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Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in North Waziristan: A Promise of Stability or a Perpetuate Struggle

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ABSTRACT

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam represents a pivotal counterterrorism and stabilization initiative in North Waziristan, aimed at dismantling militant infrastructure while fostering sustainable peace. Beyond its security objectives, the operation seeks to address deep-rooted socio-economic disparities, weak governance, and mistrust between the state and local communities. It integrates military measures with participatory approaches, engaging tribal leaders, youth, and civil society in decision-making to promote local ownership and strengthen social cohesion. Opportunities lie in leveraging this engagement to enhance development, improve service delivery, and integrate the region into national economic frameworks, including projects linked to CPEC. However, the operation faces significant challenges: balancing security enforcement with respect for local autonomy, overcoming historical marginalization, and ensuring long-term political and institutional commitment. This article critically examines Azm-e-Istehkam's strategic framework, its potential to transform conflict dynamics, and the obstacles that could hinder its success in achieving durable peace and development in North Waziristan.

Keywords: Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, North Waziristan, Counterterrorism, Peacebuilding, Community Engagement, Governance, Development Challenges.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Pakistan has seen a recurrence of militant activities, particularly along its Northwestern border areas with Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban took over in 2021 has strengthen certain global militant groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province which resulted in a significant rise of terrorist incidents across Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and in the former Tribal Areas of Pakistan. In November 2022, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan ended its ceasefire agreement with the government of Pakistan, which triggered a significant increase in terrorist activities across various regions including Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Despite of several years, the government and military leadership of Pakistan have launched series of military campaigns and peace agreements to counter insurgency and to reiterate the state writ in its former tribal areas. Military operations like Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasad were planned to dismantle the militant networks and to reestablish the control of government in this conflict affected areas. Despite securing various gains in these operations, the underlying issue of militancy and extremism still continues in these areas which often reemerged with renewed intensity. The top priority is to eliminate the extremist threat, so leaving unanswered the socio-economic problems permitted radicals to reappear in these regions. Lack of government funding in the three basic sectors of socioeconomic, education, and healthcare further magnified the regional volatility since it allowed extremist ideas to

persist in these areas. The change from short-term military success to long-term peacebuilding efforts emphasizes the pressing need for a plan to combine military operations with social economic growth.

Early in 2024, Pakistan's former Tribal regions merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in June 22, 2024, the government of Pakistan, started the Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, which literally means "Resolve for Stability," in response to extremism from its origins. Operating Azm-e-Istehkam combines military activity with major socioeconomic projects in the war-struck areas like North Waziristan. Unlike previous military operations, Azm-e-Istehkam adopts a comprehensive approach including intelligent-based missions combined with efficient border management and socio-economic uplift of the locals.

It is argued in this article that North Waziristan's post conflict rehabilitation could be dramatically changed by Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in conjunction with a thorough and inclusive development strategy. This research highlights that lasting peace can only be achieved through investment in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and socioeconomic development. It argues that true security lies in transforming traditional security measures into sustained human development initiatives, which in turn promote long-term regional stability and recovery. In accordance with ethical research standards, the identities and personal information of all interview participants have been kept strictly confidential by the researcher.

2. Operation Azm-e-Istehkam and its objective

As mentioned above in June 2024, the government of Pakistan launched Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, a multi-layered counterterrorism campaign, combining military and socio-economic measures to eliminate extremism and ensure lasting national peace and stability. The primary objective is to eradicate terrorism and extremism in a comprehensive and decisive manner, addressing both immediate security threats and also the underline causes of the conflict. In order to combat cross border insurgency and militancy, this renewed military operation launched by Pakistan classify and destroy terrorist camps both inside the country and also in the neighboring areas, particularly Afghanistan. In contrast with previous military campaigns, which often ended in mass dislocation and collateral damage, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam gears a more detailed approach by relying comprehensively on Intelligence based operations. This approach highlights the use of ground intelligence to launch targeted strikes against terrorist elements ultimately reducing the room of widespread military participation and ensuring the strength and safety of civilian population in conflict affected areas.

2.1. Rebuilding of Educational Institutions

Rebuilding and protecting educational institutions from the terrorist threats in a conflict affected regions particularly North Waziristan has become an essential aim under Operation Azm-e-Istehkam. This includes recreating the destroyed infrastructure of the educational institutions, building security checkpoints and placing skilled staff throughout the institutions. Establishing a safer and stable environment for students is one of the goals of operation.

