

# RESURGENCE OF TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN: DRIVERS, MOTIVES AND IMPACTS

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## **Abstract**

*Despite effectively combating militancy and terrorism in the first two decades of the 21st century, there is a resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan. The resurgence of terrorism has its origin from across the western frontiers of Pakistan. This return of terrorism started a few months after the establishment of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan. Whereas Afghan Taliban has promised not to allow the usage of Afghan soil against any country in the agreement “United States–Taliban deal or the Doha Accord” signed on 29 February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, the terrorists of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (FITNA AL KHAWARIJ), stationed in Afghanistan are undertaking terrorism against Pakistan in consistency. There have been significant terrorist attacks on Pakistani military posts and civilians in the last three years. The resurgence of terrorism from Afghan soil has posed serious security challenges for the Pakistani state and society. This research analyses three salient factors of the revival of terrorism in Pakistan: a) the drivers of renewed terrorism in Pakistan, b) the motives behind the revival of terrorism in Pakistan, and c) how this new wave of terrorism is impacting the state and society of Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan-Afghanistan Border, Afghan Taliban Government, Fitna Al Khawarij, Al Qaeda, Western Borders, Terrorist Attacks.

## **Introduction**

**P**akistan has been facing a renewed wave of terrorism from across its western borders ever since the takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban Government in mid-August 2021. Indeed, this is a return of terrorism since Pakistan had fully combated this menace through its various military operations ranging from 2007 to 2017. Besides primary military operations against terrorism and militancy, the Pakistan Army and Frontier Corps have conducted dozens of

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minor military operations all over the former FATA and even in the settled areas of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province. Operation Zarb-e-Azb was the last major military operation launched by the Pakistan Army with the help of the Pakistan Air Force in 2014. This operation was conducted in the North Waziristan Agency (NWA), which was considered the “No Go Area” in the former FATA. It was the main headquarters of the terrorist outfit Fitna Al Khawarij.

Through this significant counter-terrorism operation, the Pakistani Military was able to destroy all the terrorist networks of the Fitna Al Khawarij, which included IED manufacturing factories, weapon and ammunition dumps, operational headquarters, underground tunnels and communication networks. As a result of this operation, and a series of earlier conducted military operations in various parts of the former FATA, a considerable number of the Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists fled into Afghanistan,<sup>1</sup> where their abettors welcomed them; the Afghan spying network, The National Directorate of Security (NDS) and elements of Indian spying network Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). It is worth mentioning that NDS and RAW were operating in sync against Pakistan through their established terrorist launching pads in Afghanistan all along the western borders of Pakistan until 2021.

They were providing all sorts of support to Fitna Al Khawarij and many other terrorist outfits against Pakistan while making use of Afghan soil. Their support included the provision of hideouts, training, arming, financing and launching of the terrorists into Pakistan from Afghan soil. As an estimate, over 6000 Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists fled to Afghanistan, where they were kept at several hideouts from 2010 to 2017. These terrorists remained less active or else constrained from 2017 to 2021 since Pakistan maintained an excellent liaison with U.S. and NATO troops who had control over the Afghan National Army and NDS. Moreover, the Pakistan Army provided military cover to NATO and US troops during their draw-down from 2011 to 2015 and during their withdrawal in July and August 2021.

Unfortunately, there has been a gradual increase in the militancy and terrorism in Pakistan following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Afghan Taliban in mid-August 2021. The Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists, who remained less active in Afghanistan from 2017 to 2021, suddenly became active upon the takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban. It was an unexpected move since Pakistan was instrumental in bringing the Afghan Taliban into power through a peace

agreement between the US Government and the Afghan Taliban. In 2023, there has been a dramatic increase in terror attacks of Fitna Al Khawarij in KP and Balochistan provinces<sup>2</sup>. Instead, international analysts had analysed at that time that taking over Afghanistan by the Taliban was a great success for Pakistan. Whereas this takeover was considered a success for Pakistan, simultaneously, it was considered an excellent setback for India and the Western world since traditionally, the Afghan Taliban had an unwelcoming attitude toward both.

