



Narrative of Despondent Pashtuns

Terrorism, Ethnicity and the Pakistani Military



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Abstract

This primary research uses in-depth interviews to investigate the experiences and perceptions of the ethnic Pashtuns of Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) regarding terrorism, ethnicity and the Pakistani military, especially after the emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement (PTM). Since there is a dearth of literature on the perspectives of the terrorism-affected Pashtuns, this original research focusses on their direct experiences. It is important to understand how members of the ethnicity inhabiting the geo-strategically significant tribal areas perceive continuing political violence. As six out of these seven districts border Afghanistan, the terrorism therein has regional and international security implications. The research finds that contrary to stereotypes about the Pashtuns that portray them as 'solely responsible' for regional terrorism, they are largely its victims rather than perpetrators. Additionally, there exists a militant-military alliance consisting chiefly of members of Pakistan's majority Punjabis—that has benefitted from the colonial-era laws in the former FATA. These findings regarding Pakistan's ethnic problem manifesting itself as regional and transnational terrorism confirm the PTM's fundamental narrative.

(Note: Footnotes are indicated by numerical numbers while Endnotes are indicated by low-case Roman numerical numbers. Referenced documents are listed at the end of this Paper)

Introduction

The erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) comprise Pakistan's northwestern region that neighbours Afghanistan. This region consists of seven districts and six sub-divisions.¹ The FATA were merged with the adjoining Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in 2018 through an act of parliament, abolishing their separate administrative status. The seven tribal districts, prior to the merger, were known as 'agencies', namely, Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, North Waziristan and South Waziristan. Except for Orakzai, the other six districts buttress the Durand Line, which Harrison defines as,² the "controversial colonial border between Pakistan and Afghanistan that divides the Pashtuns of Pakistan and Afghanistan".¹ To the east of the erstwhile agencies, six 'Frontier Regions (FRs)'—now known as subdivisions—were also part of the FATA. These were FR-Peshawar, FR-Kohat, FR-Bannu, FR-Lakki Marwat, FR-Tank and FR-Dera Ismail Khan.³

The FATA were administered from the 'FATA Secretariat', based in Peshawar, the capital of the then neighbouring northwestern province of KP. This separate administrative unit of the FATA lay between KP to the east and Afghanistan to the west. Ethnically, the entire region is predominantly Pashtun. The Pashtuns—also known as *Pukhtuns*—are an ancient ethnic group, considered the world's largest tribal society. They are an eastern Iranian people, who speak the language 'Pashto' (also pronounced as *Pukhto*). The ethnicity is almost entirely Muslim, divided between the majority Sunnis and minority Shias. A tiny Hindu community of the Pashtuns is based in Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

i Drawn by Sir Mortimer Durand, a British diplomat and civil servant.

Pashtuns are primarily divided between two neighbouring states, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan has historically been the ‘original homeland’ of all Pashtuns. For this reason, the Pashtuns in Pakistan are sometimes referred to as a “stateless”⁴ nation, similar to the Baloch and Sindhis. In Afghanistan, the Pashtuns enjoy a *majority* with a population size of about 42 percent, settled predominantly in the eastern and southeastern provinces. However, in Pakistan, the Pashtuns form the largest ethnic *minority*, with about 15.42 percent population.⁵ According to the pre-2018 administrative configuration when the FATA-KP merger had not happened, the ethnic group was further divided inside the country among the FATA and the provinces of KP, Balochistan and Punjab.

The mountainous former FATA is generally considered Pakistan’s most impoverished and under-developed region. Literacy rate is far below the rest of the country, with more functional madrasas (Islamic seminaries) than schools.⁶ The region’s population is almost two percent of Pakistan’s total population—most inhabitants are associated with agriculture.⁷ Though the inhabitants all share the ancient Pashtun social code of honour that is a unique identity marker known as *Pashtunwali* (or *Pukhtunwali*)—translated as ‘the way of the Pashtuns’—the people of one district differ culturally from those of the geographically distant districts. The region was governed under the colonial set of laws known as the ‘Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR)’, promulgated in 1901 by the British, which was based on collective responsibility and “collective punishment”.⁸ After Pakistan’s creation in 1947, the state decided to retain the FCR, entailing a parallel political, administrative and judicial system, different from the rest of Pakistan.

The FATA, therefore, did not fall under the ambit of the Pakistani Constitution, and fundamental rights guaranteed to all Pakistani citizens

did not extend to its residents. Media, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and even political parties of the country were legally banned from operating. Due to this ban, despite the Pashtuns' primordial ethnic pride, the people of the FATA could not utilise their distinct ethnic identity for instrumental political bargaining, thus facing further exclusion inside Pakistan. In the light of the FCR and the Constitution's Article 247, the FATA fell under the administration of the federation: directly under the President of Pakistan as the supreme executive authority followed by the Governor of the adjoining KP who acted on behalf of the President.⁹ Unelected Political Agents (PAs) functioning in every agency represented the federal government and reported to the FATA Secretariat, Peshawar. Besides being the sole administrative authorities, the PAs acted as judicial authorities too, whose decisions could not be challenged under the FCR.¹⁰ In addition to being deprived of the right to appeal against decisions of their respective PAs, the FATA's residents were also not entitled to defend themselves in cases through legal representatives under the FCR because of which the law came to be known as a 'black law'.

