

# The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications

By Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch, and Riccardo Valle

The Baloch insurgency in Pakistan has intensified sharply since the beginning of 2025, marked by sophisticated attacks such as the Jaffar Express hijacking by Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction (BLA-J) on March 11, 2025, which resulted in the kidnapping of more than 400 passengers and death of at least 26 hostages. Groups such as BLA-J, Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Liberation Army-Azad faction (BLA-A) continue to deploy suicide bombers, including women, and temporarily seize territories, targeting Chinese nationals and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. The insurgency's regional spillover, especially into Iran, and competition for resources and prominence among factions of the insurgency further complicate Pakistan's internal security. The Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar (BRAS) coalition among some of the major Baloch armed groups involved in the conflict enables large-scale, coordinated strikes, undermining counterterrorism efforts. Without a political resolution addressing long-standing grievances, the insurgency threatens to escalate, destabilizing both national and regional security.

The March 2025 Jaffar Express hijacking by the Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand faction (BLA-J) marked a major escalation in the Baloch insurgency, showcasing the group's growing operational sophistication and the ongoing security challenges facing Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> On March 11, BLA-J militants halted the Quetta-to-Peshawar passenger train in the Bolan Pass by detonating explosives, then took the passengers hostage—primarily targeting security personnel on leave who were traveling back from Balochistan to their homes—and issued demands for the release of Baloch political prisoners. While the actual number of passengers on board at the moment of the attack fluctuates and varies according to several sources, both official and unofficial accounts reported that more than 400 people were traveling.<sup>2</sup> However, according to the militants, they released civilians from the train while 214 off-duty security forces personnel were taken hostage for more than 48 hours before the subsequent rescue operation, “Operation Green Bolan,” led to the deaths of all 33 BLA-J militants.<sup>3</sup> According to Pakistan's official statements, 354 hostages were released, while the operation also resulted in 30 casualties, including 26 passengers and four rescuers.<sup>4</sup> The discrepancy between the number of passengers, hostages, and the casualties claimed by militants and Pakistan's security forces contributed to the lack of transparency surrounding the attack, fueling the kind of resentments among the local population that have resulted in the ongoing political turmoil in the province.<sup>5</sup> From

a security perspective, the attack underscored the insurgency's capacity to disrupt national infrastructure, amplify its separatist agenda, and expose critical weaknesses in Pakistan's internal security.

Over the past three years, Pakistan has faced a rise in both the frequency and complexity of attacks in Balochistan, driven by various Baloch militant factions (see the Appendix for a table detailing the militant factions). While some groups conduct sporadic, small-scale operations, others have expanded their capabilities, launching daily attacks against security forces and executing large-scale operations involving dozens or even hundreds of militants. Since early 2025, in addition to the Jaffar Express attack, Baloch factions have carried out four suicide bombings—using both male and female attackers—along with three major operations that resulted in the temporary occupation of suburban areas.<sup>6</sup> While the overwhelming majority of the attacks carried out by Baloch militant factions are concentrated within Balochistan province, a notable exception is Karachi, in Sindh province, where BLA-J and other militant factions have conducted devastating attacks, including suicide ones.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, some minor factions are active in other areas of Sindh province and, to a lesser extent, in the southern areas of Punjab province, where they attack gas pipelines and machinery related to mineral extractions.<sup>8</sup>

The growing number of attacks and their sophistication, including against ambitious targets and through complex tactics employed by militant factions, reflects a long-term approach to the insurgency. Some Baloch militant groups have consolidated their power and refined their tactics, while others, despite internal

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divisions, have managed to remain relevant within the context of the insurgency and compete with other factions for resources and image projection. Weaker factions, meanwhile, depend on broader alliances to maintain relevance within the insurgency.

Despite their differences, Baloch militant groups share common historical narratives that shape their campaigns and target selection. As a result, Chinese nationals and foreign investments in Balochistan remain priority targets across factions, with the groups also hostile toward political elections in the province and in Pakistan, as they are seen as instruments of repression by the Pakistani state. Attacks by Baloch militant groups have heightened tensions between Pakistan and neighboring countries, particularly as the insurgency expands into other areas traditionally considered part of “Greater Balochistan”—the historical geographical region that encompasses areas of modern-day Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—reinforcing the conflict’s growing regional dimension.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the recent April 12, 2025, attack in Iran that claimed the lives of eight Pakistani nationals was claimed by a Baloch militant faction that operates in both Pakistan and Iran.<sup>10</sup>

This article is structured into two parts. The first part, which contains three subsections, traces the trajectory of the Balochistan conflict up to 2025. Although it does not provide a comprehensive historical overview, the first subsection offers a brief background on the conditions that triggered the insurgency, laying the groundwork for an analysis in the second subsection of intra-group dynamics and the third subsection’s examination of the evolution of armed factions’ attack capabilities and political goals. Part Two includes four subsections and examines distinctive features of the Baloch insurgency. The first subsection explores the roots and violent expressions of anti-China sentiment among Baloch militant groups, including the use of suicide bombers. The second subsection discusses the deployment of female attackers in Pakistan’s militant landscape. The next two subsections turn to domestic and international dynamics. The third subsection reviews the militants’ repeated assaults on elections, while the fourth examines the cross-border dimensions of the insurgency in Pakistan and Iran, and its implications for Pakistan’s regional relations. The conclusion highlights persistent challenges in Pakistan’s counterinsurgency strategy and outlines possible future security scenarios.

The article draws on two main types of sources. A wide array of primary sources—including propaganda, public claims, and statements issued by armed groups, particularly over the past five years—are analyzed to track shifts in tactics and the scale of violence. Secondary sources are also used to provide historical context and evaluate the long-term evolution of militant factions.

Specifically, in terms of numbers of attacks, the authors decided to present the number of claimed attacks by militant organizations in order to highlight the magnitude of the growth of activity of the groups as the groups themselves have defined it. While these attacks cannot be entirely verified through official and secondary sources, a number of other sources, such as think tanks and research centers—including the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and Global Terrorism Index (GTI)—reported on the increasing worsening deterioration of the security landscape in Pakistan and, specifically, in Balochistan province due to the attacks of Baloch separatists.<sup>11</sup> The authors also acknowledge that several sources have questioned the reliability of claimed attack data by Baloch militant groups. Furthermore, the authors are not aware of a systematic study that empirically evaluates the veracity of the

claims in relation to attacks recorded by neutral observers, as even data elaborated by ACLED tend to mix and overlap Baloch militant organizations and underreport their attacks.

