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# Effects of Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderlands Instability on Stability and Security in Pakistan

Rapid Literature Review  
July 2024

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## About this report

This rapid review is based on 26.5 days of desk-based research. It was prepared for the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not represent the opinions or views of XCEPT, the UK government, the University of Birmingham, the GSDRC or partner organisations.

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## 1. Summary

**This rapid literature review looks at Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands instability and the wider impact of this on security and stability in Pakistan.** It focuses on how borderlands instability – in particular, recent developments – play into existing tensions in Pakistan, notably violent extremism and separatist movements across the country. It also examines the state’s response: the factors that determine (or constrain) this and the impact on local borderland communities. A final aspect is the links between serious and organised crime in the borderlands and at national level. The review draws on a mixture of academic and grey literature, as well as media reports.<sup>1</sup>

### Background: roots of the crisis

**Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has been riven by ethnic, linguistic, religious and sectarian tensions,** manifested, for example, in violent extremism and insurgency in Balochistan (see below). At the same time, a weak governance foundation and ongoing tension with its neighbour India have contributed to a military-dominated state. Pakistan has failed to fulfil its potential and is now in economic crisis. It is also among the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, seen already in frequent disasters.

**The Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands have historically been characterised by tension and hostilities.** These have long-standing roots. Afghanistan has never recognised the Durand Line, which demarcates the border between the two countries. Local communities living on either side of the border have strong kinship, ethnic and other ties; they see the border as an ‘informal boundary’.

**On the Pakistan side of the border, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)** have traditionally been a deprived region of the country, reflected in very poor human development indicators. For years, they were outside the legal framework of the rest of Pakistan; the local population is highly conservative (fundamentalist); and the region is remote, with difficult terrain, making it hard to control militarily. All these factors explain why **the tribal belt has long been a hub for extremist groups,** most recently the Taliban/foreign fighters who fled there from Afghanistan post-9/11.

**Violent extremism and terrorism originating in the borderlands has targeted tens of thousands of people across Pakistan,** particularly since the US-led war in Afghanistan. This has been a major security challenge for Pakistan. In 2014, the Pakistan military carried out a large-scale offensive in the region, which succeeded in driving many militants out. But this came at a huge cost for local communities (civilian losses, destruction of property, crops, etc.), fuelling resentment against the state.

Balochistan also neighbours Afghanistan. It is Pakistan’s largest province and is rich in natural resources, but has the smallest population. **Balochis have long-standing grievances against the Pakistani state.** Initially, these stemmed from **perceptions that the state was exploiting the province’s resources while**

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<sup>1</sup> The search strategy for this rapid literature review draws on initial searches on Google Scholar and Google using various combinations of the core search terms: Pakistan, Afghanistan, border, borderlands, instability, conflict, extremism, separatism, crime, and serious and organised crime. Subsequent searches focused on specific sub-issues, combining some of the core search terms with some of the following terms: extremism, separatist groups, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISKP, Balochistan, Baloch insurgency, Balochistan Liberation Army, civil society, protests, Ulasi Pashoon, Af-Pak relations, borderland communities, migration, deportation, serious and organised crime, organised crime, soc, crime, smuggling, financial crimes, corruption, trafficking, and natural resources. Literature was also identified through snowballing and expert input, including drawing on a list of papers provided by the commissioning organisation XCEPT.

**neglecting its people.** This led to the ongoing armed insurgency, with demands for greater provincial autonomy/independence. Pakistan's response has been to crush any insurgency by force, with widespread human rights abuses. This has compounded anger among Balochis.

### **Borderlands instability: recent developments**

**In August 2021, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan.** This was expected to be beneficial for Pakistan, a long-standing 'patron' of the Afghan Taliban. However, in reality **Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have become increasingly strained.** As well as the historic dispute over the Durand Line, Pakistan has been angered by the Taliban government's failure to act against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) group (see below) and by the government's ties to rival India.

**The TTP benefitted from the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan,** gaining a safe haven from which to operate. The group seeks to establish a similar fundamentalist regime in Pakistan. Post-August 2021, TTP attacks have increased significantly across Pakistan; it has also become more discriminating, targeting security services rather than civilians. In addition, the group has expressed support for other anti-state movements in Pakistan, in particular Balochistan. A number of Baloch jihadist groups have joined the group; **despite ideological differences, the TTP appears to have reached an accommodation with the main insurgent group, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).** The TTP has been operating in the province and the BLA has adopted some of the TTP's tactics (e.g. suicide attacks).

Dating back to even before the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, **Pakistan has been pursuing a policy of border militarisation, notably through construction of a fence.** This has fuelled anger in Kabul and Pakistani and Afghan forces have periodically clashed. **Pakistan initially attempted to negotiate with the Taliban government and the TTP,** but escalating terrorist attacks, coupled with the Taliban's persistent failure to curb the TTP, **led to a different approach.** Along with increased military operations in the border region, **Pakistan has tried to put economic pressure on the Taliban government;** in November 2023, it started **enforcing a new law on repatriation of illegal foreigners.** This has predominantly targeted Afghans in Pakistan: by the end of 2023, almost 400,000 had been deported to Afghanistan – a country already struggling to provide for its people. This was followed in early 2024 by the imposition of passport and visa requirements for Afghans (notably drivers), leading to the closure of the border crossings at Torkham and elsewhere.

**Pakistan's actions have negatively impacted local borderland communities.** Offensives against extremists/insurgents and militarisation of the border have disrupted cross-border trade, livelihoods and people-to-people ties on which local communities depend. The recent border closures are causing huge commercial losses on both sides of the border. These adverse effects have fuelled historic resentment in the region against the state. **Anger has been manifested in civil society protests** (e.g. the Ulasi Pason movement – see section 3) and ongoing protests by Balochis about human rights violations in the province.

**The overwhelming response of the state to such protests has been hardline tactics and repression** (although there are a few examples of protests leading to concessions by the authorities). The repression of any opposition in the borderlands and Balochistan **fits a wider national pattern.** Pakistan saw massive public protests in the wake of the ousting in 2022 of the prime minister, Imran Khan. Since then, the government and military have ruthlessly targeted opposition parties – especially Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party – and their supporters, and **curbs on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and media freedom have increased significantly.** National/provincial assembly elections in February 2024 were characterised by the same restrictions on the opposition.

## Links between serious and organised crime in the borderlands and at national level

**Serious and organised crime (SOC) is integral to the economy of the borderlands, with both local communities and armed groups relying on it.** Common forms of borderland SOC include drug and arms trafficking; financial crimes, notably smuggling of goods and cross-border movement of currency; human trafficking; and kidnapping and extortion. In recent years, there has been a huge expansion of smuggling networks across the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran tri-border area. The borderlands are also associated with high levels of environmental/resource crime, notably illegal logging and mining.

**SOC in the borderlands has direct and serious negative effects on the rest of the country.** Tax evasion through large-scale smuggling represents a massive loss of revenue for Pakistan. Accompanied by smuggling of foreign currency out of the country, this **exacerbates Pakistan's already acute economic crisis**. Pakistan is identified as having one of the highest risk ratings for money laundering and terrorist financing in the world. This deters foreign direct investment (FDI), further hampering growth. The spread of drugs and illegal weapons from the borderlands to all parts of the country has been a long-standing factor in high levels of drug addiction, armed crime and other negative features in Pakistani society. Furthermore, **SOC fuels state corruption**, with many government officials, political groups and others involved.

### Looking ahead: challenges vs constraints

As seen above, recent developments in the borderlands feed into existing tensions and anti-state movements across the country, fuelling national-level SOC.

The following aspects/challenges are especially significant:

- **Increased security threats** – The combination of increased attacks by the TTP and its inroads into Balochistan, growing tensions (and some hostilities) between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the challenges stemming from mass deportation of Afghans, means that security threats to Pakistan have clearly increased.
- **Further potential security threats stemming from recent developments** – For example, deported Afghans could join the TTP/Taliban government in fighting Pakistan; Pakistan's **security forces are already overstretched because they are having to deal with multiple threats on multiple fronts, which creates space for other groups to operate, or even control territory**.
- **Counter-productive state response** – State policies to address the above (e.g. increased border controls, military offensives, deportation of Afghans, counter-insurgency measures, repression of civil society protests and human rights violations) are **not only failing to reduce attacks**, but rather are **fuelling public anger and anti-state feelings**.
- **Pakistan's increasingly constrained capacity to address challenges** – Factors include the armed forces being overstretched and the recent erosion of the military's dominance. Another (related) factor is **political polarisation and ongoing political crisis**, which diverts state attention and resources. The **dire economic situation** is a massive constraint. Pakistan lacks the resources either to pursue the kind of military operation needed to tackle militancy properly, or – even if the will were there – to address the socio-economic grievances that (along with repression) are drivers of public anger and violence/insurgency.

