

# The Fallacies of Presentism in Post-9/11 Terrorism Studies: The Case of Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Contemporary scholarship on terrorism, particularly post-9/11, has often been marked by presentist tendencies that foreground immediate threats and policy responses while marginalising the historical trajectories that shape political violence. This paper's main argument is that deeper historical analysis is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary terrorism, which has often been missing in post-9/11 terrorism scholarship. The purpose of this review is to synthesise the evidence available on historicity in terrorism studies post 9/11 with reference to Pakistan. To address the ahistorical bias in post-9/11 terrorism studies and the role of colonial histories in shaping contemporary terrorism, a qualitative synthesis identifies key themes: colonial histories and contemporary terrorism; presentism and a pragmatic use of history. It also highlights the value of historical perspective to help us enrich our understanding of contemporary terrorism.*

**Keywords:** Presentism, Ahistorical, Terrorism, Post-9/11, Pakistan, Colonial legacy.

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## Introduction

Since 9/11, terrorism studies situated within broader security discourse have undergone a significant transformation and appear to be informed by a presentist lens, i.e., an overemphasis on the present.<sup>1</sup> Presentism, a term drawn from historiography, refers to interpreting a phenomenon primarily in relation to the current moment.<sup>2</sup> Presentist approaches tend to marginalise deeper historical inquiry, replacing it with a near-exclusive focus on recent trends and high-profile incidents. This ahistorical orientation, which became dominant in terrorism scholarship and has often advanced to the notion of ‘new terrorism,’<sup>3</sup> framing contemporary violence as novel and unprecedented, has significantly shaped the discourse on regions such as Pakistan. While the country became the central actor in War on Terror (WoT), its colonial legacies, structural constraints, and geopolitical challenges have often been downplayed or overlooked. Present-day conflicts in Pakistan have often been interpreted primarily through the religious lens, reflecting a form of presentism that sidelines the historical trajectories significant to understanding the region’s complexities.<sup>4</sup> Such omission is significant, as postcolonial legacies of

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<sup>1</sup> Harmonie Toros, “‘9/11 Is Alive and Well’ or How Critical Terrorism Studies Has Sustained the 9/11 Narrative,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 2, May 4, 2017, 203–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1337326>; Maja Zehfuss, “Forget September 11,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (June 2003): 513–528, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659032000084447>.

<sup>2</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), as cited in “François Hartog ‘Regimes of Historicity,’” *konspektid* (blog), January 21, 2016, accessed August 21, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “The Debate over ‘New’ vs. ‘Old’ Terrorism,” *Studies in Global Justice* 4, no. 1 (2008): 117–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1_8), see, Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Lisa Malkki, “The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis,” in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Daniela Pisoio (London: Routledge, 2012), 50–56.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Lamb and Mariam Mufti, “Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Literature Review,” *Charting Our Future*, 2012, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120709\\_Mufti\\_Religion\\_Militancy\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120709_Mufti_Religion_Militancy_Web.pdf); Eamon Murphy, *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism* (London: Routledge, 2013); N. Elahi, *Terrorism in Pakistan: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Security Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

governance and militarisation remain embedded in the political and security landscape of Pakistan. This review, therefore, highlights how limited scholarship has explicitly engaged with terrorism through the lens of colonial history and its legacies, illustrating the value of addressing these overlooked dimensions.

This review synthesises existing literature to highlight the absence of historical perspectives in terrorism studies, as most of the existing scholarship traces the roots of terrorism only to recent decades. This systematic review examines the research question, "How can history facilitate an understanding of contemporary terrorism studies?" and explores two key objectives: (1) to challenge the post-9/11 tendency toward presentist and ahistorical interpretations, and (2) to evaluate the colonial histories underlying contemporary terrorism, with a particular focus on the case of Pakistan since 9/11.

### **The Ahistorical Nature of Post-9/11 Terrorism Studies**

Despite the surge in publications on terrorism post-9/11,<sup>5</sup> most studies have tended to overlook insights from older traditions such as insurgencies, colonial legacies, and state terror in favour of narrower, present-focused approaches.<sup>6</sup> Terrorism research has insufficiently addressed the historical backgrounds of conflicts or the interactions between groups within states.<sup>7</sup> Millington<sup>8</sup> and Gunning<sup>9</sup> argue that terrorism studies have stagnated due to a lack of historical techniques, citing its limitations due to ahistorical,

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<sup>5</sup> Colin Wight, *Rethinking Terrorism: Terrorism, Violence and the State*, Rethinking World Politics 25 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Lee Jarvis and Jeroen Gunning, "The Study of Terrorism after 11 September 2001: Problems, Challenges and Future Developments," *Political Studies Review* 5, no. 2 (2007): 163–177.

