

TERRORISM AND ACTIVISM OF THE BALOCH ETHNIC GROUP

29.1. 2025 Richard Klauber¹

Annotation

Recent events in early 2024 have shown the problem with the Baloch separatist organizations when their positions were shelled by Iranian and Pakistani forces. This article discusses how the Balochis are an important ethnic group located in the vast and wealthy Iranian and Pakistani areas, which is another reason for the oppression of this ethnic group.

While Balochistan represents the largest administrative unit in Pakistan, the province of Sistan and Balochistan is considered the largest in Iran. These territories are also home to mineral wealth, which is important for the economies of both regional powers. However, the Baloch population does not have much from these raw materials, and they live largely in poverty, which is one of the main factors behind the Balochis' undying rebellion against the central governments.

Introduction – Iran-Pakistan border conflict and activities of Baloch organizations

At the beginning of January 2024, Pakistan and Iran exchanged strikes directed at the territory of the other state. Both sides aimed at separatist militants, who were allegedly hidden by the other side. Fortunately, the mutual accusations did not escalate into a conflict between the states. Still, they were a harbinger that both states would continue to oppress the Baloch ethnic group as they had been until now. However, the attack was provoked by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which launched a coordinated attack on the town of Mach in Pakistan's Balochistan. Pakistani strikes were aimed at Iranian territory, which Islamabad defended by a statement that the Balochis use the Iranian border as a shelter. The Pakistani side also claims that India is behind the attacks, which, according to Islamabad, sponsors the BLA. India rejected these accusations.

Such attacks hit Pakistan's economy by disrupting cross-border trade and infrastructure projects. BLA aimed its attacks at the height of the campaign for parliamentary elections in Pakistan, deeply focused on campaign rallies and political candidates. One of the Balochis' successes has been to discourage investors from the Baluchi province, whose presence and investments could strengthen Pakistan's position in the region.ⁱ

A few days before the incident, Iran attacked targets in Balochistan, Pakistan, namely the positions of Baloch militia Jaish ul-Adl (JuA) – Army of Justice. Iran and Pakistan have recalled each other's ambassadors from the countries. These cross-border clashes are not uncommon, but some differences in the uprisings in Iran and the Pakistani insurgency can be witnessed. JuA is a Sunni terrorist organization that was affiliated with the Islamic State and was founded in 2012. JuA's predecessor, Jundullah, was also a terrorist organization linked to al-Qaeda and has also carried out several attacks on Iran.

In Pakistan, the Baloch separatism has more secular and nationalist roots. It has a long tradition that can be traced back to 1947 when the Indian subcontinent's division led to the emergence of tendencies for an independent or at least autonomous Balochistan. The last large-scale Baloch uprising in Pakistan took place shortly after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.ⁱⁱ

Balochistan is now in its fifth insurgency since 2006. Finally, in 2024 a Balochi tribal leader Akbar Bugti was assassinated during a military operation, which motivated the then-fledgling separatist movement.ⁱⁱⁱ

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This development is considered a turning point in relations between the Balochis and the Pakistani government.

Separatist militant organizations, and their influence on Iranian-Pakistani Relations

One of Baloch separatism's main military organizations is the BLA. This organization has had its greatest success in recent years, occupying the entire city of Mach for almost two days in February 2024. BLA has also been attacking facilities linked to Chinese investors, an example of which is the attack on the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) port complex, an important section of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that cost over \$62 billion in March 2024. This attack, carried out by one of the BLA brigades, namely the Majeed brigade, was thwarted by Pakistani forces.

However, BLA is part of a larger formation called Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS). This organization reinstated Baloch separatism when it was in decline in 2018. BRAS is an amalgamation of three militant groups: the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), and the Baloch Republic Guard (BRG). This organization aims to unite the militias under a national Balochi identity. Since the beginning of 2019, these separatist militias have begun to coordinate their attacks together.

The separatists also carry out the so-called Fedayeen attacks (suicide bombings). Since 2018, these bombings have targeted nationals of the People's Republic of China and projects of Chinese companies in Pakistan.^{iv}

Terrorist organizations of Baloch separatists are also present in Iran. JuA is also known in Iran as Jaish al-Dhulm, in terms of the branch of the Islamic religion, representing Sunnis and Salafists.^v


JuA also carries out terrorist attacks, mainly in the provinces of Balochistan and Sistan. In 2022, JuA

killed four members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the city of Saravan and one year later it attacked a police station in the city of Rask. The increase in the intensity of attacks is forcing both countries to respond more drastically (especially Iran, whose army has more prestige in the Middle East than Pakistan).

