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Deconstructing the Monolith
A Functional Typology of Non-State Actors in Pakistan

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Introduction: The illusion of military monoliths

For decades, Pakistan's national security paradigm has been defined by a highly reactive strategy of deploying blunt force against what it recognises as 'terrorism'.[1] The state's military power and primacy are evidenced by its substantial defence expenditure, allocating US$ 9 billion for the fiscal year 2025–2026.[2] Further, the Global Firepower Index 2026, which ranks states based on modern military capabilities, placed Pakistan 14th globally, reflecting its significant manpower, advanced equipment, and resource mobilisation.[3]

However, despite possessing exceptional conventional military might, Pakistan's persistent security struggles highlight the limits of relying on a uniform security narrative. The state's public posture categorises fundamentally different non-state actors as a monolithic enemy labelled 'terrorism'. It is important to recognise that the state benefits from this monolithic categorisation, as it provides it a justification for vigorous military clampdowns. This monolithic categorisation becomes the starting point for academic analyses of the overarching label, while delving into a group's unique intent and distinct logics of hostility. Therefore, constructing a functional typology is essential to build a truly holistic

1 "Rallies, jirgas in KP oppose Azm-i-Istehkam military offensive." *Dawn.* 1 July 2024. https://www.dawn.com/news/1843029. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

2 Nath, Sanstuti. 2025. "Guns over Growth? Pak Hikes Defence Budget By 20%, Slashes Overall Spending." *NDTV World.* 11 June. https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/guns-over-growth-pakistan-hikes-defence-budget-by-20-slashes-overall-spending-8641479. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

3 Global Firepower . 2026. *2026 Military Strength Ranking*.. https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php . Accessed on 2nd July 2026

understanding of the region's complex conflict landscape.

This study serves as an entry point to decode the unique and fragmented nature of terrorism in South Asia, with Pakistan as a case study. It examines how non-state actors can be typologised in order to deconstruct the mechanics of violence in a region. By moving beyond the catch-all label of 'terrorism', this work provides a deeper scholarly understanding of Pakistan's terror landscape to properly delineate the motives, justifications for violence, and political ambitions of different non-state actors.

To this end, the Issue Brief starts with an examination of how the insufficiency of conventional international relations (IR) theories can lead to a misdiagnosis of internal conflicts, particularly in South Asia. It elaborates how the misdiagnosed securitisation creates a vicious loop of insecurity which countries often find themselves trapped in. Once this context is laid out, the Issue Brief enumerate and describe the typologies of non-state actors in Pakistan to better understand the security landscape and to provide an alternative to the current system of securitisation.

The 'third world' security predicament and securitisation

Traditional IR frameworks depend heavily on Westphalian assumptions and define security as the ability to deter external, state-based threats to preserve international order. However, applying these conventional, military-biased metrics to post-colonial environments creates profound analytical misunderstandings.

As outlined in the *Third World Security Predicament*, post-colonial states are characterised by incomplete, ongoing state-making processes.[4] Unlike Western states, which enjoy consolidated sovereignty, many post-colonial states suffer from a lack of unconditional legitimacy regarding their state boundaries, governing elites, and institutions. Consequently, the primary threat to the regime is internal legitimacy rather than invading armies. In such a context, security challenges are rooted in internal political grievances, marginalisation, and socio-economic crises, like poverty or unequal resource distribution, that have the potential to topple institutions or regimes.[5]

Despite the inherently internal and political nature of these crises, the state frequently

4 Ayoob, Mohammed. 1995. "Concepts and Definitions: 'Third World' and 'Security'." *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 4-15

5 Ayoob, Mohammed. 1995. "State Making and Third World Security." *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 28

responds by engaging in a process of *securitisation*. The Copenhagen School defines a security issue as a public or political issue that poses an 'existential threat'. This deliberate framing offers the state the option to handle socio-economic or political grievances through extraordinary and military means. By securitising such issues, the state replaces civic governance and political negotiation with military clampdowns.[6] This error of deeming deeply rooted political crises as problems that warrant uniform military action ignores the sociological reality of non-state actors.

