

Developing an Ideology: Evolution of the Pakistani Taliban

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Summary

The militant outfit, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has been at the heart of several attacks in Pakistan lately. Most recently, it has been accused of the explosion in a mosque in Peshawar at the end of January 2023, which killed over 100 people. These attacks point to the TTP gearing up for an ideological battle, which could see the introduction of a fresh component to the South Asian militant terrain.

More than 100 people were killed when a suicide bomb ripped through a mosque in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar on 30 January 2023. The militant movement, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is widely suspected of carrying out this attack, which occurred in a heavily fortified compound that houses police and counter-terrorism units.

Since it unilaterally ended a ceasefire agreement in November 2021, the Tehreek-e-Taliban has launched [several attacks on police and military targets](#). It aims to weaken the state apparatus in parts of northwest Pakistan and establish “independent territories” where it can implement its interpretation of Islamic governance. Such attempts are not new. The TTP has long tried to establish parallel governments in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, the [attack on the mosque in Peshawar](#) occurred within the context of a concerted effort by the TTP leadership to revamp its organisational structure and formulate a clear ideological position.

The [TTP emerged as an umbrella organisation](#) in 2007, consisting of multiple militant groups in FATA – it was a semi-autonomous region that had a distinct legal and political framework. Large amounts of autonomy were vested in the hands of tribal leaders and rights to political participation were severely limited. Thus, the Pakistani military’s campaign against al-Qaeda-linked foreign militants who had taken refuge in FATA in the wake of the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan was seen by many in FATA as an infringement of their autonomy. Some of these groups came together under the label of the TTP to resist what they perceived as encroachments by the central state. The movement was characterised by a blend of ethnonationalism and religious symbolism. Though the groups that were part of the TTP used Islam to justify their militancy and, in some cases, strove to establish their interpretation of *sharia* in areas that they controlled, the movement did not have a defined religious ideology. It should be noted that while the TTP pledges support to the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is a distinct movement with different aims and structures.

The TTP’s revival of its militant campaign is inspired by the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021. It has also set out to revamp its organisational structure to mould the movement into an integrated organization. Over the last two years, the TTP has established [a centralised military training system](#) and focused on developing a command-and-control

structure that consolidates disparate militant groups. Furthermore, the TTP leadership has laid down a template and organisational chart of governance for pockets that it controls in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. These include setting up an array of ministries for information, economy, intelligence and the issuing of *fatawa* (legal opinions).

Concomitant with this are attempts to define and propagate its ideology. The TTP has sought to do this through publications, social media and the issuing of *fatawa*. Such attempts are particularly linked to the emergence of its current leader Noor Wali Mehsud. Unlike the TTP's previous leaders, Mehsud presents himself as a religious scholar and a *mufti* (jurist). He has written several works and remains in charge of the TTP's publication wing.

Under Mehsud, the TTP has taken steps to define its political ideology and agenda. For one, it has stated that its political aims are limited to the territorial boundaries of Pakistan. In doing so, the TTP is, perhaps for purposes of expediency, distancing itself from transnational Islamic movements and visions. The TTP is also increasingly commenting on the ongoing economic crisis in Pakistan and various socio-political challenges confronting the country. It blames the "western" and "infidel" parliamentary system for the economic ills of Pakistan and calls for the establishment of a caliphate guided by *sharia*. While the movement is still defining the details of its system of Islamic governance, it has proposed the political framework noted above as the provincial structure of its caliphate.

In developing its ideology, the TTP is no doubt seeking to lay down a cohesive political agenda that can unite its factions. However, it is equally important to note that it is introducing a new ideological dimension to the militant landscape. Both the TTP and the Taliban adhere to the Deobandi school of Islam. Despite simplistic statements by many observers, the Deobandi school does not believe that Islam has a fixed political structure. Figures and movements associated with the Deobandi school have justified working within various political structures. Thus, the ongoing attempt to define the contours and nature of the caliphate by the TTP marks an important intervention. This was further reflected when the TTP released a video of Mehsud addressing the Muslim scholars of Pakistan in which he justified the movement's militant campaign in Islamic terms. In this video, [Mehsud was essentially initiating a munazara](#) – a debate amongst religious scholars on theological issues. Following this, several prominent Islamic scholars in Pakistan have issued statements and *fatawa* rejecting Mehsud's arguments and the TTP violent campaign. In turn, Mehsud has promised to respond.

Looking ahead, it is clear that apart from escalating its attacks on the police and military, the TTP is gearing up to fight a polemical and ideological battle. This signals a major evolution in the movement and the introduction of a new element within the militant landscape in South Asia.

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