To understand the context of Jaish ul-Adl's attacks, we must go back to its predecessor, Jundallah, which ABC News and other sources in 2007 suggested was covert US aid against Iran. Anyway, Jundallah has always undermined Pakistan-Iran relations and JuA continues to do so. Some Iranian officials continue to believe that JuA is supported by the US. Pakistani officials, on the other hand, believe that Iran is providing territory in Sistan and Balochistan for Indian agents to assist Baloch separatists in their operations.

Still, Iran's relations with Pakistan have not been damaged as much, as Pakistani Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar met publicly with Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 15th to 19th January 2024. Their meeting showed that the situation would not escalate further. The Iranian army, which fired first, carried out a strike on the Balochi separatists. It happened on the anniversary of the death of Qassem Soleimani, and, certainly, it was also partly a propaganda event for the domestic audience.^{vi}





Last April, the Pakistani army scored a significant success in capturing Gulzar Imam, one of the leaders of the Balochi militia and founder of the Balochi National Army (BNA). Gulzar Imam was the operational head of the aforementioned BRAS. This could have dealt a major blow to the separatists in the long run, as Imam was responsible for financing operations, managing talks with foreign militia sponsors, and commanding all of southern Balochistan. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif separately congratulated Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which managed the operation. It may also have disrupted the BNA's networks with other separatist militias.

Another major blow was the incorporation of a division of the BNA, named Makran, into the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) organization, which may have been an advantage in the events in Mach at the beginning of the year. If Makran were to start operating in the north with the Taliban, Pakistan's most economically rich region, Gwadar, would be free of terrorist attacks.

It is also necessary to mention the BNA used child soldiers to carry out terrorist acts.^{viii}

After the withdrawal of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan, it was expected that the until recently friendly regime of Pakistan would withhold cross-border attacks and support for terrorist attacks. Around the beginning of 2022, BNA was formed, from the connection of BRAS, Balochi Republican Army (BRA), and other smaller militias. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan also helped Afghan and Pakistani terrorists in arms, as they managed to acquire a large amount of ammunition, and military equipment.

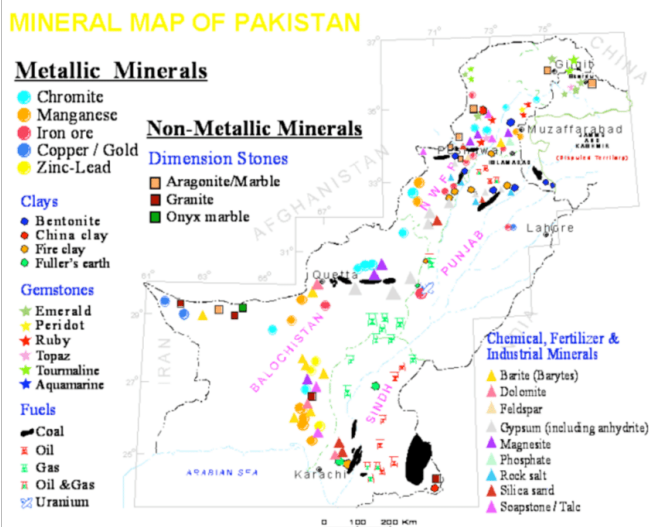
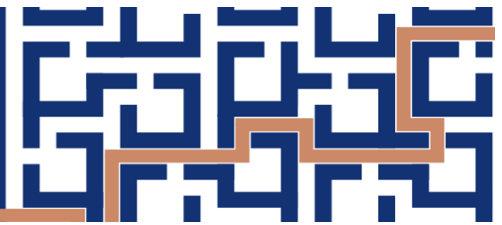
Afghanistan is also a reason for the mistrust between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistani authorities believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran, in cooperation with the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan, is trying to thwart the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, so that the Chinese will instead turn to the construction of the Iranian port of Chahbahar. The

Iranian side, on the other hand, suspects Islamabad of the role it played in installing the Afghan government in Kabul and the unfriendly administration along the Afghan-Iranian border.^{ix}

The wealth of Balochistan's natural resources in contrast to the poverty of its inhabitants

Balochistan is the richest location in terms of natural resources in all of Pakistan and Iran. There are huge deposits of gold, diamonds, copper, silver, chromite, and lithium in more than 1,600 mines. There are an estimated 500 coal mines, 600 onyx/marble mining sites, 91 iron mines, and approximately 550 chromite, antimony, fluoride, granite, and gabbro mines in this province. Balochistan has 16,650 million barrels of natural gas reserves, worth \$14 billion, and 4.4 million tons of mineral deposits in the Pakistani and Iranian EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) in the Arabian Sea, still untapped.

