



WEBINAR

**THE EVOLVING
MILITANT ECOSYSTEM:
SPILLOVER STATES, TRAVELING
MILITANCY, AND WHO GETS
TARGETED NEXT**



Tuesday 20 January 2026



5:00 - 6:00 pm

BRIEF REPORT

Conceptual Framework

Militancy in South Asia has entered a new and deeply complex phase, marked by mobility, fragmentation, and cross-border diffusion rather than rigid ideological or territorial confinement. Contemporary militant organizations increasingly function as adaptive ecosystems, exploiting governance vacuums, economic distress, regional instability, and weakened international counterterrorism coordination.

The post-2021 Afghan context has emerged as a central structural driver of this transformation. Afghanistan's political exclusion, economic collapse, and centralized decree-based governance have generated permissive environments where multiple militant entities, Islamist and ethno-nationalist alike coexist, cooperate, and compete. These groups increasingly operate through facilitation networks rather than centralized command structures, allowing militancy to travel across borders with speed and resilience.

This webinar aimed to move beyond event-based or group-specific analyses and instead examine militancy as a regional ecosystem. It explored how spillover dynamics function, how target selection is evolving, and which states, sectors, and populations face heightened risk. The discussion emphasized that militancy today is sustained not only by ideology, but also by mobility, survival incentives, narrative legitimacy, and regional governance failures.

Discussion Points



**Dilawaiz
Tabessum**

Host, South Asia Times



Hamna Shabbir

Co-host South Asia Times

- The webinar was moderated by Dilawaiz Jutt, Lead Research Coordinator at South Asia Times, who framed militancy as a structural and regional challenge rather than a series of isolated security incidents. The moderation emphasized that contemporary militant violence is shaped by governance vacuums, cross-border mobility, and regional instability, and should be analyzed as an evolving ecosystem rather than through narrow group-based or event-driven lenses.
- The moderator highlighted that the objective of the session was not to amplify militant narratives or focus on episodic violence, but to assess spillover dynamics, shifting target profiles, and the policy implications of traveling militancy through an analytical and policy-oriented framework. Emphasis was placed on informed dialogue, institutional responsibility, and regional coordination as essential elements for building long-term security and resilience.



Dr. Khurram Iqbal

Associate Professor, Quaid-e-Azam University and Former Head of Department of International Relations, National Defence University

- The militant landscape in Pakistan has undergone a structural transformation, marked by shifts in tactics, targets, and geography. Militancy today is no longer static or localized but adaptive, mobile, and increasingly network-based, operating through facilitation corridors rather than centralized command structures.
- Baloch militant organizations, particularly the BLA and its affiliates, have shifted from selective targeting of state infrastructure and security forces to mass-casualty attacks on civilians, especially in public transport, indicating strategic escalation and increased operational confidence.
- In contrast, Islamist militant groups such as the TTP have shown a gradual shift from non-combatant targets toward combatant-focused operations, though recent pressure has again pushed them toward indiscriminate targeting, reflecting tactical adaptation rather than ideological restraint.
- Geographically, militancy has expanded beyond the former tribal districts, with southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa particularly Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, and adjoining areas emerging as new epicenters, highlighting diffusion into previously stable regions.
- The capacity of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has been significantly degraded due to sustained intelligence-based operations and high-profile arrests. While sporadic symbolic attacks persist, ISKP's ability to conduct high-intensity, coordinated operations remains limited.
- The primary external driver of militancy is Afghanistan's re-emergence as a permissive hub for regional and transnational terrorist organizations, a concern validated by successive United Nations reports and shared by regional states including China, Iran, Russia, and Central Asia.
- A key internal driver is the political and institutional disconnect between Pakistan's federal and provincial governments, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which undermines counterterrorism coherence and creates confusion among frontline security forces.
- While kinetic measures are necessary, militancy, especially in Balochistan, requires a political approach alongside security operations, whereas dialogue with TTP has largely been exhausted. Clear policy alignment between the center and provinces is essential for sustainable counterterrorism outcomes.

