

## BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELDS: THE HIDDEN COST OF UNREST IN NORTH WAZIRISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

North Waziristan, a region long caught in the crossfire of militancy and military operations, faces consequences that extend far beyond visible violence. The conflict has disrupted traditional livelihoods, displaced thousands, and fractured community bonds. Markets once open and bustling with trade now struggle under economic stagnation, while social services healthcare, education, and infrastructure remain strained or inaccessible. These disruptions have deepened poverty and created long-term vulnerabilities for local populations. In this article, Conflict in North Waziristan referred to prolonged militant insurgency, military operations, and resulting instability, encompassing both direct violence and the broader socio-economic and communal disruptions. This article explores these overlooked socio-economic dimensions, highlighting how continuous instability has reshaped the daily lives of residents. By focusing on the silent, prolonged impacts, this article underscores the need to recognize that the true cost of conflict is measured not just in security terms, but in the enduring erosion of community well-being and economic stability.

**Keywords:** North Waziristan, militancy, military operations, socio-economic impact, displacement, healthcare, education, instability.

### INTRODUCTION

North Waziristan, located in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, stands as one of the most conflict-affected and strategically significant regions in South Asia. Historically shaped by the legacies of colonial frontier management and the Soviet-Afghan War, the area has long been characterized by a complex interplay of tribal autonomy, geopolitical rivalries, and weak state integration. In the aftermath of the 1980s Afghan conflict, North Waziristan emerged as a sanctuary for militant organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda, largely due to its porous border with Afghanistan, rugged terrain, and semi-autonomous tribal governance structure. The absence of strong institutional presence and sustained socio-economic development created conditions that allowed militancy to take root and thrive.

Following the events of September 11, 2001, North Waziristan became a critical front in Pakistan's counterterrorism campaign. The state launched a series of military operations like: Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasaad, and more recently Azm-e-Istehkam, to dismantle militant networks and reassert state authority. While these operations succeeded in weakening organized militancy, they also produced devastating humanitarian and developmental consequences. Widespread displacement, infrastructure destruction, loss of livelihoods, and recurring insecurity left deep scars on the region's social and economic fabric. Drone strikes, employed as a key counterterrorism strategy, further intensified local resentment by causing civilian casualties and psychological trauma, eroding community trust in state institutions and exacerbating feelings of marginalization.

In 2018, the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was presented as a landmark reform aimed at political inclusion, institutional integration, and socio-economic development. However, the anticipated transformation has yet to materialize. Weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient service delivery have perpetuated longstanding disparities. Despite the formal extension of constitutional rights, local communities continue to experience neglect, administrative inefficiency, and limited access to justice. The gap between state promises and lived realities has reinforced public disillusionment, leaving the region caught between post-conflict recovery and lingering insecurity.

Amid these broader political and security developments, the deeper socio-economic dimensions of North Waziristan's conflict remain critically underexplored. This article seeks to illuminate these hidden costs, examining how decades of instability have reshaped the everyday lives of residents. Beyond the visible ruins of war, communities grapple with economic stagnation, disrupted livelihoods, social disintegration, and persistent psychological distress. The weakening of traditional tribal structures, erosion of social cohesion, and loss of generational opportunities have collectively undermined the region's capacity for self-sustained recovery. (Yousaf, Khan, & Hussain, 2018)

By focusing on these silent and prolonged impacts, this study underscores that the true cost of conflict in North Waziristan cannot be measured solely through security metrics or territorial control. Instead, it must be understood in terms of the enduring erosion of community well-being, human security, and economic stability. Sustainable peace, therefore, requires moving beyond military solutions toward inclusive governance, targeted socio-economic investment, and genuine community engagement. Only through addressing

these human-centred dimensions can North Waziristan transition from a landscape defined by conflict to one rooted in resilience, dignity, and lasting peace.

## 2. Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan and other Militant groups

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has entrenched itself in Pakistan's tribal belt, especially North Waziristan, where post-2001 Afghan Taliban influx and alliances with groups like Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Islam, and Jundullah turned the region into a militant hub exploiting porous borders and tribal dynamics to enforce Sharia through coercion and violence. The TTP sought to impose Sharia, fight U.S.-led forces, and target the Pakistani state, rising amid governance gaps and socio-economic neglect. Embedding in tribal structures, they turned North Waziristan into a militant stronghold. Al-Qaeda-backed TTP factions in North Waziristan exploited weak state presence to form militias, establish parallel governance, and launch attacks, fueling persistent security and governance issues. (Rana, 2008). Militants in North Waziristan use targeted killings to silence opponents, intimidate locals, and reestablish influence after the Afghan Taliban's return, particularly by assassinating tribal leaders opposing the TTP. (Khan F. , 2024)