**Overall, instability in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands feeds into and exacerbates the multiple crises already facing Pakistan, further diminishing state capacity to respond to these effectively.**

## 2. Background: roots of the crisis

### 2.1 Long-standing issues

#### National level

**Pakistan is a heterogeneous country, which has experienced violence and conflict along religious, sectarian, ethnic and linguistic lines to varying degrees since the country's founding in 1947** (Idris, 2019): 'Historically, ethnic Baloch, Sindhis and Pashtuns have protested against the alleged economic and political dominance of Punjabis, who control the state apparatus. This has resulted in the emergence of ethno-national movements of varying intensity' (BTI, 2024).

**At the national level, a number of underlying structural causes of conflict in Pakistan were also established at its creation.** These have varying impacts on contemporary border/borderland dynamics (Idris, 2019; CFR, 2023):

- Being culturally and religiously diverse, Pakistan has lacked a unifying force; separatist and extremist movements have exacerbated its struggle to achieve political stability.
- The initial failure to resolve the role of Islam (whether Pakistan was created as a safe haven for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent or as an Islamic state) has led to contested notions of national identity.
- The establishment of a strong centralised, bureaucratic state – and the dominance of Punjab – later giving way to military rule has been a major source of grievance (in some cases leading to conflict) on the part of the smaller provinces.
- The perception of India as a threat has influenced foreign and domestic policy, including in determining the powerful position of the military.

**The current national context in Pakistan is one of political and economic crisis,** with an uptick in insurgent violence, a financial crisis that saw Pakistan almost default in July 2023, devastating floods in 2022 that have exacerbated food insecurity, and high inflation and unemployment – all of which has fuelled public resentment towards the government (Stratfor, 2023a; Global Organized Crime Index, 2023; ICG, 2023). Pakistan has a large, young and rapidly growing population that needs services and economic opportunities, yet the state has fallen short in meeting the needs of its population (Idris, 2019). Demonstrations over rising electricity bills, the price of fuel and inflation are increasing (ACLEED, 2023c). Political polarisation has heightened amid this unprecedented economic crisis (ICG, 2023). National elections were held in 2024, adding to political polarisation.

**Insurgency and underdevelopment are self-reinforcing factors.** A quantitative paper by Zakaria et al. (2019) examining the impact of terrorism on national economic growth in Pakistan (from 1972 to 2014) finds that: '(1) the impact of terrorism on FDI and domestic investment is significantly negative, whereas the impact on government spending is significantly positive and (2) the net effect of terrorism on economic growth is negative'.

#### Borderlands: FATA

**The intersection of cleavages in Pakistan with access to power and resources underpins some of the grievances in the country. In relation to the borderlands, this is seen in the north-western tribal belt,**

formerly known as FATA.<sup>2</sup> The region is largely considered to have been neglected by the central government, contributing to its weak socio-economic and governance characteristics. Until 2018, inhabitants were not governed as citizens under Pakistan's constitution, but under the colonial Frontier Crimes Regulation (e.g. which meant people could not access the formal judicial system, and which allowed draconian forms of 'justice')<sup>3</sup> (Yousaf, 2016; Hopkins, 2015). FATA merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018 in recognition that its prior administrative status as 'outside' the rest of Pakistan was a factor in driving conflict in the region (Idris, 2019). Grievances regarding the discriminatory approach of the state are widely referenced in the literature and stated by various ethno-national movements (BTI, 2022).

**The economic and other challenges Pakistan faces are particularly acute for the populations living in the remote border regions, who directly experience most of the violence from the insurgencies, and experience higher levels of poverty, and worse access to resources and services** (D3, 2020). The harsh and remote terrain 'makes imposition of rule of law by either [Pakistan or Afghanistan] difficult', and governance is weak (D3, 2020). In recent years, key issues that have shaped instability in the borderland regions include: the increase in militancy along and across the border; international tensions between the two governments, leading to the tightening of border controls and migration policies; the negative impacts of counter-insurgency operations in the region; and economic strains. The construction of the border fence, from 2017 onwards, has cut off border tribes from family, community and business interests (Cheema, 2022c) and has been very controversial, facing strong opposition across governments in Afghanistan, as well as ethnic Pashtun and Baloch groups (Cheema et al., 2021). All these points are explored below.

**Shakirullah et al. (2020) explore the root causes of violent conflict in the tribal belt's district of North Waziristan from the perspective of local communities, identifying deep-rooted internal factors,** including: poor socio-economic conditions, political exclusion, degradation of local institutions and culture, the feeling of being discriminated against by the Pakistani state, and the introduction and promotion of jihadi culture and militancy. Indeed, the tribal belt region is among the poorest and most deprived regions of Pakistan, and the denial of rights to the people in the area dates back to British rule (Idris, 2019). These internal drivers were exacerbated and escalated by external factors such as the Soviet and later US-led invasions of Afghanistan, porous borders and international actors seeking to destabilise the region for vested interests (Shakirullah et al., 2020). This drove local communities to welcome the Taliban and other militant groups, including the TTP (see below) (Shakirullah et al., 2020), and sometimes to join the groups (Ullah & Rahim, 2022, p.579).

## 2.2 Violent extremism

### National level

**Violent extremism has been one of the main security challenges Pakistan has faced over decades** (Idris, 2019). The state's monopoly on the use of force is contested by terrorist organisations, sectarian groups, ethno-nationalist insurgencies and criminal gangs. Much of the violence by these actors occurs in the

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<sup>2</sup> Although the six tribal agencies and seven frontier regions known as FATA have now been merged into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa district, this paper refers to this area as 'the former FATA'.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Frontier Crimes Regulation allowed for collective punishment, where a collective – a family or community – could be punished for the acts of individuals (Hopkins, 2015).



former FATA, and provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan, both of which border Afghanistan: 'While the state's monopoly on the use of force is challenged in these areas, it is not absent. Urban areas are more under control than rural areas. In principle, the state's rule is established nationwide' (BTI, 2022).

The US Department of State (2022) refers to a **'culture of lawlessness' across the country, with reference to actions of violence, abuse, and social and religious intolerance by militant organisations, other non-state actors (both local and foreign) and the security forces** (US Department of State, 2022). There are widespread allegations of the security forces and other state authorities committing human rights violations, and acts of corruption, which generally go unpunished, thus fostering a culture of impunity (US Department of State, 2022).

**ICG (2022b) notes that while the large-scale sectarian attacks in Pakistan that killed thousands in the 1980s and 1990s are now less frequent, there is evidence suggesting that sectarian tensions are spreading into larger sections of the Sunni Islamist community**, with the rise of organised and violent Barelvi political groups. The most notable that has grown in influence is the hardline political party and violent protest movement Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan ('Labaik'), which draws support mostly from Pakistan's Barelvi majority (ICG, 2022b). Labaik 'mobilises supporters by alleging blasphemy and other infringements upon religious sensitivities [and] has been responsible for inciting some of the most egregious acts of sectarian violence in recent years' (ICG, 2022b). Factors that may have contributed to Labaik's rise in prominence include (ICG, 2022b):

- Increased public exposure of Labaik through its successful mobilisations around blasphemy laws and polemic cases (including the case of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman who was sentenced to death on blasphemy charges); the proposed amendment of the declaration required of candidates for political office (which Labaik claimed would weaken candidates' affirmation of the "absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophet Muhammad"); and controversy over cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a French magazine, and statements by French President Emanuel Macron that were considered Islamophobic;
- Labaik's politicisation of blasphemy has contributed to an environment where judges, police and private citizens are likely to be rewarded rather than face repercussions for making accusations of blasphemy. Meanwhile, the Pakistani establishment has done little to rein in Labaik; for example, the movement was allowed to contest the July 2018 national elections, despite its record in promoting a hardline sectarian agenda, including inciting violence against religious minorities and Sunni opponents. Perpetrators of violence experience virtual impunity, thus further emboldening Labaik's supporters to incite or commit acts of violence in the name of religion.

There are also heightened intra-Sunni tensions, including violent incidents, such as Deobandi militants' targeting of major Barelvi shrines.

### **Tribal belt**

**The tribal areas that make up the former FATA have experienced conflict and insurgency for decades**, being an area of geostrategic and economic importance, while also being remote, and left out of Pakistan's national governance system until 2018 (Yousafzai et al. 2020). As an example, North Waziristan has particularly experienced prolonged periods of unrest and violence, including during colonial times (Makki & Iftikhar, 2022). It became notorious as an attractive place for transnational terrorist networks due to its lax administrative controls (Makki & Iftikhar, 2022). Makki and Iftikhar (2022) identify it as the 'epicentre of militancy', and a 'breeding ground' for national and transnational movements such as Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and so on. These groups have been able to operate across the porous border with impunity, and have seen

foreign fighters from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, other Central Asian states, the Middle East and Afghanistan ‘plan, plot, and execute multiple operations, in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and carry out trans-border crimes such as smuggling, extortion, ransom and the promotion of illegal economies’ (Makki & Iftikhar, 2022).

