FAISAL BROTHERS

A bus drives past a damaged vehicle in Bolan district of Balochistan, Pakistan August 27, 2024 (Reuters/Naseer Ahmed)

CONFLICT

Does Pakistan Underestimate Balochistan's Rebels?

Discover the complexities behind the recent violence, the region's rich resources, and the historical context driving the insurgency.

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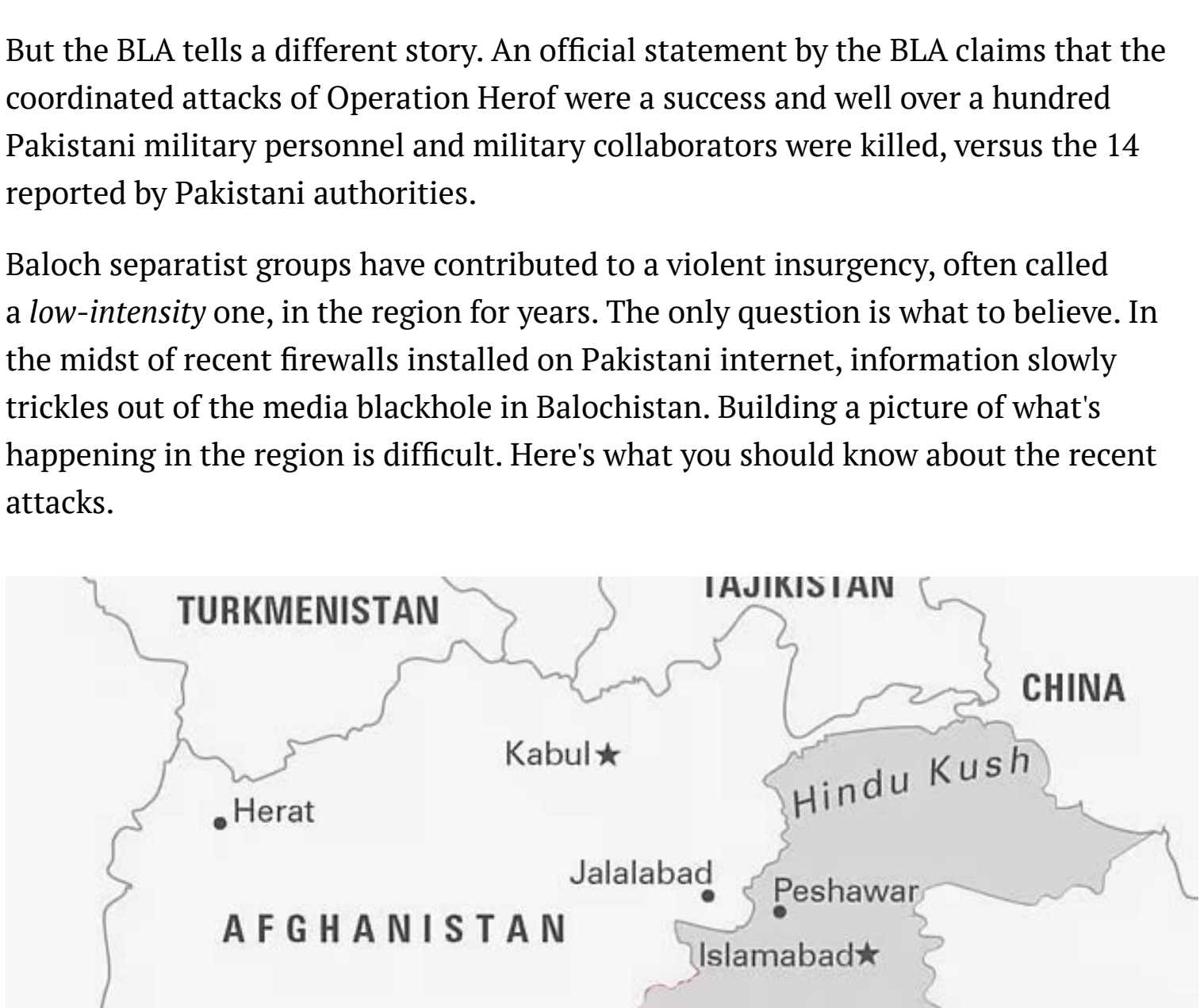
Over the past few days, scores were killed in Balochistan as a series of attacks rocked the region. Attacks targeting key infrastructure and Pakistani security forces were quickly claimed by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), an infamous Baloch separatist group. Last Thursday, the Pakistani Army raided a BLA camp in the mountainous areas of Gishk, which turned into a 2-day affair claiming both Pakistani and Baloch lives.

