

# ISAS Insights

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Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## Conflict in Balochistan

*The year 2016 saw an eruption of violence in Balochistan. This paper examines the nature of conflict in the province and the role played by key stakeholders. It recommends four priority areas for Pakistan's leadership to focus on, in order to achieve peace and stability in Balochistan.*

Faiza Saleem<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, one of the most prominent news coming from Pakistan was the violence enveloping the province of Balochistan. The province is Pakistan's largest and enjoys a strategical location, sharing a border with Afghanistan and Iran on the west and an Arabian Sea coastline in the south. It is also rich in natural resources especially gold and copper, along with sizeable reserves of coal and gas. Yet the province is the least developed in Pakistan, with the highest instance of poverty. It consistently underperforms other provinces in education, health and employment indicators. In recent years, it has also become a hotbed for sectarian and militant violence. The scale and precision of attacks increased in 2016, indicating the ability of terrorists to attack soft and hard targets at will and over half of the 498 civilians killed in Pakistan died in terrorist attacks in Balochistan.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ms Faiza Saleem is Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at [faizasaleem@nus.edu.sg](mailto:faizasaleem@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> "Bomb Blasts in Balochistan, 2016." *Bomb Blasts in Balochistan, 2016*. N.p., 4 Dec. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

## Nature of Conflict

Balochistan is fraught with multiple conflicts, of which the principal is the separatist insurgency by Baloch nationalists. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947 and the province's reluctant accession, there have been five insurgencies, with the latest one starting in 2003. The ensuing violence has manifested itself in attacks on government and security forces, infrastructure such as gas pipelines and abduction and killing of labourers and engineers. Since 2012, the ongoing insurgency has been weakened due to the Army's operation and infighting amongst the nationalist groups but has not subsided completely.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, analysts point towards increasing numbers of moderate Baloch, especially the young and educated middle classes, joining the separatists.

The proliferation of militant groups has also led to an eruption of sectarian and ethnic conflicts in the province. For example, immediately after the police college attack on October 24th, Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, although security officials believe the militant group Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami (LJ-A) was responsible for executing the attack.<sup>4</sup> LJ-A is an offshoot of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LJ) with known ties to both Al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and focuses primarily on targeting security agencies and government installations.<sup>5</sup> Thus, IS and its local affiliates are gaining ground, recently claiming a suicide attack on a Sufi shrine in Khuzdar district of Balochistan, killing 52 people and injuring over a 100.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from targeting symbols of state, militant groups also openly condemn and kill the Shia community especially the Hazaras. Historically, Hazaras have been persecuted across Pakistan. Quetta, home to the Hazara community, has seen horrific incidents – such as the killing of 4 Hazara women by armed gunmen.<sup>7</sup> Ethnic conflict in the province also manifests itself against non-Baloch people or “settlers”. Punjabi or Urdu speaking teachers have become easy targets

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<sup>3</sup> Akbar, Malik Siraj. "The End of Pakistan's Baloch Insurgency?" *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 3 Nov. 2014. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> News, BBC. "Quetta Attack: Militants Kill Dozens at Balochistan Police College." *BBC News*. N.p., 25 Oct. 2016. Web. 21 Dec. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Khosa, Tariq. "Between the Devil & Deep State." *DAWN.COM*. 01 Nov. 2016. Web. 03 Nov. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Saleem Shahid | Abdul Wahid Shahwani. "52 Killed in Suicide Attack on Balochistan Shrine." *DAWN.COM*. N.p., 13 Nov. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Shah, Syed Ali. "Four Hazara Women Killed as Gunmen Open Fire on Quetta Bus." *DAWN.COM*. N.p., 05 Oct. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

and many have transferred out of the province due to safety reasons. In the recent past, Pashtuns, natives of Northern Balochistan have also been attacked.<sup>8</sup>

## **Key Stakeholders**

Balochistan carries pivotal importance for Pakistan due to its strategic location and wealth of natural resources. For the same reasons, it is of keen interest to other stakeholders – such as the Baloch nationalists and neighboring countries. Pakistan's immediate neighbors – Iran and Afghanistan share a common border with the province of Balochistan and India, China and Russia also have interests in the region. Therefore, it is necessary to examine each of the stakeholders in turn.

Apart from the Pakistan government, which is the primary stakeholder in the province, it is the Baloch nationalists that are key to the stability of the province. Although the insurgency has lost steam and ability to inflict damage, pockets of resistance still remain. More importantly, the educated middle-class is being driven towards anti-state radicalism. This is due to the indifference of the federal government, political victimization and extrajudicial killings, lack of provincial control over resources and most recently the construction of Gawadar Port. This widespread discontent feeds into the violence and divisions we see in the province today.

