

ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 04 No. 02. October-December 2025.Page# 5256-5265
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

Lingering Phenomenon: War against Terror and its Social Impacts on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract
Guided by Carl von Clausewitz's dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means, this study examines the geopolitical origins and enduring regional consequences of the United States-led War on Terror. Initiated in response to the September 2001 attacks, the military campaign in Afghanistan rapidly evolved into a broader strategic effort to secure regional dominance and monitor major powers such as Russia and China. Sharing a porous 2,600-kilometer border and deep cultural, religious, and historical ties with Afghanistan, Pakistan absorbed millions of Afghan refugees an influx that inadvertently enabled Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants to infiltrate the country. Subsequent military operations by Pakistani security forces against these insurgents yielded short-term tactical gains but triggered a prolonged wave of retaliatory terrorism that directly challenged state sovereignty. Among all Pakistani provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) has borne the brunt of this instability due to its geographic proximity and shared sociocultural fabric with Afghanistan. Divided into two core sections, this research first conceptualizes the historical and political framework of the War on Terror, and second, evaluates its severe social, political, and economic impacts on KPK. Highlighting the persistent nature of the crisis evidenced by 1,616 reported fatalities in 2024 alone the study demonstrates how cross-border militancy has devastated local infrastructure, disrupted civilian life, and undermined regional stability. Ultimately, the findings underscore that peace and security in KPK remain inextricably linked to political stability in neighboring Afghanistan.

Key Words: *War, Terrorism, Politics, Economy, Uprising*

1. Introduction

War, says Carl Varl Clausewitz, is a continuation of politics by other means. He believed that states engage in wars to advance political objectives. From Peloponnesian wars in the 5th century to war against terror in the 21st century, the Clausewitz connotation of war still holds ground. The United States unleashed war against terror after Al-Qaida attacked it in September 2001. Although the war was intended against Al-Qaida and its leader Osama bin Laden, who was residing in Afghanistan at the time, the war had greatly affected regional states in general and Pakistan in particular as the war started to gain political advantages in the region. The US led NATO forces installed bases in regional states to keep a close eye on China and Russia. Pakistan, which shares 2600 kms border (Durand Line) with Afghanistan, welcomed millions of Afghan refugees owing to socio- political and economic links between the two states. However, in the guise of refuges, Taliban leaders and members entered Pakistan and started attacking Pakistan's military forces. The situation reached to a appoint that the Taliban challenged sovereignty of Pakistan, forcing Pakistan army to launch operations against the Taliban. These operations proved successful in the short run. However, in the long they proved disastrous as Pakistan was badly hit by terrorist attacks. These attacks still linger on. Of all the regions of Pakistan, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa was badly hit. Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KPK) is sandwiched between Punjab and Afghanistan - safe-haven of Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders. That is why whatever happens in Afghanistan has a direct or indirect effect on the people of KPK. People of KPK and Afghanistan are closely tied with one another on the basis of same culture, traditions, customs and religion. That's why if there is peace or violence in the Afghanistan, people of KPK will affect. For the last two decades or so, Afghanistan has been home to many terrorist and extremist groups. These terrorist groups are carrying out their activities in many parts of Pakistan. The terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan have affected every aspect of the citizens of Pakistan in general and people of KPK in particular. From security forces to common people, from market places to airports, these terrorist groups have left no stone unturned in destroying Pakistan.

This research work examines the historical understanding of War on terror and its incessant impacts on KPK as 1616 fatalities reported only in 2024 (Dawn.com). This research work is divided into two portions: the first portion deals with the concept of war against terrorism, while the second portion describes social, political and economic impacts of war against terror on KPK.

2. Literature Review

Substantial literature is available that helps in understanding the concept of war on terror. Soon after attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), political commentators, journalists, academicians, columnists, etc. wrote comprehensively on the subject. Ahmed Rashid, a prominent scholar has worked a lot on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian region. He is one of the most referred scholars in studying the rise of Taliban. His work Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia (2001), is helpful in tracing the emergence of Taliban (Mujahidin) through the support of ISI and CIA. He has very elaborately explained the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and how a bulk of people supported Taliban regime. His work is also helpful in understanding the impacts of Taliban regime on the region especially on Pakistan. His