For example, the contract between Pakistan's Saindak Metals Ltd (SML) and China's MCC Resources Development Co. Ltd. (MRDL) to drill at one of the world's largest gold-and-copper mines, Saindaku, expired in October 2012 but was extended for 5 years until October 2017. Later on, it was re-extended again for another five years until 30 October 2022 and again until 2035. Under the agreement, 49 % of the mine's revenues go to MCC-Metalurgical Construction Corporation of China, while 51 % of them go to the government of Balochistan and 6.5 % as royalties. There are also a lot of projects under construction within China's "New Silk Road".^{xix}



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However, in terms of the conditions of the local population, the province of Sistan and Balochistan is the lowest in terms of life expectancy, literacy, access to drinking water, child mortality, and many other factors. Although Iran is a member of many international organizations fighting against discrimination against the population, the vast majority of its inhabitants suffer from a lack of basic raw materials and repression of the regime. The Sunni population there faced similar conditions under Pahlavi's regime, but recently the current ayatollah's regime has been hardening.

The Islamic Republic of Iran practices the „gozinesh policy“, an ideological selection that requires civil servants and employees to regularly demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic. Part of this concept is also the legal concept of *velayat-e faqih*, which prohibits participation in the public and so-called "semi-state sectors" (meaning in politics or key companies for the regime). The legal principle of *velayat-e faqih* is practiced daily against different political opinions, religions, certain minorities (including the Balochis), or previous political affiliations.

Education is even worse. In Zahedan University, which has about 5,000 students, there are only 10-15 Balochi students. Even though the law of the Islamic Republic of Iran says that 75 % of students in Sistan

and Balochistan should be Balochis, 99 % of students are of non-Balochi nationality. Teaching in secondary and primary schools is in Persian, which is even embedded in the institute.^{xiii}

Many young Baloch people are forced to smuggle drugs, which is becoming a growing problem in Iran, due to the difficult economic situation.

The Iranian regime uses drug smuggling as a pretext to expand repression. With the support of international organizations, a wall was built on the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, which, among other things, severed ties between individual members of the Balochi families. On the Pakistani side, this border is undermined and attempts to cross the border are punishable by death for so-called banditry.^{xiv}

Even in the Pakistani part of Balochistan, conditions are not favorable for the local population. According to a 2019 World Bank report, the poverty rate in Balochistan exceeds over 42 %. By comparison, the nationwide poverty rate in Pakistan is around 24 %. The average annual economic growth rate between 2018 and 2019 was 2.1 %, which is much lower than in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province (5 %), Sindh (4.5 %) and Punjab (4.2 %) during the same period.^{xv}

The representation of the Balochs in the offices is also negligible. The Pakistani military has set up several bases in the region to keep local militias, and recently discovered natural gas reserves, under control.

In addition to the restriction of the political, economic, and cultural rights of the Baloch, the problem in the legal field is the fact that the Pakistani defense forces often kill Balochi protesters without trial or organize the sudden disappearance of activists. The latest extrajudicial murder carried out by the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) resulted in massive protests at the end of 2023.^{xvi}

The political activity of the Baloch people

Balochistan has only 6 % of directly elected representatives in Pakistan's National Assembly. The Balochs very often organize demonstrations against the regime in Pakistan, which are brutally suppressed by the police. The last demonstration took place in December 2023, when crowds of Balochi people marched from the Balochi Turbat to the capital Islamabad. There, police intervened against the demonstrators and dispersed the protests. The Constitutional Court also reprimanded the Pakistani police for this step. For Balochi demonstrators and activists, however, arrests, interrogations, and even torture are routine.

In June 2020, the leader of the moderate Baloch Nationalist Party, Akhtar Mengal, resigned from the federal government led by then-Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. According to Mengal, 18 missing people have been returned in the period since he joined Khan's ruling alliance in exchange for certain promises, but approximately 500 others have gone missing in more than two years.

