



A double-blind, peer-reviewed, open-access, and an HEC-recognized Y-category Journal

Research Journal of Human and Social Aspects

Web link: <https://rjhsa.cclll.org>

P-ISSN: [3006-9696](https://doi.org/10.71085/rjhsa.04.04.155), E-ISSN: [3006-970X](https://doi.org/10.71085/rjhsa.04.04.155)

Volume 4 Issue 4, 2026, Page Range: 291-305



Impacts of Armed Conflict on Civilians of Tribal Areas in Pakistan: A Case Study of FATA

Muhammad Salman¹ Fareeha Shaukat²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Management Science, COMSATS University, Lahore, Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Head Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS University, Lahore, Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.

Correspondence Author: almankhanislamian@gmail.com

Article information

Article History:

Received: 2026-08-20

Received in revised form: 2026-09-21

Accepted: 2026-09-27

Published Online: 2026-10-21

Keywords:

FATA; Armed Conflict; Civilian Casualties; Enforced Disappearances; War on Terror; Pakistan; Human Rights Violations; Displacement; Psychological Impact.

ABSTRACT

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan have endured nearly two decades of devastating armed conflict, resulting in unprecedented humanitarian consequences for civilian populations across all seven agencies. From 2007 to 2026, military operations targeting militant networks led to massive displacement of approximately one million people, widespread infrastructure destruction, and fundamental alterations to traditional socio-cultural structures. This comprehensive study documents 4,637 cases of enforced disappearances, examines casualty patterns across Waziristan, Khyber, Kurram, Bajaur, Mohmand, Orakzai, and other agencies, and analyses the profound psychological, economic, and social impacts on civilian communities. Drawing from primary interviews, official military statistics, human rights reports, and PTM Germany documentation, this research reveals systematic human rights violations, the erosion of Pashtunwali traditions, and the urgent need for reconciliation, rehabilitation, and sustainable peace initiatives.



© 2026 by the Authors. Salman & Shaukat. This article is an open-access distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

Introduction

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which was traditionally a semi-independent area consisting of seven agencies on the north-western frontier of Pakistan, became a major frontier in the global War on Terror in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. What began as a series of military actions against foreign militants who sought to get refuge in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime, transformed into a prolonged war that essentially marked the normal lives of millions of Pashtun civilians that had occupied the areas of military strategic importance. The seven agencies that FATA governs (North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Khyber, Kurram, Bajaur, Mohmand, and Orakzai) had their individual but interconnected patterns of violence and displacement as well as human suffering, which together make one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the twenty-first century in Pakistan.

FATA experienced a rising pattern of militant insurgency, military retaliations, drone attacks, suicide attacks, and targeted human rights abuses between 2007 and 2026 that claimed the lives of tens of thousands and displaced close to one million civilians of their native homelands (CRSS, 2024). The intensity of the conflict reached its climax with Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2017) that displaced 929,859 people in North Waziristan alone and subsequent operations such as Radd-ul-Fasaad have continued to affect the civilian populations across all the tribal agencies (Khan, 2024). Along with direct loss of life and displacement, the war systematically destroyed the previous tribalism, repressed the native cultural activities, demolished education and healthcare facilities, and caused long-term psychological trauma in whole communities. Recent statistics put together by PTM Germany register 4,637 enforced disappearances, 3,483 missing persons in South Waziristan, which emphasizes the structural aspect of human rights violator that happened way beyond the traditional warfare (PTM Germany, 2025).

The present research article provides the initial investigation of civilian effects of all FATA agencies that combines primary interview data, official military statistics, international human rights records, and recent statistical interpretations to provide an all-encompassing view of how sustained armed conflict has destroyed Pashtun communities. Although past sources have mostly concentrated on Waziristan, this research paper makes sure that the representation covers Khyber, Kurram, Bajaur, Mohmand, and Orakzai, where agency-specific trends of violence, displacement, and social change are recorded. By drawing through a meticulous analysis of the socio-cultural erosions of Pakistan and psychological trauma, economic destruction, and systematic human rights violation, the article highlights the high human cost of the anti-terrorist policy of Pakistan (began as a result of War on Terror), and the necessity of implementing justice, reconciliation and holistic rehabilitation programs to cure the long-term sufferings of the civilian population of FATA.

Historical Background

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas was a special administrative anomaly under the constitutional provisions of Pakistan that took over a colonial form of administration that was initiated by British imperial masters in the late nineteenth century. FATA was not part of the mainstream judicial and administrative system of Pakistan, under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901, but governed by their political agents (discussed as serving extraordinary powers) over tribal groups of mainly Pashtun people governed by a customary law that is centuries old and is called Pashtunwali.

It was the system with its principles of Melmastia (hospitality), nanwati (asylum), and badal (revenge), which formed a unique socio-political situation, where the traditional tribal councils (jirgas) and male elders (maliks) could ensure social order and solve the controversies by the native regulations and norms, without applying the official state law. Even though in 1947 the founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah vowed to

safeguard tribal autonomy whilst incorporating the communities of FATA into the national narrative, successive administrations maintained the colonial administration system, thus continuing to alienate FATA to the mainstream Pakistani institutions, such as education, healthcare, and economic growth (Waseem, 2018).

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing U.S. led invasion of Afghanistan turned FATA into a periphery to a central hot spot in the global War on Terror (Shahzad, 2011). After the fall of the Taliban government, thousands of Afghan Taliban fighters, foreign militants and Al-Qaeda members fled to the mountainous regions of FATA especially in North and South Waziristan, taking advantage of centuries old cross-border Pashtun kinship ties and the idea of *nanwati* that required tribes to offer refuge. The U.S. exerted pressure on the then President Pervez Musharraf, who in turn promised to deploy the Pakistani military against the terrorists in FATA which started back in the year 2004, a move that had never been witnessed before in the history of this country since independence. These early actions were actually starting the opposition of both the tribesmen resisting to the idea of new Taliban-like governance and militants who were intent on setting up the Taliban-style of governance, leading to a spiral of military attacks and peace deals and later, a dramatic upsurge in violence after the 2007 Lal Masjid siege in Islamabad. The increasing number of militant groups became a coordinated insurgency in 2007 known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which integrated the fragmented militant groups and started attacking state institutions, the state security forces and civilians in FATA and beyond turning the local conflicts into a national security crisis (SATP, 2011).