Unfortunately, this didn't happen, and relationships between Pakistan and the Taliban Government of Afghanistan turned unpleasant after initial cordiality. This unfriendliness in the bilateral relationship was neither good for Pakistan nor the Taliban Government of Afghanistan. Realising the unwelcoming nature of the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul, terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij started their nefarious terrorist activities against Pakistan by attacking military posts along the Pak-Afghan borders. As the Fitna Al Khawarij attacks on Pakistani posts continued, it was noted that the Afghan Taliban Militia (soldiers of the Afghan Taliban Government) started supporting the Fitna Al Khawarij elements. Instead of stopping them, in most of the cases, they provided necessary assistance to Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists by covering fires at the time of their border crossings and even by removing the border fence, Pakistan Army has erected all along the Pak-Afghan border.

## **Theoretical and Operational Perspective of the Research**

This research hypothesised that “the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan from its western borders is a well-planned activity aiming to destabilise Pakistan from the political, economic, and security perspective.” The resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan might have been planned with the involvement of external forces. At the same time, the execution is being done through Fitna Al Khawarij, and some other terrorist groups have their origins in Pakistan. The uninterrupted movements of terrorists from across the Pak-Afghan, using Afghan soil, reveal the backing of the host Government in Kabul. Pakistan is facing severe threats from terrorism, which originates from its Western Borders<sup>3</sup>. Indirectly, this terrorism might have been aiming to coerce Pakistan to attain the goals of some external power(s) in which the Afghan Taliban Government and Fitna Al Khawarij are being used as tools. The research also posits that these terrorist attacks will have significant impacts on the state and society of Pakistan; nevertheless, the Afghan Taliban Government and Fitna Al Khawarij will also be the net losers in the end. In all eventualities, the beneficiaries of this conflict could be external force(s).

It is to be understood by the Taliban Government of Afghanistan that the international community has not recognised it as a legitimate Government despite the passage of three years of its establishment. So much so that the United States, which brought them into power, has not recognised the Afghan Taliban as the legal rulers of Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban have not been elected through an election process. The terrorist outfit, Fitna Al Khawarij, is otherwise a non-state actor, being sponsored and abet from Afghan soil. The research will revolve around four key questions:

- The drivers of burgeoning terrorism in Pakistan and how Fitna Al Khawarij is being assisted in its terrorist attacks from Afghan soil,
- The motives of terrorist attacks on Pakistan by Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist groups,
- The impacts of terrorists attacks on Pakistan and
- Suggested response of Pakistan from this unending terrorism.

From the research methodology perspective, this study is based on content analysis of primary and secondary sources and analysis of the available data to support the hypothesis and the questions posed for the research. Within the philosophical distinctions, this research focuses on two separate research designs: descriptive and analytical. After setting the research theme and outlining the objectives and questions, surveying the existing literature on the subject was considered pertinent. A review of the relevant literature helped identify the gaps that needed to be filled in this research. It was revealed during the review of literature that a lot has been written on terrorism, US and NATO invasion in Afghanistan, and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Nevertheless, the return of terrorism in Pakistan emanating from Western borders needs in-depth research. Neo-Classical Realism fits into the theoretical perspective framework of this research. The crux of Neorealism revolves around the element of power politics and analyses the competitions and conflicts as enduring features in international relations. Besides, the Securitization theory is being used to analyse the security-related issues, which are getting adverse owing to continuous terrorism in Pakistan. This happens because of the involvement of internal factors exploited by external forces due to their political and strategic interests. The securitising actors have the social and political power to complicate the issues beyond resolution.

## Data of Terrorism: 2000-2024

The data below reflects the chronological order of terrorism in Pakistan from 2000 to 2024.