## Part One: The Trajectory of the Conflict

### *Background*

The Baloch people, who inhabit the larger tripartite region of Balochistan spanning Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan—a resource-rich but underdeveloped province—have long felt marginalized by the central government of Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> This sense of marginalization has fueled separatist movements and armed insurgencies that have evolved over decades.<sup>13</sup> The roots of the conflict lie in the post-partition era of the Indian Subcontinent, specifically with the accession of the Kalat State to Pakistan in March 1948.<sup>14</sup> The treaty of accession, signed at the request of Pakistan’s founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, prompted Agha Abdul Karim—brother of the Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmed Yar Khan—to revolt against the decision and lead an armed insurrection from the Jhalawan region of the state, commonly known as the first phase of the Baloch conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Although the armed revolt ended a year later with the prince’s surrender, it planted the first seed of Baloch insurgency against the Pakistan state.<sup>16</sup> The years between 1948 and 1955 saw the gradual incorporation of Balochistan into Pakistan’s state system through legislative measures. This period was described as a “long, complex, and essentially one-sided process of accession [to Pakistan] ... [leaving] a legacy of hostility, warfare and tensions that has served as a source of motivation for Baloch nationalists.”<sup>17</sup>

Another uprising in 1958 (commonly known as the second phase of the conflict) contributed to the consolidation of the Baloch people’s demand for self-determination and kept the insurgent movement alive.<sup>18</sup> While the initial two phases were deeply rooted in traditional politics and closely linked to the Khan of Kalat, the third phase, beginning in 1963 with Sher Muhammad Marri’s Baloch People’s Liberation Front (BPLF), marked a shift.<sup>19</sup> A new generation of leaders and commanders emerged, drawing on both the legacy of Balochistan’s independent past and Marxist-Leninist ideology.<sup>20</sup>

The fourth phase of the insurgency emerged in the 1970s when Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, influenced by concerns from the Shah of Iran over rising nationalist sentiments in Iranian Balochistan, dismissed Balochistan’s Chief Minister, Sardar Atta Ullah Mengal, and the provincial government led by the National Awami Party (NAP).<sup>21</sup>

After a period of relative calm in the 1990s, the fifth phase of the conflict developed due to escalating tensions between Baloch nationalist parties—weakened and incapable of forming a united political front—and the Pakistani state over persistent social and economic inequalities.<sup>22</sup> Baloch people’s demands for greater political rights, control over resources, and increased autonomy intensified. Political confrontations in the early 2000s acted as catalysts for this renewed wave of conflict, after the issue of enforced disappearances of Baloch activists and their families by elements allegedly connected to Pakistan’s security apparatus emerged as the leading humanitarian issue and driver of the conflict.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, economic demands from Baloch society clashed with perceived exploitation of Baloch resources by the central government in Islamabad and, subsequently, by China in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Chinese nationals and





*A police personnel stands guard on the Jaffar Express passenger train as it resumes its services days after an attack by ethnic Baloch separatists at the Quetta Railway station in Quetta, Pakistan, on March 28, 2025. (Banaras Khan/AFP via Getty Images)*

projects related to the CPEC became an important target, viewed by insurgents as symbols of external exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources by a so-called foreign power. The perception is exacerbated by the fact that while CPEC has been widely publicized as an opportunity for all the Baloch people to develop the province with the help of the central government and China and to increase their lifestyle, Balochistan remains an underdeveloped province marked by inequality.<sup>24</sup>

Since the first phases of the insurgency, the Baloch militant leadership and its militants have matured a strong political vision of separation from Pakistan that has endured throughout the years. This vision rests on several socio-economic factors as well as perceived human rights violations and limitations of civil liberties lamented by several segments of Baloch society.<sup>25</sup> Political, economic, and social grievances intersect nationalist and separatist sentiments, continuously fueling the conflict.

Today, on the backdrop of solid national self-awareness, separatist, militant factions whose attack capabilities grew over the years are now gradually shifting from a guerrilla-centered insurgency to new tactics that combine guerrilla warfare and the temporary occupation of areas. These tactics are preparatory to the final goal of all Baloch militant organizations: the complete independence of Balochistan, from their perspective, or the eventual conquest of the province, from Pakistan. Differences between the scope of and approach to this goal remain, with some factions limiting their conflict only to Pakistan while others expanding it to neighboring countries that form the "Greater Balochistan:" Iran and, to some extent, Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Unity and Divisions within the Insurgency in Balochistan since the 2000s***

During a police crackdown in the 1990s on a protest in Balochistan's capital city, Quetta, called by the pro-independence movement Haq-e-Tawar, a protester—Aslam Baloch—opened fire on the police as retaliation for using force against the peaceful protesters. This heralded a new phase of the Baloch insurgency as Baloch nationalists nurtured that any peaceful means of struggle can face hard handed response from the Pakistani government.<sup>27</sup> After Baloch nationalist Hyrbyair Marri founded the separatist group Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) in 1996, Aslam Baloch, also known as Aslam Achu, became first commander of BLA in the Bolan area of Balochistan.<sup>28</sup>

After the inception of BLA, another name came to prominence:<sup>29</sup> Aslam Baloch, became a pivotal figure in the conflict. He is considered to be the father of the modern guerrilla warfare of the BLA and an influential figure between different factions of the insurgency. In 2018 Baloch became the head of the splinter group BLA-J after being expelled by the BLA over organizational disciplinary issues. In December that year he was mysteriously killed in Kandahar city, Afghanistan in December 2018<sup>30</sup> Aslam Baloch was a field commander of BLA who was later expelled by the group over organizational disciplinary issues, which led to foundation of BLA-J faction in 2018.<sup>31</sup>

In 1998, the nationalist government of Balochistan, led by Chief Minister Sardar Akhtar Mengal, was removed from power through a non-confidence motion backed by the then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and Hyrbyair Marri, the brain beyond the BLA, who served as the provincial Communications and Works Minister under Mengal's government, departed for the United Kingdom silently in 2000.<sup>32</sup> In 2000, Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri,

the father of Hyrbayir Marri and an ideologue of the new nationalist movement in Balochistan, was arrested in connection with the murder case of Justice Nawaz Marri, a senior judge of Balochistan's high court who was shot dead in Quetta.<sup>33</sup> This incident led to early confrontations between the Baloch and the Pakistani state, as the seeds of the Baloch insurgency movement had been sown in the province.<sup>34</sup> These events instigated the BLA to begin in 2000 with the guidance of some former fighters from the previous 1970s insurrection, mostly from the Marri tribes.<sup>35</sup> In its initial stages in early 2000, the group targeted government installations, railway lines, and communication and transmission lines in the province. The BLA also carried out rocket attacks, landmine explosions, and dynamite attacks against the Pakistani government's paramilitary group the Frontier Corps (FC).<sup>36</sup> In 2003, another faction of the Baloch insurgency emerged: the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF). Essentially, the BLF was born as the sister organization of BLA, created with the support of the latter in order to expand the Baloch insurgency into traditionally Baloch middle-class areas, such as in Makran and Rakhshan divisions of Balochistan.<sup>37</sup>

Between 2000 and 2005, the BLA and BLF became a major security concern for Pakistani security forces and international investors in Balochistan.<sup>38</sup> On May 3, 2004, three Chinese engineers working in Gwadar were killed by the BLF.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Baloch insurgents fired rockets during President Musharraf's gathering in the Kohlu district on December 14, 2005, provoking a retaliation from the Pakistani state.<sup>40</sup> A political confrontation developed between the government and Baloch nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Bugti over the issues of employment and a land lease by the Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL), which was perceived to have been framed in bad faith over provincial shares of royalty by central government, resulting in economic exploitation.<sup>41</sup> Soon, clashes occurred between Nawab Bugti and the Bugti tribe on the one side and security forces on the other, ultimately leading to Bugti's death in August 2006. Bugti's death marked a turning point, galvanizing support for the Baloch armed groups and strengthening the existing BLA and BLF insurgency, leading to the creation of a new organization called the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and fueling anti-government attacks in the province.<sup>42</sup>

The situation intensified when the then BLA leader, Balach Marri, son of Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri, was killed in unclear circumstances in Afghanistan in November 2007.<sup>a</sup> His death triggered the aggravation of an already volatile situation in Balochistan, including the capital city of Quetta, as Balach was a popular figure among the Baloch youth. His death instigated unrest and heightened the youth's inclination toward insurgency throughout Balochistan.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, in September 2008, the BLA, BRA, and BLF declared a ceasefire for the first and only time in the long-standing conflict, and Pakistani security forces scaled back their operations, hoping for political reconciliation in the province.<sup>44</sup> However, Pakistan did not respond.<sup>45</sup>