Conflict Statistics: A Quantitative Overview

Category	Number
Total Documented Cases of Enforced Disappearances (2003–2025)	4,637
Individuals Still Missing	4,319
Internally Displaced Persons from North Waziristan (Operation Zarb-e-Azb)	929,859
Total Fatalities in 2024 (Record 9-Year High)	2,546

The period between 2007 and 2014 witnessed an increasing violence in FATA as Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces in South Waziristan to Bajaur and Mohmand started to systematically occupy agencies, enforce harsh Islamic codes, kill off tribal leaders, bomb schools, and establish parallel systems of governance to replace the traditional tribal governance. The South Asia Terrorism Portal revealed that as far back as 2011 alone, there were 5,023 fatalities, of which 4,296 were militants, 490 civilian ones and 237 security forces and that the conflict has proven to be devastating on human beings (SATP, 2011). In June 2014, the Karachi Airport attack effectively led to Operation Zarb-e-Azb, a massive military operation against militant strongholds of North Waziristan that had caused the deaths of about 3,500 militants, 490 security personnel and displacement of 929,859 civilians, nearly fifty percent of the population of the entire district (Khan, 2024). It was followed by further operations such as Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), which prolonged military operation to all the FATA agencies, weakening militant areas significantly but the other result of the operations was the change of the demographic, social, and economic environment in this region. It was the 25th Constitutional Amendment that formalized the merger of FATA and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018, officially ending the administrative system of the colonial era, but the after-effects of two decades of warfare including the displacement of large groups of people, the destruction of infrastructure, forcible disappearances, and traumatized societies continue to shape the region in terms of uncertain recovery and reconstruction.

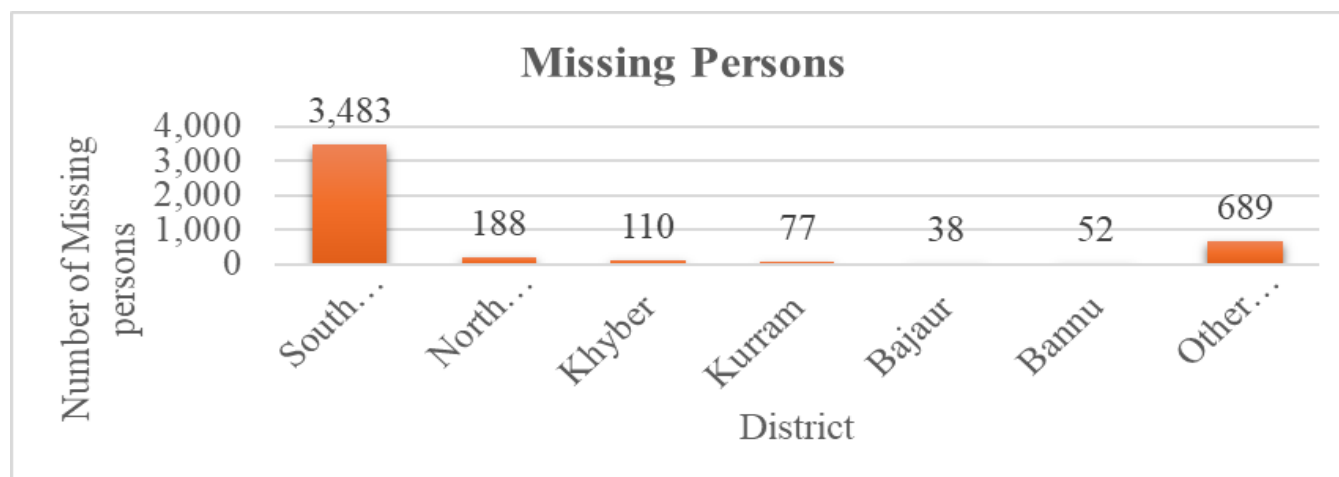
According to the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), 2024 marked the deadliest year for Pakistan's security forces in a decade, with 685 security personnel and 927 civilians killed, alongside 934 militants eliminated. This

represents a 66% surge in violence compared to 2023, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly FATA) accounting for 63% of all fatalities nationwide (CRSS, 2024).

Enforced Disappearances by Agency (2003-2025)

Agency/District	Missing Persons	Percentage of Total	Primary Alleged Perpetrators
South Waziristan	3,483	75.10%	Pakistan Army, Intelligence Agencies
North Waziristan	188	4.10%	Pakistan Army, FC
Khyber	110	2.40%	Intelligence Agencies, Pakistan Army
Kurram	77	1.70%	Intelligence Agencies
Bajaur	38	0.80%	Pakistan Army
Bannu	52	1.10%	Intelligence Agencies
Other Districts	689	14.80%	Various State Actors
TOTAL	4,637	100%	-

Source: PTM Germany, "Pashtun Missing Persons: A Grave Human Rights Crisis in Pakistan" (2025)



Alleged Perpetrators of Enforced Disappearances

Perpetrator Agency	Number of Cases	Percentage
Pakistan Army	2,362	54.70%
Intelligence Agencies (General)	1,637	37.90%
Frontier Corps (FC)	111	2.60%
Police	32	0.70%
ISI	18	0.40%
Karachi Rangers	18	0.40%
Military Intelligence (MI)	8	0.20%
Unknown/Other	132	3.10%

Source: PTM Germany (2025). Note: Pakistani armed forces and intelligence agencies account for over 92% of documented enforced disappearances.