Following a long struggle of the tribal Pashtuns against the FCR, in May 2018—as a result of the FATA's merger with KP—the law was repealed. The federal government had instead proposed the '*Riwaj* (Tradition) Act', an amalgamation of local tribal customs and the Pakistani constitution. However, after the *Riwaj* Act drawing widespread criticism from the FATA's parliamentarians and civil society members owing to the possibility of the violation of fundamental human rights, the concerned committee of the National Assembly (lower house of the parliament) rejected the Act.¹¹ Afterwards, an Interim Governance Regulation (IGR) was imposed for administrative purposes which was later suspended by the Peshawar High Court on October 30, 2018, creating a "legal void".¹²

Although the KP government challenged the High Court's decision in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the case remained pending until 2019 (when the Supreme Court overturned the High Court's decision), and reportedly confusion persisted as to what laws were to be applied in managing the administrative affairs of the erstwhile FATA. It was believed that Pakistan's regular overall system might be extended to the region within a timeframe of five years. Accordingly, this was done in 2019 albeit incompletely. Even in 2023, despite the application of most laws to the region, all the former FATA agencies do not have their own courts and thus there is dependence on those of the neighbouring formally settled areas.

Prior to the FATA-KP merger until May 2018, the writs of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and Peshawar High Court of the neighbouring KP province did not apply inside the FATA.¹³ Tribal conflict resolution committees known as *jirgas*, comprising local village elders or *maliks*, resolved intra- and inter-tribal disputes, in accordance with the unwritten *Pashtunwali*. *Pashtunwali* has been the overarching code governing the former FATA's social structure since times immemorial. However, following the Soviet intervention in neighbouring Afghanistan in 1979, and especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the dynamics of the region began to change. The new phenomenon of terrorism entered the society, altering the centuries-old tribal governance system in such a way that the region has not seen lasting peace again.

As a result of rampant terrorism, the Pakistani military's role has become crucial due to undertaking of counter-terrorism operations in every tribal district, with the importance of the civilian governance structure shrinking. This situation has ultimately affected the indigenous people of the former FATA more than any other regional actor, both with regard to the intensity and magnitude of political violence, and the subsequent

military role. This is what the rights-oriented Pashtun *Tahafuz* (Protection) Movement (PTM), formed in 2018, has repeatedly highlighted as well. Taking these factors into account together with ethnicity, the situation becomes worth analysing, in the broader context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan regional scenario.

Interestingly, there is not sufficient primary research on the experiences and perceptions of the Pashtun people of the former FATA who have suffered ‘collateral damage’, extra-judicial killings and torture of family members, killing and maiming by landmines, enforced disappearances, unlawful detentions, forced displacements, and infrastructure and livelihood destruction.¹⁴ The bulk of the literature that exists seems to orientalise them, analysing little why this region in particular appears to have become a safe haven for terrorists, and who is responsible for this upheaval in the erstwhile peaceful society. Borrowing from Spivak,¹⁵ the ‘subaltern’ indigenous Pashtuns’ voices on terrorism, ethnicity and the military in their own region have been greatly neglected in the mainstream discourse on the Global War On Terror (GWOT). Nevertheless, the PTM leaders began to highlight the indigenous perspectives as late as 2018 in their public speeches and interviews with the international media—notwithstanding a media blackout in Pakistan.¹⁶ However, given the marginalisation of the Pashtuns’ experiences in scholarly literature—partly due to the absence of primary research, this article aims to bring them to the fore through in-depth interviews.

Research Question

How do the Pashtun people of the erstwhile FATA in Pakistan experience and perceive terrorism, ethnicity and the military?

Significance

It is important to research this topic as the ethnic factor has been significantly under-researched considering its interplay with terrorism and the military. There is a marked dearth of primary research that directly reveals the experiences of the war-affected Pashtuns themselves in the erstwhile FATA. It is essential to fill this gap in the literature. Furthermore, this research can help confirm or challenge the broader narrative about the Pashtuns that prevails in both the colonial and postcolonial literature and the real world. Thus, the research may contribute to a better understanding of the supposed role of ethnic dynamics in the rise of terrorism in the erstwhile FATA, and how the people belonging to the region themselves perceive the situation. In this way, importantly, the popular charge that the Pakistani military has been backing terrorists, levelled by the PTM—an ethnic alliance originating from the then FATA—may be tested against primary data from the terrorism-affected region itself. This prospect makes the research highly significant.

Historical Background

The tribal areas have been viewed as a gateway to the Indian subcontinent by foreign invaders since Alexander the Greek.¹⁷ The indigenous Pashtun tribes, therefore, have a pre-Islamic tradition of resisting foreign invaders, who attacked the Pashtun territory of the former FATA due to its peculiar geographical location.ⁱⁱ However, the Afghan Durrani empire from 1747 to 1818 was the golden era for the Pashtuns

ii Evidenced by Pashto ethno-symbolic poetry and music, for example, the Pashtun ‘national anthem’ opens with: ‘It is our history that we have been travelling through blood.’

of this region. The empire kept the entire Pashtun community politically united - before being broken by ethnic Punjabi Sikhs, and the region occupied.