Between 2008 and 2018, the insurgency remained relatively small in scale, with some exceptions. In December 2011, the BLA conducted its first and only suicide bombing, targeting Baloch politician Shafeeq Mengal in Quetta.<sup>46</sup> This remained the sole suicide attack in the Baloch insurgency until BLA's 2017 split, when one faction (BLA-J) resumed such operations, followed by the other (BLA-A) in 2025.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Fragmented Insurgency and Intra-group Rivalries*

Organizational conflicts within the Baloch insurgency often stem from strategic rivalries, leadership disputes, class dynamics, class disparities, and power struggles. The current alliance between BLF and the BLA splinter group BLA-J, for example, was preceded by tensions between the two factions. Initially, BLA supported BLF's expansion, but as their areas of operation—particularly in southern Balochistan—began to overlap, competition over resources and recruits intensified. Tactical differences and tribal influences further deepened the divide, with BLF repeatedly rejecting integration into BLA, solidifying their distinct operational paths.<sup>48</sup>

The first major split occurred in 2012 when the United Baloch Army (UBA) broke away from the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) amid allegations of financial fraud involving Hyrbayir Marri and Mehran Marri, a Baloch separatist leader and brother of Hyrbayir Marri.<sup>b</sup> The rift led to their separation, deepening tensions between their factions and sparking conflicts over resources, including bloody clashes over equipment and resources in the early stages of disputes.<sup>49</sup>

Organizational disputes within the Baloch insurgency have often led to further fragmentation. A key example occurred in 2017 when the BLA expelled commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib Baloch over disciplinary issues, particularly Aslam's unauthorized visit to India for medical treatment.<sup>50</sup> This internal rift escalated into a major split, with BLA spokesman Azad Baloch publicly disowning both leaders.<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, the group appointed Jeeyand Baloch as its new spokesman, while Bashir Zaib went on to lead a separate BLA faction.<sup>52</sup> The split resulted in two factions: BLA-A and BLA-J.

One of BLA-J's first moves was reviving the Majeed Brigade suicide squad after seven years, intensifying violence.<sup>53</sup> c Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib's expulsion from BLA-A and foundation

a Balach Marri was the youngest son of Nawab Kahir Bakhsh Marri and was a member of Balochistan's provincial assembly when he was killed. The Pakistani media outlet Dawn reported that according to some sources, Marri was killed mistakenly "in an air strike by NATO forces in Gramshar area of Afghanistan's Helmand province." Marri had sought refuge in Afghanistan following a crackdown on militants in Balochistan. Saleem Shahid, "Balach Marri killed: Violence in Quetta, schools closed," *Dawn*, November 22, 2007.

b Mehran Marri has represented Baloch issues internationally, including at the United Nations. He has been linked to the United Baloch Army (UBA), which is banned in Pakistan and Switzerland, though he denies involvement in militancy. In 2017, Switzerland imposed a lifetime entry ban on him citing security concerns. He currently lives in the United Kingdom and remains active in the Baloch separatist movement. Murtaza Ali Shah, "Swiss slaps 'entry ban' on Baloch leader Mehran Marri," *News*, November 16, 2017.

c Founded by Aslam Achu, the Majeed Brigade is the suicide squad of the BLA and first became operational in December 2011 by conducting a suicide attack against Shafeeq Mengal, a local politician. The BLA's only suicide attack was in 2011. The unit went dormant for seven years, when in 2018 BLA-J reactivated the unit by claiming a suicide attack carried out by the "Majeed Brigade," after the group's 2017 split. Since then, BLA-J has frequently deployed the "Majeed Brigade" for conducting suicide attacks. However, in March 2025, the other faction of BLA, BLA-A, claimed an attack carried out by its own "Majeed Brigade," the first suicide attack claimed by this faction. BLA-A insisted that its "Majeed Brigade" is the heir of the BLA's original one, as opposed to BLA-J's claims. Shezad Baloch, "Balochistan insurgency: Blast near Baloch politician's home kills 13," *Express Tribune*, December 31, 2011; Abdul Basit, "The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad," *Terrorism Monitor* 20:13 (2022).



of BLA-J was followed by several field commanders and militants leaving BLA-A to join BLA-J, putting the future of BLA-A in jeopardy.<sup>d</sup> BLA-J gained prominence through high-profile attacks, while BLA-A relied on lower-intensity tactics like ambushes, IED attacks, raids, and targeted killings. Notably, BLA-A distanced itself from major assaults, including the November 2018 Chinese consulate attack and the August 2018 Dalbandin bus bombing.<sup>54</sup>

Another major split occurred around the same time within the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), a key faction within the Baloch insurgency, that has been active since 2006 following the death of Baloch nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in the same year.<sup>e</sup> In 2018, BRA field commander Gulzar Imam broke away to form his own faction, BRA (Beebagr), named after its spokesman. Later, Imam allied with Sarfaraz Bangulzai, a former UBA commander expelled for disciplinary violations. Together, they established the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) in January 2022, marking a further fragmentation of the insurgency.<sup>55</sup> The newly formed organization also joined the BRAS umbrella (an alliance of Baloch insurgent groups that will be discussed in the next section).<sup>56</sup>

In mid-2023, the arrest of Gulzar Imam by Pakistani security forces triggered a major split within the BNA, ultimately undermining the group's cohesion.<sup>57</sup> By April 2023, the BNA had fractured into two factions. Sarfaraz's faction accused BRAS of failing to properly investigate Imam's arrest, alleging that the BLF and BLA-J had manipulated the process to weaken the BNA.<sup>58</sup> As a result, Sarfaraz announced that his faction was abandoning BRAS.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, a faction of the BNA led by Anwar Chakar remains loyal to BRAS and still operates with the coalition.<sup>60</sup> Hence, the two factions came to be known as BNA (Sarfaraz) and BNA (Anwar). In December 2023, Sarfaraz Bangulzai made a groundbreaking announcement, claiming that his faction had surrendered to the state.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, BNA (Anwar) suffered from another internal rift when, in September 2024, a new obscure faction emerged, BNA (Beebarg), that started to claim attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan, Sindh, and Punjab provinces and in Iran's eastern Baloch provinces.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Unity Among Baloch Factions*

Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar (BRAS) is an alliance of Baloch insurgent groups, formally announced on November 10, 2018, to unify militant activities and strengthen the insurgency.<sup>63</sup> It emerged from an initial alliance between the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and Balochistan Liberation Army-J (BLA-J) in 2017, later

joined by the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) in April 2018.<sup>64f</sup> In May 2019, Gulzar Imam-led BRA (Beebagr) faction also announced it had decided to join BRAS, starting to take part in militant joint activities.<sup>65</sup> In July 2020, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) became BRAS' final member, marking the inclusion of a non-Baloch group. BRAS and SRA claim to resist perceived Punjabi domination in Balochistan and Sindh.<sup>66</sup>

A controversial aspect of the newly formed organization is that, despite advocating unity among different groups, BRAS has been accused of primarily serving the interests of the BLF and BLA-J. Notably, while BRA (Beebagr) and its successor BNA and the latter's offshoot, BNA (Anwar), have repeatedly claimed affiliation with BRAS, the alliance consistently recognizes only the BLF, BLA-J, BRG, and SRA as its members, omitting any mention of the BNA since the April 2023 split within the BNA and the creation of the BNA (Anwar) and BNA (Sarfaraz) factions. This exclusion, despite BNA's reported inclusion in 2022, may stem from the group's contentious origins and internal political frictions among its leaders.<sup>67</sup>

