

PUBLIC FACILITATION OF MILITANCY IN NEWLY MERGED DISTRICTS OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE OPTIONS

Muhammad Naeem Akhtar*

Abstract

The facilitation of militant groups within the Merged Districts (MDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) extends beyond ideological alignment and should be understood as a spectrum of community responses shaped by interacting structural, socioeconomic, political, cultural and security conditions. These responses range from ideological commitment and active operational support to opportunistic collaboration, coerced compliance and passive tolerance. This article examines the principal internal and external conditions that enable militant groups to obtain such local facilitation, with particular attention to governance and justice deficits, socioeconomic vulnerability, tribal and social ties, coercion and fear, political alienation, digital propaganda, and cross-border militant sanctuaries. It argues that these conditions do not uniformly generate ideological support for militancy; rather, they operate through different mechanisms that influence how communities respond to militant actors. Governance and justice gaps can create institutional vacuums, economic deprivation can generate material incentives, social and tribal relationships can facilitate protection or tolerance, while coercion and fear can compel cooperation without ideological sympathy. External sanctuaries and political and information-domain dynamics can further strengthen militant resilience and undermine public confidence in state protection. The article concludes that countering public facilitation therefore requires an integrated, population-centred approach combining sustained security and community protection with accessible justice, responsive governance, livelihood opportunities, effective border management, political inclusion and counter-narratives. The central policy challenge is consequently not only to defeat militant groups physically, but also to reduce the social, economic, institutional and psychological conditions that enable them to obtain local silence, cooperation and support.

*Muhammad Naeem Akhtar is PhD Scholar at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad and General Officer in Pakistan Army. The author can be reached at namsu8tz@icloud.com.

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Introduction

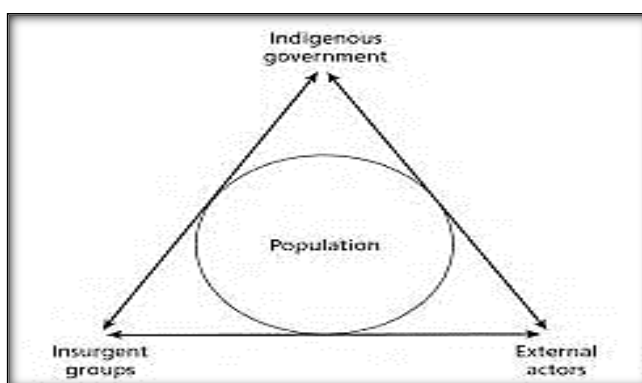
Insurgency and militancy have remained one of the most prevailing forms of armed conflicts since the end of Second World War (WW2).¹ Militancy has been defined in various forms including insurgency, terrorism, guerrilla warfare and conflicts. This signifies that these engagements are no longer carried out in a conventional way between regular militaries. Instead, its scope has increased to people, narrative building, coercion, terrorism sponsorship and anti-state actors competing for legitimacy.² Moreover, the dominating actors in militancy remain as states, militant groups and people in the affected communities that remain centre of gravity. This study uses “Militancy” as an umbrella term for organized armed anti-state activity including insurgent violence, terrorism, coercive control, intimidation and shadow governance. “Terrorism” is treated as a tactic within this broader militant ecosystem, while “insurgency” refers to a sustained political-military campaign to erode or replace state authority in a territory. Fitnah-e-Al Khawarij (FaK) led threat in the merged districts contains elements of all three. However, the term militancy is retained because the focus is not violence alone, but the wider ecology of spectrum of local compliance.³

Public facilitation in the merged districts should therefore be understood as a spectrum rather than a single act of support. At one end is active support, including recruitment, shelter, financing, intelligence, logistics and open sympathy. At the other end are passive tolerance, silence, non-reporting and avoidance of public opposition. Between these extremes lie coerced compliance, opportunistic collaboration, tribal or familial compulsion and narrative facilitation. Coerced compliance refers to food, shelter, money, information or silence extracted under threat, while opportunistic collaboration may emerge where militant networks offer money, protection, illicit trade access or dispute settlement. This distinction is essential because a committed sympathizer, a coerced villager, a smuggling profiteer and a fearful fence-sitter require different state responses.⁴ This population centric logic is central to the merged districts of KP, where militancy has persisted despite repeated military operations, administrative reforms and political integration efforts. The FATA merger of 2018 sought to extend constitutional rights, improve governance and integrate region politically. However, unmet expectations, weak justice delivery, inconsistent

implementation and federal-provincial friction have generated frustration among segments of the population. At the same time, external sanctuaries, post-2021 developments in Afghanistan, ideological messaging, economic deprivation, tribal linkages, coercion, digital propaganda and political alienation have complicated the security environment.⁵ The central argument is that public facilitation in the MDs is produced through multiple factors rather than a single ideological cause, and that these factors place communities at different points on the spectrum from active support to passive tolerance.

