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No End in Sight: Jihadist and Baluch Ethno-Nationalist Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan Since the U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan

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Wreckage left in the wake of the BLA suicide-bombing in Karachi, Pakistan (Source: Hindustan Times).

Pakistan is no stranger to suicide terrorism. However, suicide attacks witnessed in 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 point to its revival and expansion from jihadist to Baluch ethno-separatist militants. Alongside representing the resilience of Pakistan's asymmetric conflicts, the re-emergence of suicide attacks also signals a new phase in terrorism in the country. The April 26 suicide attack by a female member of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA)'s Majeed Brigade targeting a van carrying Chinese nationals in Karachi further adds a gendered dimension to the rebirth of suicide terrorism in Pakistan (Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2354305/three-chinese-nationals-among-four-killed-in-ku-suicide-attack>), April 26).

In this new phase, the underlying factors of suicide terrorism in Pakistan are qualitatively different from what they experienced during the U.S invasion of Afghanistan (Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2342304/pakistans-war-on-terror-ii>), February 7). The Pakistani Army's counter-terrorism partnership with the U.S. in Afghanistan, domestic counter-insurgency operations, and drone strikes in the ex-Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) region and Baluchistan accounted for suicide terrorism before the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, as the security situation has evolved with the U.S exit from Afghanistan, the driving factors for suicide terrorism have transformed from external to primarily internal causes. [1]

After a two-year lull from 2019 to 2020, as many as nine suicide attacks were reported in Pakistan from 2021 to April 2022.[2] Alarming, it is not just jihadist groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) that is using suicide terrorism, but also the Majeed Brigade of BLA (Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1680914>), March 20, 2022; Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2022175/bla-balochistan-insurgency>), July 27, 2019). Against this backdrop, this article will examine the evolution of suicide terrorism in Pakistan in the context of the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan and highlight the factors accounting for its revival and expansion.

Suicide Terrorism: An Intractable Feature of Pakistan's Asymmetric Conflicts

Suicide terrorism is a common feature of asymmetric conflicts. [3] Indeed, the incentive structure of suicide terrorism is hard to deter. For instance, even if a suicide bomber fails to hit the intended target, the attacker still becomes a martyr, while if the attacker achieves the original goal, he or she then becomes an icon (Arab News (<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2042201>). Pakistan, March 14, 2022). Since 9/11, suicide terrorism has become an intractable feature of Pakistan's conflicts in the ex-FATA region, which is now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan province.

Suicide terrorism is also directly proportional to conflict escalation and vice versa. [4] Following the July 2007 Red Mosque operation, suicide attacks in Pakistan increased exponentially (Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1345068>), July 13, 2017). For instance, as compared to 10 suicide attacks in 2006, Pakistan witnessed 61 such attacks in 2007 (South Asia Terrorism Portal (<https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/suicide-attacks/pakistan>), April 20). Consistent with this, 65 and 85 (the most in a year) suicide attacks were recorded in Pakistan in 2008 and 2009, respectively. During the 2007-2015 period, there were a total of 466 suicide attacks, underscoring the upward trajectory of the conflict.

However, in the aftermath of the 2014 Zarb-e-Azb Operation, which dismantled TTP strongholds in the ex-FATA region, destroyed TTP infrastructure, and forced TTP fighters and commanders to flee to Afghanistan, suicide terrorism declined progressively (The News International (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/129219-Operation-Zarb-e-Azb-in-retrospect>), June 20, 2016). As opposed to 31 suicide attacks in 2015, only 23 such incidents were recorded in 2016. In 2018, suicide attacks in Pakistan declined further to single digits with eight incidents recorded in that year. Likewise, 2019 and 2020 witnessed four attacks each, constituting a downward trend coinciding with conflict de-escalation in Pakistan (South Asia Terrorism Portal, (<https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/suicide-attacks/pakistan>) April 20).

