

The Transformation of TTP: Rise, Fall and Resurgence

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Abstract

*Following Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP),** a network of anti-Pakistan militant groups, has emerged as the main security challenge for Pakistan and a major bone of contention with the Taliban regime. Contrary to Pakistan's wishful thinking, the Taliban termed TTP's militancy as Pakistan's internal matter and refused to take any meaningful action except facilitating negotiations. Pakistan's two short-lived peace deals (November-December 2021 and June-October 2022) midwived by the Taliban, collapsed due to TTP's reluctance to disarm itself, abide by Pakistan's constitutional framework and pursue its ideological goals through political means instead of violence. Since its resurgence, TTP has recreated its foothold in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) and undermined state's writ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's southern districts. Before its reemergence, the group suffered significant leadership and organisational losses, leaving it weak, in the wake of the military operations Zarb-e-Azab in 2014 and Radd-ul-Fasad in 2017. Under the Taliban's protection, the militant group has reinvented itself by imitating the Taliban's insurgency model and restructuring its organisation, revamping the strategic communication through improved propaganda capabilities and switching from indiscriminate to discriminate targeting strategy and forging cooperation through mergers and alliances. Against this backdrop, this paper chronologically examines the emergence, rise, downfall and resurgence of TTP, using lifecycles theories of terrorist groups and conceptual literature on how terrorism ends, specifically the work of Dipak K. Gupta and Martha Crenshaw.*

Keywords: Terrorism lifecycle theories, Resurgence, Afghanistan, Pakistan

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** The Government of Pakistan now refers to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan as Fitna al Khawarij (FaK). Fitna means Discord and Khawarij means Heretics (Heretics that sow discord).

1. Introduction

Over time and space, terrorist groups emerge and fade away, some live longer, while others perish in their incipency. The majority of terrorist groups disappear within a year of their birth and only ten percent survive and become functional terrorist organisations.¹ The life span of terrorist groups depends on their conflict ecologies, level of public support, propaganda capabilities, inter-group linkages with other militant groups (alliances and rivalries) and adversarial states. In a multi-actor and volatile threat environment, terrorist groups emerge and vanish more frequently compared to other threat environments.² After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has undergone rapid changes creating openings for groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (or alternatively referred to as Fitna al Khawarij by the Government of Pakistan), a Taliban-backed conglomerate of anti-Pakistan militant factions, to regroup and relaunch their militant campaigns.³

Lifecycles of terrorist groups are useful in comprehending strategic and operational strategies of terrorist groups while navigating shifts in geopolitical and operational environments. The US exit and the Taliban's return to Afghanistan has rejuvenated TTP allowing it to revise its organisational structure consistent with the Taliban's insurgency framework, ideological narrative from global to local militancy, targeting strategy from indiscriminate to discriminate violence as well as evolve a robust propaganda apparatus and focus on the alliance-making. These adjustments helped TTP revive and evolve as a potent internal security threat to Pakistan.

¹ Peter J. Phillips, "The Life cycle of Terrorist Organizations," *International Advances in Economic Research* 17, no. 4 (November, 2011): pp. 369-385, DOI: 10.1007/s11294-011-9314-3

² Martha Crenshaw, "Mapping Terrorist Organizations," *Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University*, September, 2010, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/res/mapping_terrorist_organizations.pdf

³ Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's Unrelenting Posture," *Nexus, George Washington University*, August 16, 2022, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/tehrick-e-taliban-pakistan-posture>.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the emergence, rise, temporary downfall and resurgence of TTP. Though TTP's emergence, rise and downfall are well documented, its re-emergence studied from lifecycle lens of terrorist groups is missing. This article examines the factors and circumstances which have allowed TTP to show resilience and tremendous regenerative capacity in the face of a plethora of hostile internal and external factors. Before that, it also traces the terror group's birth, peak rise and disintegration and situates the re-emergence in that process from 2007 to 2024.

2. Historical Background

Though the outcomes of terrorist groups' emergence, rise and downfall are hardly orderly; TTP conforms to patterns of terrorist lifecycle theories except for its re-emergence. Notwithstanding territorial and manpower losses, decapitation of top leaders, erosion of public sympathy, ideological de-legitimisation and factional disputes, TTP has shown resilience and adaptability. It has evolved its organisational structure, operational strategies and ideological narratives with changing circumstances. Relative stability in Afghanistan with the Taliban's return and the sanctuary TTP has secured for itself has given it a new lease of life, enabling it to expand its lifecycle. In its current incarnation, TTP has emerged as a more lethal and strategically smarter conflict actor for Pakistan. Typologically, TTP can be classified as a proto-insurgent or a hybrid-terrorist group, i.e., a terrorist group behaving like an insurgent organisation.⁴

Typically, terrorist groups emerge with a set of grievances (real or perceived) based on a particular identity (secular, ethnic or religious), goals and

⁴ Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labelling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (October, 2014): 2-17

narratives. They are built around collective frustration towards particular circumstances which develop gradually over time but are triggered abruptly by certain incidents or developments.⁵ Terrorist groups frame grievances and shape ideological narratives in a way to garner public support and gain political/social legitimacy. Public support is the lifeline of terrorist groups; it acts as a bridge between the groups and recruits.⁶ Terrorist/Militant Groups, which have a degree of popular support and some form of political legitimacy tend to survive and grow.

