



Policy Brief

Addressing the Nexus Between Human Trafficking and Terrorism

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Executive Summary

Human trafficking and terrorist financing form a cyclical, self-reinforcing nexus in Pakistan, where criminal syndicates and militant networks exploit vulnerable populations not only for profit but also to sustain extremist operations. According to the UNODC, criminal networks in Pakistan generated approximately USD 927 million from human trafficking and migrant smuggling in 2013, up from USD 797 million in 2007, highlighting the sustained and growing scale of these illicit economies. Such extensive criminal earnings provide a deep financial reservoir that can be diverted to terrorist groups, especially in areas with poor governance and porous borders. Furthermore, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reports highest trafficking interceptions at Gwadar, Quetta, and Turbat which are key transit hubs enabling movement of both people and extremist operatives.¹

The human cost of this nexus is substantial. Trafficked individuals, many of them women and minors, may find themselves forced into bonded labor, sex work, or coercive marriages, with little recourse for justice.² In conflict-affected zones, particularly along the Afghan border and in parts of interior Sindh and southern Punjab, traffickers and recruiters often target the same communities, exploiting desperation and misinformation. Some children trafficked for forced labor have reportedly ended up in militant training camps, while others are used in support roles such as couriers or surveillance agents. These practices reveal how trafficking is not just an economic crime, but also a means of sustaining extremist infrastructures.

Policy Recommendations

- Train police, prosecutors, and judges to detect and prosecute cases at the trafficking-terrorism nexus, with modules developed in partnership with UNODC or IOM.
- Encourage joint task forces at the provincial and district levels where human trafficking and terrorism risks are most concentrated.
- Establish a centralized national database to track cases of trafficking, suspected terrorist financing, and their intersections, accessible to vetted law enforcement and judicial actors.
- Fund academic and civil society research into the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of trafficking-terrorism linkages to inform targeted interventions.

¹ Amin Ahmed, 'Business of Human Trafficking on the Rise: Report' *Dawn* (Islamabad, 20 February 2015) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1164732> accessed 10 June 2025.

² UNODC, *The Role of Organized Crime in the Smuggling of Migrants from West Asia to Europe* (2014) <https://www.unodc.org> accessed 10 June 2025.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND TERRORIST NETWORKS

Region-specific vulnerabilities compound the threat of human trafficking. Provinces like Sindh and Punjab are estimated to have over one million bonded labourers in high-risk sectors such as brick kilns, agriculture, mines, and carpet weaving, many enduring debt bondage that parallels forced recruitment strategies utilized by militant factions.³

Children are frequently trafficked into begging rings, domestic servitude, low-skilled labour, and, alarmingly, recruitment into militant or suicide operations by non-state actors. Reports confirm that terrorist groups consciously target children for abduction or manipulation, often using promises of education or livelihood, to coerce them into combat roles, suicide bombing, or espionage, and instances of both sexual and physical abuse have been documented

Militant groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) routinely benefit from this trafficking-to-funding pipeline. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the TTP was responsible for 52% of terrorism-related deaths in Pakistan in 2024, carrying out 482 attacks and resulting in 558 fatalities—a 91% increase from the previous year—underscoring the group's growing operational capacity, which depends partly on illicit revenue streams including trafficking income.⁴

Similarly, the BLA is known to leverage smuggling networks, including trafficking of persons and goods, to finance its activities and conduct operations across Balochistan. Additionally, human trafficking enables logistical mobility that serves broader terror objectives. Permanently established routes, such as pathways through Balochistan into Iran, Afghanistan, and onward to the Gulf, Europe, and beyond, are used not only for migrant smuggling but also for trafficking of weapons, narcotics, and extremist operatives. According to the UNODC, these smuggling corridors contribute substantially to both trafficking and terror: in 2013 alone, trafficking networks in Pakistan facilitated illicit flows that directly or indirectly bolster terrorist groups.⁵ Breaking these networks demands a dual-pronged counterterrorism and anti-trafficking approach: coordinating law enforcement and border management alongside victim protection and financial disruptions.

³ Human Trafficking in Pakistan, *Wikipedia* (last visited 10 June 2025) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_trafficking_in_Pakistan accessed 10 June 2025.

⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2024 (Vision of Humanity, March 2024).

⁵ Amin Ahmed, 'Business of Human Trafficking on the Rise: Report' *Dawn* (Islamabad, 20 February 2015) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1164732> accessed 10 June 2025.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan maintains parallel legislative tracks for countering terrorism and human trafficking, but the intersection between the two is inadequately addressed in law. The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997 forms the legal backbone of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, targeting offenses like terrorist financing, recruitment, and acts of violence.⁶ Separately, the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (PTPA) 2018 criminalizes trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labour, and organ removal, aligning with the UN Trafficking Protocol.⁷ However, while the ATA includes provisions on kidnapping and abduction, it does not explicitly address the use of trafficked persons in terrorist operations. This legislative gap fails to account for the growing trend where terrorist organizations fund their activities through trafficking, or use trafficked individuals for forced recruitment, logistics, and operational support. An integrated legal framework is urgently needed to recognize and criminalize this convergence.

The enforcement landscape is similarly fragmented. The FIA is responsible for cross-border human trafficking, while provincial police handle internal trafficking cases, and the military and intelligence agencies lead most counterterrorism operations.⁸ These institutions rarely collaborate, despite operating in the same physical and criminal spaces.⁹ For example, trafficking routes used to smuggle bonded labourers or brides across provincial or national borders often overlap with corridors exploited by terrorist groups for arms movement, personnel transport, and funding. Yet, there are no formal joint investigation protocols between anti-trafficking and counterterrorism units. Even the FIA's commendable initiatives, like the creation of its Anti-Human Trafficking and Smuggling Units, training programs, and victim identification SOPs, rarely intersect with counterterrorism strategies, despite clear evidence that human trafficking syndicates and terrorist cells use shared infrastructure and facilitators. Without institutional integration, both threats are treated as separate when they are, in fact, interdependent.

⁶ Anti-Terrorism Act 1997.

⁷ Governor for creating awareness to eradicate trafficking in persons, *Dawn* (Islamabad, 26 October 2024) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1867647> accessed 10 June 2025.

⁸ US Department of State, '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Pakistan' (ECOI.net, June 2023) enID 2093606 <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2093606.html> accessed 10 June 2025.

⁹ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 'Modern Slavery – Trafficking in Women and Girls in Pakistan' (ECOI.net, February 2022) enID 2069899 <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2069899.html> accessed 10 June 2025.

Low conviction rates for both trafficking and terrorism-related cases reflect a systemic failure to treat these issues as interconnected. In 2023, Pakistan investigated over 18,000 human trafficking cases, but secured just 10 convictions under the PTPA.¹⁰ Meanwhile, terrorism-related convictions remain largely limited to high-profile attacks, with few cases examining the role of trafficking in recruitment, financing, or coercion. No significant prosecutions have linked traffickers with known terrorist networks, even in regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where such overlaps are well documented.¹¹ This prosecutorial blind spot allows traffickers to continue operations that inadvertently or deliberately empower extremist groups. Moreover, the lack of witness protection and victim support infrastructure further weakens prosecution in both domains, especially when victims fear retribution from well-connected criminal or militant actors. Bridging this gap would require joint case tracking systems, financial surveillance linking trafficking profits to terror financing, and specialized prosecutors trained in both domains.

While courts have made progress in clarifying distinctions between smuggling and trafficking, they have not yet addressed the compounded harm when trafficking is used to support terrorism. For instance, landmark decisions like *Hamza Khalid v. State* focused narrowly on procedural legality, while cases like *Muhammad Shahzad v. State* emphasized definitional clarity between illegal migration and human trafficking.¹² However, the judiciary has yet to produce a precedent-setting case that interrogates the use of trafficked individuals by terrorist groups for suicide attacks, logistics, or forced marriages. Additionally, current laws do not mandate that courts consider the trafficking context when dealing with terror suspects. This legal separation of crimes that often occur in tandem creates procedural inefficiencies and weakens the state's ability to dismantle the broader criminal-terrorist ecosystem.

Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs), established to provide expedited trials for terror cases, do not currently have the mandate or expertise to prosecute cases involving human trafficking, even when the two are clearly linked.¹³ This results in a scenario where a trafficker funding or aiding a terrorist group might be tried under general criminal law or the PTPA rather than the ATA, even if the act has national security implications. Similarly, there are no provisions in

¹⁰ Humanity at Risk – The Scale and Brutality of Human Trafficking, *Dawn* (Islamabad, 7 December 2024) <https://www.dawn.com/news/1877259> accessed 10 June 2025.

¹¹ Mohsin Saleem Ullah, 'Heinous Crime of Human Trafficking' *Express Tribune* (Lahore, 12 December 2024) <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2515366/heinous-crime-of-human-trafficking> accessed 10 June 2025.

¹² *Hamza Khalid v. State* (2024); *Muhammad Shahzad v. State*.

¹³ Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018 (Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of Pakistan).

the ATA that require prosecutors to investigate whether terrorist suspects are involved in trafficking or benefitting from trafficked labour or sexual exploitation. The result is a fragmented judicial response that overlooks critical evidence of interconnected criminal operations. To close this gap, Pakistan must consider legislative amendments enabling ATCs to hear trafficking-related cases tied to terrorism, introduce financial investigation units trained in both domains, and mandate inter-agency coordination on all cases where trafficking may support violent extremism.

CHALLENGES IN DETECTION, PROSECUTION, AND VICTIM PROTECTION

Despite advancements in legislative frameworks, Pakistan continues to face critical challenges in the detection, prosecution, and protection aspects of both human trafficking and terrorism, particularly where these two domains intersect. One of the central barriers is the limited institutional capacity to detect and classify cases involving both criminal phenomena. Law enforcement agencies, especially at the provincial level, often misidentify trafficking victims as illegal migrants or voluntary participants in smuggling networks, thereby failing to investigate the broader networks that may have terrorist affiliations. The situation is further complicated in border regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where porous borders and tribal conflict create ideal conditions for trafficking and militant operations to coexist.

Prosecution is hampered by a weak evidentiary and procedural ecosystem. Victims of trafficking, particularly those coerced into serving terrorist functions, as informants, carriers, or even suicide bombers, are rarely given legal standing or protected witness status. This impedes their willingness to testify or cooperate with authorities. The use of ATC's further complicates matters, as these courts often focus on high-profile terrorism cases involving explosives or attacks on state institutions, ignoring the exploitative recruitment chains that may have enabled those acts. In 2023, for example, Pakistan reported very few convictions under the PTPA, despite thousands of trafficking investigations; a stark indication of both systemic inefficiency and reluctance to pursue complex, multi-dimensional cases that would require coordination across jurisdictions and departments.¹⁴

Another persistent challenge lies in victim identification and protection. While the FIA has developed standard operating procedures for identifying trafficking victims, these are not

¹⁴ US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2023: Pakistan* (2023) <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/pakistan/> accessed 10 June 2025.

uniformly applied across provinces, and frontline officers are often not trained in their use. Victims caught in the nexus of trafficking and terrorism are particularly vulnerable, yet often treated as suspects rather than victims. The absence of safe houses, trauma-informed legal aid, and long-term rehabilitation programs further reduces the likelihood that victims will come forward or cooperate with prosecutors. This not only denies justice to the individual but obstructs the state's capacity to dismantle trafficking-terror networks.

Furthermore, official complicity remains a significant obstacle. Reports by international watchdogs have consistently highlighted the role of corrupt border officials, police officers, and local administrators in facilitating trafficking operations.¹⁵ These networks are rarely investigated or prosecuted, creating an environment of impunity. In such cases, even when terrorism-related charges are successfully brought, the trafficking component is ignored, allowing key enablers to remain at large and continue operating. The failure to treat these facilitators as part of a broader threat undermines both counterterrorism and anti-trafficking objectives.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

Human trafficking and terrorism are increasingly transnational in nature, requiring cross-border strategies and multilateral cooperation. Pakistan's strategic location at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East places it at the center of key migration and security corridors. These routes, while vital for trade and mobility, have also been exploited by traffickers and militant groups for illicit purposes. Recognizing this complexity, Pakistan has taken important steps to improve its border management systems and enhance cooperation with neighboring countries. However, the evolving nexus between trafficking and terrorism demands even more comprehensive regional coordination and intelligence-sharing frameworks.

