



## **Policy Brief # IB-29-2025**

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# **Pakistan's Powder Keg in the Northwest**

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by

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### Introduction

In the troubled interstices of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), particularly the unruly Kurram district, clashes between internecine groups have practically dismantled the delicate mosaic of peaceful coexistence. Historically, this flashpoint of a district is synonymous with Sunni-Shia skirmishes, and land disputes but contemporarily there is more to this morass than what meets the eye. This area is a bolt hole for a host of militant outfits some of whom function as marionettes for transnational elements adding another layer of complexity to the whole Sunni versus Shia dimension and land dispute, a layer corresponding to National Security. The country has a history of deeply ingrained sectarian fissures that have choked harmony across Pakistan and beyond, Kurram is one of those tinderboxes. The last couple of months have proven to be “open-season” on bloodletting, with casualties on both sides of the conflict as a conflagration engulfs the picturesque region. Since October 2024, approximately 189 lives have been lost. The KPK government has issued a statement of dismantling around 151 bunkers.<sup>1</sup>

### Geography and Tribal Tapestry

The borderland of Kurram district is nestled against Afghanistan; it is amongst the 7 former tribal agencies bordering Afghanistan. After the 2018 merger with KPK province, Kurram was split up into three regions, Upper, Lower and Central Kurram. Experts

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<sup>1</sup> Umer Farooq, “All bunkers in Kurram to be dismantled by March 23, cabinet told,” *Dawn*, February 18, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1892603/all-bunkers-in-kurram-to-be-dismantled-by-march-23-cabinet-told>

describe the aforementioned district as the “Parrot’s Beak” since it shares borders with Afghan provinces of Paktika, Nangarhar and Khost, having an outward projection into Afghanistan. Its proximity to Afghanistan can also be determined by how Parachinar in Kurram is merely 100KM from the Afghan capital, Kabul. Kurram has a populace of 800,000 dwellers, according to a rough estimate 42% are Shia, while 58% are Sunni (predominantly Deobandi Sunni).<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the tribal mosaic, the Turi tribe is the biggest group in Kurram and completely adhere Shia offshoot of Islamic jurisprudence. Meanwhile, the Bangash tribe is bifurcated between both Shia and Sunni tribespeople, whereas other notable encompass Mangal, Mosazai, Muqbal and Parachamkani, which predominantly practice Sunni jurisprudence of Islam. Boshehra village, not least, in Upper Kurram, where both sects live side by side, tensions run high as since 2023 it has metamorphosed into an epicenter of bloody land dispute.<sup>3</sup>

Due to ingrained festering animosity with a patina of sectarianism, the Shia tribespeople had constructed a 14 kilometer long alternate rocky mountain pass called “Defense Road” that connected Shia dominated and populated villages to Parachinar in the light of how Sunni tribespeople had blocked the main route/entry point in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

### **History of the Land**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century way before the creation of Pakistan, the Turi tribe was paying taxes to the Kabul officials, who had appointed a Governor to represent them. Fast-forward to 1877, the elders of the Turi tribe, permitted British General Roberts, access through their territory to Afghanistan during the Second Anglo-Afghan war. As a quid pro quo they asked that the British seize administrative control of the region, not least because of reprisal from neighboring Sunni Mangal tribe. The British considered Turi tribespeople different from their neighbors by virtue of Mongol or Turkish origins and the fact they were hailing from the Shia sect. Furthermore, following the 1879’s Treaty of Gandamak, Afghan state gave up control over Kurram. Kurram agency was formed in towards the end

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<sup>2</sup> Zia Ur Rehman. “The Roots of Kurram’s Cycles of Bloodshed,” *Dawn*, December 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1875953/the-roots-of-kurrams-cycles-of-bloodshed>

<sup>3</sup> Rehman, “Cycles of Bloodshed.”

<sup>4</sup> Rehman, “Cycles of Bloodshed.”

of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and with Durand Line created in 1893, Turi were automatically on the British flank of the frontier.<sup>5</sup>

