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Beyond Ideology: The Complex Determinants Of Terrorism In Contemporary Pakistan

Safi Ur Rehman

School of Politics and IR, Quaid-i-Azam University.

srehman@ir.qau.edu.pk

Shaher Bano

Visiting Faculty Lahore Garrison University.

shaherbanocn@gmail.com

Nimra Fatima

MPhil IR Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

Corresponding author e-mail: *srehman@ir.qau.edu.pk

Abstract

Terrorism in Pakistan is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be attributed to ideological factors alone. In today's Pakistan, terrorism stems from a confluence of socioeconomic concerns, political repressions, regional power dynamics, historical frictions, as well as institutional weaknesses. By employing Relative deprivation and Political Opportunity structure theories, this study aims to explore how perceived relative social, economic, and political deprivation breeds fertile ground for radicalization, which terrorist organizations further exploit through ethnic and sectarian divisions. The research paper examines the role of the State's inconsistent policies, political instability, and governance deficits in exacerbating the situation. Along with potential root causes, the socioeconomic and psychological impacts are also analyzed. This study also evaluates Pakistan's counterterrorism measures and the hindrances such as corruption, lack of coordination among the agencies, and the need for a holistic approach to address the broader issues. Pakistan's challenging geographical terrain, as well as its historical entanglement in regional conflicts, pose additional challenges in its efforts to combat terrorism. The contemporary digital modes of terrorist financing are adding to the complexity. A qualitative research methodology presents a holistic picture of the complex determinants in modern Pakistan. Overall, the objectives of this study are twofold. The first is to provide a detailed analysis of the diverse factors contributing to terrorism in Pakistan, and the second is to decode the emerging modes of terrorist financing.

Keywords :Terrorism, Relative Deprivation, Radicalization, Counterterrorism

Introduction

According to the Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan ranked second among 163 states.¹. For a couple of decades, Pakistan has been at the “epicenter of terrorism”. It has been suggested that ideological extremism is responsible for the problem, which is a narrower approach to understanding this complex phenomenon. Therefore, this research postulates that the phenomenon of terrorism in Pakistan cannot be attributed to one or another factor but is a multifaceted issue that is rooted in socio-economic grievances, governance crises, lack of political opportunities, as well as psychological factors. Theoretically, this study is grounded on the Relative deprivation theory, which identifies the perceived sense of deprivation as the significant cause of grievances and frustration, a breeding ground for radicalization. While discussing socioeconomic and political deprivations, this theory also highlights the significance of psychological perceptions. Along with it, the political opportunity structure theory has also been employed, highlighting the importance of political contexts in understanding the phenomenon of terrorism. It highlights how structural opportunities are created for social movements.

Since the initial years, Pakistan has been struggling with terrorism in one form or another, including ethnic and sectarian divisions, militant jihadism, and separatist tendencies. There is a confluence of internal and external factors in examining this intricate phenomenon in Pakistan; however, this study focuses on the subjects of the abovementioned theories. Internally, Pakistan's major issues have been poverty, unemployment, low standards of education, and health, which are some of the causes of radicalization. For instance, in areas with comparatively lower economic development, it is easier for terrorist groups to exploit these governance loopholes to brainwash

¹ Institute for Economics & Peace, “*Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*” Sydney: IEP, (March 2025), <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

and get people to join them. These groups' financial rewards and social services are sometimes more appealing than the opportunities the current socioeconomic system provides.²

Terrorism is also fueled by political instability and governance problems. Political instability, frequent changes of government, military coups, and a weak political system hamper the formulation of sound and effective counter-terrorism policies. Inadequate governance structures, police, and judiciary allow terrorists to operate freely, while poor coordination between the various security organizations hinders counter-terrorism operations. The influence of geography and participation in conflicts in the region is critical to terrorism in the case of Pakistan. The conflict in Afghanistan, its allies, and the regional rivalries, including with India, further complicates the problem for the country. These geopolitical factors influence the formation of terrorist organizations and the outcomes of counter terrorism initiatives. This study also explores the contemporary challenges and opportunities of digital transformations. The unconventional mode of communication, as well as financial transactions, is further exacerbating the complexity of this phenomenon.