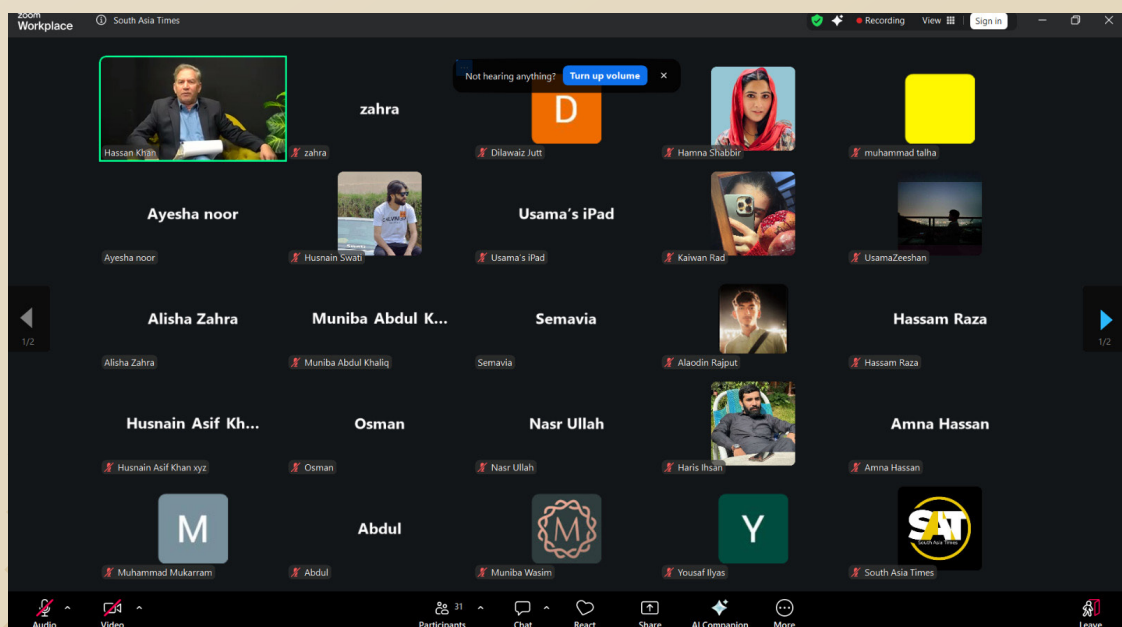
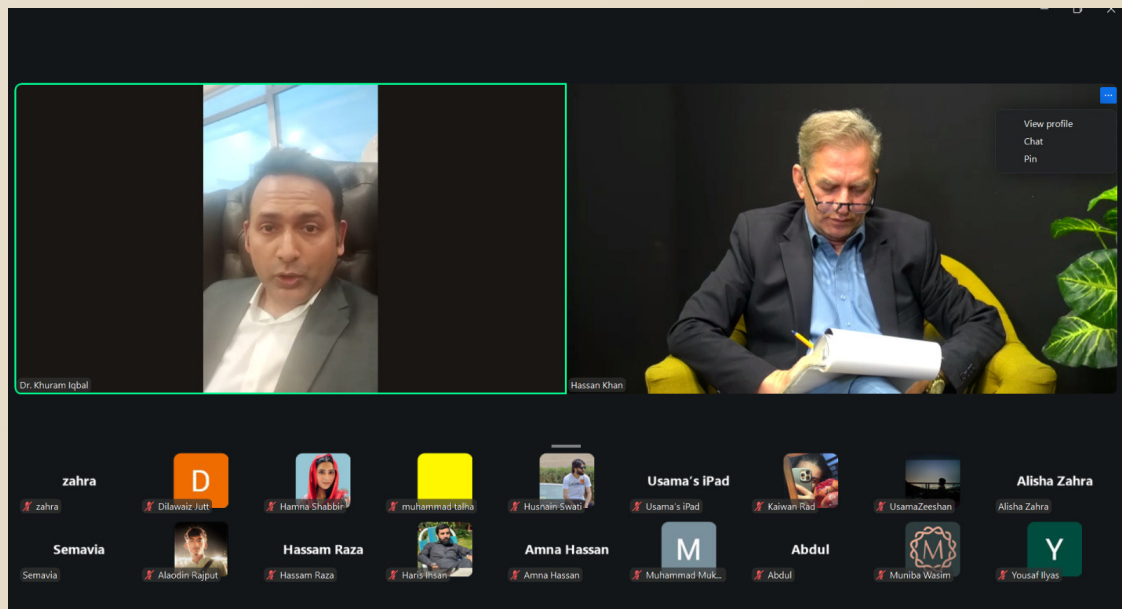
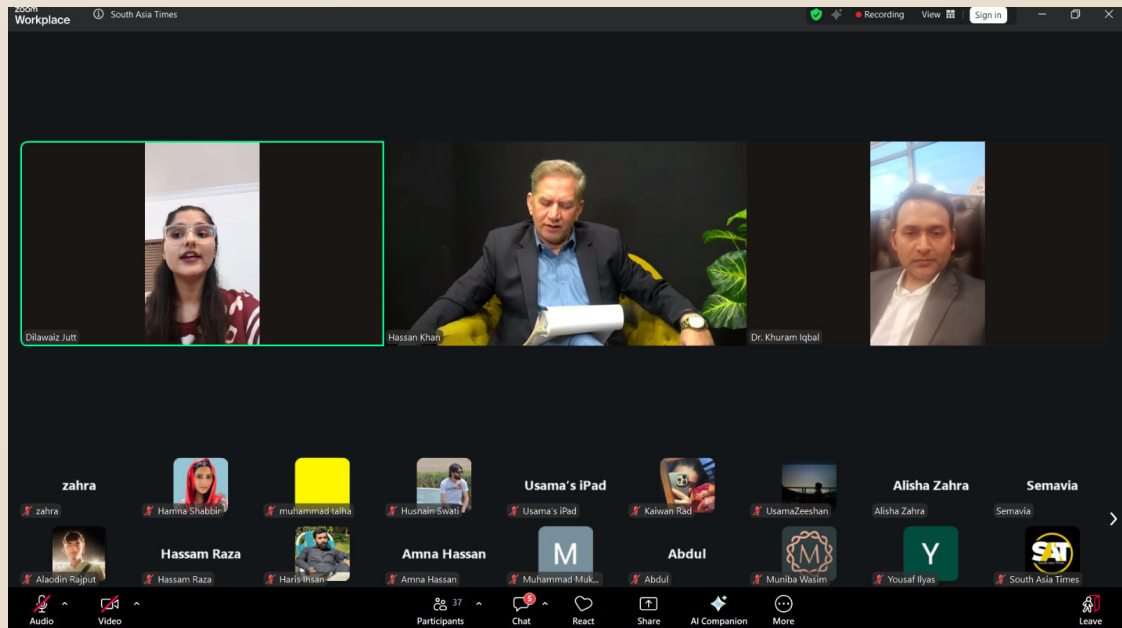


