



DURAND DISPATCH

Cutting Through The Noise

Militancy, Terrorism & Security in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region

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IN THE NEWS



THE IVORY EDGE



THE LOCAL LENS



MILITANT MESSAGE BOARD



MISCELLANEOUS





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In the News

Regional

Escalating Violence in Balochistan & Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP): February witnessed a series of violent incidents in Balochistan, Pakistan linked to the [Balochistan Liberation Army \(BLA\)](#), including an attack which killed [18 soldiers](#). In another incident, ten were killed in an [IED attack](#), while BLA targeted civilians directly by intercepting a [bus](#) in Barkhan district, killing seven passengers. The BLA's [Majid Brigade](#) suffered a serious blow when senior commander 'Kohi' was assassinated in Afghanistan by an unidentified assailant, indicating internal discord while raising concerns about BLA members' presence in Afghanistan. Additionally, a [suicide blast](#) at Darul Uloom [Haqqania](#) in Akora Khattak, KP, killed six people, including seminary head Maulana Hamidul Haq Haqqani. The mosque is a [prominent institution](#) within the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, and known for having educated several Taliban leaders. **Implications:** An increasingly hostile environment in Pakistan, with [1600 civilians](#) and security personnel killed in 2024 alone; Surge in separatist-ethnic, anti-state and sectarian violence; Threats to [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#), particularly the critical Gwadar port; Concerns about cross-border militant networks/rivalries; Deteriorating Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Pakistan Security Operations: Pakistan intensified intelligence-based operations against militants in February 2025, primarily in Balochistan and KP provinces, placing [bounties](#) on high-value militant targets to accelerate their capture. For example: Two operations resulted in [15 militants killed](#) in the KP region, while [12 Tehrik-e-Taliban \(TTP\)](#) members were targeted in North Waziristan in early February. Additionally, [18 militants](#) and two facilitators were arrested in Lower Kurram, KP after a house raid. These operations, while demonstrating Pakistan's commitment to counterterrorism efforts, entail high human costs, with [685 security](#) personnel lost during counterterrorism operations in 2024. **Implications:** Pakistan's multi-front battle against the BLA, TTP and ISKP comes with heavy losses for Pakistani security forces, and risks overextension of the country's resources; High-intensity operations risk inflaming local grievances, potentially creating new militant recruitment opportunities; Pakistan's security challenges directly impact regional stability and influence its relationships with both Afghanistan and China.

Islamic State Khorasan Province Operations: ISKP remained active in February, claiming a [suicide attack](#) that killed eight outside of a bank in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing and injuring dozens of Taliban members. ISKP was also [linked](#) to another [suicide attack](#) near Kabul at the Afghan Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, where the assailant and a security guard were killed. The Taliban continue to publicize their counter-ISKP efforts, recently [claiming](#) the dismantling of an ISKP cell.



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In the News

Implications: As the [primary](#) anti-Taliban militant force, ISKP [continues](#) with its strategy of executing high-profile [targeted attacks](#) and assassinations of Taliban officials and [religious](#) leaders, as exemplified by the [attack](#) that killed Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani in 2024. The ongoing ISKP threat raises three significant concerns: The group's continued expansion; Potential to attract foreign fighters; Limitations in the Taliban's counterterrorism capabilities.

Iran & Pakistan Afghan Refugee Expulsion: Iran and Pakistan intensified their repatriation efforts targeting Afghans seeking refuge in their countries. Iranian authorities reportedly arrested [172](#) refugees in Zabul, Sistan, and Baluchestan, while in Pakistan, 120 Afghan families among others were [returned](#) to Afghanistan. In Iran, [700 small businesses](#) owned by Afghan migrants have been [shut down](#) in Qeshm Island under the country's wider [campaign of](#) managing foreign nationals. Pakistani authorities also escalated efforts to [arrest](#) Afghan nationals, while [relaying](#) to the United States that Afghans awaiting resettlement would be deported to Afghanistan if their U.S. relocation deadline passed. **Implications:** The coordinated deportation campaigns by Iran and Pakistan suggest regional alignment in addressing Afghan refugee populations with both governments [concerned](#) about potential militant elements among refugee populations; Significant humanitarian challenges as vulnerable Afghans face uncertain futures under Taliban governance; Aid organizations face growing challenges in protecting refugee populations as host countries prioritize domestic concerns over humanitarian obligations.

