

# Terrorism Monitor

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p.1

Briefs

*Jacob Zenn*

p.3

Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State's Anti-Taliban Propaganda

*Lucas Webber*

p.6

Will Ayman al-Zawahiri's Call for Indian Muslims to Join al-Qaeda Fall on Deaf Ears?

*Sudha Ramachandran*

p.8

No End in Sight: Jihadist and Baluch Ethno-Nationalist Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan Since the U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan

*Abdul Basit*

## Islamic State in West Africa Province's Unprecedented Expansion in Nigeria

*Jacob Zenn*

When compared to the Syria and Iraq provinces, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) is the Islamic State's (IS) most prolific *wilayah* in terms of attacks, but it is also undergoing an operational expansion unseen in a decade. In 2012, ISWAP's predecessor, Jamaat Ahlus Sunnah Li-Dawa wal-Jihad (JASDJ), also known as "Boko Haram," began carrying out suicide attacks in central Nigerian states, such as Kaduna, Niger, and the Plateau states and even as far as Sokoto in

northwestern Nigeria and the capital Abuja ([vanguardngr.com](http://vanguardngr.com), July 8, 2013).

However, from 2015 onward, JASDJ and then ISWAP, which succeeded JASDJ, conducted virtually no attacks outside of northeastern Nigeria or neighboring parts of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Thus, ISWAP's two claims in the Nigerian state of Taraba on April 20 and April 23, 2022 and one claim in the state of Kogi on April 24, 2022, are a notable development ([Twitter/@SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), April 20; [HumAngle](http://HumAngle), April 23; [thecable.ng](http://thecable.ng), April 24). The Taraba attacks targeted two bars in two different cities, with ISWAP claiming more than 40 total casualties. The Kogi attack targeted a police station, with ISWAP alleging five police officers were killed. IS's al-Naba

magazine also attributed previous attacks to ISWAP in Kogi and Taraba that had originally gone unclaimed as well.

Geographically, Kogi is a state in south-central Nigeria and the transit point between Abuja and the southern economic hub, Lagos. Prior to ISWAP's latest attacks, Kogi had been the site of JASDJ prison breaks and bomb-making facilities and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru's main hub of operations in 2012 ([dailypost.ng](http://dailypost.ng), February 16, 2012). Ansaru's most notorious attack was an ambush of a Nigerian military convoy whose troops were preparing to deploy to Mali to combat al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2013 ([vanguardngr.com](http://vanguardngr.com), January 20, 2013). However, as a result of JASDJ attacks against Ansaru for splitting from JASDJ, Ansaru itself became weaker and has only begun to revive in northwestern Nigeria in the past few years ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), July 28, 2020).

Taraba, meanwhile, is a state situated in central-eastern Nigeria, bordering Cameroon and, like Kogi, is divided between Muslim and Christian populations. The targeting of "Christian" and "un-Islamic" activities in Taraban bars is reminiscent of the bombings in central Nigeria in 2012, which often targeted churches or bars ([nationalpost.com](http://nationalpost.com), November 25, 2012). Thus, like the Kogi attack, ISWAP's latest activities in Taraba not only represent an expanding area of ISWAP operations, but also a revival of prior JASDJ- and Ansaru-style attacks.

Three possible explanations exist for the ISWAP attacks in Taraba and Kogi. First, all the attacks came as part of the global IS "revenge of the two sheikhs" campaign and ISWAP may have been trying to impress IS with attacks in new locations. Second,

these incidents occurred just after a major attack on a train in Kaduna, Nigeria in which hundreds of passengers were abducted by a combination of bandits and jihadists, who may have been from ISWAP (even though the Nigerian government allege it was "Boko Haram") ([CGTN Africa](http://CGTN Africa), April 19). Thus, ISWAP may have deployed fighters from northeastern Nigeria to Kogi and Taraba to expand ISWAP operations and integrate with the bandits, just as Ansaru has done and JASDJ had done before their leader Shekau was killed in clashes with ISWAP in 2021 ([Telegram](http://Telegram), June 15, 2020). Lastly, ISWAP may have incorporated some Ansaru or even JASDJ members who had previously been deployed to Kogi or Taraba, which had been respective operation centers for the two terrorist cells.

