

PAKISTAN DID TOP THE GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX (GTI) 2026, BUT THE HEADLINE IS NARROWER THAN IT LOOKS

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Abstract

This study aims to explore that the first-place ranking of Pakistan in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026 should be treated as a serious warning, but not as a final verdict that Pakistan is unquestionably the country, most affected by terrorism in the world. The ranking is methodologically defensible. The Index, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, basically ranks 163 countries through a composite score based on incidents, fatalities, injuries, and hostages over a five-year weighted period, with fatalities carrying the most significant weight. Pakistan recorded 1,045 terrorism incidents and 1,139 terrorism deaths in 2025, the highest death toll since 2013, and led the GTI for the first time. Yet the same report shows that terrorism remains highly concentrated in a small number of countries, that sub-Saharan Africa remains the global epicenter, and more importantly, that the Sahel accounted for more than half of terrorism deaths in 2025. The canvas has also shifted since the publication of the said Index. Subsequent attacks in Islamabad, Bajaur, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, and again in Bannu by June 2026 confirm that Pakistan's position in the Index was not a passing statistical spike. They also show that the threat is not limited to the TTP-BLA frame: Islamic State-linked sectarian

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violence has again become analytically visible. Pakistan's crisis is therefore better understood as a layered threat environment shaped by the TTP, the insurgency in Balochistan, Islamic State-linked sectarian terrorism, Afghanistan-border dynamics, and uneven implementation of Pakistan's own counterterrorism architecture. The central argument of this article is that "Pakistan tops the GTI" is a valid methodological statement, but it is not a claim about comparative global suffering, territorial insurgency, state violence, or the wider human burden of conflict.

Keywords: Global Terrorism Index, Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Balochistan Liberation Army, Islamic State, Afghanistan-Pakistan border, counterterrorism, Azm-e-Istehkam

Introduction

For the first time since the Global Terrorism Index began, Pakistan has been placed at Number one in March 2026 on the GTI 2026 of the Institute for Economics and Peace. In 2025, Pakistan had a GTI score of 8.574, overtaking Burkina Faso, with 1,139 deaths across 1,045 terrorism incidents. In explaining this deterioration, the report suggested that the change was mainly linked to three connected factors: the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan since 2021, strained relations between Pakistan and its neighbors, and rising violence by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2026).

That headline is important because it expresses a real-time security crisis, rather than simply an abstract statistical situation. On 1 January 2026, Associated Press reporting on PICSS's annual review characterized 2025 as Pakistan's deadliest year in more than a decade, with a total of 3,413 combat-related deaths among civilians, security personnel, and militants (Associated Press, 2026a; Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies

[PICSS], 2026). The months that followed did nothing to soften the picture. Islamic State also claimed a 6 February 2026 suicide attack at a Shiite Mosque in Islamabad that left at least 31 people dead and more than 170 injured (Reuters, 2026a). Militants killed 11 security personnel and a child when they attacked an army checkpoint in Bajaur district on 16 February; the TTP claimed responsibility (Reuters, 2026b). In May, there was a major Bannu attack against police, followed by a bombing in Lakki Marwat (Reuters, 2026d; Reuters, 2026e); and on 20 June two remotely detonated roadside bombs killed at least seven people after going off one hour apart from each other in Bannu (Associated Press, 2026b).

Hence, this article does not argue that Pakistan had its GTI ranking unjustly inflated or concocted. It is not. Pakistan is facing yet another brutal resurgence of terror. The argument is more modest and thus easier to defend: Pakistan's GTI number-one ranking is a reasonable estimate using the GTI's methodology, but it can be misused as an isolated description of trends in global terrorism. If you are a risk analyst, the question of who is most terror-affected on a world scale is difficult to answer because 'most' means different things when measuring incident volume, lethality per attack, territorial control, hostage-taking, siege of civilians, state repression, insurgent governance and humanitarian burden. Acknowledgement and qualification, therefore, remain serious requirements for any reading of the GTI. This article is a critical policy commentary rather than a new incident database or causal model. Its contribution is to clarify what Pakistan's number-one ranking establishes, what it does not establish, and how the country's layered threat environment should be interpreted.

Literature Review

Recent literature and reporting on Pakistan's security environment converge around a single major explanation: borderland instability since 2021 has reshaped the country's threat landscape. The GTI directly links Pakistan's deterioration to both the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and militant activity on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (IEP, 2026). This is not merely a historical point. In June 2026, the UN Security Council extended the mandate for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and reiterated that Taliban authorities must meet counterterrorism commitments (Reuters, 2026f; United Nations, 2026). This continuing international context confirms that Afghanistan remains central to any serious examination of the terrorist revival in Pakistan.

