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**THE 2026 IRAN CONFLICT
AND THE ESCALATION OF
INSURGENCY IN BALUCHISTAN**



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Executive Summary

The central argument of this report is that the resurgence of armed violence in Baluchistan is domestic in origin and that its escalation across 2026 has been driven principally by the internal development of the insurgency rather than by the war across the frontier in Iran. The current wave of Baloch insurgency did not begin in 2026. It revived in the mid-2000s, gathered momentum after the launch of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, and accelerated most sharply during 2024 and 2025, well before the decisive phase of the Iran war. The organisational changes that account for the surge of 2026, the consolidation of the Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar alliance, the maturation of the BLA’s Majeed Brigade, the Baluchistan Liberation Front’s turn to coordinated multi-target assaults, and the spread of armed commercial drones and Afghan-sourced weapons – each followed a timeline of its own, and each was already in motion before hostilities opened in Iran. The insurgency, in short, is escalating for reasons of its own, and the clearest confirmation came after the war had ended, when militant attacks across Pakistan rose from 144 in July to 199 in August 2026, the tempo of violence climbing through the summer even as the ceasefire held.

Against that backdrop, the war next door is best understood not as a cause of the escalation, nor even as its principal external accelerant, but as a marginal, bounded factor that reaches the province through a single well-evidenced channel: the borderland fuel economy. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the dislocation of Iran’s exports raised the price of the smuggled Iranian fuel on which tens of thousands of frontier households depend, pushed the informal trade from five days a week to seven, and drove the borderland economy deeper into the illicit sector that armed groups tax and protect, sharpening both the material hardship and the political grievance on which recruitment feeds. A second and more modest effect followed from the weakening of Iranian control along the frontier, which eased cross-border movement at the margins without creating the sanctuary that already existed on both sides. Beyond these two channels the evidence does not reach, and this report declines the wider claims that are sometimes made, that the mediation effort distracted the state from Baluchistan, or that cross-border displacement fed the insurgency, because neither is supported by the record.

The report presents the evidence that disciplines its own argument. The largest coordinated insurgent operation on record in the province, the BLA’s twelve-district offensive of late January 2026, took place before the war’s second phase opened; the two deadliest months of the year, May and July, fell after the conditional ceasefire of 8 April and the June memorandum of understanding rather than during the fighting; and independent researchers found that armed groups inside Iran remained reluctant to engage directly. The war widened, at its margins, the space within which existing organisations operate; it did not create them, and it did not supply their motive.

That motive is domestic and documented. Baluchistan remains Pakistan’s poorest province, with an income poverty rate approaching half of its population against a national average well below thirty per cent, and a multidimensional deprivation headcount above seventy per cent, even as the

province holds close to forty-four per cent of the national landmass together with much of the country's mineral and hydrocarbon wealth. Decades of contested accession, resource grievance, political marginalisation, enforced disappearance and the conflation of peaceful dissent with terrorism have produced a reservoir of alienation that force alone cannot drain. The paradox of the security ledger makes the point plainly: the state killed militants in record numbers during 2025, and the insurgency intensified regardless, becoming through 2026 the deadliest in the country and carrying Baluchistan past Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as Pakistan's most violent province.

The report treats seriously the Pakistani state's contention that India seeks to exploit this instability, while noting that India denies it, that the International Court of Justice made no finding on the espionage question, and that independent assessments attribute the insurgency's capabilities to indigenous development. External sponsorship, where it exists, works upon domestic fault lines; it does not create them, and it cannot substitute for the political failures that give it purchase.

The policy implication, developed in a sequenced framework in Section 10, is that a political crisis cannot be resolved by military means alone, and that neither the war next door nor the foreign hand should be permitted to become an alibi that displaces responsibility from where it properly lies. The province must be treated as a political question first and a security question second by restoring the primacy of elected representatives, ensuring fiscal transfers reach citizens rather than intermediaries, ending practices that manufacture grievance, and opening a credible channel of negotiation under a national compact.