work is also helpful in understanding that Taliban and al-Qaeda had engineered terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre in Afghanistan. Neamatollah Nojumi's book The Rise and Fall of Taliban in Afghanistan (2002) analyzes the role of Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI) in creation of Mujahidin. It examines General Zia ul Haq administration role in providing covert support to Mujahidin in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union forces when it invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Salem Shehzad's book Inside Al-Qaeda and Taliban (2011) examines the role played by Pakistan's ISI in covertly supporting the Taliban. His book helps in understanding encroachment of the Taliban and al-Qaeda into Pakistan's and gaining support of local tribal elders and common people. He explains that Tehrik- e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was created from among local young Taliban fighters. The aim of TTP was to target Pakistan's military forces in tribal areas of Pakistan. Another prominent Pakistani writer, Zahid Hussain, is also very relevant in analyzing Pakistan transformation from a sanctioned to a frontline state after "September 11" attacks. In his book Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam (2006), he explains that before "9/11" relations between the US and Pakistan were not cordial over the following reasons: Pakistan's recognition of Taliban's regime in Afghanistan; series of nuclear attacks in 1998; Pervez Musharraf's military coup; and Kargil Conflict. The event of "11 September" provided an opportunity for Pakistan to end its isolation in the international arena and became a front-line non-NATO ally in combating terrorism. The book also helps in understanding rise of religious extremism in Pakistan tribal areas. Abid Ullah Jan, another prominent scholar has highlighted other side of the US invasion of Afghanistan. In his book Afghanistan: Genesis of the Final Crusade (2006) he explains that the phenomenon of "9/11" was pre-planned in order to use it as an excuse to invade Afghanistan. He says that like lies about Saddam's possession of "Weapons of Mass Destruction", 9/11 was used as a pretext for invasion of Afghanistan. He declares that the motive behind US invasion of Afghanistan was not to allow Muslims to live by Islam. He supports his argument by saying that without providing any evidence, the Bush administration openly declared that Osama Bin Laden was the mastermind of attacks on American soil. The Taliban many times demanded the US authorities to provide evidence of Osama's Involvement in September 11 attacks, he says. But the US totally rejected any other alternative and declared that there will be no negotiations or discussions…. no need to discuss innocence or guilt…we know he is guilty, Abid Ullah Jan proclaims in his book. This stance vindicates that wars are waged for political motives (Clauswitizian Model of War). Another critic of US invasion of Afghanistan is Noam Chomsky. In his work, Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in Real World (1986), he argues that War on terror is not a new term rather it was used by President Reagan two decades ago. In a sarcastic way he writes that the US waging wars on others is not terrorism but when others attack the US is declared as terrorism.

Manzoor Ahmed's article War on Terror and its implications for Khyber Pukhtunkhwa is also very helpful in understanding that Talibanization grew in Pakistan tribal areas and how it spread to other areas like Swat, Bannu, Tank, Kohat, D I Khan etc. He further writes that due to military operations in tribal areas, socio-political and economic structures of KPK have been destroyed.

Besides, different interviews have been conducted to understand impacts on KPK. Inquiring about continuous war and its impacts on KPK, Professor Muhammad Ibrahim – provincial Amir

of Jamaat-e- Islami, said that people of KPK were still facing consequences of the war imposed on them. He added that residents of KPK-especially the southern belt- were not secured as Police failed to maintain law and order situation. He also added that due to war on terror the role of Army has been increased manifold enabling them to encroach into civilian domains leading to further alienation of common people in the region.

3. War Against Terror: A Historical Spectrum

War against terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and The Taliban did not commence after attacks on World Trade Center(9/11). The US and its allies received wrath of these groups well before 9/11. Between 1991 and 1996, Al-Qaeda was involved in several major terrorist attacks. The organization participated in bombings at two hotels in Aden, Yemen, targeting U.S. military personnel who were en route to Somalia for humanitarian and peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda provided significant assistance to Somali militias, whose actions ultimately led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia in 1994. In June 1995, Osama bin Laden was also involved in an assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia. The November 1995 attack in Riyadh and the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia—both major terrorist operations targeting U.S. forces stationed in Saudi Arabia—were also consistent with Al-Qaeda's strategy at the time. In August 1998, Al-Qaeda carried out bombings against two U.S. embassies in East Africa (in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), resulting in the deaths of over 200 people, including 12 Americans. That same year, Bin Laden issued a directive declaring: "Kill Americans wherever you find them." Consequently, the United States began awaiting the right opportunity to launch an all-out war against Al-Qaeda and similar forces.