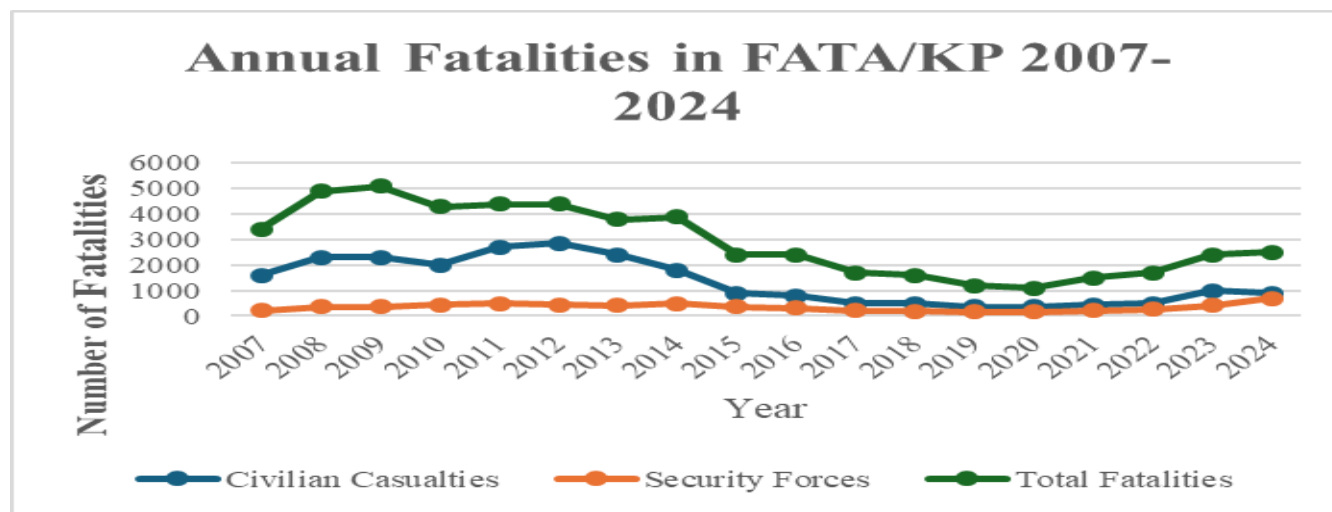
The Human Cost

Military Operations and Civilian Casualties

The extent of human suffering in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of the years 2007 to 2026 is too big to simply quantify and includes both direct fatalities and indirect fatalities in the conflict because of displacement, loss of healthcare infrastructure, and psychological effects on the population in the long run. Formal military records of Operation Zarb -e Azb (2014-2017) show that 490 Pakistani security-force Troops were killed and 1914 injured, and they claimed that roughly 3500 militants were killed (Khan, 2024). These statistics are just a tip of the iceberg of the true human cost of this war since the death of civilians is grossly under-reported. According to reports by the Pakistan military, there were only two civilian deaths in the operations of North Waziristan which, according to the human-rights organisations, is grossly underrepresented compared to the number of displaced people (929859) and the aerial bombing. The Peshawar Army Public School attack on December 2014 that claimed the lives of 140 civilians, among them 132

children, also demonstrates how civilians were the subject of violence inflicted by the state military forces and militant retaliation (Yousaf, 2014).

Detailed casualty information indicates the stalemate in the conflict. Alone in 2007, 3448 total deaths due to terrorism-related violence (1647 civilians and 221 security-forces) were recorded (State, 2008). The war intensified between 2008 and 2013, and the number of people killed annually went as high as 4,075 in 2009 when the South Waziristan offensive took place. Since 2020 had a 1,098 number of deaths, which is the lowest since 2014, the death toll dropped following Operation Zarb-e-Azb to 3,861 people in 2014. This negative trend however changed drastically as soon as 2021, with the deaths increasing by 56.2 percent to 2,380 by 2023, and a record nine-year high of 2,546 by 2024, which is a 66.3 percent increase over a single year (CRSS, 2024). This reemerging shows that military activities cannot help to correct the underlying grievances, economic marginalization, political alienation that encourage insurgency.



The pattern of violence during the distribution of casualties has specific dynamics. The entire military operations, and, as a result, the greatest number of casualties, were mostly concentrated in South Waziristan and North Waziristan, with 3,483 enforced disappearances recorded in South Waziristan alone, or more than three-quarters of

all the reported cases (PTM Germany, 2025). In Khyber Agency, 110 disappearances were observed as well as continued actions against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Islam militants whereas in Kurram Agency 77 missing person's cases were witnessed in sectarian violence. Analysis on the 2024 level indicates

Kurram, North Waziristan and Khyber to be the most severely affected areas and violence spreads to Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu and Lakki Marwat (CRSS, 2024).

Internal Migration and Mass Displacement

Forced displacement became one of the most universal humanitarian impacts, as almost one million civilians were displaced between 2007 and 2017, out of ancestral residence. Operation Zarb-e-Azb alone created 929,859 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in North Waziristan, which is made up of 80,302 families that fled to Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, and other districts even before the military operations began in June 2014. The orders of the governmental evacuation allowed civilians little time to pack the baggage, and about 450,000 citizens were passing the Saidgai security checkpoint on their way to the Bannu district. The same displacement was largely observed in operations in other agencies, as almost 200,000 Mehsud tribesmen of South Waziristan, which is a representation of almost half the district population, have had to leave their homes in 2009 operations, and an estimated 100,000 people had to flee to the Khost province of Afghanistan (Akins & Ahmed, 2013).