To earn popular support and political legitimacy, terrorist groups also provide public services and goods that the governments are unable to deliver.⁷ In 2007, when TTP burst onto the scene in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), it started with initiatives like addressing social injustices, socio-economic inequalities, political disenfranchisement and dysfunctional administrative structures. TTP created *qazi courts* (kangaroo courts) which dispensed speedy and affordable justice to the masses compared to the existing Jirga system where cases were pending for years and the decisions were manipulated in favour of the powerful.⁸ The *qazi courts* decided cases on what they perceived as merit and executed some influential local leaders without any fear, creating an immediate resonance with the local tribes in erstwhile FATA. Similarly, as a grassroots movement, TTP provided charitable services while creating a semblance of acceptance for a so-called Sharia system (a Taliban like Islamic Emirate).⁹

⁵ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise* (London: Routledge, 2008), 122.

⁶ Peter J. Phillips, "The Life cycle of Terrorist Organizations," 274.

⁷ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism*, 124.

⁸ Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycle: a case study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 8, no. 1 (2013): 72-86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2013.789599>

⁹ Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, "Understanding the Appeal of the Taliban in Pakistan," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 3 (2011): 1-14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.3.3.1>

TTP, particularly, used the ethnic Pashtun card to garner public support.¹⁰ It portrayed the Pakistan government as a US puppet that helped them massacre their Pashtun brethren in Afghanistan. To further create space for itself in then FATA, TTP systematically eliminated more than 1,500 *maliks* (tribal elders) which tilted the equilibrium of tribal social life from *malik-hujra* axis to *mullah-mosque* axis.¹¹ Historically, *maliks* were the powerbrokers and political intermediaries between the tribes and the State, and enjoyed substantial political clout, administrative and judicial powers. Their elimination created a vacuum that TTP conveniently filled.¹²

The formation of TTP was formally announced in December 2007 as several militant groups in ex-FATA coalesced under Baitullah Mehsud's leadership in the aftermath of the Red Mosque operation.¹³ Al-Qaeda was quite instrumental in encouraging these groups to band together as a movement (a fact that TTP denies now). One day after the Red Mosque operation, then Al-Qaeda deputy leader Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a video entitled "The Aggression against the Red Mosque" calling for revenge of the Red Mosque killings. He said: "Musharraf and his hunting dogs have tarnished your honor in service of the crusades and the Jews. If you do not revolt, Musharraf will annihilate you. Musharraf will not stop until he uproots Islam from Pakistan. Are there no honorable men in Pakistan?"¹⁴

¹⁰ Abdul Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Discursive Shift from Global Jihadist Rhetoric to Pashtun-Centric Narratives," *Terrorism Monitor* 19, no. 18 (September 21, 2021): 3-6, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TM_September-24-2021.pdf

¹¹ C. Christine Fair and Sarah J. Watson, *Pakistan's Enduring Challenges* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 87.

¹² Robert Lane Sammon, "Mullahs and Maliks: Understanding the Roots of Conflict in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas," (Masters Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 10.

¹³ Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 2 (2008):1-3, <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-profile-of-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>.

¹⁴ "Al-Qaeda Urges Pakistanis to revolt against Musharraf," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 12, 2007, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/alqaeda-urges-pakistanis-to-revolt-against-musharraf-20070712-n9n.html>

Reportedly, Al-Qaeda provided TTP with seed money, shared knowledge and expertise on how to create and run a terrorist organisation, technical know-how of manufacturing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), training of suicide bombers and media propaganda. Al-Qaeda's fatwas (religious edicts) condoning the so-called jihad against the Pakistani security institutions provided TTP with ideological justification for its terrorist activities in Pakistan.¹⁵

At that time, TTP had a 40-member *Shura* (religious council), *emir* (chief) and a *naib emir* (deputy chief) and each tribal agency had an elaborate organisational structure having administrative, legal, religious and military components.¹⁶ Initially, TTP had presence in seven tribal districts of the erstwhile FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KP) districts of Swat, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohistan, Buner and Malakand. Gradually, TTP expanded in cell formation, into other parts of Pakistan as well, particularly Karachi¹⁷, Quetta and some parts of South Punjab.¹⁸ TTP announced a five-point agenda of enforcing Sharia in Pakistan, fighting defensive jihad against the Pakistani security institutions, dismantling of the security check posts in ex-FATA, release of the Red Mosque cleric and chief administrator Maulana Abdul Aziz and not to cut peace deals with the government in future.¹⁹

3. The Rise

Gupta maintains that while states demonstrate their credibility through provision of basic services and necessities, terrorist groups exhibit their credibility by carrying out terrorist attacks. During their rise, terrorist groups also

¹⁵ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, (Lahore: Vanguard Book, 2007), 146.