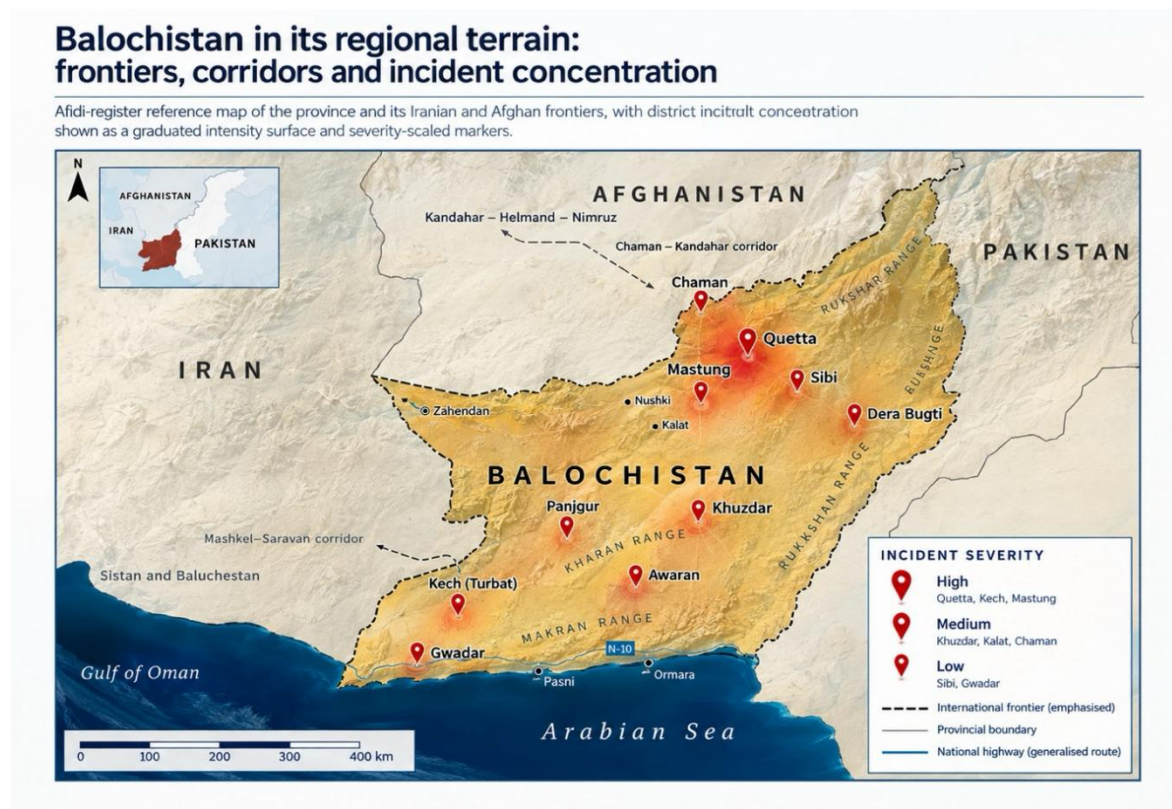
List of Abbreviations

ATA	Anti-Terrorism Act 1997
BLA	Baluchistan Liberation Army
BLF	Baluchistan Liberation Front
BNP-M	Baluchistan National Party (Mengal)
BRA	Baloch Republican Army
BRAS	Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar
BYC	Baloch Yakjehti Committee
COIOED	Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
FAFEN	Free and Fair Election Network
GTI	Global Terrorism Index
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
IBO	Intelligence-based operation
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISPR	Inter-Services Public Relations
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
NFC	National Finance Commission
PICSS	Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies
PIPS	Pak Institute for Peace Studies
SATP	South Asia Terrorism Portal
TTP	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