Whatever the case, the ISWAP insurgency can no longer be considered confined to northeastern Nigeria. In a worst case scenario for Nigeria, ISWAP may simply be activating longstanding sleeper cells that had been operating in Kogi, Taraba, and elsewhere. Perhaps these cells were previously supporting the group logistically, by providing financing, weaponry, and other supplies like computers or drones. Should attacks outside of northeastern Nigeria persist, the conflict will undoubtedly enter a new and more dangerous phase.

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## **Islamic State in Khorasan Province's One-Off Attack in Uzbekistan**

*Jacob Zenn*

On April 18, the Islamic State (IS) released a short video of Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) fighters firing rockets from the outskirts of Mazar e Sharif, Afghanistan into Termez, Uzbekistan

([Twitter/@Sayedsalahuddin](https://twitter.com/Sayedsalahuddin), April 18). If the video and claim are authentic, this attack represents the first ever ISKP attack in Central Asia and would be a natural progression after ISKP propaganda emphasized the incorporation of Central Asians, and especially Uighurs, into its ranks ([opindia.com](http://opindia.com), October 9, 2021). Even though the rockets appear to have struck nothing of significance, the attack and video clip demonstrate ISKP's strategic intention to threaten not only Pakistani targets and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, but also the entire "Khorasan" region, which historically includes Central Asia.

Uzbekistan denied that any ISKP attack took place on its soil ([rferl.org](http://rferl.org), April 19). This was in lieu of the fact that IS provinces tend to be accurate about their claims, albeit inflating the severity and casualties of their attacks. According to the Uzbek presidency's spokesperson, the reports of the ISKP attack were not "reality" and there were no military operations on Uzbekistan's territory nor any instability along its borderlands

([Telegram/@Press\\_Secretary\\_Uz](https://t.me/Press_Secretary_Uz), April 18). Despite the official government claims, videos emerged on social media showing increased Uzbekistani air force activity with helicopters conducting patrols along the Afghanistan border after the ISKP claim ([Twitter/@TajudenSoroush](https://twitter.com/TajudenSoroush), April 19).

A more plausible explanation came from the Taliban's deputy spokesperson, however, who asserted that ISKP did launch rockets toward Uzbekistan from Afghan territory, but the rockets failed to reach the Uzbekistan border ([farhatnews.com](http://farhatnews.com), April 20). As is typical of Taliban foreign policy, the deputy spokesperson affirmed that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used by any militant group to attack any external country. Video footage also emerged of the Taliban uncovering the ramshackle hideout that ISKP had used to fire the rockets, including the empty rocket launchers ([Twitter/@WarFootage](https://twitter.com/WarFootage), April 20).

On the whole, therefore, it appears ISKP produced a publicity stunt for IS by attempting to attack Uzbekistan, but caused no damage to either the country, its military, or civilians. ISKP remains embattled with the Taliban over Afghanistan and is seeking to jeopardize the Taliban's working, if not necessarily friendly, ties with Central Asian states. If ISKP's intention was to disturb Taliban relations with Central Asian states or demonstrate ISKP's ability to harm Afghanistan's northern neighbors, this operation has proven to be a dud, much like the rockets that were fired.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State's Anti-Taliban Propaganda**

*Lucas Webber*

In late January 2022, the Afghanistan-based Islamic State in Khorasan Province

(ISKP) premiered its English-language magazine, "Voice of Khurasan (VoK)" (Militant Wire, February 8). The online print series is published through ISKP's official al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production and covers a range of political and religious topics. VoK is intended to promote causes championed by ISKP and the broader Islamic State (IS) movement while also maligning their respective enemies. It, therefore, represents an attempt to build international appeal for ISKP as well as bolster recruitment and incite followers to carry out attacks.