2.1.1. Promote Access to Quality Education

Under this operation, a significant importance is placed on aggregate student registration in schools particularly of girls and reducing dropout rates among girls, who were extremely affected by the conflict. By making education more accessible, significant and safer, these operations purposes to stand against extremist ideologies and strengthen a philosophy of peace and progress through continuous learning.

2.2. Strengthening Healthcare Systems in Conflict-Affected Regions

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam addresses healthcare challenges in conflict zones by rebuilding damaged facilities, restoring services, and promoting public health through vaccination drives and awareness programs to ensure both immediate relief and long-term resilience.

2.3. Socio-Economic Enhancement

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam aims to address socio-economic disparities fueling extremism by rebuilding infrastructure roads, bridges, and communication networks to boost connectivity and economic growth, while also supporting farmers with resources and modern farming methods to enhance productivity and food security.

2.4. Strengthening Community Engagement and Trust building

The operation aims to rebuild government-community trust by involving locals in decision-making, empowering leadership, and promoting participatory governance through community forums, youth programs, and civil society partnerships to foster ownership, reduce hostility, and strengthen the social fabric. (Economic Times, 2024)

3. Operation Azm-e-Istehkam as an initiative of Peace building and Post Conflict Recovery in North Waziristan

Unlike previous operations that emphasized military force, this initiative prioritizes reconstruction, inclusive development, and economic revival through infrastructure projects, job creation, and support for local businesses aiming to heal the damage caused by decades of conflict. Below is the table of the key peace building and post conflict efforts of Government of Pakistan launched under Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in North Waziristan:

Table 1: Key Initiatives for Post Conflict Reconstruction and Peace building

Initiatives		Time Span	Key Initiatives
Socio Economic Development		2022-2024	\$200 million grant aimed at modernizing infrastructure was allocated (Rana, 2024)
Revival of Education Sector		2023-2024	Four Schools in the Deogarh Area and several schools in Kadikhel and Bangedar village of North Waziristan, accommodating 578 boys and 145 girls. (Khan M. H., 2023)
Healthcare Rehabilitation		2023-2024	0 Polio cases reported in North Waziristan in 2023 and Rehabilitation of BHUs and healthcare infrastructure. (Siddiqui, 2022)
Security and Counter terrorism efforts		2024	In 2024, over 22,000 security operations including IBO's were conducted, resulting in the elimination of 398 militants. (GulfTimes, 2024)
Rehabilitation of IDP's		2024	Total 4, 60,000 IDP's, out of which 35,000 have returned in during 2020-2024. (TheNews, 2025)
Political and Community Engagement		2024	Formation of local peace committee to involve local community in peace building. (Tribune, 2024)

Source: Data is compiled from following sources:

Rana, S. (2024, August 23). *Rs60 billion approved for Azm-e-Istehkam*. The Express Tribune. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2490305/rs60-billion-approved-for-azm-e-istehkam>

Khan, M. H. (2023, June 4). *Educational facilities being restored in North Waziristan*. The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1076933-educational-facilities-being-restored-in-north-waziristan>

Siddiqui, N. (2022, May 15). *Pakistan's third polio case of the year reported from North Waziristan*. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1689801>

Gulf Times. (2024, July 23). *398 militants eliminated in security operations during 2024: Pakistan*. <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/687223/international/398-militants-eliminated-in-security-operations-during-2024-pakistan>

The News. (2025, January 14). *IDPs return to begin from 18th in Waziristan*. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1271863-idps-return-to-begin-from-18th-in-waziristan>

The Express Tribune. (2024, June 24). *K-P governor Kundi voices support for 'Azm-e-Istehkam' operation*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2473564/k-p-governor-kundi-voices-support-for-azm-e-istehkam-operation>

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, launched in June 2024, marks a strategic pivot toward long-term peace and resilience in North Waziristan. Prompted by a rise in militant activity particularly from groups like TTP (now referred to as Fitna-Al-Khawarij) following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the operation combines military and intelligence efforts with regional cooperation and socio-economic initiatives to address the root causes of extremism (Abdullah, Fehmida, & Ali, 2024).