<sup>7</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Lisa Malkki, "The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis," in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Daniela Pisoio (London: Routledge, 2012), 50–56.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Millington, "Bad History: A Historian's Critique of Rapoport's 'Four Waves of Modern Terrorism' Model," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 4 (2022): 627–645, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2101295>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeroen Gunning, "A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?" *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 372–389, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2007.00228>.

state-centric orientation. They highlight the dominance of “problem-solving” methods that prioritise immediate practical concerns from the perspective of state actors, thereby neglecting historical and socio-political dimensions. The absence of deeper historical perspectives has led to a shallow understanding of contemporary threats, narrowly focusing on religious motivations rather than historical drivers.<sup>10</sup> By disregarding the historical and structural factors underpinning terrorism, such approaches promote superficial analyses and reactive policies that fail to mitigate root causes. Consequently, they perpetuate a cycle of short-term response without offering durable solutions.

### **New Terrorism and Language of Evil**

Furthermore, the “language of evil” that emerged after 9/11 created a psychological barrier around terrorists, portraying them as inherently wicked individuals, particularly within a religious paradigm. This represents a simplistic explanation of a complex phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Such temporal short-sightedness has produced analytical blind spots that persist in contemporary terrorism studies, limiting our capacity to understand contemporary terrorism. Overcoming these limitations requires what may be termed a “historical depth.” Wallerstein<sup>12</sup> insightfully argued that defining and analysing phenomena such as terrorism and globalisation, only within narrowly confined present-day contexts, while neglecting their historical dimensions, leads to fleeting conclusions reminiscent of daily headlines. In the post-9/11 period, mounting dissatisfaction emerged among scholars regarding the overall quality of terrorism research.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the post-9/11 narrative has, in effect, redefined terrorism into an Islamist

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen P. Cohen, “The Jihadist Threat to Pakistan,” *Brookings*, June 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-jihadist-threat-to-pakistan/>.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Jackson, “Writing Wars on Terrorism,” Aberystwyth University, pp. 8–10.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399018>.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “The Debate over ‘New’ vs. ‘Old’ Terrorism,” *Studies in Global Justice* 4, no. 1 (2008): 117–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1_8), Richard English, “Change and Continuity across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 78–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1494119>.

phenomenon, making it one that no longer has historical drivers, such as secular political ideologies or anti-colonial struggles.<sup>14</sup>

### **Undue Focus on Religious Terrorism**

Labels such as “sudden,” “new,” and “abrupt” reveal a substantial void in scholarship concerning the historical context of terrorism. The lack of historical consciousness in post-9/11 research is evident, as the intense concentration on Islamic terrorism has further discouraged serious historical inquiry.<sup>15</sup> By conflating terrorism with Islam, researchers often overemphasise the role of religious doctrine and overlook other pivotal political, social, and economic contributors. However, this shift has also been criticised for its presentist leanings, preferring to focus on recent times over historical context, and treating terrorism as a quintessentially modern phenomenon. The ahistorical approach, according to Crenshaw,<sup>16</sup> has misrepresented how terrorism evolved, as tactics like bombings and assassinations, which are often associated with “new,” have clear historical precedents in organisations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the early 20th century and anti-colonial movements in Algeria during the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> These historical parallels, thus, challenge the foundational assumptions underlying the “new terrorism” paradigm and its emphasis on alleged unprecedented developments.

### **Global impact of Presentist scholarship**

Global counterterrorism strategies, likewise, have been influenced by the presentist bias, resulting in short-term reactive measures rather than long-

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<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Liisa Malkki, “The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis,” in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Daniela Pisoio (London: Routledge, 2012), 50–56.

