


## Effectiveness of Counterterrorism Policies of Pakistan: A Critical Appraisal of the National Action Plan

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### Abstract

The National Action Plan (NAP) was issued after the Army Public School attack in 2014. However, after over nine years of the plan, it is still unclear how effective it is in eradicating terrorism and extremism. This study is an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the NAP. This study utilized Eric Van Um and Daniela PISOIU's Model of Effectiveness as an analytical tool to assess the effectiveness of the NAP. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and activists, it is argued that the NAP has only partially achieved its goals, while the hard measures of the plan have failed to give enough attention to the soft measures to succeed in the desired goals.

**Key words:** Counterterrorism, National Action Plan, Effectiveness, Eric Van Um & Daniela PISOIU's Model of Effectiveness.

### Introduction

Though Pakistan has been actively involved in fighting terrorism since 2001, it lacked a published counterterrorism (CT) policy until 2014, which is one of the potential reasons for some scholars<sup>1</sup> questioning

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Islamabad's position on the CT efforts. In 2014, Pakistan issued the 'National Internal Security Policy', which gives guidelines on countering terrorism and extremism among other issues in the country. However, soon after the Army Public School (APS) attack in Peshawar in December 2014, Pakistan issued a 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) which lists different measures to be adopted to fight terrorism and extremism effectively.<sup>2</sup>

The government started working on the implementation of the plan immediately afterwards. It was particularly more aggressive and focused on the implementation of hard measures such as military operations, the establishment of military courts etc. Media, think tanks and NGO reports have assessed the success of the plan by using different indicators. Some academic scholars have also worked on the evaluation of the CT policies of Pakistan (this is discussed under the section literature review). However, a critical academic study that assesses the effectiveness of NAP, is required both for academic and policy reasons. It is in this context that the present study critically evaluates and assesses the effectiveness of the NAP as a component of Pakistan's CT policies. This study critically investigates the NAP with a particular focus on the broader question: To what extent has the NAP addressed and countered terrorism and extremism? The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan. This study utilized the analytical model developed by Eric Van Um and Daniela PISOIU to assess the effectiveness of the NAP.

It is argued that Pakistan's National Action Plan has partially achieved its goals however, one should be cautious in saying that the plan is completely effective and has accomplished its objectives. The military aspect or the hard measures of the plan were executed immediately after the plan was formulated while on the other hand, soft measures of the plan still need a lot of effort to be implemented and to achieve the desired goals. As a result, the military operations in the country have achieved and established the government's writ and decreased terrorist incidents to some extent in different parts of the country, particularly in the Tribal districts, but extremism or extremist ideology still occupies some space in the heads of the people.

After the research design and literature review, this paper explains 1) Eric Van Um & Daniela PISOIU's Model of Effectiveness. 2) It then outlines *Output effectiveness*, which explores the question,

what has been done by the policymakers to address the issue of terrorism, extremism, and insecurity? 3) *Outcome effectiveness* – to what extent the NAP has been implemented? 4) The last section discusses *Impact effectiveness*, by exploring the impacts of the plan, which is followed by a brief conclusion.

### **1. Research Design and Methods**

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature. During this research work both primary and secondary sources were consulted to explore the research objectives. This study proceeds by asking a legitimate research question: *To what extent has the NAP addressed and countered terrorism and extremism?* This question is linked to the three sub-questions i.e., 1) *what has been done by the policymakers to address the issue of terrorism, extremism, and insecurity?* 2) *To what extent the NAP has been implemented?* And 3) *What are the impacts of the NAP?* These sub-questions fit very well with my chosen model discussed above which will guide further analysis in this paper. To investigate these questions, interviews were used as a primary source, which was accompanied by different secondary sources.

As interviews are one of the major and convenient tools of data collection in qualitative research,<sup>3</sup> all primary data was collected through interviews. These interviews were semi-structured in nature. The interview questions were shuffled according to the discussion during the interview. The questions were direct and designed to trigger discussion which provided more space for the interviewees to speak about their experiences, and knowledge, and share information. For secondary data, this paper consulted books, research papers, reports, PhD and master's dissertations, newspaper reports, think-tank reports, government documents, etc.

In total 30 interviews were conducted during the 1<sup>st</sup> March – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021 period. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting study participants and ranged from policymakers, government officials, scholars, practitioners, journalists, and human rights activists, as well as some university students (from Tribal districts). As securing access to research participants is a strategic process,<sup>4</sup> I used my personal and professional connections as a gatekeeper to reach out to as many participants as was practically possible under the circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The selected participants were initially contacted by email or telephone directly, or by using gatekeepers to introduce myself and my research work. Subsequently,

participants were sent a Plain Language Statement of the study and a Consent Form approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow. All interviews were conducted using online meeting tools (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.), and no face-to-face meetings were held as part of this research work. To protect the identity of the interviewees, pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

## **2. Literature Review**

The existing literature on the evaluation of the CT policies of Pakistan is very narrow. The available literature is focused on two main aspects, firstly, on the description and illustration of the CT policies and secondly the evaluation of CT policies by using the reduction in the number of terrorist incidents as a parameter. For instance, the study of Abbasi, Khatwani, and Hussain<sup>6</sup> focused on the illustration of military operations. However, it should also be noted that very limited official documents about these military operations have been released to the public so far. Since almost all the operations conducted until 2009 ended with peace agreements, the authors have concluded that these operations were successful. However, the fact that these peace accords were not long-lasting has been ignored. Additionally, the study focused on the general overview of the CT strategies, particularly military operations but did not discuss the implementation and effectiveness of other aspects of the policies.

