

# Repression and Revolt in Balochistan

## The Uncertainty and Survival of a People's National Aspirations

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Rife with historical tensions, the region of Balochistan has erupted into insurrections against the Pakistani state since 1948. Convinced of being historically wronged, the Baloch view their fight as one against repression and for self-determination. Though residing in the same region, the ethnic identity of the Baloch has remained in sharp contrast to the ultranationalism that defines the Pakistani state. Therefore, the Pakistani security forces, who see many of the Baloch nationalist groups as terrorists, have crushed any opposition or demand for reform. This, in addition to a deteriorating human rights scenario has further cemented Baloch opposition against Pakistan. Across the border in Iran, the Baloch face a similar fate, with extreme deprivation and marginalization by the Iranian theocracy. While undoubtedly possessing unique identities and aspirations, repression and ignorance on both sides of the border have resulted in a common desire for liberation. However, the fact that an international border separates two distinctive Baloch communities, one motivated by secular aspirations and the other by Sunni Islam, any progress toward a unified front is hindered. Drawing on such dynamics, this article will seek to highlight the fact that even though the fight for Balochistan is one of international significance, most observers have ignored the situation, leaving the Baloch in a drawn-out insurgency with no support and an increased feeling of uncertainty. In this context, many have termed the Baloch freedom movement as dying or dead. Nevertheless, recent instances have shown that the tensions in the region are still relatively on the rise. This article will seek to highlight and contextualize such events and happenings in a gradually deteriorating environment.

### A Historical Note

Today, the land of the Baloch is divided among the countries of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Almost evenly portioned between Pakistan and Iran, it is categorized as the provinces of Balochistan and Sistan-Baluchistan respectively. Within Afghanistan, a small portion of the Kandahar, Helmand, and Nimruz provinces are also part of Balochistan. The division of the region among three different countries goes back to the era of empires in southern and western Asia.

Sandwiched between the Persian and Indian empires on either side, the region has been at the crux of power play throughout history. In the 1500s, Balochistan was carved up between the Mughals to the east and the Safavids to the west.<sup>1</sup> However, after the consecutive demise of these vast empires, the region collapsed into a number of principalities, with Kalat emerging at the forefront of these. The Khans of Kalat emerged as the primary forces behind attempts at sovereignty and consolidation of the state of Balochistan in the years to come. Nevertheless, in the 1800s, with the emergence of the British Raj in India and the Qajar empire in Persia, Kalat and the larger region of Balochistan was once again at the center of the regional power play. While the British transformed Kalat into an associated state of the British Empire in 1854,<sup>2</sup> Persia reconquered western Balochistan, a region that Iran retains to this day.

While it has been assumed and held as the truth by many that Balochistan was accorded the status of a Princely State under British administration during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the Baloch themselves hold a different position. According to both separatists as well as Baloch politicians today, Balochistan or more specifically, the Khanate of Kalat, was never a part of British India and, thus, could not be treated as a part of Pakistan. Treating Balochistan as a state of the erstwhile empire would be a violation of the treaty agreements between the Kalat state and the British Raj. The aforementioned treaty is that of 1876 between the Viceroy and Governor General, Lord Lytton, and the Khan of Kalat, Mir Khudadad Khab, which mentioned that the British government would respect the independence of Kalat as long as it would act in “subordinate coordination.”<sup>3</sup> In accordance with this, the Baloch observe that the Kalat state had a different direct relationship with the British government that was separate from the British Raj in India. Nonetheless, during the process of Indian independence, before the Partition was decided upon, even Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru held that Balochistan was an integral part of India.<sup>4</sup> A border state of a newly emerging nation could not be allowed to gain independence after all.

In this context, the independence of Pakistan in 1947 brought increased pressure on the Khan of Kalat to allow for accession of the Kalat state to the state of Pakistan. However, the lower house of the Balochistan parliament unanimously passed a resolution declaring that relations with Pakistan should be established as between two sovereign states and not by accession.<sup>5</sup> It is to be noted that when Pakistan declared independence in August 1947, so also did the Khan of Kalat declare independence for Balochistan. While this signified a unified Balochi dissent against accession to the Pakistani state, the newly formed Pakistani government would not adhere to it. Largely motivated by the fear of Indian influence in a strategically critical region, Pakistan sought to carry out the accession forcefully.

Initially capitalizing on the rivalry and feuds between the Khan and the surrounding regions, it motivated many of Kalat's feudatories to join Pakistan. This, along with the mounting pressure of a possible military offensive against Kalat, served as the final straw. The Khan eventually signed the instrument of accession in March 1948, less than a year following Balochistan's declared independence.