<sup>15</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “The Debate over ‘New’ vs. ‘Old’ Terrorism,” in *Values and Violence: Intangible Aspects of Terrorism*, ed. Ibrahim A. Karawan, Wayne McCormack, and Stephen E. Reynolds (New York: Springer, 2008), 132.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “The Debate over ‘New’ vs. ‘Old’ Terrorism,” in *Values and Violence: Intangible Aspects of Terrorism*, ed. Ibrahim A. Karawan, Wayne McCormack, and Stephen E. Reynolds (New York: Springer, 2008), 117–136.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Gerwarth and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds., *Terrorism in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

term preventive actions.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the US 'WoT' has been criticised for its reliance on military intervention and surveillance as a one-size-fits-all strategy without considering the region's inherent challenges.<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on immediate threats rather than historical causes reflects the broader temporal myopia that characterises both academic and policy approaches to terrorism. Furthermore, this critique has culminated in early post-9/11 scholarship that often predicted a future of terrorism that was unprecedented and having an ideological shift, pushing things further in a presentist direction. Additionally, Gunning and Jackson<sup>20</sup> contested the use of the label 'religious terrorism' after 9/11, arguing that the conflation of political, economic, and historical drivers with religious motivators oversimplifies a broad array of factors. This is evident in secular terrorist movements such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in the latter half of the 20th century. Such critiques highlight how post-9/11 scholarly frameworks risk creating false dichotomies that fail to capture the intricate intersections of historical and colonial factors that shape and sustain terrorist movements.

### Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Terrorism

Grievances embedded in colonial history continue to impact contemporary political conflicts, particularly, in post-colonial states such as Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> It is well established that colonial policies were a decisive factor in the 1947 partition of British India into India and Pakistan, a violent division that left enduring socio-political fault-lines across the region.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>18</sup> Richard English, "Change and Continuity across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 78–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1494119>.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Halliday, "Terrorism in Historical Perspective," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1987): 139–148, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857902>.

<sup>20</sup> Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, "What's so 'Religious' about 'Religious Terrorism'?" *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 3 (2011): 369–88.

<sup>21</sup> Robert D. Lamb and Mariam Mufti, "Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Literature Review," CHARTING Our Future, 2012, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120709\\_Mufti\\_ReligionMilitancy\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120709_Mufti_ReligionMilitancy_Web.pdf). Eamon Murphy, *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen P. Cohen, "The Jihadist Threat to Pakistan," *Brookings*, June 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-jihadist-threat-to-pakistan/>.

arbitrary drawing of the Durand Line in 1893, which separated British India from Afghanistan, marginalised Pashtun tribal communities and sowed grievances that continue to resonate to the present day.<sup>23</sup> The majority of these Pashtun tribes were historically concentrated in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which, until 2018, existed as a separate administrative region before being merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and have become strongholds for groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which uses historical narratives of resistance against colonial oppression as a pretext for their actions.<sup>24</sup> These grievances have been compounded in a colonial governance structure such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which denied tribal populations the political representation and economic development, leaving behind a legacy of alienation that contemporary terrorist groups have exploited.<sup>25</sup> These inherited tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan were further compounded in the post-9/11, US-led invasion of Afghanistan, with Afghan Taliban fighters fleeing across this porous border into Pakistan and merging with local militant groups.<sup>26</sup> Resultantly, one of the most lethal coalition militant groups, responsible for the majority of high-fatality attacks among 521 incidents that claimed 852 lives, was established in 2007.<sup>27</sup> Such transnational militant convergence illustrates how military interventions grounded in ahistorical narratives without considering regions' deeper historical contexts can generate unintended consequences that destabilise broader regional security architectures. This demonstrates how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary terrorist narratives and

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<sup>23</sup> N. Elahi, *Terrorism in Pakistan: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Security Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Stanford University, *Mapping Militants: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (Stanford, CA: Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Eamon Murphy, *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

<sup>27</sup> Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2024* (Islamabad: Pak Institute for Peace Studies, January 2025), accessed August 21, 2025, [https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Overview\\_PIPS-Security-Report-2024.pdf](https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Overview_PIPS-Security-Report-2024.pdf).

recruitment strategies in post-colonial contexts, a dimension that remains largely absent from mainstream analyses in the field.

Contemporary manifestations of terrorism cannot be disentangled from colonial legacies as European imperial interventions in the Middle East embedded settler-colonial structures. Khalidi<sup>28</sup> argues that Zionism is a colonial project initiated under British auspices, which in turn catalysed Palestinian political violence in response to dispossession and subordination.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the artificial borders created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 ignoring ethnic and sectarian realities, resulted in conflict and instability for decades in the Middle East,<sup>30</sup> and seem to provide fertile ground for terrorist groups like ISIS. Furthermore, the imposition of colonial governance systems created continuities in political violence through centralisation of power and suppression of local autonomy, which frequently resulted in emerging resistance movements that blossomed into present terrorist groups.<sup>31</sup> Similar dynamics can be seen in colonial-era administrative systems that prioritised control over development in Pakistan laying the foundations for resentment.