Characteristics of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

In August 2021, as the jihadist conflict resumed with an uptick in TTP attacks against Pakistan, the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the revival of the Taliban's self-styled Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, suicide terrorism witnessed a revival of sorts in Pakistan (Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2334713/afghanistan-crisis-and-its-possible-effects>), December 20, 2021). Separately, Baluch separatists' participation in suicide terrorism is rooted in decades of political alienation and socio-economic deprivation, which is now reaching an apex. For instance, of the five suicide attacks reported in Pakistan in 2022, BLA's Majeed Brigade perpetrated three such attacks targeting the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Baluchistan's Noshki and Panjgur districts and a van carrying Chinese nationals at the entrance of Karachi University's Confucian Centre (Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1672907>), February 2; Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1686920/3-chinese-nationals-among-4-dead-in-suicide-attack-at-karachi-university>), April 26). ISKP carried out the other two attacks in March on a Shia mosque in Peshawar and President Arif Alvi's motorcade in Sibbi, Baluchistan (Dawn (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1679017>), March 9; The News International (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/940546-terror-strikes-peshawar>), March 13). Of the five suicide bombings recorded in 2021, TTP carried out four of them, while BLA claimed one such attack.

Globally, as opposed to averaging 1.6 deaths and 1.7 injuries in conventional terrorist attacks, suicide terrorism averages 4.5 deaths and 10.4 injuries, respectively. However, in Pakistan, the casualty figure for suicide terrorism is much higher than the global average, with 15.5 deaths and 39.4 injuries on average due to their indiscriminate nature. [5] From 2007-2015, most of the suicide attacks in Pakistan struck soft targets, such as places of worship, especially for religious minorities, and other public gatherings and therefore accounted for a higher casualty rate. Likewise, the high frequency of these attacks from 2007 to 2015 also explains the higher fatality rate than the global average. However, in 2021 and 2022, apart from the suicide attack targeting Peshawar's Shia Mosque, killing 66 people, the casualty rate in other attacks has been lower. This is because TTP has shifted its targeting strategy from indiscriminate attacks hitting soft targets to a more discriminate targeting strategy.

The BLA's female suicide bomber Shari Baluch's participation in suicide terrorism on April 26 by targeting Chinese nationals is consistent with the conflict trendline of educated youth from the middle-class turning toward Baluch insurgency. A graduate of Karachi University, she held a

([https://www.independenturdu.com/node/100781?](https://www.independenturdu.com/node/100781?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR39MlosIO9fa_J-ldvapatxNjWEDkSkadyBJ3k-OWI4PkL1fGM4iCOF2CY#Echobox=1650972392)

[utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR39MlosIO9fa_J-](https://www.independenturdu.com/node/100781?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR39MlosIO9fa_J-ldvapatxNjWEDkSkadyBJ3k-OWI4PkL1fGM4iCOF2CY#Echobox=1650972392)

[ldvapatxNjWEDkSkadyBJ3k-OWI4PkL1fGM4iCOF2CY#Echobox=1650972392](https://www.independenturdu.com/node/100781?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR39MlosIO9fa_J-ldvapatxNjWEDkSkadyBJ3k-OWI4PkL1fGM4iCOF2CY#Echobox=1650972392)), April 26). Likewise, the Peshawar Mosque suicide bomber, Ihsanullah, was an Afghan refugee whose family moved to Pakistan decades ago. A high-school dropout, he received training from ISKP in Afghanistan before returning for the suicide attack in Peshawar ([The News International](https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/940180-peshawar-mosque-suicide-bomber-was-afghan-police) (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/940180-peshawar-mosque-suicide-bomber-was-afghan-police>), March 10).

In both instances, the revenge factor was common: ISKP consider Shias to be heretics and legitimate targets, while the Baluch community often views the Chinese footprint in Baluchistan as a form of neo-colonialism. Both suicide bombers have humble backgrounds and hail from conflict-hit areas. Likewise, both Afghan refugees and the Baluchs have faced unwarranted harassment, allegations of sympathizing with TTP and Baluch insurgents, as well as arbitrary detentions, dislocations and stigmatization ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1680914) (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1680914>), March 20). This has contributed to a collective sense of despair, disempowerment, and humiliation. Hence, such suicide attacks are carried out to restore lost honor and take revenge for the humiliations they have endured.