Pakistan shares extensive borders with Afghanistan and Iran which are areas that have experienced protracted conflict, displacement, and informal cross-border economies. These factors have created vulnerabilities that traffickers and armed non-state actors can exploit. For instance, undocumented migration from Afghanistan into Pakistan, particularly among vulnerable women and children, has raised concerns about increased risks of trafficking and

¹⁵ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022*, ch 5 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022) https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_Chapter.pdf accessed 10 June 2025.

exploitation. While many such individuals are victims fleeing instability, criminal networks operating along the same corridors may coerce or recruit them into activities that inadvertently support extremist groups.¹⁶ Pakistani authorities have responded by enhancing screening and registration measures for migrants and refugees, particularly at the Torkham and Chaman border crossings.

Pakistan has also actively participated in regional and international initiatives to address trafficking and counterterrorism. It is a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the Palermo Protocols, and maintains bilateral agreements with countries including Iran, China, and the UAE. While implementation remains a challenge due to limited resources and technical capacity, these efforts reflect Pakistan's commitment to aligning with global standards. Notably, the FIA and National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) have been engaging with international partners like Interpol, UNODC, and IOM to improve data collection and coordination on cross-border criminal activity.

International evaluations have acknowledged Pakistan's progress in strengthening financial regulations, especially regarding anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing mechanisms. Following recommendations by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Pakistan has made substantive reforms in monitoring financial transactions and curbing informal money transfer systems, such as hawala and hundi, which have historically been misused by both traffickers and terror networks.¹⁷ These reforms present an opportunity to link trafficking-related financial flows more systematically with terrorism-related investigations, particularly in areas where criminal proceeds may be diverted to support armed groups.

Pakistan has the potential to play a leading role in fostering regional cooperation on these dual challenges. Through platforms like SAARC, SCO, and trilateral border mechanisms with Afghanistan and Iran, Pakistan can advocate for integrated strategies that treat trafficking and terrorism as interconnected threats. Enhancing joint investigations, harmonizing legal definitions of trafficking, and building shared early warning systems will be critical. As a

¹⁶ IOM & UNHCR, 'Joint Statement: UNHCR and IOM concerned about recent developments requiring Afghans to leave Pakistan's capital' (IOM Islamabad, 27 May 2025) <https://pakistan.iom.int/news/joint-statement-unhcr-and-iom-concerned-about-recent-developments-requiring-afghans-leave-pakistans-capital> accessed 10 June 2025.

¹⁷ Financial Action Task Force, "Pakistan" (FATF) <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/countries/detail/Pakistan.html> accessed 10 June 2025.

country that has consistently prioritized national security and human dignity, Pakistan's continued leadership in this space can contribute to a more stable and humane regional security architecture.

SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS AND COMMUNITY VULNERABILITIES

The convergence of human trafficking and terrorism in Pakistan is deeply rooted in a complex web of socioeconomic drivers and structural vulnerabilities. Poverty, lack of education, limited economic opportunities, and social marginalization continue to make certain populations more susceptible to both exploitation and radicalization. These vulnerabilities are not unique to Pakistan but are common across regions grappling with development challenges and conflict spillovers. However, what distinguishes the Pakistani context is how these structural factors are sometimes exploited by both trafficking networks and militant groups in ways that reinforce each other's operations.

In many rural areas of Pakistan, underemployment and weak social infrastructure create environments where trafficking can thrive. Traffickers often lure families with false promises of jobs, education, or marriage. Militant groups sometimes exploit the same conditions to recruit vulnerable youth, offering them financial incentives, ideological identity, or a sense of belonging.¹⁸ In some instances, victims of trafficking have later been absorbed into terrorist networks, used for logistical support, surveillance roles, or even forced participation in attacks. These overlapping patterns illustrate how both crimes feed off the same pool of economic and social fragility.

Communities affected by conflict or displacement—such as those along the Afghan border or in areas formerly controlled by militants—face particularly acute risks. The displacement of families due to security operations or natural disasters often results in the breakdown of traditional protective structures. In such contexts, unaccompanied minors and women are especially vulnerable to being trafficked, either domestically or across borders. Militant groups have, at times, taken advantage of this displacement by co-opting local intermediaries to traffic individuals for forced marriages, indoctrination, or labor that supports their operations. In this way, trafficking becomes not only a means of funding terrorism but also a tool of recruitment and control.