These divisions have a complex historical legacy due to the geographical location of the country. To the west of Pakistan, the province of Balochistan shares a border and the native Baloch population with Iran and Afghanistan, making it hugely important for both countries. Iran's 1.5mn Baloch are primarily settled in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan and for years, Iran has considered Balochistan as a portion of this province, causing uneasy relations with Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> However, at present it is focused on rebuilding its economy after the lifting of international sanctions and the completion of Chabahar port. It has also expressed a desire to be part of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a peaceful Balochistan is of mutual interest.

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<sup>8</sup> Newspaper, From The. "Settlers — Caught in Crossfire." *DAWN.COM*. N.p., 28 June 2011. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Chaudhry, Shahzad. "What Is Wrong with Balochistan?" *Thenews.com*. OPINION, 18 Nov. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Abbas, Syed Sammer. "Iran Wants to Be Part of CPEC, Says Rouhani." *DAWN.COM*. N.p., 22 Sept. 2016. Web. 21 Dec. 2016.

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan on the other hand are more challenging. The long and porous border makes it hard to control the movement of militants and weaponry. As a result, both countries regularly trade accusations over cross border terrorism. Pakistan claims that Afghanistan supports Baloch separatists such as Brahamdagh Bugti through training and safe havens. Afghanistan on the other hand accuses Pakistan of sheltering Afghan Taliban.<sup>11</sup> There is inherent tension and mistrust between the two countries. Afghanistan rejects the Durand Line<sup>12</sup> as international border between the two countries and claims that the Pashtuns were not given the right to self-determination at Pakistan's independence. Consequently, Balochistan finds itself in the middle of a tug of war between the two countries and national policies feed into violence within the province.

India's interest in Balochistan is a key sources of tension in bilateral relations between the two countries. Its interest emanates from Balochistan's strategic location and trepidation about growing Chinese influence through investments such as the Gawadar port. This year it has internationalized the Balochistan issue by discussing it in international forums and through speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Bringing up the Baloch insurgency serves as a response to Pakistan's stance on Kashmir and paints a negative image of Pakistan by drawing attention to the violence and use of force by the Army in the province. It remains to be seen how long India continues to raise this issue internationally. However, for the time being the insurgency in Pakistan's biggest province has been brought to the forefront, benefitting the nationalists immensely. Pakistan on the other hand believes that Indian support of Baloch nationalists extends to provision of arms, funding and training. It also sees India and Afghanistan's close ties as proof of collusion against it.

China is a staunch ally and provides Pakistan with political and economic support. It is also deeply invested in Balochistan. This involvement has benefited Pakistan since China has built the Gawadar deep sea port and infrastructure that will in turn give it access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, as well as a link to the Middle East and Europe. The \$46 bn CPEC project has already commenced operations and carries immense potential for both countries. However, the recent surge in violence threatens to cast a shadow over this project.

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<sup>11</sup> Khan, M. Ilyas. "Why Did Pakistan Admit to Hosting the Afghan Taliban?" *BBC News*. N.p., 03 Mar. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Durand Line was established after an 1893 memorandum of understanding (MoU) between British diplomat, Mortimer Durand of British India and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan.

Russia sees the significance of Balochistan in gaining a strategic foothold in Southwest Asia. Historically, relations between the two countries have been sour due to Pakistan's preference for ties with the US and its pivotal role in supporting the Mujahideen in the 1980s. However, recently Russia has stepped up relations by lifting a decades old arms embargo against Pakistan and holding the first ever joint military exercises in September 2016. This is beneficial for Pakistan as it faces increasing isolation in its neighbourhood and a friendly Russia will be inclined to supporting Pakistan's position on Balochistan. Russia on the other hand, hopes to play a central role in Afghanistan while preventing a civil war, which could threaten stability within Central Asia.

## Conclusion

Balochistan's problems are multifaceted and the competing interests of stakeholders within and outside Pakistan add to the complexity. To achieve peace and stability in Balochistan, a concerted effort is required from the Pakistan government to advance long-term, strategic policies.

First and foremost, the political process needs to be restarted. For decades, the armed insurgency in Balochistan was led by radical separatists, however, political repression has pushed many moderates as well as members of the middle classes to join the armed struggle. They have become increasingly wary of the Army's forceful tactics to suppress the uprising and induce patriotism. Thus, in order to give voice to these groups, leadership needs to return to the National Action Plan (NAP)<sup>13</sup> that involves empowering the provincial government for political reconciliation, without strings attached.<sup>14</sup> This democratic process may take time but it will deescalate tensions and bring separatists to the negotiation table. Only increased political representation can decrease the anger and frustration of the people of Balochistan. However, for decades the military has had a set policy in Balochistan resulting in a trust deficit between the military and civilian leadership.

