

Pakistan Other Insurgents: A day in the desert with Baloch guerrillas

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MAGAZINE

PAKISTAN'S OTHER INSURGENTS

A DAY IN THE DESERT WITH BALOCH GUERRILLAS

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KARLOS ZURUTUZA

The departure point was in Pakistani Balochistan. Our hosts, a patrol of Baloch guerrillas, requested that we be no more specific than that.

The driver and his passenger had their faces wrapped tightly so that only their eyes showed. Before we began the trip deep into the desert, Said (my contact) and I were blindfolded for "security reasons." For two hours we rode like this, our eyes covered, in a 4x4 with tinted windows. "Paadha, Baloch," a popular tune, hissed on the car stereo the entire time: "Wake up, Baloch, we're at war!"

Gobbled up by Pakistan in 1948, East Balochistan shares borders with—surprise!—North and West Balochistan. But here's the rub: These two latter regions are under Afghan and Iranian control respectively, making it one seriously confusing mix of angry rebels. Pakistani Balochistan isn't mentioned all that often in news reports, despite its potentially massive value to the US in the foundering war in Afghanistan and its reputation as being a vast potential source of energy for whatever creative politician or mercenary finally wins it over completely. Beneath our feet were enviable loads of unaccounted-for uranium, gold, oil, and natural gas. Naturally the Americans are interested, primarily in the hope of gaining access to the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas duct, which was set for construction in 2010 and will make an "energy bridge," according to reports, out of Iran. Both India and Iran are interested in the already approved, yet to be constructed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. The IPI is referred to as the "Peace Pipeline," at least by the three antsy militaries it will service.

In fact, the only thing that appears to make this area interesting to the media is that Quetta, Pakistani Balochistan's capital, is also home to a more noteworthy rebel, Taliban boss Mullah Mohammed Omar. But this does little for these secular eastern Baloch insurgents, whose war is far less complicated than the Taliban's: They don't want to be part of Pakistan.

At 1 AM, we were delivered to another batch of soldiers, and together we began the second part of our journey: a wrenching five-hour walk, in the middle of the night, against a granite backdrop. "Be careful where you stand," our guide warned, "the half-red moon is not going to come looking for us." It was an easy sell. The night was so dark it wouldn't take much to be separated from the group and get left for dead—killed either by starvation, enemy patrols, or, worst of all, government soldiers. For reasons that involve being shot in the face or having a bomb dropped in your vicinity, it's forbidden to carry any type of light.

When we arrived at our destination, there was a tall shadow of a soldier praying next to a cliff where

the sun was rising. Two guerrillas appeared from behind a cluster of black stones, greeting us in Balochi ("Salaam, heriat, tik-tak") as they shook our hands. Another soldier filled a canteen with river water, mixed it with sugar and lemon juice, and offered it to us. The sun was now high enough to show just how sparse their camp was—no buildings, no huts, not even a cave for shelter from the cold or a day-ruining air raid. A soldier explained this was so they could abandon the camp quickly, leaving behind only rocks blackened by the fire, which they used to grill lamb meat.

"You can have a rest here," our guide said, pointing to a Baloch carpet spread out on a large, flat rock. The sound of children's voices nearby drew our curiosity. It was a family of nomads. A shepherd wearing a kulla (the traditional red Baloch bonnet) was followed by two camels walking in a line. The first camel carried a few cooking utensils and the black cloth of a haima. The second camel carried a woman with a baby in her arms. Four children watered sheep in a nearby river. Mother and daughters were each dressed in a colorful pashk, a traditional Baloch dress with metal rivets that indicates their tribe.

"Please don't photograph the shepherds," one of the guerrillas said. This too was for security reasons, of course, but also because a Baloch woman being photographed would be the unwelcome talk of the town.

It was impossible to tell where we were exactly. In fact, it wasn't all that clear who it was we had hitched on with, either. Balochistan is riddled with nationalist rebel groups, the most important of which are the Balochistan Liberation Army, the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), and the Lashkar-e-Balochistan (Army of Balochistan).

"We are Lashkar-e-Balochistan," the 40-year-old commander of this battalion of 20 people told us. His face was hidden and he wouldn't reveal his name, so we called him Mir, or "Leader." "There are several other armed organizations, but there's no rivalry between any of us. Actually, we're all very well coordinated," Mir assured us while eating a generous meat-based breakfast. "We all share the common goal of liberating this land, Balochistan."

We asked him what that entailed. "Our actions consist of sabotaging the army infrastructures and communication towers," he said. "We set up mines in the roads where army convoys or Frontier Corps [the official military police] have to pass, or we shoot at them with an RPG bazooka."

It is important to note that in most cases the groups from East Balochistan don't share an agenda with their comrades from Iranian controlled Balochistan. A majority of the Baloch are Sunnis, which is no problem in Pakistan but is in neighboring Iran, a country where the Farsi Shiites have the power. The Baloch resistance against Tehran, Iran's capital, is of an al-Qaeda type. But the guys we're with, from East Balochistan, are Marxist-oriented and secular, of all things.