Another strain of analysis stresses that Pakistan has not one but multiple militant problems. The TTP has continued to pose the primary anti-state threat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the western border area. The BLA-led insurgency, on the other hand, has been driven by separatist politics, demands over resource allocation and grievances against security forces, as well as destabilization of infrastructure and foreign investment, particularly projects aligned with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The BLA's 2025 Jaffar Express hijacking, which the GTI rated as Pakistan's top terror attack of that year, showed an ability to strike transport infrastructure and create a mass hostage event (IEP, 2026). Coordinated Balochistan attacks in early 2026 again highlighted the insurgency's strength and ambition; a security-force response killed 145 militants over 40 hours after coordinated attacks across the province left roughly 50 people dead (Reuters, 2026c).

Third, sectarian terrorism from groups associated with the Islamic State is another subject that deserves more attention than a March 2026 reading would probably have afforded it. Rather

than being a run-of-the-mill frontier attack, the February 2026 suicide bombing of an Islamabad Mosque was an act of showpiece sectarian terrorism by Islamic State-linked militants. It was claimed by Islamic State and targeted a Shiite congregation in the capital. That makes the present threat matrix more than a TTP and BLA problem. Instead, it is better defined in relation to a layered and partly tripolar threat environment: jihadist anti-state militancy, Baloch separatist militancy and sectarian-symbolic terrorism connected with Islamic State networks.

The literature and policy debate also has a fourth strand: state capacity. Pakistan is not doctrine-free. The policy building blocks consist of the National Action Plan (2014), the Revised National Action Plan (2021), the National PVE Policy 2024 and Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, a multi-domain, multi-agency national campaign (National Counter Terrorism Authority [NACTA], n.d.; Government of Pakistan, 2024). The more difficult question is not whether Pakistan has a policy, but whether that policy has proved effective in practice. Questions over implementation continued in 2026, which means it is hard to assert that there has been a definitive implementation breakthrough. One of the key issues in Pakistan's counterterrorism framework remains doctrine versus operational control.

Methodology

The present article uses a triangulated descriptive-analytical approach. It is based on the Global Terrorism Index 2026, supplemented by national and international reporting by Reuters and Associated Press on violence and terrorism patterns in Pakistan, as well as policy indicators linked to Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reporting cycles and UN Security Council insights regarding Afghanistan. It is not intended to build a new incident database, but rather to place Pakistan's GTI ranking in a larger comparative and policy context. Sources were selected for

direct relevance to the article's core claims and cross-checked where events or figures overlapped. Where casualty totals differed because of definitions or updates, they were retained within their respective source frameworks rather than combined into a new total.

The analysis also treats measurement as part of the problem itself. The GTI uses Dragonfly's Terrorism Tracker dataset and ranks 163 countries by incidents, deaths, reported injuries and hostages, weighted over five years. The highest weight is given to fatalities, and the current year receives the biggest share of the score (IEP, 2026). While this gives the GTI utility in assessing terrorism effects over a longer timeframe, it also means that the Index cannot capture all kinds of political violence. It does not accurately estimate insurgent territorial control, civil-war violence in general, or state repression. The report specifically states that the Index does not include state repression or acts of violence by state actors in the case of Afghanistan, which means that acts carried out by the Taliban government are no longer counted in the same way (IEP, 2026).

There are also differences in the coding rules between domestic and international datasets. Pakistan-specific security bulletins, global terrorism databases, and media-based conflict counts have different classifications for fatalities, combatant status, terrorism, insurgency, and counterterrorism deaths. This disparity does not render any one source untrue; rather, it illustrates how different institutions measure different slices of violence. Consequently, a trend-based conclusion is stronger than one based on a single figure. The signposts offered in accessible datasets, and in subsequent reporting, are consistent: Pakistan's terrorism and insurgency environment deteriorated sharply in 2025 and had not waned during the first half of 2026. Open-source and wire reporting may also undercount events in areas with restricted access and classify terrorism, insurgency, and

combat deaths differently; this limitation applies to the present synthesis as well as to the wider evidence base.

