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# Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad:

Evaluating the gains & gauging the challenges ahead

Hamdan Khan and Hamayoun Khan

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**Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan**

## Summary

As part of nearly two decades old war on terror, Pakistan launched Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad in 2017 to consolidate the gains made in the long campaign. This operation was regarded as the most comprehensive and encompassing of all the previously launched operations due to its inclusive nature. It included both hard as well as soft elements of the strategy for countering the menace of terrorism, which had haunted the country for nearly two decades. This operation yielded a set of mixed results wherein the military took lead in kinetic aspect while the civilian government and its institutions lagged far behind in their area of responsibility. The execution of consensus based NAP, which was categorized as the hallmark of this operation, still awaits implementation in its full essence with some of its points either left entirely untouched or given appallingly less consideration. Recently government has shown some willingness and resolve to bridge the gaps noted in the implementation of NAP, but as they say proof of the pudding is in the eating, only time will tell if those shortcomings are addressed.

### **1. Introduction:**

Pakistan's fight with extremism is as old as its inception. The country has been struggling to tackle extremist shade of religious and ethnic fault lines existing within its society. For years, this nuisance posed serious challenge for the state either in one or the other form. However, this problem aggravated sharply after US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the State of Pakistan entered into a direct confrontation with forces of violent extremism and terrorism. Essentially, Pakistan began reaping what its leaders cultivated during the concluding decade of the Cold War by becoming part of the great power competition in Afghanistan. This head on collision, however, proved to be more deadly than anticipated as it cost the country more than 80,000 lives, which included more than 25,000 security forces personnel while inflicting an economic loss of more than \$ 100 billion to the country's already fragile economy. In addition to large-scale kinetic operations in the erstwhile tribal areas and parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, the State had to launch a series of intelligence based counterterrorism operations (IBO) in some of its major urban centers, to dislodge terrorists from there and reestablish the writ of the state. Starting with Operation Al-Mizan, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts spread over a period of more than 18 years with remarkable success rate especially during the operations in Swat and erstwhile FATA.

In 2014, Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azab to clear North Waziristan of terrorists. An important agency in the erstwhile FATA, this area was acting as the last bastion of terrorism in Pakistan and militants were using their hideouts there as launching pads to carry out violent activities across Pakistan. This military operation proved to be an all-out success in achieving military objectives and after more than two years of fighting a war of hybrid nature in former FATA and other areas along the Pak-Afghan border, Pakistan emerged victorious and regained its control over North Waziristan (NWA) and other contested tribal agencies. However, regaining control of those areas was not enough because the phenomenon of violent religious extremism with its longstanding structural background was deep rooted. The problem is more of political in nature than it appears to be a military one. Therefore, a military solution alone was never going to be sufficient.

Keeping in view the extraordinary circumstances, Pakistan's Armed Forces launched Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, whose purpose was to eliminate the "latent and residual threats of terrorism" from the country and ultimately, realize the dream of a stable and peaceful Pakistan. Over the past two years, this all-encompassing operation achieved a number of successes, but some of its aspects, which are even more crucial, still await decisive actions.

Consisting of six sections, this research presents a brief account of Pakistan's fight against terrorism while mainly focusing on Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, whose achievements and shortcomings have been discussed at length. The first section provides a critical analysis of Pakistan's counter extremism efforts followed by second section, which highlights the salient features of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad. Third section presents a detailed account of the achievements of this operation during the period of two years. Fourth section pinpoints the previously untouched subject of shortcomings of this operation in considerable detail. Fifth and penultimate section presents policy recommendations to bridge those highlighted gaps found in its implementation followed by a brief conclusion.

