

POLITICS

## The Baluchistan Imbroglia

Saturday 20 January 2024, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2024).

**The level of ignorance in Western coverage of the border clashes between Iran and Pakistan should come as no surprise. Nor should the State Department declaration that Pakistan's response was 'proportionate' - making for queasy comparisons with the ongoing mass slaughter being perpetrated by another US funded and armed entity not too far away. To get a clear picture of the latest strikes - Iran targeted the base of an armed-separatist group, the Jaish al-Adl, in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan on Tuesday; two days later, Pakistan unleashed a drone attack against Baluchi-militant 'terrorist hideouts' on the Iranian side of the border - we need to sweep away their web of lies and mystifications.**

Baluchistan is a mountainous region bifurcated by the Pakistan-Iran border, just as Pakhtun lands are divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Baluch nationalists have long resented the often brutal control exercised by the Iranian and Pakistani governments. Historically, though, whereas the Baluch leaders in Iran were politically conservative, the main Baluch tribal leaders in Pakistan were all progressive, in some cases close to the traditional communist currents of the sub-continent. Before the Iranian clerical revolution of 1979 there was even talk of unifying the two provinces as a self-governing republic.

I was involved in many discussions with Baluch tribal leaders as well as radical activists at the time. There was an independent Marxist current that spanned the tribes, led by leftist Baluch intellectuals and their non-Baluch allies from the Panjab and Sindh provinces. Their magazine, *Jabal* ('Mountain') carried some of the most interesting debates on the national question, replete with reference to Lenin's texts on national self-determination. The analogy of the Ethiopian-Eritrean divide was discussed non-stop. A leading figure, Murad Khan, argued that with the 1974 overthrow of the pro-imperialist Haile Selassie regime in Addis, the objective conditions of the Eritrean struggle had changed and the socio-economic situation in both regions could be developed in the direction of a class unity that transcended pure nationalism. Most Baluch also wanted some form of political autonomy, or failing that, independence.

Pakistan was under heavy pressure from the Shah of Iran to crush the Baluch insurgency. Tehran was worried that the radical currents might slip across the border. Bhutto, then Prime Minister, capitulated and the Pakistan Army went on to crush the rebels. From 1977, Pakistan was run by a vicious US-backed military dictatorship (as it is now, as far as Baluchistan is concerned, under the current 'caretaker' government). In 1979 the military would hang Bhutto, Pakistan's first democratically elected leader, brutalizing the national political culture. In Iran meanwhile the new Islamic Republic excited popular hopes and Baluch nationalism was compelled, for some years, to take a back seat.

Geopolitics crushed all the utopian visions emanating from Baluchistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the implosion of the Baluch leftist groups in Pakistan. The Iranian mullahs asserted their authority on their side of the border. The repression in Pakistani Baluchistan was vicious and

unrelenting. Bhutto's execution unleashed turbulence throughout the country, and soon an entire Baluchi tribe, the Marris, led by Sardar Khair Baksh Marri (a semi-Maoist by inclination) escaped by crossing the border to Afghanistan where they set up camp and were given refuge, food and weapons by the pro-Soviet PDPA government. There were reports that Marri and key aides had flown to Havana via Moscow for advice from Fidel Castro, though this has never been confirmed by either side. This phase ended with the advent of civilian government in Pakistan, but the Pakistan Army continued to virtually rule the province.

The repression of the Baluch people has been appalling over the last decades. Temporary relief under some civilian governments never lasted long, and recently the crackdown has gathered pace. A few weeks ago I was asked to sign yet another Baluch solidarity appeal, after a totally peaceful and relatively small gathering of Baluch dissidents and their Pakhtun and Punjabi supporters in Islamabad was broken up by police, its leaders arrested and some of them beaten up. My first reaction was 'why now?' At the time such arbitrary brutality made little sense. Now it does. It's obvious that the Pakistani military intelligence had orders to prevent any display of Baluch dissent in Pakistan. To choose to provoke Iran just now would only cause more headaches for Washington. At the same time, of course, it would further divide the Muslim world at a moment when Yemen - though not Egypt, Saudi Arabi or the stooges ruling the Gulf states - is offering a strikingly effective form of solidarity with the beleaguered Palestinians.

I doubt that this exchange of fire between the two states will turn into a fully-fledged war. Pakistan, already an orphan-state of the IMF, would suffer more. And China has appealed to both countries to proceed to an immediate ceasefire. China has some clout. It has a large military-economic base in Gwadar on the Baluch coast in Pakistan and enjoys close economic ties with Iran. The Beijing cavalry will be working hard behind the scenes. But the political implications of this flare-up are worth noting.

The group that Tehran targeted, Jaish ul-Adl an offshoot of al-Qaida, has been operating from Pakistani Baluchistan for well over a decade. The group has close relations with Ansar al Furqan, its Sunni equivalent in Iran. Who funds such organizations? Why does Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, busy disappearing unarmed Baluch nationalists, not deal with these well-supplied Sunni fanatics? It is they who have targeted and killed Iranian security forces, including most recently an attack on police headquarters in Rask, an Iranian border town, in December. Iran has pleaded with Pakistan on many occasions to stop these outrages. No response except honeyed words. Is anyone else funding this terrorist group? Israel? The Saudis? Any takers? I don't know, but nothing would surprise these days as Western double-standards on 'human rights' and 'international law' are not taken too seriously, except by payroll buddies.

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