¹⁶ Amir Rana, Safdar Sial and Abdul Basit, *Dynamics of Taliban Insurgency in Fata*, (Islamabad: Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 2010), 41.

¹⁷ Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal, *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2010), 110.

¹⁸ Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, "Terrorist lifecycle," 80.

¹⁹ Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan."

endeavour to expand their operational outreach by maximising their political opportunities, attracting more recruitment, funding and logistical support. Moreover, by escalating violent attacks, the terrorist groups try to delegitimise the governments, show them impotent compared to their strength, undermine government's ability to provide basic services to shake public confidence in the government and showcase themselves as the suitable alternative. Furthermore, by escalating violence, terrorist groups provoke the governments to react forcefully that can result in civilian casualties and human rights abuses. Later, terrorist groups use images of government atrocities to increase recruitment.²⁰

Following its formation, TTP started flexing its muscle beyond FATA into mainland Pakistan through terrorist attacks. Moreover, the addition of several breakaway factions of battle-hardened Kashmiri and anti-Shia militant groups from mainland Pakistan collectively known as the Punjabi Taliban transformed TTP into Pakistan's most feared terrorist group.²¹ Some of the high-profile terrorist attacks by TTP included the targeted-assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, attack on Pakistan Army's General Headquarters (GHQ), the tragic Army Public School (APS) Peshawar attack known as Pakistan's 9/11 and attacks on the Bacha Khan and Jinnah International Airports in Peshawar and Karachi, respectively. During this violent campaign, Pakistan roughly incurred \$123 billion in economic losses.²² At its peak, TTP boasted of having more than 10,000 fighters among its ranks.²³

The US presence in Afghanistan and the drone strikes in ex-FATA expedited TTP's rise and expansion. Moreover, Pakistan's highly militarised counter-terrorist tactics were used by TTP to justify its own violent campaigns

²⁰ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism*, 87.

²¹ Tahir Khan, "TTP Bajaur declares allegiance to Islamic State," *Express Tribune*, April 9, 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/867113/ttp-bajaur-declares-allegiance-to-islamic-state/>.

²² Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan's losses in war on terror fail to impact US discourse," *Dawn*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1381731>

²³ Khuram Iqbal and Sara De Silva, "Terrorist Lifecycles," 77.

and win local sympathies.²⁴ TTP portrayed Pakistan as an ally of the US involved in the killings of innocent civilians on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The revenge factor was instrumental in fueling recruitment for TTP, in some cases those who lost their loved ones in the security operations as a collateral turned to TTP to avenge their losses.²⁵

The autonomous nature of ex-FATA before the 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018 also assisted TTP's rapid rise and expansion.²⁶ Before the constitutional amendment, the mainland law did not extend to ex-FATA, instead the region was largely governed by a draconian British Colonial Era rule, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) 1901. The FCR repressed the Pashtun tribes in the name of preserving their tribal culture and way of life. Over the years, such treatment generated political disenfranchisement, social alienation and economic deprivation among the ex-FATA residents. TTP exploited these cleavages to create sympathy for its anti-Pakistan jihadist narrative.²⁷

Tactically, TTP's superior knowledge of ex-FATA's mountainous terrain and porous topography over Pakistan's security forces also assisted its rise. Historically, Pakistan's security apparatus was never deployed in ex-FATA before 9/11 and it did not have sufficient training in unconventional warfare, particularly counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT). Moreover, they also did not have adequate knowledge about ex-FATA's rugged and irregular terrain. TTP used this deficiency to its advantage and engaged in hit-and-run guerrilla operations against the security forces. Pakistan's overzealous

²⁴ Aisha Ahmed, "Going Global: Islamist Competition in contemporary Civil Wars," *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (May 9, 2016): 353-384, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2016.1171971

²⁵ Sana Jamal and M. Ahsan, "TTP-Analyzing the Network of Terror," *IRIA Report no. 6* (January, 2015): 10, <http://www.ir-ia.com/reports/IRIA-TTP.pdf>.

²⁶ The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that included seven Tribal Agencies and six Frontier Regions were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 through the 25th Constitutional Amendment. They are now referred to as the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs).