Later, the British took the mountainous region under their control; however, the Pashtun tribes resented their rule. To calm the unrest, the strict FCR was imposed on the tribes in 1901, granting them semi-autonomous status, while ethnic stereotypes were also popularised about them to project them as “wild” and “uncivilized”.¹⁸ Against the local norms, the empowerment of certain favoured tribal elders was pursued, whom the British thought could help them maintain calm locally. Hence, this was the beginning of tampering with the ancient, equality-based social structure.¹⁹ The tribal region, thereby, acted as a buffer zone between the British Empire and Afghanistan—the division between them earlier having been formalised through the drawing of the Durand Line in 1893.²⁰ The region remained under the political influence of British India till 1947 when it was handed over to the Dominion of Pakistan.

Local tribal elders had reportedly signed secret instruments of accession with the government of the newly formed Dominion, without consulting the populace. The Pakistani state thus granted semi-autonomous status to the tribal areas as opposed to the neighbouring KP, and named these areas the ‘Federally Administered Tribal Areas’ or FATA, since they were to be managed directly by the federal government. In this newly created Pakistani state, ethnic Punjabis were dominant.ⁱⁱⁱ The Punjabis, as mentioned earlier, had the front role in breaking the Afghan Durrani

iii After East Pakistan became Bangladesh, Punjabis became the largest ethnic group. They dominate all key state institutions: the military, bureaucracy, judiciary, politics, and media.

empire and taking over the eastern Pashtun territories, including the tribal areas. Therefore, the tribal areas began their life in the new state of Pakistan against the backdrop of historical inter-ethnic hostility. Besides, the Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan rejected the Durand Line altogether and famously opposed Pakistan's membership in the United Nations in 1947. The basis was that Pakistan's claim to inheritance of the Pashtun territories from the British—which included the tribal areas—was invalid, since the Durand Line agreement was signed with the British, and not the Pakistanis. According to the Afghans, the agreement had become null and void after the British left India in 1947. Pashtun territories therefore, as per the stance of the Afghan government, required re-annexation to Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Afghans have never officially accepted the Durand Line. This lingering ethnic issue remains a bone of contention between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with both states assuming opposing stances.²¹

To Pakistan, this scenario presented the Afghan state as hostile since the beginning—with India already considered unfriendly because of the 'two-nation theory'—the religion-based foundation of India's partition—and the lingering Kashmir conflict. In the minds of Pakistani policymakers, this overall situation generated fears of a regional "pincer movement"²² between Pakistan's western and eastern neighbors, aimed at encircling and disintegrating the state. In addition to the official Afghan stance on the Durand Line, the Afghan government covertly sponsored Pashtun and Baloch separatists inside the territories Pakistan had 'inherited'. Pakistan, in turn, countered this by gradually propping up anti-government Afghan Islamists during the 1970s. However, the scenario witnessed intensification after the Soviets intervened in Afghanistan in 1979. The FATA, owing to adjacency with Afghanistan, proved the strategic launchpad for Islamist

fighters popularised as '*mujahideen*' or 'holy warriors'. The Pakistani military establishment made this possible through a mushroom growth of terrorist training camps, and madrasas for religious students who later became the 'Taliban'.²³

The FATA's social structure underwent unwelcome change once again with the importance of secular tribal chiefs and their *hujras* (community gathering places) shrinking due to the rise of the mosque-based mullahs as local propagandists in favour of the Islamist anti-Soviet resistance. The isolated FATA Pashtun society's pillars were tampered with to a considerable extent by the Pakistani state, with the prospects of affording itself protection from Pashtun ethno-nationalism. America and the Arab states meanwhile supplied billions of dollars to Pakistan in support of the Islamist armed struggle dubbed as a 'holy war', which ushered in an era of radicalisation, militarisation, and opium trade in the FATA. After the Soviet defeat and withdrawal in 1989, the Taliban came to the 'rescue' of Afghanistan which had plunged into a bloody civil war. Pakistan backed them as providers of potential 'strategic depth' against India in the event of war, so as to fall back to secure positions in Afghanistan for regrouping against the enemy.

Taliban ruled Afghanistan with the proverbial iron fist from 1996 till 2001, taking care of Pakistan's regional concerns as their major benefactor, while turning Afghanistan into a breeding ground for al-Qaeda and Central Asian jihadists. Al-Qaeda subsequently launched the September 11, 2001 attacks on American soil. Subsequently, the United States invaded Afghanistan in the same year to eliminate the group's top leadership whom the Taliban had provided refuge to. Following the American bombing of their bases, the Taliban along with al-Qaeda, escaped to the adjoining FATA, beginning an unprecedented era of terrorism in the societies of the tribal areas.

Theoretical Framework

The primordialist model of ethnicity may help develop a useful understanding of the Pashtun tribal identity. Khan Abdul Wali Khan, the popular head of a prominent Pashtun ‘nationalist’ political party in Pakistan and a son of the ‘Frontier Gandhi’, that is, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, was once asked about his primary identity. He remarked that he was a “six-thousand-year-old Pashtun, a thousand-year-old Muslim and a twenty-seven-year-old Pakistani”²⁴ This indicates that as a representative of the Pashtun people, being Pashtun came first for Khan—equally true for many members of the ethnicity in the 21st century—owing to the identity’s high primordial value. Moreover, the ancient social code of honourable conduct, that is, *Pashtunwali*, is a unique ethnic boundary marker that imparts the Pashtun identity the distinctive pride and salience that supersede everything else.²⁵