1 Introduction

Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest province by landmass, occupies a position that few territories anywhere share. It is at once the country's internal frontier, the setting of a decades-old ethno-nationalist Baloch insurgency that is the central subject of this report, and a borderland that adjoins two unstable states which press upon it from opposite directions. To the west it meets an Iran convulsed, through 2025 and 2026, by war with the United States and Israel. To the north-west it faces an Afghanistan from which the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) directs a distinct campaign of violence, principally into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and, to a lesser degree, into the Pashtun districts of northern Baluchistan. These are three separate problems with three separate logics, and one purpose of this report is to keep them apart, because collapsing them into a single narrative of encirclement conceals more than it reveals. The Baloch insurgency is not the TTP's campaign, and it is not a creation of the war in Iran; the province's misfortune is that it borders both theatres while carrying an older, domestic conflict of its own.

Figure 1: The Tri-Border Theatre: Baluchistan and Its Intersection with The Iranian and Afghan Frontiers.



This study asks whether the conflict in Iran is inciting insurgency in Baluchistan. The answer developed across the sections that follow is heavily qualified, and on the central point it is negative: the evidence indicates that the war is not responsible for the insurgency and that it is not the main factor behind the escalation of 2026. The war did aggravate the security environment at the margins, and Section 3 identifies the one channel, the borderland fuel economy, through which that effect can be demonstrated with confidence, though its scope and force are bounded. To blame the war for the insurgency would be mistaken both analytically and politically, because it would lend credence to the comforting notion that the remedy lies beyond Pakistan's reach. The evidence points the other way. The war is best seen as a stress test that exposed cracks in governance, in the federal compact and in the state's relationship with its own citizens, cracks that were present and widening, well before the first missiles fell on Tehran.

1.1 Analytical Framework

The report treats the war as capable of altering the opportunity structure within which armed organisations operate, meaning their access to resources, movement and illicit markets, while leaving untouched the motivational structure that sustains recruitment, which is domestic in origin. This distinction gives the argument testable content, because it directs attention to specific and observable channels of influence rather than to a vague notion of spillover, and it requires that each asserted channel be weighed against the evidence for it, with those that fail the test discarded rather than retained for rhetorical effect. Section 3 applies this discipline and finds that only one channel is clearly sustained.

The insurgency's foundational grievance is best understood through the resource-curse and centre-periphery literature, which explains how a territory rich in natural resources but excluded from the benefits of their extraction becomes a durable site of rebellion. The narrower, bounded effects of the war are best understood through the literature on conflict diffusion and cross-border illicit economies, which examines how the disruption of one state's war is transmitted, through markets and porous frontiers, into the political economy of a neighbouring borderland. The report does not, however, rest its argument on Regional Security Complex Theory. Although Baluchistan plainly sits at the seam between the South Asian and Middle Eastern security complexes, a framing that treated the province chiefly as a node of inter-regional securitisation would sit uneasily with the report's central finding that the drivers of violence are overwhelmingly domestic. The theory is

therefore invoked, where at all, only as background geography rather than as an explanatory frame.¹

1.2 Structure of the Report

The report is organised in eleven sections. Section 2 reconstructs the two phases of the war on Iran and the regional rupture it produced, including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz that matters most for Baluchistan. Section 3 sets out, and carefully bounds, the channels through which the war reaches the province and advances the primary, endogenous explanation for the 2026 escalation. Section 4 maps the insurgent ecosystem, the BLA, the BLF and the wider Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) alliance, whose internal development does the explanatory work the war cannot. Section 5 addresses the separate problem of the TTP, its Afghan sanctuaries and a sectarian current that runs alongside the nationalist insurgency without forming part of it. Section 6 presents the quantitative record from 2022 to 2026 and uses the national and provincial series on either side of 28 February 2026 to test the war's effect rather than to assume it. Section 7 examines Pakistan's kinetic response, including the cross-border strikes and the legal questions they raise. Section 8 analyses the diffusion of arms, drones and illicit finance and weighs the allegation of Indian sponsorship. Section 9 sets out the domestic grievances that are the conflict's principal cause. Section 10 offers a sequenced policy framework, and Section 11 concludes.