Rehman *et al.*,<sup>7</sup> study is an excellent example of studies looking at the evaluation of CT policies in Pakistan. This study comprehensively evaluated Pakistan's Peace accords with militants before 2009, military operations, a combination of military operations, and the NAP formulation after the APS attack in December 2014. The authors have concluded that peace accords have no positive effect on terrorist incidents and that military operations fuelled the terrorist attacks while the combination of the military operations and NAP showed a reduction in the terrorist attacks. Similarly, for evaluation of the CT policies, the authors used the number of terrorist incidents and restoration of government writ in the conflicted areas as an indicator, however, it is believed that the terrorist and extremist ideology still exist in the heads of the people. The study conducted by Shahid Ahmad Afridi<sup>8</sup> discussed military operations and the civil-military relationship in countering terrorism. The author argued that the military had done its job by crashing militant organizations and

restoring peace and it is time that civilian governments and the military work together on violent extremism to maintain peace in the society. This study partially indicates that there is much more to be done as the military operations have been successful in restoring peace and crashing militant organizations, however, the civilian government has not done enough to counter extremism.

Likewise, a study conducted by Marvin G. Weinbaum<sup>9</sup> and Ayesha Siddiqi<sup>10</sup> points to the lack of clarity in Islamabad's strategy and claims that it is driven by military strategic objectives. Furthermore, a study by Shaun Gregory<sup>11</sup> argued that ISI supports the political elite and has "promoted an agenda of Sunni Islamism in Pakistan and of pan-Islamist *Jihad* abroad". Nevertheless, some of these studies seem outdated now as many developments have happened in the last decade and some studies found a change in the discourse of Pakistan's government towards terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

Though the above studies are valuable when it comes to the discussion of Pakistan's CT policies and approaches, they are not sufficient and lack the analytical depth to explain the effectiveness of these policies and strategies. For example, merely counting the number of incidences cannot be a good measure of assessing the policy. Likewise, the impacts particularly on society and culture are highly significant to be situated in the literature. For these compelling reasons, the present study is conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Pakistan CT policies.

### **3. Eric Van Um & Daniela PISOIU'S Model of Effectiveness**

To have a clear concept of the effectiveness of CT studies, this study adopted a model developed by Eric Van Um & Daniela PISOIU.<sup>13</sup> The concept is basically inspired by the theory of decision-making developed by Easton<sup>14</sup> with slight variation from Young<sup>15</sup> which differentiates between "output, outcome and impact of policy".<sup>16</sup> It can be divided into three main components i.e., *Output effectiveness*, *Outcome effectiveness*, and *Impact effectiveness*.

"*Output effectiveness refers to the implementation of regulations, policy instruments or compliance mechanisms*", and it completely depends on the attitude or behaviour of lawmakers/policymakers and the agencies who are responsible for their implementation. About the behaviour of the officials, "*the effectiveness of the adopted measures is assessed*". *Outcome effectiveness* focuses on the directly measurable effects that the laws/policies/regulations have on real life. So,

*Outcome effectiveness* not only depends on the behaviors of executors of these policies, but it “also depends on the behaviour of the targeted groups about the short-term objectives” of the laws/policies/regulations. *Impact effectiveness* solely depends on the attitudes of the targeted groups “in relation to the long-term objective of the CT policy”, for instance, “reducing or stopping terrorism”. The result of the measures taken will no longer be dependent on the policymakers or its executors but rather the response of the targeted audience of the policy.<sup>17</sup>

Consider the example of terrorist financing as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Let us assume that a bill has been passed into legislation that allows the freezing of assets of suspected terrorists. This legislation would be considered evidence of the *Output effectiveness* in this model as it is based on the behaviour of legislators and policymakers. The *Outcome effectiveness* is twofold in nature: firstly, the short-term goal of freezing terrorists’ assets, and secondly, the long-term goal of the bill is choking terrorists’ resources. This not only depends on the behaviour of the executors or policy implementation but also on the attitudes of the targeted group(s) towards finding alternatives for their activities. The *Impact effectiveness* would be the result of the bill being passed if it has reduced or ended terrorist activities<sup>18</sup>. This model is utilized to assess the effectiveness of the NAP. The following section gives a brief overview of the plan.

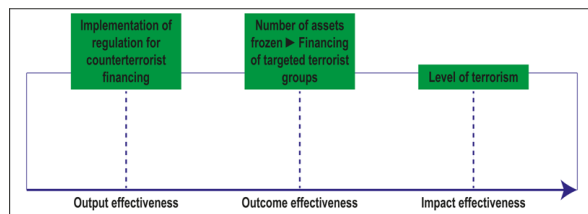


Figure 1. Concept of CT effectiveness: the example of freezing terrorist assets (Um and Pisoiu, 2015)

#### 4. Output Effectiveness – An Overview of the National Action Plan

It has now been over eight years since NAP, a reactionary 20-point agenda after the massacre of the APS attack was formulated. However, it is not clear how successful and effective the plan is. Also, it has not been clear and easy to argue whether this plan was successfully implemented or not, but the current security situation of the country indicates that some work has been done on the implementation of the plan. It is argued that the plan is partially effective, particularly the

hard measures which resulted in the establishment of government writ in different parts of the country. However, very limited work has been done so far on soft measures to counter terrorism and extremism which is demonstrated by the reappraisal of the TTP in Swat and the Tribal districts.<sup>19</sup> Below I give a brief overview of the twenty points of the NAP and critically evaluate the steps that have so far been taken to implement the plan.

Though the plan got public attention, but to some, it was a “*to-do list*”<sup>20</sup> rather than a solid plan. This ‘to-do list is like a reminder to the policymakers of what next needs to be done. For the sake of this article, I divided the twenty-point agenda into eight identical themes below.