Durand Line Tensions: Pakistan has tightened pressure on the Taliban, including [border closures](#), disrupting trade and travel. The Torkham border closure, per Pakistani officials, was triggered by Afghan authorities' illegal [attempts](#) to build a post on the Pakistani side of the border. The closure, costing \$3 million daily, embodies two critical issues: Islamabad's growing frustration with Kabul's inaction against the TTP and legitimacy of the Durand Line. This frustration is well-founded, as the latest [UN report](#) suggests, the Taliban have continued to provide sanctuary and support to TTP members, including a monthly amount of [\\$43,000](#) provided to TTP Emir, Noor Wali Mehsud's family. The report also discusses the TTP's establishment of [new training camps](#) in Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Pakitka provinces. **Implications:** Pakistan's longstanding assertions about cross-border terrorism receive validation; Failure of diplomatic engagement and Pakistani pressure to modify the Taliban behavior; Likely to result in more aggressive measures by Pakistan; A prolonged conflict along the Durand Line could destabilize an already volatile region.



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In the News

International

Islamic State-Linked Arrest: U.S. authorities apprehended [Mansuri Manuchekhari](#), a Tajik national residing illegally in Brooklyn, New York. Manuchekhari is accused of conspiring to provide material support to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and ISKP, facilitating approximately \$70,000 in transfers to affiliates in Turkey and Syria. This arrest follows the [New Orleans attack](#) in January, where Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a 42-year-old U.S. Army veteran inspired by ISIS, carried out an attack killing 15, heightening concerns about the threat of attacks inspired by terrorist propaganda in Western countries. Meanwhile, in [Germany](#), a court sentenced two Afghan nationals for planning an attack on the Swedish parliament on behalf of ISKP, and in the U.K. a 35 year old woman was [found guilty](#) of terrorism offenses with plans to travel and join ISKP in Afghanistan. A [recent report](#) highlights the vast digital ecosystem of unofficial Islamic State supporters—many of them minors—who disseminate propaganda, evade content takedowns, and sustain the group's global reach. **Implications:** Highlights risks regarding: Islamic State's media infrastructure; ISKP's efforts to [extend](#) its influence beyond Afghanistan; Risks associated with online radicalization and recruitment; Gendered recruitment; ISIS global [funding](#) channels.

UN Report Raises International Security Concerns: The February [UN report](#) underscores Afghanistan's role as a hub for terrorist activity, with ISKP identified as the most pressing threat due to its operational reach beyond Afghanistan, targeting Central Asia, Iran, and Europe. ISKP continues to recruit fighters and expand its network, leveraging dissatisfaction among ethnic groups in northern Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Al-Qaida, TTP, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement / Turkistan Islamic Party, and Jamaat Ansarullah, maintain training camps and safe houses across the country. The TTP, in particular, has ramped up cross-border attacks in Pakistan, highlighting the Taliban's continued permissiveness toward select militant groups. **Implications:** Afghanistan risks becoming a renewed epicenter for transnational terrorism; Taliban's inability or unwillingness to constrain these groups validates concerns about their counterterrorism commitments; ISKP's reach presents an evolving threat to Western interests; Collaboration between militant factions within Afghanistan could create more resilient networks.

Internal Dissent Amidst International Criminal Court (ICC) Arrest Warrants: In January, ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC announced the submission of arrest [warrant applications](#) for Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani. The charges allege crimes against humanity, specifically persecution on gender grounds, which the Taliban [dismissed](#) as baseless and politically motivated allegations.