To help find missing people, the Balochs have created many information organizations, such as Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) and the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, which inform at the federal and provincial levels. For 14 years, VBMP has been organizing hunger strikes in Quetta, which aim to return the lost Balochis and end the exploitation of the region.^{xvii}

While the Iranian regime is even stricter than the Pakistani one. In Iranian law, it is systemically unpunishable to intervene against demonstrators. This was evident at the last Balochi demonstration in Zahedan in October 2023, when protesters were flattened, stoned, tortured, or kidnapped, and children as young as 10 years old were among those beaten and kidnapped. The protest ended with gunfire in the crowd. The Iranian police have used a dedicated part of the special forces to suppress demonstrators (*yegan-vijeh*), members of these forces are often disguised as demonstrators and manipulate the crowd as the

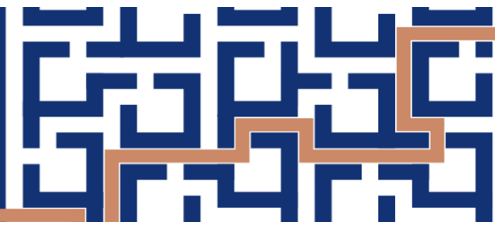
regime needs. There is also the Balochi international human rights organization Haalvsh, but it cannot operate in Iran due to the secret services crackdowns on its members.^{xviii}

The Balochs also largely participated in protests against tyranny, authoritarianism, and mullahs. At the heart of these protests were Balochi women from Iran and Afghanistan. It was mainly against wearing hijabs. Protests were also held against the extrajudicial killings of the women's sons and husbands. Balochi women are treated much more severely by Iranian forces than the rest of the Balochi because of religious reasons.^{xix}

One of the most visible Balochi figures in the opposition to Iran's mullah regime is Molavi Abdul Hamid (in the picture below). Hamid is a cleric and a Sunni who has long criticized the Ayatollah and thus created a sectarian conflict within the Shiite regime. However, Hamid mainly criticizes the regime's inability to provide people with necessities regardless of religion, which the regime calls false and claims that Hamid and his supporters are paid by foreign services.^{xx}



In Pakistan, there was tribalism and patriarchy among the Baloch originally. Protests were still led by men in the 1990s, but since then women have started to take over the leading role in Baloch society, and around 2010 the Baloch protests were led by women. But this did not help the situation in Pakistan's Balochistan, as the Pakistani media did not report the Baloch protests



that often, and when they did, labeled them as "anti-state" or "baseless".

The credit for this emancipation of women within the Balochi Society goes to activist Karima Baloch. Karima Baloch became the first female president of the Baloch Students Organization-Azad (BSOA) in 2015 after her male predecessors were murdered or disappeared. Even after the BSOA was banned, Karima continued to organize protests, marches, and hunger strikes to prevent political and economic marginalization and exploitation of Balochistan. However, she had to emigrate from Pakistan to Canada in 2016, probably for security reasons, but she died in 2020 under mysterious circumstances.

The main following Karimas are Mahrang and Sammi. Both have been activists since 2010 and are actively involved in demonstrations against the Pakistani regime. Mahrang's father was a well-known activist who was killed in 2011. Sammi's father was kidnapped three times and has not been seen since 2009. Both activists are featured in protests taking place in major cities across Balochistan. To this day, they write to the media, both local and international, about the rights of the Balochs.

Sammi, who has been Secretary General of the Voice of Baloch Missing Persons for the past decade, was able to get Prime Minister Imran Khan and Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari to meet in person so that he could voice the protesters' demands and lobby for them. It has not changed the situation, but it is a certain step forward for Balochi rights. Mahrang was the only Balochi leader who was able to organize a protest in Islamabad, Quetta, and Karachi despite the restrictions. Because these are not towns with Balochi populations, every protest had to be organized by march.^{xxii}

Protests abroad are also very important for the visibility of Pakistani Balochis. One example of these demonstrations is the protest of the British branch of the Movement for a Free Balochistan against the Pakistani army's nuclear tests in Balochistan, causing health risks and destroying the local environment. The

protest sought to embrace world politicians to force Pakistan's military to dismantle its nuclear arsenal from the region. The organizers have extended an open invitation to concerned citizens and supporters around the world to join them.^{xxiii}

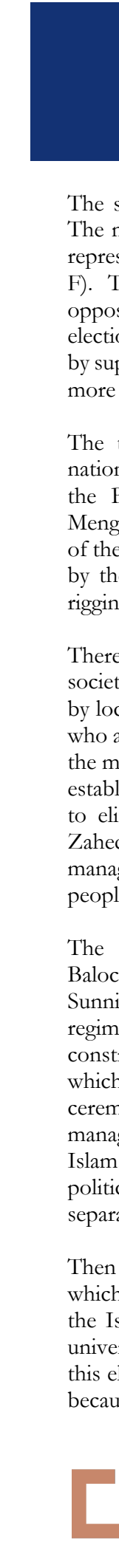
Balochi representation in Iranian and Pakistani politics

While in Pakistan there is, albeit minimal, political representation of the Balochs, with 16 representatives from the Balochi provincial assembly in the 265-member National Assembly, on the other hand in Iran the Balochi political parties are forbidden. Only a few people know about their activity because the Iranian media are much more uncompromising towards this minority.