This forceful accession of Kalat to Pakistan signified the end of the brief period of national sovereignty for the Baloch and, thus, immediately caused anti-Pakistan protests to engulf Balochistan. This marked the beginning of a struggle that has endured for decades. Pakistan's penchant for ignoring the concerns and identities of the minor ethnic groups fueled rebellion and restiveness throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. While certain achievements were made within the autonomy provided for the Baloch in the 1970s, Islamabad quashed this too. The 1970 election that brought to power the prominent National Awami League, a coalition of Baloch parties, which began to make significant structural changes in promotion of the Baloch people, was ousted by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Islamabad.<sup>6</sup> Such interference sparked a renewed rebellion in Balochistan, which resulted in the loss of 3,000 Pakistani soldiers and about 5,000 Baloch guerrilla fighters, in a conflict that lasted nearly four years. And while the Pakistani army and government were able to quell the insurgency in the 1970s, they were not able to win over the Baloch, who once again led an insurrection against the quasi-military government of Pervez Musharraf in the early 2000s.

Even though this latest uprising has shown signs of faltering or completely dying out over the past two decades, it persists today. Numerous groups that carry out acts of political violence against the Pakistani forces have emerged over the years. However, the fight for Balochistan now shows signs of desperation. Provoked by the neglect of the Pakistani government in ensuring economic or social stability and development in the region, the Baloch see a great need in separating from Pakistan. Today Balochistan's Human Development Index (HDI) ranks below 0.40 as compared to the other provinces of Pakistan that lie above 0.50.<sup>7</sup> In sharper contrast, a 2016 study by the Social Development and Policy Centre showed certain districts in Balochistan ranking below the 0.30 mark.<sup>8</sup> In fact, out of the 15 districts with the lowest HDI indexes in Pakistan, 11 were from Balochistan. According to a United Nations Development Programme report from 2003, nearly 47 percent of the 31 districts with the lowest HDI indicators were in Balochistan.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the 2016 study, it is evident that not much has changed.

Today there has possibly been increased development in the region due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, this merely serves greater strategic aspirations and is not to be understood as beneficial to the Baloch in any way. The neglect meted out by the Pakistani state to the region of Balochistan has

always been a sticking point. It is a clear indication of the lack of attachment Pakistan shares for a people and land it sought to possess rather than assimilate.

### **Pakistan's Repression**

For decades, Pakistan has suppressed and ignored the Baloch people, infuriating them and yet reducing their capabilities of protest. Out of fear of a resurgence and possibility of a united Balochistan, the government in Islamabad has only sought to consolidate more power and maintain complete control of the region through Pakistan's security forces. However, this has resulted in a deplorable human rights situation in Balochistan. The general approach adopted by the Pakistani state toward any dissent in the region has been that of force, often disproportionate to the threat. Using the military to quell any Baloch uprising into submission has become a norm, and any attempts at protest have been reduced to naught. The main cause of the Baloch failure to launch an all-out offensive against the Pakistani army has been a shortage in numbers. While undoubtedly empowered by a feeling of commitment to the Baloch nationalist cause, the fact that the Baloch comprise less than 5 percent of the total population of Pakistan, hinders any progress. Though the province of Balochistan accounts for nearly 44 percent of the Pakistani state, its population is equal to only 12.3 million as compared to approximately 200 million in the rest of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Such contrast in the numbers has meant that none of the uprisings against the government have been able to sustain themselves. Additionally, not only is the region of Balochistan sparsely populated but also the Baloch themselves only account for 60 percent of the population in Balochistan. The rest of the population consists of Pashtuns, Sindhis and Punjabis.<sup>11</sup> In countering such contrasting difficulties, the Baloch have adopted tactics of guerrilla warfare, which has given rise to groups like the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and the Balochistan Republican Army (BRA). In dealing with these groups as well, the Pakistani government has not sought methods of mediation or resolution but instead once again delegated the task to the military. To this end, activists and politicians like Naela Qadri Baloch, who fled Pakistan in 2016, have accused the Pakistani government of committing genocide in the region.<sup>12</sup> Even though such accusations are plentiful, the international community has largely ignored the Baloch cause.

While some may perceive claims of genocide as exaggerations, they are not baseless, and certain activities currently occurring in Balochistan lend support to such accusations. There are two primary methods of repression adopted by the Pakistani state: bribes and all-out bludgeoning of the Baloch.<sup>13</sup> The military has thus been accused of destroying and depopulating Baloch as well as being responsible for a multitude of forced disappearances in urban and rural Balochistan. Any

person considered a supporter or sympathizer of the Baloch freedom movement is considered a threat and kidnapped, tortured, or killed. This has not only affected the common people but also high-ranking officials. The 2006 arrest of Akhtar Mengal, the Chief Minister of Balochistan, is a glaring example. He was arrested and denied basic rights of medical treatment or bedding while being imprisoned. Adding insult to injury, he was also kept in a cage during subsequent court proceedings.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, such denial of basic prison rights is the least the Pakistani state has done. Their atrocities in the region are far worse.