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Internal Dissent Amidst International Criminal Court (ICC) Arrest Warrants: In February, internal dissent emerged when Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai publicly criticized the ban on girls' education, leading to his [reported departure](#) from Afghanistan. **Implications:** The convergence of international legal pressure and internal dissent potentially signals deepening fractures within the Taliban's leadership. Stanikzai's public break with the regime's education policies—a core ideological position—suggests ongoing factional tensions regarding governance philosophy and international engagement. These divisions could weaken the Taliban's cohesion at a time when they face mounting security and legitimacy challenges.

Foreign Aid Cuts: U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) cuts have put Afghan civilians at grave risk of losing many [essential services](#). Since the 2021 withdrawal, the U.S. has made available [\\$21 billion in aid](#) primarily for food and health services. Slashing an already restricted aid [budget](#) in addition to existing [financial pressure](#) will worsen the humanitarian and security environment in Afghanistan, where [two thirds](#) of the population is estimated to be in need of urgent assistance. Particularly detrimental effects are likely for women's reproductive health initiatives in a country already known as one of the [“deadliest places in the world for women to give birth.”](#) Meanwhile, China has emphasized it will continue its [economic](#) support to the Taliban. **Implications:** Reduction in critical aid threatens to accelerate Afghanistan's severe humanitarian crisis, and trigger a cascade of consequences: Deterioration in human security conditions; Significant increases in maternal and infant mortality rates; Vulnerable populations increasingly susceptible to both Taliban repression and extremist recruitment; China's growing economic engagement likely to diminish Western influence over Afghanistan's future trajectory.

US-Taliban Equipment Bargain: Following the 2021 U.S. military withdrawal, the Taliban seized an [estimated](#) 78 aircraft, 40,000 military vehicles and over 300,000 abandoned weapons valued at [\\$7.12 billion](#). President Trump has [demanded](#) their return, which the Taliban claim are [assets of Afghanistan](#). The arsenal has boosted the Taliban's military capabilities but has also reportedly been sold to violent [non-state actors](#). Perhaps confident that the West remains focused on great power politics, the Taliban appear to be leveraging the equipment as a [bargaining](#) chip to influence future discussions. The Taliban signaled their hope to reset relations, potentially using the weaponry or [untapped mineral reserves](#) as leverage, which has already attracted investors like China and Russia. **Implications:** Shapes future U.S.-Taliban negotiations; Impacts regional military balance; Creates domestic political pressure in U.S.; Concerns about equipment misuse.



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The Ivory Edge

Strategic Decapitation: Operational and Perceptual Effects

Leadership decapitation—[targeting](#) key figures within militant groups—often makes headlines as a counterterrorism strategy. But does it work? How does removing top commanders affect a group’s operations, and what implications does it have for states battling militancy? [Leadership decapitation](#) aims to disrupt the enemy's command structure, hinder its operational capacity, and ultimately [weaken](#) the organization. But targeting decisions matter on two fronts – operationally and perceptually –as they impact both the perceived legitimacy of governments as well as the safety of civilians. Recent analyses, using the case of Afghanistan, show that outcomes vary depending on both who gets targeted, and who orchestrates these operations.

Not All Leaders are Equal: Removing lower-tier leaders—those embedded most closely with frontline fighters—can [provoke](#) unpredictable or heavy-handed attacks against civilian populations, while eliminating higher-tier leaders tends to weaken a group’s capacity for large-scale strikes. This is the insight of [Targeting Quality or Quantity?](#) which examines how targeting each “rank” of ISKP leadership altered the group’s operational behavior. By tracking district-level data from 2015–2019 in Afghanistan, the study reveals that the disruption of top-tier strategists leads to a tangible drop in the group’s attacks, whereas removing local commanders closer to the ground can incite short-term spikes in retaliatory attacks especially against civilians.