Year	Incidents of Killing	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists/Insurgents/Extremists	Not Specified	Total
2000*	65	137	8	20	1	166
2001	110	190	31	26	48	295
2002	103	148	20	65	24	257
2003	55	137	23	29	8	197
2004	168	347	208	302	68	925
2005	166	465	79	124	18	686
2006	317	541	301	568	56	1466
2007	531	1311	548	1271	464	3594
2008	1149	1796	647	3724	516	6683
2009	1665	2154	1012	7884	267	11317
2010	1246	1537	512	4945	348	7342
2011	1573	2371	674	2752	253	6050
2012	2347	2743	734	2444	267	6188
2013	2034	2713	665	1541	375	5294
2014	1569	1471	508	3268	263	5510
2015	950	866	339	2407	73	3685
2016	526	541	291	897	68	1797
2017	294	439	216	533	81	1269
2018	164	363	158	162	10	693
2019	136	142	137	86	0	365
2020	193	169	178	159	0	506
2021	268	215	226	223	0	664
2022	365	229	379	363	0	971
2023	527	386	532	584	0	1502
2024	397	266	307	373	4	950
Total**	16918	21677	8733	34750	3212	68372

**Source:** The data has been collected from various new papers.

## Analysis of the Data of Militancy and Terrorism in Pakistan

Pakistan has been highly affected by terrorism in the last two decades. The abovementioned data gives a bird's eye view of the terrorism in Pakistan from 2000 to 2024 (to date). Starting from 2000, the initial terrorist attacks and human losses were less compared to later phases. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual increase in the incidents of terrorism and resultant human losses, both of civilians and personnel of security forces. The data above show fewer terrorist attacks from 2000 to 2006. Indeed, until 2006, individual terrorist groups were operating in various parts of Pakistan, especially in the former FATA area. The incident of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) united all mushroom terrorist outfits under the umbrella of

a new terrorist organisation with the name of Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (Fitna Al Khawarij) in 2007. The formal announcement was made in December 2007 with Baitullah Mehsud as its Ameer (supreme leader).

The Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) incident under the codename; 'Operation Sunrise' in July 2007 is considered a strategic blunder, which united most of the religious-based terrorist organisations under the banner of Fitna Al Khawarij. There were many other options for ending the siege of the Red Mosque and Jamia Hafza, which could have avoided the use of force and the great tragedy of human losses, later exploited by international media and terrorist groups. Indeed, immediately after the incident at Red Mosque, the terrorist organisation stepped up its terrorist activities all over the country. The abovementioned data reflects the increasing pattern of attacks after 2007. In 2006, there took place 317 incidents of terrorism, killing a total of 1466 people, whereas in 2007, there were 531 incidents of terrorism, which killed 3594. From 2008 to 2014, terrorism remained at its peak in Pakistan. This was despite undertaking active military operations in various parts of Pakistan. In 2008, there took place 1,149 terrorist attacks killing 6683 individuals. In the subsequent years, there has been a rise in the pattern of terrorist attacks: 1,665, 1,246, 1,573, 2,347, 2,034 and 1,569 from 2009 to 2014. The pattern of casualties (human losses) has increased in recent years.

In the middle of 2014, the Pakistani military conducted a major military offensive against all terrorist organisations, mainly in the North Waziristan area. This Military Operation with the codename Zarb-e-Azb was a significant setback for all terrorist organisations. Indeed, it was a joint military operation by the Pak Army and Pakistan Air Force against various militant groups: Fitna Al Khawarij, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Al-Qaeda, and Lashkar-e-Islam. Though Operation Zarb-e-Azb caused a massive internal displacement of the local people from North Waziristan, the outcome of the operation was a complete success, and the primary militant group Fitna Al Khawarij could not organise itself again in Pakistan. As a result of this operation, 929,859 people (80,302 families) were displaced before the conduct of the operation.

After the conduct of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, there came a gradual decline in the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. This can be deduced from the abovementioned data:

- In 2014, there were a total of 1569 terrorist attacks;

- In 2015, there came a sharp decline in the frequency of terrorist attacks; 950 terrorist attacks were recorded in 2015;
- In 2016 this number was further reduced to 526 and 294 in 2017,
- In 2018 there took place 164 terrorist attacks while 136 terrorist attacks took place in 2019 and 193 in 2020. Many terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij fled to Afghanistan after Operations Zarb-e-Azb, where they were well received by Afghan Government officials of that time besides NDS and RAW agents.