More recently, dozens more were killed in BLA operations on a major highway in Bela, a road near Musakhel, a railway in Bolan, and a police station in Kalat. In the wake of the violence, the BLA announced the end of the first phase of Operation Herouf. Not only did the operation allegedly kill 130 Pakistan military personnel, the BLA also controlled checkpoints on highways for 12 hours and a Pakistani military camp for 20 hours.

In response, Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi decried the attacks (some of which allegedly targeted Pubjabi citizens), promised retribution, and called on the provincial governments of Balochistan to repress terrorism. Today, President Asif Ali Zardari ordered the Interior Minister to completely eliminate terrorists, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called for an aggressive response. In clearance operations, the Pakistani Army reports to have killed 21 Baloch militants and says 14 of its own troops died in the attacks.

But the BLA tells a different story. An official statement by the BLA claims that the coordinated attacks of Operation Herof were a success and well over a hundred Pakistani military personnel and military collaborators were killed, versus the 14 reported by Pakistani authorities.

Baloch separatist groups have contributed to a violent insurgency, often called a *low-intensity* one, in the region for years. The only question is what to believe. In the midst of recent firewalls installed on Pakistani internet, information slowly trickles out of the media blackhole in Balochistan. Building a picture of what's happening in the region is difficult. Here's what you should know about the recent attacks.