Analysis

Regional sanctuary and neighbourhood effects. The nature of the terrorism problem that Pakistan faces cannot be comprehended without reference to the Afghan context. The GTI connects Pakistan's deterioration to the post-2021 regional collapse, while subsequent reporting continues to show that Islamabad and Kabul are still stuck in accusation and denial over the TTP sanctuary. Pakistan says TTP leaders and fighters operate from Afghan territory; the Taliban authorities deny this (Reuters, 2026h). Whatever the diplomatic wording, the operational pattern is clear: violence is focused in borderland provinces, and the most active anti-state actor, the TTP, is structurally bound to the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier.

A multi-layered militant crisis, not a single terrorist wave. The original TTP-BLA frame is still valuable, although incomplete. The TTP is mainly an anti-state jihadi actor concentrated near the Afghan frontier. The BLA-led insurgency is rooted in separatist politics and Balochistan's long-running conflict over autonomy, resources, representation, and security. The Islamabad Mosque bombing, linked to the Islamic State, establishes a third analytical layer: sectarian-symbolic terrorism able to reach beyond the western borderlands. These differences are hidden under a single aggregate GTI number.

State capacity and implementation. The institutional response to this has not been absent in Pakistan, but it has been uneven. Operation Azm-e-Istehkam and the related policy frameworks show that the state is making a concerted effort to integrate kinetic action, intelligence-sharing, prevention, and broader governance responses. But the continued attacks in Islamabad, Bajaur, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, and Balochistan show that militant

adaptation is still outpacing certain parts of the state response. In short, key challenges continue to be intelligence fusion; policing, prosecution, and witness protection capabilities; local governance; and the challenge of converting tactical disruption into enduring strategic control.

Measurement and narrative. Context matters: any write-up that deals with Pakistan and the GTI has to disentangle rank from context. The GTI is not a moral judgment; it is a composite index. It reflects long-term exposure to terrorism, but not all forms of political violence or social suffering. That is why it can rank Pakistan number one at the same time as finding sub-Saharan Africa the global terrorism epicenter and the Sahel responsible for over fifty per cent of terrorism deaths in 2025 (IEP, 2026; Vision of Humanity, 2026).

Both the GTI and domestic security reporting show a marked rise, but their figures differ because they are categorized under separate definitions and sources. Pakistan had 1,045 terrorism incidents and 1,139 terrorism deaths in the GTI for 2025. It also revealed that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan represented 97 per cent of terrorism deaths in Pakistan, with western border areas being responsible for more than 74 per cent of attacks and 67 per cent of deaths (IEP, 2026). Nor is this violence evenly dispersed across the state. The focus of the crisis is borderland-centered, with a particular burden falling on security forces and frontier populations.

If the TTP had not been the main contributor to Pakistan's GTI score, Islamabad would likely have scored better. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the TTP was described in 2025 as the third most lethal terrorist group globally and the deadliest in Pakistan. The organization caused 637 deaths and perpetrated 595 attacks in Pakistan, accounting for 56 per cent of terrorism-related deaths (IEP, 2026). Moreover, the TTP's operational momentum did not stop at the 2025 reporting-year cut-off, as

subsequent assaults in Bajaur and Bannu were either claimed directly by the TTP or reportedly carried out by splinter or front groups connected back to it.

A further dimension of insecurity comes from the Baloch insurgency. The GTI emphasizes the issue of the 442 hostages of the Jaffar Express hijacking, highlighting how BLA violence has influenced Pakistan's national and international security image (IEP, 2026). The same point is upheld by the coordinated Balochistan attacks in early 2026.

The Islamic State-claimed Islamabad Mosque incident has added a new layer of complexity to this dynamic. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the assault on the Shiite Mosque in the capital that killed at least 31 worshippers and left more than 170 wounded (Reuters, 2026a). It challenges a narrowly construed view of Pakistan's crisis as simply a frontier insurgency, but that event does not preclude either the TTP or BLA from having center stage. It means that sectarian and urban targets remain under threat, and that capital-city security cannot avert the salience of high-impact symbolic violence.

Burkina Faso is used as the principal comparator because Pakistan overtook it in the 2026 ranking and because the contrast illustrates the difference between incident volume and lethality per attack. In contrast, the headline becomes more debatable once its component measures are examined. Despite the existence of far more attacks in Pakistan, average fatalities per attack during 2025 were higher in Burkina Faso. The GTI details that Burkina Faso had 846 deaths from just 59 incidents compared with 1,139 deaths from a greater number of incidents in Pakistan: 1,045 (IEP, 2026). This is not a flaw the GTI fails to recognise; rather, it shows how a composite score can obscure differences among its component indicators. This comparison does nothing to diminish Pakistan's position in the Index, but rather illuminates what that ranking means. Pakistan saw sustained high volumes of

incidents, casualties, injuries and hostage numbers. This should not be restated as the claim that, under any meaningful metric, Pakistan is the world's clear centre stage.