¹⁸ Mariam Al Malak, Allison Carmack, Lilian Castaneda et al., 'Human Trafficking in the Digital Age: A 21st-Century Health Challenge' (2018) 6 Public Health Reviews <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6020923/> accessed 10 June 2025.

Cultural factors and social norms can also contribute to vulnerabilities. In some conservative communities, the stigma associated with trafficking or sexual violence may prevent victims from coming forward or seeking protection. Moreover, where girls are removed from school due to early marriage or economic pressures, their limited mobility and visibility make them more susceptible to both forced labor and exploitation by groups that may present themselves as providing protection or religious guidance. In these cases, the boundary between social vulnerability and ideological manipulation becomes increasingly blurred.

Importantly, the Government of Pakistan has taken a range of measures to address these issues. Initiatives such as the Ehsaas Programme, skills training under the Kamyab Jawan Programme, and the Benazir Income Support Programme aim to alleviate poverty and build community resilience; key components in preventing both trafficking and radicalization. Additionally, provincial governments have introduced gender empowerment programs and vocational education schemes to provide at-risk populations with alternatives to irregular migration or extremist recruitment. These efforts underscore the state's recognition that addressing root causes is as important as law enforcement in tackling complex crimes like trafficking and terrorism.

Ultimately, strengthening community-based resilience remains vital. Investing in education, particularly for girls; expanding youth engagement programs; and enhancing local awareness of trafficking and terrorism risks can build stronger resistance to both forms of exploitation. Civil society organizations, religious leaders, and community elders all have a critical role to play in early warning, victim reintegration, and countering the narratives used by traffickers and militant recruiters. With a collaborative and preventive approach, Pakistan can continue to mitigate the socioeconomic conditions that allow trafficking and terrorism to intersect and persist.

Policy Recommendations

- Train police, prosecutors, and judges to detect and prosecute cases at the trafficking-terrorism nexus, with modules developed in partnership with UNODC or IOM.
- Encourage joint task forces at the provincial and district levels where human trafficking and terrorism risks are most concentrated.

- Establish a centralized national database to track cases of trafficking, suspected terrorist financing, and their intersections, accessible to vetted law enforcement and judicial actors.
- Fund academic and civil society research for the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of trafficking-terrorism linkages to facilitate informed interventions.

Action Matrix				
Options for Pakistan				
Option	Pathways to Solution	Implementation of Solution	Actors Responsible	Implementation Timelines
Strengthen enforcement of the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (PTPA)	Amend the PTPA to include clear counter-terrorism linkages; improve victim protection clauses	Legislative amendment; increased prosecutions through FIA and judiciary training	Ministry of Law and Justice, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), National Assembly	Year 1: Draft legal amendments and conduct stakeholder consultations; Year 2: Pass amendments and initiate nationwide judicial and law enforcement training; Year 3: Monitor enforcement trends and begin impact assessment
Enhance inter-agency coordination between anti-trafficking and counter-terrorism units	Develop formal coordination frameworks and information-sharing protocols	Establish joint task forces at federal and provincial levels	Ministry of Interior, NACTA, FIA, Provincial Police Units	Months 1–6: Inter-ministerial dialogue and design of coordination framework; Months 7–18: Establish task forces and train personnel
Expand regional and international cooperation on trafficking-terrorism linkages	Engage in intelligence sharing with neighboring states and regional bodies; harmonize legal approaches	Bilateral agreements; participation in SAARC, UNODC initiatives	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, FIA, NACTA, Interpol Liaison Officers	Year 1: Initiate diplomatic outreach and legal reviews; Years 2–3: Sign MOUs/agreements, begin joint capacity-building programs; Year 4: Evaluate cross-border

				cooperation and adapt strategies
Address socioeconomic vulnerabilities through targeted community resilience programs	Launch livelihood and awareness programs in high-risk border and tribal areas	Implement community-based interventions in Gwadar, Turbat, Quetta	Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, Ministry of Education, NGOs	Year 1: Identify target communities, conduct needs assessments; Years 2–3: Implement education, employment and awareness campaigns; Years 4–5: Institutionalize programs and evaluate long-term impact