1. Execution of those convicted terrorists and establishment of military courts
2. Ending militants’ outfits, their re-emergence, and disrupting their communication networks.
3. Countering extremists’ propaganda, their glorification, and streamlining religious schools.
4. Protection of religious minorities and dealing with religious terrorists.
5. Strengthening NACTA, choking terrorists’ financing & establishing anti-terrorism force.
6. Tribal districts & judicial reforms & registration of Afghan refugees.
7. Preventing abuse of the internet and social media websites.
8. Concluding Karachi’s operation, zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab, and empowering Baluchistan’s government for political reconciliation.

The NAP began with the execution of the convicted terrorist, however, it is pertinent to mention that since 2008, capital punishment had been abolished and no one was hanged until December 2014 in Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> But with the announcement of the NAP, the ban on capital punishment was lifted, and the death penalty resumed.<sup>22</sup> Though the establishment of a military court in 2015<sup>23</sup> was controversial, nonetheless it was one of the *Outputs* of the policymakers.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, policymakers immediately gave the green light to military operations and courts which somehow contributed to an anti-military narrative in the country.<sup>25</sup>

To end militant outfits, ban terrorist organizations/groups, and prevent their re-emergence, the existing institutions were mobilized and to some extent empowered (e.g., NACTA empowerment under NAP). As an effort, to dismantle the communication system, particularly through mobile phones, mostly unregistered or misregistered, the government asked citizens for the registration of mobile phone SIM cards. A mechanism was set up through which each citizen was allowed to register up to five SIM cards using their Computerized Nation Identity Card while any remaining unregistered SIM cards were blocked by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. Additionally, the government authorized law enforcement agencies to stop and search, conduct intelligence-based operations, and arrest suspects without any warrant from a court in different parts of the country.<sup>26</sup>

After the formulation of NAP, the policymakers launched *Paigham-e-Pakistan* (The Message of Pakistan) in 2018 – a unanimous document prepared with the help of religious scholars from all major sects, academic scholars, the Council of Islamic Ideology of Pakistan, and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan – which focuses on collective reflection of the country. This initiative includes multiple programs such as *Aman* [peace] programs of religious scholars, *Naujawan* [youth] of Pakistan, *Dukhtaran* [daughters] of Pakistan. This initiative aims to bring all religions to a common platform so that they can work together and counter extremism to achieve peace in society.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, NACTA, produced countering extremism policy guidelines in 2018 which give details about drivers of extremism, national policy guidelines on the “rule of law”, “media and citizens engagement”, “educational reforms”, and “promotion of culture”.<sup>28</sup> However, it has not been adopted to reduce the level of violence and intolerance in society, on the contrary, intolerance has been increasing every day.

Furthermore, in 2015 the government issued a code of conduct under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Act 2007, which replaced the code of conduct of 2009. This code gives fundamental principle which prohibits electronic media from airing content of hatred based on religion, race, colour, sect, gender, etc. It also gives guidelines on the coverage of incidents of violence, crime, religious tolerance and harmony, and the usage of decent language.<sup>29</sup> One of the private TV anchors persons commented on this: “*We are*



*strictly advised to give very limited screen time to the terrorists' and extremists' activities/narratives*".<sup>30</sup> The code of conduct aims to prevent the glorification and propagation of extremism and hate in the country.

Moreover, the regulation of *madrassas* and the protection of religious minorities were and still are one of the major challenges to Pakistan. The regulation of *madrassas* (religious schools) first started after the September 11 attacks following the promulgation of Pakistan *madrassas* education boards, with which the *madrassas* were supposed to register and be modernized.<sup>31</sup> However, to date, very few *madrassas* have been modernized.<sup>32</sup> After NAP, steps were taken towards regulation of *madrassas*, particularly their registration and monitoring of external funding and implementation of curriculum reform.<sup>33</sup> To tackle the issue of freedom of religion and the protection of religious minorities<sup>34</sup> in the country, the NAP aimed to take 'practical' steps. To this end, a few legal structures on provincial levels such as Sindh Hindu Marriage Act, 2016, Hindu Marriage Act, 2017 (for all provinces), Sindh Hindu Marriage Act, 2018 (amendment in the 2016 Act), and Punjab Sikh Anand Karaj Marriage Act, 2018 have been passed.

The NAP also called for strengthening NACTA, the coordination and research body for anti-terrorism. NACTA was created through an ordinance in 2009 and later in 2013, it was ratified through a parliamentary Act.<sup>35</sup> NACTA was given some attention after the NAP, for instance, the National Task Force on Countering the Financing of Terrorism was established while the rest of the agencies were also mobilized to counter and choke terrorists' financings. The National Task Force works along with 28 other stakeholders including provincial CT departments, Home Departments, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), the State Bank of Pakistan, and different ministries, etc.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, after the NAP specialized Counter Terrorism Forces (CTF) were established to strengthen the existing forces in all four provinces. The central objectives of NACTA are to synchronize and monitor the state's efforts against terrorism to formulate comprehensive counterterrorism strategies and put forward their suggestions to the government for implementation.<sup>37</sup>

Tribal districts' reforms, judicial reforms in the country, and the registration of Afghan refugees were big challenges to the

government. The NAP proclaimed reforms in these districts and the return of the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to their homes as soon as possible. The immediate focus was on the repatriation of IDPs to their homes. In 2015, a reform committee was established which presented its findings and gave several recommendations on the development, budget, and other administrative issues to the parliament. These recommendations were approved by the Prime Minister in 2017, however, it took over three years to merge FATA with the KP province after the 25<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment in 2018.<sup>38</sup> The merger of Tribal districts gave 23 more seats to the KP provincial assembly which will increase the role of these districts in provincial matters and will echo their voice at the federal level.<sup>39</sup> The federal government promised Rs. 110 billion for 2018 and a similar amount for the following year for development programs. While registering Afghan refugees, the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) was tasked to register them, and also refugees were asked for their voluntary return to Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Thus, a record number (1,554,910) of refugees were registered in the year 2015.