## 1. Pakistan's fight against violent extremism: A critical appraisal

### List of Military Operations in Pakistan

- Operation Al-Mizan (2002-2006)
- Operation Rah-Haq (November 2007)

- Operation Sher-e-Dil (September 2008)
- Operation Zalzala (2008-2009)
- Operation Sirat-e-Mustaqeem (2008)
- Operation Rah-e-Rast (May 2009)
- Operation Rah-e-Nijaat (October 2009)
- Operation Koh-e-Sufaid (July 2011)
- Operation Zarb-e-Azab (July 2014)

Since Afghan war, the political use of various religious denominations and militarization of society on the whole, have left deep scars on the cultural behaviour of society in general, giving rise to extra-political religious intolerance. Playing soft on religious extremism over a period of three decades, not only promoted destructive occult jihadism in Pakistani society, but the political system also ceded space to the jihadi outfits allowing them to work on their agendas. This worsened intra-religious grievances and destroyed the social fabric of the society. Such persisting conflictual social-political behaviour, constructed on biased selfish political needs and opposed to the common understanding of the psychology of the society, was unnatural. Its reversal, therefore, lies in employing radical socio-political measures, as the problem of religious militancy was the direct consequence of the political use of religion in the first place. It indeed had been a contradiction in the state behaviour itself.

Karl Marx explained in his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843); "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, and material force must be overthrown by material force... The theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is the man himself. "

Ad hominem is applicable in Pakistani context as well as it implies having a direct political reaction to the material existence of religious extremism by literally personifying the problem, thereby making it identifiable and easy to point out. De-radicalization of society

demands employment of greater efforts and resources than those used to radicalize it. This explanation is to suggest a direct and ruthless material reaction by the State against any self-approved, self-declared and self-governed jihadist militancy, irrespective of the socio-economic, political, and ideological position it holds. Simply put, action against extremist mindset demands persistent coercive political actions. Soft measures may be employed later over a period of long duration to completely root out this menace. So far, perpetuity of the problem is a cause of concern. Politically the State is playing the role of passive agent in dealing with the problem. The State is still not ready to accept its responsibility of being the causative agent in the past. It, thus, continues to remain in a state of denial to trace back its footsteps to undo the problem of religious extremism.

## **2. Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad:**

The launch of “Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad” was announced on February 22nd, 2017 by Inter-Services Public Relations, the media wing of Pakistan’s armed forces. This Operation, whose name can be literally translated in English as ‘elimination of discord’, was aimed at steering Pakistan towards a stable and peaceful future by eliminating the remnants of terrorism from across the country. ISPR’s statement contained some very attention-grabbing & inclusive terminologies, which reflected the expanse of the scope and the breadth of this Operation.

The statement, in its first few sentences, highlighted that this operation was aimed at “indiscriminately eliminating the residual/latent threat of terrorism, consolidating gains of operations made thus far and further ensuring the security of the borders.” Then, the press release went on to name the law enforcement agencies, which were to take part in this operation. It read, “Pakistan Air Force, Pakistan Navy, Civil Armed Forces (CAF) and other security/Law Enforcing Agencies (LEAs) will continue to actively participate/intimately support the efforts to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the country”.

In the next paragraph, the statement shed light on the Counter Terrorism (CT) efforts, which were to be carried out, besides the effective border management, and would become the defining features of this campaign. The statement concluded with emphasis on “de-weaponisation and explosive control” across the country while making the “Pursuance of National Action Plan (NAP)” as the “hallmark” of this operation. This assertion vastly expanded the scope of the Operation.

Undoubtedly, military's media wing had announced the launch of an all-encompassing operation that was to address both "hard" as well as the "soft" residual aspects of the menace that had plagued the country for years. After more than a decade of fighting terrorism/violent extremism within its borders, and sacrificing lives of thousands of civilians and armed forces personnel, Pakistan successfully overcame the ostensible threat. The gains made after such a gigantic struggle, therefore, had to be consolidated at all costs.

The Use of word "indiscriminate" in the initial few sentences of the statement suggested that the days of nurturing armed groups and using them as a matter of state policy had ended and that the country's political and military leadership had finally dedicated themselves to eliminating all sources of terrorism, both overt and covert. Moreover, the phrase "Consolidating gains of the operations made" clearly implied that the state would no more allow the massive achievements, made after rendering such heavy sacrifices, to be squandered because of the weakness or ineffectiveness of some branch of the government.