Mr Hassan Khan

Former Director News &
Current Affairs, Khyber TV,
Senior journalist

- Militancy in Pakistan and the wider region has intensified due to governance collapse rather than the mere presence of conflict, with Afghanistan emerging as a central spillover state after 2021. Weak institutional capacity, factionalism, and decree-based rule have created permissive operational space for militant networks.
- Afghanistan currently hosts nearly two dozen terrorist organizations, many of which directly target Pakistan, including TTP, BLA, Majeed Brigade, and Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, while others focus on China, Iran, Tajikistan, and Central Asia, indicating region-wide threat diffusion.
- The Taliban regime has demonstrated either inability or unwillingness to act decisively against these groups, prioritizing internal legitimacy and political survival over regional security responsibilities, thereby allowing militant mobility and cross-border operations to expand.
- Pakistan's western border regions, particularly southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and parts of Balochistan, have become primary spillover zones, with governance retreating after sunset and multiple districts effectively turning into contested or no-go areas.
- The merger of former tribal districts without parallel judicial, policing, and administrative reforms created governance vacuums, which militant groups have strategically exploited to re-establish influence and operational depth.
- Militant targeting patterns have evolved under counterterrorism pressure, expanding from security forces to civilians, economic infrastructure, educational institutions, courts, and markets, reflecting both tactical desperation and strategic escalation.
- Chinese interests across the region have emerged as high-value symbolic targets, with attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan demonstrating militants' intent to internationalize conflict and undermine regional economic connectivity.
- Despite shared regional threat perception, collective pressure on Afghanistan remains fragmented, with Pakistan largely acting alone through diplomatic, economic, and kinetic measures, while other neighboring states continue engagement and trade with the Taliban regime.