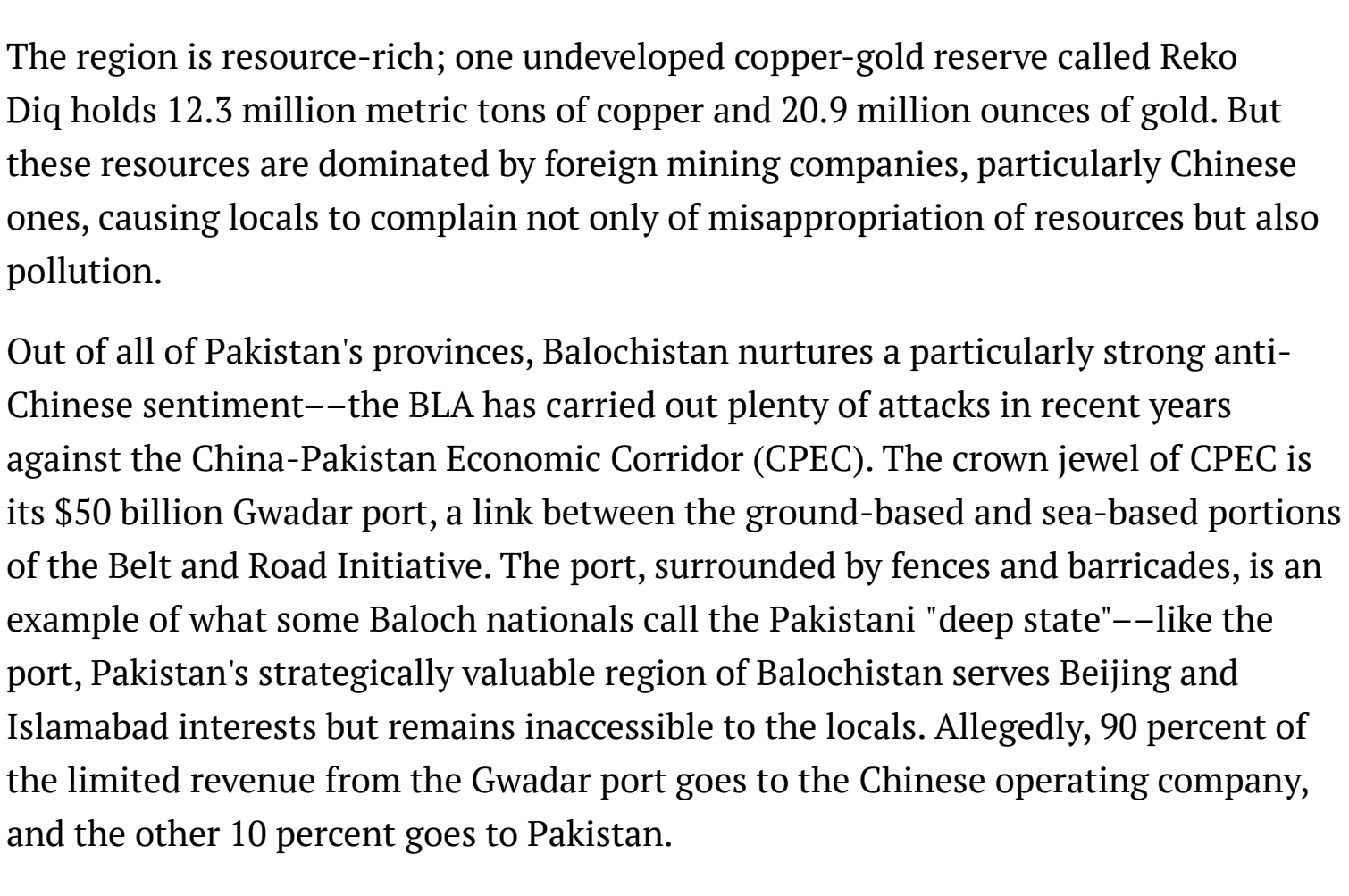
A map of Pakistan and the surrounding region highlighting Balochistan Province (IRIN)

The Landscape of Balochistan

Fragments of the Balochistan landscape––a Chinese-controlled Gwadar port, an under-examined human rights crisis, and continual IED attacks––all connect to each other. The human rights crisis, exacerbated by poverty, encourages locals to join militant movements, often the only chance at income or upward mobility. These militant movements prompt aggressive counter-insurgency action, which intensifies the human rights crisis.

The region is resource-rich; one undeveloped copper-gold reserve called Reko Diq holds 12.3 million metric tons of copper and 20.9 million ounces of gold. But these resources are dominated by foreign mining companies, particularly Chinese ones, causing locals to complain not only of misappropriation of resources but also pollution.