## 3. Military Operations

Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts included Rah-e-Nijat (2009) in South Waziristan, Zarb-e-Azb (2014) in North Waziristan, and Radd-ul-Fasad (2017) nationwide. The ongoing Azm-e-Istehkam (2024) integrates military action with socio-economic initiatives, signaling a shift toward comprehensive stabilization. (PIPS, 2019). The table given below depicts key success and challenges in some of Pakistan's key military operations against TTP:

### Gains and Setbacks in Pakistan's Key Military Operations

Operation (area & period)	Militants Killed / Captured	Key Gains	Key Losses
Operation Rah-e-Nijat (South Waziristan, 2009) *	Approximately 800 killed, 83 captured	Regained control of several Taliban strongholds in South Waziristan.	Large humanitarian cost (displacement, loss of livelihoods)

<b>Operation Zarb-e-Azb (North Waziristan, 2014)**</b>	Approximately 3500 and above militants were killed.	Cleared many entrenched militant enclaves, and restored (partial) state control.	Massive IDP crisis, major infrastructure damage, economic dislocation.
<b>Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (June 2024 North Waziristan) ***</b>	Approximately 1005 were killed till today in Intelligence Based Operations.	Renewed national effort through military means combined with social and economic development.	Operation focuses much on military action and the issues with Afghanistan could undermine long-term success.

**Source:**

\* "Terrorism in Pakistan - Yearly Fatalities | SATP."

n.d. <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan>.

\*\* "Mapping Conflict Trends in Pakistan." 2014. Peaceworks.

[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW93-Mapping\\_Conflict\\_Trends\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW93-Mapping_Conflict_Trends_in_Pakistan.pdf).

\*\*\*Al Jazeera. 2024. "Azm-e-Istehkam': Can new Pakistani military operation curb armed attacks?" June 24, 2024. Accessed August 14, 2025.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/24/azm-e-istehkam-can-new-pakistani-military-operation-curb-armed-attacks>.

**4. Socio-Economic impact of conflict**

The military operations launched against TTP militants, while strategically successful in dismantling insurgent networks, came at a tremendous cost to the civilian population. Over a million residents were displaced, forced to abandon their homes, businesses amid intense conflict. Caught in the crossfire, many civilians experienced the loss of loved ones, while others, in desperation, sought refuge across the Afghan border where they faced further challenges and a lack of adequate humanitarian support. With

limited access to shelter, food, and medical assistance, displaced families were vulnerable and exposed. Once known for its economic independence, North Waziristan suffered a collapse of its local economy as markets were destroyed, agricultural lands abandoned, and trade routes disconnected, eliminating the primary source of income for many. The disruption of traditional livelihoods led to sharp increases in poverty, unemployment, and psychological trauma across the region. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) faced immense socio-economic challenges; despite relief efforts by the government and NGOs, resources often fell short, exacerbating frustration and hardship. Basic human needs, including food, shelter, and especially education, remained unmet, putting pressure not only on the displaced but also on host communities ultimately contributing to social fragmentation and desertification (Ullah, Khan, & Ullah, 2022). The dismantling of socio-economic structures has left a profound impact, underscoring the urgent need for post-conflict recovery initiatives that are inclusive and rooted in the voices and needs of local communities. (Makki & Tahir, 2021)

**Socio-Economic Indicators of North Waziristan: Pre-Conflict vs. Post-Conflict Situation**

Indicator	Pre Conflict	Post Conflict
Displacement*	No mass displacement	Approximately 929,859 people displaced
Unemployment**	Thriving Small scale economy	32% of Chilgoza traders faced unemployment due to conflict
Source of Income**	Based on 60% Agriculture and 20% on Cross Border Trade	Significant transition on the monetary aid due to the collapse of local economy
Destruction of Infrastructure***	Fundamental Infrastructure with basic functionality	Approximately 47% of infrastructure was completely destroyed, the remaining 53% severely damaged.

**Source:**

\*Irshad Ullah Khan, Alamgir Khan, Asif Ullah. "Socio-economic Impacts of Internal Displacement on the

Internally Displaced Persons of North Waziristan: 2014-201." *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)* 3, no. 1 (June 6, 2022): 554–80.