"Upon coming home in the region, they had been bombarded and the houses, businesses and shops had been devastated, and they were required to reside in the open in -20 degrees December weather. They did not even have basic facilities of life. They were provided with entry cards which were referred to as, Watan Card. The National Identity Card was invalid there. They were forced to feed months and reconstruct their lives since the shops were burned down. Prior to the armed conflict, individuals enjoyed a luxurious life with good socio-economic

status, attended schools, and held their festivals and weddings." (Ali, 2025)

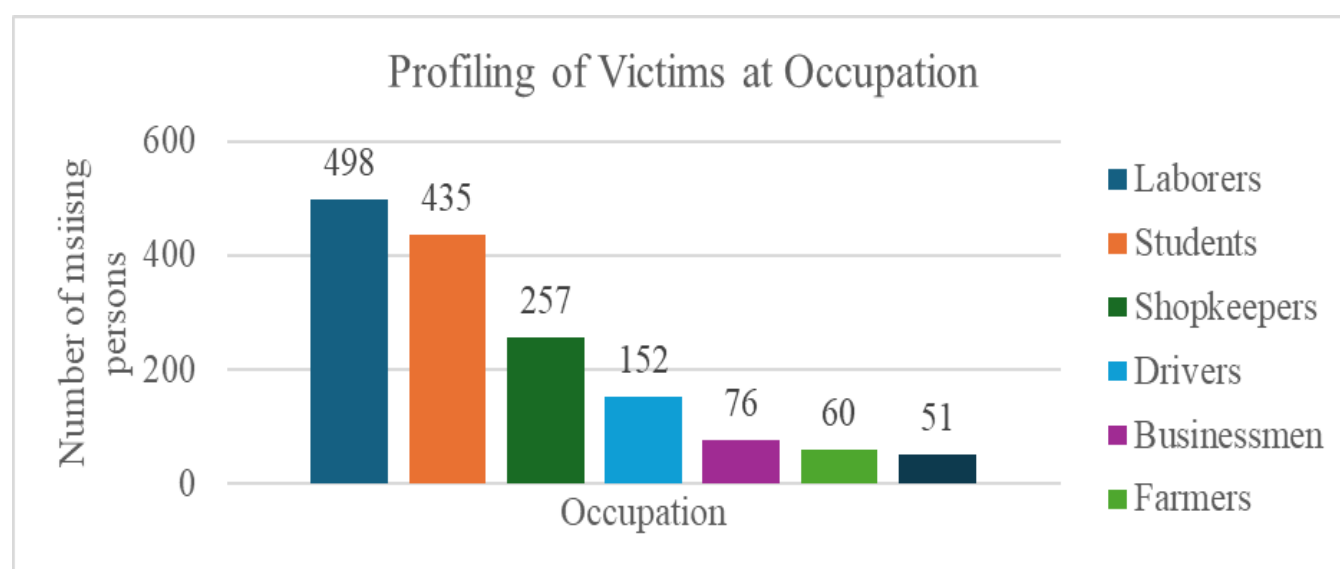
The IDP camps in Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, and Peshawar were offering little shelter and services and the families were mostly dwelling in tented accommodations without sufficient water, sanitation, health care, or educational access. The dispute of national identity card as a mandatory identification introduced administrative obstacles because the national identity cards of displaced persons were often regarded as invalid in conflict zones. Much of the time, families depleted their savings in the time of displacement as they came back to find their homes and agricultural land ruined by the bombardment, military occupation and their business completely destroyed. The displaced families in North Waziristan who returned in winter without infrastructure meant they faced extreme conditions which they had to start anew and at the same time, with extreme cold weather, food supply and lack of medical services.

Profiling of Victims at Occupation

The investigation of enforced disappearance cases found that the vast majority of regular civilians of various professions became the targets, which did not correspond to the official accounts according to which the disappeared citizens were mostly militant suspects. As was documented by PTM Germany, the single most destroyed group was the labourers (498 disappeared individuals) then students (435), shopkeepers (257), drivers (152), businessmen (76), farmers (60), teachers (51), and tailors (26) (PTM Germany, 2025). This professional allocation proves that forced disappearance was also aimed at socio-economic pillar of communities of FATA.

Occupation	Number Missing	Implications
Laborers	498	Working-class targeting; economic disruption
Students	435	Youth suppression; educational disruption
Shopkeepers	257	Business community targeting; market disruption
Drivers	152	Transportation network disruption
Businessmen	76	Economic elite targeting; investment decline
Farmers	60	Agricultural sector disruption
Teachers	51	Educational system targeting; intellectual suppression

Source: PTM Germany (2025)



The high proportion of students among disappeared persons is particularly concerning, suggesting systematic targeting of educated youth who might possess political awareness or capacity for social mobilization. The targeting of teachers proved particularly devastating for FATA's already fragile educational infrastructure, as many educators were killed for expressing liberal views contrary to militant ideology, while others faced threats from both Taliban militants and security forces.

Psychological and Social Impacts

Mental Health Crisis and Trauma

The mental shattering caused by twenty years of war represents a hidden but widespread humanitarian crisis that has taken place with most of the population. In a psychiatric study conducted by Dr. Khalid Mufti, it was reported that more than

54 per cent of individuals that reside in conflict zones displayed symptoms of acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, lack of appetite and sleep problems. Gender distribution was especially vivid as it was found that about 60 per cent of the affected were women who were predominantly victims of fear, panic and post-traumatic stress whereas men were victims of clinical depression. These figures have probably been grossly understated, because no medical facilities were available in some isolated FATA regions, so the symptoms may be undiagnosed, and some may be socially stigmatized and unwilling to accept treatment.

Children were especially exposed to being traumatized psychologically because they had observed violence involving military campaigns, suicide attacks, beheadings and school bombings. The long-term developmental effects on the

children who witnessed extreme violence at tender ages, are behavioural problems like aggression, anxiety disorders, inability to build a trusting relationship and rejection of formal education. A large number of children saw relatives slaughtered or vanished, which causes the development of attachment disorders and grief that interferes with the healthy development of psychology. The reason was that the systematic destruction of educational infrastructure resulted in the deprivation of hundreds of thousands of children of years of education, resulting in not only educational deficits but also interfering with normal social and psychological development.