The number of cases of disappearing Baloch being attributed to either Pakistan's security forces or Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) has slowly been on the rise. Many political activists, members of the Baloch Students Organization, and journalists have been abducted in broad daylight by pro-Pakistani gunmen and security forces. For example, Hamid Mir, a senior Pakistani journalist, hosting a program on Balochistan in 2014, was shot in a suspected assassination attempt by ISI gunmen—although Mir survived, the case highlights Islamabad's extreme attempts to censor media coverage of tensions in Balochistan.<sup>15</sup> A year later, a famous human rights activist, Sabeen Mahmud, was killed by gunmen in Karachi for hosting an event called "Take 2 of Unsilenced Balochistan." While the attack was pinned on random Pakistanis who felt threatened by a woman talking about human rights issues in a province of Pakistan, fellow activists have accused Pakistan's powerful ISI of playing a role.<sup>16</sup> These are just two in a number of other cases that have plagued both Baloch and other activists fighting for their rights. This has continued to such an extent, that with hundreds of bodies being uncovered every year, Balochistan is now being viewed as Pakistan's land of mass graves.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is evident that Naela Baloch's accusations of genocide are perhaps not too far from the truth.

However, Pakistani repression does not stop there. Not only have the Baloch people been ignored and repressed but the Pakistani state has also exploited the resource rich region for oil and mining—with no benefits to the people of the province. While gas was discovered in the province in the 1950s, it was largely used to supply Karachi and Punjab, with Quetta, the capital of Balochistan only receiving access to these local resources in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Since then, Islamabad has provided this natural gas only to supply the army cantonments in Balochistan, and as of 2014, 59 percent of the urban population of Balochistan did not have access to the resource. As of January 2020, the Sui Southern Gas Company, which supplies gas to Sindh and Balochistan, reported the shortfall of gas at nearly 40 percent.<sup>19</sup> The federal government's continued marginalization of the province stands as the cause of this problem and is also at the crux of Baloch dissent against Chinese investment and the CPEC. Such deprivation, combined with the repres-

sion and blatant disregard for the Baloch people, is held as justification for their increasing resentment and larger aspirations for freedom.

### **Across the Border in Iran**

In the Shia-dominated country of Iran, the Baloch are disregarded in much the same way as in Pakistan. While on the Pakistani side, nationalist and federalist aspirations factor highly, for the Iranians, the tensions and repression of the Baloch are a result of the religious divide. With the predominantly Sunni Baloch accounting for scarcely 2 percent of Iran's 82 million in an overwhelmingly Shiite nation, Tehran has largely neglected or suppressed the minority. A lack of reporting as well as immense repression from the Iranian government has not allowed for Baloch struggles to reach a tipping point. There has been a rise in radical movements and terrorist groups across the province, but the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other such security forces have been largely suppressed such organizations. Nonetheless, throughout last year, attacks in the region have increased significantly, with numerous reports highlighting the possibility of a growing Sunni insurgency in Sistan-Baluchistan.<sup>20</sup>

Like other minorities in Iran, the Baloch have faced political, cultural, and socioeconomic discrimination at the hands of the government. Not only are the Baloch underrepresented in the government and the security forces, but much like their distant kin in Pakistan, they also live in one of the poorest provinces in Iran. Areas with larger Baloch populations are severely undeveloped, with reports indicating that nearly 70 percent of the population lives under the poverty line.<sup>21</sup> As a result, four prominent militant groups have arisen in Iran. Historically, the first and most prominent of these was Jundallah or the "Soldiers of God." This rather radical group has played a role in the extreme radicalization and instability in the province. Being responsible for a number of attacks and bombings on both government and civilian targets, the organization was highly active from 2003 until 2010, when its founder, Abdolmalek Rigi, was tried and hanged.<sup>22</sup> The execution of Rigi caused Jundallah to splinter into the Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) and the Harakat Ansar Iran (Movement for the Partisans of Iran) groups, which are prominent and active even today. While the Harakat Ansar Iran group merged with another and transformed itself into the Ansar al-Furqan (Guardians of the Criterion) militant group, Jaish al-Adl has remained the most powerful of the splinter organizations.<sup>23</sup>

Jaish al-Adl has carried out a number of prominent attacks against the Iranian government, which considers the organization to be the successor of the Jundallah. However, while Tehran categorizes as separatists, the group has identified themselves as "Iranian," with merely the need to gain Sunni representation in the