3.1. Key Opportunities

Launched in 2024, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam aims to dismantle militancy, restore governance, and integrate North Waziristan into national development, while promoting stability, economic recovery, and inclusion of marginalized communities. Various fundamental opportunities that lies in this military action are as follows:

3.2. Enhanced Security Measures

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam is a security initiative in North Waziristan focused on tackling militancy while minimizing civilian harm. It combines grievance redressal, inclusive governance, advanced intelligence, and surveillance to dismantle militant networks. Given Pakistan's open, difficult-to-police border with Afghanistan, the operation also strengthens security presence and pursues diplomatic engagement to address cross-border threats. Its goal is both to neutralize immediate dangers and to create lasting peace, enabling post-conflict recovery and stability in the region. (Sami, 2024) As part of the interviews conducted with experts representing the military, education, and healthcare sectors, the military expert emphasized that:

The cross-border situation, the TTP elements crossing Afghanistan has grown more intense in 2025. Border fencing is completed over 98% and there are now more than 1000 new Border forts. Drone Surveillance and night patrolling is conducted in the border areas to help us spot and stop infiltrators. (Personal Communication, April 2025)

Azm-e-Istehkam's enhanced security measures offer a key opportunity for lasting peace in Pakistan's former tribal areas by addressing the root causes of militancy, disrupting cross-border infiltration, and curbing local unrest, thereby laying the groundwork for a more secure and governed region.

3.3. Socio-Economic Initiatives and Infrastructural development

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam combines military action with socio-economic and infrastructure development to address poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic rights in North Waziristan. By investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, it tackles root causes of extremism, rebuilds trust, and aims to transform the region into a resilient, peaceful society. During a series of interviews conducted by the researcher with the experts related to multiple sectors mentioned above, the educational expert highlighted that:

“We have refurbished and reconstructed over 200 schools in North Waziristan, including 61 for girls, many of which were previously destructed or destroyed by militants. To keep them secure, we have set up School Protection Units and linked in with local communities. With NGO support, we have brought in 50 digital classrooms and launched mobile schooling that’s reached 4,000+ displaced kids. What is changing is the mindset that more parents are now sending their daughters, which was rare just a few years ago.” (Personal Communication, April 7, 2025).

These initiatives aim to uplift vulnerable communities, counter extremist ideologies, and offer alternative paths to progress. By addressing underlying grievances, they help prevent radicalization and foster stability and sustainable peace (Noor, 2024). The operation aims to utilize Pakistan’s economic resources to combat terrorism and extremism, offering a path for peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery in North Waziristan through targeted socio-economic and infrastructural improvements. By integrating all elements of national power, it addresses both immediate security threats and the root causes of regional instability. (Kiani, 2024).

3.4. Community Engagement and Trust Building

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam targets militancy in North Waziristan while promoting lasting peace through youth, civil society, and tribal leader engagement. It stresses participatory decision-making, inclusive dialogue, and civil-military cooperation that respects local dynamics (Spychala-Kij, 2020). Operation Azm-e-Istehkam aims to secure lasting peace in North Waziristan by building trust, involving communities in decision-making, and addressing root causes to reduce militancy and promote collaboration. (Haroon, 2024) One of community leader in the same series of interview mentioned above stated the researcher that:

“a couple of Jirga’s are organized in different districts of North Waziristan where government representatives and Army officers genuinely listen the grievances of the people. The tribal elders are now part of the district peace committees, and their input actually counts. People here feel a mix of emotions. Not everyone is convinced, some people still carry doubts from the past, but there is a general feeling that we are finally being heard. (Personal Communication, April 7, 2025).

In North Waziristan, shifting from short-term security measures to long-term stability requires genuine community engagement, involving tribal elders, youth, and marginalized groups in every stage of planning and implementation. Such participation, combined with trust-building efforts, can restore state legitimacy, strengthen community bonds, and counter militant ideologies. Addressing local needs and truly empowering conflict-affected communities paves the way for defeating terrorism and achieving lasting peace and national unity.

4. Key Challenges

Azm-e-Istehkam’s success is hindered by Afghan cross-border militancy, political disunity, poor infrastructure, and mistrust between locals and the state. Tribal complexities, historical neglect, and underdevelopment further challenge counterterrorism and rebuilding efforts, while the legacy of past operations like Zarb-e-Azb displacement, destruction, and insecurity compounds the difficulties. Some of the major challenges are as follows:

4.1. Resurgence of Militant groups

Launched in June 2024, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam targets rising militancy in North Waziristan, where TTP and allied groups have escalated attacks by exploiting governance gaps and local grievances. A major clash in April 2025 between Afghan-based militants and Pakistani forces, resulting in 71 militant deaths, underscored the scale of the threat. Hafiz Gul