Who Executes the Strategy Matters: Another study, [Winning or Losing Hearts and Minds](#) shows that removing militant leaders has repercussions beyond merely reducing violence—it also alters how civilians perceive the government’s capacity to protect them. Linking national survey data on Afghan attitudes with data on top-level strikes against ISKP (2015-2018), the study finds that all targeted strikes reduced perceptions of the militants’ strength, and when Afghan forces led such operations, local confidence in the government’s security performance increased. In other words, successful operations appeared to sway public perceptions of the government’s strength and resolve favorably. The key takeaway? Who is perceived to lead successful efforts can be just as important for winning public trust as who gets targeted.



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The Ivory Edge

Lessons for Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy

Targeting Priorities: Pakistan should focus on high-tier militant leadership to weaken operational capacity, exercising caution when targeting lower-level commanders in populated areas. Mapping organizational hierarchies to distinguish between strategic decapitation and tactical disruption operations could enable more precise outcome prediction.

Domestic Legitimacy: Successful domestically-led operations against high-profile targets may demonstrate state capability and shift local perceptions in favor of government actors and security forces. Operations perceived to be influenced by external actors—especially in regions where government authority remains contested—through foreign assistance, weaponry or training—could generate greater public distrust, which armed extremist groups can exploit. Planned targeting of lower-tier leaders should be accompanied by civilian protection measures, including enhanced security presence and clear communication with affected communities.

Cross-Border Complications: Pakistan faces the challenge of militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan, and illegal cross-border movement. This necessitates targeted diplomatic engagement to prevent leadership regeneration following successful operations, focusing on intelligence sharing rather than comprehensive border control.

Pakistan: January-February 2025 Attacks by Actor (Source: ACLED)





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The Local Lens

A Generation at Risk: Afghanistan's Educational Future

While the world has condemned the Taliban's [exclusion](#) of 1.4 million Afghan girls from education, which has entailed severe [economic](#) and [mental](#) health consequences, an equally destructive transformation is occurring in boys' education. Behind classroom doors that remain open for male students, academic curricula are being systematically [hollowed](#) out, replaced by religious education that prioritizes ideological conformity over critical thinking. This twin catastrophe represents a coordinated dismantling of Afghanistan's future that is likely to leave the country intellectually impoverished for years. Immediately after taking power, the Taliban [banned](#) girls from secondary education and issued directives to align curriculum with "Islamic values"—a euphemism for their rigid [ideology](#). Between September 2024 and January 2025 alone, the Taliban [initiated](#) 41 religious madrassas across multiple provinces, while also [converting](#) secular schools, universities, and training centers into religious seminaries.

Boys' Education in Crisis: The Taliban's [dismissal](#) of female teachers, use of corporal punishment and [Talibanization](#) of the curriculum have gravely undermined boys' education in the country. Following the expulsion of female educators from boys' institutions, Afghanistan faces a critical instructor [vacuum](#) that forces remaining teachers to juggle up to four distinct subjects—many in fields where they possess no training or background knowledge. This educational malpractice virtually guarantees substandard learning outcomes. Lessons now contain high levels of [religious propaganda](#) at the expense of academic subjects. Students report that many teachers encourage [religious chants](#) (Zikr) instead of teaching actual curriculum. The use of corporal [punishment](#)—for arbitrary offenses like choice of hairstyle, clothing style, and possession of mobile phones—has created an environment of fear and anxiety. This has led many to abandon school altogether, while impoverished families choose [child labor](#) over education. The Taliban have also altered [employment](#) criteria within public service sectors, prioritizing certificates from religious schools and a history of combat experience with the Taliban over proficiency in English and computer literacy. This change is prompting many young Afghans to abandon their studies and seek opportunities abroad.

A Generation at Risk: Girls' schools remain closed while boys' schools appear to function as religious indoctrination centers. This educational dismantling threatens to create a generation lacking skills for development and governance, entrenching cycles of poverty and extremism for decades. While restoring girls' education remains critical, the deterioration of boys' education demands equal focus to prevent the loss of an entire generation's potential.