<https://ideapublishers.org/index.php/jhsms/article/view/780>

\*\*Ahmad, Sohail, Naveed Alam, Muhammad Afnan Khan, Ashfaq Ahmed Zeb, Maaz Ali, and Owes Ahmad. "Impact of Militancy on the Trade of Pinus Gerardiana Nuts (Chilgoza) in District North Waziristan Agency (Ex FATA)." *Social Science Review Archives*. 3, no. 1 (January 9, 2025): 434–49. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i1.322>.

\*\*\*PKKH.TV, "Operation Zarb-e-Azb: US Declines to Commit Aid for Displaced Persons," *PAKISTANKAKHUDAHAFIZ*, June 25, 2015, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://pakistanakhudahafiz.com/operation-zarb-e-azb-us-declines-commit-aid-displaced-persons/>

### 5. Education Sector

Militancy and military operations in North Waziristan have crippled education, especially for girls, through school destruction, displacement, and fear-driven dropouts—reversing years of progress and leaving a generation at risk. Recovery demands rebuilding schools, ensuring safety, and engaging NGOs to restore learning as part of lasting peace efforts. (Khan, Kanwal, & Wang, 2018) In North Waziristan, lack of functional schools has pushed many children, especially boys,

into unregulated madrassas. While all do not promote extremism, some have been taken over by militants. Without modern education, youth lack critical thinking, job skills, and broader perspectives, making them more vulnerable to recruitment. Militants exploit poverty and frustration by offering financial incentives and a false sense of identity. Educational deprivation is not just a consequence of militancy but a deliberate tactic to control the locals. (Razaq, 2023)

As highlighted earlier, years of conflict and terrorism in North Waziristan has severely damaged the educational sector in the area. This gap widened the socio-economic divide but also created opportunities for extremist groups for the recruitment of extremist and radicalized mindsets. The lack of quality education has hindered personal growth, weakened the community growth and weakened the regional progress. Addressing these issues require more than rebuilding of schools in fact it demands a sustained commitment to safe, inclusive and quality education that counter-interact extremist ideologies and strengthen long term peace and stability in the region.

### Educational Landscape in North Waziristan in Pre and Post Conflict Condition

Indicator	Pre Conflict	Post Conflict
Total Enrolled Students *	A total of 86,323 students were enrolled.	Education of more than 85,000 students has been disrupted
Number of educational institutions **	896 educational institutions, including 604 primary schools.	604 institutions damaged or made non-functional
Overall Literacy Rate ***	Overall ratio 15.88% (Male: 26.77%, Female (1.47%))	Only 17% of the population is literate
Out of School Children ****	Approximately 40% of children were out of school	58% of children between 4-14 years are out of school
Functional Schools *****	Majority Operational	Over 300 schools remain non-functional a decade after military operations

**Source:** \*Zulfiqar Ali, "Conflict Takes a Heavy Toll on N Waziristan Education Sector," *Dawn*, July 15, 2014, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1119289/conflict-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-n-waziristan-education-sector>

\*\* Khawar Ghumman, "Military Operations Affected Education in Fata: Safron," *Dawn*, December 9, 2013, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1061443>

\*\*\* "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Status of Women and Girls in North Waziristan District."

UN Women Pakistan. UN Women Asia and the Pacific, May 11, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2025.

<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2020/11/pk-Status-of-Women-and-Girls-in-North-Waziristan-District.pdf>

\*\*\*\* Rehmat Mehsud, "More Than Half of Children in Pakistan Tribal Areas Still out of School Special," *ARAB NEWS*, January 10, 2020, accessed May 31, 2025,

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1610861/pakistan>.

\*\*\*\*\* Rehmat Mehsud, "Schools in Pakistan's Tribal Districts Struggle to Write the Next Chapter Previous," ARAB NEWS, December 21, 2018, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1423811/pakistan>

The data presented above illustrates the blatant contrast between the pre- and post-conflict educational landscape of North Waziristan, highlighting the extensive damage inflicted on the region's education sector.