²⁷ Mona Kanwal Sheikh, *Guardian of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21.

militaristic response often resulted in unintended civilian casualties, which the TTP conveniently exploited to gain public sympathy.²⁸

4. The Downfall

According to Gupta, even the most well-entrenched terrorist groups can lose momentum and their terrorist activities subside making it difficult for them to sustain violence over a longer period of time. The downfall of a terrorist group can take three broad trajectories: a) political and military defeat of the group, b) transformation into a criminal entity, and c) attainment of the group's political and ideological objectives.²⁹ However, Gupta maintains that these outcomes are hardly structured or orderly. So, even if a terrorist group is defeated, it may remain loosely intact through residual members and leaders if the cause that gave birth to it in the first place remains intact.³⁰ The downfall can also happen as a result of disagreements between one or more factions in the group with the strategies of the group's central leadership, divergent perceptions of conditions, particularly the likelihood of achieving popular support and moving to mass action.³¹ For instance, what level of violence should be used, which targets are permissible and what are the ways of funding, are common causes of discord and division within the group.

Martha Crenshaw maintains that in a conflict system where only a handful of terrorist groups operate and equilibrium of coexistence with the government is not very high, the conflict remains relatively stable, violence remains low and the group is likely to live longer.³² On the contrary, in a complex conflict system which has a fluid environment and rivalries between and among the groups and

²⁸ Magnus Norell, *Militancy in the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Afghanistan* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2010)

²⁹ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism*, 161.

³⁰ Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism*, 161.

³¹ Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction*, (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2010), 13.

³² Martha Crenshaw, "Mapping Terrorist Organizations," 76.

with the government are rampant, the competition for recruits, resources, ideological supremacy and organisational ascendance is extensive, violence remains high and the lifespan of terrorist groups is relatively small.³³

TTP's indiscriminate violence against civilians, disregard for cultural sensitivities as evident from their violent campaign against Sufi shrines across Pakistan, and engagement in criminal activities such as bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom and money extortion significantly eroded its public support. According to Jessica Stern, given the allure of money, grievances can turn into greed particularly when a group's ideological goals become fuzzy, organisational structure weakens and the leaders fail to provide a strategic direction to the ranks in the long-run.³⁴ Moreover, when the rank-and-file do not fully understand how violence is linked to the group's stated political and ideological objectives, they simply act based on their own interests and use violence beyond the leadership's given parameters damaging the organisation's political legitimacy.³⁵

Crenshaw maintains that a government's coercive action against a terrorist group is most effective when it is used after public loss of sympathy with the terrorist group.³⁶ For TTP, uncontrolled and unprovoked acts of terrorism proved too costly. Violence against civilians is morally wrong, even if its benefits seemingly exceed its costs.³⁷ The brazen use of violence against civilians not only eroded TTP's public support but also turned public opinion against the group. Territorial losses in Swat and South Waziristan in Operation Rah-e-Rast (Path to Righteousness) and Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Salvation) also downgraded the

³³ Martha Crenshaw, "Mapping Terrorist Organizations."

³⁴ Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2003, as quoted in Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40.

³⁵ Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy."

³⁶ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Process and Consequences*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 222.

³⁷ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 212.

group's organisational and operational capabilities. These two operations were carried out in an atmosphere of hostile public opinion towards TTP.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned losses, TTP managed to regroup in North Waziristan and regained some momentum through a violent campaign during the 2013 parliamentary elections in Pakistan. The breaking point came when the group targeted teenage female education activist Malala Yousafzai in Swat in 2013 and mounted a brutal attack on APS Peshawar in 2014, killing over 141 people, mostly students and teachers.³⁸ These two incidents precipitated TTP's temporary downfall paving the way for decisive action against the group in the form operation Zarb-e-Azb (named after the sword of the Prophet).³⁹ In Pashtun culture, it is considered immoral to target women and children in tribal or political disputes. TTP's attacks on Malala Yousafzai and APS Peshawar were therefore turning points in its subsequent downfall until the Taliban's return in August 2021.

The post-APS environment gave birth to a rare political consensus in the form of an All-Parties Conference (APC) in 2014 where the Pakistan Army was given the *carte blanche* to go after TTP across Pakistan. The APC also passed a 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), a counter-terrorism and counter-extremism roadmap, that outlined a comprehensive roadmap beyond kinetic measures to root militancy and terrorism from Pakistan.⁴⁰ Even Pakistan's religious political parties such as Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam Fazal Group (JUI-F) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) which traditionally supported a reconciliatory approach towards TTP could not defend its brutal actions in the aftermath of the APS attack. It is important to mention that though NAP and Zarb-e-Azb were not

³⁸ "Pakistani Taliban: Peshawar school attack leaves 141 dead," *BBC*, December 16, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30491435>

³⁹ "MPC ends with national consensus on NAP," *Dawn*, January 2, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1154662>.

⁴⁰ "MPC ends with national consensus on NAP," *Dawn*.

