In mid-December, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) chief, who subscribes to the same Deobandi school of thought as the Afghan Taliban and the TTP, received an invitation from the Afghan Taliban to visit Kabul. This ensued amid the plummeting ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the challenge posed by the TTP. Pakistan's Foreign Office denied that the state of Pakistan was in talks with the TTP, iterating that the visit was a personal invitation and not one sponsored by the establishment.<sup>20</sup>

### EMERGING PATTERNS IN THE TTP'S ATTACKS

- Although the majority of attacks by the TTP have been concentrated in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the TTP's ingress into Punjab seems to be on the rise as well. This is indicative of the TTP's expansion into areas beyond its traditional strongholds, which may strain the Pakistani military in countering it.
- In 2023, security forces recorded the highest number of fatalities. However, civilians, too, bore the brunt of the TTP's attacks despite a shift in its manifesto in 2018, wherein the group pledged

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18. "Security Council Press Statement on Terrorist Attack in Daraban, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan", *UN Press*, December 13, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15529.doc.htm>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

19. Akmal Dawi, "Pakistan Seeks US Help Against Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan", *Voice of America*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-seeks-us-help-against-pakistani-taliban-in-afghanistan/7397076.html>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

20. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Foreign Office Downplays Taliban's Invitation to Fazl, Denies Talks with TTP", *Dawn*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1799787#:~:text=ISLAMABAD%3A%20The%20Foreign%20Office%20on,of%20official%20knowledge%20about%20the>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

to move away from indiscriminate attacks on non-combatants and instead focus on targeted attacks against security forces and other government agents/installations. Among the security forces, the ill-equipped, poorly trained police personnel, who are nearing demoralisation, incurred heavy losses in the face of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-grade sophisticated weapons employed by highly trained TTP militants. This makes the case for bolstering the police and law enforcement agencies as they remain the first line of defence against terrorists.

- The TTP and its splinter groups have been increasingly targeting high-value military installations and other hard targets, which indicates the need for beefing up security around sensitive installations.
- The TTP has demonstrated a preference for suicide bombings, and resultantly, in 2023, there was a dramatic surge in suicide attacks, with 31 such incidents, in stark contrast to the six registered in 2021.<sup>21</sup> This underscores the need for the Pakistani establishment to prioritise the de-radicalisation of extremist religious forces, employing a whole-of-government approach to diminish the potential pool for recruiting suicide bombers.
- The number of terrorist attacks was higher than the number of operations (small scale intelligence-based operations) against terrorists, which raises doubts about Pakistan's "all-out comprehensive operation" against terrorism, as announced by the government in April 2023. Moreover, Pakistan faces a dilemma in its counter-terrorism efforts for two significant reasons. Firstly, the counter-terror operations of *Zarb-e-Azb* (2014) and *Radd-ul-Fasaad* (2017) had resulted in heavy displacement in the tribal areas and added severe strain to Pakistan's economy. Given that Pakistan was on the brink of default in the first half of 2023, and since then has tried to stabilise its economy through several measures, such as obtaining an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and securing funds from Saudi Arabia and the United

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21. "Pakistan's Violence-Related Fatalities Mark a Record 6-Year High, 56% Surge In Violence Recorded in 2023: CRSS Annual Security Report", Centre for Research and Security Studies, December 31, 2023, <https://crss.pk/pakistans-violence-related-fatalities-mark-a-record-6-year-high-56-surge-in-violence-recorded-in-2023-crss-annual-security-report/>. Accessed on January 4, 2023.



Arab Emirates (UAE), its present economic condition is still not too conducive for initiating a sustained, high-intensity campaign against the TTP. Secondly, the establishment's decision to strike more TTP hideouts in Afghanistan will come at the cost of compromising Afghanistan's sovereignty, thereby antagonising not just the Afghan Taliban, but also the civil society, where anti-Pakistan sentiments are heightened, particularly in the light of the mass expulsion of the Afghan refugees.

- The Taliban had sporadically announced the arrest of TTP members in 2023, as evidenced by the arrests following the Chitral attack. Additionally, in December, there were reports of the Afghan Taliban having detained three commanders and 16 soldiers associated with the Malakand division of the TTP.<sup>22</sup> However, these cosmetic steps has not yielded effective results on the ground. The unwillingness to rein in the TTP *inter alia* stems from the Taliban's concerns about TTP defectors potentially joining its arch-rival, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP).
- This denotes a more tumultuous phase between Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially in the light of a notable shift in Pakistan's policy, wherein it has decided "not to advocate for the Afghan Taliban's case internationally."<sup>23</sup> Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Munir Akram, stated at the UNSC that any engagement with the government in Afghanistan will be contingent on the Afghan Taliban's actions against terrorist organisations in Afghanistan, including the TTP.<sup>24</sup> Apart from attempting coercive diplomacy, Pakistan has been flexing its economic muscle vis-à-vis Afghanistan by imposing a 10 per cent processing fee on certain imported goods and banning other smuggling-prone items under the Afghan

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22. Shahabullah Yousafzai, "Afghan Taliban Arrest TTP Terrorists Amid Growing pressure", *The Express Tribune*, December 5, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2449012/afghan-taliban-arrest-ttp-terrorists-amid-growing-pressure>. Accessed on January 15, 2023.

23. Kamran Yousuf, "Pakistan Shifts Stance on Afghan Taliban", *The Express Tribune*, November 9, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2445604/pakistan-shifts-stance-on-afghan-taliban>. Accessed on January 5, 2023.

24. Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Redefines Engagement Rules with Kabul", *The Express Tribune*, December 21, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2450736/pakistan-redefines-engagement-rules-with-kabul>. Accessed on January 15, 2023.

Transit Trade Agreement.<sup>25</sup> These measures taken to pressurise the Afghan Taliban, would invariably exacerbate the economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSION

Pakistan is grappling with a polycrisis, and its military, which remains the chief arbiter of key policies, finds itself encumbered due to concentrating only on security threats amidst the prevailing political and economic turmoil. In addition to the TTP challenge, it also has to address the Baloch insurgency and the ongoing Baloch protests in the heart of Islamabad.

It appears that the TTP will continue to pose one of the greatest threats to the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan and beyond, particularly in South Asia and Central Asia. Its spill-over into the Indian subcontinent will invariably remain a cause of concern, considering that some sections of anti-India terrorist groups, such as the Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, had fought alongside TTP foot soldiers in Afghanistan against the US and allied forces. These groups are also known to maintain training camps in Afghanistan, which has made India apprehensive. Moreover, the TTP has established links with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), with some factions of the latter having merged into the former. AQIS has fighters in Afghanistan, and appears to have made efforts to refocus on the Kashmir issue. This also suggests that varied militant groups have acquired renewed vigour and greater operational freedom along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, following the Taliban's takeover. Thus, the lines between them, notwithstanding the competing nature and subsequent rivalries among some, have become blurred as they coexist in the same operational space, while embracing the Sunni Deobandi school of thought. This has made the terrorist network an indiscernible complex web, and the security landscape more tenuous. Furthermore, given that the TTP has benefitted the most from an Afghan Taliban government, there are growing concerns about a metastasised TTP threat, which could possibly surpass the

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25. Shahbaz Rana, "Govt Tightens Transit Trade Import Regime", *The Express Tribune*, October 4, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2439142/govt-tightens-transit-trade-import-regime>. Accessed on January 15, 2023.

Afghan Taliban's ability to contain the militant group. In hindsight, these far-reaching security ramifications underscore the need for the concerned countries, particularly Pakistan, to espouse coordinated measures (both kinetic and non-kinetic) to neutralise the TTP.