**While Pakistani military operations from 2014<sup>4</sup> were successful in reducing the number of TTP attacks, and in moving many combatants out of the former FATA area, there were significant negative impacts on local communities** (ICG, 2023). The military campaign displaced hundreds of thousands of people, while scorched-earth approaches destroyed agriculture and other livelihood sources (Fazli, 2022) This alienated residents, fuelled resentment towards the state and encouraged recruitment into militant groups (ICG, 2023).

### Balochistan insurgency

**Balochistan is Pakistan’s largest province, but the most sparsely populated, and has vast natural resources. It has a long history of ethno-nationalist, sectarian and crime-related violence;** a number of separatist groups there have fought Pakistani security forces since 1948 – the longest insurgency in the country (ACLED, 2020). The oldest and largest Baloch group is the BLA.

**Insurgency in the region is driven by: perceived economic exploitation of the province’s natural resources by the centre/Punjab and its under-development; lack of Baloch representation in government;** the influx of outsiders (Punjabis and Pashtuns) into the province, which threatens the Baloch majority; and bitterness at the repressive measures taken by the centre/military to crush insurgency (Idris, 2019). For example, while the province contains nearly 20 per cent of Pakistan’s natural resources, it is among the poorest, and least urbanised and developed (Ashik, 2020). The spectrum of objectives of the actors involved runs from greater autonomy and control over resources, sought by mainstream Baloch politicians; to full independence for the province, which the armed separatist groups want (ACLED, 2020). The Baloch militants target both security forces and civilians (ACLED, 2020). The military’s heavy-handed campaigns in the region have attracted widespread allegations of human rights abuses. However, the political response is considered to have been more constructive, with significant reforms aimed at addressing Baloch grievances (Idris, 2019).

**More recently, Baloch groups have violently opposed Chinese investment in the region, as it is a key location in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative.** CPEC investment ‘has brought about major change for both the region and South Asia at large. Because of the CPEC’s potentially huge economic benefits for Pakistan, it is highly unlikely that Islamabad will offer any concessions to Baloch nationalists without a greenlight from China’ (Kowalski, 2019).

## 2.3 Civil society

**Pakistan has a large and diverse sector of non-governmental organisations, interest groups, community-based organisations, coalitions, faith-based organisations, social movements, professional associations,** trade unions, media networks, labour unions, citizen groups, voluntary organisations and development organisations (BTI, 2022; Mirahmadi et al., 2015): ‘Levels of social trust in Pakistan often map on to networks of kinship and patronage, reproducing forms of solidarity and norms of reciprocity along existing class, ethnic, caste and religious dimensions’ (BTI, 2022). For some groups, this can be highly institutionalised; for example, faith-based civil society organisation (CSO) networks are connected through

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<sup>4</sup> Operation Zarb-e-Azb.

their nodes of mosques and madrasas, soup kitchens, social welfare organisations, political parties and publishing houses (Mirahmadi et al., 2015).

**The power of civil society groups varies significantly; for example, some groups directly influence agenda setting, such as those representing economic elites, or which work with international donor organisations, or Islamist parties and organisations** (BTI, 2022). Some exercise moderate influence through their abilities to mobilise their constituents; for example, professional associations of lawyers and doctors securing concessions from the government by holding strikes and protests (BTI, 2022).

**Social movements that contest state or entrenched interests are often repressed and persecuted; this treatment has become more common in the past few years**, with increased rates of arbitrary detention, arrest, abduction of activists, and use of colonial-era sedition laws in prosecutions (BTI, 2022). The shrinking space for civil society in Pakistan is occurring on:

multiple fronts, including state repression, reprisal from non-state and pressure groups, unnecessary laws curtailing the human rights work, flawed global financial mechanisms creating opportunities for security agencies to crackdown on civil society organizations, such as [the] Financial Action Task Force, and shrinking support for national and grassroots human rights organisations (Baloch & Dawar, 2023, p.3)

**In relation to the borderlands, the limited recent literature on civil society mostly discusses just a few specific movements/examples**; for example, the contemporary Ulasi Pashoon movement (see section 3) or the role of civil society in countering violent extremism (CVE). The latter framing reflects the interests of Western actors in the post-9/11 world. While there is recent research on this issue, much of it is 5–15 years old, reflecting the higher level of engagement of Western actors in the region in that period.

### Role in CVE

**The most common discussion of civil society in relation to the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands is the role of civil society in relation to CVE**, with the literature covering many different angles. For example, Mirahmadi et al. (2015) examine the major role civil society in Pakistan has played in implementing peacebuilding and CVE-related programming through: CSOs organising anti-terror campaigns, public rallies, demonstrations and conferences; public intellectuals and community leaders promoting peace and social cohesion (e.g. through radio stations); and by advocacy groups conducting research and public awareness campaigns (including peace rallies and formal denunciations of attacks). One example highlighted by Mirahmadi et al. (2015) is a peacebuilding programme in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province funded by the United States Agency for International Development, the Pakistan Initiative for Mothers and Newborns, which taught mediation and conflict transformation skills to women and young people (Mirahmadi et al., 2015). Another paper explores how community-based youth organisations based in North Waziristan have mobilised their local communities to address issues around education and building community resilience to violent extremism (Makki & Akash, 2022).

Meanwhile, Ahmed et al. (2021) explore whether religious leaders mobilised their communities against violent extremism, based on a perception survey of 180 people in Lower and Upper Dir valley. They find that religious leaders did play some role in building community resilience through ‘bonding’ (building connections between individuals who are *similar* in terms of their social identities) and through ‘bridging’ (building connections between individuals who are *dissimilar*), but not through ‘linking’ (as they did not report building connections with government agencies). Ahmed et al. (2021, p.216) note that ‘weak linking with government agencies may lead to lack of public trust between government agencies and the communities’, illustrating a **common issue experienced in borderlands of weak relations between the centre and periphery, and between national political elites and community leaders**.

## 2.4 Pakistan-Afghanistan relations

**Afghanistan has never recognised the contested Durand Line, the long border dividing Pakistan and Afghanistan, with all governments since 1947 taking a similar position** (Olsen et al., 2022). Those living in the borderlands **tend to see it as an ‘informal boundary’** (Malouta & Attai, 2019; D3, 2020; Kaura, 2022). As Cheema (2022c) explains, the border, as it became formally known after 1947, changed relations and practices, but could not create distinct or separate communities. Historically, the border has functioned as a region rather than a dividing line, and the ‘Pashtun communities on either side of the border remain linked by trade, family ties, culture, religion, and history’ (D3, 2020). According to Cheema et al. (2021): ‘The region has evolved into a transitory area that contains actors from diverse backgrounds, such as refugees, traders, nomadic tribesmen, labourers, militants and members of security agencies’. However, the introduction of the border has reshaped economic networks among the border tribes; for example, through opportunities for smuggling (Cheema et al., 2021).<sup>5</sup>

**At the national level, Afghanistan and Pakistan have a long history of tense relations of coexistence,** explain Threlkeld and Easterly (2021, p.1), with contestation over sovereignty concerns, security interests, geopolitical dynamics, cross-border ties and regional connectivity in terms of trade and investment.<sup>6</sup> Points of tension have included: aligning with competing sides during the Cold War; US- and Saudi-backed proxy warfare; historic support for militias in each other’s country; Pakistan’s sponsorship of the Taliban; differing ambitions for Afghanistan’s future (e.g. Pakistan especially opposes growing Indian influence in Afghanistan); disputes over water; and the post-9/11 era, when both countries aligned with the US, despite Pakistan maintaining its ties to the Taliban (Threlkeld & Easterly, 2021; Idris, 2019).

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<sup>5</sup> While it is possible that restrictions have led to increased competition for control of routes/supply chains, this review was unable to find evidence, though more research could potentially yield this.

<sup>6</sup> The borderlands play a role connecting Central Asia, the Arabian Sea and India (Threlkeld & Easterly, 2021).

### 3. Borderlands instability: recent developments and effects on extremism/separatism in Pakistan

#### 3.1 Return of the Taliban government in Afghanistan

**Currently, the main factors shaping the security environment of the Pakistan-Afghanistan region are the ongoing consolidation of Afghan Taliban authority in Afghanistan and the increase in attacks by non-state armed actor the TTP** (Cheema, 2023a). The arrival in power of the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) in Afghanistan in August 2021 has significantly influenced trends in regional militancy, Pakistan's security approach to insurgent groups and its western border, the approach of neighbouring governments to Afghanistan, and Afghan refugee/migration flows (Cheema, 2023a). Since 2021, clashes along the disputed border and in the borderlands have increased, with attacks carried out by extremist groups and also state/military actors (such as Taliban soldiers and Pakistani border guards) (Kaura, 2022; Cheema, 2023a). For example, a report covering the period between October 2022 and March 2023 details cross-border clashes between Pakistani and Afghan security officials at the two main border crossing points, Torkham and Chaman/Spin Boldak (Cheema, 2023a). This led to temporary border closures by both sides in November and December 2022 (Cheema, 2023a). Meanwhile, in April 2022 Pakistan carried out airstrikes against TTP targets in Afghanistan; Stratfor (2023b) warns that 'a revival of such attacks could significantly sour relations with the Taliban'.

