

# CNSS Explainer 13

## Train to Turmoil: Balochistan's War

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# What happened?

**March 11, 2025:** BLA militants blew up tracks, stopped Jaffar Express in Balochistan tunnel; 400+ passengers en route from Quetta to Peshawar during Ramzan.

**Action:** Took 200+ hostages, triggering overnight gunfight with Pakistani forces amid suicide bomber fears.

**Demand:** BLA sought Baloch prisoner release, threatened to destroy train in 48 hours.

**Clash:** Shootout killed 30+ security; 200 civilians freed, 200 personnel held as "prisoners of war."

**Response:** BLA offered exchange; Pakistan's Interior Minister refused, saying "no concessions."

**Resolution:** Siege ended in 30 hours with March 12 rescue; 33 rebels killed, most hostages saved.

**Losses:** 21 passengers, 30+ security died.

**Impact:** Deadliest attack since 2018, driven by Pakistan's stretched security forces battling the Taliban and Pakistani Taliban (TTP).

# Recent Developments

1. In March 2025, the Baloch Raj Ajoi Singer (BRAS), a coalition of Baloch militant organizations, announced that a joint meeting had been held among groups operating under its umbrella, including the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), Baloch Republican Guards (BRG), and the Sindhi organization Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA).

2. **Goal:** Reorganize BRAS into Balochistan's National Army, as per spokesperson Baloch Khan.

3. **Plan:** BLA, BLF, BRG, and SRA aim to build a national army, focusing on training militants ideologically, adopting modern tech, boosting media use, and crafting a coordinated strategy against Pakistan.



# Balochistan Separatism Explained

The Baloch, an ethnic group native to Balochistan spanning Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, seek an independent state, with most violence in Pakistan since the 1940s. Balochistan, including Kharan, Makran, Las Bela, and Kalat, joined Pakistan in 1947 amid conflict.

## **I. Early History and Accession to Pakistan**

Before the 1947 partition, princely states could join India, Pakistan, or stay independent; the Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmed Yar Khan, declared Kalat's independence on August 15, while Kharan, Makran, and Las Bela chose Pakistan. Historian Dushka H. Sayyid notes Kalat's minor strategic role compared to Kashmir or Hyderabad due to its remote location. Initially, Jinnah supported Kalat's independence, but British pressure to counter instability led him to urge merger in October 1947, which the Khan rejected. On March 18, 1948, Pakistan annexed Kharan, Makran, and Las Bela, isolating Kalat; a false rumour of Indian alignment forced the Khan to join Pakistan in 1948 with no external backing.



## **II. First Wave: 1950s Insurgency**

In the late 1950s, Pakistan's 1955 "One Unit Scheme" centralized power, merging provinces into West Pakistan to curb separatism in present-day Bangladesh, while reducing Baloch representation and stalling a local assembly. In 1958, the Khan of Kalat, Nawab Nauroz Khan, re-declared independence, but Pakistan deceived him into surrendering in 1959, crushing the uprising with a fierce crackdown.

## **III. Second Wave: 1960s Rebellion**

In 1963, Sher Muhammad Bijrani Marri, alias General Sherof, launched a nationalist revolt seeking Pakistani troop withdrawal, One Unit Plan abolition, and Balochistan's unification; it ended in 1969 when General Yahya Khan succeeded Ayub Khan, signed a truce, and dissolved the plan in 1970, making Balochistan a province with Punjab, Sindh, and the Frontier.

## **IV. Third Wave: 1970s Uprising**

In the 1970s, unrest flared after the National Awami Party, pushing for autonomy, won Balochistan's 1972 elections; fearing another secession like Bangladesh's in 1971, Pakistan dissolved the Akbar Khan Bugti-led government in 1973, imposing martial law and igniting a four-year uprising by thousands of Baloch tribesmen.



Driven by poverty despite oil and gas wealth—most profits taken by the federal government post-1973 Constitution—and inspired by the birth of Bangladesh, it ended in 1977 when Gen. Zia-ul-Haq ousted Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, offered amnesty, and pulled troops, bringing a fragile peace into the 1980s.

## **V. Fourth Wave: 2000s Conflict**

Violence reignited in the mid-2000s after the alleged rape of a Baloch woman doctor by soldiers and the 2006 killing of tribal leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, propelling the BLA to lead a push for independence over autonomy.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan destabilized the region, with Baloch fearing marginalization by Pashtun refugees; recent years have seen escalating attacks on security and infrastructure, but Pakistan remains unyielding, prolonging the conflict.

### **Context and Grievances**

Balochistan remains one of South Asia's poorest regions due to its sparse population and lack of fertile land, despite significant oil and gas reserves—a sore point since the 1973 oil embargo highlighted their value, yet most profits flow to Islamabad.

These economic disparities, combined with a history of political suppression, continue to drive separatist sentiment.



## Why Things Are Getting Worse

The Baloch insurgency simmered for 15 years after the mid-2000s but has surged recently, fueled by Pakistan's political and economic crises and, more crucially, the Taliban and TTP's shifting roles, intensifying separatist momentum in Balochistan.

Pakistan backed the Taliban during the U.S. Afghan occupation, expecting help against the TTP, but the Taliban instead let the TTP launch surging attacks on Pakistan from Afghanistan, stretching security forces thin and enabling the BLA to ramp up its operations.

Terror attacks quadrupled from 2020 to 2024, per the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, led by TTP, BLA, and ISIS Khorasan, with a 70% rise from 2023 to 2024—the biggest jump since 2009—and an 84% increase in Balochistan. In early 2025, 140 incidents marked a 60% rise over last year's two-month average, culminating in the Jaffar Express hijacking, likely the deadliest attack recently, highlighting the escalating crisis.



## What Next?

Pakistan's overstretched security forces can't resolve the conflict militarily, and a political fix looks doubtful post the March 2025 Jaffar Express hijacking.

History proves crackdowns only briefly suppress the recurring Baloch insurgency, requiring either more autonomy or economic growth for lasting peace in the nation's poorest region.

## Implications

The merger may intensify attacks on Pakistani law enforcement and Chinese CPEC interests along the Makran Coast, using shared sanctuaries, resources, and manpower to pressure Pakistan and counter China's \$65 billion projects.

Despite past tribal rifts weakening the Baloch insurgency, leaders now see unity as key to challenging Pakistan and meeting their goals.

A background image showing a crowd of people, with a prominent Indian flag (saffron, white, and green with a navy blue wheel) visible in the upper left. The image is darkened to serve as a background for the text.

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