Scholars identify population control and local compliance as central to militancy durability.⁶ Galula's phrase that, "The Guerrilla must move among the people as fish swims in the sea" remains relevant in this case of merged districts.⁷ However, in this case, the military movement cannot always be easy as the scope of problems range between economic, political and cultural factors along the militancy movements. It examines the socio-political, economic, cultural and external conditions that facilitate militancy through public means without treating the whole community as a threat. The study uses qualitative secondary analysis of academic literature, policy documents, official and unofficial data, media reports, and conflict-monitoring outputs. A thematic approach identifies recurring mechanisms through which local populations support, collaborate with, tolerate, or comply with militant actors, with particular attention to governance, socioeconomic, cultural, political, coercive, and external-security conditions. Rather than treating these as direct causes of militancy, the study examines how they generate different forms of public facilitation. Given its reliance on secondary sources, the analysis identifies and explains key mechanisms without claiming statistical causality.

Figure 1: Govt, Insurgents and External Actors Triad



Key Factors Contributing to Public Facilitation of Militancy

The merged districts of KP have served as grounds of militancy for decades. Although perceived by many as an abode of extremism, the true nature of local sympathy towards militant organizations is rather more complex, arising out of desperation caused by crisis of governance and justice, rather than any inherent extremism of locals. For understanding local support towards militancy, there is need to break the security myth and look at the cracks within the society, which have resulted in militancy becoming a rational choice for many. This section examines the principal factors and mechanisms associated with public facilitation of militancy. Each factor is considered in terms of how it can translate an underlying grievance, vulnerability or social relationship into a specific form of local facilitation.

Historical Alienation, Global Power Contest and Post 2021 Security Reversal

Some of the factors including historical grievances, great power competition and the security perspectives post-2021 US withdrawal of Afghanistan are examined as under.

Colonial Legacy of Frontier Exclusion and Indirect Control

Under British rule in 1849, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) institutionalized collective responsibility, indirect control through selected tribal Maliks and exclusion from ordinary constitutional, judicial and representative structures. The political agent became the principal face of the state, associated more with coercive authority than development or citizenship. This left a durable perception of the state as distant, extractive and punitive.⁸ Over time, such historical alienation weakened trust in formal state institutions and created a social environment in which militants could exploit grievances, portray themselves as alternative protectors, and secure silence, sympathy or reluctant local cooperation.

Cold War Militarization

During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), the MDs (erstwhile FATA) became the frontline for a U.S backed jihad against the USSR. The period was marked by the militarization and ideological radicalization of the area through support of mujahedeen groups by foreign intelligence agencies in terms of

finances, weaponry, and training. The networks, structures, and mindset of militancy developed in this period have never really faded away. Its relevance to public facilitation lies less in establishing direct contemporary support than in the persistence of networks, narratives, and social relationships that subsequently lowered the barriers to militant influence.

Post-9/11 Dynamics

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the region again became a central theater in the “Global War on Terror.” US invasion itself and US pressure on Pakistan to conduct military operations, coupled with controversial CIA drone strikes inside Pakistani territory, caused significant civilian casualties and displacement. These actions were framed by militants and perceived by many locals as a foreign-imposed war, dramatically increasing anti-American and in turn, anti-Pakistan sentiment. The resulting grievances, therefore, functioned as a facilitating condition by increasing the credibility of militant narratives and reducing trust in state and foreign-supported security interventions among affected communities.

Post 2021 Taliban Takeover and FaK Resurgence

The US / NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover in August 2021 altered the militancy curve in KP and the MDs by giving FaK psychological, ideological, operational and geographic depth. FaK drew confidence from the Afghan Taliban’s victory narrative, benefited from cross-border sanctuaries, and exploited weakened enforcement of counterterrorism commitments.⁹ Pakistan’s internal security environment has sharply deteriorated. CRSS recorded 2,414 fatalities in the first three quarters of 2025, almost equaling the 2,546 fatalities of entire 2024.¹⁰ PICSS reported an increase in combat related deaths from 1,950 in 2024 to 3,413 in 2025, the sharpest violence curve in over a decade.¹¹

Militant Re-entry into Populated Areas

Post-2021 militant regrouping and the space created by ceasefires, talks and cross-border sanctuary, FaK elements re-entered populated and semi-populated areas to regain local influence, intimidate communities, secure logistics and complicate kinetic actions through civilian proximity. Their presence among civilians created fear, reduced reporting to security forces and allowed militants to

exploit any security incident for propaganda. This made local compliance less a matter of ideology and more a product of coercion, perceived militant permanence and community vulnerability.