TTP-specific measures, their implementation brought about the group's temporary downfall. The remaining sanctuaries of the group in the erstwhile FATA and sleeper cells in mainland Pakistan were dismantled and the group fled to Afghanistan.⁴¹

Internal Disputes and Organisational Differences

Following the killing of its founder Baitullah Mehsud in a drone attack in August 2009, a bitter succession struggle and leadership disputes emerged within the TTP.⁴² Baitullah was a charismatic leader who enjoyed undisputed authority over all TTP factions. He did not allow ethnic rivalries and factional disputes to overcome organisational matters. However, his killing left a big power vacuum that brought the long-running internal fissures and frictions within TTP in the public eye.⁴³

After Baitullah's killing, Hakimullah Mehsud and Waliur Rehman emerged as the two main contenders for succession. Following weeks of violent clashes and inconclusive Shura meetings, a compromise was reached resulting in the appointment of Hakimullah as the new TTP chief and Waliur Rehman as his deputy. In 2013, both Waliur Rehman and Hakimullah were killed in the US drone attacks, triggering another round of bloody power-struggle among various TTP factions. Eventually, with the intervention of the Haqqani Network, Mullah Fazlullah was appointed as the new TTP chief but the bitter struggle for succession left the group divided into four major factions: Jamaatul Ahrar (JuA), the Punjabi Taliban, Waliur Rehman faction and Hakimullah Mehsud faction,

⁴¹ "Army chief approves plan to dismantle terror hideouts, sleeper cells," *Geo News* (Tv), May 2, 2016, [https://www.geo.tv/latest/105048-Army-Chief-approves-plan-to-dismantle-terror-hideouts-sleeper-cellsutm_source=feedburner+geo%2FGiKR+\(Geo+Pakistan+-+Geo+TV+Network\)](https://www.geo.tv/latest/105048-Army-Chief-approves-plan-to-dismantle-terror-hideouts-sleeper-cellsutm_source=feedburner+geo%2FGiKR+(Geo+Pakistan+-+Geo+TV+Network)).

⁴² Farhan Bokhari, "Taliban leader's death starts power struggle," *Financial Times*, August 9, 2009, <https://www.ft.com/content/7dd1aa9c-8423-11de-aa5d-00144feabdc0>.

⁴³ Imtiaz Ali, "Commander of the Faithful," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/07/09/commander-of-the-faithful/>.

weakened TTP⁴⁴ After leading a rather fractured and operationally weak group, Fazlullah was also eliminated in a drone attack in Afghanistan's Kunar province on June 13, 2018. He was succeeded by Noor Wali Mehsud—a militant commander belonging to the powerful Mehsud faction of the Pakistani Taliban.⁴⁵ The return of TTP's leadership to Mehsud faction and Wali's focus on alliance building and overcoming TTP's internal differences stopped internal decaying.⁴⁶

Ideological Rifts and Pro-IS Defections

Crenshaw opines that once a terrorist organisation disintegrates, the ideologically less committed members who join terrorism for professional reasons leave the organisation and join a more stable group with better pay offs. The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group in 2014 as the new leader of the global jihadist movement triggered renewed defections in the already fractured TTP. IS immediately attracted support and sympathies of marginalised TTP factions desperate for new opportunities.⁴⁷ The rise of IS offered them a much-needed way out. Hence, it is unsurprising that most of the support for IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan came from former TTP members. Later, several factions from Central Asian militant groups also joined IS. The first emir of IS's regional affiliate, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), Afghanistan and Pakistan was the former head of TTP's Orakzai chapter, Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Asad Hashim, "Pakistani Taliban split into factions," *Al-Jazeera*, May 28, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/05/pakistan-taliban-splits-into-factions-201452881310231943.html>.

⁴⁵ "TTP appoints Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as chief after Fazlullah's killing," *Dawn*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1415660>.

⁴⁶ Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 11 (2018): 21-25, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CTC-SENTINEL-122018.pdf>

⁴⁷ Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khurasan," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 3 (March, 2015), 7-12, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2015/03/CTCSentinel-Vol8Issue317.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Abdul Basit, "IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Assessment, Impact and Implications," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017): 19-39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297839?seq=1>

The first TTP faction to pledge allegiance to IS was Tehrik-e-Khilfat, an obscure group from Karachi. Tehreek-e-Khilafat announced its support for IS on 9 July, 2014, vowing to raise Islamic State's flag in Khorasan. After swearing the allegiance, the group issued a statement maintaining, "From today, Sheikh Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi shall consider Tehreek-e-Khilafat and mujahidin fighters from Pakistan as one of the arrows in his quiver. We are praying from the Almighty Allah to give us a chance in our lives to see the expansion of the Islamic State boundaries towards the Sub-continent and Khurasan region in order hoist the flag of the Islamic State here."