The literature generally lacks or devotes insufficient attention to the observation that elements, including socioeconomic disadvantage, political marginalization, and regional geopolitics, significantly influence the occurrence and maintenance of terrorism. These factors are crucial to consider when attempting to understand the situation better and develop a sufficient counterterrorism strategy. It's essential to understand the narratives that lead to the emergence of terrorists, along with socio-economic conditions, governance issues, and political dynamics. Therefore, tackling terrorism effectively in Pakistan requires a comprehensive approach that addresses these multifaceted factors, ensuring long-term peace and stability. The significance of

² Syed M Zaidi, "Economic Impact of Terrorism in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis." *Asian Journal of Economics and Empirical Research* 2, no. 1 (2015): 7–10.

this research thus lies in providing a theoretically based, extensive qualitative analysis of terrorism and advocating for developing a more sophisticated and provocative approach beyond mere military action, killing terrorism, not terrorists, incorporating socio-economic development, improving governance, and leveraging emerging digital innovations.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology has been used to explore the multifaceted picture of terrorism in Pakistan. Based on an extensive literature review, this research delves deeply into the existing scholarly understanding of the eminent root causes of this phenomenon. Along with academic literature, other secondary sources such as watch reports from governmental organizations and international sources have also been consulted extensively. The in-depth exploration of the problem has identified a research gap in the theoretical grounding of the issue. A narrower or one-dimensional approach is often used to explain this complex phenomenon. Terrorism in Pakistan transcends ideological divides, encompassing social, economic, political, and geographical dimensions. This research thus aims to fill the existing research gap by analyzing terrorism through an elaborate theoretical framework. Relative Deprivation Theory and Political Opportunity Structures theories explain the nature of terrorism in contemporary Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

Relative Deprivation Theory

Sociologists and social psychologists have proposed the relative deprivation theory, which argues that it is not the absence of resources that makes people or groups feel deprived but their perception that they are worse off than others. This deprivation can be social, economic, or political, leading to frustration and, thus, social unrest, such as conflict and terrorism.³ Relative

³ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 24–28.

Deprivation Theory is especially applicable to the case of Pakistan to explain how socioeconomic injustices lead to radicalization and the joining of terrorist groups. The relatively lower access to resources creates a sense of deprivation, which ignites frustration and grievances. These, in turn, result in violent behavior.⁴ In Pakistan, the provinces infamous for terrorist activities rank highest in the poverty index. According to the PIDE 2024 index, Balochistan has the highest multidimensional poverty rate, at 70%, followed by KPK at 48% and Sindh at 45%⁵.

The socioeconomic gap, natural resources exploitation, and political alienation make the people of Balochistan feel neglected and deprived of their rights compared to other provinces. The region's natural resources, such as gas and minerals, are believed to be exploited by the central government with little or no trickle-down effect to the region's people. The militant groups then manipulate and exaggerate these loopholes to foster public support and justify militancy. They claim to solve these complaints by offering an idea and a tangible solution, which lures people into joining them. Likewise, in the case of Karachi, the economic competition and ethnic differences make the people of different groups feel deprived compared to other groups. The absence of employment aggravates the feelings, the unavailability of proper infrastructure in their cities, and the exclusion of some ethnic minorities. Terrorist organizations and militant groups exploit these sentiments to recruit them and assure them that the only way to get social and economic justice is to fight for it (violence).⁶

⁴Afzal Mahmood, "Vicious Triangle of Transitional, Security, Uncertainty and Poverty," *Journal of Asian Development Studies* 14, no. 1 (2025): 25. <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.1.25>.

⁵ Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund. *Geography of Poverty in Pakistan: A District-Level Update*. Islamabad: PPAF, n.d. https://www.ppaaf.org.pk/doc/Geography%20of%20Poverty_UPDATE.pdf.

⁶ Relative Deprivation Theory is especially applicable to Pakistan to explain how socioeconomic injustices lead to radicalization and joining of terrorist groups. Most provinces in Pakistan, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and some parts of Sindh, are still underdeveloped, have a high poverty index, and have low literacy and health facilities. Such circumstances provide the necessary background for the emergence of relative deprivation among the population.

Political Opportunity Structure Theory

POS theory postulates that the political context plays a crucial role in forming social movements, which provides breeding grounds for violence and conflict. This theory holds that contentious politics, including terrorism, will likely occur when political opportunities are available. These opportunities can be the government's weakness, political instability, divided elites, or regional and international political dynamics.⁷ These opportunities are constructed structurally by forces beyond the individual's control. Since gaining independence, Pakistan has been witnessing political instability, frequent transfer of power, and military rule. Political instability breeds terrorism.⁸ By fostering political opportunities that enable terrorist organizations to exist. In times of weakened civil authority, such as during post-coup or transitional periods, the absence of strong state power to ensure security creates a power vacuum that provides fertile ground for terrorist activities to flourish. The state's repressive policies, inefficient governance, and lack of accountability accelerate the recruitment and sympathy gaining of extremist organizations, even among highly educated people.⁹.