External Actors' Role in Sustaining Militancy and Local Facilitation

External Enablement and Local Compliance

The role of external actors in creating public facilitation of militants in the merged districts through construction of the narrative of "Foreign War," building militant strength and extending the duration of the war, further reinforces the notion of militant resilience. Actions such as sanctuary, weapons, funds and logistics from external parties make militants look resilient and hard to defeat.¹²

Indian Grey-Zone Support and Proxy Enablement

The Indian grey-zone activities continue to be an important factor outside of Pakistan which helps maintain the network of militants against Pakistan. Pakistan has pointed out that there have been instances when India has indulged in sponsoring militants, such as the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav being one of those instances. Regarding KP and MDs, the issue here for Pakistan is that India sponsors anti-Pakistan militants using Afghan territory, in cahoots with unfriendly elements. The link of the issue with public facilitation may not be direct but important nonetheless since external sponsorship gives the perception of the militants being resourceful, protected and durable.¹³

External Sanctuary and Weak Doha Enforcement

A core undertaking of the Doha framework was that Afghan soil would not be used for terrorism against other states. Weak enforcement of this commitment has enabled FaK to exploit Afghanistan based sanctuaries, movement space and ideological affinity. The Taliban-led Interim Afghan Government's (IAG) reluctance to prevent FaK activity has strengthened FaK confidence in KP and the MDs. Since the TTA-FaK connection is based on ideology, past cooperation, and kinship relations across borders, the FaK has moral and practical strength as well. From the perspective of local populations,

this leads to the understanding that the militants are not passing through but are here to stay.¹⁴

Aid Diversion and Indirect Reinforcement of IAG Control

Post-2021 international assistance has remained important for Afghanistan's fragile economy. In contrast, when aid distribution is subject to interference or coercion on the part of Taliban, it may indirectly enhance the influence of the IAG while failing to guarantee counterterrorism commitments. In turn, this is critical to the MDs as enhanced control by the IAG without efforts directed against FaK sanctuaries will continue creating the favorable environment for the FaK. At the community level, this further reinforces the idea that militants have outside depth and are therefore untouchable.¹⁵

Ideological Manipulation, Religious Narratives and Educational Vulnerabilities

Ideological Framing for Public Facilitation

Religion and identity are one of the primary drivers of militancy in the merged districts as they provide a powerful frame through which militant groups legitimize violence and seek local facilitation. FaK fuses local grievances with broader religious and anti-state narratives, portraying the Pakistani state as a Western proxy, hostile to Pashtun identity and indifferent to Islamic governance. Such communication might have a greater impact on a population that is conservative and politically marginalized in nature. The FaK offers their own interpretation of Sharia, which according to them has been ordered by God, while the state and security forces are labeled as illegitimate with phrases like "Kafir Fauj" and "Dollar Army." This is done to legitimize passive acceptance, recruiting, offering sanctuary, silent compliance, and empathy among the vulnerable populations. Galula suggests that insurgents utilize ideological affiliation to attract and maintain popular support; this is the case for MDs through religion, propaganda and promises of justice.¹⁶

Madrasa Influence and Educational Vulnerability

The ideological attractiveness is further emphasized where conditions of poverty, poor formal education, and uncontrolled religious education are

prevalent. In the aftermath of the Afghan anti-Soviet Jihad, there has been a noticeable growth of madrassas in the MDs and neighboring regions due to external funds with geopolitical considerations.¹⁷ By 2021, more than 4,600 madrassas were officially registered in KP, with the actual number believed to be higher when unregistered institutions are included¹⁸. The madrasahs offer free education, boarding, food, and religiosity in the under-developed communities which makes them a good attraction for many parents. However, with inadequate supervision, some madrasahs continue to be open to any form of indoctrination. Various empirical studies have shown that close to 20% of the students in madrasahs in the MDs were sympathetic ideologically to the militants.¹⁹ The problem is not madrasa education itself, but the space created when poverty, limited formal schooling, external patronage and weak curriculum regulation allow extremist interpretations to circulate. This ideological factor does not operate in isolation. Scholars such as Kalyvas provides an explanation for coercion and selective violence, Gurr explains relative deprivation, Kilcullen points to local conflict ecology, Crenshaw explains terrorism as strategy and the greed and grievance theory explains how criminal economies thrive along with ideological rhetoric. Together, all these theoretical dimensions demonstrate that facilitation in the MDs is multi-faceted and not single-causal since ideology works by interacting with grievances, coercion, poverty, poor governance and insecurity.²⁰

Tribal Affinity, Cultural Obligations and State's Local Knowledge Gap

Tribal-Cultural Obligations and Militant Exploitation of Hospitality Norms

The militant dynamics are also influenced by the norms and traditions of tribal community since these affect reaction of local population to the presence of militants operating within the tribal kinship structure. Pashtunwali, badal, nanawate, ghairat and clan loyalties may foster a reluctance to act against the militants because they belong to the same tribe, village or clan. Hospitality practices could also make matters difficult when the militants use "nanawate" or family relations in order to obtain some protection, silence or freedom of movement. Nonetheless, these cultural practices carry certain obligations on the part of the guest who must honor the host, not put the household at risk and certainly not abuse hospitality through coercion or crime.