### **Globalizing ISKP's Regional and Local Narratives**

VoK issues tend to include translated ISKP materials from the original Pashto. The goal is to disseminate those narratives and ideas to a broader international audience in English (Twitter/@Valle\_Riccardo, March 9). This indicates it is a predominantly outward-facing media project intended to transcend regional cultural and linguistic barriers. It also includes original content as well as translations of past and present IS leadership statements and releases by official IS media organs, which serves to situate regional ISKP propaganda within the overarching mission of the broader global Islamic State movement.

As such, VoK represents the latest publication in IS's history of English language magazines, such as Islamic State Report, Jihad Recollections, Dabiq, and Rumiya. Moreover, in recent years, a similarly named pro-Islamic State in Hind Province (ISHP) online print series has emerged called "Voice of Hind (VoH)," which, much like VoK, has focused on bringing localized narratives from the IS South Asia discourse to a global audience (Terrorism Monitor, March 11, 2022). However, VoH is more India- and Kashmir-focused, whereas VoK is mostly about Afghanistan-related affairs.

VoK is disseminated on social media and messaging applications, and is also translated into Malayalam, which is a

language spoken by tens of millions of people mostly in India's Kerala region. This is notable as ISKP has a track record of recruiting fighters and gaining supporters from these areas (Terrorism Monitor, April 8; The Hindu, March 28, 2020). The magazine's second issue featured a three-page biographical profile of suicide bomber Najeeb al-Hindi, which mentioned how he made hijrah (migration) from India to Afghanistan and "sacrificed his life for Islam" by attaining martyrdom (Hindustan Times, March 11). [1] The I'lam Foundation, which is an online repository and distribution channel for IS propaganda, and pro-ISKP channels, circulate VoK links to allow followers to access and download the magazine at any time (Militant Wire, April 17). Shorter snippets of the issues are also shared on Telegram and elsewhere for easy narrative congestion.

In terms of ISKP's media strategy, the introduction and development of the VoK series is consistent with the increased internationalization of ISKP's overarching propaganda campaign (Times of India, March 12). ISKP's al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production has, for instance, intensified its efforts to reach a broader range of ethnic and linguistic groups (Militant Wire, February 17). ISKP has historically published its materials in Arabic, Pashto, and Dari, but, more recently, it has expanded its linguistic repertoire to include content in at least Urdu, Uzbek, Tajik, Hindi, Malayalam, and English (Eurasianet, March 17). In addition to VoK, for instance, al-Azaim published a 54-page-long book, which was its first in the English-language, titled "Jihad: The Way to Jannah" (Militant Wire, February 24).

### **Voice of Khorasan's Anti-Taliban Narratives**

ISKP is a predominantly Afghanistan-based insurgent group, and thus the Taliban is by far and away its primary rival in the region. Accordingly, the group's media warfare strategy is largely based on efforts to delegitimize the Taliban as a governing

body and discredit the group's religious authority (Terrorism Monitor, December 16, 2021; WION, February 4). ISKP purveys its anti-Taliban narratives through various mediums, such as videos, audios statements, e-books, magazines, and more.

VoK launched its attack against the Taliban straight out of the gate in the cover of its premier issue featuring photos of Taliban leaders cordially socializing with officials from China, Pakistan, and the previous Afghan government. All of these countries' governments have been explicitly declared as enemies of ISKP (WION, March 7). Perhaps most notably, the text featured an article aggressively impugning the new Afghan rulers titled "Who are the Taliban?"

The article, which included photos of Taliban leaders and delegates meeting with Chinese and American diplomats and of "Taliban praying with [Pakistan's] ISI Chief," set the tone for the entire magazine series. VoK stated that the Taliban was created by Pakistan's government and intelligence apparatus under the guidance of the CIA and Saudis. [2] The magazine also scorned the Taliban for concealing and lying about the death of Mullah Omar, its involvement in the illicit opium industry, and its "extreme nationalism and tribalism," which "has nothing to do with the Islamic system" and "is ever present within the group." [3]