The fragmentation and competition among the political elites in a state also lead to conflict, which eventually turns into violent extremism and terrorism. Politicians and political parties have allegedly sponsored and funded militant groups so that they could be assisted to pull through in their struggle to capture power. Political actors have also used it as an avenue for a power

⁷ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23-25.

⁸ Schumacher, M. J., & Schraeder, P. J. (2019), Does Domestic Political Instability Foster Terrorism? Global Evidence from the Arab Spring Era (2011–14), *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44(3), 198–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1538124>

⁹ Hussain Abid, "Who Are the BLA – the Group Behind Pakistan's Deadly Train Hijack?" *Al Jazeera*, (March 12, 2025), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/12/who-are-the-bla-the-group-behind-pakistans-deadly-train-hijack>.

struggle¹⁰. This has been observed in cases like Karachi, where the political parties have been alleged to have links with the militants for their support. These affiliations not only provide terrorists with protection and resources but also endorse the terrorists' actions, which also complicates counter-terrorism efforts.

Another aspect contributing to the understanding of the political opportunity structure in the context of Pakistan is the geopolitical factor. The Afghan conflict and the strategic rivalry with India also play a critical role in Pakistan's internal security dynamics. This is especially true for jihadist international networks, Afghan refugees, and the use of militant surrogates in regional politics, all of which have fostered terrorism within an already unstable security environment. The Global Terrorism Index report (2025) has linked the escalation of terrorist activities in Pakistan to the rise of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, as TTP has been responsible for more than 52% of terrorist attacks in Pakistan.¹¹ Similarly, in the recent terrorist attack by BLA, where it ambushed a train and held 400 people hostage, India has been alleged as the mastermind behind this incident.¹²

Literature Review

There is a substantial body of literature on terrorism in Pakistan in which ideological extremism has been cited as one of the reasons for terrorism in the country. Martha Crenshaw, in her book "Explaining Terrorism: Understanding Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and

¹⁰ Turgay Beyribey, "Terrorism as a Conceptual Site for Power Struggles: Problematization of Terrorism in Turkey in the 1970s," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2023): 179–201
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221131432>.

¹¹ Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, (March 2025) <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

¹² Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Links Train Hijacking to 'Afghan Handlers' and Indian Mastermind." *Al Jazeera*, (March 14, 2025)

Consequences,” proposed that ideology is a crucial factor in how terrorists view their purposes and actions. As Crenshaw noted, ideology provides the framework of reference by which the members of a terrorist group recognize each other and their cause and demarcate themselves from the rest of society. This aspect is crucial in mobilizing society for collective action.¹³ Bruce Hoffman, in his book “Inside Terrorism,” also supports this by saying that ideology is the sustenance of terrorism. According to Hoffman, ideology plays a crucial role in the cohesiveness and motivation of a terrorist group, especially in the event of challenges. He stresses that without a powerful ideological story, these groups could not attract and maintain their followers and explain their actions to themselves and others they want to appeal to.¹⁴

In the specific context of Pakistan, Jessica Stern's book "Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill" identified madrasas as the source of radical Islamist ideologies. Stern explains how these institutions train young students to embrace a violent version of Islam to be used in the preparation of recruitment into militant groups. She claims that such people are the most dangerous because they are religious fanatics trained in the art of warfare and motivated by a divine call. Peter Bergen, in "Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden," gives insight into the jihadist ideas that transcend national boundaries and affect Pakistan. Bergen explains how international jihadist movements like Al-Qaeda have helped local militant organizations in Pakistan in terms of ideas, money, and equipment. He notes that these transnational networks assist in supporting local insurgencies by integrating them into a global conflict, making them more appealing and sustainable.¹⁵

¹³Martha Crenshaw, “Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences,” New York: *Routledge*, (2011)

¹⁴ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 75–80

¹⁵ Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 143–150.