This significant ethnic identity, however, could not be utilised for *instrumental* political bargaining by the people of the FATA pre-2018, due to the then prevailing governance system, as national political parties were “legally banned from functioning” in the region.²⁶ The *instrumentalist* approach to ethnicity, thus, could apply to the FATA. Therefore, the Pashtun identity’s significance could only be attributed to its *primordial* value and *Pashtunwali*’s ethno-symbols like *patt* (honour), *shegara/khegara* (kindness) and *toora* (bravery), which together form the acronym ‘Pashto/Pukhto’. Baeova has even equated ethnic identity with *primordial* affiliation while referring to the emotional and psychological force of ancient ethnicity.²⁷ *Shils* and *Geertz* have outlined elements of primordialism in their influential writings, which *Ozkirimli* considers the “culturalist approach”.²⁸ These elements include “givens of social existence”, such as blood relations, shared territory, common religious group, communal

language and peculiar social customs.²⁹ Eller and Coughlan elaborate on these primordial affiliations as having an emotionally “overpowering” impact on the ethnic community members’ psyche.³⁰ All these conditions apply to the erstwhile FATA’s Pashtuns, with little exception.

Method

For this research, qualitative research design was selected to address the open-ended research question at hand. The strategy involved the historical study of terrorism and governance in the erstwhile FATA. The ethnic aspect was two-dimensional: Pashtuns as a largely misrepresented ethnic minority facing terrorism were studied, along with the Punjabi ethnic majority in Pakistan that dominates the powerful military. It was studied whether this historical minority-to-majority relationship had any interplay with terrorism in the FATA.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews. As the questions needed to be semi-structured for understanding people’s perceptions, qualitative interviewing was the most suitable research method. The open-ended nature of the questions helped gain in-depth responses, thus covering important aspects of the interviewees’ experiences. Fourteen respondents participated in the research. Two participants each were included from the seven erstwhile FATA districts, so that the analysis could represent an inclusive cross-sectional view of the region. These individuals were also assigned ethnic pseudonyms for the purpose of concealing their identities ethically. The interviewees were chosen through convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling. They were self-selected by virtue of social media conversations. However, they were chosen as they were all reasonably qualified to provide information for the research, since they had personally experienced terrorism and also possessed knowledge of the

ex-FATA's history. This allowed for greater insights and more meaningful interviews.

Findings

This section comprises two major findings, as described in the following part.

One: Pashtuns in Pakistan: Perpetrators or Victims?

“First my uncle was kidnapped and they [the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP] killed him... Then, we lost my cousin and a close relative in cross-fire... The loss we have suffered cannot be recovered... [sadness]”

“I had to flee to Peshawar because living under the Taliban's rule and the subsequent military operation was an impossible task... [pause] My school was bombed, and we were threatened to leave school or else face bombs and bullets.”

The above are two voices from two different agencies of the erstwhile FATA: North Waziristan and Bajaur respectively. These interviewees had personally suffered the rise of terrorism in their areas. The first, *Khadeen*, was a professional and the second, *Zmarak*, had just finished undergraduate education. However, both were living out of the tribal districts as their particular areas had become uninhabitable. These interviewees had not only suffered losses of lives and/or homes, but also the loss of their cultural traditions and anti-Taliban tribal leadership. The Pashtun culture with the indigenously maintained peace, music and folk dance was replaced by the Taliban's rigid Islamist law, whereas the leadership vacuum was filled by the Taliban commanders themselves.³¹

Contrary to the situation in the erstwhile FATA, the closure of the

Pashtun educational activist and Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai's school by the TTP became known to the entire world after she was attacked in a settled and less isolated area, Swat, in KP.³² However, the humanitarian plight of the people of the adjoining FATA has gone unnoticed by the world, as because of the FCR, journalists could not access the areas freely.

According to the interviews conducted, instead of understanding the Pashtuns as helpless victims of terrorism and subsequent military operations, these people and their code of *Pashtunwali* have been blamed to be responsible for the political violence in the region by various Pakistani and international authors.³³ *Yousaf* offers a counter-narrative to this constructed notion, suggesting that the Pashtuns have been more victims than perpetrators of terrorism.³⁴ With regard to *Pashtunwali*, *Taj* debunks the claim that the Pashtuns are bound by their culture to always offer 'unconditional hospitality'³⁵ and refuge to fugitives, even if they are al-Qaeda or Taliban violent extremists.³⁶ This stands in contradiction to *Pashtunwali*, according to which, hospitality and refuge are not unconditional, especially to those involved in "blood feuds", such as the terrorists, as *Taj* has reported from the erstwhile FATA.³⁷ Nevertheless, if certain people did provide refuge, it was mostly due to the Pakistani state's 'carrot-and-stick policy', as described by an interviewee from Orakzai district, meaning either offering money and luring with rewards of the 'Hereafter' for providing refuge to the 'holy warriors', or the threat of persecution in case of non-compliance.