Functioning as a key coordinator of insurgent operations, BRAS organizes large-scale attacks on symbolic dates, such as Pakistan's Independence Day (August 14, 2024), Baloch Martyrs' Day (November 13, 2024), and the anniversary of Balochistan's accession to Pakistan (March 27, 2025). On August 9, 2024, BRAS published a communique announcing that the coalition was going to intensify its attacks during August 14 celebrations as well as target the celebrations themselves, resulting in multiple attacks carried out by BLA-J and BLF between August 8 and 14.<sup>68</sup> BLA-J claimed some attacks specifically targeting celebrations and security forces guarding the events, while the BLF claimed 32 attacks against multiple and different targets.<sup>69</sup> Between November 12 and 13, 2024, BRAS directly claimed 45 attacks across 42 areas of Balochistan carried out by the entire coalition, while between March 27 and 30, the coalition released several statements claiming 88 attacks in different parts of Balochistan and publishing a video showcasing BLA-J and BLF fighters conducting searching operations and setting up checkpoints.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, on March 2, 2025, BRAS leadership announced plans to enhance technological and operational capabilities, adopt modern warfare tactics, and pursue diplomatic efforts, potentially signaling the intention of strategically escalating conflict with the state.<sup>71</sup> Between 2018 and 2024, BRAS became an effective control room for cementing pre-existing alliances between groups while consolidating the power of its two major factions, BLA-J and BLF, and increasing the number of joint claimed attacks, reaching 204 in 2024.<sup>72</sup>

#### *The Attack Activities of Baloch Militant Factions*

Currently, there are around 10 militant factions that operate within the Baloch insurgency. While groups like BLA-J, BLF, and BLA-A regularly claim attacks, primarily against Pakistani security forces, others such as the BRG, BNA (Anwar), and BNA (Beebarg) face significant operational constraints and have become less relevant in the insurgency. Finally, some minor groups, primarily the United

d For instance, in August 2019, BLA-A argued that the August and November 2018 attacks claimed by BLA-J—and rejected by BLA-A—were carried out by sincere Baloch youths “tricked” by Aslam and Bashir and recruited into BLA-J. See “BLA statement on United States of America,” *Baloch Liberation Voice* on Telegram, August 7, 2019. However, in other statements, BLA-A attempted to downplay the size of BLA-J manpower by arguing that BLA-J Majeed Brigade did not include affiliates of the original BLA but rather members of other organizations, such as BRA and BLF. See “We have not carried out the Karachi Stock Exchange attack. Baloch Liberation Army,” *Baloch Liberation Voice* on Telegram, July 1, 2020.

e It is important to note that BRA has not been officially active since around 2016 when internal rifts started to form and eventually erupted in 2018. However, in October 2024, BRA militants resurfaced in the Dera Bugti area of Balochistan carrying out two targeted assassinations. Author (Baloch) interview, local militant sources, October 2024. See also The Khorasan Diary, “ALERT: At least 2 people were shot dead in two separate firing incidents . . .,” X, October 13, 2024.

f It is important to note that BRG was initially formed in 2012 following the murder of the wife and daughter of Bakhtyar Khan Domki, the group's leader, who were also the sister and niece of Brahamdaght Bugti, the grand-nephew of Nawab Bugti. See S. Raza Hassan, “Domki family killing was a message,” *Dawn*, February 4, 2012.

Baloch Army (UBA), have become nearly defunct.

Since 2021, Baloch militant groups have escalated both the frequency and complexity of their attacks. Their primary targets include security forces, alleged informants, members of “Death Squads,” infrastructure linked to security forces and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, Punjabi workers, and Chinese nationals. The March 2025 attack on the Jaffar Express by BLA-J, for example, followed a pattern of smaller attacks on the same target by the BLA-A and BNA (Anwar) since 2023.<sup>73</sup> Currently, BLA-J and BLF vie for dominance, with the BLA-A as a key rival. These three groups have refined traditional tactics, introduced new strategies, and expanded their operational structures. Additionally, they have cultivated ties with smaller Baloch and Sindhi nationalist factions, solidifying their status as the leading forces of the insurgency. In the paragraphs that follow, the authors provide details on various Baloch separatist groups’ attack activities.

#### *Baloch Liberation Army-Jeeyand (BLA-J)*

BLA-J is currently the most dynamic Baloch militant group. Between 2019 and 2021, its activity followed a steady upward trajectory, with the number of claimed attacks rising from 50 in 2019 to 64 in 2020 and 88 in 2021.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the use of suicide attackers (*fidayees*) remained limited to one deployment per year.<sup>g</sup> However, since early 2022, BLA-J has rapidly expanded its operations, claiming 188 attacks in 2022, 247 in 2023, and 302 in 2024.<sup>75</sup> The number of suicide attacks also rose, with BLA-J claiming three in 2022, two in 2023, and a record six in 2024.

BLA-J currently conducts two intermittent special campaigns, Operation Zir Pahazag (Guarding the Coast) and Operation Herof, alongside targeted suicide attacks. In 2025, the group concluded Operation Dara-e-Bolan, one of its most ambitious campaigns, which began the previous year.<sup>76</sup> These operations indicate a long-term and evolving strategic approach to the insurgency, combining multiple tactics and an ever-more sophisticated application of the concept of guerrilla warfare. As recent publications of the group have revealed, BLA-J insurgency rests upon the dual concept of mountainous and urban guerrilla warfare.<sup>77</sup> BLA-J maintains constant pressure on Pakistani security forces through daily attacks on checkpoints and patrols, while periodically deploying suicide bombers and armed attackers against high-value targets, including Chinese nationals and military installations. Operation Zir Pahazag focuses on disrupting CPEC-related infrastructure along the coastline, directly challenging state control over resources. Meanwhile, Operations Dara-e-Bolan and Herof, which involve the temporary occupation of areas in Balochistan, align with BLA-J’s broader objective—the eventual conquest of Balochistan.

While expanding its complex operations, BLA-J has also enhanced the capabilities of its special units, which now play a central role in its strategy. The group’s special forces are divided into four units: Majeed Brigade, STOS (Special Tactical Operations Squad), Fateh Squad, and Zephyr Intelligence Research & Analysis

Bureau (ZIRAB). The first three have long been involved in special operations, often working together. Typically, the Majeed Brigade initiates attacks with suicide bombings, followed by STOS conducting intelligence-based operations and the Fateh Squad leading vanguard assaults. The existence of ZIRAB, BLA-J’s intelligence wing, was officially revealed in October 2024 during a suicide attack targeting Chinese nationals in Karachi.<sup>78</sup> Since then, every major attack has been carried out with ZIRAB’s preemptive intelligence support, signaling a growing emphasis on coordinated, high-impact operations.<sup>79</sup>

In May 2019, BLA-J launched Operation Zir Pahazag (Guarding the Coast) with a suicide attack on the Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar, Balochistan.<sup>80</sup> BLA-J deployed four Majeed Brigade suicide attackers to target the Pearl Continental Hotel, aiming to destroy the building and kill Pakistani security forces and Chinese nationals linked to CPEC and deter Chinese and foreign investment in Balochistan.<sup>81</sup> This operation continued the group’s anti-Chinese campaign, which began in 2018 with attacks on Chinese engineers in Dalbandin and the Chinese consulate in Karachi.<sup>82</sup>

Operation Zir Pahazag remains active, with BLA-J executing four additional phases. In August 2021, a BLA-J suicide bomber targeted a convoy of Chinese nationals and security forces in Gwadar, while the group issued a warning for China to cease its economic activities in the region.<sup>83</sup> The next three phases of Operation Zir Pahazag took place in 2023 and 2024. In August 2023, two BLA-J suicide attackers ambushed a convoy of Chinese engineers in Gwadar, engaging Pakistani security forces in a prolonged battle.<sup>84</sup> The fourth and fifth phases of Operation Zir Pahazag took place on March 20 and 26, 2024, involving 12 Majeed Brigade members. The attackers targeted Gwadar’s Port Authority Complex and the Naval Air Base PNS Siddique in Turbat, Balochistan.<sup>85</sup>

Operation Zir Pahazag remains the longest-running operation by BLA-J or any Baloch nationalist faction. While primarily targeting Chinese nationals and Pakistan’s coastal security infrastructure, it is not BLA-J’s only large-scale campaign. Between 2019 and 2025, the group conducted numerous suicide and special operations, echoing its 2018 attacks.