However, some authors claim that the emphasis on ideology in the literature is *misleading* because it tends to reduce the factors that lead to terrorism. Louise Richardson, in her book "What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat", argues that although ideology plays a role, it is not the only factor that defines terrorism. Richardson, however, points out that other factors like political grievances and socioeconomic conditions are also influential in pushing people towards terrorism. She argues that there is a need to develop a better approach that looks at the matter from a holistic perspective.¹⁶

In "Understanding Terror Networks," Marc Sageman also challenges the centrality of ideology, as he notes that social connections are significant in making a terrorist. Other relevant data, which can be found in Sageman's work, show that there is much evidence that people join the terrorists not because they have been brainwashed, but because friends or relatives are terrorists. This shift emphasizes ideology and delves into the social mechanisms that lead to recruitment and radicalization. It seeks to understand how ideological beliefs are disseminated and adopted, focusing on the societal contexts that foster the growth of extremist mindsets¹⁷.

Anatol Lieven, in "Pakistan: A Hard Country," describes the socio-political situation in Pakistan and concludes that economic and social factors have led to the emergence of terrorism. He pointed out that Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remain politically and economically backward, and terrorists use these areas to get human resources to replenish their ranks.¹⁸ Asim Sajjad Akhtar's paper "The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan" provides a clear and critical perspective on the socio-economic factors that breed terrorism. Akhtar

¹⁶ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2006), 60–65

¹⁷ Sageman Marc, "Understanding Terror Networks"
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7869496_Understanding_Terror_Networks.

¹⁸ Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (PublicAffairs, 2012)

also points out that the state's inability to deliver basic needs and economic opportunities makes people feel unjustified and excluded from society. He points out that although radical ideologies offer a format for voicing complaints, the root causes are more frequently political and economic.¹⁹.

Ahmed Rashid, in "Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia," also deals with the influence of regional geopolitics on the ideological setting of Pakistan. In this case, Rashid investigates the effects of the war in Afghanistan and the competition with India in the formation of the militant groups in Pakistan. He further posits that the state has relied on these groups as surrogates, leading to the penetration of radicalism in the security docket, making it challenging to address terrorism.²⁰ In "The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba," Stephen Tankel discusses how Pakistan's foreign policy influences its internal security situation. Tankel opines that the state's utilization of militant groups as instruments of foreign policy, especially against India, has ensured the prevalence of radicalism in the security domain.

C. Christine Fair, in her book "Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War," explores the structural causes that support terrorism in Pakistan. Fair explains how the Pakistan military's assessment of its security interests, which require the continued preparedness to confront India, has implicitly endorsed some militant organizations. She continues to explain that this support is not only ideological but also a rational decision to continue having a say in the region.²¹.

¹⁹ Akhtar Aasim Sajjad, *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008), 185–190.

²¹ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 110–115.

In his article "Networks of Rebellion: Understanding Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse," Paul Staniland describes the causes of terrorism as political exclusion and state repression. According to Staniland, social groups excluded from political systems use insurgency and terrorism to fight for their rights. He claims that such actions only aggravate these conditions.²² Maya Tudor's paper "The Promise of Power: Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan: A Comparative Analysis of the Roots" delves into Pakistan's political history and structures. Tudor also points to the absence of democracy and political representation in the region as a factor that has allowed radical ideas to develop. She explains that it is only possible to reduce the attractiveness of radicalism if these structural problems are solved.²³

Sabrina Sohail's thoughtful article "Exploiting Encrypted Networks: A CPM analysis of Telegram's role in Extremist propaganda and Radicalization by terrorist organizations" sheds light on the unconventional ways, such as digital platforms, in which terrorist organizations use to disseminate propaganda and radicalize the youth.²⁴ In her research, "Big Data and Counter-terrorism: A Way Forward," Maryam Baloch explores the emerging avenues of countering terrorism using digital alternatives such as algorithms and "big data." While presenting challenges, these digital platforms can also provide opportunities by presenting inventive ideas such as geo-tags, psychographic evaluations, social media behavior patterns, etc.²⁵.

²² Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

²³ Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power: Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 120–125.

²⁴ Muhammad Shoaib, "The Taliban's Strategy for Victory in Afghanistan (2001-2021): A Case Study of Strategic Communication," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 1–14, <https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/Journals/article/view/140/91>.

²⁵ Maryam Baloch, "Understanding the Ideological Dimensions of Terrorism in Pakistan" (National Counter Terrorism Authority - NACTA, September 2021), <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Maryam-Baloch.pdf>.