Due to the small proportion of representatives in the provincial assembly, the identity of the chief minister of Balochistan and the party with the largest number of seats in the provincial assembly is of little importance.

Pakistani Balochistan is administered more or less by the military, but it is also the sphere of influence of the Pakistani Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which briefly lost favor with the military, and therefore influence in 2017 when some members switched to the purely Balochistan Awami party. This party, which had military support, then ruled Balochistan until last year, when the army again showed favor with the PML-N ahead of this year's elections. Political parties in Balochistan are apathetic, nationalists are reacting to them by not going to the polls, as evidenced by this year's elections, which had the lowest turnout ever.^{xxiv}

There are three types of political parties in Balochistan, Pakistan. The first type is the federalist parties, which follow the policy of Islamabad, followed by the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP). The party is suspected by opponents of being tailored to Islamabad, a fact supported by the fact that the party was founded the day before the 2018 parliamentary elections.^{xxv}



The second type is represented by religious parties. The main religious party Balochi party in Pakistan is represented by the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (Fazl - JUI-F). The party has long been the leader of the opposition, but has strengthened after the recent 2023 elections, but has lost its reputation as a religious party by supporting liberal-minded protests and has become more of a national party.^{xxvi}

The third and last type is represented by ethno-nationalist parties. The most prominent party in this is the Balochistan National Party – Mengal (BNP-Mengal). The BNP party is probably the most radical of the above-mentioned political parties, as evidenced by the recent call for protests over alleged election rigging.^{xxvii}

There are no Balochi political parties in Iran, and their society is not controlled by the Iranian authorities but by local elites. The Balochi elites include tribal chiefs, who are the traditional elites in the country. However, the mullah regime systematically neutralizes them and establishes contacts with the Balochi people directly to eliminate their influence. In the Iranian city of Zahedan and the Khash region, the regime has not yet managed to sever the ties of the tribal chiefs to the people.

The second very important political elite of the Balochi are the Molavis, clerics who represent the Sunni faith and thus represent resistance to the regime. The Molavis managed to push through the construction of a significant number of Sunni schools, which failed under Pahlavi's regime. The Molavis hold ceremonies and build mosques and last year they managed to register 22,000 students to study Sunni Islam. The Molavi play a key role in the security or political situation in Balochistan, as some help separatist militias.

Then there is a relatively new elite of intellectuals, which was created with the new educational policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, when over thirty new universities were built in Balochistan. A large part of this elite is dependent on the influence of the Molavi because they have no reach to the Balochi population,

this part of the Balochi elite in Iran is disparate in opinion.


Economic elites are of great importance, as they can influence both local and tribal politics in Iran. They exert their influence in sociopolitical decision-making processes, such as electoral politics in city and village councils or the Islamic Consultative Assembly. But this group also does not pursue one goal and lacks unity and cohesion.

In Balochistan in Iran, women do not have the status they have recently gained in neighboring Pakistan. This is due to the success of the propaganda of the regime, which has managed to create an almost hostile culture towards women. For most of the Balochs, the feeling of male superiority over women was strengthened. The Balochs are so indoctrinated by this idea that even today in everyday discourse the word "Ayezak" (weak or incapable) is often attributed to the Balochi woman.^{xxviii}

The Balochi can also vote for the Islamic Consultative Assembly, after reviewing the candidates by the Guardian Council, the Balochi elites, led by Molavis, hold a meeting to determine their candidates. Religious elites play a key role in the election of candidates, but none of them forget to promote the interests of their tribe. In the presidential elections, the Balochs stand on the side of reformists and moderate candidates, while in terms of left-right political orientation, the Balochs are strongly left-leaning.^{xxix}

Conclusion

The Balochs are a nation with its own culture, organization, and religion. However, the Balochi patriarchal, tribalistic society in the Islamic Republic of Iran is very different from the more liberal, activist Balochi society with a strong tinge of women's emancipation in Pakistan. There is also a very important difference in the number of terrorist organizations, with only one operating on Iranian soil (Jaish ul-Adl), while there are many more on Pakistani soil. However, there is one thing that the two political regimes are very similar in terms of repression of the



Balochi population, which often ends in the murder of protesters, and also in the mutual distrust of both regimes.

Very poor living conditions can be at least partially solved by political parties in the national government of Balochistan, which has little power, but unlike the

Iranian regime, where the Balochis have only a few candidates, approved by the regime through the Guardian Council, and then by their own Molavis, who look mainly at religious and tribal issues, the Pakistani Balochis have a much better chance to change anything and maybe even partially prevent the mining of mineral resources in their country.

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