Further, VoK ridiculed the Taliban for its friendly relations with Shias, particularly Hazaras, and the incorporation of members from Shia communities into the Taliban movement and civil society. ISKP also alleged the Taliban fought directly alongside the Americans against ISKP and chided the Taliban for its dealings with "the biggest enemies of Islam such as China, Iran and Russia," and for ignoring the "eradication of the Uighur Muslims" and the "mass murders committed by the Russian, Iran regime and its proxies" in Iraq and Syria (Hindustan Times, February 4). [4]

In subsequent issues, ISKP celebrated attacks against the Taliban and accused the group of being installed by the Americans in August 2021 and being pushed by the Americans into the "dead and impure pool of democracy." [5] Further, VoK asserted that the leaders of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, through Pakistan's ISI and the control of the U.S, "signed the ultimate deal of treachery with America which was based on prohibition of Jihad in the land, expelling muhajireen [migrant] fighters and fighting Khilafah as America's proxy." [6] ISKP seeks to undermine the Taliban's foreign relations and in its latest issue about the April 18 rocket attack targeting Termez, Uzbekistan, the group proclaimed its "eyes ... are fixed on neighboring countries, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, and other nations of kufr [infidelity]." [7]

## Conclusion

ISKP's VoK series is emerging as an important medium in the branch's push to expand its reach and gain broader international traction. The magazine's propagandists seek to establish a contrast between ISKP and the Taliban. The former is presented as a pure and pious Islamic movement actively fighting those hostile to their faith and the latter is a morally and religiously corrupt Pashtun ethno-nationalist organization that has friendly relations with the enemies of Islam and is even allied with some of them in the fight against IS. [8] ISKP is considerably weaker than the Taliban and its other nation-state foes. Therefore, the group is looking to make improvements where possible, with one of the identified opportunities being in the media space where ISKP can create added momentum for its campaign to recruit and incite violence against its enemies, especially the Taliban.

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## Notes

[1] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 2, March 2022.

[2] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 1, January 2022.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 4, April 2022.

[6] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 2, March 2022.

[7] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 5, May 2022.

[8] al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan, Issue 3, April 2022.

## Will Ayman al-Zawahiri's Call for Indian Muslims to Join al-Qaeda Fall on Deaf Ears?

*Sudha Ramachandran*

In a video released on April 5, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri praised an Indian Muslim female student for defying a local ban on students wearing hijab to school. Calling on Muslims to "stop being deceived by the mirage of the pagan Hindu democracy of India," al-Zawahiri pointed out that it was "the same scheme of deception that the West employed ... the true nature of which was exposed by France, Holland, and Switzerland when they banned the hijab while allowing public nudity ([The Hindu](#), April 6)." He called on Indian Muslims to fight the assault on Islam

"intellectually using the media and weapons on the battlefield against the enemies of Islam" ([Indian Express](#), April 7).

Global jihadist appeals have failed hitherto to resonate with Indian Muslims. Rather, local events, such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 and other violence targeting Muslims, have animated Indian Muslims and radicalized a portion of them. In this context, al-Zawahiri's recent speech on the hijab row and India's democracy must be seen as an appeal to Indian Muslims by drawing on local infringement on their way of life and culture. But, how successful is he likely to be in drawing Indian recruits to al-Qaeda?

## Al-Qaeda, India, and the Hijab Ban Row

South Asian countries, including India, have figured in the speeches of jihadist leaders and their propaganda publications well before al-Zawahiri's latest speech, which signals the importance of the region to their strategies ([Times of India](#), August 7, 2007). While al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have successfully established networks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, they have made few inroads into India, despite the country being home to around 200 million Muslims and disaffection among them growing in recent decades ([Observer Research Foundation](#), August 21, 2020). In 2014, al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and appointed an Indian Muslim, Asim Omar, as its first emir in the hope that it would boost Indian Muslim recruitment into AQIS' ranks. However, it did not have the desired impact ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 2019).

These trends may now be changing, especially since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which espouses Hindutva, [1] came to power in 2014 and was re-elected with an even larger mandate in 2019. Muslims,

their homes and businesses, places of worship and way of life have come under increasingly severe pressure from Hindutva groups in recent years. Among the assaults on their religious and cultural values that have triggered much anger among the Muslim community is the row over Muslims wearing hijab to schools, which al-Zawahiri referred to in his video message.

