**[A surge in terrorist attacks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779238/a-surge-in-terrorist-attacks)**

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THE bloodbath in Mastung last week was yet another grim reminder of the relentless rise of militant violence that is threatening national security.

The [suicide attack](https://www.dawn.com/news/1778511) on a Rabiul Awwal congregation in the Balochistan town left almost 60 people dead. At least five people were killed in a [targeted attack](https://www.dawn.com/news/1778538/uat-least-4-killed-12-wounded-in-twin-blasts-targeting-police-station-in-kps-hangu-policee) in KP on the same day, swelling the number of fatalities.

It was one of the bloodiest days of the current year that has already recorded the highest number of casualties among security forces in the past eight years. Terrorist attacks have become almost a daily affair. The return of terrorism presents a most serious challenge to a nation mired in multiple crises. The spate of killings across the country demonstrates the expanding capacity of militant groups to carry out increasingly audacious operations.

While the administration silently watches the situation drift toward anarchy, armed marauders carry out their deadly attacks with impunity. The pattern and scale of violence indicate that the militants are better armed than before and well organised.

A [report](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779035#:~:text=Civilian%20deaths-,rose,-87pc%20in%20Sept) recently released by the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) reveals a staggering 57 per cent escalation in militant violence nationwide over the last quarter.

It’s an extremely alarming situation, raising questions regarding our counterterrorism strategy that appears to be faltering as militants of all stripes continue to operate. The latest wave of violence highlights the inability of the security agencies to deal with the rising militant threat.

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Almost 1,100 people, including 386 security personnel, lost their lives to militant violence in the first nine months of the year, according to the CRSS report. The report notes that the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks this year has increased, with KP and Balochistan having suffered 92pc of all fatalities since the beginning of the year.

While a reinvigorated Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has reportedly been involved in most of the terrorist attacks, more worrisome is the growing presence and activities of the Islamic State-Khorasan group. Several recent militant raids have been traced to the group. Although no one has claimed responsibility, the suicide attack in Mastung last Friday bears all the hallmarks of an IS-K attack.

It is not for the first time that Mastung, which houses madressahs known for their association with outlawed extremist sectarian outfits, as well as transnational militant groups, has been drenched in blood. There has been a marked escalation in sectarian violence, with the town becoming the hub of religious radicalism.

One of the most radical madressahs was established by the family of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, an Al Qaeda leader and mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The connection was revealed after a [suicide attack on a Muharram procession](https://www.dawn.com/news/392270/inquiry-ordered-into-massacre-45-deaths-confirmed-quetta-under-curfew) in Quetta in 2004 was traced to the facility.

The investigations showed that the mastermind of the attack were Mosaib al Baluchi and Dawood Badani, close relatives of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who were later arrested and taken to Guantanamo by American forces. It was the first time that an Ashura procession was attacked by militants here, lending a new and dangerous dimension to sectarian terror in the province.

Over the years, Mastung, located some 50 kilometres from Quetta, has become the main centre of extremist sectarian groups. The latest attack also marked an escalation in attacks on rival Sunni groups. In 2017, a suicide bomber struck the convoy of a JUI-F leader Abdul Ghafoor Haideri, who was then deputy chairman Senate, killing several people.

Many madressahs in the region have become the focus of the outlawed Lashkar-i-Jhangvi which has now reportedly taken up the banner of IS-K. The latest attack on the Rabiul Awwal procession indicates the growing influence of the hard-line Salafi version of Islam, that has its origins in the Middle East.

There has also been a marked rise in IS-K activities in KP. In the past three months, the terror group has claimed several attacks in the province. It had claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that [killed at least 54 people](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767493) at a political rally held by the JUI-F in July this year in Bajaur district that borders Afghanistan. The former tribal region has long been a sanctuary for Islamist extremists, including TTP and IS-K.

The recent clashes in Bajaur are believed to be a spillover of the conflict between IS-K and the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. A large number of local JUI members, who fought alongside the Afghan Taliban, have returned home after the end of the war. The conflict has now spread to other areas in KP and Balochistan, giving a new twist to the ongoing militant violence.

The emerging nexus between some TTP factions and IS-K is most alarming. There have been a few reports of a tactical alliance between some Baloch separatist groups and IS-K, too. If correct, the coalition of various militant groups will render the situation more complex and challenging for the security agencies.

According to one estimate, the number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan has swelled after the Taliban takeover. Most of the fighters are said to have been drawn from other transnational terrorist organisations. The nexus with other groups poses a threat that goes beyond Afghanistan, with Pakistan potentially turning into the new battleground for global terrorist networks.

As political instability and uncertainty grow in the country, and as the economy declines, the terrorists are poised to benefit from a situation that is on the cusp of anarchy. The most recent wave of terrorism has once again exposed the lack of a cohesive policy as security forces struggle against the audacious militant attacks that have taken the lives of scores of security personnel and ordinary people in the last few months.

The need of the hour is an effective and sustainable counterterrorism strategy that can eliminate the terrorist elements who are threatening the country’s security. Pakistan must immediately review its national security policy to correct the lapses that have led us to this pass.

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