Perpetrators of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

TTP and ISKP

Though the Egyptian Islamic Jihad carried out the first suicide attack in Pakistan in 1995, TTP is still the pioneer group to use suicide terrorism as a strategic weapon of choice ([Pak Institute for Peace Studies](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/35506633/Suicide_Terrorism-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1650804158&Signature=S5M8R5S7uvUIbZdpCsibxcRV-jhQIm-rSSLEuNcUtQVbKvUDZa02ELvAdaol4wcyDskW1MOJrOo78u4zaD97EoayJRvbQi3WqD85HyFbstNE XKDeC00W8wRXumG6Qz2L9qTUxXtbsva1EjEOsr9f4IWuCKzfUX2TFQ0Rghs8E30asTJk-2CYXL1jI5OIzlnl8NCUu2uCEzO1O7Ao3xV86fXHYIzPOFiGtBRUA~5w9o893VaTAVppomxBwN0n5w6mzFUXT5A8-81Xg-NbNgjGk13dtg1P4CUU5UkYmQeUKK8NdBYa0yUaR0acp~txSGjDwMDwMewEwKu70uVXitfB4Q_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA) ([https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/35506633/Suicide_Terrorism-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1650804158&Signature=S5M8R5S7uvUIbZdpCsibxcRV-jhQIm-rSSLEuNcUtQVbKvUDZa02ELvAdaol4wcyDskW1MOJrOo78u4zaD97EoayJRvbQi3WqD85HyFbstNE XKDeC00W8wRXumG6Qz2L9qTUxXtbsva1EjEOsr9f4IWuCKzfUX2TFQ0Rghs8E30asTJk-2CYXL1jI5OIzlnl8NCUu2uCEzO1O7Ao3xV86fXHYIzPOFiGtBRUA~5w9o893VaTAVppomxBwN0n5w6mzFUXT5A8-81Xg-](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/35506633/Suicide_Terrorism-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1650804158&Signature=S5M8R5S7uvUIbZdpCsibxcRV-jhQIm-rSSLEuNcUtQVbKvUDZa02ELvAdaol4wcyDskW1MOJrOo78u4zaD97EoayJRvbQi3WqD85HyFbstNE XKDeC00W8wRXumG6Qz2L9qTUxXtbsva1EjEOsr9f4IWuCKzfUX2TFQ0Rghs8E30asTJk-2CYXL1jI5OIzlnl8NCUu2uCEzO1O7Ao3xV86fXHYIzPOFiGtBRUA~5w9o893VaTAVppomxBwN0n5w6mzFUXT5A8-81Xg-NbNgjGk13dtg1P4CUU5UkYmQeUKK8NdBYa0yUaR0acp~txSGjDwMDwMewEwKu70uVXitfB4Q_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA)

[NbNgjGk13dtg1P4CUU5UkYmQeUKK8NdBYa0yUaR0acp~txSGjDwMDwMewEwKu70uVXitfB4Q_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/35506633/Suicide_Terrorism-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1650804158&Signature=S5M8R5S7uvUIbZdpCsibxcRV-jhQIm-rSSLEuNcUtQVbKvUDZa02ELvAdaol4wcyDskW1MOJrOo78u4zaD97EoayJRvbQi3WqD85HyFbstNE XKDeC00W8wRXumG6Qz2L9qTUxXtbsva1EjEOsr9f4IWuCKzfUX2TFQ0Rghs8E30asTJk-2CYXL1jI5OIzlnl8NCUu2uCEzO1O7Ao3xV86fXHYIzPOFiGtBRUA~5w9o893VaTAVppomxBwN0n5w6mzFUXT5A8-81Xg-NbNgjGk13dtg1P4CUU5UkYmQeUKK8NdBYa0yUaR0acp~txSGjDwMDwMewEwKu70uVXitfB4Q_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA)), January 2021). TTP learned this operational tactic from al-Qaeda in the ex-FATA region after the 2001 U.S military intervention in Afghanistan. Qari Hussain Mehsud, the cousin of former TTP head Hakimullah Mehd, was the master trainer of suicide bombers in Pakistan ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/888971/ttp-s-top-gun-qari-hussain-killed) (<https://www.dawn.com/news/888971/ttp-s-top-gun-qari-hussain-killed>), October 16, 2010). Suicide attacks subsequently became an almost daily occurrence in Pakistan after the 2007 Red Mosque operation. From 2007-2015, Pakistan was the worst-affected country of suicide terrorism in the world. The 2007 Karsaz bombing in Karachi targeting a political rally of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (he returned to Pakistan after years of self-imposed exile) was the TTP's most lethal suicide attack in Pakistan, killing 180 people ([The News International](https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/901227-remembering-karsaz) (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/901227-remembering-karsaz>), October 18, 2021).