As Paul Staniland notes, insurgent groups are not randomly born. Instead, they mobilise, politicise social networks, convert peaceful associations into mechanisms for violence pre-war, and are resilient precisely for these reasons.[7] Because these networks are deeply embedded within the social fabric, deploying uniform, extraordinary military force against them rarely dismantles the threat. Instead, it fractures the society that harbours them.

When the state fails or refuses to differentiate between an embedded socio-political network and an existential, maximalist threat, it forces a dangerous policy default. The subsequent reliance on indiscriminate force inadvertently triggers a self-sustaining cycle of violence, trapping the state in a perpetual loop of insecurity. Theoretically, this 'insecurity loop' functions as an environment in which, rather than resolving the root grievance, the application of uniform state violence alienates the civilian population and provides opportunities for the insurgent networks to exploit the situation for recruitment. Consequently, the very military operations designed to contain instability actively exacerbate it. The state is forced to continually deploy force against a threat that grows more deeply embedded with every intervention.

The insecurity loop in Pakistan

By historically treating complex socio-political grievances as uniform physical targets, Pakistan's reliance on a singular strategy of pure force serves as a case study of a state trapped in a perpetual 'insecurity loop'.

First, the use of indiscriminate force routinely triggers a documented vengeance effect. Under this force, militant networks actively weaponise the state's reliance on blunt force. Their strategy is based on provoking repressive reactions from the government by carrying out extreme events. As Audrey Kurth Cronin notes, pure state repression hardly ends militancy because armed groups design strategies of polarisation and mobilisation to turn a state's raw strength against itself.

6 Buzan, Barry et al. 1998. "Security Analysis: Conceptual Apparatus." *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 21-24.

7 Staniland, Paul. 2014. "Organising Insurgency." *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 9.

When the state deploys uniform military force, it causes collateral damage, harming and alienating the innocent population.[8] Quantitative assessments of Pakistan's historical counterterrorism strategies demonstrate this dynamic. Research tracking counterinsurgency data between 1974 and 2015 indicates that isolated military operations routinely fail because they trigger a dominant 'vengeance effect'.[9] The use of indiscriminate power inspires local sympathy for the militants, generating social backlash. Consequently, rather than incapacitating the threat, military interventions transform neutral populations into active combatants.

This is what David Kilcullen terms the 'accidental guerrilla' syndrome.[10] This structural backlash heavily outweighs the number of militants the state actually incapacitates, leading to an overall increase in violence.

Second, while major military offensives achieve tactical successes by temporarily clearing physical territory, they consistently fail strategically. Historically, major military offensives in Pakistan, such as Operations *Al-Mizan*, *Rah-e-Nijat*, and *Zarb-e-Azb*, have successfully cleared insurgent strongholds.[11] However, because these operations frequently lack follow-through in socio-economic development, robust legal frameworks, and civilian governance reform, they leave behind administrative voids later filled by militants, who return once the military withdraws.[12]

Ultimately, this dynamic subjects the state to an insurgent strategy of exhaustion. It prevents populations from cooperating with the government and forces the state to continuously deploy its military to clear the same territories, allowing insurgents to impose massive costs in terms of lives, resources, and political capital. This erodes political will and traps the country in a perpetual cycle of starting over. To accurately deconstruct this self-sustaining insecurity loop, there is a distinct need for a functional typology of non-state actors.

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8 Cronin, Audrey. 2009. "Repression." *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 115-142.

9 Rehman, Faiz et al. 2017. "What have we learned? Assessing the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies in Pakistan." *Economic Modelling*. 64: 2-3

10 Kilcullen, David. 2009. Chapter 1: The Accidental Guerilla. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Next One.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 28-32

11 Shah, Mariam. 2024. "Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Beyond Azm-e-Istehkam." *Royal United Services Institute.* 1 July. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/pakistans-counterterrorism-strategy-beyond-azm-e-istehkam. Accessed on 2nd July 2026.

12 ibid.

Defining the typology

A functional typology, at its core, differentiates and categorises non-state actors based on specific metrics regarding their ultimate political ambition with respect to the state, and the logic that drives the violence they commit. This separates the monolithic group of 'terrorists' into three distinct types:

1. Spoilers, or groups motivated towards creating a change in existing circumstances to address their grievances
2. Competitors, or those who seek to rule, and
3. Disruptors, or those who aim to shatter the existing order altogether.