The row erupted in late December last year when authorities of a government-run pre-university college in the southern Indian state of Karnataka's Udupi district prevented six students from wearing the hijab inside the classroom. They were stopped from entering the school ([The Hindu](#), February 9). The issue soon snowballed and pro- and anti-hijab demonstrations spread to several other districts in the state. Among the districts that were roiled in unrest was Mandya, where 19-year-old Muskan Khan was harassed by several dozen Hindu male students, wearing saffron (a color associated with Hinduism and Hindutva groups) scarves ([DNAIndiaNews](#), February 11). The men heckled Khan for wearing a hijab by chanting the Hindutva slogan, *Jai Shri Ram* ("Victory to Lord Ram," a Hindu deity). In response, Muskan raised her fist defiantly and shouted *Allahu Akbar* ([India Today](#), February 8).

This made Khan the unwitting symbol of Muslim resistance to Hindutva groups, which caught the attention of the al-Qaeda leader. By challenging "a mob of Hindu polytheists" with a "defiant slogan of *takbeer* (Allah is great)," she "emboldened the spirit of Jihad" and reinvigorated the Muslim community, al-Zawahiri claimed in the video ([Indian Express](#), April 7).

## Conclusion

Al-Zawahiri's video message was widely reported in the Indian media. It prompted security officials to state that they would monitor Khan and her family to probe if they had links to jihadists ([New Indian Express](#), April 7). Indeed, al-Zawahiri's

showering of praise on Khan brought her family the unwanted attention of security officials, although her father strongly condemned al-Qaeda and sought to distance his family from the al-Qaeda chief's message ([Times of India](#), April 7).

What has been the impact of al-Zawahiri's recent call to Indian Muslim youth to fight the "enemies of Islam"? Has it prompted them to join jihadist groups? According to an official in the Intelligence Bureau (IB), there has been "no noticeable rise in recruitment by jihadist groups active in India in the wake of the release of the al-Qaeda video." However the hijab row seems to have prompted a "rising number" of Muslim students to "join mass Islamic organizations like the People's Front of India and its student's wing, the Campus Front of India," the official said. According to the official, Muslim radicalization has "surged over the past three to four years especially in response to the lynching of Muslims and the rising instances of Hindutva leaders calling for genocide of Muslims over the past year." [2] Hindutva leaders like Yati Narsinghanand Giri, for example, reportedly called for the ethnic cleansing of Muslims at a religious conclave like the one that took place in Haridwar from December 17-19, 2021 ([The Wire](#), December 22, 2021).

Muslim disaffection may not be driving youth to join global jihadist groups in large numbers, but the harassment of Muslims in India like Khan has deepened disillusionment with democratic processes, which could in turn push them to form local radical groups. Groups like the Indian Mujahideen had emerged in the 2000s in response to the demolition of the Babri masjid and the Gujarat pogrom ([Economic Times](#), June 20, 2013). Similar groups with local goals and recruits could emerge again.

While al-Zawahiri's video may not lead directly to a rise in Muslim recruitment into jihadist ranks, it has increased state surveillance of Muslims, given the

perceived threat of their responding to al-Zawahiri's call. Jihadist leaders' speeches referring to India and its Muslims, in fact, tend to only make Muslims vulnerable to state action. Such speeches can indirectly prompt radicalization of Indian Muslims if security officials more robustly surveil and indulge in the mass arrest of Muslims for possible links to jihadist groups. India, therefore, must be cautious to avoid driving Muslims toward sympathy for jihadist groups, rather than jihadist leaders doing the job themselves.

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## Notes

[1] Hindutva is a political ideology that views India as a Hindu nation and defines Indian culture in terms of Hindu cultural values. Its goal is to make India a Hindu state. See Sudha Ramachandran, "Hindutva Violence in India: Trends and Implications," Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, vol. 12, no. 4 (June 2020), pp. 15-20.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918077?seq=1>

[2] Author's Interview, Intelligence Bureau official based in Mangalore, Karnataka, India on May 2, 2022.