Shiite-dominated country.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the group has adopted tactics of terrorism and guerrilla warfare, carrying out some of their deadliest attacks within the last few years. On 16 October 2018, 12 IRGC members were kidnapped from an outpost in western Iran in retaliation to the death of four Sunni Baloch militants.<sup>25</sup> Government forces were only able to recover five of the abductees. Within the next few months, the group carried out another attack against the IRGC, killing at least 27 in a suicide bombing in February 2019.<sup>26</sup> In December 2018, another three people were presumably killed and 40 others injured in an attack in the port city of Chahabar conducted by either Jaish al-Adl or Ansar al-Furqan.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Iranian government sees Jaish al-Adl as a prominent security threat, alleging interference and support from external actors like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.<sup>28</sup> However, the US government designated the group as a global terrorist organization in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

While Jaish al-Adl and its counterparts on the Pakistani side have similar aspirations for the liberation of the Baloch, the ideologies of the various organizations are not harmonious with one another. While organizations like the Balochistan Raaji Ajoji Sangar (BRAS, Balochistan National Freedom Front) in Pakistan is motivated by secular and nationalist aspirations or at least the need to launch coordinated attacks against the Pakistani military and Chinese interests in the region, sectarian and religious currents govern the motivations of Jaish al-Adl. This has resulted in regular cross-border conflicts between both groups.<sup>30</sup> Thus, it is understood that the overemphasis of the religious identity that Jaish al-Adl seeks to instill in the Baloch is in complete contrast to the secular aspirations of the militant groups in Pakistan.

### **Baloch Uprising, Aspirations, and Leaders**

While Jaish al-Adl dominates the landscape on the Iranian side, the BRAS does so on the Pakistani side. Launched in November 2018, the BRAS is a unification and consolidation of three Baloch subnationalist groups, the BLF, the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG), and a splinter faction of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA).<sup>31</sup> However, this unification is symbolic of recent developments, and the fight under such militant groups has continued since the beginning of the fifth uprising in 2002. Initially adopting a hardline approach against the military, the militants' use of guerrilla warfare has drawn out the conflict for almost two decades. The early years of the conflict saw Balochistan descend into an all-out insurgency, with militants capturing and controlling vast regions under the BLA, the primary group at the time. The key leaders of the insurgents at the time were Akbar Bugti and Balach Marri, two tribal *sardars* who held influence over a large number of Baloch.<sup>32</sup> It was claimed at the time that nearly 2,000 Bugtis and an

equal number of Marris, among others tribes spread across Balochistan, were resisting the Pakistani forces.<sup>33</sup> Today, many key leaders of the Baloch have been exiled from the country or killed by the Pakistani state in a bid to reduce dissent in the region. This has undoubtedly reduced the intensity of the insurgency of the early 2000s. However, the BRAS and other militant groups active in the region still carry out frequent attacks against the Pakistani establishment.

**Table 1. Major Attacks against the Pakistani Armed Forces and Chinese projects<sup>34</sup>**

Date	Killed	Injured	Attack Details	Location	Perpetrator
30 AUG 2018	0	3	Suicide attack by son of Baloch leader injured Chinese engineers	Dalbandin, Pakistan	BLA
23 NOV 2018	4	0	Hour-long shootout at the Chinese consulate, killing police and civilians	Chinese Consulate, Karachi, Pakistan	BLA
14 DEC 2018	6	14	Attack on Frontier Corps	Kech District, Pakistan	BLA, BRAS
29 JAN 2019	9	21	Bombing and firing at the Office of the Deputy Inspector General, killed 5 police and 4 civilians	Office of Deputy Inspector General, Loralai, Pakistan	Unknown
16 FEB 2019	2	0	Attack on Frontier Corps	Loralai, Pakistan	Unknown
18 FEB 2019	4	0	Attack on Frontier Corps	Panjgur District, Pakistan	BLA
29 MAR 2019	Not Specified	Not Specified	22-vehicle convoy attacked by remote-controlled bomb, killing several Chinese engineers and workers. This attack coincided with the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister to Gwadar	Hamdard University, Karachi	BLA
18 APR 2019	14	0	15 attackers stopped a bus and killed 10 naval, 3 air force, and 1 coast guard officers.	Makran coastal highway, between Karachi and Gwadar, Pakistan	BRAS
12 MAY 2019	5	0	Bomb on Pearl Continental Hotel in retaliation to Chinese projects in the region, killed 4 hotel workers and a naval officer.	Gwadar, Pakistan	BLA
13 MAY 2019	4	11	Blast near a police van	Mini Market area, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
20 JUL 2019	1	10	1 policeman killed	Double Road, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
27 JUL 2019	4	0	Attack on Frontier Corps across the Pak-Afghan border	Turbat District, Pakistan	Unknown
30 JUL 2019	5	32	Blast near a police van	Quetta, Pakistan	Taliban
26 SEPT 2019	0	3	Three policemen killed by a bomb	Bypass, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
29 SEPT 2019	3	12	Bomb blast	Chaman, Pakistan	Unknown