Some say the Baloch National Party is the political arm of the insurgents. So it wasn't surprising to see "BNP" carved into a huge rock nearby. Mir and his soldiers don't care for them much and see the fruitless dealings between the BNP and the Baloch Republican Party in the Parliament in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, as pointless grandstanding. "We too are doing politics. With weapons. There's no other way in Pakistan," Mir said. He was quoting Khair Bakhsh Marri, the historical leader of the resistance and sardar (tribal chief) of the Marri clan, the biggest in all of East Balochistan.

Still, the BRA has all kinds of power throughout Pakistan, and its enemies span across borders. It's been suggested that the BRA, under Brahamdagh Bugti, the telegenic face man of the Baloch insurgency in its entirety, is receiving military training from Anglo-American troops. As the gossip goes, these white soldiers and their bosses hope to use the Baloch guerrillas to control the flow of

Taliban along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Islamabad is spreading those rumors to feed the theory that India and the US are supporting us, but that's not true. We're still waiting for someone to come and give us some support," Mir told me. Finished, he tossed his Kalashnikov over his shoulder and invited me to meet his soldiers.

Everyone was dressed in shalwar kamiz, a pairing of knee-length pants and a loose shirt that is standard issue in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. After Mir had introduced us to the rest of the group, I got to chatting with a 25-year-old soldier whose code name is Enqelab, "Revolution" in Balochi. He explained that he cares more about survival than he does ideology.

"There aren't things like gas, electricity, or tap water in my village," Enqelab explained, putting his bazooka on the floor. "My older brother and I used to go to the pipes that carry the water to the gas plant in the Sui region, loosen the nuts with a spanner, and collect the water we needed for the day in a five-liter plastic can. One day the police came and took away my brother under charges of tampering with government installations. He was tortured and jailed for six years. Now he's not able to fend for himself anymore."

The gas plant Enqelab referred to is the most important in Pakistan and also one of the triggers of the armed uprising of the Balochs. Sui represents Islamabad's plunder of the rich natural resources of the area: gas, coal, uranium, gold, oil. In fact, the only places Sui's riches don't seem to reach are the Balochs' adobe shacks built atop the reserve.

Bair, or "Revenge," arrived three years ago from Quetta, where he was a member of the Baloch Students Organization. His urban activism cost him two months in jail, where he was tortured daily. He's hardly the only one. Since March of 2005, more than 7,000 political, social, and human-rights activists have been kidnapped, tortured, or murdered by the Secret Service, the real rulers of this country. Some people turn up dead a few days after being arrested. Many are left to rot in jail, and the occasional one is set free to warn others.

"The jail I was in was a mere two square meters with no lights," Bair explained. "It felt like I was being buried alive. They just took me out to beat me up, blindfolded and hanging upside down. Very often the severe beating made me pass out. My only hope was to find any kind of tool with which I could take my own life. I never thought I was going to get out alive from that place, but eventually I was released. I felt I couldn't go through all that again. But neither did I want to be arrested and thrown to the desert from a helicopter. So I decided to join the Lashkar-e-Balochistan."

Girok ("Lightning") joined after the Pakistani Army devastated his village in the southeast of the country. He and his family were forced to move from a peaceful but completely isolated area to what would be a completely barren area of the Balochi desert plains if it weren't for the massive mountains of trash from Karachi. (There are 20 million people in Karachi, if you're curious about the amount of garbage and shit we're talking about.) According to some international organizations, nearly 80,000 Baloch families like Girok's have been displaced in the past three years.

But the Lashkar-e-Balochistan gave Girok new perspective: "All my life I've been running and complaining of my bad luck, but that's over." He stroked a scar on his right forearm, which he explained was not the result of a stray bullet but from an overterritorial raven that attacked him in the dump that he used for housing and food.

Finally we cornered Umit ("Hope"). The others watched the horizon with suspicious eyes. But Umit ruled out the possibility of a big-scale raid in this area. "There are no roads for transports in this craggy land. Their only option would be an aerial attack," he said confidently but without inspiring confidence. "In that case, we all hope that this granite is as hard as it seems." Given the total quiet

we've had so far, there is a real sense that everything is dead calm until it is absolute fucking mayhem.

"Islamabad is using the weapons Washington gave them to fight the Taliban against us," Umit said. In his hand was the same Kalashnikov his father had used many years before. Umit is the last one left from a family whose members have taken part in the five Baloch armed uprisings since Pakistan annexed Balochistan in 1948. Today, though, Cobra helicopters fly above regularly, many of them left over from before Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is believed that the former Iranian shah Reza Pahlevi gave this "Made in USA" weaponry to Pakistan for free, with the aim of helping to put down a Baloch insurgency threatening to extend itself to those Baloch areas under Iranian control.

"Why should we sacrifice our right to freedom to a federation ruled by just one nation?" Umit wondered. The obvious answer is that they shouldn't. But after 60 years, the question must seem increasingly rhetorical.

P.S.

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