It is important to acknowledge that these categories do not exist in rigid, static silos. The framework reflects the messy, overlapping nature of conflict in South Asia and is, hence, inherently fluid. The categorisation of a non-state actor depends entirely on its current strategic posture, and a shift in timeframe or political perspective would directly impact the categorisation itself.

A question then arises as to why this typology is required. Proposed solutions and analytical understanding of threats often depend on how particular threats are perceived. From a strategic standpoint as well as academic understanding, it is necessary that different non-state actors be seen accurately in terms of their motivations, demands, and logic, so that specific strategies can be designed for specific threats.

1. The Spoiler

The Spoiler is essentially motivated by political, economic, or other forms of grievances and the desire for a change in circumstances. It does not outright reject the state or seek to replace the federal government but uses violence as a strategy to bring parties to the negotiation table. It utilises violence to draw attention toward itself, weaponising hostilities for leverage. Another defining feature of the Spoiler is the finitude of its goals, due to which, theoretically, it is a threat that can be negotiated with. This category further bifurcates into two distinct types: internal and external.

Internal Spoilers: Grievances and leverage

The Internal Spoiler directs its violence inward, orientating it directly toward the state. Balochi and Sindhi ethnonationalist groups, such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), Sindhi Revolutionary Army (SRA), and Sindhi Liberation Army (SLA), exemplify this category. Driven by deep-seated grievances regarding political marginalisation, resource exploitation, developmental concerns, and targeted state atrocities, their objectives for violence relies on garnering attention toward

their cause and gaining leverage for negotiations.[13][14]

Motivated by these concerns, they are ultimately looking for a change in their circumstances, whether through greater autonomy, development, or, in extreme cases, secession. Regardless of their theoretical capacity for negotiation, however, the state often responds to their activities and existence with blunt force. This default response not only escalates the physical violence but also strengthens the insurgents' narrative of state-sponsored atrocities and systematic ignorance, thus reinforcing and empowering the very logic of their violence and demands.

External Spoilers: The illusion of 'manageable assets'

Conversely, the External Spoiler directs its violence outward, away from the host state. Groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hizbul Mujahideen, and Muslim Mujahideen are examples in this category. Historically, these groups have been utilised by the state's security apparatus as low-cost, high-deniability tools of statecraft to inflict pain on rival states and force political concessions across international borders.[15] Because their operational targets have historically aligned with the state's external objectives, Islamabad has frequently operated under the illusion that these groups are 'manageable assets'. However, this external proxy strategy is volatile and frequently backfires, exacerbating the state's own internal crises. This was most notably demonstrated between 2003 and 2004, when splinter factions of JeM attempted to assassinate Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf twice, over disagreements related to the state's post-9/11 tactical shifts. This turn of events reveals the inherent instability of the External Spoiler.[16]

2. The Competitor

The second category within this functional framework is the Competitor. Unlike the Spoiler, which utilises violence as a strategy to secure concessions or changes in circumstances from the state, the Competitor aims to dismantle the state's monopoly on

13 Mir, Nazir Ahmad and Muneeb, Yousuf. 2024. "Resolving the Baloch issue is in Pakistan's Political and Economic Interest." *Al Jazeera*. 22 January. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/22/resolving-the-baloch-issue-is-in-pakistans-political-and-economic-interest. Accessed on 2nd July 2026.

14 Rana, Muhammad Air. 2022. "Militancy in Sindh." *Dawn*. 16 October. https://www.dawn.com/news/1715297. Accessed on 2nd July 2026.