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The Militant Message Board

Tehrik-i-Taliban In January and February, the TTP was linked to about 77 and 51 attacks, respectively in Pakistan, based on data from [ACLED](#). However, the group claimed to have [conducted 110](#) attacks in January alone. TTP's messaging included multiple [fighter](#) eulogies (including [three commanders](#)), anti-state [statements](#), and interestingly, signs of factional discord. Infighting appears linked to the activities of [Jamaat-ul-Ahrar \(JuA\)](#). JuA initially broke away from TTP in 2014 but [rejoined](#) in 2020 as part of a broader trend of factional consolidation which has seen over 70 [militant factions](#) join hands with TTP. JuA recently [reactivated](#) its propaganda arm – Ghazi Media – which had been [suspended](#) since JuA's recent reconciliation with TTP. The reactivation of Ghazi Media appears to challenge TTP's media monopoly (Umar Media), suggesting JuA may be reasserting its independent identity. This media divergence likely stems from unresolved tensions dating back to [2022](#), when JuA leadership accused TTP of involvement in the assassination of their leader, Omar Khalid Khurasani.

Islamic State Khorasan In February, ISKP was linked to two suicide operations in Afghanistan as noted above, amid denouncements of the Taliban. As a part of their ongoing anti-Taliban [campaign](#), Al-Azaim released at least two videos, including one entitled, [Revenge of the Innocent Children](#), and [another](#) castigating the Taliban's [cooperation](#) with the international community, further publicized in Islamic State's weekly [Al-Naba magazine](#). Accusing the Taliban of religious heresy, ISKP also condemned their bans on Salafi scholarship, ongoing crackdown on Salafi [madrasas](#). Most recently, Iran sent its foreign minister to Kabul to discuss refugee and water security [issues](#), while the Taliban engaged with [Germany](#) and [Japan](#).

Future Monitor Jabhaat Al-Ribaat, a relatively new entity promoting anti-Taliban and anti-Western [rhetoric](#), published a tweet through their media wing, [Al-Dukhan](#), [inviting](#) Deputy Foreign Minister, Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai, to join its ranks. [Stanikzai](#) recently criticized the Taliban's policies [regarding](#) women's education, [fleeing](#) to the UAE, indicative of a [deepening](#) schism between Taliban factions. In addition, the Massoud Foundation, associated with the [National Resistance Front of Afghanistan](#) (NRF), an armed resistance group active in Afghanistan, published the first edition of a new publication, called ['Resistance.'](#)



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Miscellaneous

Official Reports

- [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report, January 30, 2025](#)
- [UN Report, Thirty-fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring, February 6, 2025](#)

Security & Governance

- [Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, February 6, 2025](#)
- [Inside the Taliban's Surveillance Network Monitoring Millions, Mahjooba Nowrouzi, BBC Afghan Service, February 2025.](#)
- [Migrating Poppy Cultivation: Afghan Poppy Farmers in Balochistan, Jelena Bjelica and Nur Khan Himmat, Afghan Analysts Network, February 23, 2025](#)
- [Taliban Withdraw Afghanistan from International Criminal Court, Ayaz Gul, Voice of America, February 20, 2025](#)
- [Taliban Declares End To Doha Agreement With The United States, RFE/RL Radio Azadi, February 28, 2025](#)

Militancy & Extremism

- [Deciphering a Potential Revival of the Islamic State, Kabir Taneja, ORF, February 18, 2025](#)
- [Teenage Terrorists and the Digital Ecosystem of the Islamic State, Moustafa Ayad, CTC Sentinel, February 2025, Volume 18, Issue 2](#)
- [Combating Islamic State Finance: Central Asia and Around the World, Adam Rousselle, February 19, 2025](#)
- [Turkistan Islamic Party Criticises Chinese Imperialism, Calls for Cooperation, Riccardo Valle, Militancy Chowk, February 25, 2025](#)