In the wake of the Operation Zarb-e-Azab, Pakistan launched a massive border-fencing venture to secure its Western border with Afghanistan, which remained a traditional passageway for mischievous elements based across the border to conduct terrorist activities in Pakistan. Under operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, safeguarding borders was to become the topmost priority of the LEAs and it was to be ensured that the previous gaps in the border management were bridged and the movement of people at Pak-Afghan border was thoroughly regulated.

"Countrywide de-weaponisation and the explosive control" was regarded to be an ambitious agenda given the questions about the capacity of LEAs in Pakistan. However, this goal is very much achievable in the long run by means of preventing the unchecked inflow of weapons and explosives in the country, and by introducing further strict regulatory measures.

Towards the end, ISPR designated the NAP as the hallmark of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad. In a way, it was acknowledgment that the 03-year-old plan for countering extremism and terrorism was still to be implemented in its complete essence. It was also a reminder that this 20 point agenda may not be a panacea for all the ills of Pakistan, even though its sincere and unequivocal implementation could still steer the country out of the security quagmire facing it. The inclusion of NAP, therefore, widened the scope of operation to an unprecedented range because of its inherent comprehensiveness.



### **3. Achievements of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad:**

Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad has come to be characterized by the Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs), conducted by civil and military LEAs against militant infrastructure in different parts of the country. Aimed at latent remnants and/or sleeper cells of the terrorist groups, these operations have been lauded for their efficacy and targeted precision. Since the formal launch of operation in February 2017, more than 75,900 raids have been conducted across the country, which includes IBOs as well as the combing operations resulting in the arrest and killing of hundreds of suspects. Only in 2018, more than 45,760 operations were carried out, which led to a steep decline in violent incidents across the country.

For consolidating the gains made by the operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), it was imperative that administrative, economic and social reforms are introduced in those areas so that these historically conservative regions may not become a hotbed for extremism once again. Prolonged disconnect of erstwhile FATA from the mainstream due to the implementation of colonial-era laws there until recently led to plenty of grievances of the people of that area towards the central government of Pakistan. These grievances in some cases contributed to the spread of extremism and violent terrorism in those areas with spillover effects reaching the whole country.

However, in May 2018, KPK provincial Assembly, National Assembly, and Senate passed landmark legislation (25th Constitutional Amendment) regarding FATA's merger with KPK, thereby addressing one of the major grievances of the people of that area. After the passage of this legislation by the three Houses, President of Pakistan accorded his assent to the legislation on May 31, 2018 paving the way for the merger of FATA with KPK. The people of erstwhile FATA would now be subject to the Constitution of Pakistan and civil governance structure much like the rest of the country. The merger process is being carried out in a systematic way. This gigantic accomplishment is a major step towards consolidating the gains made by military operations in erstwhile FATA and indisputably, would lead to a massive transformation in economic, social and political domains.

To materialize social and economic progress in the area, it is a prerequisite that infrastructure such as schools and colleges along with the communication network consisting of roads and other relevant substructure is developed there to cater to the needs of the population.



Erstwhile FATA and other insurgency-hit areas of Pakistan previously lacked the necessary infrastructure for robust economic and social headway.

After the conclusion of the military operations, the government of Pakistan initiated a grand infrastructure development program in the insurgency-hit areas. Only in North Waziristan, a total of 493 infrastructure related projects have been initiated, which are expected to ameliorate the lives of more than 03 million people. These projects include highways and small roads, educational & technical training institutions, fruit processing establishments and health centers including five major health facilities.

Securing Pakistan's western border from any illegal intrusion was an important objective of operation RuF. To achieve that aim, Pakistan started a massive border fencing campaign along Pak-Afghan border despite strong opposition from Afghanistan. Pak-Afghan border is 2,611 Kilometers long and the mentioned fence, to be completed by the end of 2020, is planned at the maximum possible length of the border. Until now, more than 833 kilometers of border, has been fenced including 539 kilometers of the critical phase completed on priority basis. Out of 833 kilometers, 478 kilometers is in KPK whereas remaining 355 kilometers is along the border with Afghanistan in Baluchistan province.