The NAP also called for the prevention of internet and social media abuse. The parliament passed “Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020” which make social media companies obliged “with respect to blocking and removal of unlawful online content”, “establishment of national coordinator” and “Provision of information by social media company” to the government.<sup>41</sup>

The NAP also called for a solid and meaningful conclusion to the then-ongoing Rangers<sup>42</sup> led operation in Karachi which started in September 2013. The plan also focused on militancy in Punjab and asked for zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab. Similarly, to deal with the feeling of deprivation of separatist Baluch in Baluchistan province, the plan included that the federal government would empower Baluchistan’s government for political reconciliation.

Though the plan is quite exhaustive, there are still several shortcomings of NAP. Firstly, the policy does not give any detailed guidelines for any of its twenty-point agenda. Military courts were established but there were no details for the procedures of the court rulings and because of this several concerns were raised by some policymakers, lawyers, and human rights activists and some of these concerns proved right in the following years as the military court were given an extension and their decision were suspended by high

court. Secondly, the policy is very general and includes several important issues such as legal and constitutional reforms, strengthening institutions, empowerment of governments, and dealing with terrorism and extremism. However, it does not include any specific guidelines for its implementation and monitoring. Thirdly, the policy was itself very generic and did not take into consideration any cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of the country. KP, the province most affected by terrorism, and the Tribal districts which were home to terrorists after the declaration of the so-called “WoT” in Afghanistan, are culturally very different from the rest of the country. The policy did not give any guidance on how to address these cultural sensitivities and as a result, a sense of deprivation, hatred, and anger can be found in the inhabitants of the region. These negative feelings and anger have elicited themselves in the form of the Pashtun *Tahafuz* [Protection] Movement (PTM). An academic expert in the field has suggested that “*there should be a specific policy for different regions, cultures, and ethnicity under the broad umbrella of national policy*”.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the policy does not provide any information on monitoring and implementation mechanisms which are important aspects of any policy for assessing its success. Nevertheless, there are certain *Outcomes of the effectiveness* of the policy which will be discussed in the following section.

## **5. Outcome Effectiveness – Implementation of NAP**

The *Outcome effectiveness* is the direct measurable effect of the policy on real life. It depends not only on the approach of the executive but also on the targeted audience about short-term objectives. As mentioned above, the policy itself is an example of the *Output effectiveness* which has been discussed. In the following section, *Outcome effectiveness – to what extent has the policy been implemented?* – has been discussed.

### **5.1. Execution of Convicted Terrorists & Establishment of Military Courts**

The military courts were established soon after the announcement of NAP. By the end of 2019, these courts had convicted 617 suspected terrorists, out of which 346 had been executed while 271 were given prison sentences of different durations. However, the majority of these cases were not related to terrorism but were criminal charges.<sup>44</sup> Some concerns were raised by practitioners, lawyers, and lawmakers

which proved right as the duration of the special courts was extended for two more years. Some of the decisions of these military courts were challenged in upper courts and the Peshawar High Court even suspended military courts' decisions by giving 426-page long and detailed judgments.<sup>45</sup> Obaid Aslam, a high court lawyer commented on military courts:

“Military courts were extremely controversial. No one knows what happened in these courts and what procedures were adopted for trials. The only source of information was ISPR<sup>46</sup> and very limited information was publicly available about the entire process within these courts. One could obviously say that these courts were a success as they executed hundreds of militants even though it violated human rights. But similar to the support of US citizens for the “War on Terror” after the 9/11 attacks, the APS attack in Peshawar helped bring the nation to the same page”.<sup>47</sup>

The establishment of the courts and the execution of the convicted terrorist part of the NAP was implemented successfully but one cannot claim that its implementation and execution were effective because of four important reasons. Firstly, the majority of the executed cases were not related to terrorism. Secondly, the decisions of military courts were challenged in other courts while later their decisions were overturned by higher civil courts as well. Thirdly, these courts violated human and constitutional rights by not allowing the accused a chance for a fair trials. And finally, it is also not clear that these executions have any impact on the level of terrorism.

## **5.2. Ending Militants' Outfits, their Re-Emergence & Disrupting their Communication Networks**

The measures adopted as part of the NAP, including Operation *Raddul Fasaad*, put pressure on banned terrorist organizations/groups and their members and facilitators by convicting and executing them. The number of banned organizations/groups until April 2021 was 79, among which 42 are religiously motivated.<sup>48</sup> The level of terrorist incidents fell from 1569 in 2014 to 950 in 2015 (as shown in Figure 2 below) and further in the following years after the NAP was announced. To dismantle the terrorists' communication, the government blocked around 98.3

million illegal mobile phone SIM cards and dozens of websites.<sup>49</sup> The government writ has been established in the area which was previously known as a “no-go area”<sup>50</sup> and claimed that operation *Raddul Fasaad* was a success and that it had “broken the backbone of TTP”,<sup>51</sup> however, this claim is constantly challenged by the PTM leaders and members.<sup>52</sup> The number of terrorist incidents decreased in the country, however, the locals fear that rogue elements are appearing again. These elements “threaten locals at the moment but they could get strength over time”<sup>53</sup> if it is not tackled on time.