Thus, the literature on terrorism in Pakistan paints a rather multifaceted picture where ideology is intertwined with socioeconomic conditions, political grievances, and geopolitical strategies. This understanding is essential in formulating counter-terrorism measures that go beyond the aspects of indoctrination to the general causes of terrorism. Surprisingly, there is a lack of research on the relationship between socioeconomic factors, political marginalization, regional security dynamics, and ideological factors that contribute to terrorism. Economic inequalities, exclusion of political actors, and the utilization of militant groups are often overlooked or downplayed in research. This research focuses on these non-ideological factors that contribute to terrorism in Pakistan to offer a broader perspective on the issue.

Socioeconomic Deprivation and Terrorism

There is a belief that ideological factors have primarily caused terrorism in Pakistan; many scholars and policymakers have focused on the rising trend of radical Islamic thought as the primary cause. This perspective is also correct but somewhat limited in scope, as it does not consider all possible causes of terrorism. One of the most essential variables neglected in the literature is the role of socioeconomic factors in terrorism promotion. Socioeconomic deprivations, including poverty, limited access to resources, and lack of education, are significant factors contributing to terrorism in Pakistan. The absence of these resources led to the feeling of frustration and hopelessness among the Pakistani youth, which makes them vulnerable to joining terrorist organizations as they offer them a sense of purpose and belonging.²⁶.

²⁶Amber Javed, Dr. Noor Elahi, and Dr. Bahadar Nawab, "Decoding the Radicalization Puzzle: Uncovering the Factors Fueling the Fire in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research*¹ 5, no. 2 (2023).

Gurr and Richardson argued that unemployment among youth makes them feel deprived, which makes them resort to terrorism²⁷. The provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and some parts of Sindh are underdeveloped and have a high poverty index, poor literacy, and poor health indicators. 70% of the people of Balochistan are identified as multidimensionally poor, 48% in KPK, and 45% in Sindh, while in Punjab it is 30%²⁸. These circumstances foster sentiments of exclusion and political alienation that terrorist organizations use to recruit people. Due to this, the economic difficulties that the people face in their lives and the lack of opportunities result in frustration and hopelessness. This environment facilitates the terrorist organizations to provide not only the ideological frame but also the material rewards that include financial support and social services to the recruits. For instance, the economic exploitation of the resources of Balochistan has been a matter of grievance for quite some time. The region has minerals and natural gases, but the gains have not been shared. Hence, poverty and unemployment are rife. This economic marginalization has created a feeling of injustice, and thus, the local people are easily recruited by the militant groups who claim to solve these problems.²⁹

In Karachi, for instance, economic marginalization is compounded by ethnic rivalries, which worsen the situation. Due to the city's diverse ethnic structure and economic differences, some ethnic groups are relatively deprived. This has been well understood by both sectarian and political militant groups, who use it as a rallying point by vowing to address these economic and

²⁷ C. Richardson, "Relative Deprivation Theory in Terrorism: A Study of Higher Education and Unemployment as Predictors of Terrorism" (Senior Honors Thesis, New York University, 2011)

²⁸"Poverty rate increases in Pakistan from 38.6pc to 39.5pc in five years: PIDE," *The Nation*, May 25, 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/25-May-2024/poverty-rate-increases-in-pakistan-from-38-6pc-to-39-5pc-in-five-years-pide>.

²⁹ Piazza, James A. "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159-177

social injustices. This analysis of the dynamics is limited to ideology, while it is crucial to consider the economic and social factors that push people to embrace radicalization.

Political Exclusion and State Repression

Another factor that is also rarely highlighted in the literature is political marginalization and state oppression as some of the factors that lead to the emergence of terrorism. The political system of Pakistan has been volatile and autocratic, and has witnessed a change in regimes quite often, including military coups.³⁰ These conditions make it very easy to escalate political grievances into acts of violence. When political systems fail to represent the diverse voices and interests of their people, especially marginalized minorities, these groups are often compelled to seek alternative avenues for expressing their grievances, which can unfortunately lead to insurgency and terrorism.

Historically, the use of military force and the accompanying human rights violations have only intensified existing problems. Regions like Balochistan and former FATA exemplify this, where the state's counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations have frequently involved extrajudicial killings and collective punishments, further inflaming local populations. This vicious cycle of repression, radicalization, and rebellion perpetuates violence.

Additionally, the political marginalization of ethnic and sectarian groups in the governance structure of Pakistan has rendered some of them marginalized. Some ethnic groups have enjoyed political and economic power, and others have been excluded. This has led to bitterness and opened the door for extremism. For instance, the Shia community in Pakistan has suffered persecution and acts of violence, and the state has failed to protect them. This has created the formation of sectarian militant groups that employ such grievances to undertake terrorism and mobilization.