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center provided such a turning point. On the morning of September 11, 2001, 19 hijackers seized control of four commercial airliners that had departed from airports along the U.S. East Coast. Two of the planes were deliberately flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, while a third struck the Pentagon in Virginia. The fourth plane failed to reach its intended target and crashed in Pennsylvania; it is believed that the passengers and crew on board had overpowered the hijackers and regained control of the aircraft. In total, these events claimed the lives of 3,000 people. (BBC)

Based on Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's prior involvement in attacks on U.S. embassies, U.S. intelligence agencies identified him as the mastermind behind these attacks. In an address to a joint session of Congress, U.S. President George W. Bush declared: "On September 11, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country." Describing these events, he stated: "We are at war with a new and different kind of enemy.". (George W. Bush "Address before joint session of congress on United States).

President Bush also accused the Taliban regime of committing atrocities against its own people, stating: "The people of Afghanistan have suffered terribly—many are starving, and countless others have been forced to flee their homes. Women are denied access to education. People can be thrown into prison simply for owning a television set. Religious practice is permitted only as dictated by the regime's leaders. In Afghanistan, a man can even be imprisoned if his beard is not long enough. The United States respects the Afghan people—after all, we are

currently the largest provider of humanitarian aid to the country—but we condemn the Taliban regime. It not only oppresses its own people but also poses a threat to people across the globe." The Bush administration gave Taliban the following ultimatum: *"Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned*.

When Taliban did not meet these demands, the US and its western allies waged a war against Al-Qaeda and Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The western forces led by the US soon succeeded in overthrowing the Taliban government and soon destroyed all sanctuaries of terrorist organizations. The terrorists were either killed or fled other side of border i.e. Pakistan. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, was installed as the interim President of Afghanistan.

Pakistan: From Sanctioned to a Front-line State

Pakistan also condemned the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and expressed its deepest condolences to the American people. Relations between Washington and Islamabad were not particularly harmonious following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—and especially after Pakistan granted recognition to the Taliban regime. Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime, the others being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Washington had warned Islamabad to sever its military, diplomatic, economic, and political ties with the Taliban—a regime that, during its violent rule in Afghanistan (1996–2001), provided a safe haven for Al-Qaeda and rejected U.S. demands to hand over Osama bin Laden.

On May 28, 1998, Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, straining relations between Washington and Islamabad. The then-U.S. President Bill Clinton condemned Pakistan's nuclear testing and its excessive pursuit of nuclear technology, imposing economic sanctions that blocked the country from accessing billions of dollars in loans from multilateral institutions. The Kargil conflict also ended in defeat for Pakistan; the United States publicly accused Pakistan of instigating the war and imposed an arms embargo on both India and Pakistan. Furthermore, the U.S. compelled the Pakistani military to withdraw from the region. Pervez Musharraf military coup also angered the US authorities and imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan. The US and other western countries strongly condemned Musharraf's move as they believed that it will further undermine democracy in Pakistan.

Consequently, the 9/11 attacks served as yet another turning point in the relationship between Pakistan and the United States. Once again, Pakistan found itself at the center of the international stage—a situation reminiscent of the period surrounding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Previously, Pakistan had faced condemnation from Western leaders, particularly those in the United States, due to the events; however, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it underwent a transformation, becoming a valued partner to the United States. By virtue of its geographical location, its cultural ties to Afghanistan, and the historical role it played in the rise of the Taliban, Pakistan shifted from a nation under sanctions to a key U.S. ally in the fight against terrorist organizations within Afghanistan. Geographically, Pakistan shares a 2,640-kilometer border with Afghanistan, known as the "Durand Line." As a result, Pakistan was tasked with both providing bases for U.S. forces and preventing terrorists from entering its own territory.

Culturally, there are ethnic links between Pakistan's northern provinces and southern Afghanistan—the populations in both regions are ethnically Pashtun. Historically, Pakistan had provided military and economic support to the Taliban, aiding them in their struggle against the "Northern Alliance"—a coalition of various warlords within Afghanistan.

Given Pakistan's importance, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush issued an ultimatum to President Musharraf: "Either you are with us, or you are against us." President Musharraf faced a difficult dilemma: continue supporting the Taliban, or join the Western camp to help eradicate these malevolent forces. Ultimately, President Musharraf joined the U.S.-led war on terror. Defending his decision, Pervez Musharraf stated: "Any other response could have resulted in Pakistan being bombed, its nuclear facilities being threatened, and the establishment of military bases in India—its arch-rival". Afreen Baig (2008).