### The Role of History in Understanding Terrorism

Historical analysis contributes to a critical lens through which to understand the continuity and change of terrorism, thereby undermining the idea that terrorism is a modern phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> A historical method focuses on how power and knowledge are intertwined, shaping not only how we understand concepts, like terrorism but also how we respond to them. This method

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<sup>28</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Martin Miller, "The Foundations of Modern Terrorism: State, Society and the Dynamics of Political Violence," *Choice Reviews Online* 51, no. 03 (October 21, 2013): 51–1740, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-1740>.

<sup>30</sup> Fred Halliday, "Terrorism in Historical Perspective," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1987): 139–148, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857902>.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Miller, "The Foundations of Modern Terrorism: State, Society and the Dynamics of Political Violence," *Choice Reviews Online* 51, no. 03 (October 21, 2013): 51–1740, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-1740>.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism in History," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/10473>.



allows scholars to move beyond surface-level explanations of terrorism that focus primarily on ideological or religious motivations. By looking at the colonial roots of modern terrorism, scholars and policymakers can more effectively confront the grievances that drive radicalisation, transcending the parochial presentism that focuses exclusively on near-term threats in favour of addressing deep, historical forces.<sup>33</sup>

### **Case Study: Pakistan**

The post-9/11 era brought Pakistan's terrorism problem into sharp international focus, often portraying the country exclusively as a hotbed of terrorism without accounting for its complex historical legacy.<sup>34</sup> Pakistan's inheritance of militarised governance, exploitation of tribal regions, and the institutionalisation of structural violence under laws such as the FCR were not taken into consideration while mapping Pakistan's road towards counterterrorism.<sup>35</sup> The punitive and arbitrary nature of the FCR denied due process and eroded state legitimacy, creating fertile ground for militancy. Lack of political rights and collective punishment drove some tribal residents to seek empowerment and justice through radical networks.<sup>36</sup> The absence of critical postcolonial and historically grounded analyses of Pakistan has allowed terrorism to be framed through reductive narratives

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<sup>33</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," United States Institute of Peace, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, Eamon. \*The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism New York: Routledge, 2014; Barakzai, S. "Terrorism and Insurgency in the Tribal Areas: Investigating the Historical Roots." *Journal of Social Sciences Review* 4, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>35</sup> Iqbal, Z. "Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Legacy of Colonial Administration." *Journal of Defense Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008); Tahir, M. "Colonial Legacies and the Persistence of Conflict in Pakistan's Tribal Regions." *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Noreen Naseer, "A Critical Note on the Frontier Crimes Regulation (1901) in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Pakistan," *Review of Human Rights* 2, no. 1 (2016): 44–54, <https://reviewhumanrights.com/index.php/RHR/article/download/70/5/14>; Harrison Akins, "FATA, Frontier Crimes Regulation, and Pakistan's Enduring Legacy of British Colonialism," Baker Center Publications, University of Tennessee, August 2022, <https://baker.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FATA.Frontier.Crimes.Regulation.Pakistan.Enduring.Legacy.British.Colonialism.pdf>.

and stereotypes that obscure its deeper historical and socio-economic roots.<sup>37</sup> The heterogeneous and pluralistic character of terrorism in Pakistan mainly traces its roots to coloniality. However, the post-9/11 framing of Pakistan as a centre of religious terrorism, coupled with the absence of historically grounded analysis, has narrowed understanding of the country's long trajectory of conflict and adversely affected long-term approaches aimed at mitigating political violence.

### The Current Study

Post-9/11 research is limited in its engagement with deeper historical analysis and often exhibits presentist tendencies. Previous reviews have examined various dimensions of terrorism, including ideological motivations, security frameworks and the conceptual shifts towards 'new terrorism.'<sup>38</sup> However, no systematic review has specifically addressed the absence of a deeper historical perspective – tracing back to colonial times – within post-9/11 terrorism studies in the context of Pakistan. Recognising this omission is crucial, as historical legacies have a profound impact on terrorism evolution, state responses and scholarly framing.<sup>39</sup> This systematic review asks the specific question: "How can history help us understand contemporary terrorism studies?" Centring on the post-9/11 era, it critiques the impact of presentism and ahistorical approaches to terrorism studies and their coexistence, and it analyses how colonial legacies continue to inform contemporary manifestations of terrorism, specifically in Pakistan. The review focuses on qualitative studies to highlight the gap of historically informed approaches in terrorism research.