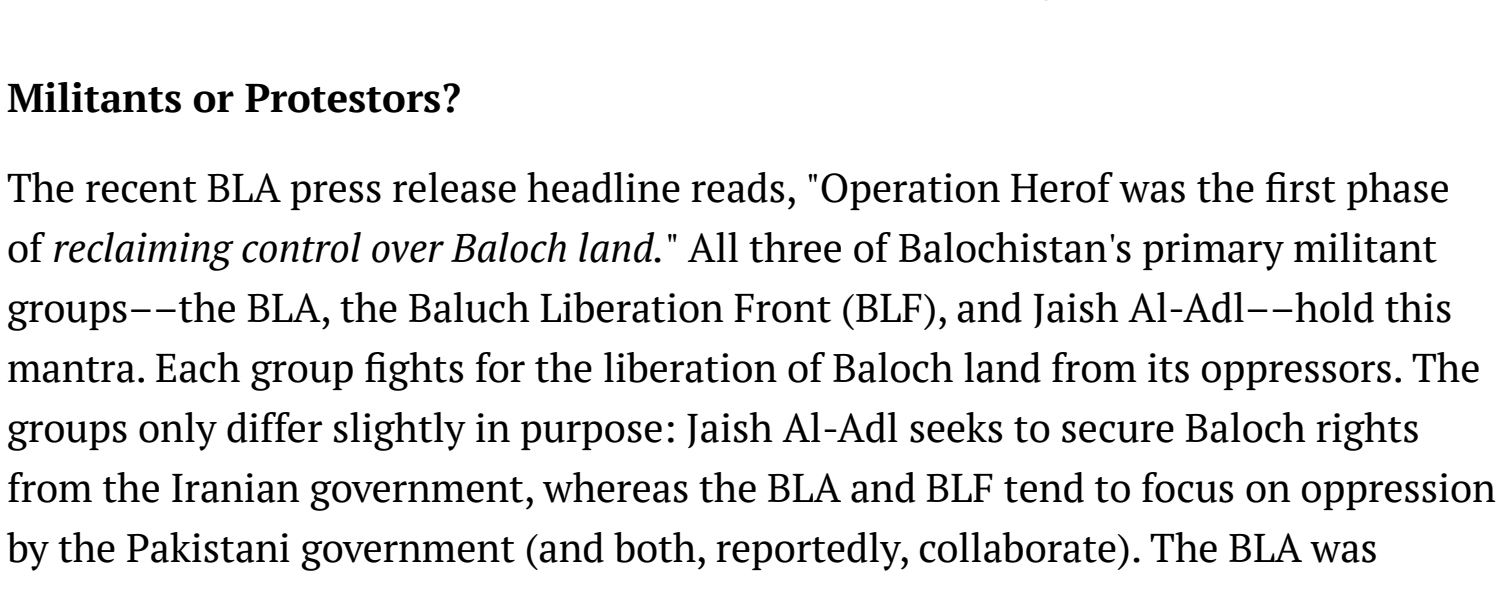
Out of all of Pakistan's provinces, Balochistan nurtures a particularly strong anti-Chinese sentiment––the BLA has carried out plenty of attacks in recent years against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The crown jewel of CPEC is its $50 billion Gwadar port, a link between the ground-based and sea-based portions of the Belt and Road Initiative. The port, surrounded by fences and barricades, is an example of what some Baloch nationals call the Pakistani "deep state"––like the port, Pakistan's strategically valuable region of Balochistan serves Beijing and Islamabad interests but remains inaccessible to the locals. Allegedly, 90 percent of the limited revenue from the Gwadar port goes to the Chinese operating company, and the other 10 percent goes to Pakistan.



Chinese workers pose for a picture with Pakistani soldiers in Gwadar port, November 13, 2016 (Aamir Qureshi AFP/Getty Images)

The Baloch people have historically endured oppression by foreign powers, and Baloch tribes were nomadic for centuries. Now, the region is administratively divided into three regions: the Iranian-administered region, the Pakistani-administered region, and the Afghan-administered one. Pakistan administers most of the region by far. Balochistan was annexed by Pakistan in 1948, and the most recent insurgency started in 2000 when militants began targeting a Pakistani army base. Notably, Baloch nationalist movements are secular, as Baloch peoples priorly were culturally secular (although a report by Nova SouthEastern University claims Pakistani and Baloch citizens have a negligible difference in their Islamic political views).

A recent report by the Human Rights Council of Balochistan totaled the number of enforced disappearances in Balochistan over the month of July at 76. According to the Council, the Pakistan army is responsible for an overwhelming amount of those disappearances, and Baloch separatists allege that the Pakistan army is also responsible for tortures, killings, and imprisonments. Because the provincial government is administered and leaders nominated by Pakistan, the local government is seen as unhelpful to Baloch nationalists.



Baloch protestors at the sit-in at Gwadar port in June, initiated by the BYC (via Telegram)

Militants or Protestors?