4. Wave of Terrorism in Pakistan

When the US invaded Afghanistan, Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders fled to Pakistan areas of FATA and Baluchistan and owed to wage war against the state of Pakistan. Pakistan since then has been facing severe problems due to this war and is considered to be one of the most affected countries in the war against terror. Discussing the wave of terrorism in Pakistan, Umbreen Javed says "'Pakistan itself has fallen prey to so-called "Pakistani Taliban", trained in "madrasas" or religious schools in the country's tribal belt, these "home grown" Pakistani militants have expanded their presence and influence in the heartland, Umbreen Javed (2011). The Taliban leaders which fled Pakistan were welcomed by the local Pashtuns. Many Taliban leaders which were previously recruited from Madrassahs in Pakistan returned to their families. The JUI-F party which had won elections in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and Baluchistan welcomed and supported Taliban leaders.

The wave of Talibanisation in Pakistan was not felt till 2004 and Pakistan's Army and ISI did not take serious steps in controlling these evil forces. The Pakistani security forces were taken by surprise when in March 2004 Taliban in South Waziristan, under the command of Nek Muhammad killed about 200 soldiers. Beside this, around 300 tribal elders were also executed who did not support local Taliban. In just three years, Taliban in Pakistan got so much stronger that Army was forced to sign a peace deal with them in South Waziristan. The peace deal only encouraged the Taliban and took advantage of political chaos in the country, they declared a full fledge War against the state of Pakistan. By 2007, 1500 Pakistani soldiers and policemen had lost their lives. Since the many military operations have been launched. While these operations have deterred threats posed by the Taliban, they have also long-lasting consequences for the people of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa.

5. Social Impacts on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Owing to social, political, geographical and cultural affiliation, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa has been severely impacted by the war against terror. These impacts are highlighted in the lines to follow.

5.1. Social Impacts:

Due to proximity with North Waziristan Agency, KPK has been badly damaged by war against terror resulting in loss of many innocent people. Besides this, many heinous attacks on

Police stations have led to insecurity among the people. Socially, people of KPK have been affected in the following ways.

5.2. Volatile Security Situation

The foremost impact of terrorism on the people of KPK is volatile security situation. Due to close proximity with North Waziristan and other tribal agencies, people of KPK are always at risk of losing their lives. The Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs), particularly Police, are unable to secure lives and properties of the people as they themselves have been regularly targeted by terrorist groups. Some of the attacks on the Police in recent years are given below.

- The first major blow to the Police was when DIG Abid Ali was attacked by terrorist while he was on his way from Bannu to Peshawar. He was one of the courageous Police officers and stood firmly against terrorist groups. He had received many threatening calls from Taliban, but he continuously searched after them without any deterrence. His loss had severe consequences as people felt insecure.
- Another major blow to the Police department was in 2007, when a suicide bomber exploded himself near Police Check post in Lakki Marwat. At least 16 people including four policemen were killed.
- In 2008, terrorists bombed Police vehicle in Bannu, resulting in killing of nine people including four Policemen. In this attack sixteen by-standers were also injured.

The attacks on police in KPK continue till today as police stations have been bombed from Peshawar to D.I Khan (Khorasan Diary). Till today, no police station is secured in KPK specifically the South belt of the province.

5.3. Impacts on Educational Sector:

Terrorists and their extremist ideology are against modern western and female education. They spare no stone unturned in the education system. While the entire country has been affected due to such ideology, KPK has been at the top of the list.

- Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban and later became the youngest Nobel Peace laureate, narrates her story in the following way: “I loved school. But everything changed when the Taliban took control of our town in Swat Valley. The extremists banned many things — like owning a television and playing music — and enforced harsh punishments for those who defied their orders. And they said girls could no longer go to school”. (Malala Fund). This is the story of every girl in KPK.
- Another devastating episode was terrorist attack on Army Public School in Peshawar on 16 December,2014. The attack resulted in the loss of about 150 children. The entire nation mourned the loss of innocent souls. The bereaved families have yet to recover from that trauma.

The enemies of education continue to attack girls education where school buildings are destroyed from North Waziristan to Khyber, From D.I Khan to Chitral.

5.4. Impacts on Sports and other Recreational Activities:

Another social impact on the people of KPK is that since war on terror, most of the sports and other recreational activities have been banned. After emergence of Taliban, Pakistan Army created its bases in KPK. Since then, all cricket and football grounds have been closed by Pakistan Army. Similarly, people have lost interests in games such Kabaddi and Volleyball because if they gather, terrorist groups attack them leading to loss of lives. For example, a suicide bomber blew himself when two teams were facing each other in a volleyball match

5.5. Impacts on Culture and identity of Pashtun People:

The War on Terror and prolonged militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)—including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—have profoundly disrupted the traditional social fabric, cultural practices, and identity of the Pashtun people. The traditional code of *Pakhtunwali*—built on pillars like *Melmastia* (hospitality), *Badal* (revenge or justice), and the authority of the *Jirga* (council of elders)—has been severely strained or co-opted by militant networks and prolonged state-military conflict. Similarly, Militancy and counter-terrorism measures led to the shrinking or outright prohibition of traditional cultural practices, including public music, local festivals, dance, and poetry recitals.

