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## OPERATION RADD-UL-FASAAD: PAKISTAN'S MILITARY RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

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On February 22, Pakistan Army announced the launch of a nationwide military operation- "Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad", according to the statement issued by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the army's media wing.

The ISPR Press Release 87/2017 (Pakistan Defence) stated:

"Pakistan Army launches "Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad" across the country. Operation aims at eliminating residual/latent threat of terrorism, consolidating gains of operations made thus far and further ensuring security of the borders. Pakistan Air Force, Pakistan Navy, Civil Armed Forces (CAF) and other security/Law Enforcing agencies (LEAs) will continue to actively participate/intimately support the efforts to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the country.

The efforts entails conduct of Broad Spectrum Security/Counter Terrorism (CT) operations by Rangers in Punjab, continuation of

ongoing operations across the country and focus on more effective border security management. Country wide de-weaponisation and explosive control are additional cardinals of the effort. Pursuance of National Action Plan will be the hall mark of this operation."

The Operation came as a response to a series of at least six back to back attacks in Pakistan within a week (mid- February), killing more than 100 people in different parts of Pakistan. One of the deadliest attacks in the string of recent terror attacks in Pakistan took place on February 16 when a suicide bomber blew himself up amongst the devotees in the Shrine of Sufi saint Lala Shahbaz Qalandar in the town of Sehwan in Sindh province. The attack resulted in about 88 deaths and more than 300 were injured when a suicide bomber targeted the devotees during the holy dhammal which involves music, chanting and prayer. The responsibility of the attack was claimed by Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). On the

same day, in Awaran, an IED attack on a military convoy took place.

On February 15, a bomber on a motorbike targeted a government van carrying civil judges in Peshawar. The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack. On the same day in Mohmand, suicide bombers targeted a government compound. On February 14, commander of the bomb disposal unit and a colleague were killed trying to defuse a bomb in Quetta. On February 13, a suicide bombing killed at least 12 people in Lahore and more than 80 were wounded. The bombing targeted the owners of the medical shops and pharmaceutical manufacturers who were protesting and demonstrating near the provincial assembly. The attack was claimed by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a Pakistani Taliban splinter group.

It was a deadly week for Pakistan with the series of attacks. Pakistan security forces launched a major crack down following the attack on the Sufi Shrine. Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad is unique, as for the first time the government has allowed armed forces to enter Punjab province which is home to some well known militant groups. Pakistani Daily, DAWN (February 22), reported that following the announcement of the operation, "Punjab had requested the federal government to deploy over 2,000 Rangers personnel in the province, who would be given policing powers to conduct

intelligence-based operations (IBOs) against militants, wherever required, with full authority."

Pakistani leadership blamed Afghanistan for harbouring militant sanctuaries and handled a list of 76 'most wanted terrorists' to Afghanistan seeking immediate action. Reportedly, the army has been empowered to take action in Afghanistan in case there is concrete evidence of the terror attacks being conducted from Kabul.

Pakistan's military response to terrorism is not new and it has launched several anti-terror Operations since 2007. Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched by the army in 2014 in North Waziristan was applauded and the military leadership was immensely proud of its "success" in the operation. General Raheel Sharif was nationally applauded for Operation Zarb-e Azb and the military leadership claimed that terrorism had scaled down with a decreasing number of terrorist attacks. The recent series of attacks have challenged that sense of relative security.

Operation Radd-ul-Nasad, is a continuation of the National Action Plan (NAP) which was formulated after the 2014 attack in Peshawar on the Army Public School. The NAP was criticized for its slow movement and half hearted approach in dealing with terrorism. Pakistani media, in response to the recent terror attacks, and the military response to terrorism, has taken direct

aim at Islamabad's lack of commitment to fight terrorism.

Dawn (February 16), "Domestically, the bombings have shed an unsavoury light on the patchy implementation of the National Action Plan. Developing the will to want to end all forms and manifestations of militancy is important, but the strategy and operational tactics to do so is an essential concomitant. The reaction of the Punjab government to the Lahore bombing is illustrative of the muddleheaded nature of the state's response."

Although Islamabad blames Afghanistan for sheltering terrorists and has also not refrained from pointing a finger towards New Delhi, Pakistan's belief in a strategy of terrorism as a foreign policy tool has been widely acknowledged. Islamabad treats select terrorists organisations – Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish –e-Mohammad, as its strategic assets. It has long supported covert war on the Indian territory with the support of these groups. Its desire to control Afghanistan and create strategic depth in Afghanistan did allow the growth of the Taliban in the 1990s and then again, the come-back of the Taliban insurgency in 2004. Not only in the neighbourhood, but even within the Pakistani territory, Islamabad has been supporting militancy for its strategic gains. In Baluchistan for example, the state agencies have been promoting and supporting extremist groups to counter the armed separatist insurgency by

ethnic Baluch, who have been fighting for their basic rights since 1940s.

Pakistan's answer to counter militancy lies within its thinking and strategy, which has allowed the growth of non-state actors for decades. The military operation to counter terrorism can yield results in numbers but whether the current operation will be successful in countering the phenomenon of terrorism remains to be seen.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*