According to the interviews conducted, instead of understanding the Pashtuns as helpless victims of terrorism and subsequent military operations, these people and their code of *Pashtunwali* have been blamed to be responsible for the political violence in the region by various Pakistani and international authors.³⁸ This is the reason that the Pashtun tribal

leaders not just in the FATA but also in the adjoining KP decided to form anti-Taliban *lashkars/lakhkars*,^{iv} since they had little source of defence.³⁹ This led to their direct elimination by the terrorists,⁴⁰ while the Pakistani government or military did not act,⁴¹ as these interviewees complained. In this context, a university student, Mashal, displaced from North Waziristan because of terrorism, informed, “*I have personally witnessed more than a hundred mutilated human bodies, including those of our tribal elders, lying on roads at different times and places... They were killed on charges of spying for the US, as a note written in Pashto would be kept over every corpse, and no one was allowed to bury the mutilated body for three days. The society was terrorised and paralysed [pause]... However, due to the isolation of the area and no media coverage for the area due to the FCR, all these things went unnoticed... [disappointment].*”

Targeted killings of nearly 2,000 tribal elders across the entire FATA, as per the interviewees and confirmed by previous research in the region,⁴² uprooted the social structure. The institution of *jirga* was destroyed which had previously ensured the smooth functioning of the society, in line with the traditional *Pashtunwali*. Even funerals, reportedly, were not spared from suicide bombings. This is because according to the interviewees, terrorists viewed any gathering as the ideal target for the elimination of those tribal elders who were educating their people regarding the terrorists, and also about the military’s complicity in bringing them to the FATA⁴³ for subsequently launching them against the Coalition-Afghan forces. Pertinently, the former Director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and ex-Vice President of Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, also

iv A *lashkar/lakhkar* in Pashto literally means an armed group.

publicly alleged that the policy of Pakistan's Punjabi-dominated military establishment has been to maintain the Taliban as a "proxy army" for the destabilisation of Afghanistan, by attempting to defeat the Coalition-Afghan troops. This could not happen if the terrorists had no sanctuary in the adjoining FATA because of the presence of resistant Pashtun elders, therefore, those male leaders required to be eliminated who were posing a threat to Pakistan's Afghanistan-centric foreign policy objective. This resulted in the tribes being left first at the mercy of the Taliban and then the army operations, as an interviewee displaced from the region lamented.

However, the mainstream Pakistani electronic media, which also happens to be dominated by the majority Punjabi ethnicity and does not (and also cannot) digress from the official narrative, has hardly provided coverage to these targeted killings and even mass murders of the Pashtun elders, instead "associat[ing] the tribal Pashtuns with violence."⁴⁴ Therefore, it is only through direct interaction with the native people themselves that a clearer understanding may be developed with a population that remains misrepresented, or, at best, under-represented. The role of the Pakistani media remains questionable with regard to the situation in the erstwhile FATA and who is blamed for it, as various interviewees complained.

Apart from the sufferings, the interviews also revealed the pattern of, first, state exploitation of the Pashtuns either by trick or force, and then, blame for terrorism. Exploitation, according to my findings, has been at four levels: that of the people of the FATA, their ethnic code, their devotion to Islam, and their land. As an interviewee, Gul, from Mohmand district pointed out, the Pakistani state has consistently labelled the Pashtun men as "brave", by which it intended to use them as a "reserve army" to achieve its regional interests in Afghanistan, and in Kashmir against India. Similarly, *Pashtunwali* tenets such as revenge and honour

have been selectively employed to manipulate the Pashtuns into believing that first the Soviets and then the Americans were their “enemies having attacked their honour”, which required “avenging through waging holy wars.”⁴⁵ The Pashtun devotion to Islam was also manipulated by labelling the regional wars as ‘jihad’, for instance, the anti-Soviet war is openly referred to as the ‘Afghan Jihad’. This, however, does not mean that there were no Taliban-minded or pro-Pakistan elements among the tribes who favoured the fighting in Afghanistan. However, through the interviews one discovered that they were fewer in number as compared to the more secular-minded people. Finally, the tribal Pashtuns’ land was exploited by keeping it deprived of regular governance and justice system, and treating it as a black hole for terrorists called “strategic assets”. In this regard, the Pakistani ex-Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General Ashfaq Parvaiz Kayani, referred to the Afghan Haqqani Network’s leader, Jalaluddin Haqqani—based in North Waziristan—as one such ‘asset’, as evidenced in a 2008 transcript handed to Mike McConnell, Director of the United States National Intelligence.⁴⁶

Following their multi-pronged exploitation, the erstwhile FATA’s Pashtuns, males in particular, complained of being ethnically profiled as “wild and barbaric”, “Taliban-minded”, and even “terrorists”—ironically after enduring persecution at the hands of the TTP. Similarly, their cultural code has been projected—nationally and internationally—as ‘favourable to terrorism’, after they formed anti-Taliban *lashkars* in accordance with that very code. Moreover, their Islamic practices have also been confounded with the terrorists’ violent Islamism.⁴⁷

Notably, the ethnic segregation and internal colonialism that the Pashtuns’ land has suffered, as a media-isolated colonial buffer zone, is accorded little importance to.⁴⁸ In spite of their region being at the forefront

of the GWOT, their voices have been conspicuously silenced, especially by the Pakistani state and its media.⁴⁹ Pakistan's media has fully exercised its *power* to produce the kind of *knowledge* suited to the state's strategic objectives, while marginalising the indigenous narratives. Therefore, in order to highlight the voices of the people of the ex-FATA, an interviewee, *Nangyalay*, a teacher who had been displaced from North Waziristan, stated, “*We are actually the victims, not perpetrators... [pause]. Try to tell those abroad what is happening with us not only in the tribal areas, but also Peshawar, Mardan [city near Peshawar], and all other Pashtun areas [in a requesting style]... ”*

Militant-Military Alliance

“I started weeping when I watched the videos of Waziristan... Imagine if your family and all from your hometown are ordered to leave the area till tomorrow [for the military operation to be conducted], and you have no place to hide, no car, and no money... [pause]. After a month, you see in the videos your destroyed homes and villages, and they [the military] show it to the world through the Paki media that, ‘Look, we have destroyed the hideouts of the Taliban’, while in reality they have destroyed your villages instead of targeting the terrorists, and you have no voice in the state media... What would be your feelings? I cannot tell you what I have seen... They [the military] have destroyed us [the Pashtuns]... Personally, I’ve suffered for the wrongs I have not committed... [sadness].”