"Those people constantly experience feelings of fear as there is the constant threat of bomb blasts any time, specifically those people who are literate and have some sense that injustice is being done with them, so Taliban most of the time aim such civilians in two ways; either by target killing or by forced displacement. After witnessing so much violence, they are in a state of continuous stress and trauma. Every other person in the region has someone missing or killed in their homes during armed conflict. They have no freedom of speech and are not allowed to express their feelings publicly, and if someone tries to do so, the militant groups displace or kill them." (Waziristan, 2025)

The methodical application of terrorism by militants multiplied the effects on the psychology of people many times over. To spread fear, the Taliban used the method of public executions, beheadings on lampposts, and the release of videos of executions to achieve extreme fear. During 2005 alone in North and South Waziristan, Taliban forces killed 60 tribal and religious leaders accusing them of being American spies and hanging their heads in public as warnings. Taliban had evolved ritualised murder techniques whereby a targeted person would be sent a needle, thread and 1000 rupees (\$16) to go and buy a burial shroud and sew it with his/her own hands, a mental form of torture that would push those against far more horrifying than of terrorising whole communities.

Destruction of Traditional Socio-Cultural Institutions

The military conflict gradually destroyed the traditional social structure of FATA that had been able to keep the land stable and the conflict under control over the centuries using the indigenous Pashtun institutions. The hujra, which had always been the main venue of social life of male members of Pashtun Society, in which tribal elders used to convene to solve communal problems, lost its significance when militancy and Talibanization turned the masjid into the most important communal hall. This changed the balance of power in a fundamental manner since the International Crisis Group reported that militancy has affected religious clerics leaving their masajid in hujras thereby enabling Taliban elements to utilize religious sentiments to reinforce their power (ICG, 2025). The system of the jirga that had long solved conflicts by reaching an agreement by all, lived in accordance with the customs of the land and the Pashtunwali, was systematically destroyed as the Taliban embarked to show their own definition of Islamic state.

The fact that the Taliban used the Pashtunwali principles to recruit new members destabilised the traditional social order especially. The idea of badal (revenge), which was historically controlled by jirga mediation to avoid the likelihood of a never-ending blood feud, was a recruitment strategy when the Taliban urged families who had lost their members in military actions or drone attacks to take revenge by enlisting in militant factions. This badal weaponisation turned FATA into a battleground not just between state and militants but also between tribes and clans and created a lack of social cohesion which in the past allowed collective action. The traditional maliks and tribal elders lost their power to be assassinated by militants and at the same time they lost their credibility among the people who viewed them as accomplices of the state security organs.

Suppression of Cultural Practices and Women Rights

The Taliban influence led to the systematic repression of the indigenous culture of the

Pashtun, especially music, dance, and socializing between both male and female. Attan, a traditional dance to rhythmic dhol music in wedding and festival occasions were outlawed as un-Islamic, the voices of the culture were suppressed, which had been a core element of Pashtun identity since ancient times. Music has been declared haram and the Taliban has been destroying music instruments and intimidating musicians. There were restrictions or an outright ban on television, internet access and mobile phones in Taliban controlled regions. These cultural taboos were applied to personal grooming with the Taliban introducing a mandatory beard to all adult Muslim men and placing 5000 rupees to shaving offenders. (Rashid, 2008)

"There was once a period when such dances were held regularly. She remembered how women danced alongside men without fear or humiliation, and how respect for women's dignity was deeply ingrained in society. Although men and women participated together, no one dared to insult or dishonour the women. Women and girls in the mountainous regions of FATA once moved freely in their daily lives. They regularly went to the gudar (small streams or natural water sources) to fetch water, and to nearby fields and mountains to collect firewood for household use. There were few restrictions on their movement, yet their honour was strictly respected." (Nargis Bibi, 2025)

The female population was also affected by both Taliban limitations and the overall war conditions, which imposed on this group of people unexampled limitations on mobility, education, employment, and even the most basic sense of dignity. Strenuous purdah regulations prevented women, who previously could go to gudar and fetch water, collect firewood, and even do agricultural labour. The Taliban militants enforced the full veil which was mandatory included covering all parts of the body. In case women were spotted in the streets without the right covering, beating, whipping and verbal abuse were not exotic. There was systematic targeting of women education as militants bombed girls' schools, threatened women students and teachers and even made 180 girls' community schools in North

and South Waziristan illegal. Forced marriage to militants were extreme abuse to women and their autonomy.

Economic Devastation and Livelihood Destruction

Destruction of Economic Infrastructure

The armed conflict systematically dismantled the already limited economic infrastructure in an already impoverished region with subsistence agriculture and small-scale trade making the region an economic disaster area. The agricultural sectors were devastated since military activities, militant occupation, and displacement rendered agricultural communities unable to cultivate farms, irrigation canals, and to defend crops and animals. Militants in most regions would set agricultural land on fire or destroy it with military actions, and the displacement over a long period of time during the period of planting and harvesting over several years resulted in the loss of productivity. The 2017 Pakistan Census found that there were only 25,595 total housing units in North Waziristan of which 21,968 were electrified, 10,525 piped water and only 1,523 gas cooking units (Javed & Khan, 2018).

The commercial infrastructure and the business sector were brought to the verge of total destruction as grocery stores, markets, commercial establishments were bombed, plundered by different armed groups, or left empty during displacement. Without any services or security, Taliban militants arbitrarily taxed businesses, houses, transportation, petrol pumps and dispensaries taking away their resources. Business owners were extorted, ransom kidnapped and forced to close businesses when they did not submit to the demands of militants. The militants and the use of improvised explosive devices caused a lot of destruction to road networks, bridges and there were not many efforts to rebuild them even several years after the intensity of conflicts slowed down.