The government has used a variety of tactics, for instance, stop and search, arrests, and conducting intelligence-based operations. This has resulted in the arrest of hundreds of thousands of individuals to eradicate members of banned organizations/groups.<sup>54</sup> Among other drivers, extremist ideology present in the country can act as fertile soil for rogue elements to nourish.

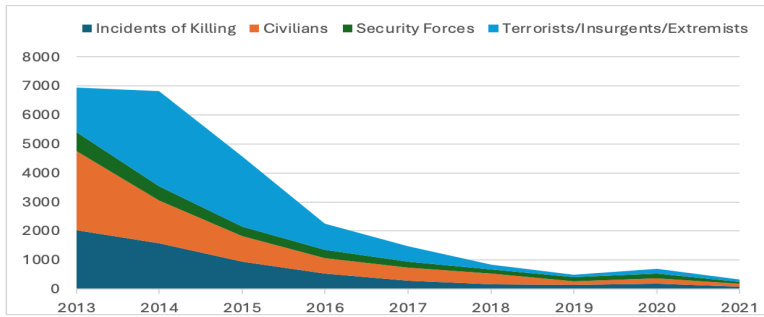


Figure 2 Terrorist Incidents and number of casualties from Jan 2013 - May 2021

### 5.3. Countering Extremist Propaganda, their Glorification, and Streamlining Religious Schools

The NAP has especially focused on both hard and soft approaches to counter extremism. The *Paigham-e-Pakistan* program was initiated which is more focused on Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan. The problem of extremism is certainly more entrenched in these provinces. However, the Tribal districts, on the other hand, are still deprived of the utility of such programs which is, in part, due to a very limited role of the civil government in the region. Due to the lack of data availability, the effectiveness of these programs is uncertain and a separate study is to evaluate the outcome of these programs. Similarly, a report issued by NACTA demonstrated that thousands of cases have been registered and several arrests have been made over

hate speech and hateful material.<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Interior took the initiative in March 2017 and blocked 937 URLs and 10 websites of banned terrorist organizations. Along with this, under the Sound System Ordinance 2015, in 2017, a total of 17,562 cases were registered for using loudspeakers for hate speech, 19,289 people were arrested and thousands of equipment were seized.<sup>56</sup> However, these reports are mostly outdated, and no recent data is available, on the other hand, politicians blame each other for not fully implementing the NAP.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, hate speech and extremist propaganda literature, are still circulating even in universities in the capital of the country.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies mostly respond in reaction to events rather than acting proactively.

Furthermore, regulating *madrassas* is a challenge. The *madrassa* consortium, *Ittehad Tanzeemat-e-Madaaris Pakistan*, expressed concerns about the NAP and argued that a link between militancy and religion is erroneous.<sup>59</sup> However, the government has so far managed to shut down 250 *madrassas* under NAP<sup>60</sup> and plans to bring 30,000 *madrassas* under government control.<sup>61</sup> Some policymakers believe that *madrassas* act as a “vote bank” for religious political parties,<sup>62</sup> in contrast, academics believe that connecting the two, extremism and *madrassas*, is not wise despite it being the most common argument in the media. “Connecting extremism and *madrassas* is very common in journalistic reports but in reality, this is not the case. It is just their [the media] perceptions, and their [the media] reports are not research-based”.<sup>63</sup> However, the *madrassa’s* role in the creation of the then *mujahideen* is not a hidden fact while more recently the violent protest of TLP is an example of *madrassas’* role in the extremism.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, unfortunately, there is no recent reliable data from independent or government sources that could give us more insights into the effectiveness of the policy and the issues around it. Similarly, there are no strong checks and balances on *madrassas*, consequently, extremist propaganda spreads in the country which puts religious minorities at high risk.

#### **5.4. Protection of Religious Minorities and Dealing with Religious Terrorists**

To protect religious minorities and deal with religious terrorism, several laws/acts, and bills have been passed by the policymakers on the provincial level. However, these measures only deal with civil matters of religious minorities and do not necessarily protect religious

minorities from religion-based terrorism. According to a media report, around 1,000 girls are forcibly converted to Islam each year (Gannon, 2020), the claim was rejected by the government by saying it is “rubbish and baseless”, and that there is no “empirical evidence” of the report (Sajid, 2020). However, there is no data available that highlights the matter in detail, nonetheless, religious minorities demand an anti-force conversion law. In a seminar held in Karachi, minorities lawmakers, and human rights activists raised questions on the pending status of a law on forced conversion.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the Hazara minority in the Baluchistan region is continuously targeted by terrorists. In 2021, the killing of Hazara (Shias) Baluchistan demonstrated the threat to religious minorities. After this terrorist incident, thousands of Hazara started protest,<sup>66</sup> while the then Prime Minister Imran Khan called them to refrain from “blackmailing the premier”.<sup>67</sup> In protecting religious minorities, the plan has failed which is demonstrated by the continuous targeting of minorities by terrorist organizations.