15 "How Pakistani Madrassas Contribute to Radicalisation Dynamics and Religious Terrorism in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir." *European Foundation for South Asian Studies*. April 2019. https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/how-pakistani-madrassas-contribute-to-radicalization-dynamics-and-terrorism-in-indian-j-and-k/. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

16 "Pakistanis to Hang for Musharraf Plot." *Al Jazeera*. 4 October 2005. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/10/4/pakistanis-to-hang-for-musharraf-plot. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

power entirely and replace it with its own administration. It aims to create administrative voids to fill them with itself, securing power over territories.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) exemplifies this logic. Since its resurgence in 2021, TTP has aimed to undermine the state's authority in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by attempting to set up administrative departments and parallel governance systems with locally designated governors.[17] Additionally, the organisation structurally directs its violence at hard military and police targets to project itself as a legitimate 'state-in-waiting'. While it is important to note that the TTP has been linked to attacks on civilians, this posturing is demonstrated by their formal code of conduct (*layha*) published in 2018, which explicitly banned attacks on public places, markets, and hospitals.[18] Further, the core TTP leadership made vigorous, public attempts to distance the organisation from the devastating 2023 Peshawar Mosque bombing, as mass-casualty attacks on civilian worshippers directly conflict with their strategic posturing as a legitimate governing alternative.[19]

Theoretically and narratively, the Competitor focuses on physically exhausting state security forces through targeted campaigns, creating a power vacuum that they intend to fill with a functional shadow administration. Moreover, developing this posturing narratively while being involved in attacks on civilians also helps their case, as it strengthens the belief that the state cannot adequately protect its population, making room for them as responsible alternative leaders.

However, there are subtle fractures within this category that the monolithic label of 'terrorist' obscures. Factions like Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) technically sit under the broader TTP umbrella and share their ultimate goal of overthrowing the state, but they employ a fundamentally different logic of violence. Rather than restricting their focus to state apparatuses, JuA intentionally targets the soft society to break social cohesion, spark sectarian division, and delegitimise the government's ability to protect its citizens.

17 Shahid, Kunwar. 2025. "The Growing Ambitions of the Pakistani Taliban." *The Diplomat.* 29 January. https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/the-growing-ambitions-of-the-pakistani-taliban/. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

18 Jadoon, Amira and Sara Mahmood. 2018. "Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe." *Combating Terrorism Center.* 11(11): 24.

19 Mehmood, Arshad. 2023. "Pakistani Taliban Splinter Group Claims Responsibility for Mosque Bombing as Death Toll Hits 100." *The Media Line.* 31 January. https://themedialine.org/top-stories/pakistani-taliban-splinter-group-claims-responsibility-for-mosque-bombing-as-death-toll-hits-100/. Accessed on 2nd July 2026

This divergent operational logic was demonstrated through JuA's enthusiastic ownership of the 2023 Peshawar Mosque bombing, exposing a deep rift within the broader insurgent network.[20]

3. The Disruptor

The final category within this functional framework is the Disruptor. Its logic of violence is rooted in creating societal havoc and entropy. Unlike the Competitor, the Disruptor has no intention to out-govern or run shadow administrations within the territorial boundaries of the existing state. Unlike the Spoiler, it does not utilise violence to negotiate concessions or secure a change in circumstances from the central government. Instead, its ultimate goal is to disrupt, dissolve, and shatter the prevailing system of nation-states. Since it completely rejects the Westphalian concept of the nation-state in favour of a transnational entity, its demands leave no room for political compromise, bargaining, or appeasement.

The Pakistani faction of Jundallah exemplifies the domestic variant of this category.[21] Initially operating as a local threat, Jundallah's strategic trajectory demonstrates the distinct ability of a Disruptor to expand beyond national boundaries. In November 2014, Jundallah became one of the first major breakaway factions of the TTP in the South Asian region to officially pledge allegiance to Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[22] This move was part of a broader effort to establish a foothold for a global caliphate in South Asia.

Today, ISKP represents the most realised manifestation of the Disruptor in South Asia. The organisation views Westphalian borders as an apostate construct and aims to dismantle the state system entirely to establish a transnational *Wilayat* (province). This objective is reflected in their narratives and choice of targets, which are strategically chosen to break down the pluralistic foundation of Pakistani society. Furthermore, because they reject the nation-state as an illegitimate entity, they view any participation in it as an act of apostasy. This was demonstrated by their devastating July 2023 suicide bombing of a Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) political rally in Bajaur, which killed over 60 people.[23]

By targeting those who participate in the democratic process, ISKP seeks to cause systemic chaos.

20 Ibid.

21 Sheikh, Mona Kanwal. 2017. “Islamic State Enters Al-Qaeda’s Old Hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*. 16(1): 41.