*Repression and Revolt in Balochistan*

Date	Killed	Injured	Attack Details	Location	Perpetrator
16 OCT 2019	1	5	Attack on bypass, possibly by Tehrik-e Taliban (TPP) or other extremist groups	Bypass, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
21 OCT 2019	3	9	Attack, possibly by TPP or other extremists	Spinny Road, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
30 OCT 2019	1	0	Suicide bomber on motorbike killed 1 policeman	Loralai, Pakistan	Unknown
16 NOV 2019	3	4	Roadside bomb killed 3 paramilitary troops	Kalach, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
10 JAN 2020	15	20	Suicide bomber targeted a mosque in Quetta, possibly by a religious extremist group	Satellite Town, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
17 FEB 2020	10	35	Suicide bomber hit a police vehicle	Quetta Press Club, Quetta, Pakistan	Unknown
19 FEB 2020	16	0	16 Army personnel killed by BLT	Singsila area, Dera Bugti District, Pakistan	Balochistan Liberation Tigers
20 FEB 2020	5	3	Attack against a Frontier Corps check post	Turbat District, Pakistan	Unknown
19 MAY 2020	6	0	Frontier Corps vehicle targeted by improvised explosive devices	Mach District, Pakistan	Unknown
13 JUN 2020	1	1	Attack on state-backed "death squad" members operating under the ISI and army	Panjgur District, Pakistan	BRA
16 JUN 2020	1	0	One man shot dead in retaliation for murder of Baloch woman in 2019	Panjgur District, Pakistan	BRA
3 JUL 2020	0	Not Specified	Attack on levies post in Chappar Lat area, where militants confiscated ammunition	Harnai District, Pakistan	BLA
5 JUL 2020	Not Specified	Not Specified	Militants attacked Security Forces checkpoints with heavy weaponry	Harnai District, Pakistan	BLA
7 JUL 2020	5	Not Specified	A convoy of the Frontier Corps was ambushed on its way to a military camp at Narom	Kech District, Pakistan	BRAS
9 JUL 2020	0	Not Specified	36-inch gas pipeline destroyed with an explosive in Pir Chata area	Dera Bugti District, Pakistan	BLT
11 JUL 2020	0	2	Unidentified gunman opened fire and critically injured two policemen	Mastung District, Pakistan	Unknown
14 JUL 2020	3	8	Militants carried out a "fire raid" on Security Forces patrolling convoy near Kahan area	Panjgur District, Pakistan	BLF
17 JUL 2020	2	6	An Anti-Narcotics Force team of the Pakistani Security Forces was attacked and bombed	Kharan District, Pakistan	Unknown
19 JUL 2020	0	Not Specified	Unidentified militats attacked the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited gas field and attacked security posts around the field	Dera Bugti District, Balochistan	Unkown

The attacks listed in table 1 are a clear indication that while the intensity of the uprising has been reduced, it has not been quelled completely. With this, the Bugti–Marri areas, the Quetta region, central Balochistan, and the Makran belt have continued to bear the brunt of these attacks. A possible reasoning behind the same is the support the movement still receives. Even though many key leaders of the Balochistan militant groups have been exiled from Pakistan, they still direct affairs from abroad. Brahamdagh Bugti, the grandson of Akbar Bugti, is currently in the United Kingdom, apparently still in control of the Balochistan Republican Army, the alleged militant wing of his Balochistan Republican Party (BRP).<sup>35</sup> Balach Marri’s brothers have also been exiled from Pakistan but are still viewed as influential among the continuing nationalist movements. Mehran Marri, who was granted political asylum in the United Kingdom, is allegedly the leader of the United Baloch Army, a splinter faction of the BLA, which was apparently led by Hyrbyair Marri, his other brother.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the Lashkar-e-Balochistan, another nationalist group in Balochistan, is allegedly headed by Javed Mengal, the son of former chief minister Ataullah Mengal and brother of Akhtar Mengal.<sup>37</sup> While unable to directly contribute to the groups in Balochistan, they have apparently sourced funding and seek to globalize an issue that has failed to garner international attention and aid.