### **5.5. Strengthening NACTA, Choking Terrorists’ Financing & Establishing Anti-Terrorism Force**

The NAP also aimed to strengthen NACTA. According to the NACTA Annual Report 2019, the body is focused on multiple areas which include countering extremism and terrorism, countering terrorists’ financing, and working on building capabilities of the Counter Terrorism Department. For example, as of December 2022, NACTA convicted 41 individuals for terrorism financing (the total number of registered cases are 1708) and froze 5,551 bank accounts.<sup>68</sup> The institution now regularly publishes a research journal, and annual reports and contributes to the development of CT strategies. Before the NACTA, there was a huge gap between academia and policymakers. This gap has been reduced to some extent as NACTA arranges capacity-building trainings, seminars, and conferences to bring academia and policymakers to a platform. NACTA was given the mandate of data collection/information/intelligence and of dismantling the data in relevant stakeholders to deal with security issues. However, the institution is underfunded<sup>69</sup> and is faced with administrative issues. *“The [NACTA’s] board of governors is composed of high profile and busy officials which make it difficult to attend or participate in the quarterly meetings in a year”.*<sup>70</sup>

Since the endorsement of NAP, four provinces of Pakistan have taken several steps towards establishing a specialized CTF while some also maintained the existing anti-terrorism units.<sup>71</sup> The number of personnel, of the Punjab Elite Police (1997) and Counterterrorism Force (2014), was increased.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the Sindh province had its own “Special Security Unit” established in 2010. Interestingly, despite the presence of the “Special Security Unit”, which is supposedly highly trained against organized crime, Rangers have been conducting operations in Karachi for years, which is a question mark on the functionality of the “Special Security Unit”. The CTF of KP was established in 2013 with an initial strength of 2,400 police officers. They are not only highly trained in counter-terrorism operations but also their mandate allows them to “operate as intelligence-gathering agency”.<sup>73</sup> However, no data is available that demonstrates the effectiveness of these forces, as the threat of terrorism is like a hanging sword and the recent terrorist activities in a different part of the country demonstrate its seriousness. The Anti-Terrorist Force is a similar unit in Baluchistan that conducts operations against militants but unlike other provinces, no special training has been provided to this unit and its officers have either been trained in Islamabad’s or Lahore’s training schools.<sup>74</sup>

### **5.6. Tribal Districts & Judicial Reforms & Registration of Afghan Refugees**

After the establishment of government writ in late 2015 in Tribal districts, the IDPs were returned to their home. They were given compensation of up to a maximum of Rs. 450,000 (\$6000) for damage to their houses during the military operation. This amount of money was not sufficient to build a house in which at least 10-15 people live. Additionally, this compensation was not given to everyone and those who were given this support, it was with long delays. Khuram Ejaz, an activist from the region described it as:

“The government promised to conduct a survey in four weeks. Then the government was supposed to give compensation to locals for their damages, however, the survey was not conducted on time. People who returned to their villages were living in terrible conditions, surrounding themselves with fabrics for home *Pardah* [seclusion]. There were no basic facilities .... while some influential people were given compensation quickly as compared to the rest”.<sup>75</sup>



Similarly, the budget that was allocated for the development programs of the Tribal districts has not been spent on the development of the region – a matter very much questioned by the locals.<sup>76</sup> It was expected that the merger of the Tribal districts with the KP province would solve the problems of the region, however, the local community realized that nothing had changed and if anything, their problems increased further.<sup>77</sup> There is a need to do more against “poverty, hunger, terrorism and illiteracy”.<sup>78</sup> Similar concerns were expressed by several participants of this study. The merger process was supposed to be completed in five years with this period being considered as a transition period but the process is running behind schedule which is believed to be due to “weak state response to security challenges in KP province”.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, very limited work has been done so far on the development and rebuilding of the educational, healthcare, and other infrastructure in the area. During the military operation, around 600 schools were partially damaged or destroyed. However, as of 2020, only 79 new schools have been established,<sup>80</sup> and no further recent data is available on the matter.

Moreover, NAP also listed the reforming of the judicial system which has a bad reputation in public<sup>81</sup> and its extension to Tribal districts. However, nothing has been done so far for judicial reformation. According to Frederick Rawski, Asia Director of the International Commission of Jurists, “the lapse of the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians is a step in the right direction, but unsurprisingly – even four years [now eight years] after military courts were empowered to try civilians – there is no sign of the promised reforms to strengthen the ordinary criminal justice system to effectively and fairly handle terrorism-related cases”.<sup>82</sup> After the merger of Tribal districts with KP, the judicial system has been

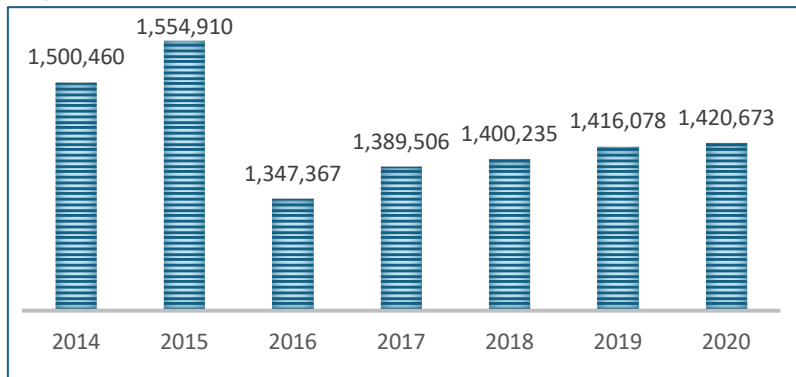


Figure 3 Number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan since Jan 2014-March 2020 Source UNHCR

extended to these districts, but to date, no infrastructure has been developed.<sup>83</sup> The Federal Levies, now KP police, in the region are not well trained and even serving police are unable to register First Information Report (FIR). On the other hand, there is a common narrative in the government that overnight change is not possible, and that it will take time to reform the existing system. Nevertheless, a counterargument is that it has now been over nine years since the NAP and there is almost no evidence of any initiatives for judicial reforms while the number of pending cases in the country is increasing every following year.

For decades Afghan refugees have been living in Pakistan, but the number of their registration is not crystal clear as some of them are registered while others are not. The NAP planned for the registration of the Afghan refugees and asked the NADRA to register the refugees, however, the process was slow and during that timeframe, the Pakistani state recommended, the refugees' voluntary return to Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup> The law enforcement agencies also started a crackdown on illegal and unregistered refugees in which thousands of refugees were arrested,<sup>85</sup> and in 2016, about 614,411 refugees returned to Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> However, there is no national refugee law in Pakistan which would be a more efficient way of dealing with refugees.<sup>87</sup> Figure 3 below shows the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan from 2014 to March 2020 period.