Kinship, Language and Trust Deficit

Militants are able to use the factor of permanence since most of them come from the same locality, speak the same dialect, know sub-tribal connections and are deeply rooted in local social networks. Thus, militants can understand the sentiments of the community, find informers and impose silence or obedience. By contrast, civil administration, police, FC, Army and intelligence officials usually serve tenure-based postings and may rotate within two to three years. Officials from outside the area may also face language and cultural-lingo gaps, limiting their ability to build HUMINT and durable trust. Communities know that officials may leave while militants and their families may remain, making cooperation with the state appear risky unless protection, continuity and local ownership are assured.²¹

Exploitation of FATA Merger Grievances, Justice and Governance Gaps

Weak Governance and Policing

Weak governance and inadequate policing further aggravate the problem. Chronic delays in legal processes, perceived corruption in public offices, limited administrative outreach and under-resourced police/CTD structures erode public trust in the state.²² Militants exploit this weakness through propaganda, coercion and selective service provision, converting frustration into passive tolerance or coerced compliance. It does not mean that there is an ideological backing for militancy in these communities; rather, fence-sitters are motivated by fear, procrastination, insecurity, and lack of credible alternatives. According to Galula, insurgents exploit the governance gaps by delivering what the government fails to deliver.²³ The governance deficit therefore does not automatically produce militant support; rather, it creates an institutional vacuum that militants can convert into passive tolerance, opportunistic collaboration or reliance on parallel mechanisms of protection and dispute resolution.

Unmet Merger Expectations and Governance Deficit

The FATA-KP merger is a significant constitutional move that sought to mainstream the once-troubled regions by granting rights, establishment of courts, police, political participation, and development. However, inadequate progress on merger promises has resulted in the development of an expectation gap among

the MDs. Lack of high-profile involvement of provincial officials, civil bureaucracy, and relevant service departments strengthens the notion that the state is remote, indifferent, and only focused on security matters. According to the theory of relative deprivation, there exists a risk of resentment and susceptibility to anti-state discourse due to the mismatch between public expectations and delivery of the promise. Militants exploit this disillusionment by portraying delayed development, weak protection and administrative absence as evidence of state failure, while presenting themselves as alternative sources of order, justice and protection.²³

The Justice Vacuum

Justice remains the most sensitive governance gap. After the merger, the FCR framework was abolished and formal courts were extended to the merged districts. However, this transition did not immediately produce a justice system that was accessible, speedy, culturally familiar and trusted by local communities. Informal jirgas continued socially, while KP also enacted the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Alternate Dispute Resolution Act, 2020. Yet implementation remains uneven and a uniformly trusted, constitutionally protected and rights-compatible hybrid justice mechanism has not fully matured.²⁴ This gap between formal court extension, continued social reliance on jirgas and slow dispute resolution has allowed militants to portray their parallel arbitration as swift and decisive, especially in land disputes, inheritance issues, tribal feuds, compensation claims and returnee grievances.

Militant Exploitation of Post-Merger Gaps

Militants frame post-merger delays as proof of state failure. They portray themselves as protectors of local interests and exploit grievances linked to unemployment, land disputes, compensation delays, weak representation and slow dispute resolution. In situations where the state is considered to be absent or incapable, militant narratives are likely to have credibility among people who need quick protection, mediation, or solution. According to the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (2022), 58% of the people from MDs consider militants to be sensitive to local demands.²⁵ A similar example includes the findings of a study carried out by PILDAT in 2021, wherein 62% of respondents from the MDs believed that jirga and militant-led legal system was preferable to state judicial system due to its efficiency and culture compatibility.²⁶ Their

parallel justice may appear efficient, but it ultimately deepens coercive control and undermines state authority.

Security-Governance Synchronization

The question of governance in the merged districts cannot be discussed independent of security. The judiciary, education system, health care, development agencies, contractors, elders, and local leaders cannot operate efficiently if militants have the capacity to kill, extort, threaten, or kidnap. Hence, security is the precondition of governance while governance provides a sustainable environment for security. The basic problem in policy making is that there is no coordination between security and governance; in cases where the military operations create space but other institutions do not act promptly, the militants will gain influence and more grievance will occur.