The recent BLA press release headline reads, "Operation Herof was the first phase of *reclaiming control over Baloch land.*" All three of Balochistan's primary militant groups––the BLA, the Baluch Liberation Front (BLF), and Jaish Al-Adl––hold this mantra. Each group fights for the liberation of Baloch land from its oppressors. The groups only differ slightly in purpose: Jaish Al-Adl seeks to secure Baloch rights from the Iranian government, whereas the BLA and BLF tend to focus on oppression by the Pakistani government (and both, reportedly, collaborate). The BLA was recognized by the US as a terrorist organization in 2019. Investigating photos of the members of the BLA and BLF show ranks of young men and women, sometimes students, whose parents often were involved in Baloch nationalist movements before them.

Yet the political environment of Balochistan is rapidly changing. Decades ago, the insurgency gained traction after the death of a Bugti tribe leader and Pakistani politician named Nawab Akbar Bugti. As a politician and local leader, Bugti fought for his tribe's autonomy and asked Islamabad to give control of the region's resources to the tribes, with a moratorium on military bases being constructed. Bugti reportedly controlled militants who conducted attacks on Pakistani security forces. His death in 2006 became a subject of national debate, with some claiming it was a deliberate killing by the Pakistani army and others claiming it was an accident. The recent Operation Herof attacks occurred on the anniversary of Bugti's death.

But whereas Bugti primarily advocated for his own tribe, the movement today is a more unified and holistic front: the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC). A Baloch woman named Mahrang Baloch leads the BYC, a Baloch human rights organization that has been able to unite various tribes for protests. The BYC's first major protest was staged in 2023 after the killing of a young Baloch man by security forces––a young man who had previously been forcibly disappeared. Mahrang claimed this killing was a "fake encounter." The BYC organized protestors into a long march to Islamabad, which caught media attention. Last June, the BYC organized a "national gathering," asking Baloch people to travel to Gwadar for a sit-in that lasted 10 days. Both on the way and at Gwadar, the protestors were met with violence from Pakistani security forces. Pakistani army officials have even accused the BYC of being a proxy for Baloch rebel groups. In response, critics have accused the Pakistani forces of repressing a peaceful alternative to militant organizations.

Pakistani security forces respond to a bomb at an election rally in Balochistan province on July 13, 2018 (Banaras Khan/AFP/Getty Images)

Pakistani SSG or Death Squads?

In the past few days, Pakistani officials have made reference to their killing of rebels by Pakistani security forces in a raid. But according to the official BLA statement, the attack was successfully repelled. On the morning of the 22nd, "hundreds of Special Service Group (SSG) commandos" were deployed around the camp. Baloch media reported shelling by gunships and ambulances carrying troops leaving the area during this time. According to the statement, by the end of the repelled attack 48 hours later, 12 Pakistani SSG forces were dead and 18 more injured as BLA fighters launched counterattacks, driving them back.

The BLA treated the allegedly successful defense as a testimony to their strength. If Pakistani special forces did indeed retreat after 48 hours, it's a significant event for two reasons. Firstly, Pakistan's use of its own troops instead of death squads points to a frustrated Beijing and Islamabad's growing fear of negative press. Secondly, the subsequent retreat of the SSG means the tactical capabilities of insurgent Baloch groups could be underestimated (this theory seems strengthened after the subsequent Operation Herof attacks). Or perhaps the failure points to lowered training standards in the SSG. Pakistan's special operations forces could equally suffer from low morale; the SSG has conducted numerous anti-militant operations in other parts of Pakistan, as well, which have been met with public backlash.

Local Baloch media, especially dissident media, claims that the Pakistani army has operated through locally-recruited death squads in Balochistan for at least over a decade. For example, the Baloch Mussallah Diffa Tanzeem was a tribal militia formed in 2008 to protect Baloch locals from rebels, but allegedly was largely funded and supplied through connections to the Pakistani military. Baloch separatist voices have accused the Pakistani paramilitary group known as the Frontier Corps (Pakistan's paramilitary organization) of funding various private militias from around this time, who reportedly are run by drug lords, Islamic extremists, or pro-Pakistani figures.