### **5.7. Prevention of Abuse of Internet and Social Media Websites**

To prevent abuse of the internet and social media, the National Response Centre for Cyber Crime wing is reacting to different events happening in the online sphere. The problem, however, is that they are acting to counter propaganda and other abusive material particularly hate speech or to take the perpetrators into custody, but no information is available on whether any of these perpetrators are trialled. The approach of FIA is reactionary rather than proactive and preventative. In the online sphere, hate speeches are circulated "without effective check from the authority".<sup>88</sup> In 2017, a study found that 41 out of the 64 banned organisations (the number has now reached 79) were actively present on Facebook and have different groups with hundreds and thousands of members and followers on the social media platform.<sup>89</sup> There is also no mechanism to prevent fake news, extremist propaganda and extremists' online activities.

### 5.8. Concluding Karachi's Operation, Zero Tolerance for Militancy in Punjab, and Empowering Baluchistan's Government for Political Reconciliation

Operation in Karachi was led by Rangers of Pakistan and was started in September 2013 against the four main violent groups i.e., the TTP, sectarian outfits, ethno-nationalist armed wings – that mostly work for different political parties – and criminal gangs working in different parts of the city. Following the announcement of NAP, the operations continued and mostly targeted Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, *Jundullah* and ISIS affiliates or inspired groups.<sup>90</sup> During the operation, several militants and group leaders were killed. It is believed that the operation has achieved its objectives as the security situation in the city has improved and the number of target killings saw a steep decline from 965 in 2013 to 13 in 2018.<sup>91</sup> According to statistics issued by Rangers on five years' performance, 2013-2018, a total of 14,327 raids were carried out in which close to eleven thousand (10,716) suspects were arrested and handed over to police for further action. In addition, thousands of light and heavy arms and hundreds of kilograms of explosive material were recovered during the operations.<sup>92</sup> However, many believe that street crimes still exist and that the drivers of extremism and ethno-nationalist crime persist for which further action is needed.<sup>93</sup>

NAP also called for zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab, which is the most populated province of the country. The Punjab government carried out 108,180 search operations, 2,821,324 stop and search at different checkpoints and arrested 21,632 suspects between 2015 and 2017.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, in February 2019, the interior ministry decided to ban *Jumat-ud-Dawa (JuD)*, and soon after the government of Punjab took administrative control of *madrassas* and mosques, *Jamia Masjid Subhan Allah and Madrassa Al-Sabir*, in Bahawalpur associated with *JuD* and *Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)*.<sup>95</sup> Over 900 assets of *JuD* and *JeM* were also frozen of which 611 were frozen in Punjab only.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, in May 2019, a media outlet claimed that the Punjab government had seized 500 properties and other assets associated with *JuD* which included *madrassas*, schools, hospitals and ambulances.<sup>97</sup> Despite these measures taken by the government, sectarian violence is at its peak in the province. The recent violent protest of TLP is an example of this. The federal government declared

TLP as a terrorist organisation – interested members of TLP were previously given a stipend by the military administration after a violent protest in November 2017.<sup>98</sup>

Baluchistan has been ignored and deprived from development since the independence of Pakistan which made this province more fragile. Despite the abundance of natural resources, this province is the poorest and most underdeveloped in the country which makes this province a fertile ground for separatists and militancy. The NAP called for political reconciliation, which unfortunately could not be implemented.<sup>99</sup> In 2015, a program, *Pur-Aman* [peaceful] Baluchistan was launched to bring the angry Baloch separatists to the national mainstream if they lay down their weapons and agree to the rehabilitation support.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, after the NAP, Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, the then chief minister of Baluchistan, was given a mandate by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for the implementation of the NAP clause. To this end, a delegation of the provincial government held a negotiation with Brahamdagh Bugti, leader of the Baloch Liberation Army. However, the unstable government and shuffling of the Chief Minister made negotiations impossible to continue it.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, the then government has promised political reconciliation, however, despite, Baluchistan's government demands for the implementation of the NAP,<sup>102</sup> the campaign is yet to be initiated as no efforts have been made to reach Baluch insurgents.<sup>103</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic a clear escalation of militant activities can be seen in the province.<sup>104</sup>

As evident from this critical assessment of the NAP, it is apparent that the plan has been partially implemented which resulted in partial or short-term success in the form of the establishment of government writ and a decrease in terrorist incidents in the county. The following section discusses the impacts of the NAP on terrorism.

## **6. Impact Effectiveness**

The plan, NAP, has been effective in achieving its objectives related to terrorism in the short term as shown in Figure 2 above. The Pakistani military chased and crushed the militants' organisations and their members in operations in different parts of the country. Operation *Radul Fasaad* in the Tribal districts resulted in restoring the government writ and establishment of negative peace. However, for several reasons, the plan has not proved effective in the long run. First, the terrorist incidents still happen in different parts of the country. In

the Tribal districts – where intense military operations were conducted and the military still holds partial administration of the region – the militants are still a threat, which is very much contrary to the government’s claims of “broken the backbone” of militants.<sup>105</sup> Militant attacks civilians as well as the security forces in the region.<sup>106</sup> People of the region are still in chaos as they feel unsafe there. Ahmad Khan, a university student, described the situation as:

“Before the military operation in the region, people involved in some illegal activities or involved with militant/terrorist groups were the ones who would be afraid. But now the situation regarding fear, I believe, is worse because every individual is afraid of being killed or harmed”.<sup>107</sup>