The above is the voice of *Aimal*, a tribesman of the North Waziristan district where a major military operation, called ‘*Zarb-e-Azb*’,^{vi} was

v ‘Paki’ is a pejorative term for ‘Pakistani’.

vi Translated from Arabic as ‘strike of the Prophet’s sword’.

commenced in 2014. Even prior to the operation, Aimal, along with his family, was compelled to flee the area for the adjoining KP in 2013 following the TTP committing human rights violations. Accordingly, Mohsin Dawar, a founding leader of the PTM and member of the Pakistani parliament from North Waziristan district, wrote in *The Washington Post* that this particular area “once served as the global headquarters of terrorism”.⁵⁰ Interviewees complained of what they felt was a ‘collusion’ between the Pakistani military and terrorists, as Farhat Taj establishes throughout her book, *Taliban and Anti-Taliban*, with several interviewees calling them, “two sides of the same coin”. They implied that the militant-military alliance has been playing a strategic game against the ethnic Pashtuns in the name of the GWOT. This impression is also confirmed by my discussions with various Pashtuns of KP.

Importantly, the belief that the military is in cahoots with the terrorists also constitutes the core of the PTM’s public narrative.⁵¹ Bhatt refers to the alliance between the military and rightists/jihadists as an “organic association”⁵² - a mutually beneficial partnership. Findings reveal that the collusion has worked in a manner that first the Pakistani military would bring the jihadists from Afghanistan to the FATA, and then arm, train and fund them.⁵³ Next to the numbers of the international terrorists, the majority of these would be the Punjabi Taliban, whether fighting alongside the Afghan or Pakistani Taliban.⁵⁴ Importantly, space in society would already exist for them in the absence of proper and quick justice dispensation under the FCR’s governance regime. In the beginning, the terrorists would “act like Robin Hood”, by teaching brutal lessons to rogue elements of the society, as an interviewee, *Brekhna*, a teacher from Kurram district put it. However, later, they would also begin to act tyrannically towards innocent civilians.⁵⁵ The military would reportedly give the terrorists free hand to

kill dissenting tribal elders and by striking ‘peace deals’ with them, thus effectively ceding territory after territory.⁵⁶

As further evidence of the ‘militant-military alliance’, the interviewee Mashal, who was an eyewitness to the tribal elders assassinated and their bodies thrown on the roads by the TTP in North Waziristan, stated, “*These killings would all be carried out with the approval of the army, because these elders were discussing with the army the matter of vacating the area of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban... It means the army was and is playing a double game...*” Thus, the pattern reveals a leadership vacuum created in the society of every tribal agency that would then facilitate the terrorists’ strengthening of their hold. Formally or informally, they would establish an ‘Islamic Emirate’, imposing their own Islamist laws on the locals, with the military not taking timely counter-terrorism action.⁵⁷

As the de-facto FATA rulers, the terrorists would also open training camps to help launch offensives against the Coalition-Afghan forces across the Durand Line.⁵⁸ When the US would complain of the Taliban having sanctuaries in the FATA and pressurise Pakistan to ‘do more’ against them, devastating bomb blasts would tend to occur—again mostly in Pashtun cities such as Peshawar—apparently to show the world that, “Pakistan [itself] is a victim of terrorism”,⁵⁹ as former President and ex-COAS Pervez Musharraf has been proclaiming. In turn, the FATA Pashtuns, as the interviewees lamented, would be blamed for the attacks by the pro-military establishment media. It was projected that they were ‘furious’ at the US invasion of Afghanistan and had subsequently provided refuge to the fugitive Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda jihadists under *Pashtunwali*.⁶⁰ Since Pakistan had joined the GWOT as a US ‘ally’, these Pashtuns were supposedly taking ‘revenge’ on the state through these attacks inside Pakistan.⁶¹ Even if this media narrative of the Pashtuns siding with the

terrorists is taken to be true, the former seeking revenge from the state by attacking their own co-ethnics is illogical, since such attacks were most detrimental to the Pashtun people themselves.