Along with fencing, construction of border posts has been an important priority. A total of 843 border posts were to be built along the Pak-Afghan border and until the end of 2018, construction work at 233 posts had been completed while 140 posts were being built. It is claimed that due to effective management of the border, unauthorized crossing of the border has become extremely difficult. This landmark achievement has been made despite the fact that Afghan authorities remained non-cooperative and at times, even hostile to Pakistan's efforts for safeguarding its border. Pakistan and Afghanistan have a long-running border dispute, with Kabul adamant that it will not accept the Durand Line as the international border.

#### **4. Shortcomings of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad:**

The military, had at the time of launch of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, set itself the objective of "indiscriminately" eliminating the latent/ residual threat of terrorism, but the criticism of counter-terrorism operations being selective persisted. It is alleged that only those militant groups that engaged in violent activities against the State of Pakistan faced action, while the groups having extra-territorial operations got ignored. Government's reluctance and lack of

resolve to act against some of these groups not only created domestic challenges but also tarnished Pakistan's image at the international level. The ongoing review of Pakistan's counter-illicit financing regimes at Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is one manifestation of the international disquiet about the operational space available to some of the UN listed individuals and entities.

During 2018 general elections, an alarming trend was witnessed which exhibited the state's soft policy towards the symbols of intolerance and in certain instances violent extremism. A large number of parties with extremist inclinations, some of them having a history of supporting or committing violence got a nod from Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to contest elections. Moreover, a large number of parties having direct or indirect links with banned terrorist organizations also got clearance from ECP. The final list of candidates issued by ECP included some 925 candidates with either direct links to extremist organizations or with a record of supporting their cause indirectly. This discriminatory approach adopted by ECP raised many eyebrows and remained a matter of debate in academic and media circles.

Although the Government of Pakistan has been vehemently rejecting all the allegations regarding its alleged soft approach against certain outfits, realities on ground depict a slightly different picture. Certain armed groups kept enjoying operational space until recently, when in February 2019, the government moved to ban the organizations some of those outfits. Moreover, the government also took administrative control of more than 200 seminaries across the country and arrested some of the leaders of the newly banned organizations. Although these recent moves apparently look like government's reinvigorated resolve for action against these "supposedly harmless" groups, it is yet to be seen whether these actions represented a strategic shift of the State or were tactical responses to ward-off growing international pressure.

Implementation of NAP has been described as the cornerstone of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, which in effect widens the scope of this operation by making it wide-ranging and all-encompassing. The government has, however, long been criticized for the halfhearted implementation of NAP as it made practical headway only on some of its points while overlooking others either completely or partially.

Point 04 of the NAP states that "NACTA, the counter-terrorism institution will be strengthened to form a concerted front against nationwide terrorism. Later on, this institution was

assigned the task of overseeing the implementation of NAP, a task well beyond its range and capacity. An institution that was to spearhead the implementation of NAP faced massive organizational, financial and capacity challenges. Besides the absence of a comprehensive legal mechanism to guide its operations, NACTA's organizational competence lagged far behind its Western contemporaries. It was in view of NACTA's failure to lead and coordinate counter-terrorism operations between the various LEAs and between the federal government and the provincial governments that Prime Minister Imran Khan had to constitute a National Internal Security Committee. It remains to be seen how this newly instituted superstructure works and delivers what NACTA failed to do.

Point 06 of the NAP lists "Choking financing for terrorist and terrorist organizations" as an important objective of the whole proposal. However, Pakistan's performance has not been very impressive in this domain either and once again; challenges are organizational, structural and somehow political in nature. In June 2018, Pakistan was placed on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which is the international watchdog against money laundering and financing of terrorism. Reasons cited by FATF for such a measure included the country's "structural deficiencies" in Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating Financing of Terrorism (CFT) regimes. Although Pakistan remained on FATF grey list in the past, but such a designation, after the government flaunted its successes under Radd-ul-Fasad, negatively reflected on the implementation of NAP.