³⁰ Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 112-114.

Furthermore, the judicial and law enforcement structures of Pakistan have been alleged to be corrupt, slow, and not well integrated. This enables the terrorists to evade the law through bribery, political influence, and/or any other legal loophole that is accessible. These are aspects that contribute to the continued acts of terror, the groups are encouraged, and the public is discouraged from reporting cases to LEAs due to the attitude of invincibility and the lack of capacity to apprehend terrorists.

Geopolitics and the Role of the State

The complex nature of the Afghan conflict and Indo-Pakistan rivalry has significantly influenced Pakistan's terrorism landscape and broader South Asian instability. Pakistan's deep involvement in the Afghan wars, pre-Soviet, post-Soviet, and the U.S.-led campaign, has had severe repercussions for its internal security. The influx of Afghan refugees, the proliferation of jihadist networks, and the use of militant proxies in regional politics have further exacerbated the situation.

When Pakistan uses militant groups as a part of its foreign policy, it has allowed radical ideologies to become a part of its security structure. This strategy, which is mainly aimed at restraining the influence of India in the region, has led to the state's somewhat ambiguous stance on some of the militants and their networks. Nevertheless, these groups operate with apparent endorsement from some factions within the state, and that is why the fight against terrorism has remained a herculean task. Such a duality in policy not only retains the operational ability of these groups but also offers them a form of legitimacy. The hostile relations with India have particularly impacted the dealings with groups, including LeT and JeM, which have been used as a balancing force against India. This makes the counterterrorism processes more complex because attempts to disband these groups can be viewed as a threat to national security interests. Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan, maintaining a friendly regime in Kabul, has entangled the country

in complex relationships with various Afghan militant groups. This strategy has often backfired, as these groups have redirected their operations towards Pakistan, exacerbating domestic security challenges.

Impacts

Like the multifaceted nature of terrorism in Pakistan, its impacts are also multidimensional. According to the Global Terrorist Index, Pakistan is the second most affected state by terrorism. In 2024 alone, Pakistan suffered 1081 casualties. The number of terrorist attacks has also doubled from 517 in 2023 to 1099 in 2024³¹. The socioeconomic fabric has also deteriorated significantly. In the last two decades, terrorism has cost Pakistan 152 billion dollars, along with 70000 casualties.³² An extensive body of literature has been published on the impacts of terrorism in Pakistan. However, this is needed to understand the emerging challenges.

Contemporary Challenges

While presenting opportunities, the proliferation of digital platforms has also added many challenges in addressing the already intricate phenomenon of terrorism.

Unconventional Communication Channels

- **Telegram**

³¹"Global Terrorism Index 2025: Pakistan becomes world's second most terrorism-affected country," *The Economic Times*, (March 20, 2025), <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/global-terrorism-index-2025-pakistan-becomes-worlds-second-most-terrorism-affected-country/articleshow/118764139.cms>.

³² Farwa Hassan, "The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP): Genesis, Evolution and Future Trajectory" (National Counter Terrorism Authority - NACTA, March 2023), <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Paper-1-Farwa-Hassan-1.pdf>.

Social media networks facilitate radical activities by providing channels for communication, aiding financial transactions, and enabling critical support.³³ From encrypted networks such as Telegram to Pornsites, the digital avenues are offering safe channels of communication and financing to terrorist organizations to radicalize youth. Telegram, particularly because of its security features, has provided a platform for secret communication and encrypted messages, which terrorist organizations can easily use to promote radical ideas and mobilize young minds.³⁴ Pakistan-based terrorist organizations are also keeping up with technological sophistication, using Telegram as their information dissemination channel. The infamous Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also holds various groups and channels that they use to exploit the loopholes of Pakistan's governance structure to advance their extremist propaganda. Recently, Telegram has been serving as the central medium for sharing updates about the violent attacks and their results, as well as the official statements made by spokespersons. Online groups and channels are believed to circulate sympathetic content, spread propaganda, and share news.³⁵.

- **Adult Websites**

Besides these formal channels, another research has shown that terrorist organizations use steganography in Pornsites to hide discrete information, by embedding instructions within the images or videos. Osama bin Laden was also believed to be using encoded messages on porn as

³³ Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," (2016), *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(1): 77–98
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408>

³⁴ Muhammad Shoaib, "The Taliban's Strategy for Victory in Afghanistan (2001-2021): A Case Study of Strategic Communication," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 1–14,
<https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/Journals/article/view/140>.