## **No End in Sight: Jihadist and Baluch Ethno-Nationalist Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan Since the U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan**

*Abdul Basit*

Pakistan is no stranger to suicide terrorism. However, suicide attacks witnessed in 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 point to its revival and expansion from jihadist to Baluch ethno-separatist militants. Alongside representing the resilience of Pakistan's asymmetric conflicts, the re-emergence of suicide attacks also signals a new phase in terrorism in the country. The April 26 suicide attack by a female member of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA)'s Majeed Brigade targeting a van carrying Chinese nationals in Karachi further adds a gendered dimension to the rebirth of suicide terrorism in Pakistan ([Express Tribune](#), April 26).

In this new phase, the underlying factors of suicide terrorism in Pakistan are qualitatively different from what they experienced during the U.S invasion of Afghanistan ([Express Tribune](#), February 7). The Pakistani Army's counter-terrorism partnership with the U.S. in Afghanistan, domestic counter-insurgency operations, and drone strikes in the ex-Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) region and Baluchistan accounted for suicide terrorism before the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, as the security situation has evolved with the U.S exit from Afghanistan, the driving factors for suicide terrorism have transformed from external to primarily internal causes. [1]

After a two-year lull from 2019 to 2020, as many as nine suicide attacks were reported in Pakistan from 2021 to April 2022.[2]

Alarming, it is not just jihadist groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) that is using suicide terrorism, but also the Majeed Brigade of BLA ([Dawn](#), March 20, 2022; [Express Tribune](#), July 27, 2019). Against this backdrop, this article will examine the evolution of suicide terrorism in Pakistan in the context of the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan and highlight the factors accounting for its revival and expansion.

### **Suicide Terrorism: An Intractable Feature of Pakistan's Asymmetric Conflicts**

Suicide terrorism is a common feature of asymmetric conflicts. [3] Indeed, the incentive structure of suicide terrorism is hard to deter. For instance, even if a suicide bomber fails to hit the intended target, the attacker still becomes a martyr, while if the attacker achieves the original goal, he or she then becomes an icon ([Arab News Pakistan](#), March 14, 2022). Since 9/11, suicide terrorism has become an intractable feature of Pakistan's conflicts in the ex-FATA region, which is now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan province.

Suicide terrorism is also directly proportional to conflict escalation and vice versa. [4] Following the July 2007 Red Mosque operation, suicide attacks in Pakistan increased exponentially ([Dawn](#), July 13, 2017). For instance, as compared to 10 suicide attacks in 2006, Pakistan witnessed 61 such attacks in 2007 ([South Asia Terrorism Portal](#), April 20). Consistent with this, 65 and 85 (the most in a year) suicide attacks were recorded in Pakistan in 2008 and 2009, respectively. During the 2007-2015 period, there were a total of

466 suicide attacks, underscoring the upward trajectory of the conflict.

However, in the aftermath of the 2014 Zarb-e-Azb Operation, which dismantled TTP strongholds in the ex-FATA region, destroyed TTP infrastructure, and forced TTP fighters and commanders to flee to Afghanistan, suicide terrorism declined progressively ([The News International](#), June 20, 2016). As opposed to 31 suicide attacks in 2015, only 23 such incidents were recorded in 2016. In 2018, suicide attacks in Pakistan declined further to single digits with eight incidents recorded in that year. Likewise, 2019 and 2020 witnessed four attacks each, constituting a downward trend coinciding with conflict de-escalation in Pakistan ([South Asia Terrorism Portal](#), April 20).