Economy of Desperation & Exploitation of Unemployment Factor

Relative Deprivation and Poverty as a Facilitation Environment

Economic deprivation is a major driver of public facilitation of militancy in the MDs, where poverty is reinforced by conflict, weak formal industry and disruption of cross-border livelihoods. Unemployment among the working-age population stands at 7.1 percent, higher than the national average of 5.6 percent, while youth constitute nearly 60 percent of the population and face limited prospects beyond informal labour, agriculture and small-scale trade.²⁷ According to CFSLA 2019-20, households in the MDs spend about 79 percent of their income on food, while 47 percent have contracted debt, indicating acute financial vulnerability. Low Social Development Index scores further reflect restricted access to education, healthcare and economic mobility. Relative Deprivation Theory shows that the disparity between expectations and the actual situation creates vulnerability to becoming part of an organization due to its ability to provide income or in protest against the perceived negligence of the state.²⁸

Militant Monetization of Vulnerability

The militant organizations translate economic problems into power through providing wages, logistical arrangements, protection, market opportunities, and involvement in illegal trade. Under conditions where militant networks provide income, protection or access to illicit markets, economic vulnerability can create incentives for opportunistic collaboration or recruitment. The following figures for incomes and expenditures on food of households in the MDs depict the degree of their vulnerability.

Area / Distt	Average Household Monthly Income (Rupees)	Average Household Monthly Food Expenditure (Rupees)	%age of Food Expenditure Share in the Total Expenditure	%age of Households That Have Contracted Debts (In the Past Six Months)
Bajaur	24509	20335	81%	59%
Mohmand	32380	21751	77%	18%
Khyber	27611	22285	77%	47%
Orakzai	30970	23876	85%	47%
Kurram	31996	26173	77%	61%
NWD	29289	26009	79%	57%
SWD	31090	26178	75%	55%
MDs-wide	28967	22635	79%	47%

Source: Comprehensive Food Security and Livelihood Assessment (CFSLA) 2019-20

Border Closures and Livelihood Shock

Security-related border closures, trade limitations, and restrictive movement can be inevitable under certain security threats, but the application of such policies without creating alternative economic sources results in economic retaliation. A number of border towns are economically dependent on trade, transportation, informal markets, fuel supply, monetary flows and money earned from semi-legal or illegal sources. With reduction in these sources, youth from the impacted area are increasingly exposed to militant recruiting groups and smuggling networks. Economic hardships further make way for facilitation through creating the image of militants as source of income and opportunity.

Illegal Economy and Militant-Local Nexus

The militancy in the MDs is further fueled by an illegal economy based on smuggling, drug running, extortion, hawala, foreign funding, and even new digital currency arrangements. Such economic activity not only generates income for militants but can pull some locals into participating due to either greed or fear. Smuggling of drugs from Afghanistan, smuggling, extortion of traders and money through hawala enable militants to raise money, instill fear among the population and undermine state authority. When there is a lack of formal employment opportunities in certain regions, the involvement in criminal activity becomes a more attractive option than lawful work. Hence, the illegal economy is a facilitation factor because it finances the militants, ties locals to the militant networks, and undermines the authority of the state.²⁹

Collateral Damage, Revenge and Retaliatory Violence

Harm and displacement of civilians as well as property damage caused by military actions have become an everlasting grievance in some of the MDs. From the angle of Relative Deprivation Theory, perceived inequality or deprivation could lead to resentment, which would make civilians vulnerable to the anti-state narrative. In this case, militants would take advantage of the situation by providing security, financial help and narratives of revenge, transforming the loss suffered into empathy, silence, recruitment or logistic help. If there is no transparency in relation to civilian harm, compensation and rehabilitation, as well as atrocities committed by militants, militants would use the lack of information in order to present the state as indifferent.³⁰

Militant Coercion, Blackmailing and Fear Based Facilitation

Selective Violence and Coerced Compliance

Public facilitation in the merged districts does not have to be voluntary. Where the government is unable to offer protection on an ongoing basis, militants apply coercion, intimidation, and blackmail to force the civilians to give them protection, food, money, information, silence, or lack of cooperation with the security forces. The idea of selective violence by Kalyvas accounts for this behavior of the insurgents.³¹ In such conditions, a household may assist militants not because it supports their ideology, but because refusal may invite punishment, social exposure or physical harm.

Silence of the Neutral Majority

For the inhabitants of these merged areas, the problem lies not in actively supporting the militants on one hand and taking sides with the state on the other; rather, their focus is to ensure their own survival and security. The militants take advantage of the neutral stance of these people by means of threatening letters at night, extortion, intimidations to elders, intimidating informers, and targeted killings. Fearful non-cooperation with the state on account of the same factor makes it a sort of indirect facilitation for the militants.

Fear as Public Facilitation

Coercion and blackmail use fear as an operational tool. Communities, who think that the militants will stay even when the government officials leave, might refrain from informing about their movement, withholding testimony, paying protection money, providing temporary shelter or staying silent after assaults. All of this means that the fear-driven assistance allows militants to stay present in the community without having any ideological consent from the majority. This is important to realize that coercion cannot be equated with sympathy.