Beyond targeting Chinese nationals (see the next section), BLA-J also launched suicide attacks on military installations. In February 2022, the Majeed Brigade carried out Operation Ganjal, deploying two teams of suicide attackers against military camps in Noshki and Panjgur. This marked BLA-J’s first attempt to seize and hold territory for three days, signaling a tactical shift in its insurgency strategy.<sup>86</sup> In June 2023, BLA-J conducted its second female suicide bombing, setting a precedent that other Baloch insurgent groups would later follow.<sup>87</sup> In November 2024, BLA-J deployed a suicide bomber to attack non-commissioned officers at Quetta railway station as they awaited transfer to the Jaffer Express.<sup>88</sup>

The year 2024 was a pivotal one for BLA-J, as it launched two major operations aimed at demonstrating its capability to seize and hold large territories and urban areas for extended periods. Operation Dara-e-Bolan, the first of its kind, involved 385 militants, including 12 Majeed Brigade members.<sup>89</sup> Between January 29 and 31, 2024, the group occupied urban areas around Macch and surrounding highways for two consecutive days, marking a significant escalation in its operational strategy.<sup>90</sup> BLA-J described Operation Dara-e-Bolan as the first phase of a broader strategy aimed at demonstrating its ability to seize key areas of Balochistan.<sup>91</sup> The second and final phase, concluded in March 2025, involved a

g Baloch militant groups and specifically BLA-J refer to suicide attackers as “fedayeen,” or “self-sacrificing fighters” who engage in prolonged clashes with security forces until their ultimate demise. They also carry out suicide attacks by detonating explosive vests and vehicles. Miran Mazar, “TBP Report: Majeed Brigade – The Inside Story,” Balochistan Post, July 20, 2020.

two-day hostage crisis during the Jaffer Express attack and a suicide bombing targeting a military convoy in Noshki.<sup>92</sup> While BLA-J exaggerated the reported casualties, the operation showcased the group's evolving tactical capabilities and underscored intra-group cooperation within the BRAS alliance, as the January 2024 phase was coordinated with other Baloch militant factions.<sup>93</sup>

Like Operation Dara-e-Bolan, the August 2024 Operation Herof (Black Storm) aimed to seize control of major highways across Balochistan, including coastal routes, and temporarily occupy the Bela military camp. BLA-J deployed 800 fighters and seven suicide attackers, framing the assault as the first phase of a broader effort to reclaim key territories.<sup>94</sup> While the second phase has yet to be announced, in early January 2025, BLA-J briefly occupied Zehri, near Khuzdar, before retreating. The group claimed this incursion was a tactical exercise in preparation for the next phase of Operation Herof.<sup>95</sup>

#### *Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)*

While BLA-J and BLF report similar attack numbers, their insurgency strategies differ significantly. BLF has historically focused on frequent, lower-profile attacks rather than large-scale special operations, maintaining a steady attack rate with a sharp rise in 2023. The group claimed 176 attacks in 2021, 162 in 2022, and 284 in both 2023 and 2024.<sup>96</sup> This trend appears to continue, with 128 attacks recorded in the first three months of 2025.<sup>97</sup> As part of the BRAS umbrella, BLF closely collaborates with other militant groups, particularly BLA-J, supporting its efforts during Operation Dara-e-Bolan in January 2024.<sup>98</sup>

Though BLF primarily focuses on sustained, low-intensity attacks, it has occasionally carried out special operations, particularly in 2024. In September 2024, the group launched a three-day operation against security forces and so-called "Death Squads" in Barkhan district. BLF claimed that the offensive was coordinated with BLA-J and BRG fighters, who provided support to its units.<sup>99</sup> In November 2024, BLF launched another special operation, targeting a military camp in Kech district. The attack was a coordinated effort involving its Intelligence Wing and Qurban Unit, demonstrating the group's tactical capabilities to integrate the activities of its different military branches and units.<sup>100</sup> Notably, BLF does not heavily publicize its special operations. Similarly, it reports its frequent attacks with minimal fanfare, even when targeting symbolic objectives such as CPEC-related machinery or police checkpoints in Karachi, Sindh province.<sup>h</sup>

BLF does not publicly disclose details about its internal organization and forces. Its most prominent units are the Sniper Tactical Team (STT), the Qurban Unit, and the Intelligence Wing. While the STT has operated for a long time, BLF recently rebranded it.<sup>101</sup> The Qurban Unit acts as a vanguard, operating as a fight-to-the-death force. BLF primarily deploys it for attacks on military convoys, installations, and bases.<sup>102</sup> However, its details are kept secret, in contrast to the BLA-A Majeed Brigade and Fateh Squad.

Despite BLF's high activity, it has received less media attention than BLA-J, partly due to the lower profile of its media wing.

However, BLF has been more engaged in media production than many other groups, regularly publishing magazines and quarterly attack reports, whereas others typically release only statements and videos. In November 2024, BLF launched *Asper Magazine*, a monthly publication focused on media warfare. Featuring propaganda in both Balochi and Urdu, the magazine prominently emphasizes anti-China sentiments, dedicating three articles to "Chinese economic and military colonialism" in Balochistan.<sup>103</sup>

#### *Baloch Liberation Army-Azad (BLA-A)*

The third major Baloch militant faction, BLA-A, emerged from a significant internal split within BLA in July 2017. This division led to the expulsion of commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib, who then formed their faction, BLA-J, later forming BRAS with BLF. The original BLA, in turn, later became known as BLA-A, and today operates outside of BRAS. Unlike most other groups, BLA-A is not part of BRAS and has traditionally been weaker than BLA-J and BLF. From 2020, it maintained a limited operational scope, avoiding special operations and suicide attacks. However, in 2024, BLA-A dramatically escalated its insurgency. While it claimed six attacks in 2020, 20 in 2021, 46-50 in 2022, and 38 in 2023, its activity surged to 154 attacks in 2024.<sup>104</sup> The sharp rise in BLA-A's claimed attacks appears to be a response to BLA-J's evolution and its 2024 special campaigns. Growing competition between the two factions has thus led to outbidding between the two factions.

In early 2025, BLA-A further aligned its tactics with BLA-J. In late January, it launched Operation Kalat, briefly seizing parts of a military camp and the town of Manguchar before retreating.<sup>105</sup> This operation, though on a smaller scale, mirrored BLA-J's Operations Herof and Dara-e-Bolan, showcasing BLA-A's ambition to rival its counterpart through its new "Stay, Hit, and Run" strategy. On March 3, 2025, BLA-A conducted its first-ever suicide bombing, revealing that it had retained its own Majeed Brigade, which it claimed as the original BLA unit.<sup>106 i</sup> The attack, carried out by a female suicide bomber, further underscored the growing rivalry, with BLA-A emulating BLA-J's complex operations and use of suicide attackers to gain prominence among the Baloch public.