After Tehreek-e-Khilafat, the TTP spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid along with six other TTP commanders publicly pledged oath of allegiance to IS on 21 October, 2014.⁴⁹ Shahid issued a statement after pledging allegiance, which noted, "I am confirming my allegiance to Amirul Momineen Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and would abide by all his decision. Whatever is the order, and whatever the circumstances, I shall be loyal to him and obey his orders." Later, the Bajaur faction of TTP also defected to IS further weakening TTP.⁵⁰ Likewise, another TTP faction from Bajaur defected to TTP in 2015 maintaining, "Mullah Omar was limited only to Afghanistan and not for the whole Muslims. He was only our jihadi Ameer and not a Khalifa. We do not know where Mullah Omar is. We have not heard that he considers himself as Ameer. No one has ever asked to declare Mullah Omar as our Ameer."⁵¹

Failure of Strategic Communication

Terrorism is propaganda of the deed and strategic communication lies at

⁴⁹ "Pakistan Taliban sack spokesman Shahidullah Shahid for IS vow," *BBC*, October 21, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29640242>.

⁵⁰ Tahir Khan, "TTP Bajaur declares allegiance to Islamic State," *Express Tribune*, April 9, 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/867113/ttp-bajaur-declares-allegiance-to-islamic-state/>.

⁵¹ Abdul Basit, "IS Penetration in Afghanistan-Pakistan."

the heart of achieving the immediate and long-term goals of a terrorist organisation. In the battle of ideas and winning hearts and minds between the government and a terrorist group, the way the terrorist leadership communicates with its supporters and sympathisers and addresses the community at large is critical in determining its lifecycle.⁵² TTP always faced a great difficulty in reaching out to the masses in an effective manner. Since TTP primarily comprised of Pashtuns, it encountered challenges in communicating with non-Pashto speaking audience across Pakistan. This is why most of TTP's propagandists like the chief of the Punjabi Taliban Asmatullah Muaviya and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) ideologue Abu Zar al-Burmi were non-Pashtuns.

Likewise, despite a loud ideological rhetoric of transforming Pakistan into an Islamic Emirate, TTP failed to articulate its operational strategy and political vision as to how it will transform Pakistan into a theocracy. Though TTP regularly on-off published several magazines such as *Ihya-e Khilafat*, *Mujalla Taliban* and *Sunnate Khawla*, there was no clarity as to what kind of Islam TTP envisioned for Pakistan. Crenshaw maintains when policies of a terrorist group no longer serve its original strategic purpose, they corrupt the organisation using them, thereby changing its character.⁵³ Instead of working for broader ideological goals, certain factions and individuals within the terrorist organisations develop their own interest-driven tactics, using terrorism as a means to accumulate power, money and influence by engaging in criminal activities. The same happened to TTP during this phase of its lifecycle.

5. Resurgence

Jessica Stern notes that terrorist groups that show political adaptability,

⁵² Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism*, 89.

⁵³ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 211.

organisational agility and ideological flexibility live longer than their expected lifespan. Against the backdrop of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, TTP, which had experienced a temporary organisational decline, revitalised and underwent a notable resurgence. With changing circumstances, TTP has proven to be adaptive operationally, flexible ideologically and resilient organisationally. It has shown resilience that makes it a long-term security risk to local and regional peace and security. Several factors have contributed to TTP's resurgence, including forming alliances and mergers, restructuring organisational operations, enhancing operations beyond the 'violence spectrum' and incorporating a robust communication strategy. A careful examination of these factors provides insights into TTP's resurgence.

Alliances and Mergers

In 2024, TTP managed to forge alliances with 16 militant groups, that included nine factions from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, four from Balochistan, three from Sindh and one from Punjab, bringing the total number of groups aligning with TTP since 2020 to 64. Under Noor Wali, TTP has been actively working to unite various militant factions, pursuing a coordinated armed struggle for establishing an Afghan Taliban-style theocratic regime in Pakistan.⁵⁴ Consequently, TTP has extended its influence beyond the NMDs, merging militant factions from both Pashtun and Baloch areas of Balochistan. In Punjab, TTP has strengthened its foothold by aligning with militant factions that hold considerable influence in both the northern and southern parts of the province. In the north, it has joined hands with the Ghazi Force, a faction comprising madrassa students of Red Mosque who later became militants. In the south, the group has linked up with militants of former Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. By tapping into

⁵⁴ Abdul Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan Ingress Into Punjab: Prospects and Challenges," *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/tehrreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ingress-into-punjab-prospects-and-challenges/>.

these networks, the TTP has established an extensive footprint across the whole province.⁵⁵

The lethality and longevity of terrorist groups are significantly dependent on their ability to form alliances and coalitions with other terrorist groups. Such alliances allow these terrorist groups to pool their resources, divide their labor and expand their geographical influence, enabling them to design more effective militant campaigns that not only promote their ideological messages but also attract attention to their demands. Terrorist groups that operate in geographically contiguous areas, share a common enemy and align ideologically, are more prone to merge and form alliances. In case of TTP, all the merging groups are based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, united by their deep-seated animosity towards the State of Pakistan, their common goal of establishing a theocratic regime in the country and their adherence to a rigid interpretation of Deobandi Islam. These factors, combined with Noor Wali's ambition to unite Pakistani jihadist factions under his leadership, have paved the way for these mergers. In addition to these mergers, prominent jihadist groups like TTP, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group and Lashkar-e-Islam (LI) have also been collaborating to launch joint attacks – aimed at challenging the authority of the state in the NMDs.