Economic activity was based on agriculture but it was set on fire and their businesses and shops were destroyed. They faced severe challenges of unemployment and were left with no income sources to run their families, due to which his family

migrated to Peshawar. All the people were not well aware enough and do not have much knowledge to migrate to other places and lived a miserable life in Waziristan. Government through UNICEF and NGOs provided some support but it wasn't enough as compared to the economic loss. Government should provide citizens with business opportunities that have long-run positive impact, trade should be restarted and government should initiate community building programmes to rebuild and reconstruct the infrastructure. (Civilian from North Waziristan, 2025)

Unemployment and Destruction of Livelihoods

Mass unemployment became the immediate impact of war and long-term hindrance to post-war restoration. The human right of almost one million people being displaced implied that even businessmen whose enterprises or farmlands had not been affected physically could not operate their businesses because of missing population, broken supply chain, and restrictions imposed by security. Professional workers, such as teachers, doctors, engineers, and administrators, ran out of the area to find a safe haven and job, leaving the area without a brain drain, which left communities without the technical knowledge to rebuild the area. The situation was especially acute with young men who were at the same time suspected by the security forces of having militant inclinations and were also targeted by militants to recruit them forcefully.

Even with the vast natural resources' endowment, which comprise of valuable mineral deposits of marble, granite, chromite, copper and manganese in addition to the potential oil and gas deposits, the region has not been able to exploit the same, due to insecurity and lack of investments (Trade, 2025). On the same note, although FATA is the second largest producer of pine nuts in Pakistan after China, the industry is affected by low rate of utilization owing to absence of training. The current surge of murders to 2,546 as of 2024, the highest in 9 years or 66 percent of 2023, indicates that the situation with respect to security is worsening, effectively negating future

opportunities to invest or exploit natural resources to the good of the community (CRSS, 2024).

"By living in other urban areas, the civilians are secured and protected from the harm of Taliban but they always miss their hometown. After migrating to urban areas, sons are looking forward to re-establish the business and gradually explored new avenues, so in urban areas they got good profit margins from the trade. However, leaving behind all the sources of livelihood for a secure life meant starting from scratch, with no home, no business, no personal conveyance and nothing to eat." (Civilian from South Waziristan, 2025)

Breach of Education and Healthcare System

Destruction of Education infrastructure

One of the long-term effects of the conflict is the systematic attack on educational institutions. The militants, especially Taliban groups, rolled out a campaign of bombing and burning schools throughout FATA agencies, considering modern education, especially that of the girl-child, to be against their understanding of the Islamic concepts. South and North Waziristan's 180 schools of girls' community were forcibly shut down and several education institutions were destroyed knowingly and unknowingly. Surviving schools were often used as bases by militants making them unusable as places of education.

Massive internal displacement had to send tens of thousands of students to put a stop to their education, which was in many cases permanent. In many regions, the school attendance dropped to zero percent, as people generally feared terrorism, were restricted by security forces, and the schools simply did not exist anymore. Female education was especially targeted, and in most tribal districts, female students had no schooling whatsoever. It resulted in many teachers being murdered because of publicly leading liberal opinions, which led to a situation where the remaining teachers fled or engaged in extreme self-censorship. The aggregate outcome is an educational disaster. A whole generation of children in the FATA, especially girls, received little or no formal education, 2007-2017.

Healthcare System Collapse

The healthcare services that had already been insufficient in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) before the conflict broke out, saw a similar decline of about half over the years of the peak violence. This degradation could be explained by the lack of trained paramedical staff, severe shortages of medicine and medical supplies, overriding insecurity fears that could not allow doctors and medical staff to do their work. It is no wonder that physicians and paramedical personnel refused to work in conflict areas, where they risk being targeted by militants, could be targeted by security agencies in case they were suspected of treating rebels, and were directly threatened by the Taliban of their lives on the basis of health workers wearing western attires or using cell phones. The U.S. drone bombings also contributed to absenteeism in the medical professionals (PTM Germany, 2025).

Citizens of South Waziristan and other remote agencies are forced to go to other districts like Dera Ismail Khan in search of any medical attention other than first aid. Shortage of experienced physicians and the deficiency of required medical facilities lead to the high number of unmet requirements. Already high maternal and child mortality rates were sharply increased as pregnant women were unable to receive skilled birth attendance and emergency obstetrics services. Many critically ill patients lost their lives as they tried getting to hospitals which were far away, because the roads were damaged, security checkpoints were set-up, and transportation was poor, thus making it difficult to evacuate patients. As a result, there were decreased life expectancy and higher mortality rates due to treatable diseases in the tribal areas, such as pneumonia, diarrhoeal diseases, tuberculosis, and difficulties during pregnancy.

Systematic Human Rights Violations and Enforced Disappearances

The Enforced Disappearances Crisis

Perhaps the greatest and most systemic crime against human rights that has ever been reported in the FATA conflict is the enforced

disappearances. PTM Germany in its elaborate 2025 analysis recorded 4,637 total cases that included 4,319 people who cannot be traced and only 318 people have been released. These disappearances were systematic and of such scale that the Pakistan Army, the intelligence agencies, have been accused of 2,362 cases (54.7) and 1,637 cases (37.9) respectively, which shows that enforced disappearances was a calculated counterinsurgency strategy. The loss of disappearances in South Waziristan (3,483 cases, 75.1% of the total) and North Waziristan (188), Khyber (110) and other agencies is directly related to the severity of operations of the military (PTM Germany, 2025). The time-series, where the most notable disappearance sums could be observed (483 cases) in 2009, (631 cases) in 2010, and (573 cases) in 2014, corroborates the major military operations, with enforced disappearances being a part of the military strategy. The International Commission of Jurists documented that the Attorney General of Pakistan had told the Supreme Court that more than 500 persons declared missing were actually under the custody of the security agencies but these were not done through charges, judicial control or family information-which is a violation of the basic due-process rights provided under the Constitution of Pakistan (Omer, 2013).