1.3 Methodology and Sources

The report adopts a single-case, within-case design employing process tracing, supported by a structured before-and-after comparison of the incident record on either side of 28 February 2026, at both the national and provincial levels, with the window from March to August 2026 examined most closely. The design matters to the argument because the comparison tests for a war effect rather than confirming one: if the war were the leading driver of the escalation, the incident series should show a marked and sustained rise once its second phase opened, and Section 6 examines whether it does. The analysis foregrounds the number of incidents and the intensity of counter-insurgency operations rather than fatality counts alone, since fatalities are volatile and contested. At the same time, operational tempo is a steadier measure of the insurgency's trajectory, tracking

¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

the movement's opposition to CPEC more closely than any external event. Causal inference rests on the observation of intervening processes rather than on statistical association across cases, and each channel set out in Section 3 is assessed against the evidence available to sustain it, with the weight of that evidence stated plainly, including where it is thin or absent.

Quantitative material comes from monitors whose counting rules differ materially, and the report notes that divergence rather than reconciling it. The Pak Institute for Peace Studies counts terrorist attacks on a narrow definition; the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies counts militant attacks inclusive of insurgent violence and records security-force operations separately; the South Asia Terrorism Portal counts incidents of killing; and the Institute for Economics and Peace applies its own coding in the Global Terrorism Index. These series are not interchangeable, and figures from different monitors are not combined in a single trend line. The analysis relies on open-source material and involves no fieldwork or primary interviews. Because the events are recent, ongoing, and contested, and because media access across much of Baluchistan is restricted, casualty figures vary by source and are likely under-recorded; state and insurgent claims are attributed as claims throughout and are not treated as established fact.

2. The 2026 Iran Conflict: Two Phases and Its Regional Impacts

2.1 From the Twelve-Day War to Open Conflict

The full-scale war between the United States and Israel, against Iran, that broke out in 2026 had been escalating since the twelve-day Iran–Israel war of June 2025 that ended with Operation Midnight Hammer, the American strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.² The outcome of that showdown was a ceasefire declared by the United States, which failed to settle the basic issue of Iran's nuclear programme, and a weakened but defiant Tehran. Iran continued its efforts to rebuild its inventory of medium-range missiles, reportedly bringing it closer to pre-war levels, and to strengthen its nuclear facilities to withstand further attack, during the second half of 2025 and early 2026.³

² Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Strikes on Nuclear Sites in Iran*, CRS Insight IN12571 (Washington, DC, June 23, 2025).

³ Critical Threats Project, "Iran Update, February 2, 2026," American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, February 2, 2026.

Indirect talks between the United States and Iran to reach a new nuclear deal began under Omani mediation in February 2026. Ultimately, the discussions stalled, though Iran showed some flexibility, according to the foreign minister serving as mediator, and some progress was made; the United States expressed dissatisfaction with how the talks were progressing.⁴ This diplomacy proved unsuccessful, and the second, more serious round of the war began.

2.2 The Second Phase: 28 February to Spring 2026

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched an attack on Iran, which the Americans dubbed Operation Epic Fury.⁵ About 900 strikes were launched in the first 12 hours on Iranian missile sites, air defence and military infrastructure, and in an effort to decapitate the leadership in western and central Iran, the Israeli air force said, adding that it was the largest strike sortie in its history.⁶ One of the first and most significant impacts of the war was the death of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in the joint attacks, which took him out of the centre of the Iranian system and led to a succession crisis that ultimately resulted in the ascendance of Mujtaba Khamenei.⁷

Iran retaliated by firing a barrage of missiles and drones on military installations of Israel and the United States across the Middle East. Targets included the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet in Manama, Bahrain; Ali al-Salem Air Base in Kuwait; Kuwait International Airport in Kuwait; an early-warning radar site in northern Qatar; and the airport and military base in Erbil, Iraq. There were strikes also in Abu Dhabi and Dubai (UAE) and in Riyadh and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. In some of these states, residential buildings in Manama, as well as other civilian zones,

⁴ Parisa Hafezi and Olivia Le Poidevin, “US-Iran Talks End with No Deal but Potential Signs of Progress,” Reuters, February 26, 2026.