**The heightened tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan came as a surprise to Islamabad and analysts of the region. During the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan was widely considered to have quietly supported the Taliban** (Mir, 2022; Kaura, 2022; Bahiss, 2023). This was understood to fit into Pakistan's overall anti-India foreign policy approach (Kaura, 2022). When the ITA took power in 2021, it was expected that Afghanistan and Pakistan would remain allies. However, their relationship has deteriorated significantly, with border issues greatly contributing to this. The ITA also appears willing to continue engagement with India, an obvious concern for Pakistan. Kaura (2022) suggests that one reason could be that the ITA has little to gain from keeping India at bay, especially as India can provide essential financing for reconstruction and development.

**Islamabad has blamed increased violence in the borderlands on cross-border militancy and accused the ITA of failing to counter it** (Stratfor, 2023a). For example:

Caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti claimed that more than half of the 24 suicide bombings the country had faced since January were conducted by Afghans, and that Afghans also made up a majority of militants who have raided Pakistani military bases in recent months (Stratfor, 2023a).

In recent months, the Afghan Taliban claim to have arrested some 200 suspected anti-Pakistan militants in border areas, and that the group's supreme leader ordered Taliban fighters not to conduct attacks in Pakistan. But militant attacks in Pakistan have nonetheless continued, sustaining distrust between the two sides (Stratfor, 2023a).

Islamabad criticises the ITA for not doing enough to contain the TTP and for allowing the group safe haven in Afghanistan (Cheema, 2023a). The ITA refutes both criticisms.

**While Pakistan initially downplayed the violence in the borderlands, as unrest has increased, Islamabad has responded more strongly by tightening border restrictions – a key point of tension for Kabul** (Kaura, 2022). Border restrictions include, for example, the construction of a new border fence, passport and visa requirements, sporadic border closures and the mass deportation plan from Pakistan of Afghans (the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan – see below). The ITA has strongly condemned the construction of the

fence dividing the Pashtun 'nation' on both sides of the border (Qazi, 2022). It has also been strongly critical of the 'ill-treatment of Afghans by Pakistan's border agencies' and demands that Pakistan remove visa requirements (Cheema, 2023a, p.9). Indeed, tensions over border management have also provoked more violence; for example, key informant interviews in the border areas suggested the new border fence was the main trigger for the most serious border clash in recent years, which occurred in December 2022 at Chaman/Spin Boldak between Pakistani and Taliban border forces (Cheema, 2023b).

Kaura (2022) emphasises that **'the underlying issues between the two countries remain difficult to resolve**. Kabul's consistent refusal to accept the Durand Line as the international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which has triggered the recent clashes between their security forces, remains a key driver of tensions, undermining trust and provoking enmity'. While Pakistan sees border security as key to preventing militant activity, the ITA contests increased border management and the border itself (ACLED, 2023b): 'Reeling from multiple crises at home, including a sharp economic downturn, political instability over the confrontation between the powerful army and former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and the continuing impact of massive flooding earlier this year, Islamabad's shaky relationship with the Afghan Taliban makes the situation tremendously perilous for Pakistan' (Kaura, 2022).

### 3.2 Rise in violent extremism

**Levels of insurgent violence declined from 2019 to 2021, but increased in 2022 and 2023** (BTI, 2022; ICG, 2022a). The decrease in militancy prior to 2021 is attributed to successive campaigns by Pakistan's military (BTI, 2022; US Department of State, 2022; Geo TV, 2023). Insurgent violence and clashes between state forces have particularly intensified across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and in the borderlands. The main violent extremist groups operating there and posing the biggest threat to stability are the TTP, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Baloch separatist groups.

#### The Pakistani Taliban

**The current main threat to Pakistan's security, and the primary cause of tension in the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, is the TTP, which is an umbrella organisation for Sunni Islamist groups operating in Pakistan** (Reuters, 2023; Palmer & Holtz, 2023). Also known as the Pakistani Taliban, the TTP was established in 2007. It pledges allegiance to the Afghan Taliban, and states its aim is to establish a Sharia-compliant state in Pakistan (Reuters, 2023; Mir, 2022). The TTP's current narrow strategy focuses its attacks on Pakistan's security services (Sayed, 2021). Cheema (2023a, p.1) explains that the TTP is currently attempting to exploit rising anti-military sentiment in the tribal areas, with the long-term objective of expanding territorial control in the borderlands, requiring the group to secure public franchise.

**In pursuit of its goals, the TTP has become more engaged in mainstream political issues; for example, expressing support for a range of movements opposed to the Pakistani state** such as Pashtun and Baloch nationalists (despite their deep ideological differences) (Sayed, 2021). Acting as an umbrella group is beneficial as smaller jihadist groups can act as proxies for major factions, carrying out attacks that would otherwise contradict the Taliban's rules (Cheema, 2023a). The complexity of these alliances and the frequency of attacks complicates the investigation process for Pakistan's security and law enforcement agencies (Cheema, 2023a).

**TTP attacks increased in 2022 and 2023**. ACLED (2023b) records over 400 political violence events involving the group in 2023, more than double the number of events recorded in 2022. Most attacks occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (67 per cent of the attacks in 2022) and Balochistan (31 per cent) (Geo TV, 2023), with some also occurring in Punjab and Sindh provinces. Peace negotiations with the TTP broke

down in July 2022 (Cheema, 2023a). Cheema (2023a, p.1) finds that cross-border attacks by the TTP ‘reached an unprecedented level in May 2023’.

Kaura (2022) comments that **the alliance between the ITA and the TTP ‘seems stronger than ever and there are signs of integration across the Durand Line’**. Kaura continues: ‘Not ready to accept Pakistan’s border-fencing activities, which are viewed as “one-sided”, “illegitimate”, and an attempt to change the status quo ante, Taliban fighters are reportedly removing the barbed-wire fence at many places along the Durand Line’. While there have been attempts to rekindle peace talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government, thus far, ‘the TTP’s demands remain irreconcilable with the security interests of the Pakistan state and regional actors’ finds Cheema (2023a, p.1).

**From Islamabad’s perspective, the Taliban government is not doing enough to curb the TTP’s activities.** However, the ITA insists these groups are not using Afghan territory to plot or conduct attacks outside the country (ICG, 2022a; UN Security Council, 2022). Mir (2022) suggests that Kabul could support the TTP’s aims to establish a Sharia-compliant state in Pakistan. International Crisis Group (ICG 2024: 15) echoes this: ‘The Taliban’s reluctance to clamp down on the TTP is partly motivated by reluctance to act against a longstanding ideological ally’. However, International Crisis Group (ICG 2024: 15) also suggests other reasons: ‘They may also feel their clout with the TTP is limited, given that many of the group’s former members played a key role in founding [ISKP], and if pushed, might defect to their enemies’. ISKP is opposed to both the Taliban and TTP (see below).

**There have been numerous attempts to negotiate peace with the TTP, with a few short-lived ceasefires.** In 2021, a ceasefire lasted one month before the TTP resumed attacks to put pressure on the Pakistani authorities to meet its demands (Ahmed, 2023; Idris, 2024, forthcoming). The next ceasefire in 2022 lasted three months, after which the TTP returned to violence and ordered its fighters to carry out attacks across the country, arguing that it was facing rising attacks by the military, especially in the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The Center for Preventive Action (CFR, 2024) **warns that the increase in TTP attacks could have knock-on effects in terms of facilitating other forms of extremist violence:**

As the TTP expands in Pakistan and security deteriorates, separatist movements and other armed groups could regain strength. United or not, these groups present a major challenge to a cash-strapped Pakistani government. A destabilized Pakistan creates the risk for further proliferation of militant groups in the region and a greater risk of them holding territory and developing the capabilities to launch international terrorist attacks.

**At the same time, there are serious constraints on Pakistan’s capacity to respond militarily.** The withdrawal of US military aid and assistance in 2018 significantly weakened Pakistan’s counterinsurgency approach (CFR, 2024). The administration of President Donald Trump suspended or redirected over US\$800 million in security assistance ‘over a perceived continuing unwillingness to target militants who receive sanctuary in Pakistani territory and carry out attacks in Afghanistan’ (CFR, 2024). In June 2018, global watchdog the Financial Action Task Force added Pakistan to the ‘grey list’ of countries not doing enough to stop money laundering and terrorist financing (CFR, 2024). In April 2023, Pakistan announced a nationwide offensive to eradicate militants; this would require an operation on the scale of that in 2014. As well as highlighting the fact that civilians became collateral damage in that operation, the Center for Preventive Action notes: ‘Pakistan now finds itself at risk of default, raising questions about how it will fund the effort’ (CFR, 2024).