Extrajudicial Killings and Summary Executions

In addition to enforced disappearances, extrajudicial murders and summary executions carried out by the militants established a culture of legal impunity. Taliban militants killed tribal leaders, religious scholars that did not support their ideology, and people that were suspected of being spies in a systematic way and would most times display mutilated bodies in open places to enhance their terror. In 2005 alone, 60 tribal and religious leaders were killed in Waziristan by the Taliban who then hung their beheaded bodies on the lampposts and handed out DVDs of the execution. The complete destruction of family units like those of Malik Khandan proved that no one was safe despite his/her status or his/her obedience. Extrajudicial murders have also been associated with security forces but there are very

few records of these murders because there is limited access to conflict areas and because of intimidation of witnesses. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have made several reports of people who were captured into military or intelligence custody and later been found dead mostly with torture wounds. In 2018, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), a movement that arose to seek justice against those who had gone missing, came up with a systematic list of comparative incidents where young men had been murdered in so-called encounters with police forces, which their families claimed were actually executed. Neither the targeting of human-rights activists nor their continued targeting stopped with the November 2025 forced disappearance of six PTM delegates, such as Noorullah Tareen and Hanif Pashteen, just one day after they had attended a peace jirga at the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly (EU SEE, 2025).

Restrictions on Freedom of Movement and Expression

In FATA, the life of the civilians is subjected to extreme limitations on fundamental freedoms, which include the freedom to move, to speak, to assemble, and to access information. The security forces established elaborate checkpoint systems, curfews and special permits to enter/ exit most of the places. The system of the Watan Card introduced in the period of displacement was rather successful in making national identity cards ineffective in addressing the issue of verification in most conflict areas, which further complicated bureaucracy. The regions under the Taliban control were even more severely restricted, as the militants, prohibited television, music, access to the internet, and cellular phones and demanded special permission to move around. Women were especially severely restricted, and they were obliged to have male-guards to any movement outside the home and were virtually outlawed in regard to working or education. The freedom of expression and the right to information were crushed to death. Journalists who tried to report the conflict were threatened, detained and were even subjected to violence by several people. Citizens who voiced opinions against militant ideology were accused of apostasy or collaboration

and those who criticized military operations were accused of being militant sympathizers who could be detained or disappeared. The overall atmosphere of fear made people state that they felt incapable of even sharing family experiences with neighbours due to the fear that their words could be reported and serve as an area on which to base the targeting.

Contemporary Situation and Resurgent Violence (2021-2026).

Positive predictions of 2017-2020 turned out to be fatally early, and the wave of violence returned with a new frightening scope since 2021. According to the data presented by the Center for Research and Security Studies, violence rose by 38, 56, and 66 percent in 2021, 2022, and 2024 respectively, after six years (2015-2020) of decreasing fatalities (a 33 percent average reduction) (CRSS, 2024). The 2,546 deaths in 2024, is the highest number of deaths in nine years since 2016 and the highest number of deaths since 2015. The month of November 2024 was the deadliest month having 125 attacks, 450 fatalities, and 625 injuries. Khyber took the highest number of deaths (1,616 out of 6,300 deaths nationwide), followed by Kurram, North Waziristan, Khyber, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu and Lakki Marwat as the most affected districts.

The revival proves that military campaigns, notwithstanding their human and economic expenses, did not help to reduce the root causes of insurgency such as political marginalization, economic deprivation, grievances related to human-rights abuse and the absence of legitimate governance. The 2021 Taliban conquest of Afghanistan in August 2021 removed the buffer that had been present when the Afghan government colluded with Pakistani counter-terrorism operations, giving the Pakistani Taliban a refuge and safety in return, and the August 2024 statistics of terror attacks (909) versus security operations (257) is 73 per cent greater than the figure of neutralized militants (934), a figure that suggests that the security forces have lost the initiative (CRSS, 2024).

Systematic repression has been used against the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement that rose in 2018, demanding justice over forced disappearances, end to extrajudicial murders, the elimination of landmines, and the equality of the Pashtuns. The subsequent PTM October 2024 Pashtun Qaumi Jirga was followed by further heightened state oppression, such as the November 2025 state-enforced disappearance of six PTM representatives. The fact that peaceful political activists are still being targeted shows that the Pakistani state is threatened by demands on justice and equal rights, and thus creates a cycle of grievances that would ensure the further continuation of violence. This has been repeatedly demanded by international human-rights organisations such as Amnesty International, human rights watchdogs, and the United Nations human-rights experts, who have mostly gone without any effect.

Conclusion

This comprehensive study on the effects of armed conflict on the civilians of FATA, between 2001 to 2026 records a devastating humanitarian disaster marked with organized human-rights abuse, mass displacement, and annihilation of centuries-old Pashtun social institutions. The evidence is overwhelming as 4,637 forced disappearances, 4,319 of which have not been solved yet; almost one million displaced individuals; 1, 930 school establishments were attacked; healthcare capacity has been reduced by half and violence has reached unprecedented levels in 2024. Counter-terrorism policies which focus on military action have cost the civilian population a staggering price and have not led to permanent peace. The consequences of the war are not limited to immediate loss of life, but to the destruction of traditional institutions of the Pashtunwali culture in a systematic manner, widespread psychological trauma on 54 percent of the population, repression of cultural practices and women rights, economic destruction that cannot be recovered through proper reconstruction, and mistrust of state institutions, which continues to breed violence.