### **Characteristics of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan**

In August 2021, as the jihadist conflict resumed with an uptick in TTP attacks against Pakistan, the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the revival of the Taliban's self-styled Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, suicide terrorism witnessed a revival of sorts in Pakistan ([Express Tribune](#), December 20, 2021). Separately, Baluch separatists' participation in suicide terrorism is rooted in decades of political alienation and socio-economic deprivation, which is now reaching an apex. For instance, of the five suicide attacks reported in Pakistan in 2022, BLA's Majeed Brigade perpetrated three such attacks targeting the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Baluchistan's Noshki and Panjgur districts and a van carrying Chinese nationals at the entrance of Karachi University's Confucian Centre ([Dawn](#), February 2; [Dawn](#), April 26). ISKP carried out the other two attacks in March on a Shia mosque in Peshawar and

President Arif Alvi's motorcade in Sibbi, Baluchistan ([Dawn](#), March 9; [The News International](#), March 13). Of the five suicide bombings recorded in 2021, TTP carried out four of them, while BLA claimed one such attack.

Globally, as opposed to averaging 1.6 deaths and 1.7 injuries in conventional terrorist attacks, suicide terrorism averages 4.5 deaths and 10.4 injuries, respectively. However, in Pakistan, the casualty figure for suicide terrorism is much higher than the global average, with 15.5 deaths and 39.4 injuries on average due to their indiscriminate nature. [5] From 2007-2015, most of the suicide attacks in Pakistan struck soft targets, such as places of worship, especially for religious minorities, and other public gatherings and therefore accounted for a higher casualty rate. Likewise, the high frequency of these attacks from 2007 to 2015 also explains the higher fatality rate than the global average. However, in 2021 and 2022, apart from the suicide attack targeting Peshawar's Shia Mosque, killing 66 people, the casualty rate in other attacks has been lower. This is because TTP has shifted its targeting strategy from indiscriminate attacks hitting soft targets to a more discriminate targeting strategy.

The BLA's female suicide bomber Shari Baluch's participation in suicide terrorism on April 26 by targeting Chinese nationals is consistent with the conflict trendline of educated youth from the middle-class turning toward Baluch insurgency. A graduate of Karachi University, she held a Masters of Philosophy in education ([Independent Urdu](#), April 26). Likewise, the Peshawar Mosque suicide bomber, Ihsanullah, was an Afghan refugee whose family moved to Pakistan decades ago. A high-school dropout, he received training

from ISKP in Afghanistan before returning for the suicide attack in Peshawar ([The News International](#), March 10).

In both instances, the revenge factor was common: ISKP consider Shias to be heretics and legitimate targets, while the Baluch community often views the Chinese footprint in Baluchistan as a form of neo-colonialism. Both suicide bombers have humble backgrounds and hail from conflict-hit areas. Likewise, both Afghan refugees and the Baluchs have faced unwarranted harassment, allegations of sympathizing with TTP and Baluch insurgents, as well as arbitrary detentions, dislocations and stigmatization ([Dawn](#), March 20). This has contributed to a collective sense of despair, disempowerment, and humiliation. Hence, such suicide attacks are carried out to restore lost honor and take revenge for the humiliations they have endured.

### **Perpetrators of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan**

#### *TTP and ISKP*

Though the Egyptian Islamic Jihad carried out the first suicide attack in Pakistan in 1995, TTP is still the pioneer group to use suicide terrorism as a strategic weapon of choice ([Pak Institute for Peace Studies](#), January 2021). TTP learned this operational tactic from al-Qaeda in the ex-FATA region after the 2001 U.S military intervention in Afghanistan. Qari Hussain Mehsud, the cousin of former TTP head Hakimullah Mehud, was the master trainer of suicide bombers in Pakistan ([Dawn](#), October 16, 2010). Suicide attacks subsequently became an almost daily occurrence in Pakistan after the 2007 Red Mosque operation. From 2007-2015, Pakistan was the worst-affected country of suicide terrorism in the world. The 2007

Karsaz bombing in Karachi targeting a political rally of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (he returned to Pakistan after years of self-imposed exile) was the TTP's most lethal suicide attack in Pakistan, killing 180 people ([The News International](#), October 18, 2021).

