

# Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Balochistan Requires Recalibration

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## Introduction

Every major terrorist organization operating in Balochistan today targets the Pakistani state as a whole rather than a single institution. Army personnel, the Frontier Corps, Levies, Police, Counter-Terrorism Department officials, intelligence assets, judges, civil administrators, and innocent civilians are all systematically targeted. Terrorists make no distinction between uniforms, and policymakers should not either. Public debate frequently degenerates into comparing institutional performances rather than examining whether Pakistan's overall security architecture functions coherently. Counter-insurgency is not an institutional competition; it is the coordinated application of political authority, law enforcement, intelligence, governance, justice, and—where necessary—military force. The core question is not which agency is making greater sacrifices, but whether Pakistan is fighting as a unified, constitutional state.

## The Blind Side of Security and Strategic Ownership

Pakistan has repeatedly demonstrated sufficient military capability to dismantle organized terrorist infrastructure. Operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Radd-ul-Fasaad* significantly degraded militant capacities. Yet, terrorism continues to regenerate because eliminating armed groups is not synonymous with eliminating the underlying conditions that allow insurgencies to survive (Kilcullen, 2009; Nagl, 2005). Counter-terrorism destroys operational networks, whereas counter-insurgency restores state legitimacy. The latter depends fundamentally upon effective, accountable governance.

Perhaps the least discussed weakness of Pakistan's current counter-terrorism model is the gradual drift of strategic ownership away from civilian institutions. Operational coordination in Balochistan revolves largely around paramilitary headquarters and intelligence-driven operations due to the severe threat environment. While their operational contribution is indispensable, a critical constitutional distinction must be maintained. The conceptual framework of national counter-terrorism policy belongs within civilian democratic institutions. Parliament legislates; federal and provincial governments formulate policy; police forces investigate offenses; prosecutors prosecute; and courts adjudicate guilt. The armed forces perform an essential constitutional role in supporting civil authority where authorized by law. Their operational execution should reinforce—not substitute—the civilian institutions responsible for long-term governance.

This distinction is not merely theoretical. After any major security failure, a predictable blame game emerges: federal ministers fault provincial policing for poor execution, provincial leaders criticize federal legislation and sentencing laws as weak, police blame courts for releasing suspects on bail, and courts cite police procedural misconduct for evidentiary failures. Enforcing constitutional clarity eliminates this circular scapegoating by establishing a non-negotiable framework of primary accountability. Parliament owns the legal architecture, provincial governments own operational execution on the ground, and the judiciary owns procedural gatekeeping. Ownership means recognizing that a failure in any single domain represents a systemic risk rather than an isolated error. For a strategy to succeed, citizens must view it as *their* strategy rather than an imposed security apparatus. This determines whether progress is measured purely by body counts and arrests, or by the restoration of public confidence, the rule of law, institutional legitimacy, and sustainable peace.

## **Institutional Friction and the Role of Local Policing**

Pakistan's security architecture in Balochistan increasingly exhibits overlapping jurisdictions rather than complementary responsibilities. Siloed in isolation, disparate agencies cultivate independent intelligence and guard private archives. Operating like parallel fleets across the same turbulent waters, they conduct isolated strikes under complex chains of command, each answerable to a different headquarters. Such fragmentation inevitably produces duplication, conflicting priorities, delayed information sharing, and institutional rivalry. No counter-insurgency campaign has ever been sustained through a fragmented command culture. Unity of effort does not require rigid uniformity, but it strictly requires clarity of mandates operating under a unified, civilian-led strategic framework.

The district police represent the state's permanent civilian presence within communities. Unlike temporary deployments, local police maintain criminal records, investigate offenses, gather admissible evidence, manage neighborhood informants, and build prosecutions that stand up in court. Yet, policing has become one of the most neglected components of the security architecture. A key issue is the deterioration of police record management. Criminal intelligence is only as reliable as the databases that sustain it. Incomplete records, fragmented databases, and poor interoperability undermine analytical accuracy. As a result, intelligence products rely excessively on external inputs that lack systematic local verification. This is not an argument against intelligence agencies; it is an argument for professional validation and local institutional memory. A Station House Officer (SHO) frequently understands neighborhood dynamics far better than a remote database. When state mechanisms bypass local policing expertise, intelligence inevitably loses precision.

## **Dissent, Due Process, and Public Trust**

Human rights advocates increasingly note a concerning trend: the broad-brush categorization of political dissent and free expression as anti-state activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Over-reliance on informant networks that conflate legitimate political dissent with support for terrorism alienates the intelligentsia, students, and community leaders—the very indigenous stakeholders needed to build peace and uphold state legitimacy. Similarly, the widespread application of the Fourth Schedule under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) has raised critical concerns regarding proportionality and due process. While preventive restrictions are necessary in specific, evidence-backed security cases, broad surveillance mechanisms shift the burden onto citizens to prove their loyalty. This approach dilutes the sharpness of evidence-led investigations and historically exacerbates alienation rather than quelling insurgency.

Perception is operationally significant. Successful counter-insurgency relies on voluntary public cooperation. Communities that feel broadly targeted rarely become willing intelligence partners. The objective of counter-terrorism must be to isolate terrorists from society—not to isolate society from the state. Success cannot coexist indefinitely with administrative practices that alienate local populations. History demonstrates that insurgencies rarely survive because governments lack firepower; they survive when populations lose trust in state institutions (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006).

## **Accountability, Resources, and Governance Imperatives**

Nowhere is this institutional strain clearer than in district policing. Field officers today face two threats: the insurgent on the street, and administrative vulnerability from within. When an officer survives an attack, they often face administrative inquiries before receiving institutional support. Operational setbacks are frequently treated as individual command failures, while systemic causes—such as planning flaws, equipment shortages, communication blackouts, or delayed reinforcements—are ignored. Professional accountability is vital, but passing the blame downward undermines morale.

No organization can foster initiative in junior commanders if survival is perceived to carry greater administrative risk than martyrdom.

Operational necessity must take precedence over administrative convenience. Field policing cannot succeed without adequate resources. Many stations continue to operate with insufficient fuel, minimal investigative funds, aging vehicles, and limited forensic tools. Specialized protective assets and armored vehicles must be deployed where operational risks are highest. Furthermore, senior leadership must maintain a visible presence in the field. Managing operations exclusively from urban headquarters disconnects leadership from ground realities. Accepting operational failures with transparency and adapting strategy accordingly remains a fundamental requirement of effective policing. Higher command must also accept that responsibility travels upward, not just downward. Every major security incident should trigger an impartial review of command preparedness and structural flaws rather than scapegoating lower-tier staff.

Kinetic operations may suppress violence, police investigations may secure convictions, and intelligence agencies may prevent imminent attacks, but none of these alone can resolve an insurgency. Only effective governance can achieve lasting stability. Counter-insurgency ultimately depends on which entity holds greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Legitimacy cannot be established through coercion alone; it arises from constitutional governance, accountable policing, impartial justice, and political inclusion. Balochistan does not merely require more security deployment; it requires significantly better governance. Under Pakistan's constitutional setup, both federal and provincial civilian leaderships must jointly take ownership of the counter-terrorism framework. Every executing agency—whether Police, CTD, Levies, Frontier Corps, or Armed Forces—must operate within clearly defined legal mandates under an integrated civilian-led policy. The goal must never be institutional primacy, but institutional harmony. Police must help shape intelligence, intelligence must generate court-admissible evidence, and the population of Balochistan must be treated as partners in peace rather than passive subjects of security policy.

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