Research Findings

An exclusive analysis of the study yields the following four main results:

First, Pakistan is facing a real — not a media-imagined — resurgence of terrorism. The GTI findings, domestic security reporting, and the sequence of attacks through June 2026 all point in the same direction.

Second, the crisis is not singular. Its underlying engine consists of overlapping militant arrangements: the TTP and allied jihadist violence in the northwest, the BLA-led separatist violence across Balochistan, and the Islamic State-linked sectarian terrorism that can hit symbolic or urban targets.

Third, Pakistan's policy architecture is broader than outside commentary often assumes, but implementation remains weaker than doctrine. Training, financing controls, prosecution, digital investigation, prevention, and intelligence coordination matter precisely because kinetic operations alone have not produced durable control over terrorism or violent extremism.

Fourth, the GTI score for Pakistan is best understood as a composite terrorism impact score derived from the GTI methodology. It is not the kind of comparative verdict that no other country suffers greater scars from violent extremism, territorial insurgency, or war-like insecurity.

Discussion

The strongest response to Pakistan's GTI ranking is not to dispute the data but to narrow down the claim. Pakistan did top the GTI. What needs to be resisted is the exaggeration that this

turns Pakistan into the single worst terrorism case in every comparative sense. The GTI is a five-year weighted combination of incidents, deaths, injuries and hostages. That framework placed Pakistan at the highest rank because of high incident volume, multi-year deterioration and a hostage spike. This is a defensible statistic.

But the GTI is not a comprehensive measure of all political violence. The report itself indicates that Afghanistan's rank decrease does not mean violence in the country has ended, because state repression and violence by state actors fall outside the scope of GTI coding (IEP, 2026). Similarly, the report continues to designate sub-Saharan Africa as the overall global epicenter of terrorism, with the Sahel accounting for more than half of terrorism deaths in 2025. In other words, the GTI can put Pakistan on top while the wider geography of terrorism deaths, territorial insurgency and conflict-related suffering is still very much focused elsewhere.

Pakistan also needs to reflect on its own role in this crisis. External drivers for instability are real, not least because of the Afghanistan border problem and Islamabad's inability to neutralize anti-Pakistan terrorist sanctuaries across the border. But treating militancy solely as a plot of foreign powers, and not also as a problem in overall governance, weakens Pakistan's case. Local-level effectiveness in counterterrorism relies more on legitimacy, policing capacity, prosecution, witness protection, political settlement and development strategy. In Balochistan, for example, a purely security-led model cannot replace a political response to long-standing grievances regarding resource extraction, representation and the need for local populations themselves to feel secure. This governance question is not separate from the effectiveness of counter-terrorism and efforts against organised violence; it is part of it. A security operation

may undermine an armed network or reduce attacks for some time, but the sustainability of that gain is contingent on what happens afterwards. In cases of insufficient ordinary policing, where courts cannot process terrorism cases, witnesses are unprotected and local governance lacks public trust, stronger security might create only a temporary gap. Success should not be assessed solely based on operational outcomes and the number of attacks declined in the short term. It is equally important that the state is able, after a given period, to incorporate improvements to overall security into the normal governance of state institutions, in which police, prosecutors, courts and civilian authorities can operate without exceptional military dependence. This encompasses civil governance that does not rely on extraordinary security provisions. This is even more relevant in districts, where communities experience the challenges of weak governance, mainly in the shape of security checkpoints and kinetic operations complemented by emergency measures. Security and intelligence are more sustainable when the local population is able and willing to cooperate with authorities, and such cooperation is more probable when governance institutions are lawful and responsive. All this does not exclude the need to act with resolution against organised violence. It implies that security measures are intended to create conditions for normal governance and are not intended to be a permanent substitute for governance.

The issues with intelligence, investigation and prosecution are similar in Pakistan's case. Pakistan's threats come from a diverse collection of formal and informal groups, many of which are interrelated in dynamic and shifting ways. An institutional response that treats each of these groups in isolation will likely miss connections that militant groups exploit. The integration of intelligence is critical, but so is the flow of information from

intelligence collection into evidence that can be prepared for prosecution and presented in court. While a suspect may be known operationally to the security agencies, failure to collect and present evidence in a legally sustainable form may hinder efforts to secure a prosecution. On the other hand, a prosecution system cannot fill an intelligence void that enables networks to regenerate. The gap between expectation and delivery is therefore a comprehensive problem that relates to border control, the integration of intelligence, criminal investigation, the tracing of digital and financial information, the prosecution of offenders and the protection of witnesses. Failure at one stage can weaken gains made at another. Reforming institutions should not be seen as a substitute for counter-terrorism operations. It seeks to make tactical disruption self-sustaining.