## **The Post-2021 Terrorism in Pakistan**

The abovementioned data indicates a surge in the terrorist activities of Fitna Al Khawarij from mid-2021. This was a time when the Afghan Taliban took over Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. Analysing the pattern of terrorism from 2021 to 2024, there is clear evidence of a gradual increase in terrorism in Pakistan from August 2021 to 2024. In 2021, there took place 268 terrorist attacks compared to 193 in 2020. In the year 2022, several terrorist attacks were witnessed. A total of 365 terrorist attacks were recorded in 2022, which killed 971 individuals, including 379 men and officers of the security forces. The terrorist attacks further increased to 527 in 2023, causing the death of 1502 individuals, including 532 personnel of security forces. Till July 2024, 397 terrorist attacks were recorded. The year 2024 is considered the worst year from the security perspective since it killed over 950 people, including 307 individuals of the security forces, in the first seven months of the year.

It is quite disturbing that, despite the assurance that Afghan soil will not be used against any country by terrorists hiding in Afghanistan, the Taliban Government failed to stop the terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij from undertaking terrorist activities in Pakistan. Indeed, Pakistan is the only country which is facing terrorism emanating directly from Afghan soil. Except for the initial few weeks after their takeover, the attitude of the Afghan Taliban Government and their officials has been unfriendly and non-cooperative. During the occupation of the US and NATO, the Afghan Taliban remained closer to Pakistan, and some of their senior leaders were residing in Pakistan.

## **Pakistani Protest with the Afghan Taliban Government**

Pakistan has conveyed its concerns to the Afghan Taliban Government over the repeated incidents of terrorist activities of Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist groups that used Afghan soil. In this regard, Pakistan sent its diplomats

and political leaders, including the Defense Minister, military officials, religious scholars and even notables. Regretfully, they did not take any action against terrorists; instead, they showed ignorance most of the time. Once Pakistan protested against this non-stop terrorism of Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist groups from Afghan soil, the Afghan Taliban Government simply responded that Fitna Al Khawarij is the issue of Pakistan and Afghanistan has nothing to do with it. In November 2023, the former Pakistani Interim Prime Minister, Mr Anwar ul Haq Kakar, demanded that the Afghan Taliban Government help Pakistan by stopping Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists from entering Pakistan and using Afghan soil for terrorism in Pakistan. He said, "During the last two years when the Afghan Taliban returned to power, terrorist attacks have increased by 60%, while suicide attacks increased by 500% in Pakistan."<sup>4</sup> Mr Kakar further said that all details and data of terrorist activities of Fitna Al Khawarij have been shared with officials of Afghanistan's Taliban Government from time to time. Pakistan demanded action against terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij, who makes use of Afghan soil from the Taliban Government. Still, they are reluctant to do that, which is a concern for Pakistan.

Responding to this, the spokesperson of the Afghan Taliban Government, Mr Zabihullah Mujahid, said, "The Islamic Emirate does not allow anyone to use the territory of Afghanistan against Pakistan. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is not responsible for maintaining peace in Pakistan. Since insecurity has increased in Pakistan after the victory of the Islamic Emirate, it does not mean that we are behind the insecurity in Pakistan. Weapons are safe in Afghanistan. They are not stolen. Arms smuggling is prohibited and all illegal activities are prevented."<sup>5</sup> On many other occasions, the Taliban Government responded even more adversely once Pakistan protested against incessant terrorism emanating from Afghan soil. Although the Afghan Taliban Government is not responsible for the security of Pakistan inside its territorial frontiers, it is accountable for disallowing Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist organisations from using Afghan soil and facilitating them during the border crossing process to Pakistan.

The abetment of terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij and other groups is being done regularly by Afghan Taliban's Malatia. They even removed the border fence along the Pak-Afghan border many times in 2022. Pakistan is fencing all along the Pak-Afghan border for mainly three purposes:

- To seal the illegal border crossings by anyone from both sides,



- To stop the chances of smuggling, mainly narcotics/ drugs and weapons, and
- To stop the movement of terrorists from both sides of the border. Since the breach of the fence was done by Afghan Taliban Malatia (Taliban Soldiers) therefore, it aims to destroy the peace and security of Pakistan, which factually cannot be denied by the Afghan Taliban spokesperson.

