

Redefining Security: Pakistan's Integrated Federal–Provincial Response to Terrorism and Extremism

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's legislative and justice sector response to terrorism has largely revolved around the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997, which replaced the Suppression of Terrorist Activities (Special Courts) Act, 1975. Given the deep interlinkages between terrorism, cross-border dynamics, and geopolitics, the federal government has played a central role in shaping the ATA. However, the law's framework has increasingly shown signs of obsolescence. Designed primarily to counter sectarian violence which was the dominant threat in the 1990s in Pakistan. Therefore, the ATA is ill-equipped to address the evolving nature of global and transnational terrorism that has emerged over the past two decades. Structurally, the ATA is detection-oriented rather than preventive, relying on provisions for preventive detention derived from the Security of Pakistan Act, 1952, and mechanisms to operationalize international sanctions under the United Nations and FATF regimes. Judicial interpretations have further narrowed the definition of terrorism, often confining its application to post-incident scenarios. In recent years, however, Pakistan's legislative trajectory has shown a subtle yet significant shift. Provinces have been accorded a more active role particularly in enacting laws on preventive detention, appointing special judges, and instituting inquiry mechanisms for detainees. Simultaneously, non-kinetic and community-based initiatives have emerged to counter violent extremism and promoting interfaith harmony and peacebuilding through institutional and societal engagement. This policy practice note traces these evolving legislative developments, highlighting the transition from a predominantly federal, punitive framework toward a more devolved and preventive response to terrorism and extremism in Pakistan.

2025 AMENDMENTS TO THE ANTI-TERRORISM ACT, 1997

As a constitutional premise, it is important to note that criminal law, criminal procedure, and evidence law fall within the concurrent legislative domain of both the Federation and the Provinces under Articles 142 and 143 of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973). Since anti-terrorism legislation criminalizes acts constituting terrorism, it forms a subset of criminal law, thereby empowering both the Federation and the Provinces to legislate on the subject. The 2025 amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997, introduced at both federal and provincial levels, reflect a significant legislative evolution. These amendments can be categorized into three major variants:

1. The first variant is based on the amendment made by the Federation and the Punjab. Through, the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act, 2025 (passed on 4th September, 2025) and the Anti-Terrorism (Punjab Amendment) Act, 2025 (passed on 29th May, 2025), section 11-EEEE of the ATA has been amended to grant powers of preventive detention to the government against the persons involved in terrorist activities, target killing, kidnapping for ransom, extortion and maintenance of supplies. The preventive detention can be for a period of three months (extendable to three more months) subject to the constitutional safeguards under Article 10 concerning the right to liberty. Conventionally, the grounds to invoke preventive detention are exceptional, but the amendment provides additional grounds for preventive detention by including, inter-alia, the ground of 'maintenance of supplies'. The amendment is temporal in nature as a sun-set clause of two years has been provided where-after the power of preventive detention will stand abridged.
2. The Anti-Terrorism (Balochistan Amendment) Act, 2025 (passed on 5 June 2025) also revises Section 11-EEEE, but introduces additional grounds for preventive detention, including involvement in IED-related activities, sabotage of vital installations, and sectarian attacks on minorities. In addition, the amendment provides for:
 - Inquiry mechanisms led by individual officers or Joint Investigation Teams (JITs)
 - Oversight Boards to review detention cases. The inclusion of Oversight Boards headed by civilian officers and potentially comprising criminologists and psychiatrists is a progressive measure aimed at minimizing arbitrary detention and ensuring quasi-judicial scrutiny. This amendment includes a six-month sunset clause, underscoring its temporary and experimental nature.

3. The Anti-Terrorism (Sindh Amendment) Act, 2025 (passed on 2 September 2025) adopts a structurally distinct approach from other provinces. Rather than expanding preventive powers, it amends Sections 13 and 14 of the ATA to strengthen judicial administration:

 - Section 13 empowers the Sindh Government (Home Department) to increase or abolish Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs);
 - Section 14 authorizes the appointment of lawyers and retired judges as ATC judges; and
 - Section 14(7) permits the appointment of registrars from the executive service to the ATCs.

This framework enhances provincial autonomy in judicial appointments and institutional management, reflecting Sindh's emphasis on administrative reforms rather than expanded coercive powers.

ESTABLISHMENT OF COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The Provincial Governments have enacted specific laws to establish dedicated Centres of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). These include:

- The KP Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2021 (passed on 7 September 2021);
- The Balochistan Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2024 (passed on 31 October 2024);
- The Sindh Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2025 (passed on 2 June 2025); and
- The Punjab Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act, 2025 (passed on 25 June 2025).

These legislative frameworks are primarily administrative in nature, providing institutional mechanisms for provincial governments to design, coordinate, and implement comprehensive action plans against violent extremism. The definition of violent extremism is largely uniform across all provinces and is reproduced below:

“Countering violent extremism means prohibition of the commission of violent acts, activities and beliefs to achieve ideological, religious, economic, social or political goals leading to terrorist activities”

Each law emphasizes an interdisciplinary and whole-of-government approach, mandating collaboration among education systems, law enforcement agencies, media organizations, religious institutions, civil society, and local administration. Collectively, these centers aim to prevent radicalization, promote social cohesion, and build community resilience through research, policy advocacy, and targeted capacity-building initiatives.

These provincial CVE laws complement the federal counterterrorism framework established under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997, by shifting the focus from punitive enforcement to preventive and rehabilitative strategies. While the ATA primarily addresses terrorism through legal sanctions and prosecution mechanisms, the CVE laws strengthen the non-kinetic, community-based dimension of counterterrorism. Together, they create a multi-tiered national response in which the Federation leads on legal, enforcement, and international cooperation aspects, while the provinces operationalize grassroots prevention, deradicalization, and reintegration initiatives. This integrated approach reflects Pakistan's gradual transition from a purely security-centric model to a comprehensive counter-extremism policy rooted in inclusion, resilience, and long-term social stability.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the evolving geo-strategic and security landscape, states across the globe are reorienting their approaches to terrorism and violent extremism from reactive enforcement to preventive, coordinated, and multi-dimensional strategies. Even multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) recognize terrorism as a dynamic international threat that demands collective intelligence-sharing, institutional coordination, and harmonized legislative responses. Within this broader context, Pakistan's recent legislative developments particularly the empowerment of Provinces to legislate under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) and the establishment of Centers of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) mark a strategic and progressive shift in national counterterrorism policy. By devolving preventive powers, promoting provincial ownership, and institutionalizing inter-sectoral collaboration across law enforcement, education, media, religious leadership, and civil society, Pakistan is steadily transitioning from a centralized, coercive framework to a comprehensive, preventive, and community-driven approach. These reforms signify an important alignment with global counterterrorism and deradicalization standards, enhancing the federal-provincial synergy essential for ensuring sustainable peace, resilience, and social cohesion.



Going forward, Pakistan should strengthen coordination mechanisms between the Federation and Provinces through joint monitoring frameworks, inter-provincial learning platforms, and data-driven evaluation systems. Integrating CVE initiatives with national security and development agendas, investing in community-led prevention models, and enhancing institutional capacity will be critical to translating these legislative reforms into tangible, long-term impact on peace and internal stability.



This practice note is prepared by Kamran Adil (PSP-Punjab Police), Muhammad Shahid Khan (Senior Director, SSDO), and Syed Kausar Abbas (Executive Director, SSDO).



ssdopakistan



ssdo_pakistan



www.ssdo.org.pk