## ISKP: the transnational caliphate

**ISKP (also known as IS-K and ISIL-K) is a Salafi-jihadist organisation founded by fighters who defected from the TTP, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban in late 2014.** It is violently opposed to the TTP, the Afghan Taliban and the Government of Pakistan. ISKP's ultimate goal in Pakistan is to overthrow the government, and the governments of its neighbours, to create a transnational caliphate, as part of its international and sectarian agenda.

It primarily operates in Afghanistan, and in the Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and, to a lesser extent, Punjab. Recent attacks by the group demonstrate that its Pakistani networks are 'willing and able to conduct mass-casualty attacks on civilian targets'. While ISKP poses a threat to small groups of security forces in north-west Pakistan, it is 'unable to pose a meaningful challenge to the Pakistani state' (Palmer & Holtz, 2023). The group claimed in 2022 to have carried out 181 attacks in Afghanistan and 58 in Pakistan (Cheema, 2023c). There was a decline in its activity from 2022 to 2023 (Palmer & Holtz, 2023). Part of this decline is likely to have been due to attacks by the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. The conflict between these actors complicates policy responses to the insurgents as, for example, counter-terrorist activities against the TTP risk strengthening ISKP, and vice-versa, although the main security threat to Pakistan at present emanates from the TTP (Palmer & Holtz, 2023).

## Developments in militancy in Balochistan

**The Baloch insurgency is undergoing a possible resurgence; a number of disparate factions have come together in a collective offensive against Pakistan's military** (Cheema, 2022b). For example, ACLED (2020) reported a rise in organised political violence as a result of:

greater unity among Baloch separatist groups, the formation of trans-province alliances between Baloch separatist groups and other separatist groups, and increased exploitation and repression of Baloch civilians by Pakistan's military during security operations in Balochistan. These three factors, along with the rise in violence, suggest a possible resurgence of the Baloch separatist movement.

The BLA was 'highly active' in 2022, claiming to have carried out 188 attacks in Pakistan (although this number may have been inflated) (Cheema, 2023b; Jan, 2022).

**Present-day instability in Balochistan has also facilitated the entry into the province of other non-state armed actors. The TTP, in particular, has become more active**, which Basit (2023) states 'is neither random nor opportunistic, but is rather well thought-out'. The TTP has had a presence in Balochistan before, but was confined to Pashtun areas; the group has made recent inroads into Baloch-dominated areas (Basit, 2023). Basit (2023) argues that the group does not want to 'leave the jihadist space open for [ISKP breakaway group] Islamic State in Pakistan Province (ISPP)'. The TTP has secured the allegiance of four Baloch jihadist groups. It has also increased its attacks in the province. In November 2022, the group targeted police who were protecting a polio vaccination team in Quetta; in December, it killed six security personnel in Chaman district, near the border with Iran (Basit, 2023). As of June 2023, TTP attacks already exceeded the seven events recorded in the whole of 2022 (ACLED, 2023d).

**A further reason the group is expanding its presence is that 'having a foothold in Balochistan provides the TTP with an alternative sanctuary** in Pakistan as well. This can be a useful insurance policy for the TTP during difficult times' (Basit, 2023). Basit (2023) adds that Balochistan 'not only offers ample hideouts to the Taliban, but money-making opportunities as well'.



**To bolster its position in the province, the TTP has reached out to separatists, expressing support for Baloch grievances** (Basit, 2023):

the TTP has been consistently publishing statements on different challenges that Balochistan is facing, such as enforced disappearances (Balochs extrajudicially detained by Pakistani security agencies), people dying of waterborne diseases in Dera Bugti District, the killing of nine Baloch insurgents during a military operation in Ziarat in July 2022, as well as the April 2022 killing of a truck driver by the security forces in Chaghi District. During that same month, the TTP also issued a *nasheed* (a type of song or vocalized hymn) in Baloch with Urdu subtitles, showing footage of various issues confronting Balochistan.

**Basit (2023) argues that the TTP is ‘dangling out a carrot to Baloch separatists, with the aims of making common cause against the Pakistani state’.** There are no formal links between the TTP and BLA, but the latter certainly appears to tacitly accept the TTP’s activities in Balochistan. Basit (2023) suggests three possible reasons for the BLA tolerating the TTP: (1) the TTP’s presence is still limited, so the BLA does not see it as a threat; (2) the BLA does not want to weaken itself by opening up a new front against the TTP; or (3) the group silently welcomes the TTP’s expansion into Balochistan, seeing it as positive. The third reason applies not just to the TTP and BLA having a common enemy in the form of the Pakistani state, but also in ISPP: ‘if the TTP’s presence weakens ISPP’s influence in Balochistan, it will also be advantageous for Baloch separatists’. Basit (2023) points out that the BLA and TTP coexisted ‘in their respective hideouts in Afghanistan’, and the TTP trained the BLA in its Afghan training centres. He cites the BLA’s adoption of suicide attacks as something the group has learned from the TTP.

**In terms of implications of the TTP’s inroads into Balochistan,** Basit (2023) warns:

the TTP’s forays into Balochistan have potential long-term implications on the overall trajectory and makeup of the Baloch conflict... This development is likely to result in increasing levels of violence in the province, disturbing an already volatile security situation. It could also trigger turf wars between rival jihadist groups for recruits, resources, and hideouts.

## 4. State response and effects on local communities/civil society

### 4.1 Increased border controls

**Historically, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has functioned as a region rather than as two regions/countries divided** (D3, 2020). Socio-economic and cultural similarities have proved to be significant motives for permanent settlement in the region, while conflict, poverty and economic hardships have shaped the cross-border movement of people (Cheema et al., 2021). Transnational mobility in the borderland region is identified as critical for the livelihood strategies, networking ties, and social and cultural exchanges of communities divided by national borders (Cheema et al., 2021; D3, 2020). **Notably, border disputes between Afghan and Pakistani authorities have been resolved through negotiations by local actors**, such as local *ulema* (religious leaders) (Cheema, 2023b, p.3): ‘Local arbiters are perceived as credible brokers in cross-border conflict’.

**There is a clear disjuncture between the views and interests of local people in the borderlands, and political leaders in Islamabad and Kabul.** For example:

The border is merely a non-existent artificial line from a local perspective, fracturing centuries of profuse socio-economic interaction. With a vague understanding of security threats, locals find fencing a direct threat to their businesses and livelihoods. Ironically, the State uses the same narrative both for peacebuilding through cross-border dependence and to control the regional extra-legal economies intersecting with terrorism (Makki & Iftikhar, 2022).

Certainly, borderland communities have deeper linkages and commonalities with people along and across the border than with people in the capital cities (Cheema et al., 2021). Drawing on the results of a survey and interviews with people living in the borderlands, Malouta and Attai (2019) find that most respondents did not see ‘a porous border’ as a risk to their own security; instead, they saw proximity to the border as having a positive impact, although they recognised the role a porous border could play in enabling insurgents to launch attacks from a safe haven.

**In contrast, border management is critical for the centre.** Weak governance in the peripheral borderlands affects the general security and economy of the country as it allows insurgents to ‘take advantage of porous borders and kinship networks to take refuge in neighbouring countries’ (Ansary, 2020). However, in practice controlling the border is very difficult. **Ultimately, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border presents a unique and complex challenge in terms of border management, with its harsh, mountainous terrain, weak infrastructure and governance** (especially in relation to Afghanistan, which has no history of a centralised state/governance system), and its pronounced illicit crime-livelihoods nexus (D3, 2020; Cheema et al., 2021). However, as the research by Malouta and Attai (2019) indicates, ‘even some modest success in enforcing stronger controls at key crossing sites might have significant impacts on the livelihoods of local residents’.

Cross-border violence and terrorist threats have led to frequent border closures and travel restrictions, making it difficult for individuals to move freely across the border (IOM, 2023c). **Recent years have seen the militarisation of border crossings, tightened border controls along the Durand Line, and the construction of a long border fence** (started in 2017) and surveillance forts. Changes to Pakistan’s refugee policy (see below) appear to have reduced population movements. The changes have led to significant numbers of migrants and refugees returning to their homeland; most Afghans crossing the border now are temporary economic migrants. Movement has also been reduced by the borderlands’ complex security situation, including its armed insurgencies, internal displacement flows, and continuing mistrust of the Afghan population (who are popularly seen as linked with extremism) (Cheema et al., 2021).

Drawing on a survey and interviews with population groups residing and operating along the border, Designs, Data, Decisions (D3, 2020) finds that **border restrictions (e.g. passports and visas), the construction of the border fence, and border closures because of Covid-19 seriously negatively affected informal trade and travel that are critical to the local economy** of the border areas. Similarly, the study finds that the easing of restrictions at border crossings – such as the 24/7 opening of the Torkham gate – benefitted stakeholders in the Muhmand Dara area by alleviating traffic delays and partially mitigating the adverse economic effects of stricter border controls (D3, 2020).