The removal of the fence by the Taliban Malatia of Afghanistan was not an isolated event; instead, it was a planned activity. It was later defended by the Afghan Taliban Defense Ministry, whose spokesperson, Mr Enayatullah Khwarazmi, said in a statement that, ‘Taliban forces stopped the Pakistani military from erecting an “illegal” border fence along the eastern province of Nangarhar’. This speaks of the mindset of the Taliban Government about the Pak-Afghan border. Such offensive and irrational statements were not made even in Hamid Karzai’s and Asharif Ghani’s elected governments during their tenures. Upon ignoring the Pakistani requests and protests over the abetment of Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists in April 2022, Pakistan fired a few rockets on the hideouts of Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists, to which the Taliban Government severely reacted. Mr Zabihullah Mujahid said on that occasion, “This is a cruelty, and it is paving the way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pakistani side should know that if a war starts, it will not be in the interest of any side”. The question is that, if firing over the hideouts of terrorists is cruelty, then what about the killings of thousands of innocents by this Fitna Al Khawarij terrorist outfit, being hosted and abetted by the Afghanistan Government?

### **UN Report of Afghan Taliban Support to Fitna Al Khawarij**

The Afghan Taliban Government is fully supporting the Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist groups in the provision of hideouts and launching facilities from Afghan soil to Pakistani border areas. Nevertheless, they deny providing any assistance to Fitna Al Khawarij. On its part, Pakistan has provided all the evidence to the UN about Afghan Taliban support to Fitna Al Khawarij and other terrorist groups. On July 11, 2024, the United Nations issued a report which very clearly says that Fitna Al Khawarij is an alliance of extremist groups in Afghanistan. Indeed, Fitna al Khawarij is the “largest terrorist group”<sup>6</sup> on Afghan soil. Fitna Al Khawarij receives growing support from that country’s Taliban rulers to conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan. This report of the UN sanctions monitoring team has

made an assessment based on the facts that there is a massive surge in terror attacks of the Fitna Al Khawarij on Pakistani security forces and civilians.

United Nations report has authenticated that, as a result of these Fitna Al Khawarij attacks, hundreds of security forces personnel and civilians have been killed in Pakistan. It further says. "Fitna Al Khawarij continues to operate at a significant scale in Afghanistan and to conduct terrorist operations into Pakistan from there, often utilising Afghans."<sup>7</sup> This UN report has also estimated the strength of the Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists in Afghanistan as 6000-6500.<sup>8</sup> The UN report also indicates that, although there has been constant support of the Taliban Government to Fitna Al Khawarij ever since they took over the power, nevertheless this support has increased in recent months. "Taliban support to Fitna Al Khawarij also appears to have increased."<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, the Afghan Taliban Government do not consider Fitna Al Khawarij, a terrorist group; perhaps they had a similar origin and still believe in continuing it if the situation changes for them in Afghanistan at any later stage.

### **Debating the Linkage between Afghan Taliban, Al Qaeda and Fitna Al Khawarij**

The terrorism in Pakistan has to be analysed through a perspective study and connections between the Afghan Taliban (now ruling the state), Al Qaeda and Fitna Al Khawarij. In his regards, Bill Roggio, the Senior Fellow and Editor of FDD's Long War, has written an article, The article is entitled; "Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda aiding Pakistani Taliban's insurgency". The author, Bill Roggio, has extensively studied the linkage between these three groups. He exclusively studied the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan after the Afghan Taliban took over the Government in Afghanistan. His research work deduces that terrorism in Pakistan is done by Fitna Al Khawarij, who is of Pakistani origin. Nevertheless, it is directly and indirectly assisted by the Afghan Taliban Government and Al Qaeda; "Taliban, with the help of Al Qaeda, is directly sheltering, supporting, and training the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (Fitna Al Khawarij) despite claims to the contrary."<sup>10</sup> The ground realities of the last three years of terrorism in Pakistan as mentioned above validate this research. This research was published in the FDD's Long War Journal in June 2023.