⁵ U.S. Department of War, “Operation Epic Fury,” accessed August 6, 2026.

⁶ “Daily Report: The Second Iran War, February 28, 2026,” Alma Research and Education Center, February 28, 2026.

⁷ Sam Woodhouse, “Ayatollah Khamenei’s Iron Grip on Power in Iran Comes to an End,” BBC News, February 28, 2026; and “Who Is Mojtaba Khamenei, a Contender for Iran’s Leadership amid War?,” Al Jazeera, March 8, 2026.

were targeted, which Iran claims were allegedly used for covert operations by the CIA and Mossad.⁸

The IRGC warned of shutting down the world's key Strait of Hormuz. Around 20 million barrels of crude oil and other refined products pass through the waterway daily, representing around one-quarter of world seaborne oil trade, nearly 20 per cent of the world's oil consumption, and some 20 per cent of world liquefied natural gas trade. Up to 80 per cent of these volumes are meant for Asian markets, and any disruption carries a risk to energy prices and the economies on which Pakistan directly depends.⁹ The hostilities continued for some forty days until the conclusion of a conditional ceasefire on 8 April 2026; the Americans kept on attacking in May over the disputes over the Strait.¹⁰ In mid-June 2026, Qatar and Pakistan mediated a memorandum of understanding that included a 60-day ceasefire, reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, and a timeline for a final settlement. However, its implementation was not without difficulties: traffic over the Strait began to trickle in, and the parties failed to agree on the definitions of the interim terms; tit-for-tat strikes began within two weeks.¹¹

Table 1. The Two Phases of the 2026 Iran Conflict

Feature	First phase (June 2025)	Second phase (from 28 February 2026)
Belligerents	Israel and the United States against Iran	Israel and the United States against Iran
Codename (US)	Operation Midnight Hammer	Operation Epic Fury
Duration	About twelve days	About forty days of intense combat; residual strikes into May
Principal targets	Air defences, nuclear sites, missile stocks	Leadership, missiles, air defence, nuclear and government sites
Notable outcome	Iran degraded but defiant; programme reconstituted	Death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei; contested succession

⁸ "Multiple Arab States That Host US Assets Targeted in Iran Retaliation," Al Jazeera, February 28, 2026; and "What We Know about US Military Bases in Mideast Gulf Targeted in Iran Retaliatory Strikes," France 24, February 28, 2026.

⁹ International Energy Agency, "Strait of Hormuz," accessed July 2026; and U.S. Energy Information Administration, "World Oil Transit Chokepoints," last updated March 3, 2026.

¹⁰ "The Iran Strikes, Explained: How We Got Here and What It Means," American Jewish Committee, July 2026.

¹¹ "Iran to Open 'Communication Channel' on MoU with US after Talks in Qatar," Al Jazeera, July 1, 2026; and Barak Ravid, "U.S. and Iran Reach Deal to Extend Ceasefire and Open Strait," Axios, June 14, 2026.