Meanwhile, ISKP, which comprises TTP's Bajaur and Orakzai breakaway factions, has also carried out suicide attacks in Pakistan. As mentioned, of the four suicide attacks recorded in Pakistan in 2022, ISKP carried out two of them. Unlike TTP's selective targeting strategy of only hitting hard targets, ISKP has employed suicide terrorism to target religious minorities and Sufi shrines in Pakistan, whom the terror group consider heretical. ISKP's suicide terrorism is also intended to win new recruits, gain publicity, and attract fresh funding. One dimension of ISKP's suicide terrorism is its rivalry and outbidding violence against TTP, which is a much larger and resourceful organization. However, ISKP has carved out a niche presence for itself by using emotive narratives like the creation of a self-styled caliphate which resonates with the urban middle and upper middle-classes of Pakistan ([Express Tribune](#), February 27, 2015).

#### *BLA's Majeed Brigade*

The Baluch separatists have also embraced suicide terrorism in pursuit of their ethno-separatist goals. BLA's Majeed Brigade, which is mainly responsible for training self-sacrificing guerrilla fighters, spearheads the Baluch separatists' suicide terrorism campaign in Pakistan ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 25, 2019). In addition, the BLA's former commander and the mastermind of the 2018 Chinese Consulate attack in Karachi, Aslam Achu, was the one

who revived the Majeed Brigade in Afghanistan. Achu's son was one of the five suicide bombers who perpetrated the Karachi attack on the Chinese Consulate ([Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research](#), December 28, 2018).

Achu was killed by a bomb blast in Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2018 ([Express Tribune](#), December 26, 2018). He broke away from Hyrbair Marri's Baluch Liberation Army and formed his own faction after developing intractable differences with the former over operational and organizational matters ([The News International](#), July 5, 2020). Reportedly, the BLA learned suicide terrorism from TTP in its training centers in Afghanistan ([Gandhara](#), May 18, 2021). Since then, the BLA has successfully employed suicide terrorism in the 2019 Gwadar Pearl Continental Hotel attack, the 2020 Pakistan Stock Exchange assault, the 2021 Gwadar suicide bombing that killed a Chinese engineer, and the 2022 assaults on the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Noshki and Panjgur ([Arab News Pakistan](#), March 14, 2022).

The adoption of suicide terrorism by Baluch insurgents, and their female counterparts in particular, marks a significant shift in the Baluch insurgent campaign. It also indicates growing frustration amongst the Baluch militants with the Pakistani state's heavily militarized and counter-productive counter-insurgency campaign.[6] Further, it shines a light on their undying motivation and devotion with the cause of Baluch separatism. The adoption of suicide terrorism was, however, not an easy decision for the Baluch separatist groups ([Independent Urdu](#), February 14, 2021). They feared being bracketed alongside TTP and ISKP by the Pakistani security establishment. At the same time, they also

risked losing the donors who funded these groups for their secular leanings. Nevertheless, they persisted with the tactic to exhibit the highest level of devotion to the cause of Baluch nationalism and separation from Pakistan.

## Conclusion

As many as nine suicide attacks in Pakistan since the start of 2021 is possibly too narrow a timeframe to suggest a revival of suicide terrorism in Pakistan. However, the expansion of suicide terrorism from TTP and ISKP to Baluch separatist groups is undeniable. It is also evident that both the jihadist and ethno-separatist groups in Pakistan possess the capability to mount suicide attacks in pursuit of their stated goals. The adoption of suicide terrorism is a sign of their growing strength and underscores the complex and protracted nature of Pakistan's asymmetric conflicts. To this end, Pakistan will have to re-evaluate its internal threat landscape following the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan. Once a data-driven understanding of motivations for suicide terrorism emerges, a revision of existing counter-terrorism and insurgency policies will be warranted.

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## Notes

[1] Author's interview with a Pakistani security official, April 14, 2022.

[2] The figure is based on author's own monitoring of the internal situation in Pakistan through media reports.

[3] Ann Wilkens, "Suicide Bombers and Society: A Study on Suicide Bombers in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Sweden Defence Research Agency*, February 2011, p. 16.

[4] Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (August 2003), pp. 343-361.

[5] Nicholas Wilkey, *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, PhD Dissertation, University of Adelaide, April 2014, p. 108.

[6] Author's interview with Adnan Amir, a Baluch journalist, April 10, 2022.