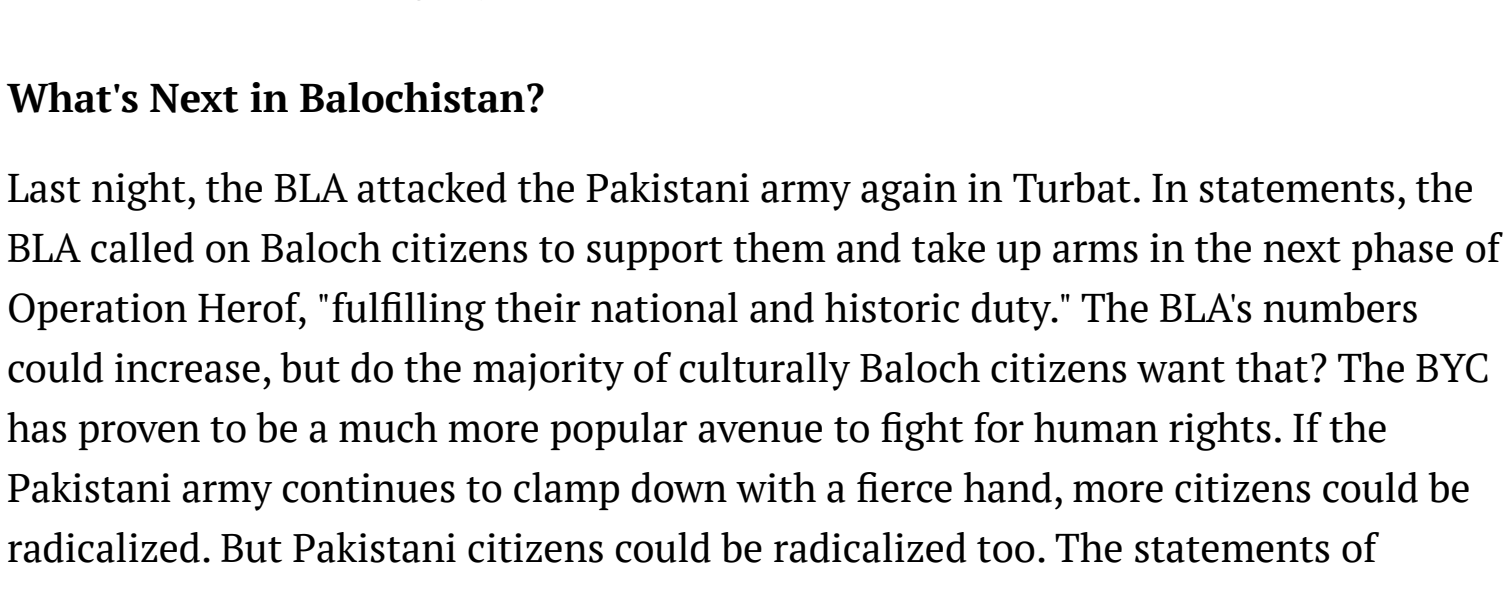
If the FC has shifted away from funding death squads to utililzing its own troops, it's likely due to media attention and Chinese pressure. Beijing politicians and Chinese investors, anxious to secure its key investments in Balochistan (both those of CPEC and otherwise), need the organizational approach of the Azm-e-Istehkam (or Resolve for Stability) Pakistan's "intelligence-based" military campaign. And because of the leverage of CPEC and other economic agreements, it can force Pakistan to do so. The UN recently called on Pakistan to take the necessary measures of investigating and prosecuting enforced disappearances. That is a step in the right direction, but it is threatened by the death squads that allegedly utilize ransoms to make money.

Operation Herof Attacks: What Happened?