Organisational Restructuring

The TTP's organisational reforms were largely driven by the need to address the fragmentation of the group in 2014, which mainly stemmed from its loosely organised and decentralised structure.⁵⁶ To overcome this weakness, TTP adopted a more centralised model inspired by the Afghan Taliban, empowering

⁵⁵ Iftikhar Firdous, "Deciphering the TTP's Strategy to Revive in Punjab," *The Khorasan Diary*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.thekhorasandiary.com/en/2024/05/07/deciphering-the-ttps-strategy-to-revive-in-punjab>.

⁵⁶ Shahzad Akhtar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (November 15, 2023): 285–306, doi:10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924.

the central leadership while limiting the influence of local commanders. This reorganisation resulted in the establishment of a shadow governance system in 2022, consisting of nine shadow provinces and several central units.⁵⁷ Since then, TTP adjusts its organisational framework, leadership structure and operational strategy every year to adequately negotiate and evolving operation environment, pointing to its maturity as a conflict actor.

Under a revamped structure, the leadership council has been granted the highest authority, responsible for appointing so-called shadow ministers. Membership in the council is a prerequisite to becoming a so-called minister. Key ministries include information and broadcasting, political affairs, defence, accountability, education, finance, and welfare. In addition to these ministries, specialised structures are also introduced, which includes a General Directorate of Intelligence, a suicide brigade and a training camp, a three-tier judicial system, an institution for “Islamic” jurisprudence, and a housing department.⁵⁸

Each ministry operates with a minister and a deputy. The Defence Ministry, as the largest unit, is divided into two military commissions: the North-zone and South-zone, each with six or seven members, including a director and a deputy.⁵⁹ These commissions oversee shadow provinces and recommend the appointment of provincial representatives. Appointments at every level, including shadow governors, are made with input from the emir and the deputy, based on recommendations from the Defence Ministry and reports from the accountability commission.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Abdul Sayed, “The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/the-evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan?lang=en>

⁵⁸ “Tehreek-e-Taliban appointments for 2023,” *Umar Media*, December 30, 2022.

⁵⁹ “Guidelines for the Defense Ministry,” *Umar Media*, January 2023.

⁶⁰ “Guidelines for the Defense Ministry,” *Umar Media*, January 2023.

This shadow governance framework of TTP has not only strengthened the group's internal cohesion but also enhanced its ability to expand its operations and solidify its influence in the regions where it is already active.

Ideological Reorientation

Jessica Stern observes that a drive to ensure group's survival can lead to ideological flexibility resulting in alteration of its stated original objectives to attract new recruits and resources. When organisational survival is at stake, the interpretation of ideology varies according to requirements of self-preservation. Even the most religious groups, according to Mia Bloom, are pragmatic and power seeking, and in troubling times they will prioritize survival over ideological considerations. TTP has revisited its ideological position and has re-cultivated itself from simply an ideological jihadist group to an anti-Pakistan proxy group, thereby expanding its lifespan. Furthermore, as part of its ideological reorientation, the group has somewhat successfully managed to rebrand itself. Among other things, it has added an unapologetically ethno/nationalist dimension to its ideology with a pronounced Deobandi-sectarian dimension. In some ways, the ideological rebranding of TTP as an ethno-religious/sectarian-nationalist group has allowed it to set itself apart from other competing groups in the region.

Revitalising Communication Strategy

TTP's approach towards strategic communication has undergone significant transformation. With a more cohesive structure, their approach is now more systematic and methodical. For instance, their previous propaganda magazines were published randomly with irregular publishing intervals in contrast to Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent's (AQIS) flagship magazine *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*. With a revised and centralised organisational structure, their

publications are produced and uploaded with regularly. TTP's primary media cell Al-Umar Media now falls under their newly established Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The merger of two AQIS factions with TTP has additionally enhanced its propaganda capacity. Qari Muneeb Jatt, who used to run AQIS's Al-Sahab Media, now overlooks propaganda operations with Al-Umar Media.

Al-Umar Media, named after Taliban's founder Mullah Muhammad Umar, has been periodically active since 2003. Previously it was simply known as Umar Studio, but it was subsequently changed to Al-Umar Media in 2010. TTP's content during this period revolved mostly around footages and testimonies of suicide bombers. This was revised in 2014 when a media commission was formed within TTP to improve its broadcasting and media outreach, however, owing to the geopolitics at the time it had very limited success.