Back in the FATA, the situation under the terrorists would deteriorate so greatly that the inhabitants could not continue to live anymore under their rule, as learned from the interviewees who had to flee various tribal agencies for KP. According to the Peshawar Declaration on terrorism in 2009,^{vii} international terrorists in Pakistan's Pashtun region were 17,000, Punjabis 9,000 and Pashtuns 4,000.⁶² Therefore, it can be inferred that non-Pashtun actors would mostly be in charge of the Pashtun areas. Moreover, despite repeated requests by the locals for clean-up operations, the military would delay taking action.⁶³ Following the increase in the American pressure to act against the Taliban being launched from the FATA into Afghanistan, the Pakistani military would launch an operation as per the pattern in every agency. These operations would be accompanied by media hype about the military's "resolve to eliminate the non-state actors", as an interviewee, *Zeegar*, having first-hand information of the central Orakzai district, pointed out. These "half-hearted military operations" would not be aimed at the complete elimination of all miscreants, which is why the Peshawar Declaration unanimously termed the former as "dramas".⁶⁴ These operations, according to *Zeegar*, would kill "only innocent civilians" and destroy their properties through indiscriminate aerial bombardment and artillery firing,⁶⁵ as the longer quote at the beginning of this theme reveals

vii In December 2009, a grand conference of the Pashtuns of Pakistan was organised in Peshawar. The Declaration issued subsequently is called 'Peshawar Declaration': a policy document with recommendations on how to eliminate terrorism from Pakistan.

how civilians have been affected.

Therefore, a perception has developed among the Pashtuns that the Pakistani military first created “controlled chaos”⁶⁶ in the predominantly Pashtun areas through the terrorists, taking advantage of the lawlessness facilitated by the FCR. Subsequently, it approached the areas in the name of ‘clean-up operations’, while targeting mostly civilians and only displacing the terrorists, thus causing them to spread further.⁶⁷ Another interviewee, Khaisteen, a university student, articulated it precisely, *“For me, it is like ‘create a situation and then deploy the security forces to combat it’... Traditionally there were/are conflicts among different tribes of the FATA, however, those have been resolved through traditional means. But to motivate certain groups in the name of religion and sects is something planned to take control of the area... [reflection].”*

It can be argued that the operations conducted as a result of the militant-military alliance have benefited the Punjabi-dominated military, as they allowed it to assume physical control of the Pashtun areas by establishing its presence, building garrisons and reducing civilian role in governance, as in Swat.⁶⁸ Such control could, in turn, check the potential development of nationalist tendencies among the Pashtun inhabitants. As two interviewees remarked, the predominantly Punjabi forces stationed in the erstwhile FATA and governing the region practically, have been harbouring the “intentions to repress the local people through various tactics”, and treating the Pashtun populace as “one belonging to an occupied territory”. As clear from the sentiment reflected by the PTM activists on the ground and on social media, the oppressive actions by the military have been fuelling inter-ethnic hatred among the residents of the tribal areas.

Moreover, since the ex-FATA are located in the strategic western border zone, thus by assuming the rule of these areas gradually the military has also been bringing under its control the Durand Line, or the Af-Pak border. This process has been completed through the Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* in North Waziristan. The military, following the operations conducted as a result of the militant-military alliance, has continued to play the dominant role in Pakistan's foreign policy. Lastly, the operations have been a source of military aid worth billions of dollars for the armed forces.⁶⁹ Interviewees, therefore, considered both the military and terrorists "accomplices" in their sufferings, having the "same aim". They believed that as Pashtuns they were the ultimate losers in this strategic game, played largely by non-Pashtuns on the Pashtun land. Both the forces, that is, the military and terrorists, have mostly not only been ideologically controlled by ethnic Punjabis, but also the foot soldiers were supplied chiefly from the Punjab province, besides international jihadists — as *Taj* reports of Waziristan.⁷⁰

The fact is telling, that it is the Pashtuns have widely been profiled as 'terrorists' by the Pakistani military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) department and the state machinery—against which the PTM's outspoken chief, *Manzoor Ahmad Pashteen*, has openly protested.⁷¹ Moreover, the utilisation of the Pashtuns' land for terrorism is the reason the interviewees reflected that only after the passage of 71 years did the Pakistani security establishment permit the houses of the legislature and the President to mainstream the tribal region by merging it with KP - that despite the earlier national-level commitments.⁷² If this had happened prior to the anti-Soviet war or GWOT, the military might have lost the tribal areas where the militant-military alliance was to be materialised. This is why *Amrullah Saleh* termed the erstwhile FATA "expendable areas" that

have been at the Pakistani military's disposal.⁷³

Nevertheless, one of the interviewees, *Heela*, a tribeswoman forced to migrate to Peshawar, was careful not to spare from blame those politicians who have claimed to represent the tribal Pashtuns' political interests, "*Pashtun leaders who signed the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan must also be held responsible for the miserable lives of their fellow Pashtuns from the tribal areas, because they agreed to the inhuman FCR regime that has been ruling the FATA... If the Punjabi-dominated state has inflicted sufferings upon the people of the tribal areas, the Pashtun 'nationalist' parties and leaders have also never fought for their rights, and left them alone to be exploited and manipulated... [sadness].*"

Discussion

The ethnic power asymmetry⁷⁴ in Pakistan manifesting itself through the above findings confirms the fundamental narrative of the PTM that the Pashtuns remain the chief victims of terrorism and that the military has been in collusion with terrorists. Besides being the direct sufferers of terrorism and military operations, the people of the erstwhile FATA have also lived under a parallel colonial politico-legal system, the FCR—deprived of fundamental rights. Thus there exists a feeling of ethnic side-stream[ing]⁷⁵—as opposed to main-streaming—among these Pashtuns, as witnessed through the people of Waziristan vocally leading the PTM. In addition, they harbour the perception of being ethnically profiled by most Pakistani and international academic discourses. These discourses cite their ethnic code, Pashtunwali, as a key facilitating mechanism for Islamist terrorists. It is noteworthy that since Pashtunwali predates the Pashtuns' embracing of Islam, it is not based on the religion and is thus secular. It has a strong nationalistic outlook and its tenets require the Pashtuns to defend

their native land under all circumstances. Accordingly, the Pashtuns have waged wars historically against all foreign invaders, such as Alexander the Greek, the Mughals, and the British, who entered their territory given its geo-strategic location as a gateway to India. Therefore, it becomes evident that Pashtunwali has inspired national wars of liberation and could not serve as the inspiration behind religiously motivated, Taliban-style terrorist activities, yet the code and the Pashtuns as an ethnicity have been widely framed and misrepresented as ‘pro-terrorism’.⁷⁶