#### *Other Factions of the Baloch Insurgency*

Beyond the three main factions, the Baloch insurgency includes several smaller groups that conduct attacks sporadically. Among them, BRG is the third most active within the BRAS coalition, though its role remains limited. It has primarily supported BLF and BLA-J through coordinated attacks. However, BRG appears to be in decline, possibly benefiting other factions. Its activity has gradually decreased, with 26 attacks in 2022, 28 in 2023, and 18 in 2024.<sup>107</sup> In early 2025, BRG claimed 10 attacks within three

<sup>h</sup> For instance, BLF claimed five low-intensity attacks in Karachi in 2023, while BLA-J only one. See "Balochistan Liberation Front Operations - 2023," *Aashob BLF* on Telegram, January 2024, and "Dhakk - 2023," Hakkal Media, January 2024.

<sup>i</sup> For BLA-A, this marked the second suicide attack carried out the Majeed Brigade, as the group claims to be the original BLA. The group argues that the first attack carried out by the Majeed Brigade was in 2011 before the split. Since the Majeed Brigade was reactivated in 2018 by BLA-J, the latter faction has been conducting suicide attacks using the name of the Majeed Brigade, while BLA-A repeatedly stated that BLA-J had "hijacked" the name of the Majeed Brigade for conducting its own suicide attacks. Furthermore, BLA-A did not conduct a single suicide attack between 2011 and 2025, when they claimed their first ever suicide attack. BLA-A reiterated that it was carried out by the Majeed Brigade and that the Majeed Brigade had conducted only two suicide attacks: in 2011 and 2025. This is indirect criticism to BLA-J that has been conducting multiple suicide attacks since 2018 using the same name.



months, suggesting either an attempt to stay relevant by increasing operations or potential support from other Baloch factions to sustain pressure on security forces.<sup>108</sup>

BNA (Anwar) and UBA have largely ceased operations despite maintaining their claims of resistance. Following its 2023 internal rift, BNA (Anwar) experienced a sharp decline in activity, with claimed attacks dropping from 34 in 2022 to around 20 between 2023 and early 2025.<sup>109</sup> The group's decline is evident, as it had claimed 106 attacks in 2021 under BRA before merging with a UBA faction.<sup>110</sup> Today, the group is still part of BRAS, participating in major operations launched by the coalition. The last major attack claimed by BNA was before the split: the January 2022 bombing of a bank in Lahore, Punjab province.<sup>111</sup> However, BNA (Anwar) infiltration of Punjab continued to persist also in February 2023, with the group claiming an IED attack targeting the Jaffar Express in Chicha area of Faisalabad district, Punjab province.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, the rather obscure BNA (Beebarg) appears to have more ambitious objectives, and has claimed more than 30 attacks between September 2024 and March 2025.<sup>113</sup> In January 2025, the group also launched its special operation, Operation Gerok, that has targeted mostly communication towers, vehicles, and drones belonging to Iranian security forces.<sup>114</sup>

Recently, following the April 12, 2025, execution of Pakistani laborers in Iran claimed by BNA (Beebarg), BNA (Anwar) issued a statement denouncing the attack and accusing BNA (Beebarg) militants of being associates of BNA (Sarfaraz) and tarnishing the reputation of BNA.<sup>115</sup> The group—BNA (Anwar)—further stated that it was distancing itself from the attack and that its struggle was confined to Pakistan only, and not Iran, promising investigations into the rival faction.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, between 2022 and 2024, the remaining independent faction of UBA that did not join BRA to form BNA claimed approximately 30 attacks, with only one relatively significant operation, Operation Bombur in February 2022.<sup>117</sup> Today, UBA exists outside of BRAS.

## Part 2: Distinctive Features of the Baloch Insurgency

### *CPEC and the Anti-China Campaign*

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was launched in 2015 with an estimated \$62 billion in investments. Designed to enhance infrastructure, energy production, and trade connectivity, CPEC primarily links Gwadar Port in Balochistan to China's Xinjiang province via an extensive network of roads, railways, and pipelines, granting China strategic access to the Arabian Sea.<sup>118</sup>

Despite its economic potential, CPEC has intensified the Baloch insurgency, exacerbating grievances over resource control, marginalization, and cultural erosion. The growing sophistication and frequency of attacks on CPEC-related targets underscores the persistence of the insurgency, which, if unaddressed through inclusive development and dialogue, threatens regional stability and the project's success.

In response to these perceived resentments, Baloch militant factions have launched different operations and have increasingly targeted Chinese nationals and investments, viewing them as enablers of exploitation. BLA-J has been spearheading the anti-China campaign with a series of deadly suicide bombings and attacks. Three out of five phases of Operation Zir Pahazag have specifically attacked Chinese interests and nationals. In the third

phase in 2023, crucially, BLA-J not only reiterated its threats against China but also issued a 90-day ultimatum to Beijing to withdraw its presence from Balochistan, otherwise, the group would increase its military activities against Chinese nationals and Pakistan's security infrastructures.<sup>119</sup> While Operation Zir Pahazag was developing, BLA-J carried out other independent operations against Chinese nationals.<sup>120</sup> These include the June 29, 2020, suicide attack by four members of the Majeed Brigade who targeted the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) in Karachi in Operation Stock Exchange.<sup>121</sup> Later, in April 2022, BLA-J deployed its first-ever female suicide bomber, Shaari Baloch, who carried out the suicide attack against the Confucius Institute in Karachi.<sup>122</sup> In October 2024, BLA-J deployed one suicide bomber who targeted a convoy of Chinese nationals and escorting security forces in Karachi, marking the last attack against Chinese interests in 2024.<sup>123</sup> Other key Baloch groups—BLF, BLA-A, BRG, SRA—have carried out low-intensity attacks mostly targeting CPEC machinery, gas pipelines, mineral trucks, and workers involved in the project.<sup>124</sup>

The evolution of insurgent tactics from hit-and-run attacks to coordinated, high-profile operations reflects mounting resistance to CPEC. The growing sophistication of these attacks underscores insurgents' tactical capabilities and their opposition to perceived economic exploitation. In response, Pakistan has deployed extensive security forces to safeguard CPEC projects, further militarizing the region. The Pakistani government's heavy-handed counterinsurgency measures, including military crackdowns and unconventional measures, have deepened Baloch alienation, reinforcing perceptions of political and economic marginalization.<sup>125</sup> Instead of suppressing the insurgency, these actions have fueled local resentment, increasing sympathy for insurgents.<sup>126</sup>

Pakistan has sought China's support in intelligence-sharing and counterinsurgency efforts, deepening Beijing's involvement in its internal security. This cooperation in the security sector risks increasing Pakistan's strategic dependency on China, granting Beijing influence over Pakistan's security policies and decision-making process within certain matters relating to CPEC.<sup>127</sup> Since 2024, following Baloch militant groups' attacks targeting Chinese interests and nationals, Pakistan-China security cooperations has been taking new steps, with a more robust Chinese participation in the security sphere of the CPEC project, specifically during the development of CPEC Phase II.<sup>128</sup> Currently, several Chinese nationals are engaged in work at the Thar Coal Block power projects in Sindh under CPEC.<sup>129</sup> Amidst the rumors of possible deployment of Chinese forces in Pakistan—that Islamabad has vehemently denied—in the innermost security perimeter surrounding these workers could spark domestic backlash, as China's expanding role may be perceived as infringing on Pakistan's sovereignty.<sup>130</sup> Insurgents may exploit this narrative, intensifying anti-China and anti-government sentiments.<sup>131</sup>

### *Female Suicide Attackers*

The incorporation of female suicide attackers within Baloch insurgent groups, particularly BLA-J Majeed Brigade, marks a significant evolution in the tactics of the Baloch insurgency. This strategic shift not only broadens the operational scope of these groups but also serves as a potent propaganda tool, challenging traditional gender roles within the conservative Baloch society.