The 1979's Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and creation of the Mujahideen under the auspices of the US might, the influx of Sunni Afghan refugees and the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's rule by virtue of the Khomeini's revolution, had profound ramifications as Kurram's sectarian and demographic calculus altered – bunkers housing lethal weapons date back to this era. The aforementioned Afghan refugees, predominantly Sunni hailed from Paktika, Khost and Logar, settled on land owned by Kurram's Shia who would eventually draw the short straw, and initiated cultivation on the land as peasants. It is also noteworthy that the land parallel to Kurram in Afghanistan, district Jaji or Zazai, Paktika province used to be deemed a stronghold of Osama bin Laden and his legion of Arab fighters during the Soviet invasion. In 1984, the Soviets bombed Sunni areas of Kurram as a repercussion for providing safe haven to the Mujahideen. Amidst this enormous regional development, skirmishes between Afghan Mujahideen and Kurram's Shia population erupted in 1986, since the latter declined the former's entry and passage through Shia dominated lands. 4 years earlier, another sectarian clash brewed ensuing the expulsion of 60 Shia families from Sunni- dominated Sadda town to Shia-dominated Parachinar.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, with the US-led 2001 invasion of Afghanistan following Twin tower inferno and Pentagon damage caused by 9/11 attacks, Taliban and Arab guerilla fighters particularly Al-Qaeda cadre began fleeing to hole up in Kurram, however as anticipated, the Shia populace declined to host them. With the expulsion drive of Afghan refugees in 2005 by the Musharraf's government, out of fear of return of Shia dominance, Sunni tribespeople started encroaching on Shia lands vacated by Afghan refugees.<sup>7</sup>

### **Insecurity Determinants of Kurram**

Experts describe the moth-eaten security edifice of the aforementioned district as multi-pronged, not least quadrilateral in nature, which create a recipe for sectarianism, proxy

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<sup>5</sup> Rehman, "Cycles of Bloodshed."

<sup>6</sup> Rehman, "Cycles of Bloodshed."

<sup>7</sup> Rehman, "Cycles of Bloodshed."

warfare and inter-sect land encroachment. Firstly, is the use of proxies and nexus of enemy aliens present that have created a hotbed of international conflict, secondly is who occupies the seat of the government in Kabul and patrols the 1640 mile long porous border. Thirdly, are the incessant land disputes and festering animosity entangled with traditional issues between warring Shia and Sunni tribes, and lastly weak governmental control over the region helps unfortunate incidents to brew. In the case of the former, Tall-Parachinar-Sadda highway that weaves all three parts of Kurram remain the sole entry point into the district. Skirmishes which have frequented in recent months lead to the closing of the aforementioned route. In this situation, Shia tribes-people find themselves at the top shut off from the route, with their only exit through Nangarhar to access Peshawar or through Gardez in Paktia.<sup>8</sup>

### **Appalling Cycle of Violence**

From financial and structural point of view, Southern region of the KPK province is the most impoverished one. This neglected and unstable region has three divisions, Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu – both Waziristans which globally infamous for being sanctuaries of the Pakistani Taliban, are part of Bannu as well as Dera Ismail Khan Divisions, while Kurram district fall within the limits of Kohat division. In terms of statistics, around 67% of attacks against Pakistan's security apparatus has been in South of KPK. Due to the thicket of terrorist attacks, targeting killings and kidnapping for ransom, government employees are instructed not to travel on main roads after sunset, the dire straits of the situation is evident from how the police force avoids patrolling after Maghrib prayer.<sup>9</sup>

The security situation in Kurram district between 2021 - post US troop withdrawal and return of Taliban in Kabul – and 2024 has severely deteriorated to say the least. Statistics reveal that casualties attributed to kaleidoscopic violence has surged by 15%, while there has been an unprecedented 400% increase in attacks against the Law enforcement agencies (LEAs), inter alia, the Armed forces, Frontier Corps (F.C) and the intelligence bureau. Additionally police is being deliberately targeted to challenge the

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<sup>8</sup> Iftikhar Firdous, "Why Kurram Will Remain Unsettled," *The Khorasan Diary*, January 16, 2025, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2025/01/16/why-kurram-will-remain-unsettled>

<sup>9</sup> Firdous, "Remain Unsettled."



little civilian control that is left, with terrorist attacks rising by 100%, whereas, evolving nature of onslaughts have augmented by 300%. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) usage in attacks on LEAs and non-combatants also amplified by 200% and while firing raids has amplified by 225%. Terror financing and kidnapping for ransom continue to plague the fragile peace.<sup>10</sup>