**In January 2024, Pakistan imposed a requirement for passports and visas for Afghan drivers crossing the border.** This led to the closure of the Torkham gate, the busiest border crossing between the two countries, with large numbers of vehicles and goods stuck on both sides (RFE/RL, 2024). Chaman, the second-busiest border crossing in Balochistan, closed more than two months earlier; minor border crossings such as Dand-e-Pathan and Angoor Adda were also closed. As of January 2024, talks between Islamabad and Kabul to resolve the impasse had failed. Sustained closure of the border crossings was causing huge commercial losses for both Afghan and Pakistani traders (RFE/RL, 2024), and also triggered public protests (see below).

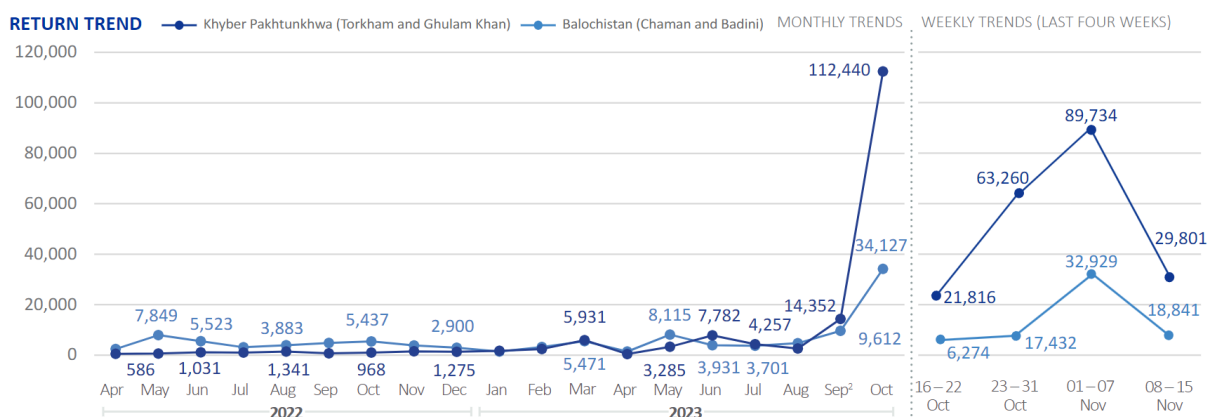
## **4.2 Deportation of Afghans from Pakistan**

**One of the most significant recent events was the Pakistan government’s decision to introduce the Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan,** announced on 26 September 2023 with a deadline of 1 November (IOM, 2023a, 2023b). **This tougher approach to migrants appears to have been in response to an increase in militant attacks, rising crime and Pakistan’s severe economic challenges** (Stratfor, 2023a). While Pakistani officials claim the policy did not target any specific group, over the previous year officials often blamed Afghans for Pakistan’s struggles (Stratfor, 2023a). As explained above, diplomatic relations between the countries have been tense, illustrating Pakistan’s loss of patience with the Taliban (Bahiss, 2023). Indeed, Pakistan had threatened action like this for years but never followed through, notes Bahiss (2023). This was a particularly sensitive period for Pakistan in the context of its economic challenges and long-delayed elections, which were scheduled for 8 February 2024 (Stratfor, 2023a).

**Prior to the deportation drive, the number of undocumented Afghans returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan had already increased significantly, highlighting the difficult economic context** that Pakistan has been experiencing (IOM, 2023c). Push factors included unaffordable housing rent (41 per cent of returnees surveyed), unaffordable household utilities (35 per cent) and lack of employment opportunities (24 per cent). Pull factors included the availability of assistance in Afghanistan (58 per cent), and reuniting with family and relatives (39 per cent) (IOM, 2023c). More recently, push factors have included fear of arrest (97 per cent) and communal pressure (22 per cent) (IOM, 2023b).

**Officials estimated the new policy would impact around 1.7 million Afghan nationals currently residing in Pakistan,** although this could have been an underestimate as the real number of Afghans in Pakistan was not known; many people live undocumented in the borderlands, accustomed to crossing back and forth when they need to (ACLEED, 2023a; ICG, 2023). Since 1 November, returns of Afghans have been unprecedentedly high (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Number of Afghans leaving Pakistan (data as of 15 November 2023)**



Source: IOM, 2023b, p.1

**The deportation plan also limited the assets Afghans could take back with them and Pakistani security forces were heavy-handed in their raids:** they were accused of confiscating assets beyond the policy stipulations and harassing Afghans regardless of their visa status and demanding bribes, with isolated reports of them requesting sexual favours from Afghan women (Bahiss, 2023).

**Afghan migrants face an ‘increasingly hostile environment’ where they are vulnerable to harassment and exploitation by local law enforcement authorities and discrimination by host communities** (Cheema, 2023a, p.2). A common stereotype links Afghan migrants with terrorism, arms and crime (Cheema, 2023a, p.2). The current deportation drive will only deepen this distrust. Furthermore, **the Pakistani authorities may be exacerbating inter-ethnic and inter-group tensions by encouraging citizens to report ‘illegal foreigners’ via a hotline**, and threatening legal action against Pakistani citizens accused of ‘assisting’ undocumented migrants, reportedly prompting landlords to evict Afghan tenants or for employers’ to terminate Afghan employees’ jobs (Stratfor, 2023a).

Stratfor (2023a) warns that **overall, the new policies are likely to worsen threats to Pakistan’s security by stretching authorities’ resources; intensifying anti-government grievances;** heightening risks of protests and violence, and inter-group stereotypes and grievances; and potentially destabilising Afghanistan and the region more broadly. Pakistan’s security forces are already busy with heightened levels of militancy, crime and social unrest driven by other political and economic grievances. Ironically, the TTP may end up benefiting from the approach if aggrieved Afghan returnees decide to fight against the state that deported them (Bahiss, 2023). A recent report by International Crisis Group (ICG, 2024, pp.15-16) claims this is further incentivising Afghans to support the TTP:

Grievances that lead Afghans to back the TTP include Afghan refugees’ allegations of mistreatment by Pakistani security forces; Kabul’s claims that Pakistan has annexed Afghan territory; and years of sporadic cross-border shelling by the Pakistani army. Though Islamabad denies many of these charges, anti-Pakistan sentiment, sometimes fuelled by Pashtun nationalism, is widespread in the [Afghanistan side of the] borderlands.

**The mass movement of people will certainly worsen humanitarian and economic conditions in Afghanistan** as it intensifies pressure on the already existing humanitarian crisis, with strained basic services, housing, natural resources and livelihoods (Stratfor, 2023a). This could destabilise the region more broadly and, for example, ‘migration from Afghanistan could grow exponentially, raising concerns in Europe and along the migrant trail in countries such as Iran and Turkey’ (Bahiss, 2023).

**The ITA has condemned the repatriation policies and called for their reversal** and has ‘alluded to a potential retaliatory military response’ (Stratfor, 2023a). The policies may also ‘inflare disagreements within the Afghan Taliban over whether the group should continue supporting its long-standing partner TTP’, which would likely be the desired outcome for Islamabad (Stratfor, 2023a).

### 4.3 Civil society protests

#### Local anger and protests

**As seen above, tighter border controls and other measures by the state have had a detrimental impact on local borderland communities. Communities and political actors in the tribal areas have expressed rising discontent with the increased militancy, violence, insecurity and disruption to their lives in the borderlands (including due to the construction of the border fence),** translating into a mass public movement in those areas (see below) (Cheema, 2023b, p.1). The increased insecurity includes rising militant attacks by extremist groups, and increased criminal activities such as the sale of drugs, targeted killings, and kidnapping for ransom and extortion (Geo TV, 2023).

**State and military responses to recent attacks in Balochistan have included suspending cross-border movement and carrying out a street-by-street ‘clearance operation’,** with the risk of deepening grievances against the state. As Cheema (2022a, p.5) explains:

Local residents in border villages were notified of the operation through announcements from mosque loudspeakers... People on roads and at police checkpoints were asked to show their identity cards; some were searched and temporarily taken into custody for questioning... With the restive insurgency and securitized environment in Balochistan, borderland residents in the Baloch belt have become accustomed to the experience of clearance operations... Communities largely cooperate with the armed forces and local authorities, but the experience does exacerbate long-standing grievances against the Pakistan state and foster some sympathy for the insurgents.