Interestingly, locals of the region also question the Pakistan army’s failure to keep the region clear of militants, especially given the fact that the military has checkpoints on all connecting roads leading to the region. Some even use the slogan “*yeh jo dehshat gardi hai, iss ke peechai wardi hai,*” which means “the military uniform is behind this terrorism”<sup>108</sup>. PTM is one of the biggest critics of the Pakistani military and usually uses this slogan in their public gatherings. Similarly, some of the banned organisations/groups are active in the country with new names. Moreover, some recent reports have pointed that Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent is active in the region with its membership estimated to be between 150 and 200.<sup>109</sup>

Second, there is a major shift in the strategy of the TTP. The organization partially shifted its focus from the KP and Tribal districts to Baluchistan province. It is important to note that this province also has separatist groups and is the most underdeveloped and deprived one in the country. This atmosphere of the region and the US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan gives an edge to TTP in their regrouping and conducting attacks. In September 2020, different splinter groups pledged to the TTP’s new chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud.<sup>110</sup> Since then TTP has been active and conducting attacks in the region, threatening women’s rights groups and even inviting other extremist groups for collective struggle.<sup>111</sup> These activities not only indicate their regrouping but also their strength in the country. It is also worth mentioning that it seems that TTP is targeting China’s presence in the region,<sup>112</sup> and importantly, certain parts of the China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor will pass through and end on the Gwadar port of Baluchistan province.

Third, extremism, on one hand, is spreading like fire in the woods in the country,<sup>113</sup> while on the other hand, NAP failed to prevent abuse of the internet and social websites. The recent TLP protest in different parts of the country is an example and question mark on the implementation of the policy.<sup>114</sup> Rizwan Chudhari, a university professor and expert in the field of terrorism studies commented as:

“The extremist propaganda material is easily available in the country and even ISIS has roots in the society which is demonstrated by the recent attempt of a university student to travel to Syria who was detained at Lahore International Airport. Similarly, social media is an easy source to get to extremist material. Different extremist groups are actively propagating and delivering hate speeches, but we do not see any action against them despite the presence of laws”.<sup>115</sup>

The right-wing extremists are also enjoying almost absolute freedom in the country. Extra-judicial killing in the name of blasphemy is on the rise as several accused of blasphemy have been killed and hundreds of cases have been registered with police.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, hate speech is a common practice in both physical and virtual spaces. Tawab-ur-Rahman shared a recent activity on social media as:

“Hate speech, fake news, propaganda, and spreading conspiracy theories is a common practice in Pakistan. One can find hundreds of examples of these activities just by doing a simple Facebook search. Recently, a religious cleric was spreading conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19. Nobody acted against him until eventually, some social media activists reported him to the FIA. The FIA then took action and arrested him but interestingly he has not been punished instead a video was released by the same cleric in which he can be seen reading from a script and asking the public to follow SOPs and cooperate with the government. Following the release of this second video people started making fun of the cleric and would say that the FIA had updated the software of the cleric”.<sup>117</sup>

Additionally, in February 2021, the federal religious ministry and ministry of education announced five new boards for the registration of the *madrassas*.<sup>118</sup> Before this, there were only five boards with which the *madrassas* could be registered, but now it is ten in total.

Despite the fact of registration and regulation of *madrassas* through these new boards, I believe that there is a vast possibility that it will give more space to sectarian violence as these new boards will give legitimacy to other sectarian groups in the country.

Fourth, besides some basic reform in the constitution to allow the merger of the Tribal districts with KP, no special attention has been given to these districts. In addition, no judicial reforms have yet been brought. Consequently, the system is not trustworthy. Regarding the Afghan refugees, much has been done for their registration. It will perhaps take long for Afghanistan to be stable and peaceful; therefore, Pakistan should think of alternative arrangements for managing Afghan refugees and maintaining peace in the country without depriving the refugees of any human rights. This is not possible without the assistance of the international community, both financial and expertise. If we want to bring peace to the region then we ought to think of our policy mistakes made in the past and avoid repeating them.

Lastly, the FIA's approach towards preventing abuse of the internet and social sites is more reactionary rather than proactive. The behaviour of the TTP has changed and they have adopted different strategies to regroup in the country. They chose different locations in the country. Baluchistan is the biggest and most fragile province in the country and if the militants took control of the province, then it will be difficult to defeat them as the province shares a border with Afghanistan as well as Iran, and any external threat can easily manipulate the security situation.

## **7. Conclusions**

The NAP has two broad aspects i.e., hard, and soft measures to fight and counterterrorism and extremism. The hard measures and the aspects of the plan related to the Pakistani military administration were implemented soon after the plan was announced while those related to the civil government administration are yet to be fully implemented. The effectiveness of military aspects of the plan are partially effective as the threat of terrorism still exists and is arguably even on the rise, and I fear the threat will increase in the following years if not tackled in time.

In the Outcome of the NAP, the policy executors took some initiatives by launching different projects, however, the impact of those projects is very limited. The level of terrorism and extremism is

increasing every next day as demonstrated by the recent terrorist attacks and violent protests of TLP. In Pakistani society, culture and religion overlap each other. Therefore, the *madrassas* and their curriculum have a great role in shaping society as demonstrated in the Cold War era. Hence, it is important to have strong accountability of *madrassas* and their curriculum to have a prosperous society. Apart from this, the military operation in the Tribal districts has had impacts in the form of the establishment of government writ, however, it has also impacted the Tribal districts' social fabric and their local culture. Therefore, a detailed study is needed to understand the disruption of the social fabric in the region.

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