The Pashtuns, as evident from the PTM’s rhetoric, now wish to be understood empathically, not as the perpetrators of Taliban-style terrorism but rather as the sufferers of it, which is important for correct ascertainment of the blame. Nevertheless, the Pakistani media has been continuing the blackout of the Pashtuns espousing an alternative regional narrative—pre- and post-PTM. Additionally, it is noteworthy that after being portrayed as ‘terrorists’ by the state and its media, the Pashtuns from the ex-FATA upon demanding justice are being dubbed as ‘traitors’⁷⁷ and ‘foreign agents’.⁷⁸ Furthermore, on ethnicity, the tribal Pashtuns’ perception of the terrorists causing socio-cultural damage in their region by taking advantage of the then retained FCR—especially post-September 11, 2001 attacks—entails a tacit role of the military’s policymaking elite that mainly belonged and still belongs to the majority Punjabi ethnicity. Drawing upon the Peshawar Declaration issued in 2011, it is pertinent to mention that the Punjabi Taliban including sectarian elements were more than double the number of the Pashtun Taliban in the ex-FATA. Therefore, Pakistani military personnel sharing province, ethnicity and the characteristically Punjabi anti-India cultural background with the jihadists facilitated the militant-military alliance. Since the erstwhile FATA, particularly, were not a major source of recruitment for the military, it became relatively easier

to disadvantage the ethnic minority people through such an alliance.

As the PTM has pointed out, the Pashtuns have been “caught between the militants and the military for years”,⁷⁹ following exclusion from the GWOT by the Punjabi-dominated security establishment. This ethnic dimension remains under-explored in the literature, which, in turn, raises questions about *power* inherent in the production of *knowledge*, and whether responsible readers should unquestioningly accept knowledge, epistemologically. The strength of this study lies in addressing the terrorism phenomenon from a fresh ethnic perspective, attempting to represent the voices of the subaltern Pashtuns whilst considering them an ethnic *minority*. This is because representation remains an important consideration in the agenda of social research. However, methodological limitations of this study include the use of the convenience sampling technique, and the qualitative research issue concerning broad generalisation. However, it is left to the readers to judge to what extent this research represents the general perceptions prevailing among the tribal Pashtuns, considering the PTM’s internationally propagated narrative. A counter-argument can be put forward against this study by citing certain Pashtuns from the KP province who have served in high positions in Pakistan. However, this may be counter-balanced by the disproportionately high number of Punjabi policymakers in vital state institutions, as *Samad* and *Shah* have confirmed.⁸⁰ Moreover, the majority of the army officers and soldiers having been stationed inside the Pashtun areas are also Punjabi, as mentioned earlier.

Implications for the future include further *primary* research into terrorism in the ex-FATA post-merger considering the role of ethnicity. As the PTM’s *Mohsin Dawar* has been revealing through his articles in *The Washington Post*, the Taliban, after a “secret deal with the military”,

were regrouping and have already embarked on a targeted assassination campaign in the tribal areas post-*Zarb-e-Azb*, since the military had not targeted all terrorists in that Operation, according to research. Based on this, it can be predicted that the erstwhile FATA may once again become a breeding ground of terrorist activity in the near future, especially after the TTP having found sanctuary in Afghanistan. Thus, it is imperative that the prevalent objectifying research lens be reconsidered and the perspectives of the indigenous Pashtuns be taken into account through primary research before arriving at final conclusions regarding regional terrorism.

As evident from this research, it is important to remember that the Punjabi ethnic dominance in Pakistan's military and terrorist organizations is a significant cause behind the terrorism in the Pashtun tribal areas. This ethnic problem manifesting itself as terrorism in non-Punjabi areas has consistently affected not just regional security but also carries international repercussions. This is enabled by the erstwhile FATA having served as a magnet⁸¹ for foreign jihadists such as members of the transnational al-Qaeda and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Haqqani Network, Uzbekistan's Islamic Jihad Union, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Libyan Islamic Fighters Group, and Xinjiang's Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement.⁸² In view of this, international security policymakers are better advised to avoid simplistic and ethnically monolithic conceptions of the Pakistani state that do not help explain its security policy. Rather, since the security policy of the state is intertwined with its ethnic problem, terrorism may not be considered in isolation but as a function of this ethnic dominance, as the findings from this research suggest.

For practical purposes, voices of ethnic minority movements suppressed inside Pakistan such as the PTM may be accorded importance, as Pakistan's official narrative on terrorism carefully avoids ethnic

terminology and is instead vouched in the homogenising language of state nationalism. This can help international policymakers understand and frame terrorism in the crucial region more in line with on-the-ground realities, aiding the shared cause of global peace.

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