Bahadur's launch of "Operation Al-Fatah bi al-Nusrat ul Rehman" and TTP's revival of "Azm-e-Sharia" signal a coordinated push to destabilize the region. While Operation Azm-e-Istehkam is strategically designed, its progress is hindered by shifting militant tactics and the use of Afghan safe havens. Sustained success requires cohesive political strategies and enhanced regional diplomacy to address underlying challenges and ensure long-term stability. (Mehmood & Shah, 2023)

The main challenge is renewed militant activity by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan in North Waziristan. Current operations favor targeted, intelligence-based strikes to avoid mass displacement, but their impact is limited by militants' cross-border safe havens and weak international backing. (Analyst, 2024). In 2024, militant attacks and casualties in Pakistan sharply increased, driven by the TTP's exploitation of post-Afghan Taliban instability. Weak political resolve, resource shortages, and guerrilla warfare challenges undermine counter-terrorism. Without broader reforms and reconstruction alongside Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, recent militant gains could seriously threaten national security (Khan I. , 2025). In 2024–2025, escalating militancy in North Waziristan is straining Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, which needs military action backed by socio-political reforms to secure lasting peace and protect Pakistan's stability.

4.2. Cross Border Sanctuaries

Despite numerous military operations, North Waziristan continues to face persistent militant threats due to cross-border sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Militant groups like TTP, ISKP, and Haqqani Network exploit poorly regulated border areas especially in provinces like Khost, Paktika, and Nangarhar to launch attacks into Pakistan and retreat with impunity. The resurgence of these threats, especially after the Taliban's return to power, led to the launch of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in 2024. However, the operation faces serious challenges, including unregulated border routes, illegal arms smuggling, and ideological propaganda. These cross-border dynamics hinder counterterrorism efforts, delay resettlement, weaken public trust, and pose risks of regional tensions. For the operation to succeed, enhanced border management, regional intelligence sharing, and coordinated diplomacy with Afghan authorities are essential (Makki, Iftikhar, & Yamin, 2024).

Afghan Taliban's passive or indirect support in his views has allowed militants to function without specific restrictions undermining Pakistan's counter-terrorism measures and complicating Pakistan's efforts to achieve lasting peace in the region. He argues that Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy under Operation Azm-e-Istehkam faces significant obstacles without a meaningful cooperation from neighboring country Afghanistan. (Basit, 2025) TTP bases in Afghanistan and weak cross-border cooperation undermine Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, keeping Pakistan's border areas at risk.

4.3. Lack of Consensus and Public Skepticism:

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam aims to counter terrorism and stabilize regions like North Waziristan but faces political rifts, deep mistrust, and criticism over its opaque decision-making and socio-economic costs. Public skepticism, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former FATA, stems from past displacement, losses, and poor rehabilitation. While framed as both a security and development effort, persistent trust deficits, fears of rights abuses, and demands for transparency, oversight, and social investment threaten its long-term success (Kidwai, 2024). The unilateral launch of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, without provincial or parliamentary consultation, has deepened Pashtun mistrust, fueled by past military hardships. Absent transparent, inclusive dialogue, the operation risks losing legitimacy and long-term effectiveness (Ahmad, 2024).

The lack of political consensus and rising public skepticism hinder the success of Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in North Waziristan. Designed mainly as a military campaign, it lacks transparency, inclusivity, and strong backing from key political parties and civil society. PTM established in 2014 as a movement originally formed for protecting rights of Pashtuns, has also contributed to lack of consensus and varying level of public skepticism. Lasting peace requires broad national consensus and public trust, which can be achieved by engaging all stakeholders in dialogue and ensuring counterterrorism efforts align with community rights and needs, including concerns raised by opposition groups like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

5. Conclusion

Operation Azm-e-Istehkam aims to counter terrorism and restore peace in regions like North Waziristan, reflecting the state's renewed commitment to security and stability. Its lasting success, however, depends on more than military action, it requires political will, socioeconomic revival, regional diplomacy, and institutional integrity. This operations introduced several notable differences when compared with previous military operations in North Waziristan as it focuses not only on security but also post conflict reconstruction and community development. Addressing historical grievances, ensuring transparent governance, and investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure are essential to transform it from a tactical response into lasting progress. Trust-building, political unity, and a people-centered approach are key to fulfilling its promise. By addressing and understanding the root causes of conflict and promoting social development, this operation holds a significant position aiming to foster long-term peace and stability in the region.

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