On 9 September 2019, banners calling attention to the acute human rights violations in Balochistan appeared in Geneva, Switzerland, in front of the venue for the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>38</sup> The key drivers of such protests and campaigns have been the BRP and the Free Balochistan Movement (FBM), headed by Hyrbyair Marri.<sup>39</sup> The BRP and the World Baloch Organization have also held a number of campaigns across the United Kingdom, raising banners of “End Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan.”<sup>40</sup> In 2019, there was an increase in the campaigns across London, in the form of newspaper advertisements, billboard signs, and joint awareness campaigns. In the month of June, the BRP also flew “Free Balochistan” banners during a Pakistan–Afghanistan cricket match in Headingley Stadium.<sup>41</sup> Such campaigning has not only been prominent in London but also at events held in Switzerland, South Korea, and across Balochistan. A conference titled “The Humanitarian Challenges in Balochistan” was also held in Germany by the Human Rights Council of Balochistan, the Baloch Human Rights Organization and the Baloch Human Rights Council—three organizations dedicated to the Baloch cause.<sup>42</sup> However, it is doubtful that this has resulted in much for the movement as a whole.

Nonetheless, within Balochistan, inflammatory actions aimed at escalating tensions with the Pakistani government have surfaced once again. Leaders like Khalil Baloch, the current chairman of the Balochistan National Movement (BNM),

have vowed support for Balochistan's "freedom fighters." In an e-mail interview in 2019, he was quoted as saying "the recent escalation in militant attacks is a direct reaction to the growing atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in Balochistan and China's relentless plunder of Baloch resources."<sup>43</sup> In the same interview, he also said that the BNM, once one of the strongest parties in Balochistan, would no longer negotiate autonomy with the Pakistani government and seek a separate state for itself. Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch, the leader of the BLF, has also made such statements within the last year. When asked in an interview why democratic means have not been used to resolve grievances with Pakistan, he said that "there is no democracy in Pakistan and the Baloch are compelled to rebel against oppression."<sup>44</sup>

Such statements have seemingly coincided with the increasing attacks in the region over the past few months, as can be seen in table 1. Largely centered around Balochistan's capital city of Quetta, the attacks draw attention to the increasing unrest in the province. This unrest also reached a tipping point in the beginning of June 2020, with mass protests being held across the province in retaliation for the shooting of a mother and her child by Pakistani army-supported criminals. Protests have erupted across Balochistan demanding justice for four-year-old Bramsh, who was shot along with her mother, Malik Naz, in Turbat city in southern Balochistan.<sup>45</sup> According to reports, thousands of protestors pelted stones and burned a number of military establishments, forcing Pakistani Army soldiers to abandon their border patrol posts.<sup>46</sup> The problem with the situation in Balochistan is that protests or campaigns do not suppress the brutality of the Pakistani forces but seem to only incite more of the same.

While reports of the large protests in the province surfaced on 11 June, the Pakistani military abducted eight Baloch youths four days later.<sup>47</sup> It is alleged that nearly 47,000 Baloch have been illegally abducted by the Pakistani armed forces.<sup>48</sup> Since the protests on 11 June 2020, reports have shown a significant increase in the number of enforced disappearances, raids, and arrests being carried out by the Pakistani Security Forces.<sup>49</sup> While the Baloch have strived endlessly for either a separate state or at the very least autonomy, representation, and an end to exploitation, none of their uprisings have gained them much in these regards. It remains to be seen if the recent protests and an increase in attacks will serve to change the current scenario.

## **Geopolitical Considerations**

The increased chances of protest and uprisings in Balochistan have not only destabilized the region but also affected the interests of a number of external actors. While undoubtedly compromising for some, it has also been used as a strategic tool by others. It goes without saying that a united Balochistan, how-

ever unlikely that possibility may be, is an existential threat to both Pakistan and Iran. In 2009, the Khan of Kalat, Mir Suleman Dawood, formed the Council for Independent Balochistan, which was meant to signify a renewed fight for the freedom of Balochistan. This council was to grant representation not only to other separatist leaders like Brahamdagh Bugti but also to Baloch from Iran.<sup>50</sup> While the initiative never gained traction, it is nonetheless indicative of the Baloch aspiration for a nation comprising of people on either side of the border. It is undoubtedly out of the fear of such aspirations that the governments of both Pakistan and Iran have adopted disproportionate uses of force in countering any uprisings in their provinces.