The first recorded instance of a female suicide bomber in the Baloch insurgency occurred in April 2022, when BLA-J operative



Shari Baloch, a 30-year-old mother of two, targeted the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi. This attack resulted in the deaths of three Chinese instructors and their Pakistani driver, signaling a departure from previous operational norms.<sup>132</sup> Subsequent incidents underscore the increasing role of women in such operations. On June 24, 2023, BLA-J female suicide bomber Sumaiya Qalandrani Baloch carried out a suicide attack targeting a Pakistani military convoy in Turbat, marking the second instance of a female suicide bomber in the Baloch insurgency.<sup>133</sup> At 25 years old, Sumaiya held a bachelor's degree in computer science and was actively involved in the media wing of the Baloch Liberation Army, Hakkal. She was engaged to Rehan Baloch, the son of General Aslam Baloch, the founding leader of the BLA.<sup>134</sup> In 2018, Rehan carried out a suicide attack targeting Chinese engineers near Dalbandin.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, her family reportedly faced state repression, with multiple male members forcibly disappearing during a military operation in Tootak in February 2011.<sup>136</sup>

In a new development, in March 2025, BLA-A fielded its first female suicide bomber of the Majeed Brigade. Mahikan Baloch attacked a military convoy in Balochistan's Kalat district, killing and wounding several security personnel.<sup>137</sup>

The fact that, since 2022, both BLA factions have increasingly fielded female bombers reflects a deliberate strategy to integrate women into militant activities. This trend indicates a calculated effort to diversify their tactics and personnel. The deployment of female suicide bombers offers several tactical advantages. Women can often bypass security measures more easily than men, exploiting societal norms and expectations. Furthermore, their involvement garners significant media attention, amplifying the psychological impact of the attacks and serving as a recruitment tool by portraying a broad-based resistance movement.

### ***Anti-election Campaigns in Pakistan***

Another specific trend is the Baloch insurgents' history of launching several operations during elections in Pakistan. Baloch insurgent groups consider parliamentary elections a tool of repression. As a result, insurgents have often targeted the election process since 2013.<sup>138</sup> The tactics employed by the Baloch insurgents included targeting poll stations, election candidates, and threatening election staff in the province. Particularly, since its inception in 2017, BRAS has been the main coordinator of anti-election violence staged by its factions. Repeatedly, the umbrella organization has issued various statements arguing that the coalition rejected elections in Balochistan and intended to boycott them by any means.<sup>139</sup>

In the last general election of the province in 2024, the insurgents remained a significant challenge for the election process, as evidenced by their number of attacks in parts of Balochistan. The insurgents used light weapons and firecracker blasts to maintain fear among the participants, targeted killings, missiles, remote control bombs, and hand grenades.<sup>140</sup> Between January and February 2024, BLA-A launched a special operation aimed at disrupting Pakistan's political elections in Balochistan, claiming 70 attacks targeting polling stations, convoys, political candidates, and security installations.<sup>141</sup> As a result, BLA-A remained a prime reason for the postponement of the election process twice in its stronghold in Kohlu.<sup>142</sup> The operation was launched in response to BRAS' similar campaign in the same period that claimed 161 attacks carried out by the different factions belonging to the umbrella coalition in 22 areas of Balochistan and Punjab provinces.<sup>143</sup>

### ***The Regional Geopolitical Impact of the Baloch Insurgency***

While the Baloch insurgency has its most vivid manifestation in Pakistan, the insurgency is a regional, heterogeneous phenomenon with ramifications in the countries that share a portion of the larger, Greater Balochistan area, including portions of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.<sup>144</sup> In Iran, the Baloch population inhabits the Sistan-va-Baluchestan province, including parts of Kerman and Hormozgan provinces. Historically, the Baloch communities living in Iran faced state discrimination due to a sectarian basis and economic disparities, contributing to the framing of a sense of grievance against the state, often leading to major confrontations between Baloch militants and the Iranian state.<sup>145</sup> As a result, Iranian authorities always remained concerned about any success of the Baloch uprising in the neighboring bordering areas. Despite the political contrasts between the then Shah and Bhutto regimes, in 1974, during the fourth phase of the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan, the Iranian regime provided logistic support to Islamabad in order to crush the uprising, due to the concerns in Tehran about potential spread of the conflict across the border.<sup>146</sup>

However, the situation changed over time, and both Iran and Pakistan have repeatedly accused each other of providing safe havens to Baloch insurgents on both sides of the border.<sup>147</sup> The scenario has worsened due to the Jaishul Adl revamped insurgency in Iran since 2021, with an increase in attacks and complexity of operations in 2024, highlighting a regional trajectory of the Baloch insurgency.<sup>j</sup> As a result, there is an evident growth of the Baloch insurgency on both sides of the border, with intersections between groups and areas.<sup>148</sup> In January 2024, following an Islamic State attack in Kerman province, Iran carried out airstrikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province, allegedly targeting Jaish ul Adl's military camps.<sup>149</sup> The group acknowledged that some family members of the group were indeed killed and injured in the cross-border strikes.<sup>150</sup> In an apparently controlled retaliation, Pakistan subsequently launched similar strikes targeting alleged BLA-A and BLF camps in Iranian Balochistan, prompting both factions to deny their presence on Iranian soil.<sup>151</sup> Despite occasional tit-for-tat actions, it appears that Tehran and Islamabad have again reached a common understanding after January 2024, first appointing border liaison offices and then conducting joint border airstrikes at the Pakistan-Iran border targeting Jaish Ul Adl's positions, which the group acknowledged, in November 2024.<sup>152</sup>

Furthermore, in the context of intra-group relations, the Iranian factor has played a major role in reciprocal accusations between different organizations. BLA-A has also repeatedly accused BLF of being a puppet of Iran and fueling divisions among BLA in 2017, while also accusing BRAS of being a project of Iranian intelligence.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, BLA-A female suicide bomber, Mahikan Baloch, released an audio message before the suicide attack on March 3, 2025, targeting a military convoy. In the audio,

j Jaishul Adl is a Sunni jihadi militant organization whose members are predominantly ethnic Iranian Baloch. The group was founded in 2012 by the current leader Salahuddin Farooqi. The group's main goal is Sistan-va-Baluchestan province's independence from Iran and the collapse of the Iranian regime. After August 2021, the group has intensified its attacks in Iran, particularly during 2023 and 2024. Imtiaz Baloch, "Jaish ul Adl Profile and Post-Taliban Afghanistan Threats," World Anti Extremism Network 2024, November 2024; Daniele Garofalo, "Inside Jaish al-Adl Armed Struggle: Interview with the Spokesperson," Khorasan Diary, December 2, 2023.

she addressed the Iranian Baloch people in Sistan-va-Baluchestan province advocating for the Greater Balochistan region.<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, while BNA (Anwar) denied any activity in and against Iran, the BNA (Beebarg) faction has extended its activities also to Iran after the November 2024 Iran-Pakistan joint strike targeting Jaishul Adl's hideouts in Pakistan, marking a new phase of the anti-Pakistan Baloch insurgency.<sup>155</sup>

Despite its weak operational capabilities, the latest attack claimed by BNA (Beebarg) highlights its regional aspirations. On April 12, 2025, the group executed eight Pakistani laborers in the Mehristan area of Iranian Sistan-va-Baluchestan Province, accusing them of cooperating with Iran and Pakistan against Baloch people "from Bandar Abbas [Iran], Dera Ghazi Khan [Pakistan's Punjab], or any other distant region that has been separated from the historical homeland of Balochistan."<sup>156</sup>

### Conclusion: A Restless Province

It is likely that Baloch militant organizations will continue to expand their attack capabilities. While Pakistan's security forces have obtained mixed results when reacting to Baloch militant groups' attacks, the prevention and containment of major operations and the overall expansion of the insurgency have not been affected by Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, with an increasing deterioration of the security environment in the province since 2018. On the other hand, while Baloch militant groups tend to inflate the number of attacks and, specifically, inflicted casualties, 2024 and 2025 have been pivotal for the Baloch insurgency and the development of new ambitious tactics, posing new challenges for the Pakistani state not only on the ground but also from a mediatic standpoint.<sup>157</sup> Hence, the media warfare framed by Baloch militant groups continues to erode the general perception of the efficacy and validity of counterterrorism strategies developed by the Pakistani state.