Meanwhile, ISKP, which comprises TTP's Bajaur and Orakzai breakaway factions, has also carried out suicide attacks in Pakistan. As mentioned, of the four suicide attacks recorded in Pakistan in 2022, ISKP carried out two of them. Unlike TTP's selective targeting strategy of only hitting hard targets, ISKP has employed suicide terrorism to target religious minorities and Sufi shrines in Pakistan, whom the terror group consider heretical. ISKP's suicide terrorism is also intended to win new recruits, gain publicity, and attract fresh funding. One dimension of ISKP's suicide terrorism is its rivalry and outbidding violence against TTP, which is a much larger and resourceful organization. However, ISKP has carved out a niche presence for itself by using emotive narratives like the creation of a self-styled caliphate which resonates with the urban middle and upper middle-classes of Pakistan (Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/845316/is-is-a-threat-to-pakistan>), February 27, 2015).

BLA's Majeed Brigade

The Baluch separatists have also embraced suicide terrorism in pursuit of their ethno-separatist goals. BLA's Majeed Brigade, which is mainly responsible for training self-sacrificing guerrilla fighters, spearheads the Baluch separatists' suicide terrorism campaign in Pakistan (Terrorism Monitor (<https://jamestown.org/program/blas-suicide-squad-majeed-fidayeen-brigade/>), February 25, 2019). In addition, the BLA's former commander and the mastermind of the 2018 Chinese Consulate attack in Karachi, Aslam Achu, was the one who revived the Majeed Brigade in Afghanistan. Achu's son was one of the five suicide bombers who perpetrated the Karachi attack on the Chinese Consulate (Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research (<https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/aslam-balochs-killing-implications-for-balochistan-insurgency/>), December 28, 2018).

Achu was killed by a bomb blast in Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2018 (Express Tribune (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1875211/mastermind-chinese-consulate-attack-killed-kandahar-bbc>), December 26, 2018). He broke away from Hyrbair Marri's Baluch Liberation Army and formed his own faction after developing intractable differences with the former over operational and organizational matters (The News International (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/681470-a-new-wave-of-terror>), July 5, 2020). Reportedly, the BLA learned suicide terrorism from TTP in its training centers in Afghanistan (Gandhara (<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/the-rise-of-the-new-pakistani-taliban/31261608.html>), May 18, 2021). Since then, the BLA has successfully employed suicide terrorism in the 2019 Gwadar Pearl Continental Hotel attack, the 2020 Pakistan Stock Exchange assault, the 2021 Gwadar suicide bombing that killed a Chinese engineer, and the 2022 assaults on the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Noshki and Panjgur (Arab News Pakistan (<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2042201>), March 14, 2022).

The adoption of suicide terrorism by Baluch insurgents, and their female counterparts in particular, marks a significant shift in the Baluch insurgent campaign. It also indicates growing frustration amongst the Baluch militants with the Pakistani state's heavily militarized and counter-productive counter-insurgency campaign.[6] Further, it shines a light on their undying motivation and devotion with the cause of Baluch separatism. The adoption of suicide terrorism was, however, not an easy decision for the Baluch separatist groups (Independent Urdu (<https://www.independenturdu.com/node/93826>), February 14, 2021). They feared being

bracketed alongside TTP and ISKP by the Pakistani security establishment. At the same time, they also risked losing the donors who funded these groups for their secular leanings. Nevertheless, they persisted with the tactic to exhibit the highest level of devotion to the cause of Baluch nationalism and separation from Pakistan.

Conclusion

As many as nine suicide attacks in Pakistan since the start of 2021 is possibly too narrow a timeframe to suggest a revival of suicide terrorism in Pakistan. However, the expansion of suicide terrorism from TTP and ISKP to Baluch separatist groups is undeniable. It is also evident that both the jihadist and ethno-separatist groups in Pakistan possess the capability to mount suicide attacks in pursuit of their stated goals. The adoption of suicide terrorism is a sign of their growing strength and underscores the complex and protracted nature of Pakistan's asymmetric conflicts. To this end, Pakistan will have to re-evaluate its internal threat landscape following the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan. Once a data-driven understanding of motivations for suicide terrorism emerges, a revision of existing counter-terrorism and insurgency policies will be warranted.

Notes

[1] Author's interview with a Pakistani security official, April 14, 2022.

[2] The figure is based on author's own monitoring of the internal situation in Pakistan through media reports.

[3] Ann Wilkens, "Suicide Bombers and Society: A Study on Suicide Bombers in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Sweden Defence Research Agency*, February 2011, p. 16.

[4] Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (August 2003), pp. 343-361.

[5] Nicholas Wilkey, *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, PhD Dissertation, University of Adelaide, April 2014, p. 108.

[6] Author's interview with Adnan Amir, a Baluch journalist, April 10, 2022.



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