**The Pakistani government’s deportation drive and its new cross-border travel policy have also provoked localised protests, some of which have been attended by thousands of people** (including in the border district of Chaman in Balochistan province) (Stratfor, 2023a). Pakistan’s deportation law, and the recent crackdown and mass deportation of Afghans, have ‘triggered at least eight protests across Pakistan’ (ACLEDA, 2023a). Stratfor (2023a) notes: ‘Risks of protests and potentially violent resistance to such operations may consequently rise as deportations continue’. Pakistan’s requirement for all Afghans (notably drivers) crossing the border to have passports and visas has led to the closure of border crossings, including the two biggest at Torkham and Chaman:

The move has been met by intense backlash from Kabul and the Pashtun minority communities affected by the border closure... Members of the local Ahmadzai Wazir tribe, who live on both sides of the border, are demanding unrestricted travel and improved trade facilities... In Chaman, hundreds of thousands of traders and porters have been protesting the imposition of travel documents since October 21 (RFE/RL, 2024).

**Since summer 2022, Wana, in South Waziristan, has been the centre of political uprisings such as the Ulasi Pashoon movement** (meaning ‘social awakening’ in Pashto, framed by Pashtun nationalist narratives) (Cheema, 2023a). For example, in January 2023 a big protest rally in South Waziristan organised by Wana Ulasi Pashoon included workers from multiple political parties, including the Pakistan People’s Party, Awami National Party, National Democratic Movement, Jamaat-e-Islami, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (Geo TV, 2023). Also, in the town of Angoor Adda, on the border of South

Waziristan, local communities have been demanding the return of visa-free movement across the border and trading permits (Cheema, 2023a).

**The PTM, which was created in 2018, is one of the groups involved in the Ulasi Pagoon. It is an ethnically affiliated, non-violent, grassroots civil society movement that campaigns for human rights for Pashtuns, and against the violence and repression carried out by Pakistan's security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during their military operations targeting terrorists and militants (BTI, 2022; Afzal, 2020).**

**The PTM alleges that Pakistan's military and the Taliban have committed extensive human rights violations against Pashtuns** in the north-west region for two decades, including killing innocent civilians with impunity (Afzal, 2020). It also highlights that Pashtuns are regularly harassed at checkpoints and treated with suspicion (Afzal, 2020). Recent PTM protests have demanded the reversal of the government's mandatory visa policy for Afghan nationals entering Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2023). The movement also alleges that the military has supported TTP militants and, 'most explosively', that the Taliban is being allowed to return to the tribal areas in a 'secret deal with the military' (Afzal, 2020). Makki et al. (2022) note that over time the PTM has become synonymous with the narrative of 'Pashtun nationalism' and that 'the primary demands of PTM were concerning removal of checkpoints, landmines, curfews, house-to-house searches and encounter killings of Pashtuns'.

#### **State response: repression**

**The growing Ulasi Pagoon movement has in some areas made the resolution of local grievances a strategic priority for district administrations and security agencies, with some positive outcomes;** for example, *rahdari* easement privileges for border residents that allow free movement were briefly restored at Angoor Adda in July–August 2022 (Cheema, 2023a). However, in another example, protests against the construction of the border fence in communities around the Tanai locality in South Waziristan 'seemingly had little impact and have led to clashes between Pakistani authorities and Afghan National Police, ultimately reversing the fence's purpose of improving security in the area' (D3, 2020, p.38).

**Overall, the Pakistani state has responded to the PTM with repression, violently arresting its leaders and activists, and censoring coverage of its huge rallies** by news outlets (Afzal, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2023). Afzal (2020) explores why the Pakistani state finds the PTM so threatening, suggesting that it may be because the group challenges the integrity of the military. Another explanation is that the state finds ethnic loyalties threatening, with long-term fears over Pashtun separatism, in the context of the secession of East Pakistan to form Bangladesh in 1971, and the decades-long Baluch separatist insurgency. Afzal (2020) suggests that the state 'appears to believe its policy of support to fundamentalist Islamists, including the Afghan Taliban, helps counter Pashtun influence'. While there is no formal evidence on the Pakistani public's views on the PTM, Afzal (2020) comments that they appear to support the state's narrative in being critical of the PTM, building on broader stereotypes that conflate Pashtuns with terrorism.

**The same repression is seen against those protesting against Pakistan's actions in relation to the Baloch insurgency and human rights violations in the province** (including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention and torture). In a recent example in December 2023: 'authorities in Islamabad used excessive force, including tear gas, batons and water cannon against peaceful protesters engaged in "The Baloch Long March" led by women against continuing repression and human rights violations, including enforced disappearances in... Balochistan' (CIVICUS, 2024).

**The Pakistani state has a long 'tradition' of seeking to repress political/public opposition (arguably since the founding of the country in 1947).** The state response to civil society protests by borderland communities conforms to the norm. However, **over the past couple of years, repression of opposition**

**groups, and curbs on freedom of expression and assembly, as well as of the media, have increased significantly in Pakistan.**

**The recent escalation stems from the political crisis following the ousting of Imran Khan as prime minister,** and his subsequent arrest and imprisonment. Khan's ousting is widely seen as a consequence of having 'fallen out' with Pakistan's powerful military (see Idris, 2024, forthcoming). However, the move triggered massive public protests across the country by supporters of Khan and his PTI party. The government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who succeeded Khan, has consistently pursued a strategy of crushing all opposition, backed by the military. Human Rights Watch (2023) reports:

Pakistan's political and economic crises deepened in 2023. Following a similar playbook as its predecessors, the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif clamped down on the media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political opposition. The authorities used draconian counterterrorism and sedition laws to intimidate peaceful critics.

**CIVICUS in January 2024 highlighted the growing restrictions on protest and opposition in Pakistan** (CIVICUS, 2024). They included:

- Criminalisation, threats and harassment of human rights defenders and the failure to hold perpetrators to account.
- Efforts to intimidate and censor journalists and media outlets and silence online expression.
- Restrictions and attacks on peaceful protests, especially by ethnic Pashtun minorities and women's rights activists.
- The barring of Khan from contesting legislative elections, and the rejection of nomination papers of almost all national and provincial PTI leaders by the Election Commission of Pakistan.
- Pakistan's media watchdog issuing a directive in August 2023 barring all TV channels from giving airtime to 11 individuals, including Khan, journalists considered close to him, and individuals accused of criticising the military or government.

**Elections for national and provincial assemblies were held in February 2024, but were characterised by significant restrictions on opposition parties,** as well as post-election manipulation of results. The high representative of the European Union issued a statement (EU Council, 2024):

We regret the lack of a level playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections, restrictions to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression both online and offline, restrictions of access to the internet, as well as allegations of severe interference in the electoral process, including arrests of political activists.

Candidates associated with the PTI secured the highest number of seats in the National Assembly (falling short of an outright majority). Despite this, the new government was formed by the parties in second and third place (the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and Pakistan People's Party, respectively), which enjoyed the backing of the military.

## 5. Serious and organised crime

Global Organized Crime Index (2023) country analysis for Pakistan details significant SOC issues. Some of the main issues relating to the borderlands include: human trafficking; human smuggling; extortion and protection racketeering; arms trafficking; illegal logging; drug trafficking; financial crimes; and state corruption.

### 5.1 Smuggling, financial crimes and corruption

**Financial crimes such as tax evasion via illicit cross-border trading are widespread along the border, and are a key livelihood source** (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Drawing on a representative survey and interviews with populations at two major border crossing points (Spin Boldak district and Muhmand Dara), Malouta and Attai (2019) find that a large percentage of the local population make their living from both licit and illicit trade across the border, much of which evades taxation; indeed, many informants did not differentiate between the two. Views on the value of greater enforcement of customs regulations were mixed; some thought stronger regulation would be beneficial locally and nationally, while others thought that weak law enforcement was the reason why the borders generated opportunities, and more regulation would hurt livelihoods (Malouta & Attai, 2019). They conclude (Malouta & Attai, 2019, p.1):

In order to deliver services, assure security and shore up its legitimacy, the Afghan state would have to improve its capacity to deny entry to militants and collect customs duties and taxes. However, taming corruption and enforcing stricter border controls in conflict-affected areas are daunting tasks. Restricting cross-border movement would also affect the livelihoods of millions of Afghans in some of the country's most contested regions, potentially undermining efforts to restore peace.

**In recent years, there has been an 'an unchecked expansion of smuggling networks' across the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran tri-border area** (Cheema, 2023a, p.9), including smuggling of:

- Fuel from Iran to Pakistan (sometimes via Afghanistan)
- Fertiliser, wheat and foreign currency from Pakistan to Afghanistan
- Cars, spare parts, electronics, cigarettes, cloth, coal and Iranian fuel from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

**Pakistan is identified as having one of the highest risk ratings for money laundering and terrorist financing in the world** (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). This risk assessment is due to (NIOC, 2020b, pp.6-7):

- The long porous border with Afghanistan (which supports predicate crimes such as smuggling, drug trafficking, human smuggling, cash smuggling and terrorists transiting to/from Afghanistan).
- The presence of militant groups and individuals in Pakistan.
- The high incidence and frequency of predicate crimes both for money laundering and terrorist funding.
- The presence of a robust *hawala* and *hundi* (money/value transfer services) sector in Pakistan.
- Weak regulation of the financial sector.
- The country's very low rating on anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International's Corruptions Perceptions Index.
- A large segment of non-profit organisations not being regulated and being little documented.
- The real estate, precious metal, gems and jewellery sectors – the most likely repositories of laundered money and terrorist funding – being almost completely unregulated.