It is to be noted that the UN has repeatedly pointed out this linkage between the three organisations in 2023 and 2024. In June 2023, the UNSC revealed that; "The link between the Taliban and both Al Qaeda and Tehrik-e-

Taliban Pakistan (Fitna Al Khawarij) remains strong and symbiotic”<sup>11</sup>. This report further explains that many terrorist groups are operating in Afghanistan, which ultimately carries out terrorism in Pakistan with greater flexibility and support of the Defecto Government of Afghanistan. “There are indications ... that Fitna Al Khawarij is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban, that groups of foreign terrorist fighters are projecting threat across Afghanistan’s borders.”<sup>12</sup> Since the origin of these three organisations is almost the same, their connections and linkages with each other are natural.

Why Fitna Al Khawarij has geared up its activities against Pakistan after 2021 needs debate. Indeed, the Afghan Taliban Government was reestablished in 2021 as a result of the US-Taliban Agreement of February 29, 2020<sup>13</sup>. They were given complete authority over the entire Afghanistan after two decades of fighting by the same forces which dislodged them in 2001. Since Pakistani Taliban otherwise have their allegiance with the Afghan Taliban, they dreamt of having similar provisions for them. They wanted an area where they could establish their own rule and then expand that to take more areas for their influence. They were eyeing the former FATA area, which was misruled under FCR for decades and became a concentration area for terrorists during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Upon the merger of the former FATA into KP province, they got disturbed and later re-started militancy and terrorism after the establishment of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan. It is worth mentioning that Afghanistan was also unhappy over the merger of the former FATA with KP Province since it was the hub of all undesired activities for all such forces that could operate to destabilise Pakistan.

While having such a plan in mind, Fitna Al Khawarij's leadership could have conceived two different scenarios:

- Afghan Taliban were fighting against a foreign invasion that occupied their country from 2001 to 2021. Therefore, their fightback had logic. In their fight against occupation forces, they had the sympathy of the people of Afghanistan.
- In the case of Fitna Al Khawarij, they were fighting against their state, their armed forces and their people through an element of fear and terror. They have no support from the people to implement their nefarious designs and anti-Pakistan stance. Pakistan has a democratically elected people’s government with a clearly defined

and unanimously approved constitution. Terrorists like Fitna Al Khawarij have no place in the constitution of Pakistan.

With all these violations of sovereignty and security threats through the promotion of militancy and terrorism in Pakistan, the international community cannot and indeed will never recognise the Government of the Afghan Taliban. Indeed, supporting terrorists and non-state actors like Fitna Al Khawarij for destabilising a well-established state like Pakistan disqualifies the Afghan Taliban as the legal ruler. By supporting terrorist organisations like Fitna Al Khawarij against a UN member and nuclear state, the Afghan Taliban Government violates the UN Charter and International Law, which itself is an offence. Such self-imposed, callous and terrifying elements cannot be considered to rule the people, nor can they be recognised as lawful rulers anywhere in the world.

### **Post 2021 US-Taliban Relations**

The U.S. and West disconnected from the Taliban Government after the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan in August 2021. The United States even froze \$9.5 billion<sup>14</sup> in Afghan Central Bank assets of Afghanistan on August 18, 2021. The US never wanted these assets to go into the hands of the Taliban. Nevertheless, it maintained a secret linkage with the Afghan Taliban Government. It used various humanitarian agencies of the United Nations and NGOs for the economic survival of the Taliban Government and the Afghan masses. Besides, Taliban officials and leadership have been meeting with US officials in Doha, Qatar and elsewhere. The State Department called the post-2021 US-Afghanistan relations a 'pragmatic engagement'<sup>15</sup>. There has been no disconnection between the Taliban and the US despite its pull-out from that country. The distinctiveness of US diplomacy is that, besides the Taliban Government, it is maintaining close collaboration with various political, religious and social groups in Afghanistan. It has many goodwill relations within Afghan civil society.

