

# Jihad Post-Soviet Invasion/War on Terror: Impact on Pakistan

Hannan Rifaat Hussain  
March 2023

## Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the transformation of Jihad in the post-soviet invasion era, and the recurring impact of the war on terror on Pakistan. It uses key facts and statistics to explain implications that are exclusive to Pakistan, such as a growth in Afghanistan-based militant groups, consolidated safe havens and a refugee surge for decades, with viable recommendations to score gains:

- Pakistan should engage more assertively with Afghan regime to impress upon them the importance of taking concrete steps to prevent cross border attacks against Pakistan.
- Failure to crackdown against safe havens by TTA should be followed by a dialing-down of “commercial and economic relations.” The Afghan Taliban consider these interests as chief priorities, and is ill-prepared to lose more ground.
- Islamabad should keep a close watch on Indian interactions with the TTP, and its support through financial inducements.
- Islamabad should continue to maintain close links with Washington to widen the pool of targeted intelligence against common security threats. This includes Al-Qaeda’s patronage to TTP fighters, and vice versa.
- Swift action should be taken to relocate registered Afghan refugees from illegal settlements in sensitive areas of Pakistan, and a threshold should be set to limit excess refugees from adding to Pakistan’s economic burden.

## Issue to be Analyzed

The evolution of Jihad in the post-soviet invasion era, and the recurring impact of the war on terror on Pakistan. This policy brief uses key facts and statistics to explain implications that are exclusive to Pakistan, such as a growth in Afghanistan-based militant groups, consolidated safe havens and a refugee surge for decades.

## Analysis

In the decades following the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, three constants in the war on terror stand consolidated with direct implications for Pakistan's security. These include a marked rise in inter-militant power struggles in Afghanistan, chiefly between the Afghan Taliban, its offshoots and the Khorasan affiliate of the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>1</sup> Divided loyalties of Soviet and U.S.-backed jihadists in the Afghan war gave way to a pattern of foreign and cross-border terrorist recruits.<sup>2</sup> This pattern established Afghanistan as a notorious base for anti-Pakistan militancy and has been used by the TTP to facilitate a surge in anti-state offensives, according to observations and statistics published by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.<sup>3</sup>

Second, a rapid influx of conflict-hit Afghans – constituting a major share of the 1.35 million registered refugees – has added significant strain on Pakistan's economy as it navigates modest growth for its own burgeoning population. The cumulative 1.35 million sum of refugees from the war on terror does not account for the hundreds and thousands of undocumented refugees that have arrived since. The adverse implications of such a refugee influx reflects in the growth of illegal settlements in Pakistan's sensitive urban areas, as well as the risk of being drafted by Afghanistan-linked militant groups as recruits in domestic terror attacks.

Third, the decades-long restructuring and regrouping of mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan was largely ignored by the Soviet Union and the United States as an adverse spillover threat to Pakistan. The resulting vacuum after Washington's 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was used by U.S.-focused groups such as Al-Qaeda to redouble their patronage to anti-Pakistan jihadists based in Afghanistan, including breakaways from the Afghan Taliban that would form the core of the TTP umbrella in 2007. Based on Washington's transactional view of Islamabad's outsized support for the war on terror, Pakistan had to take it upon itself to stamp-out militants through successive operations as witnessed in 2009. Thousands of new troop deployments along a porous border signaled heightened vigilance to cross-border spillovers. The withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan in late 2021 has run counter to Pakistan's expectations of regional security, given a 1,800-strong surge in ISIS recruits and an eight-year high surge in domestic terror attacks

<sup>1</sup> "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals," *Security Council Report*, United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. July 2022. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S%202022%20547.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hartman, "The red template: US policy in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 23, No 3, pp 467-489. (2002).

<sup>3</sup> See February report "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals," *Security Council Report*, United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. February 2022. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement>.

## New, restructured militant groups and the TTP challenge

Scores of armed jihadists that were once empowered under Soviet watch were engaged by the United States to support its post-2001 strategy of militarily defeating the Taliban. However, it led to the underground consolidation of a restructured Taliban, while Pakistan's participation in the war on terror contributed to the formation of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007. Al-Qaeda's own refuge under the Afghan Taliban's patronage affected Pakistan's strategy of leading an all-out elimination of militant groups that target the state's sovereignty.

However, a culture of proliferating terrorist safe havens under the hood of Washington's 20-year invasion of Afghanistan opened the gates to a change in militant power dynamics in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> India has provided substantial financial support to the TTP in a bid to aid attacks against Pakistan. Through a video confession in April 2017, the group's former spokesperson and senior commander Ehsanullah Ehsan confirmed New Delhi's significant intelligence and financial assistance to the banned group.<sup>5</sup> These revelations were corroborated further by a dossier made public by Pakistan in 2020, and shared with the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). It contained vast evidence of India's financial and material sponsorship of UN-designated terrorist groups, including the TTP, through arms supplies, militant training and bank transactions.<sup>6</sup>

Towards the latter leg of the U.S. occupation, Washington wanted Pakistan to play an outsized military-centric role to help rein in anti-U.S. actors in Afghanistan. Islamabad's calculated gains and its firm belief in a diplomatic solution held true to this day, given how the war in Afghanistan killed nearly 70,000 in Pakistan and cost over \$120 billion in economic losses.<sup>7</sup> As government statements, high-level visits and official communications reveal, Islamabad willingly refused to get drafted into the U.S.-led coalition's push for a military-led imperative in Afghanistan.