Point 08 of the NAP envisages the establishment and deployment of a "Dedicated Counter-terrorism Force". Although some considerable progress has been made in this regard and Punjab, Sindh and KPK have established special Counter Terrorism Forces, yet the prime institution of police, which is to tackle terror-related cases and deal with this menace at the grassroot level, is mired by organizational discrepancies, political interferences and rampant corruption .

Point 10 of NAP emphasizes the registration and regulation of religious seminaries but the government has been very reluctant to proceed on this count as it worries about a possible backlash from the religious groups running those seminaries. Regularization of seminaries and improvements in their curriculum is a prerequisite for preventing the spread of extremism in the country.

Point 19 of NAP proposes the “Formulation of a comprehensive policy to deal with the issues of Afghan refugees”. However, five years after the formulation of NAP and over two years after the launch of Operation RuF, the government has yet to come up with its own stated, “Comprehensive policy”. There have been many statements from the higher-ups of the government like current Foreign Minister talking about the “dignified and sustainable repatriation” of Afghan refugees and PM Khan intending to grant citizenship to the Afghan children born in Pakistan. However, until now, these statements have not translated into anything substantive and the government’s lack of intent to deal efficaciously with this matter is very much evident.

Absolutely no progress regarding the point 20 of the NAP places a huge question mark over the government’s intent and resolve to implement the plan in its letter and spirit. It promises a “revamp” and “reforming” of Pakistan’s criminal justice system but till date, no concrete step has been taken in this regard. Military courts formed under NAP have been granted an extension and one more extension is very much on the cards given the precarious state of the normal criminal justice system. These military courts, however, can never be a permanent solution to this critical problem and a major overhaul of the criminal justice system is inevitable.

## **5. Policy Recommendations:**

1. It is extremely important to ensure that no banned group is allowed to operate covertly or overtly in Pakistan by changing its name or apparent outlook.
2. Pakistan’s international image and prestige are much higher than the free roaming of few individuals. Thus, government is required to take concrete steps to ensure that Pakistan’s international image is not tarnished and the country is not labeled as a terror-hub because of these few individuals.
3. The inadequate capacity of civilian LEAs in Pakistan has remained a major reason for their poor anti-terrorism record. This has led to a situation where tackling terrorism has primarily become a military subject. Civilian LEAs need to be equipped and trained enough to replace the military in its counter-terrorism role so that the focus of the armed forces could remain on the external threat. For this to happen democracy has to take strong roots in the country. Moreover, the parliamentary committee on national security should be activated at the earliest. The heads of intelligence agencies should regularly brief the parliamentary committee on security issues.

4. Terrorism and Extremism is intricately linked to poor governance and underperforming institutions. Therefore, it is very important that the institutions responsible for ensuring robust governance are made efficacious.

5. Long promised comprehensive policy on the Afghan refugees should be finalized and fully implemented.

## **6. Conclusion:**

Pakistan is just steering out of the most critical phase of its history. The state has proved its resilience in the face of numerous challenges from multiple directions. However, this struggle against the odds is not over yet and still, a lot has to be done and much more has to be achieved. Pakistan is a country with massive potential. Optimal utilization of that potential would benefit the whole world. However, for realization of that potential it is imperative that first of all the domestic challenges are sorted out in the most efficient manner and to survive with esteem in the globalized world where international players are not provided with vulnerabilities or weak points to defame and degrade Pakistan.

Operation RuF was a pivotal action to realize the core aim of a peaceful and stable Pakistan. Over the past couple of years, it has successfully made noteworthy progress on the security front, but its shortcomings, most of them structural in nature, ought to be sorted out on long-term basis. These shortcomings, it should not be forgotten, are undermining Pakistan's whole campaign against violent extremism and terrorism. It would be highly unrealistic to expect the goal of stable Pakistan to be achieved as long as these shortcomings are not overcome. Therefore, it is an imperative that the State of Pakistan and its relevant institutions realize their duties and bridge all the gaps in the implementation of NAP, which is the hallmark of Operation RuF.

*\* Hamdan Khan and Hamayoun Khan are adjunct fellows at Islamabad Policy Institute.*