The people of Afghanistan are being supported financially and economically through various UN humanitarian agencies, NGOs, IGOs and MNCs. The US also maintained a very close liaison with the Taliban Government for the implementation of all the clauses of the US-Taliban agreement, which suits both sides. We also ensured that the Taliban would not allow the usage of Afghan soil against any other country. The Taliban Government is implementing this clause of the agreement in letter and spirit, except in the case of Pakistan. Afghan soil is constantly being used against Pakistan for terrorism by Fitna Al Khawarij and

other groups. The United States never questioned the Afghan Taliban Government for its dedicated support to Fitna Al Khawarij, the leading terrorist group undertaking terrorism in Pakistan.

It is to be noted that, in the agreement between the US and Taliban, concluded on February 29, 2020, the exact text regarding the usage of Afghan soil is worded with specific reference to the United States and its allies. It reads as, after the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, “Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies”<sup>16</sup>. In another part of the agreement, it is mentioned that the “Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them by the commitments in this agreement.”<sup>17</sup>

In the post-2021 scenario, the US maintained its political and economic relations with the Afghan Taliban. As per the Evaluation Report of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), issued in January 2024, internationally, the United States is the largest donor state to Afghanistan. Ever since its forces pulled out from Afghanistan in August 2021, the U.S. has provided approximately \$2.6 billion in the form of funding to the United Nations, NGOs and other Public International Organisations (PIOs) for that country. Indeed, Washington has maintained its distinctive status of being the single largest donor of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> This is not all being done as aid; some political, economic, or strategic goal must be linked to it. In international politics, there is always a relationship of give and take, and various strategies are used to attain the intended objectives directly and indirectly.<sup>19</sup>

## **US Military Equipment and Fitna Al Khawarij**

While withdrawing from Afghanistan, the U.S. military has left a considerable number of arms and ammunition in that country. This included the most modern and sophisticated weapon systems, surveillance systems, Night Vision Goggles and aircraft.<sup>20</sup> US Military claims that most aircraft were demilitarised and rendered inoperable before the withdrawal. It has been now an open secret that outlawed Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists have access to weapons left by the United States in Afghanistan. The supply of arms to the Fitna Al Khawarij has significantly jeopardised the security situation of the region; particularly, a significant increase in terrorism is being witnessed, particularly in Pakistan. According to the US Department of Defense, “US military equipment worth \$7.12

billion” was left behind by the former Afghan government at the time of the pull-out of its forces from Afghanistan in August 2021.

According to a report by the Voice of America, the Pentagon downplayed the report that Afghan Taliban fighters got access to more than \$7.12 billion worth of US military equipment at the time of the fall of the Ashraf Ghani Government in August 2021. Pentagon, however, admits that this entire war munition was given to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) by the US. Pakistani military and police officials reported that Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists use American war munitions against Pakistan. Pakistani security agencies got hold of these war munitions from the possession of arrested Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists or else from those killed during various terrorist attacks on Pakistani security forces. These modern and sophisticated American-made weapons include:

- Thermal vision equipped rifles and helmets,
- Laser sights and suppressed rifles,
- M24 sniper rifles and M4 carbines with Trijicon ACOG scopes,
- DShKM heavy machine guns,
- 107mm Type 85 single-tube rocket launchers and
- M16A4 rifles with thermal scopes.<sup>21</sup>

Pakistan’s Defense Minister, Khawaja Asif, has acknowledged the use of these US-made sophisticated weapons systems by Fitna Al Khawarij against Pakistani security<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, with the use of these modern American weapons, the lethality and accuracy of the Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists have increased manifold. The security officials of Pakistan say that by using US-made night vision devices, the terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij can see and engage Pakistani security personnel on long ranges, very effectively causing maximum human losses.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, all these American-made weapons and equipment have given much edge to terrorist groups, mainly the Fitna Al Khawarij. Apart from those which were in use of ANDSF, most of the guns being used by Fitna Al Khawarij terrorists include war munitions left behind by the American Military at the time of its withdrawal.