Youth Bravado and Negative Cultural Romanticization of Militancy

Bravery and ghairat (honor) have an important part to play in making militancy possible, especially amongst young males in troubled areas where the Pashtun people live. These concepts are deeply ingrained in the oral tradition of the tribes.³² Pashtunwali embodies courage, defiance, and defense of community values and thus creates a culture where insurgency becomes a heroic action. According to counter-insurgency theory, insurgent groups make use of the social norms of society to turn violence into heroism and defiance.³³ The cultural frame among MDs in KP is reinforced by their historical experience of exclusion and foreign intervention. Stories of rebellion, going back from anti-colonialism to the Afghan jihad, are used by militants to show that they carry on the tradition of defiance.³⁴ These ideas are disseminated through local poetry, music, and religious discourse, normalizing militancy as an expression of courage and communal loyalty³⁵. Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (2020) survey found that 72% of youth in honor-centric communities viewed militancy as a legitimate response to perceived injustice.³⁶ While the World Bank (2019) observed that acts of militancy

are often socially validated as expressions of bravery under Pashtunwali. Together, these socio-cultural norms legitimize militancy, making counter-radicalization efforts ineffective unless they engage with the underlying cultural and historical context.³⁷

Digital Propaganda by FaK and Allied Proxy Handlers

In contemporary times, digital propaganda has emerged as an important method to influence through the MDs. The FaK and its affiliated networks have taken advantage of platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube, Telegram and Signal to propagate their propaganda against the state by fabricating lies about martyrdom and targeting the youths. Professional editing of videos, casualty fabrication and resistance rhetoric have been employed in order to portray the image of the state as repressive and that of the militants as the protectors of the religious, honour and communal values. The encrypted messaging apps have played a role in recruiting people for the cause of militants. Its significance for public facilitation lies in its ability to reinforce existing grievances, normalize militant narratives and reduce the perceived legitimacy of state institutions, rather than assuming that exposure to propaganda automatically produces militant support.

Political Polarization and Provincial- Federal Frictions

Polarization within politics and tensions within the relationship between the federal government and the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have created a situation where militants can be able to make use of their narrative because of the political confrontations that have been going on. Political actors who choose to work in confrontation with each other rather than collaboration may create situations where governance problems, developmental problems and even the provision of services may become more apparent, making the citizens believe that the state is inefficient. Consequently, federal-provincial discord may indirectly contribute to increased public sympathy for, or tolerance of, militant actors by weakening the state's legitimacy and responsiveness in the eyes of affected communities. Thus, political polarization should be understood as an enabling condition that can amplify existing grievances rather than as a direct cause of militant facilitation.

Weak State/ Society Interface and Facilitation Vacuum

Limited engagement between communities, youth and state institutions, including LEAs, has weakened public trust in the MDs. Indirect governance under the Frontier Crimes Regulation historically discouraged participatory politics, while post-merger interaction with civil administration, policing, local government and grievance-redress institutions remains uneven. This distance enables militants to exploit local frustration and present themselves as alternative sources of influence, protection and dispute mediation.³⁸

Way Forward

Countering public facilitation of militancy in the MDs requires a sequenced approach that directly responds to the factors identified above. Security must create the space for governance, while governance, justice, livelihoods and political inclusion must sustain security. The response should therefore follow the logic of security-enabled governance and governance-sustained security. Some of the ways in which this issue can be addressed in short, medium and long-terms is provided as under:-

Reversing Historical Alienation and Post-2021 Security Reversal

- **Establishment of Population Protection Bases:** A strong and potent CTD force presence be ensured in MDs especially settled areas of MDs (such as Bannu, DIK, Tank, Lakki etc) through effective provincial - federal collaboration. MDs massive police transformation (moving beyond khasadars converted police) is a key enabler of security. Move from episodic security operations to population protection based force deployment and operation in which cleared areas be converted to safe zones, followed by courts, police, service delivery, compensation and local governance.
- **Restoring State Confidence in Populated Areas:** Ensure persistent state presence in vulnerable populated and semi-populated spaces through coordinated deployment of police, CTD, FC, intelligence agencies and civil administration.
- **Community Assurance and Protection:** Establish community protection forums, rapid-response mechanisms and confidential

reporting channels so that locals can resist militant intimidation without fear of abandonment.

- **Granting Magisterial Powers to Deputy Commissioners in the Merged Districts on the Swat Model:** The restoration of limited magisterial powers to Deputy Commissioners in the merged districts, similar to the arrangement adopted in Swat, could strengthen local governance and improve the state's ability to maintain public order. Such powers would enable district administrations to respond more effectively to emerging law-and-order challenges, coordinate with law enforcement agencies, and address local disputes before they escalate into security concerns.