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<sup>37</sup> Dayyab Gillani, "The History of Terrorism in Pakistan," Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*, edited by Richard English, p.226. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Jeroen Gunning, *Hizballah and the Politics of Discontent* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009); Marc Lynch, "The Political Science of Terrorism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 367–387.

<sup>39</sup> S. Mahmood, *Colonialism and Violence in Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Rizwan Khan, "Genealogies of Terrorism: Colonial Borders and Pakistan's Violent Political Landscape," *South Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (2020): 23–45.

### **The Ahistorical Bias in Post-9/11 Terrorism Studies**

The question is to what extent does terrorism demonstrates continuity across historical periods, challenging the post 9/11 tendency toward presentist and ahistorical interpretation, which has primarily pervaded ever since at the cost of its historical context, is a crucial reference.<sup>40</sup> In redrawing 9/11's limits, Toros<sup>41</sup> opposes that 9/11's narrative "is alive and well" in terrorism studies and has engendered a presentist bias on the terrorism 'threat.' It is largely understood as being driven by Islamist actors while shaping global counterterrorism policies. It is often in a reactive way which would be addressing the symptoms without going to the root causes.<sup>42</sup> Zehfuss<sup>43</sup> observes that the fixation on 9/11 obscures the deeper historical grievances that fuel terrorism. Together, these point to how post-9/11 terrorism studies have been founded upon ahistorical assumptions about the causes of terrorism, stifling our ability to grasp the visceral drivers of terrorism.

These ahistorical biases in post-9/11 terrorism studies have narrowed the focus on current threats to the neglect of the historical continuity of terrorist

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<sup>40</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism," *Studies in Global Justice* 4, no. 1 (2008): 117–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1_8); Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Leena Malkki, "No: The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis," in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Justin Sinclair (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 35–42.; Harmonie Toros, "'9/11 Is Alive and Well' or How Critical Terrorism Studies Has Sustained the 9/11 Narrative," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 203–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1337326>; Maja Zehfuss, "Forget September 11," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (June 2003): 513–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659032000084447>.

<sup>41</sup> Harmonie Toros, "'9/11 Is Alive and Well' or How Critical Terrorism Studies Has Sustained the 9/11 Narrative," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 203–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1337326>.

<sup>42</sup> Richard English, "Change and Continuity across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 78–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1494119>.

<sup>43</sup> Maja Zehfuss, "Forget September 11," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (June 2003): 513–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659032000084447>.

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tactics and ideologies.<sup>44</sup> By focusing on 9/11 as a juncture, terrorism studies have failed to recognise parallels to other historical phenomena, such as the anti-colonial struggles of the 20th century.<sup>45</sup> This presentist lens has skewed our understanding of terrorism and has prevented us from developing effective and long-term strategies.

### **Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Terrorism in Pakistan**

In the backdrop of the roles of colonial histories in shaping contemporary terrorism drawing upon the works of Pakistan is a pertinent issue.<sup>46</sup>

The roots of terrorism in Pakistan can be traced back to the colonial era, when the partition of British India gave rise to socio-political fault-lines that are still fuelling militancy. Moreover, the legacy of colonial governance, including the marginalisation of tribal areas, has provided fertile ground for groups like the TTP.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Mufti and Lamb<sup>48</sup> point out that colonial policies like the FCR exacerbated grievances in Pakistan's tribal regions, which later became the TTP's strongholds.

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<sup>44</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism," *Studies in Global Justice* 4, no. 1 (2008): 117–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8660-1_8); Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Leena Malkki, "No : The Fallacy of the New Terrorism Thesis," in *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*, ed. Richard Jackson and Justin Sinclair (London ; New York : Routledge, 2012), 35–42.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism in History," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/10473>.

<sup>46</sup> N. Elahi, *Terrorism in Pakistan: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Security Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019). Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

<sup>47</sup> Eamon Murphy, *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.45.

<sup>48</sup> Robert D. Lamb and Mariam Mufti, "Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Literature Review," CHARTING Our Future, 2012, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120709\\_Mufti\\_ReligionMilitancy\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120709_Mufti_ReligionMilitancy_Web.pdf).

Conversely, Mir connects the TTP's rise to 'mirror' Taliban problems stemming from colonialism.<sup>49</sup> Elahi<sup>50</sup> looks into how the TTP's activities in Pakistan intertwine both historical resistance and contemporary extremism, arguing that the group's attacks, like the 2014 Army Public School massacre, are part of a broader historical continuum of militancy in the region.<sup>51</sup> Understanding the jihadist threat in Pakistan requires addressing the legacy of colonial rule under policies of divide and rule, which spread seeds of sectarian and ethnic conflict.<sup>52</sup> Taken together, these studies indicate that colonial legacies remain relevant to the contemporary phenomenon of terrorism in Pakistan, which too often remains unacknowledged in historical accounts.