³⁵ Riccardo Valle and Asfandyar Mir, "Telegram's Role in Amplifying Tehrik-e-Taliban's 'Umar Media' Propaganda and Sympathiser Outreach," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET)*, January 30, 2024,
<https://gnet-research.org/2024/01/30/telegrams-role-in-amplifying-tehreek-e-talibans-umar-media-propaganda-and-sympathiser-outreach/>.

well as sport websites in plotting various attacks.³⁶ Organizations opt for this channel because the high traffic on these websites makes it difficult to identify covert messages.

- **Videogames**

Another unconventional mode of communication used by terrorist organizations is video games. They are emerging as one of the most dangerous and undetectable avenues of communication among terrorists, as they are challenging to monitor. For instance, the PS4 offers party chat functions among the players, which is challenging to monitor and easier to manipulate³⁷. Terrorist organizations often use online gaming platforms for four purposes, i.e., “to propagate content, recruitment, communication, combat training, and terrorist financing”.³⁸ In the 2000s, Al-Qaeda supposedly developed a game called “Salil al-Sawarem.”³⁹

- **Contemporary Terrorist Financing**

Along with digitalizing communication channels, digital terrorist financing has also emerged as an indisputable challenge. From Cryptocurrency to TikTok gifting and other social media monetization tools, terrorist organizations exploit the digital avenues of financial transactions. Digital financing usually involves three steps: disseminating fundraising propaganda, communicating through encrypted messages, and selecting the preferred mode of transactions.⁴⁰. Cryptocurrencies have become a preferred mode of transactions because they offer pseudo-

³⁶ “Terrorists talk via porn sites,” *NZ Herald*, July 29, 2008, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/terrorists-talk-via-porn-sites/4ISMS5MT5TESFKH5VJGLJC2BTI/>.

³⁷ Ethan McMahon, “Communicating Terror: The Role of Gaming Consoles and Backdoors,” *Columbia Journal of European Law*, (January 15, 2016)

³⁸ Maryam Baloch, “Big Data” and Counter Terrorism-A Way Forward,” *Pakistan Journal Of Terrorism Research*, Vol-04, Issue-1 (2022)

³⁹ Ahmed Al-Rawi, “Video Games, Terrorism, and ISIS’s Jihad 3.0,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (August 5, 2016): 740–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1207633>

⁴⁰ Jacob Zenn, “The Digital Terror Financing of Central Asian Jihadis,” *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 4 (April 2024), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-digital-terror-financing-of-central-asian-jihadis/>.

anonymous cross-border transactions, which can circumvent national and international surveillance systems.⁴¹ Games such as World of Warcraft are also used for crypto transactions. A recent emerging yet unexplored avenue is social media monetization tools such as live streaming, online gifting, etc. Through these features, virtual gifts can be converted into real money. The State of Utah in the United States has alleged that TikTok monetizes illegal acts.⁴²

Way Forward: Addressing the Multi-faceted Nature of Terrorism

The solution to a multi-level issue also requires a multi-dimensional approach, which, after identifying the root causes, should offer tailored approaches according to each level. The problem of terrorism in Pakistan cannot be addressed with the help of the fight against ideological extremism alone; it is necessary to take into account the socio-political and economic factors and to develop a comprehensive strategy, combining kinetic as well as non-kinetic measures. An effective counter-terrorism strategy combines kinetic measures involving the tactical and operational levels and soft or non-kinetic measures, including strategic planning. Pakistan needs a proactive counter terrorism strategy instead of a reactive one.

The kinetic Counter terrorism focuses on eliminating the perpetrators of terrorism by either killing or capturing them.⁴³. Kinetic measures involving extensive military and intelligence operations, although they disrupt the terrorists' networks, can't produce long-term solutions.⁴⁴. The Kinetic operations, such as Rah-e-Raast, Zarb-e-Azb, Rad-ul-Fasad, etc, have gained tacit success.

⁴¹ Marshall, A. (2017). P2P Cryptocurrency Exchanges, Explained. Cointelegraph. Retrieved March 3, 2023

⁴²"Utah Sues TikTok for Raking in Millions From Virtual Strip Clubs Involving Minors," Utah Department of Commerce News Blog, June 3, 2024, <https://blog.commerce.utah.gov/2024/06/03/utah-sues-tiktok-for-raking-in-millions-from-virtual-strip-clubs-involving-minors/>.