Whether it is the 1985, 2018, or 2024 resurgence, 2,546 fatalities, a 66% increase and the highest number recorded in nine years, proves beyond any doubt that military operations and the 2018 FATA merger failed. The demographics of the victims of disappearance include occupational groups such as the labourers, students, shopkeepers, drivers; they are in contrast to the official accounts and paint a picture of intentional civilian killing. The ongoing cases of peaceful activists and the failure to bring the perpetrators of previous events to justice, six representatives of the PTM were killed in November 2025, is a sign of the fact that security institutions see requirements to provide justice as threats instead of justified complaints. To achieve sustainable peace, it is necessary to have a paradigm shift.

The vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah during 1947, is highly applicable to this day; it suggests the need to build up the spiritual, cultural and material capacities, so that the status of the civilians of the FATA could be restored to equal citizens with same dignity. After the creation of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah maintained the British civil structure of law and order that was very much in favour of people. The current civil structure of law and order, however, has made the unprecedented move of withdrawing the military garrisons from Waziristan. On October 18, 1947, in a meeting with a grand jirga from North and South Waziristan, Jinnah said: "With utmost confidence and trust you as our Muslim brethren... Pakistan has no desire to unduly interfere with your internal freedom... We want to put you on your legs as self-respecting citizens who have the opportunities to fully develop your great spiritual, cultural and material resources and that you may play your full part in the defence of Pakistan. It will certainly be my constant solicitous care and indeed that of my government to help you all we can as quickly as possible." With respect to Jinnah's vision, the Government of Pakistan needs to put clear mechanisms in place, through the tribal structure, for dealing with problems of law and order. This system, by and large, maintained balance between the centre and periphery. Pakistan should facilitate the constitutional integration of the Federally

Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region. FATA-with its tribes of Waziristan as well as the other communities of the periphery.

As the armed conflict in Waziristan led to devastating consequences for the civilians, including displacement, loss of lives, economic decline, adverse psychological effects and the destruction of the social structures. The prolonged violence has created instability and generated long-term grievances and distrust in the region. In order to develop the FATA region of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's vision offers a peaceful and sustainable path forward. Prioritizing education, healthcare and infrastructure and a strong economy is crucial for immediate relief and for managing non-violence and unity among Pakistanis can help resolve tribal conflicts and counter external influences that exploit grievances.

Extensive self-reliance through component farming, trade and local industries would be helpful to create employment opportunities and this would also reduce dependency on external forces. Moreover, by strengthening democratic participation and political awareness, Pakistan would be able to reconstruct and restore the FATA region to meet its own needs. Promoting social

inclusion, including gender equality and justice, can create a more progressive and prosperous society. Adopting these principles can help Pakistan to transition from conflict toward lasting peace and development.

Furthermore, the government, instead of funding military operations in Waziristan, should be funding community projects for basic social sectors as these will create employment opportunities and help recover the economic loss and stabilize the economic condition of the region. As FATA is rich in natural and mineral resources so it is the duty of government to employ the local people in employment programmes led by government. If given positive opportunities, the dignity and rights as equal citizens, the security, integrity and unity of Pakistan will be restored. Only then, the people of Pakistan can work together to bring peace and stability to a country that has known little of these over the past two decades. Finding peace and securing stability in the FATA should be the first and foremost priority of every elected government of Pakistan. Long-sufferings of FATA's population can only receive lasting peace when comprehensive approaches are developed which focus on justice, development and human rights.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

Funding Statement

No funding is received for this project.

References

- Akins, H., & Ahmed, A. (2013, April 12). Waziristan: "The Most Dangerous Place in the World." *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/4/12/waziristan-the-most-dangerous-place-in-the-world>
- Center for Research and Security Studies. (2024, December 31). *2024 Marks Deadliest Year for Pakistan's Security Forces, Record High Fatalities in a Decade*. <https://crss.pk/2024-marks-deadliest-year-for-pakistans-security-forces-record-high-fatalities-in-a-decade/>
- EU SEE. (2025, December 15). *Enforced Disappearance of PTM Delegates after Peace Jirgah at KP Assembly Raises Concerns over Pakistan's Civil Society Enabling Environment*. <https://eusee.hivos.org/alert/enforced-disappearance-of-ptm-delegates-after-peace-jirgah-at-kp-assembly-raises-concerns-over-pakistans-civil-society-enabling-environment/>
- International Crisis Group. (2025, July 16). *The Islamic State in Afghanistan: A Jihadist Threat in Retreat?* <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b183-islamic-state-afghanistan-jihadist-threat-retreat>
- Javed, N., & Khan, M. (2018). *6th Population and Housing Census 2017*. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.
- Khan, F. (2024). The Violent Construction of Silence(s): The Case of Targeted Killings in North Waziristan, Pakistan. *Violence: An International Journal*, 5(1), 76–93.
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Board of Investment & Trade. (2025, January 12). *North Waziristan District*. <https://kpboit.gov.pk/north-waziristan-district/>
- Omer, R. (2013, August 23). *Justice for Pakistan's "disappeared."* International Commission of Jurists. <https://www.icj.org/resource/justice-for-pakistans-disappeared/>
- PTM Germany. (2025). *Pashtun Missing Persons: A Grave Human Rights Crisis in Pakistan*. Club suisse de la presse.
- Rashid, A. (2008). *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. Penguin.
- Shahzad, S. S. (2011). *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*. Pluto Press.
- South Asia Terrorism Portal. (2011, June 18). *FATA Assessment 2011*. <https://www.satp.org/terrorism-assessment/pakistan-fata-2011>
- U.S. Department of State. (2008, March 11). *2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Pakistan*. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annual-report/usdos/2008/en/57005>
- Waseem, A. (2018, May 31). President Signs KP-Fata Merger Bill into Law. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1411156>
- Yousaf, M. (2014). *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge*. Georgetown University Press