The colonial continuities of marginalisation and pre- and post-9/11 geopolitical dynamics should have been identified as central to understanding contemporary terrorism in Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> A superficial understanding of terrorism in post-colonial states is a product of the lack of historical analysis in terrorism studies, which has overlooked these connections. These dynamics point to the urgent need for terrorism studies to develop more historically informed analytical tools capable of tracing the genealogies of contemporary militant movements and their legitimating narratives.

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<sup>49</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, p.3.

<sup>50</sup> N. Elahi, *Terrorism in Pakistan: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Security Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Ismail Khan, "Taliban Massacre 131 Schoolchildren: Principal among 141 Dead in Attack on Army Public School, Peshawar," *DAWN.COM*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1151361/taliban-massacre-131-schoolchildren-principal-among-141-dead-in-attack-on-army-public-school-peshawar>.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen P. Cohen, "The Jihadist Threat to Pakistan," *Brookings*, June 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-jihadist-threat-to-pakistan/>.

<sup>53</sup> N. Elahi, *Terrorism in Pakistan: The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Security Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019). Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

### The Value of Historical Analysis in Understanding Terrorism

This theme highlights why historians should be concerned with the imperfections of presentist narratives. Scholars<sup>54</sup> claim that a historical perspective which traces the evolution of terrorism from the Zealots of the 1st century to the Al-Qaeda of today, must be understood as the framework of understanding terrorism. A historically informed perspective enables policymakers to move beyond reactive measures and confront the deeper drivers of terrorism.<sup>55</sup> The findings of these studies suggest how historical analysis offers a more complete portrait of terrorism that goes beyond the purview of the post-9/11 era.

A historical analysis illuminates the limitations of presentist narratives as a more nuanced understanding of terrorism. Scholars can trace the evolution of terrorist tactics and ideologies, thereby identifying patterns of continuity and change and challenging the assumption that post-9/11 terrorism is all 'new.'<sup>56</sup> In Pakistan, understanding its colonial legacy of perpetrators and victims of marginalisation and their resistance can offer policies aimed at addressing the root causes of militancy rather than the imperative to respond militarily.<sup>57</sup> Adopting this historical perspective could, therefore, enable policymakers to move beyond the symptom-focused responses that have characterised post-9/11 counterterrorism toward more comprehensive approaches that address structural drivers of radicalisation.

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<sup>54</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism in History," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/10473>; Richard English, "The Future Study of Terrorism," *European Journal of International Security* 1, no. 2 (2016): 145–147.

<sup>55</sup> Richard English, "Change and Continuity across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (July 7, 2018): 78–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1494119>.

<sup>56</sup> Richard English, "Change and Continuity across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (July 7, 2018): 78–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1494119>.

<sup>57</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

### **Conclusion**

The present review highlights that historical perspectives are necessary in our understanding of terrorism studies in the post-9/11 times. The ahistorical bias in terrorism studies has produced a presentist narrative which tends to exaggerate the newness of modern threats while ignoring the historical continuity of terrorist strategies and ideologies. Colonial legacies, often overlooked in historical accounts of contemporary terrorism, have profoundly influenced Pakistani terrorism. While recent scholarship has begun to stress the importance of history in terrorism research, the colonial and postcolonial dimensions remain critically underexplored. In the case of Pakistan, the roots of terrorism should not be traced solely to the 1979 Afghan War; colonial legacies have profoundly shaped both the practices of violence and the state's counterterrorism responses, yet these continuities are rarely acknowledged. This omission limits theoretical understanding and risks reproducing Eurocentric assumptions about "modern" terrorism. Future research should, therefore, prioritise the colonial and postcolonial roots of terrorism, along with other historical moments, to offer more context-specific and multi-causal analyses. In addition, historians could contribute to explaining how and why certain terrorist movements decline, offering case-based insights that complement broader theoretical perspectives from other disciplines. This illustrates the value of long-term, context-specific, and multi-causal historical approaches in terrorism research. Notably, this review finds a significant gap in scholarship regarding the colonial and postcolonial dimensions of terrorism, particularly in relation to Pakistan. Future work should remain interested in the historical dimensions of terrorism and continue to investigate the topic across multiple regions and through the application of mixed methods to better understand this global phenomenon. ■

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