Another consideration that the Iranian government has to make with regard to the insurgency in Balochistan is that of strategic and economic needs. In light of increasing sanctions from the United States, Iran is seeking a way out into the international market and sees cooperation with China as the next best alternative. Already having shown support for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Tehran has also recently shown immense interest in the CPEC. In a joint statement in April 2019 between Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, the two countries pledged to support regional connectivity, raising concerns over a possible China–Iran–Pakistan nexus.<sup>51</sup> In such a scenario, any attacks by the Baloch on Chinese infrastructural projects in Pakistan are detrimental to Iranian interests as well. Therefore, during the meeting in April, decisions over the creation of a Joint Rapid Reaction Force in countering terrorism were made.<sup>52</sup> While this agreement may serve the strategic purposes of Iran, it could be highly compromising to Pakistan's neighbor to the east, India, with whom Iran has traditionally enjoyed good relations.

With Iran discussing the possibility of a liquefied natural gas pipeline being connected with the CPEC as well as greater cooperation between the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar, tensions in India have been stoked, as the latter port was developed with Indian investment.<sup>53</sup> For New Delhi, Chabahar was meant to be a means in circumventing Pakistan and solidifying India's access to Central Asia. The project was also part of New Delhi's larger aspirations of countering Chinese influence in the region through the development of India's own counter port. Supposed intervention by India in the region has thus been repeatedly used by the Pakistanis as a tool to link India with the Balochistan freedom struggle.<sup>54</sup> A separate, friendly, united Balochistan would undoubtedly serve India's greater strategic interests of containing Pakistan's ambitions. However, the question of whether the Indian government has truly intervened in the region is up for debate. Nonetheless, Pakistan has accused India of supporting militant groups in Balochistan since the very first uprising in 1948.

The reference to Balochistan in Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's speech in 2016 was also viewed by Islamabad as an intrusion into Pakistan's affairs.<sup>55</sup> However, with no references to Balochistan since then, it can be understood that the reference was merely meant as anti-Pakistan rhetoric related to the Kashmir issue rather than any actual support for the freedom movement. Nonetheless, the repercussions of such a statement were manifold. While the statement invigorated a few in Balochistan, it also had serious ramifications for others. According to Hybyair Marri, "If one had checked social media 10 days after the statement, one would have seen that Pakistanis killed about 60–70 Baloch each day," goading them to call on support from their Indian friends.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Pakistan sees external influence by India as the biggest threat to Balochistan.

On the other hand, for the Baloch, the biggest external threat comes from China. The Baloch approach toward Chinese investment, which was initially accusatory of Islamabad and Beijing's exploitation of Balochistan's resources, has gradually turned violent. Within the last two years, militants have carried out a number of shootings and bombings against Chinese infrastructural projects and Chinese workers. In March 2019, the BLA attacked a 22-vehicle convoy with a remote-controlled bomb that killed several Chinese engineers and workers.<sup>57</sup> The BLA, which is greatly opposed to further Chinese investment in the region, also targeted the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018.<sup>58</sup> The organization also claimed responsibility for an attack on a bus carrying Chinese mining workers in August of the same year.<sup>59</sup> This increase in attacks against the Chinese stems from the Balochs' feeling of being exploited and cheated out of their rightful resources. With the region already being majorly ignored and deprived by the Pakistani government, additional exploitation is unacceptable to the Baloch.

What the Baloch see as exploitation, Islamabad sees as development and Beijing sees as strategic influence. As part of the BRI, the CPEC has been touted as one of its biggest and most controversial projects yet. Initially valued at 46 billion USD, the total cost had risen to 62 billion USD as of 2017,<sup>60</sup> which has undoubtedly increased even more by now. With infrastructural projects spanning the length and breadth of Pakistan, it is perhaps the biggest project undertaken under the BRI. However, a majority of these projects are found in the province of Balochistan. The Gwadar International Port as well as its airport, along with a vast array of pipelines, railways, and highways all run through this region. These projects are meant merely to facilitate trade and mining for Pakistan and grant China access to the Arabian Sea. For the Baloch, however, there is not much to gain—not only are their resources being exploited but also their land. Gwadar, which constituted the crux of China's strategic plans for the region, has seen an entire special economic zone leased to China for a total of 40 years.<sup>61</sup> Recent reports

regarding the construction of a high-security compound near Gwadar Port, which will apparently be used as a naval base by China, have also surfaced.<sup>62</sup>

There is also another problem that the Baloch face from increased Chinese investment in the region. As is the case with other Chinese projects around the world, projects and investment under the BRI, including the CPEC, bring with them an influx of Chinese workers. It is believed that China plans to settle nearly 500,000 Chinese in Gwadar port as part of the CPEC, which will have serious repercussions on the national, economic, and historic rights of the Baloch.<sup>63</sup> With so many Chinese set to enter Balochistan, the Baloch fear irreversible demographic changes and increased marginalization.<sup>64</sup> In this context, Mir Suleman Dawood has not only touted the CPEC as an existential threat to the original inhabitants of Balochistan but has also called on both the United States and India to support an independent Balochistan.<sup>65</sup> While the Baloch have begun a series of attacks against CPEC projects within the region, their leaders are unsuccessfully attempting to draw in support from external stakeholders, terming the CPEC as “threatening to the interests of both India and the US.”<sup>66</sup>