Secondly, public sector spending on socio-economic development needs to be a priority. Balochistan is Pakistan's least developed province with 71% people living in multidimensional

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<sup>13</sup> The National Action Plan (NAP) was established by the Pakistan Government in January 2015 to crack down on terrorism, through setting up of military courts, implementation of death sentences, freezing of terrorism financing, banning of militant and sectarian groups and empowerment of local and provincial governments to carry out these tasks.

<sup>14</sup> Khosa, Tariq. "The Balochistan Saga." *DAWN.COM*. 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2016.

poverty.<sup>15</sup> Clearly the province with the most natural resources and prominent strategic location, is lagging behind in socio-economic development.<sup>16</sup> Public spending on education and health is low and infrastructure development is concentrated on resource extraction and more recently the CPEC project. Increasing public sector spending on developmental programs can produce tremendous benefits for the province. For example, road and rail networks, comparable to big cities in Punjab and Sindh should be initiated to increase economic activity and create jobs. The recently developed 27-km Orange Line Metro in Lahore benefits 250,000 passengers a day (increasing to 500,000 by 2025) and is estimated to have created 10,000 direct and indirect jobs through increased mobility and access. The Line will also benefit small businesses in Punjab.<sup>17</sup> Similar projects in Balochistan, if initiated by the federal government can lead to private sector investment, as well as positive effects on the Baloch economy. However, it is imperative that the jobs created be given to Baloch people and quotas set for ethnic minorities. Evidence suggests that projects started under CPEC have created jobs but they have been filled by non-Baloch candidates.<sup>18</sup> Such actions will not placate the dissatisfaction felt by the Baloch about their ethnic and political exclusion and exploited resources.

Thirdly, the Pakistani civilian and military leadership needs to distance itself from militant groups and extremist factions. In the past, these groups have been used to achieve the state's 'strategic' objectives in the region. Hence, distinctions were made between 'good and bad terrorists'. However, this policy has backfired as the same groups are now harming Pakistan and its relationships with other countries through their actions. It also erodes Pakistan's moral and political credibility if it cannot control the groups operating within its borders. The Pakistan military has made tremendous sacrifices in the fight against terrorism and operation Zarb-e-Azb<sup>19</sup> has been successful in targeting terrorist sanctuaries across North Waziristan. It has also brought relative peace to Pakistani cities, but unless a uniform approach is taken towards militant outfits, permanent peace will not be attainable.

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<sup>15</sup> Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) combines different factors to determine poverty beyond income-based lists. The three dimensions are Health, Education and Living Standards measured using ten indicators.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, Amin. "39pc of Pakistanis Live in Poverty; Fata, Balochistan Worst Hit." *DAWN.COM*. N.p., 21 June 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Baloch, Sanaullah. "CPEC: A Baloch Perspective." *Thenews.com*. OPINION, 4 Oct. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Baloch, Sanaullah. "CPEC: A Baloch Perspective." *Thenews.com*. OPINION, 4 Oct. 2016. Web. 08 Dec. 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Operation Zarb-e-Azb is a joint military offensive conducted by the Pakistan armed forces against foreign and local militant groups. It began in June 2014.

Lastly, Pakistan's foreign policy needs to be pragmatic and aligned with ground realities. An India-centric approach is harmful as it only serves to exacerbate tensions between the neighbors. While India expands its regional involvement through trade deals and soft power, Pakistan's perennial fear of Indian encirclement leads it to break diplomatic ties, close borders and view neighbours with suspicion. Such measures are counterproductive and if Pakistan continues with this approach, it risks losing its economic and strategic leverage. At the same time, Pakistan needs a sustainable working relationship with India which will only happen once both countries agree to discuss longstanding issues such as Kashmir.

Pakistan can use its relations with China and burgeoning friendship with Russia to bring stability to its most restive province. Both China and Russia have concrete reasons to welcome a peaceful and stable Balochistan. For China the "One Belt One Road" initiative is crucial for its energy supply and overseas market for manufactured goods. Thus, it requires a stable Balochistan. While Pakistan has invested in providing security, this has been limited to the Gawadar Port region. Recent attacks such as the one on Police College in Quetta or the Shrine in Khuzdar, underscore the need for wider and deeper security provision. Understanding that economic development is top priority of China, Pakistan must placate the security related concerns in order to attract greater Chinese investment across Balochistan. In addition, the shelved coal-powered projects designated under CPEC could be reinitiated in the province. Russia is concerned with conditions in Afghanistan and an unstable and violent Balochistan is bad news for the region. With Pakistan responding positively to Russian overtures, relations may improve between the two. In sum, far-sighted policies and stronger ties with neighbouring countries will help Pakistan isolate and fight terrorist elements. This has to be accompanied by sustained investment in development and reforms for strengthening provincial governance in Balochistan.

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