⁴³ Khurram Iqbal, Muneeb Salman, "Gap analysis of Pakistan's non-kinetic responses to violent extremism," Cogent Social Sciences, (2023), 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2221906>

⁴⁴ Jenna Jordan; Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes. International Security (2014), 38 (4): 7–38. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00157

However, they couldn't eliminate terrorism. The military operations in the FATA and PATA regions have disrupted the social, economic, and political fabric of the tribal areas. Between 2.7 and 3.5 million people in KPK and FATA were displaced. Among them, 50000 pregnant women in camps were in terrible conditions. Similarly, the operation Sunrise in Lal Masjid further exacerbated violent extremism, within a year after it, 1188 casualties occurred in 88 terrorist attacks.⁴⁵. Pakistan needs to reevaluate its kinetic strategies by making them more sensitive to the local populations.

Soft or non-kinetic measures focus on identifying and preventing violent extremism through non-coercive measures. This primarily involves countering violent extremism (CVE) political strategies, including de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and counter-narrative building. A multi-level approach should offer rehabilitation at the individual level to deconstruct radical ideas, organizational transformations, and counter-narrative building at the environmental level. Although in Pakistan, various CVEs in the form of rehabilitation centers and departments are working, Pakistan needs to enhance its institutional capacity to widen the scope of soft counterterrorism.

The theoretical framework based on the Relative deprivation and political opportunity structure theories has postulated that socioeconomic, political, and governance loopholes create frustration and grievances, which the extremist organizations then manipulate. Thus, understanding, acknowledging, and addressing these root causes can help counter extremist tendencies. Addressing these causes requires a thorough framework based on socioeconomic development, political stability, efficient legal frameworks, and effective community

⁴⁵ Zia ur Rehman Hussain, "How Lal Masjid changed militancy," *Dawn*, July 13, 2017.

engagement.⁴⁶ Pakistan also needs to develop a national consensus on the counterterrorism approach. Incorporating local communities in counter terrorism efforts, introducing grassroots educational reforms, and addressing socioeconomic and political disparities even at the micro level are imperative to designing a holistic national counter terrorism strategy. To eliminate terrorism, Pakistan also needs to reevaluate its foreign policy, and international and regional actors, such as China, need to play an essential role in fostering dialogues among the hostile neighbors.

Another important avenue of opportunity is keeping pace with digital advancements and using emerging technologies to address emerging problems. Leveraging “Big Data” to navigate the extremist elements is an intricate yet crucial step. Pakistan still lags far behind in the Cybersecurity space. By training algorithms to trace money laundering, following social behaviors through Deep Neural Networks, using geo-tag devices, dark web training, and psychic evaluations, Pakistan can also curb the emerging trends of digital extremism. Combining human intelligence and big data can help provide Pakistan safe cyberspace.

This study underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that extends beyond military force to address the root causes of terrorism. Key components of an effective counterterrorism strategy include socioeconomic development, political stability, and good governance. By understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of terrorism, policymakers can develop more sustainable and practical strategies to mitigate this persistent threat in Pakistan. A sophisticated counterterrorism approach must combine prevention and response, tackling the underlying issues that breed terrorism while simultaneously addressing immediate threats. This holistic strategy is essential for achieving lasting peace and stability.

⁴⁶ Mariam Shah, "Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Beyond Azm-e-Istehkam," *Royal United Services Institute*, (July 1, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/pakistans-counterterrorism-strategy-beyond-azm-e-istehkam>).

Conclusion

For decades, Pakistan has been an unfortunate victim of terrorism; however, the contemporary determinants of terrorism in Pakistan are far beyond the ideology. The phenomenon of terrorism in Pakistan is an intricate process made of an amalgamation of socioeconomic and political grievances, and governance loopholes, which terrorist organizations exploit to promote propaganda against the state. The relative deprivation theory postulates that the sense of relative deprivation is the primary cause of grievances and frustrations, which ultimately leads to joining extremist organizations. The political opportunity structure theory states that structural opportunities give space to extremist tendencies, such as political instability, power struggle, or a hostile regional environment. Along with the theoretical background, this research has also analyzed the contemporary digital challenges, which include unconventional modes of communication, such as Telegram, Adult sites, and Online games. The emerging digital platforms of terrorist financing, such as cryptocurrency, and other social media monetization tools further complicate the issue. However, a comprehensive way forward based on a combination of kinetic, non-kinetic, and developmental approaches has been proposed to address this challenge holistically. Leveraging digital avenues to counter terrorism measures has also been suggested.