Due to War against terror, Pashtuns are also facing identity issues. Most of the times, Pashtuns face racial profiling and alienation in other parts of the country. In the same way, Large-scale internal displacement (Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs) forced rural tribal populations into unfamiliar urban centers, breaking down traditional communal cohesion and shifting family structures. (Khalid,2020).

5.6. Social Movements

In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), prolonged armed conflict, terrorism, and large-scale military operations have given rise to various grassroots, non-violent social movements advocating for peace, constitutional rights, and the protection of civilians. The most prominent among these is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—which evolved from the "Mahsud Tahafuz Movement" (established in 2014) and expanded significantly in 2018. The PTM has mobilized thousands of Pashtuns, demanding the removal of landmines, an end to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and accountability for human rights violations committed during counter-terrorism operations. Meanwhile, the recent resurgence of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has spurred the emergence of several local civic resistance movements, such as the "Swat Olasi Pasoon," "Aman Pasoon, (Peace Uprising) " the "Swat Qaumi Jirga," and the "Orakzai Peace Movement." Furthermore, in Bannu and Lakki Marwat, many people regularly organize Aman Pasoons against terrorist acts.

5.7. Forced Displacement

In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), terrorist activities and counter-militancy operations triggered large-scale

internal displacement—with the number of displaced persons reaching a peak of approximately 3 million around 2009. Local residents were forced to flee their homes to escape violence, shelling, and the destruction of their communities, schools, and medical facilities. These displaced families faced severe economic hardship, limited access to basic services, psychological trauma—including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—and a range of protection-related challenges.

6. Way Forward and Recommendations

To address the long-term social impacts of the “war on terror” in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it is necessary to shift from purely military operations to a comprehensive and people-centered peacebuilding strategy.

i. Institutionalizing mental health support: Integrating "trauma-informed" psychological care into local healthcare systems to address and heal the intergenerational trauma, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from prolonged violence and displacement.

ii. Rebuild educational infrastructure: prioritize the reconstruction of damaged schools—with a particular focus on girls' education—and reform the curriculum to foster critical thinking, pluralism, and peace.

iii. Revitalizing the local economy: Ensure that development funds are disbursed transparently and in a timely manner to the consolidated tribal administrative districts, while simultaneously expanding vocational training, microfinance, and youth employment opportunities to address the challenges of economic marginalization.

iv. Expand deradicalization programs: Scale up rehabilitation and counseling initiatives—such as the "Sabaoon" rehabilitation program—to assist former militants and high-risk youth in reintegrating into society and becoming contributing citizens.

v. Strengthening traditional social structures: Empowering and modernizing Pashtun’s existing social structures—such as the Jirga and Hujra—to foster inclusive and community-led conflict resolution mechanisms and rebuild social cohesion.

vi. Advancing police modernization and strengthening accountability mechanisms: Equipping the police force and its counter-terrorism department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with forensic tools, while implementing community policing strategies to maintain public order without creating a rift with the local population.

vii. Addressing the trust deficit between the state and its citizens: ensuring transparent civilian governance, safeguarding human rights, and responding to the grievances of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to prevent extremists from exploiting local frustrations.

viii. Strengthening regional diplomacy and border management: Combine strict yet humane border controls along the Durand Line with constructive regional diplomacy to eliminate safe havens for cross-border militants.

7. Conclusion

The war on terror has left a deep and lasting social imprint on the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, damaging community cohesion, disrupting intergenerational education, and causing severe psychological trauma to millions. Prolonged armed conflict and large-scale displacement have eroded traditional Pashtun social structures, such as the council of elders (Jirga) and the council (Hujra), while infrastructure damage and economic stagnation have left an entire generation facing unemployment and alienation. Overcoming these lasting wounds requires moving beyond temporary security measures and instead investing continuously in mental health, inclusive education, and responsible civil governance. Only by restoring social structures and empowering a resilient generation of young people can the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region transform from a conflict-ravaged area into a beacon of lasting peace and stability.

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