Curbing External Actors and Cross-Border Enablement

To mitigate the influence of external actors in fostering popular support for militancy in the MDs, it is essential to implement a multifaceted strategy that integrates diplomacy, border control, and local resilience building:-

- **Effective Border Management:** Strengthen border control through regulated crossing points, surveillance, fencing/walling in vulnerable patches, UAVs, sensors and real-time intelligence sharing. Good practices of Turkish and Iranian border management especially walls with strong points and surveillance hubs be incorporated.
- **Diplomatic and Intelligence Pressure:** Sustain diplomatic engagement, intelligence cooperation and international exposure of external sanctuaries, proxy support and weak enforcement of counterterrorism commitments.
- **Financial and Sanctions-Based Disruption:** Target militant financing through hawala monitoring, digital-finance tracking, sanctions advocacy, border interdiction and coordinated action against facilitators.
- **Lawful Cost Imposition:** Any cost-imposition strategy against external sponsorship should remain calibrated, intelligence-driven and framed within international law, diplomatic exposure and precise counterterrorism pressure.

Countering Ideological, Religious and Educational Manipulation

A pragmatic approach to counter ideological support for militancy in the MDs involves engaging credible religious authorities, reforming madrassas, and mainstreaming education:-

- **Religious Counter-Narrative:** Engage credible religious scholars, especially those familiar with KP and the MDs, to delegitimize militant violence and expose the misuse of Islam, Sharia and Pashtun honour.
- **Madrassa Registration and Reform:** Ensure mandatory registration, curriculum review, teacher training and gradual integration of modern subjects, vocational skills and civic education into madrassas.
- **Mainstream and Vocational Education:** Expand quality schooling, technical education, scholarships and student quotas for youth from vulnerable MDs in major institutions across Pakistan.
- **Youth Awareness against Extremist Narratives:** Use schools, colleges, madrassas, media and community platforms to build critical thinking, digital literacy and resistance to extremist propaganda.

Aligning Tribal and Cultural Structures with the State

Tribal affinity and strong cultural bonds in the MDs often lead communities to support or protect militants when they belong to the same tribe or locality. Countering this requires; aligning tribal structures with the state rather than confronting them:-

- **Community-Based ADR:** Provide legal cover to rights-compatible ADR mechanisms linked with formal courts so that militants cannot exploit justice delays. ADR decisions countersigning authority be given to Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner.
- **Culturally Informed Policing:** Train LEAs in local customs, Pashto language, tribal dynamics and community engagement to reduce trust deficits and improve HUMINT.

- **Engagement of Elders, Maliks and Jirgas:** Involve tribal elders, maliks, jirgas and religious authorities in peacebuilding, dispute resolution and public denunciation of militant coercion.
- **Tribal-Led Development and Peacebuilding:** Channel selected development, reconciliation and youth initiatives through credible local leadership to shift tribal solidarity from militant protection to community resistance.

Addressing Post-Merger Grievances, Justice and Governance Gaps

Collateral damage, vengeance, and cycles of retaliatory violence frequently exacerbate grievances and foster community sympathy for militant organisations; hence, the following actions are necessary:-

- **Special Governance Model for MDs:** Implement a time-sensitive 5–10-year specialised governance framework featuring a dedicated governance and development authority for MDs, supported by federal-provincial finance and legislative supervision.
- **Implementation of Merger Commitments:** Perform a transparent audit of merger commitments, encompassing development allocations, judiciary, law enforcement, local governance, healthcare, education, infrastructure, remuneration, and employment.
- **Accessible Justice and ADR:** Augment courts, mobile courts, prosecutorial offices, legal aid centers, and enhance alternative dispute resolution mechanisms for land, inheritance, compensation, tribal conflicts, and returnee problems.

Addressing Unemployment, Poverty and Livelihood Disruption

The "economy of desperation," in which militant groups use unemployment and poverty to recruit local youngsters, can be mitigated by establishing sustainable economic opportunities in the MDs.

- **Employment and Skills Programmes:** Initiate extensive employment, vocational training, and youth entrepreneurship initiatives specifically designed for the construction, mining, agricultural, transport, and legal commerce sectors.

- **Small-Business and Market Support:** Provide financing for small businesses, tax incentives, local procurement opportunities, and infrastructure to accommodate unemployed youth.
- **Polytechnic and Exportable Skills:** Establish a contemporary polytechnic college to educate MDs youth for skilled employment in Pakistan, Gulf nations, and Europe.
- **Legal Border Livelihoods:** Establish regulated border markets, facilitate customs processes, issue transport permits, and provide legal cross-border commerce channels to mitigate livelihood disruptions caused by border limitations.

Mitigating Revenge-Based Facilitation and Retaliatory Violence

- **Precision in Security Operations:** Improve intelligence, rules of engagement and civilian protection measures to reduce collateral damage during operations.
- **Transparent Civilian-Harm Review:** Perform regular assessments of civilian casualties, erroneous intelligence, and property damage, thereafter implementing corrective actions.
- **Compensation and Rehabilitation:** Facilitate the prompt payment of damages, rehabilitation, reconstruction assistance and public acknowledgement where appropriate
- **Reconciliation and Trauma Support:** Ensure the timely disbursement of compensation, rehabilitation, reconstruction support, and public recognition where warranted.