Nonetheless, while such appeals have been directed at the US government time and again, Washington has largely turned a deaf ear. The role the United States plays in Balochistan is undoubtedly one of interest. Under the Obama administration, while some voiced support for a separate Balochistan, the official stance of the government was one against “carving out Balochistan from Pakistan”;<sup>67</sup> thus, leaving the Baloch to an uncertain fate. In recent times, the uncertainty of US support has increased, with Pres. Donald Trump going so far as to label the BLA as a terrorist group. Coming merely a year before the US presidential elections, this has been viewed as a move to appease the Pakistani government and spur on the Afghan–Taliban peace negotiations.<sup>68</sup> Amid the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the Trump administration considers the support of Pakistan to be critical to the peace process. Therefore, Washington has finally banned the BLA after years of Pakistani appeals for such action. This approval, however, has had serious ramifications for the Baloch freedom movement, reducing its autonomy and freedom to revolt.

While other issues within Asia have gained significant attention, the Balochs’ freedom struggle has been largely unreported or ignored. The conflict over Kashmir, for example, has featured widely in the international media as well as international government statements for decades. While the US government accepts Balochistan as the territory of Pakistan, it holds that the territory of Kashmir is disputed. Though Washington has expressed concern over the human rights abuses in Balochistan, it remains adamant in its opposition to self-determination for Balochistan.<sup>69</sup> In July 2019, 16 members of the European Parliament sent a

letter to President Trump, urging him to take cognizance of the human rights violations and exploitation in the region in response to him terming the BLA as terrorists.<sup>70</sup> While this may mark a certain divergence in stance by a portion of the international community, there has been minimal mention of Balochistan by EU member countries themselves. In sharp contrast, some EU member countries have issued statements on Kashmir, and the EU parliament has also extensively discussed the Kashmir issue.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, the international media has often castigated the Indian armed forces for perceived abuses in Kashmir, while largely ignoring the atrocities committed by the Pakistanis in Balochistan. The international community's contrasting approach to both these issues is quite questionable, lending itself to the politicization of strategic interests. In this scenario, the Baloch are yet again left to fend for themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The future of the Baloch and their freedom movement is embedded in uncertainty. While there are many who see the possibility of a resurgence as likely, the odds are stacked strongly against the Baloch. Lacking in both military prowess as well as economic financing, the Baloch have only been able to sustain their movement for this long due to sheer determination. Thus, the Baloch freedom struggle has suffered a shortage of numbers that will never be a match for the Pakistani military. However, this is not the only obstacle to a united state of Balochistan: the lack of international support and internal unity have also had similar effects. Most of the current leaders of Balochistan are subsumed by their own self-interests and internal political tensions and lack the motivation to form a common front against the Pakistani state. Not only have some sought to fight their own fight, causing the movement to splinter, but many leaders have also been wooed by the government in Islamabad and have thus turned against their own.<sup>72</sup>

The insufficiency of support from the international community for the movement has become apparent. Though the issue is one of international significance, owing to a number of external stakeholders and cross-border aspirations, it has still been ignored. What is quite apparent is the Baloch will never be able to make any significant gains or even win their freedom from the Pakistani state without external assistance. This has granted the Pakistani government a free hand in dealing with the region, allowing the military to sustain much of its activities in repression of the Baloch. A member of the Indian National Security Advisory Board stated in December 2019 that the insurgency in Balochistan was likely to intensify.<sup>73</sup> However, even if there is an iota of truth in this, it is more likely that this too will result in no gains for the Baloch, as the Pakistani state's repression against the Baloch is in fact intensifying in like fashion. According to the Human

Rights Council of Balochistan, the attacks and military raids against the Baloch have also significantly increased, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>74</sup>

The determining factor for the Baloch in the end will be that of external influence, whether for benefit or for harm. While India and the United States have chosen to either remain silent or make decisions that are detrimental to the survival of the Baloch freedom movement, the Chinese have been able to retain their presence in the region and almost complete the CPEC. This is clearly indicative of the fact that the Pakistani state has the influence and ability to constrain the insurgencies in the region and carry on with its projects and plans for Balochistan. Already deprived of their resources and repressed by the Pakistani state, it is likely that the Baloch may soon become a marginalized population in their own land. With the military becoming more repressive, the cases of enforced disappearances mounting daily, and the insurgency failing, it has become evident that the Baloch are running out of time. ❀

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