The new phase of the conflict poses several questions on specific issues. The mounting threats to Chinese interests in Pakistan have increased the likelihood of possible deployment of Chinese security forces in Balochistan, likely deepening perceptions of foreign exploitation. In March 2025, rumors surfaced that three Chinese private security firms were tasked with overseeing security operations in a collaborative effort, with 60 Chinese security personnel stationed at two CPEC power projects in Sindh province.<sup>158</sup> While this could strengthen counterinsurgency efforts, it risks increasing Pakistan's dependence on China for economic and security spheres. India, in turn, may view this as a cyber and surveillance threat, further complicating regional security dynamics.

Another geopolitical dilemma concerns relations between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, especially after the return of the de facto Taliban government and the recent tensions between Kabul and Islamabad. As the Baloch insurgency reveals its transnational dimension, security cooperation between Pakistan and Iran seems to follow established security patterns with short-term gains in joint operations but the lack of a long-term settlement of the border security dynamics. On the other hand, antagonistic relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the issue of reciprocal accusations of sponsoring terrorism is expanding from the jihadi realm to nationalist groups, deepening the divide between the two countries.<sup>159</sup> Opting for non-cooperation will only favor militant groups, such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) and Islamic State Pakistan (ISP), which might take advantage of the precarious security situation within Balochistan to expand their capabilities, potentially further eroding Islamabad's security efforts and increasing threats to all regional countries beyond Pakistan.<sup>160</sup>

Ultimately, the Baloch insurgency stems from long-standing grievances deeply rooted in the troubled post-partition era in the subcontinent. The conflict has been exacerbated by several political, economic, social, and humanitarian factors over the years to the extent that today, there is a consolidated anti-state narrative over perceived and factual grievances that kinetic actions and traditional counterinsurgency efforts cannot tackle alone. A key aspect of the conflict that fuels its complexity and uncertain status is the absence of a comprehensive and independent system to monitor trends in the insurgency. The Baloch insurgency suffers from a data problem that poses a core challenge to the understanding of the evolution and current dynamics of the conflict, hampering efforts to properly assess the situation. However, this gap could also present an opportunity for the CT community that can better monitor and map Baloch militant activity by increasing its presence in Balochistan via a number of local sources who can cross-check information coming from official and pro-militant sources.

A sustainable resolution requires more than military action. It is the view of the authors that ideally, counterterrorism and other security-focused measures should be confined only to security issues while the Pakistani government should adopt a political strategy toward humanitarian concerns within the legal framework of the constitution. Baloch concerns over core issues should also be addressed, with accountability being among the first priorities, providing the population with adequate space for expressing them. Without first adopting such a new vision over the conflict in Balochistan, the province will likely remain a breeding ground for resentments against the Pakistani state. **CTC**

## Appendix

### *Factions of the Baloch Insurgency*

Acronym	Name	Description
BLA	Baloch Liberation Army	The first modern Baloch separatist faction founded in 1996 by Hyrbyair Marri. Today, the group is divided into its two factions: BLA-A and BLA-J.
BLA-A	Baloch Liberation Army (Azad)	The original BLA, today known as BLA-Azad from the name of its spokesman. After the December 2017 internal split of BLA, BLA-A became the weaker faction but recently displayed growing attack capabilities.
BLA-J	Baloch Liberation Army (Jeeyand)	The BLA faction was founded by commanders Aslam Baloch and Bashir Zaib after their expulsion from BLA in December 2017. The faction came to be known as BLA-Jeeyand from the name of its spokesman. It is the strongest of the two BLA factions. Its leader is Bashir Zaib.
BLF	Balochistan Liberation Front	Believed to have been founded in 2003, BLF is one of the major factions of the Baloch insurgency and a close allied of BLA-J. Its leader is Allah Nazar.
BNA	Baloch Nationalist Army	The faction was founded in January 2022 by Gulzar Imam and Sarfaraz Bangulzai. It was crippled by multiple splits and surrenders. Today, the group is divided into two factions.
BNA (Anwar)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Anwar)	One of the two active BNA factions. Set up in April 2023 after the BNA internal split, it is led by Anwar Chakar. The faction is part of BRAS and carries out attacks solely in Pakistan.
BNA (Beebarg)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Beebarg)	One of the two active BNA factions. Believed to have been set up between January and September 2024 after the surrender of BNA (Sarfaraz) in December 2023, the faction is not part of BRAS. It has carried out attacks in Pakistan and Iran.
BNA (Sarfaraz)	Baloch Nationalist Army (Sarfaraz)	BNA faction led by Sarfaraz Bangulzai that surrendered in December 2023. The faction was the result of the split with BNA (Anwar) after Gulzar Imam's arrest in April 2023.
BRA	Baloch Republican Army	Emerged in 2006 after the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti and is believed to be linked to Brahamdagh Bugti. BRA has not been active in the conflict since rifts within its ranks in 2016, though it briefly resurfaced in October 2024.
BRA (Beebagr)	Baloch Republican Army (Beebagr)	Splinter faction of BRA. BRA (Beebagr) was founded by Gulzar Imam in October 2018 after frictions emerged between him and the BRA leadership and he was expelled by the organization. BRA (Beebagr) was disbanded after Gulzar Imam formed BNA with Sarfaraz Bangulzai in 2022.
BRAS	Baloch Raaji Aajohi Sangar	Established in November 2018, BRAS is an umbrella coalition that today includes BLA-J, BLF, BRG, SRA, and, possibly, BNA (Anwar). It is a military and political platform used by the militant factions to launch coordinated attacks across Pakistan.
BRG	Baloch Republican Guards	Formed in 2012, BRG was established by Bakhtyar Khan Domki after his wife and daughter were killed in Karachi.
SRA	Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army	Founded around 2010 and headed by Syed Ashgar Shah, SRA is a Sindhi separatist militant organization active in the Sindh province of Pakistan that is also part of BRAS.
UBA	United Baloch Army	UBA was established in 2012 after it split from BLA over differences between Hyrbyair and Mehran Marri. A minor faction, it is believed to be linked to Mehran Marri, though the latter has denied his involvement.

### *Factions of the BRAS alliance, current and inactive*

Faction	Joined in
Baloch Liberation Army - Jeeyand (BLA-J)	November 2018 - Present
Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)	November 2018 - Present
Baloch Republican Guards (BRG)	November 2018 - Present
Baloch Republican Army - Beebagr (BRA-Beebagr)	May 2019 - January 2022
Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA)	January 2022 - April 2023
Baloch Nationalist Army - Anwar (BNA-Anwar)	April 2023 - Present (Not officially acknowledged)
Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA)	July 2020 - Present



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