### **Seismic Shifts and Beyond Borders**

To begin with and connect the dots of the conflict, the onslaught on a Shia convoy in the month of November, 2024 in Kurram district which claimed the lives of 49 individuals, exploded into a retaliatory and mindless spree of bloodshed by both sects. A month later, Syria fell to Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa's (nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Julani) Salafist, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in dramatic fashion, to an extent annihilating the Iranian axis of resistance – fall of Kabul post US withdrawal in 2021 is of the aforementioned ilk. This put a kibosh on the operations of Iranian militias in the ancient country of Syria, including Lewa-az-Zainabiyun (Zaynabiyun Brigade) which received fighters from Kurram district.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, sectarian skirmishes in areas such as Badshah Kot, Bagan, Tallo Kunj of Kurram district has witnessed a new sectarian entrant, the aforementioned Zaynabiyun Brigade. They are acolytes of Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini who was born in Pewar, Parachinar, Kurram district and he was famous for being an associate of Iranian revolution's architect, Ruhollah Khomeini. Hussaini received education from Najaf, Iraq and was assassinated at his seminary in Peshawar. The Shia leader was conferred with the title of "wakeel" of the Ayatollah, an honor usually given to the "Marja".<sup>12</sup> The pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini, Allama Arif Hussain Al-Hussaini, General Qasem Soleimani and Hassan Nasrallah on billboards in Kurram are a common sight and it exemplifies how the district is entwined with the transnational Shia movement.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, two high-profile assassinations seem to have coincided with the security situation in Kurram, firstly the assassination of Haji Khalil Haqqani by the Islamic State

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<sup>10</sup> Firdous, "Remain Unsettled."

<sup>11</sup> Firdous, "Remain Unsettled."

<sup>12</sup> Firdous, "Remain Unsettled."

<sup>13</sup> Rehman, "Cycles of Bloodshed."

Khorasan (ISKP) – Khalil Haqqani was part of the Kurram Accord – secondly, the more recent assassination of Maulana Hamid ul Haq Haqqani, son of the late, pro-Taliban Maulana Sami ul Haq in Darul Uloom Haqqania, Akora Khattak. Maulana Hamid ul Haq was engaged in rapprochement between Kabul and Islamabad.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Haqqani Factor**

Historically, the Haqqani network has had inevitable clout in Kurram district primarily because their strategic base in Dande, North Waziristan is in close proximity to the aforementioned district, which in turn offers a relatively secure pathway to the Sunni-dominated, Sadda in Central Kurram. Additionally, Kurram district is merely 60 miles from Kabul, providing the shortest route from the Loya Paktia bulwark of Haqqanis' Zadran tribe that entails Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces in Afghanistan. Apart from this, when Osama bin Laden holed up in Paktia, he along with his legion of Arab Mujahideen used Kurram to commute between Jalalabad and Jaji during the 1980s. Bin Laden built a Masada (Lion's den) in Jaji which was morphed into a cavernous structure to resist against the Soviets. In other words, if history of Bin Laden anti-Soviet Jihad is recorded, Kurram will get a prominent mention.<sup>15</sup>

When Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) Pakistan was added to the equation in 2007, they adhered to their Takfiri ideology (deeming as “kafirs” or non-Muslims) and embarked on their sectarian agenda. Due to close operational and ideological affinity between TTP and the Haqqanis, the latter were censured both as mediators and part of the problem. In 2008, the Murree Accord was brokered between the Sunni Bangash and Shia Turi tribes, which ensued in the opening up of Tall-Parachinar-Sadda highway, blocked for almost 12 months. However, the accord signed failed to put a decisive end to the mindless bloodshed on both sides emanating from decades old sectarian vendetta. In 2011, another siege of the main highway brought things to a standstill; resultantly the Haqqanis weren't able to get passage through Upper Kurram. However, with the imprimatur of the Haqqanis, prominently Haji Khalil Haqqani, the brother of the head of the Haqqani tribe, Jalaludin

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<sup>14</sup> Firdous, “Remain Unsettled.”

<sup>15</sup> Firdous, “Remain Unsettled.”

Haqqani was able to broker another deal allowing the secure passage for all sects, once exercising their clout in Kurram.<sup>16</sup>

### **The TTP Factor**

If there holistic analysis of the issue at hand, the TTP is also the nub of the problem of a region we should have been syncretic with Shia-Sunni unity floating like oil slick over water. Since 2005, Taliban faction led by Fazal Saeed from Uchat Killay village was considered to be active in Kurram. However, with TTP coalesced in 2007, Hakeemullah Mehsud was ordered to supervise activities in Orakzai and Kurram of former FATA. Like in the past, Shia elders resisted TTP duress to instrumentalize Parachinar as a base to attack US-led forces in Afghanistan. Resultantly, Shia tribespeople were emboldened to unite and organize a resistance campaign against TTP. In turn, TTP levied an exclusion and boycott campaign against Shia populace in areas with mixed sectarian make-up. Sunnis who opposed this boycott were also punitively punished. Currently, with the debacle of a withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and leaving behind of weapons' cache worth billions of dollars, the bloodshed and violence continues to simmer because of this catalyst.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Firdous, "Remain Unsettled."

<sup>17</sup> Rehman, "Cycles of Bloodshed."