Reducing Coercion, Blackmail and Fear-Based Compliance

Militant organisations frequently acquire public backing through force, intimidation, and extortion, compelling communities to offer shelter, intelligence, or financial aid. Addressing this necessitates:-

- **Persistent State Presence:** Ensure a prominent and continuous presence of police, Counter Terrorism Department, Frontier Corps, administrative, and development officials in population centers.
- **Rapid Response to Threats:** Establish rapid-response teams to combat extortion, nocturnal correspondence, threats to the elderly, intimidation of informants, and militant coercion.

- **Confidential Reporting and Witness Protection:** Create safe channels for reporting, witness protection, temporary relocation and community protection measures.
- **Community Policing:** Enhance local law enforcement, promote local recruiting, and extend tenure durations to ensure communities feel secure after reporting militant intimidation.

Disrupting the Illegal Economy and Militant-Local Nexus

The illegal spectrum of activities including smuggling, extortion, illegal mining and cross-border trade often brings together militants and local actors for a convergence of interests, generating financial incentives that sustain militancy. Countering this requires:-

- **Action against Smuggling and Drug Trafficking:** Enhance border surveillance, customs enforcement, and intelligence-driven operations to combat smuggling and drug trafficking routes. Transparent single-window border terminal management is essential for mitigating smuggling and drug trafficking.
- **Countering Extortion and Illegal Mining:** Crackdown on illegal mining and informal tax networks, protect traders, contractors and transporters from extortion.
- **Financial Monitoring:** Integrate NIFTAC/PIFTAC, FIA, CTD KP, customs, banks and intelligence agencies to track hawala, digital financing and illicit transfers.
- **Legal Economic Alternatives:** Set up border markets, job creation programmes and regulate trade, to make legal livelihoods more attractive than illegal networks.

Countering Bravado and Negative Cultural Romanticization of Militancy

- **Alternative Role Models:** Promote local examples of bravery linked to education, public service, entrepreneurship, sports, scholarship and community protection.
- **Sports and Cultural Programmes:** Organise sports leagues, cultural activities, literary forums and youth festivals to channel honour, pride and competition into peaceful directions.
- **Redefining Honour and Bravery:** Utilise local media, religious scholars, elders, and educators to articulate true ghairat as the

safeguarding of community life, educational institutions, women, children, and public order.

Reducing Digital Propaganda and Online Facilitation

- **Legally Governed Digital Monitoring:** Enhance collaborative oversight by the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of IT, FIA Cyber Crime Wing, PTA, CTD KP, and intelligence agencies about extremist content, fundraising, and recruitment activities.
- **Pashto and Local-Dialect Counter-Narratives:** Develop rapid counter-narratives through religious scholars, tribal elders, teachers, journalists, victims of terrorism and youth influencers.
- **Digital Literacy:** Digital literacy programmes in schools, colleges, madrassas and community centres to enable youth to identify fake news, manipulated videos and extremist messaging.
- **District Information Cells:** Set up district-level information cells to counter militant claims quickly, call out fake casualty narratives and develop a positive civic identity.

Reducing Politically Driven Facilitation and Youth Disillusionment

- **Electoral Credibility:** Improve result transparency, dispute resolution, independent monitoring and public communication to restore trust in political processes.
- **Separating Dissent from Militancy:** Avoid conflating peaceful political dissent with militant facilitation, while maintaining firm action against actual militant support.
- **Youth Councils and Political Inclusion:** Establish district- and tehsil-level youth councils representing students, madrassa youth, traders, professionals, tribal youth, civil society and women where feasible.
- **Federal-Provincial Coordination:** Insulate policing, compensation, development and local service delivery from partisan conflict to reduce alienation and mistrust.

Strengthening Community Engagement and Sustained Youth Outreach

- **State-Society Interface:** Establish structured interaction among administrative institutions, police, LEAs, elders, teachers, merchants, youth and religious scholars.
- **Community Protection Forums:** Employ community forums to determine grievances, spot militant intimidation, encourage confidential reports and have regular contact with vulnerable communities.
- **Youth Engagement beyond Symbolism:** Substitute symbolic engagement with paid internships, scholarships, civic-service programs, technical training, business grants and sports event.
- **Peace Education and Civic Responsibility:** Encourage constitution knowledge, peace education and citizenship responsibility among schools, colleges, madrasas and the community.

Conclusion

The facilitation of militancy by the public in the MDs is not just an ideologically driven phenomenon; it comes from the resultant impact of alienation through history, external refuge, gaps in governance, economic hardships, intimidation, political mistrust, and cyber propaganda. This can be in the form of assistance or acquiescence, largely motivated by fears, survival, and permanency of militancy rather than ideology. Therefore, counter-militancy requires more than defeating militant groups physically; it requires reducing the social, economic and institutional conditions that enable them to secure local silence, cooperation or support, through sustained security, responsive governance, accessible justice, economic opportunity and community engagement.

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