22 Ibid.

23 “Pakistan suicide bombing death toll rises to 63.” *Al Jazeera.* 2 August 2023. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/2/pakistan-suicide-bombing-death-toll-rises-to-63. Accessed on 2nd July 2026.

Typological anomalies: The case of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)

While the functional triad provides analytical context, it is crucial to recognise that the framework is not exhaustive. The messy, overlapping nature of militancy in South Asia produces actors that resist clean categorisation, exposing the limits of this study. The strategies and political ambitions of non-state actors can evolve and adapt over time depending on state pressure, internal organisational fractures, leadership transitions, and shifting ideological landscapes. Consequently, this functional typology should not be interpreted as a rigid, immutable matrix, but rather as a dynamic diagnostic model designed to assess an actor's operational posture at a specific strategic juncture.

Such a situation can produce hybrid actors like the sectarian militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) that does not fit neatly into any single category.

On one hand, LeJ does not project an ambition to run shadow administrations or provide public services like a competitor, nor does it seek concessions or dialogue like a Spoiler. The group's justifications for violence focus entirely on demographic engineering and sectarian purification as it systematically assassinates Shia professionals and carries out bombings in minority neighbourhoods to shatter the pluralistic societal foundations of the Pakistani state.[24]

Yet, unlike transnational disruptors like ISKP, LeJ has historically actively recognised the Pakistani nation-state and has operated within highly localised, domestic, and sometimes proxy-aligned structures. Their actions reflect the intention that while they do not wish to rule or form a global caliphate, they are actively seeking changes within society.

The fact that LeJ's purely ideological, sectarian justifications for violence sit uncomfortably between these categories demonstrates the limits of this study. It underscores that while the functional triad captures the primary political dynamics of the Pakistani militant landscape, further research and deeper conceptual work are required to categorise and fully decode highly specialised, non-state sectarian networks that challenge state-centric frameworks.

Conclusion: Moving beyond the monolith

To avoid further entrapment in the self-sustaining insecurity loop, scholarly discourse must move past the monolithic label of 'terrorism' and recognise the differences in internal threats. The historical reliance on this homogeneous recognition

24 United Nations Security Council. 2011. *Narrative Summary: Lashkar i Jhangvi (LJ).*

repeatedly fails because it misdiagnoses highly distinct internal threats. The framework presented in this brief is functional because it evaluates non-state actors based on operational objectives, intent, and motives for hostility, thereby providing the necessary context required for analytical frameworks that are not divorced from ground realities. Rather than defaulting to a uniform strategy of containment, such a typology demonstrates that different categories of non-state threats demand highly specialised, differentiated understandings.

However, while this functional typology provides context for deconstructing the current conflict landscape, the framework is not exhaustive. The dynamic, overlapping, and fluid nature of militancy in South Asia means that groups can evolve, shift their strategic postures, or operate on the boundaries of multiple categories over time. The case of LeJ represents a clear typological anomaly, illustrating that certain networks do not fit neatly into these three functional silos. This limitation underscores that the framework is not a rigid, static matrix, but rather an ongoing diagnostic model. It leaves significant room for further research to deepen, expand, and refine these classifications as the regional security environment continues to evolve.

Ultimately, this framework possesses utility beyond the Pakistani security landscape. Internal conflict within South Asia is highly unique and has a multidimensional nature due to its deep societal embeddedness and porous borders. It therefore frequently exists beyond traditional and externally oriented insecurity discourses.[25] Standard Westphalian models of international relations that assume consolidated state borders and clear-cut state-on-state threats fail to offer adequate explanations for post-colonial environments. Applying this functional, intent-driven lens across South Asia may lead to a more accurate, ethnocentric analysis of security and sovereignty for these states.[26]

By allowing researchers and analysts to decode the specific political ambitions and justifications for violence emerging from different regional actors, this typology provides a conceptual nuance that could help break the cycle of starting over, and build a more holistic understanding of South Asian security.

25 Staniland, Paul. 2014. Organising Insurgency. *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 9.

26 Buzan, Barry et al. 1998. Security Analysis: Conceptual Apparatus. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 21-22.

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