Four factors played a key role in the significant improvement of the operations of Al-Umar Media. First, the formation of alliances and mergers have allowed TTP to bring experienced media operatives like AQIS's Muneeb Jutt in the organisation. Second, the group's critical transformation period (2015-2019) allowed them to revisit and reassess their political and propaganda strategies which led to improved performance. Third, organisational restructuring of TTP has allowed the operations of Al-Umar Media to expand since it is more disciplined and has operational freedom. Finally, the presence of the Afghan Taliban has also contributed significantly to the effectiveness Al-Umar Media's operations. Having access to advanced equipment and production infrastructure has allowed them to expand significantly. To reach out to a larger audience, TTP's media content includes diverse products including daily radio broadcasts, podcasts, infographics of their activities, video statements, periodicals, and magazines (See Annex 1). These media products are in different languages

including Pashto, Urdu, Dari/Persian and Arabic. TTP circulates their media products through Al-Umar Media on social media (Facebook and X [formerly Twitter]), messaging applications (WhatsApp and Telegram) and their official Al-Umar Media channel [access provided through Dark Web].

Thus, where in the past their media operations in Pakistan were often affected by counterterrorism efforts, which forced TTP to keep a mobile and rudimentary media infrastructure. The group now has somewhat unrestricted mobility and safe havens which has allowed them to completely revamp its communication strategy.

6. Conclusion

TTP has defied its elimination through organisational restructuring, revamping communication strategies, and revisiting its ideological objectives. Furthermore, the terror group has given up indiscriminate violence and adopted a selective targeting strategy of targeting Pakistani security forces. It has added to its organisational strength by overcoming internal differences and absorbing other militant factions into its fold. Since July 2020, more than 60 militant outfits from different parts of Pakistan have pledged their oaths of allegiances to TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud. Likewise, the group has reinvented itself by investing in its propaganda warfare capabilities and articulating its narrative through Al-Umar media (publishing monthly magazines, issuing regular statements, producing podcasts and video series, etc.). The terror group has not only become more dangerous but also strategic in its approach, where violence is just one part of its activism. It is engaged in effective information warfare against the Pakistani state expanding the battlefield from physical to cyberspace as well.

TTP is trying to exploit the existing social polarisation, political fault lines

and the growing state-society gap to radicalise, recruit, fundraise and incite violence in Pakistan. TTP's sanctuaries in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime will allow it to expand its operations in Pakistan and continue its violent campaign unhindered. The deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan relations will further cement TTP's position in the Taliban's strategic calculus which will use the group as a bargaining chip in their dealings with Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan's kinetic operation against TTP within its border will only be tactically effective. Islamabad will have to combine its security strategy with adroit diplomatic efforts with Kabul to find a working formula to tackle the TTP challenge whether it is relocation of the group from Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas to other parts of Afghanistan, disarming and relocating the group to Pakistan or facilitating peace talks consistent with Pakistan's constitutional framework. In short, Pakistan will have to devise a multipronged strategy by focusing equally on kinetic and non-kinetic strategies. At the same time, bridging the state-society gap, overcoming existing social polarisation, improving governance and fulfilling the promises made to the Newly Merged Districts will go a long way in undermining TTP's ability to stay relevant.

Appendix 1: Al-Umar Media Products

1	Magazines	<ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Mujallah Taliban (Urdu, monthly)ii. Banat-e-Khadijat-ul-Kubra (Urdu, monthly, female-focused)iii. Sada-i-Taliban (Monthly, Pashto)
2	Audios	<ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Jihadi Nasheeds (Urdu and Pashto)ii. Speeches of TTP leaders and scholars (Urdu and Pashto)iii. Pasoon (Bi-weekly current affairs podcast in Pashto)iv. Zoul FM Radio (Northern zone active, southern zone in the pipelines)
3	Video Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Zer-e-Nazar (Under Observation, highlighting government's corruption)ii. Abtal-e-Ummat (Account of martyrs, testimonies of fidayeen)iii. Muakay Tez Hein (Battles are accelerated, details of attacks)iv. Hum Tyar Hein (We are ready, training videos)v. Hum Log Hein Taliban (We are the Taliban, Introduction of TTP)vi. Mein Jihad Ka Musafir Hoon (I am a Traveller of Jihad, life stories of TTP militants)vii. Dawat-e-Jihad (A Call to Jihad, Ulema's speeches to attract recruits)viii. Shaheen Jawan (Brave Men, fidayeen attack)ix. Kafalat-ul-Yateem (Supporting the Orphans, taking care of fidayeen families)x. Nah Janay Kab Meri Basti Ke Log Jageen Ge? (When will the people of my community wake up?)`
4	Statements	Routine statements to claims attacks, current affairs comments, organisational decisions and infographics about monthly attacks
5	Manzil	A tri-monthly newspaper carrying news of TTP's activities, such as attacks, internal developments, etc.