This is especially evident in the case of Balochistan. Understandably, the state would be compelled to confront armed groups that attack innocent civilians and security personnel and undermine economic and social infrastructure. However, in an environment of insurgency, treating the situation as a security problem of a single category would tend to mask the distinction between armed violence and non-violent grievances. A more constructive approach would aim to widen lawful political space for communities that express concerns regarding representation, the distribution of resources, accountability and the local security situation, while isolating militant groups. This is not an assertion that acts of terrorism are justified in this case. Politically and socially, this would undermine the space in which insurgency can present itself as the only outlet for grievances. In fact, the presence of a political vacuum benefits insurgent and armed groups; therefore, the state's focus on political engagement, transparent development and socially accountable security is an essential part of countering terrorism. Pakistan's primary concern

is not a lack of policy instruments, but the difficulty of making them operate together while simultaneously managing multiple security concerns; a unified approach to the TTP, BLA and Islamic State-linked networks would therefore be counterproductive.

Pakistan nevertheless retains policy agency. Pakistan was not returned to enhanced monitoring during the June 2026 FATF reporting cycle; according to Reuters, Iraq and Bosnia and Herzegovina were added to the grey list, not Pakistan (Financial Action Task Force [FATF], 2026; Reuters, 2026g). This is a narrow but relevant point. This demonstrates that Pakistan is at a different juncture in terms of AML/CFT compliance from two or three years earlier. What financing compliance is not, however, is strategic control. The biggest lesson is that policy choices will work only in combination: border management, financial intelligence, policing, prosecution, prevention and political strategy need to work hand in hand.

Future Perspectives

The near-term outlook remains difficult. The Afghanistan sanctuary dispute was not resolved by June 2026 and the UN Security Council returned to assess Taliban counterterrorism commitments, indicating sustained international concern (Reuters, 2026f). The internal record of post-GTI attacks indicates that neither frontier militancy nor urban symbolic targeting can be presumed contained. Pakistan's priority counterterrorism agenda must now function simultaneously on multiple fronts: TTP violence, Baloch separatist resurgence, Islamic State-linked sectarian terrorism, Afghanistan-border instability and wider regional shocks.

Five priorities stand out. Pakistan will require either a more resolute security agreement with Afghanistan or more effective means of border denial if it cannot achieve the former. It will

require more comprehensive police, prosecution and witness-protection reform if terrorism cases are to survive beyond the battlefield. Pressure will also need to be sustained on terrorism financing and the supporting logistics. The state will require a robust prevention strategy embedded in the National PVE Policy 2024, beyond delivering slogans, to implement local programming. And lastly, a political response must be formulated in Balochistan to address resource- and representation-related grievances, as well as trust deficits and the security of local communities around strategic infrastructure sites.

No single one of these measures is sufficient alone. Kinetic pressures can disrupt militant networks, but in the absence of institutional reform and political accommodation, they generally create an environment in which regeneration is possible. On the other hand, armed groups can interpret political outreach beyond the limits of security control as weakness. The future of terrorism in Pakistan will therefore depend on whether the state can connect tactical response to institutional reform and political strategy.

Conclusion

The Global Terrorism Index 2026 ranking regarding Pakistan was a de facto indicator of marked deterioration, not an anti-Pakistan smear. The attacks recorded after the publication of the Index leave no serious grounds for dismissing the ranking. Under the GTI methodology, Pakistan was the most affected country because of sustained high incident volume, rising fatalities and injuries, and hostage-taking events involving the TTP and BLA.

Nevertheless, the ranking ought to be interpreted with caution. It does not show that Pakistan somehow is uniquely worse than every other country subject to terrorist attacks on all measurable variables. Its measure is limited, and does not cover territorial insurgent rule, state repression, civil-war violence and

the resultant humanitarian burden of war. A defensible contemporary assessment must therefore do both things at once: take Pakistan's situation as seriously as it deserves and explain how a composite indicator should never replace an expansive geopolitical, territorial and human understanding of the nature of violence.

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