- A low tax to GDP ratio of 11.6 per cent, which indicates an undocumented economy and tax evasion.

Again, insurgency and underdevelopment are self-reinforcing factors. In this case, the status of being a country at risk of terrorist financing and consequent international monitoring has a negative impact on FDI, as 'it is extremely difficult for foreign investors to do business in Pakistan, while also abiding by international rules around funding terrorism' (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

**The movement of currency is of particular concern for broader national stability during this period of acute financial crisis in Pakistan:**

With the increased demand of goods emanating from Afghanistan, available foreign currency is being smuggled out of Pakistan on a daily basis, primarily from Peshawar. Some media reports estimate more than USD 5 million in currency is moved from Pakistan to Afghanistan on a daily basis (Cheema, 2023a, p.10).

The Pakistan government is increasingly concerned by the loss of state revenues to smuggling: 'These factors incentivise border actors to shift from regulated trade flows to an expansion of irregular trade through a porous border system, made possible through partnerships with state agents on both sides.' It is clear there is a nexus of illicit smuggling networks that is challenging to target, with so many livelihoods dependent on trade, with limited alternative employment opportunities: 'A crackdown on smuggling will exacerbate volatility in the border region' (Cheema, 2023a, p.10).

**There are widespread allegations of corruption, where networks of state officials, political parties, politicians, gangs and military officials influence the political process,** mostly at provincial level, and benefit from criminal markets (including drug trafficking) (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Cheema (2023a, p.1) explains how:

various structures of rentiership exist and the most important actors in the border system on the Pakistani side are local courier groups (often highly unionized, such as the Laghrris) and the 'local Taliban'. These groups often work in collusion with some state actors (such as border force personnel), coopting them to work against others (such as the Pakistan military and local levies).

**As mentioned in section 3.2, over the past decades remote areas with porous borders, such as North Waziristan, have been home to many militant groups that have also engaged in transnational crimes** such as 'smuggling, extortion, ransom and the promotion of illegal economies' (Makki & Iftikhar, 2022).

## **5.2 Trafficking and smuggling of drugs, arms and people**

**Drug trafficking is a key aspect of SOC across the region.** Pakistan is a leading transit country for heroin due to its proximity to Afghanistan, and high rates of addiction and domestic demand mean it is also a destination country. It is a significant player in the global cannabis trade, serving as both a source, transit and destination country; and has become a destination country for synthetic drugs (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Mafia-style groups and criminal networks (mostly located in Karachi) control heroin trafficking, cooperating with groups such as the Taliban (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Corrupt government officials also facilitate heroin trafficking, and enable the mafia-style groups that may provide support to their domestic and foreign policy goals (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

**Most of the drug-trafficking routes for goods that originate in Afghanistan and pass through Pakistan go through Balochistan,** with its numerous land and maritime entry and exit points for smuggled goods (Fazli, 2022). Balochistan's 'idiosyncratic system of law enforcement' compounds the problem of drug trafficking; for example, only urban areas have police for law enforcement, while rural areas have tribal militias that

are answerable to tribal chieftains. Fazli (2022, p.21) explains that a heavy security presence has proved incapable of preventing illicit movement and that the 'rule of law is virtually non-existent in many parts of Balochistan. Drug and other crime barons, tribal chiefs, public representatives and local elites virtually run a parallel economy, based on smuggling'.

**The Taliban's announcement on 3 April 2022 of its policy to prohibit poppy cultivation and the use of and trade in narcotics looked to be a highly destabilising policy for Afghanistan**, bearing in mind the critical role that opium plays in the livelihoods of farmers (Fazli, 2022). The ban would affect farmers in the southwest, where many Taliban leaders are from, and thus could provoke a serious backlash if implemented (Fazli, 2022). Yet, it appears that that policy is not really being implemented (Fazli, 2022). According to Fazli (2022, p.27):

insecurity explains only part of the failure of international and domestic efforts to eradicate or reduce Afghan poppy cultivation after the Taliban was ousted in 2001. The fact that farmers and other stakeholders could see few long-term alternatives to a lucrative and resilient crop was far more significant. Those alternatives are even more elusive today.

**Arms trafficking is a significant issue in Pakistan as illicit weapons are widely available; arms and military accessories emanating from Afghanistan have proliferated since the withdrawal of US-led forces** (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). There has also been a surge in demand for small arms as incidents of terrorist attacks, extortion and street crime have increased (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Transparency on legal arms exports is limited, thus suggesting the occurrence of illicit activity: 'Overall, arms proliferation has resulted in increased rates of violence from organised criminal groups, insurgents and violent extremists across Pakistan' (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022a) suggests that Pakistan's increased security presence at the borders may also be in response to the increase in smuggling of weapons out of Afghanistan from the huge caches left behind by the forces of the former government.

**Human trafficking is another significant issue in Pakistan that is mainly related to forced labour, sexual exploitation and forced begging**, with some organ trafficking. Pakistan is a source, transit and destination country. Common sectors for forced labour include agriculture, construction, fisheries, textiles, domestic labour and mining. Human trafficking occurs internally within Pakistan, and externally to the Middle East, Europe and China: 'Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants and marginalised minorities... are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, and victims are largely targeted through false advertising or the implementation of debt' (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023; US Department of State, 2023).

**People smuggling is a large industry, with Pakistan being a source and transit country for people travelling to Western countries**, including Pakistanis, Afghans, and refugees from other neighbouring countries and other South and South-east Asian countries (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Most human smuggling in and out of Pakistan occurs along the borderlands of Balochistan, Iran and Afghanistan (the 'Naukundi route' is the most well-known) (National Initiative Against Organized Crime Pakistan (NIOC), 2020a). It is a key industry driving the local economy and the largest source of revenue for some villages; the market is largely facilitated by corrupt government officials (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Smuggled individuals are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation along their journeys.

### **5.3 Natural resources and environmental crimes**

**Environmental crimes are another significant problem in Pakistan, as a country with enormous mineral wealth, particularly in the Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in Balochistan** (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). Smuggling occurs in relation to timber/logging, illicit mining (of coal, gold, copper),

gems and precious stones, and poaching (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). For example, a timber mafia operates in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan forests: 'illicit timber is often smuggled out of Pakistan to neighbouring countries and back into Pakistan for the purpose of tax evasion, and subsequently smuggled to the Middle East' (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

**Corrupt regional government officials enable illegal flows of natural resources; there is limited scrutiny due to corruption, insecurity and the remoteness of the areas where illegal activities are taking place** (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023):

In Balochistan, high-value metals such as gold and copper have also become a source of conflict between miners, the local and central governments, and Baloch nationalists. In particular, conflict has erupted over the Reko Diq mine, one of the largest gold and copper mines in the world. Balochistan's coal industry also lacks regulation and is linked to corrupt and criminal interests (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

#### 5.4 SOC actors

**A wide range of actors engage in SOC activities that are connected with the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.** While there is limited information about them, Global Organized Crime Index (2023) identifies several kinds:

- **Criminal networks** engage in various markets (e.g. human smuggling, illegal logging and wildlife crimes), including human smuggling in Balochistan.
- **Mafia-style groups** engage in various activities (e.g. heroin trafficking, non-renewable resource crimes, flora crimes, racketeering and extortion). They are powerful in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Karachi, and can influence political decisions around elections and the prison system.
- **Private sector actors support human trafficking through bonded labour schemes** in agriculture, workshops and the brick kiln industry. They help to blur illicit and licit activities (e.g. in arms trafficking, illegal mining and logging). Businesspeople in profitable sectors (such as textiles and sugar) evade taxes and launder money using offshore entities or the accounts of low-wage employees. Licensed foreign currency dealers in every city participate in illegal *hawala/hundi* practices, which also contribute to money laundering.
- **State actors** include corrupt government officials who cooperate with mafia-style groups and criminal networks to further the country's domestic or foreign policy ambitions (e.g. including suppressing the Balochistan insurgency or opposing India). State-embedded actors are believed to be involved in a range of criminal markets.

**There is a symbiotic relationship between terrorists, organised criminals and political groups, and the lines between them are blurred, especially due to the widespread availability of firearms** (Zahid, 2018). Terrorist groups rely on criminal groups for financing, logistics, movements and weapon supplies; they cannot survive for long without developing a strong financial support base, which is mostly achieved through criminal activities (Zahid, 2018). For example, the TTP extorts payments from traders and other affluent people in return for not attacking them (Rehman, 2021). If they refuse to pay, the militants use small bombs near their homes to frighten them; if they still refuse to pay, the TTP either kills them in public or bombs their houses (Rehman, 2021).

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