Webinar Highlights



Policy Recommendations

- Militancy in Pakistan and the region should be approached as an ecosystem enabled by global counterterrorism backsliding, weakened international pressure, and a fragmented global order. Pakistan's policy must account for the reduced leadership of global powers and adopt a more self-reliant and regionally coordinated counterterrorism posture.
- Afghanistan's role should be recognized not as passive negligence but as a calculated permissive environment, where both Islamist and non-Islamist militant groups are used as instruments of pressure. Pakistan should systematically document and internationalize this reality to counter narratives of indifference and denial.
- Kinetic military action, while necessary, cannot succeed in isolation. As highlighted in the analysis, militancy thrives where governance, trust, and legitimacy collapse. Counterterrorism policy must therefore integrate governance restoration, institutional reform, and public confidence-building as core security objectives.
- Governance loopholes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, particularly the absence of completed judicial, administrative, and policing reforms, should be treated as strategic vulnerabilities. These gaps provide militants with space to embed themselves socially, administratively, and narratively.
- Policy must respond to the redefinition of militancy as a political and liberation-oriented struggle, particularly by the TTP. Labeling alone is insufficient; the state must counter this framing through credible governance delivery, constitutional legitimacy, and visible justice mechanisms.
- The battle for narrative legitimacy must be elevated to a central pillar of counterterrorism strategy. Militants increasingly rely on digital platforms, misinformation, and religious symbolism. Pakistan must reclaim Islamic discourse, counter disinformation, and prevent militants from monopolizing moral or ideological narratives.
- The digital domain should be institutionalized as a frontline security space, with coordinated state mechanisms to monitor propaganda, counter fake news, and rebuild trust between the state and society, particularly among youth vulnerable to militant messaging.
- Regional engagement should move beyond symbolic dialogue toward pressure-based coordination, encouraging neighboring states to align their economic and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan to measurable counterterrorism commitments, rather than unilateral accommodation.
- A differentiated approach must be maintained between Islamist militancy and Baloch insurgency. While dialogue with TTP has repeatedly failed and appears exhausted, Balochistan requires parallel political engagement, grievance redressal, and development-focused interventions alongside security measures.
- Finally, restoring domestic legitimacy must be recognized as the decisive factor in defeating militancy. Military success without governance credibility, narrative coherence, and public trust will remain temporary, allowing militancy to adapt, travel, and regenerate across regions.

Executive Summary

The webinar “The Evolving Militant Ecosystem: Spillover States, Traveling Militancy, and Who Gets Targeted Next” examined the transformation of militancy in Pakistan and the wider region, emphasizing how militant violence has shifted from localized, group-centric activity to a networked, transnational ecosystem. Speakers argued that this transformation is not accidental but the product of governance collapse, regional instability, weakened international counterterrorism coordination, and permissive environments particularly in post-2021 Afghanistan.

The discussion highlighted that militancy today is sustained not only by ideology but by mobility, economic survival, narrative legitimacy, and facilitation networks operating across borders. Afghanistan’s political exclusion, economic collapse, and centralized yet fragmented governance were identified as central drivers enabling spillover violence affecting Pakistan, China, Iran, and Central Asia. While Pakistan has relied heavily on kinetic measures, speakers emphasized that tactical successes remain temporary without parallel governance reforms, institutional presence, and regional pressure mechanisms.

Speakers converged on the view that sustainable counterterrorism requires addressing legitimacy deficits, narrative warfare, and domestic governance weaknesses alongside military action. Militancy, they argued, adapts where trust in the state erodes and where political, judicial, and administrative vacuums persist. Long-term security therefore depends not on force alone, but on restoring governance credibility, reclaiming ideological space, and building coordinated regional responses to an increasingly mobile and adaptive militant ecosystem.

Conclusion

From a South Asia Times perspective, the resurgence of militancy in and around Pakistan as driven by global counterterrorism backsliding, regional permissiveness, and domestic governance gaps. Weak international pressure has allowed militant groups to operate with confidence, while militancy increasingly relies on political framing, economic survival, mobility, and narrative control rather than ideology alone. Afghanistan has become a hub for groups like the TTP and BLA, reflecting a calculated permissive environment where militancy is a tool of pressure. Within Pakistan, incomplete judicial, administrative, and policing reforms have created governance vacuums that militants exploit. SAT concludes that military action alone cannot defeat militancy rooted in legitimacy crises and digital narratives. Effective counterterrorism requires reclaiming ideological space, restoring public trust through credible governance, and addressing both internal and external enablers. Without tackling these structural drivers, militancy will continue to adapt and regenerate despite tactical successes.

Thanking Remarks



Mr. Salman Javed

Director General,
South Asia Times


I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to our distinguished speakers, Mr. Hassan Khan and Dr. Khuram Iqbal, for sharing their valuable insights and expertise on this critically important subject. Their thoughtful analysis and grounded perspectives greatly enriched our understanding of the evolving militant ecosystem, its regional spillover dynamics, and the shifting nature of security threats. I would also thank the moderator and participants for their meaningful engagement. At South Asia Times, we remain committed to fostering informed, policy-oriented dialogue that contributes to constructive debate and effective responses to the complex security challenges facing Pakistan and the wider region.



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