Instead, it demanded requisite attention to brutal fighter recruits and unaddressed terrorist safe havens operating under Taliban patronage that contribute to a rise in anti-state attacks in recent months. A practical mix of targeted diplomacy with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, and a firm understanding of the TTP's modus operandi, uniquely position Pakistan to cater to its sovereign interests and security concerns. Given a surge in terrorism-induced casualties over the past year, grass-root resistance to militancy spillovers, and an economy that refuses to be strained further through the war on terror, Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan puts the highest priority on national interests.

<sup>4</sup> "Pakistan hints at strikes in Afghanistan amid twin Taliban threats," Nikkei Asia, January 6, 2023.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/Pakistan-hints-at-strikes-in-Afghanistan-amid-twin-Taliban-threats>

<sup>5</sup> "India, Afghanistan gave help to Pakistani Taliban, says group's ex-spokesman," Reuters, April 26, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-militants-idUSKBN17S1VN>

<sup>6</sup> "Specific proof of Indian terrorism in Pakistan unveiled," DAWN, November 15, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1590441>

<sup>7</sup> "Afghanistan-Pakistan ties and Future Stability in Afghanistan," Peaceworks USIP Report, August 2021.

[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/pw\\_175-afghanistan\\_pakistan\\_ties\\_and\\_future\\_stability\\_in\\_afghanistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/pw_175-afghanistan_pakistan_ties_and_future_stability_in_afghanistan.pdf).

## Economic impact of Afghan refugees

As a result of the war on terror, Pakistan played a meaningful role for legions of fleeing Afghan refugees, and has successfully registered some 1.35 million within its territory.<sup>8</sup> However, continued military operations by U.S. and its NATO allies post-2002 led to an acceleration in that refugee influx, with many cross-border terrorist interlocutors tapping undocumented refugees to drive anti-state recruitment.

The United States' lead role in failing to effect promised institutional reform in Afghanistan was a key factor behind dwindling access to services and livelihood for disenchanted Afghans at home, prompting their pivot to Pakistan. Findings from the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) confirm that \$187 billion was spent by the U.S. to rebuild Afghanistan, but none of it could keep Afghanistan from emerging as "poor, aid-dependent, and conflict-affected" in wake of a hasty U.S. troop withdrawal.<sup>9</sup>

One of the other indirect risks behind this refugee surge was the heightened threat of cross-border militancy through a growth in Afghan-based terrorist groups. For instance, the TTP's Mohmand chapter, alongside several reconsolidated factions, is partly the result of TTP seeking more local penetration under the patronage of the Afghan Taliban. The banned outfit's growth into several brutal subdivisions targeting Pakistan's civilian and military personnel has put a premium on safe havens across a range of territorial expanse in Afghanistan. It is here that Islamabad, despite welcoming about 250,000 Afghan migrants amid the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, faces a daunting task integrating and vetting illegal refugees.<sup>10</sup>

## Recommendations

- Pakistan should engage more assertively with Afghan regime to impress upon them the importance of taking concrete steps to prevent cross border attacks against Pakistan.
- Failure to crackdown against safe havens by TTA should be followed by a dialing-down of "commercial and economic relations." The Afghan Taliban consider these interests as chief priorities, and is ill-prepared to lose more ground.
- Islamabad should keep a close watch on Indian interactions with the TTP, and its support through financial inducements.

<sup>8</sup> "Registered Afghan Refugees in Pakistan – Operational Data Portal," *UNHCR Pakistan*, December 31, 2022.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>

<sup>9</sup> "Quarterly Report", US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), July 30, 2021.

<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-07-30qr.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> "Media Update: United Nations Pakistan," UN Pakistan, 20 June 2022. <https://pakistan.un.org/en/187422-media-update-united-nations-pakistan-20-june-2022>

- Islamabad should continue to maintain close links with Washington to widen the pool of targeted intelligence against common security threats. This includes Al-Qaeda's patronage to TTP fighters, and vice versa.
- Swift action should be taken to relocate registered Afghan refugees from illegal settlements in sensitive areas of Pakistan, and a threshold should be set to limit excess refugees from adding to Pakistan's economic burden.

### **Conclusion**

Post-Soviet invasion Jihad has proliferated militancy and security threats out of Afghanistan, and made it critical for Pakistan to stem spillovers by dealing with the Afghan Taliban regime head-on. The economic costs of excess Afghan refugees, coupled with the rise and fall of Al-Qaeda and resurgent TTP fighters, illustrate the need for hard diplomacy and intelligence-based targeting of anti-Pakistan assets in the long-term.