Nevertheless, there exists a controversy over the weapons left behind by the US Military during its final withdrawal in August 2021. Details of these weapons are covered in the preceding paragraphs. President Joe Biden was in denial mode to accept that the US Military could leave behind such a heavy number of weapons at the time of its withdrawal. Pentagon, however, revealed

this in its reports to Congress with contradictions. Afghan Taliban Government officials however confessed the seizure of U.S. weapons at the time of their takeover in August 2021 as: a) Light Arms: 300,000, b) Heavy Weapons: 26,000 and Military Vehicles: 61,000.<sup>24</sup> Since the Afghan Taliban were in control of the entire American leftover weapons, therefore it is widely assumed that they did their further disbursement to Fitna Al Khawarij despite denying this and claiming to have this whole weapon and ammunition. The controversy over these U.S. weapons and their usage by Fitna Al Khawarij gives rise to many questions.

## **The Suggested Way Forward**

Under the existing situation where terrorism has become a grave security threat to the state and society of Pakistan, a two-pronged strategy may be adopted as the way forward. The military should deal with the first part of the suggested strategy in the security domain; to physically combat the terrorism. The second part of the proposed strategy should fall into the domain of political forces, diplomats, intellectuals and members of the civil society of Pakistan as a Socio-Political Strategy. Considering the nature of security threats from widespread terrorism and the involvement of domestic and external forces, both strategies should work simultaneously in their respective domains with complete harmony.

In the security domain, the Pakistani Military has to continue combatting the terrorist activities as being done all over the country through the recently conceived Operation “Azm-e-Istehkam”. Since the focus of this operation revolves around the “Resolve for Stability” by combating the menaces of extremism and terrorism, therefore it should be restricted to the terrorism-hit areas without creating a disturbance and displacement of the masses and without collaterals damage. Within the security domain, the focus of military operations should be on two key aspects. The first aspect should focus on a rigorous border monitoring system through physical monitoring, vigilant surveillance, and intelligence by using all available means.

Strong border management through a well-coordinated surveillance and intelligence system would leave significantly less space for the terrorists to infiltrate into Pakistan and fight, too. The second aspect of the security strategy should focus on the identification and targeting of those terrorists who are already present in various parts of the country. Identifying and combating this category of terrorists will be a very challenging task since most of the terrorists of Fitna Al Khawarij and other groups have deeply penetrated the local social fabric through

religious motivation and elements of coercion. For success against this group of terrorists, the military will have to take the locals of the affected areas into confidence. Restoration of trust and initiation of confidence-building measures between masses of the affected areas will act as a key to success against terrorists and terrorism.

Pakistan needs to make a lot of efforts in the Socio-political domain both within Pakistan and with the Government and stakeholders of Afghanistan. Besides these two areas, the external forces having their strategic and political interests linked with the promotion of terrorism against Pakistan have to be engaged through diplomatic and political means. The covert nature of the involvement of external forces in the promotion of terrorism within Pakistan warrants a cautious, intelligent and prophetic handling. They have to be provided with all the evidence of their involvement in the promotion of terrorism in Pakistan. The contemporary rift between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban Government has external dimensions too. Since there is irrefutable evidence available for the usage of Afghan soil for terrorism against Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban Government has to be told in clear terms about the consequences for both Pakistan and Afghanistan at political, social and economic levels. Indeed, neither side can afford the continuation of the existing gulf between two fraternal brothers and the deteriorating security situation owing to rampant terrorism in Pakistan. Since there is no option of airing a conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the strategy of external forces has to be debated at length and understood by Islamabad and Kabul before it is too late.

Although currently Pakistan is the only country, facing terrorism from across the PaK-Afghan borders, the other regional states bordering Afghanistan may also face the threat of militancy and terrorism in the subsequent phases. To control and constrain the terrorism emanating from Afghan soil, the regional states bordering Afghanistan; China, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan should form a regional security mechanism against the threats of terrorism from Afghanistan. This forum should make result oriented engagements with the Afghan Taliban Government through dialogue for bringing an end to the terrorist activities in the region on long-term basis.



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