### 6. Healthcare Sector

Years of militancy and military operations in North Waziristan devastated its already neglected healthcare system, destroying or closing hospitals, clinics, and health units, and forcing medical staff to flee due to insecurity. This left thousands without emergency care, maternal services, immunizations, or treatment for chronic illnesses, a serious obstacle to restoring trust and stability in the region. (Yusufzai, 2008) The prolonged terrorism in North Waziristan severely damaged its healthcare system, with women and children suffering the most. The collapse of services eroded

leading to higher child and maternal mortality, unchecked diseases, and unaddressed psychological trauma. The collapse of healthcare infrastructure severely deepened the region's humanitarian crisis and harmed public well-being. The destruction of hospitals and forced displacement and killing of health workers due to lack of security has left local communities with inadequate access to medical facilities. This eventually resulted in increased death rates and revival of preventable diseases highlighting the significant need for the development of a comprehensive strategy that caters both the immediate healthcare crises and the structural inequalities. (Khan & Ahmed, 2019) Ongoing violence in North Waziristan devastated healthcare infrastructure, as hospitals and basic health units were destroyed and medical staff were abducted or killed, causing severe shortages. Women faced the greatest impact due to mobility restrictions and the absence of female providers. This collapse of healthcare became both a humanitarian crisis and public trust, and limited recovery efforts left basic health needs unmet. Rebuilding healthcare is both a humanitarian priority and essential for restoring stability and long-term well-being in the region.

### Health care situation in North Waziristan in Pre and Post Conflict Condition

Indicator	Pre Conflict	Post Conflict
Number of healthcare centres*	A total of 336 healthcare centres were established	38 health centres are reported to be functioning within private guesthouses (Hujras), while 41 healthcare facilities urgently need restoration.
Availability of essential medicine*	availability of essential medicine was limited	Critical shortages, with availability recorded at just 3% in June 2024
Availability of medical Equipment*	Due to limited availability of essential medical equipment was inadequate	Only 28 out of 315 facilities had 70% of the required instruments and equipment
Maternal care and Child health services **	50% of births were attended by skilled health personnel.	It decreased to approximately 43% in conflict-affected regions.
Incidents of Violence against Healthcare and Polio workers ***	In May 2008, 9 health workers conducting a survey were kidnapped in North Waziristan	Increased frequency of incidents, including harassment, targeted killings, security threats, and kidnappings, particularly affecting polio workers.

**Source:** \*Yusufzai, Ashfaq. "38 Health Centre's Found Operating in Hujras." DAWN.COM, February 19, 2025. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1892845/north-waziristans-38-health-centres-found-operating-in-hujras>

\*\* Das, Jai K., Zahra Ali Padhani, Sultana Jabeen, Arjumand Rizvi, Uzair Ansari, Malika Fatima, Ghulam Akbar, Wardah Ahmed, and Zulfiqar A. Bhutta. "Impact of Conflict on Maternal and Child Health Service Delivery - How and How Not: A Country Case Study of

Conflict Affected Areas of Pakistan.” *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (May 27, 2020).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00271-3>

\*\*\* Yusufzai, A. “Health Infrastructure a Casualty of War on Terror within Pakistan.” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 179, no. 9 (October 20, 2008): 889–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.081401>.

### 7. Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

Since independence Pakistan is facing the issues of sectarianism and ethnicity, which hindered the concept of national solidarity and integration. These fault lines are supported and financed by India and Afghanistan, in KPK and Baluchistan, who wanted to destabilize Pakistan. One such movement is Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, was formed in 2014 in South Waziristan where the students of Gomal University wanted to protect their people from the devastating effects of military operations in their area. “Military operations conducted by the Pakistani government in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan displaced millions of Pashtuns. In 2009, Pakistan Armed Forces began Operation *Rah-e-Nijat* against the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* militants— also known as the Pakistani Taliban. This clash uprooted around half a million Pashtuns in South Waziristan, resulting in destroyed homes, lost livelihoods, and the death of thousands” (Mohamad,2024). This movement faced state crackdowns, arrests, and a terrorism designation due to its criticism of security policies.(Ahmed & Khan, 2020). The movement is banned on the ground of its foreign funding from Raw and NDS and anti-state activities (Syed, & Raza , 2019.). This movement highlight the state of Pakistan’s failure to address the genuine concerns of the people of KPK and Baluchistan. Just military operations in these areas without socio-economic developments initiatives further alienated and frustrated the locals.

### 8. Conclusion

The prolonged conflict in North Waziristan has had profound socio-economic consequences that continue to shape the region’s trajectory. Military operations such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Rad-ul-Fasad* although weakened militant groups like TTP, but have also left behind problems including large-scale displacement of native people, devastation of vital infrastructure, and severe socioeconomic

hardships. Social cohesion has been strained by militarization, psychological trauma, and the erosion of traditional tribal structures.

Sustainable peace in North Waziristan requires not only security reforms but also a comprehensive, inclusive approach towards reconstruction, prioritizing education, healthcare, infrastructure, and local governance. Pakistan's counterinsurgency strategy needs urgently change toward a human-centric perspective.

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