Furthermore, the possibility that the Pakistani military establishment has underestimated the BLA is not only evidenced by the repelled raid but also by the subsequent Operation Herof attacks. The raid on the BLA camp is perhaps connected to the BLA's next actions; either it pressured the BLA to take action, or the Frontier Corps hoped to prevent attacks with a successful raid. Either way, we have yet to see what the Pakistani response is to these attacks, and it will likely be strong.

The Pakistani media narrative is that the highway attacks included the indiscriminate burning of cars at the highway checkpoints and also at a Levies station. They also allege that the BLA deliberately sought out Punjabi drivers on the road, pulling them out of cars and killing them. The logic behind that ethnic violence would be similar to the BLA's attacks on Chinese workers: they are taking Baloch jobs.

On the other hand, in its statements, the BLA claimed that the passengers it shot were off-duty or undercover Pakistani intelligence, army, or Frontier Corps members. It also alleges the only vehicles it burned were those carrying Baloch supplies to Pakistan, and Pakistani military and death squad operatives burned the rest to sow unrest. Additionally, the local police and Levies (the local paramilitary outfit) were apparently warned not to assist the Pakistani security forces in counterattacks. Footage released by the BLA details not only the occupied camp but the other attacks, too, including the highway checkpoints set up. A warning by the BLA was issued before the attacks allegedly warning citizens to stay off the roads.



A vehicle burned in the recent highway attacks in Balochistan (AP/Rahmat Khan)

What's Next in Balochistan?

Last night, the BLA attacked the Pakistani army again in Turbat. In statements, the BLA called on Baloch citizens to support them and take up arms in the next phase of Operation Herof, "fulfilling their national and historic duty." The BLA's numbers could increase, but do the majority of culturally Baloch citizens want that? The BYC has proven to be a much more popular avenue to fight for human rights. If the Pakistani army continues to clamp down with a fierce hand, more citizens could be radicalized. But Pakistani citizens could be radicalized too. The statements of Pakistan officials about the recent attacks generally say the BLA wreaked havoc over the past weekend in order to target Punjabi citizens blithely, inflaming ethnic tensions. Yet the actual footage released by the BLA of their operations shows an unexpected level of coordination for random ethnic killings. The BLA is clearly tapped into reliable IED and other military supply networks.

Sadly, the important question doesn't seem to be what the *Baloch people* believe about the recent attacks, but rather what *Pakistan* and other countries do. The beliefs of the larger powers will shape Balochistan's future. China can't afford for the Baloch insurgency to gain international (or even national) sympathy, much less can Pakistan. Thankfully for them, sympathy seems unlikely. The BLA is still recognized by the US as a terrorist organization. Consequently, the Baloch separatist voices could look to their Taliban neighbors for political support but run the risk of tainting their reputation and exchanging a Pakistani "deep state" for an Afghan one. Hope remains in the BYC, a peaceful organization that could initiate more "National Gatherings" in the future. Although the Pakistan military complex has criticized the organization, other Pakistani voices have expressed support.

At the start of 2014, mass graves were uncovered in the Khuzdar district of Balochistan. Locals reported that the decomposing bodies totaled somewhere over 165 (a number Pakistan disputed). Human rights organizations suspected that the bodies were those who had gone missing in enforced disappearances or extrajudicial killings. In the years that followed, mass graves in Balochistan were discovered more and more. The total number of uncovered bodies is now well above a thousand. Pakistan's deliberate cordoning off of the graves forced many Baloch locals to believe what they already suspected: Pakistan was carrying out large-scale extrajudicial killings. Thus, the question for Islamabad is: what should be done with the Baloch citizens who believe Pakistan is behind a human rights crisis?

Analysis

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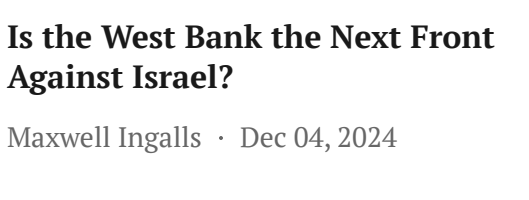

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