Iranian response	Limited missile exchanges	Sustained missile and drone salvos on Israel and Gulf bases
Strait of Hormuz	Threatened	Threatened and partially contested; June MoU
Termination	Ceasefire	Conditional ceasefire, April 8, 2026; June MoU

2.2 Pakistan's Role as a Mediator

One of the most significant events of the conflict was Pakistan's rise as a mediator. In collaboration with Qatar, Islamabad facilitated Washington and Tehran's return to the negotiating table and the signing of a memorandum of understanding in June 2026 for a ceasefire and the opening of the Strait of Hormuz. The international community recognised this role for facilitating the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).¹² Pakistan has played an essential role in this conflict, as it has access to both parties. Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. has drastically improved, as U.S. President Trump called Field Marshal Asim Munir his favourite field marshal.¹³ At the same time, Pakistan maintained good working relations with Tehran, as it mediated de-escalation between the two. The United States launched strikes on Iranian bases from bases in the Gulf states. Iran responded by attacking the bases, making the Gulf states themselves part of the conflict, and Pakistan's strategic partnership with those states, including the mutual defence pacts signed with Saudi Arabia the year before, furthering its reach. Pakistan could thus talk to Washington, Tehran, and the Gulf capitals at the same time.

Pakistan's security and economic interests also pushed it into mediation. A protracted war between the United States and Iran was something Pakistan had strong reason to prevent, since it would have destabilised its own western border regions. Pakistan is heavily reliant on oil imports from the Middle East and has limited stocks of crude and refined product; any disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz would have had a direct impact on the country's energy supply.¹⁴ Some five million Pakistanis work in the Gulf, with their remittances, a record \$41.6 billion in

¹² Anadolu Agency, "World Leaders Praise Pakistan for Brokering US-Iran Deal," TRT World, June 15, 2026; "Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran," June 17, 2026, The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara.

¹³ "How Pakistan's Asim Munir Became Trump's 'Favourite Field Marshal'," Al Jazeera, December 31, 2025.

¹⁴ "Pakistan Dangerously Dependent on Imported Oil," *Express Tribune*, May 11, 2026; and "Pakistan Has Oil Reserves for Days, Not Months," *Express Tribune*, March 17, 2026.

FY2025–26, being a major source of foreign exchange; a prolonged conflict would have led to lower remittance flows and mass return migration and unemployment.¹⁵ Hence, mediation was in Pakistan's best interest and also helped regional de-escalation.

2.3 The Wider Regional Consequences

Pakistan is affected by the conflict in three dimensions, namely, the security situation in Baluchistan, energy prices, and financial markets.¹⁶ Disruptions to maritime movements through the Strait of Hormuz drove up energy prices worldwide at a time when Pakistan imported most of its petroleum and its reserves lasted only days, not months. Those moves to limit that exposure through solar generation were already underway but not on a large enough scale to counter the shock. The war thus came as an exogenous price shock on top of a balance-of-payments constraint, with the costs straight through the fiscal line.

The federal government has reduced its workweek to four days, half the public service had to move to remote working, and schools were closed for 21 days in March, with cabinet ministers asked to waive their salaries for some two months, and federal and provincial legislators asked to consider salary cuts of about 25 per cent.¹⁷ These conservation measures are usually associated with severe energy and financial crises, and they indicate that the war's economic impact on Pakistan was immediate rather than expected.

Iranian attacks on facilities that housed U.S. troops showed the Gulf nations that a pact with Washington did not ensure the security of their land, and some diversified their security strategies. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia signed defence treaties with Pakistan, the Saudi one of which included mutual defence clauses similar to those in a formal alliance. This boosted Pakistan's regional profile, but also its vulnerabilities, as the UAE had requested a \$3.5 billion loan, presumably in

¹⁵ State Bank of Pakistan, "Workers' Remittances," FY2025-26 data; and "Saudi Arabia, UAE Drive Pakistan Remittances to Record \$41.6bn," Gulf News, July 2026.

¹⁶ Tobias Adrian et al., "How the War in the Middle East Is Affecting Energy, Trade, and Finance," IMF Blog, March 30, 2026.

¹⁷ Imran Ahmed and Tanujja Dadlani, "Pakistan and the United States-Iran War," Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, April 23, 2026.

response to Islamabad's growing commitments in the Gulf, and India enhanced its own ties with Israel and the UAE.¹⁸

The assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei, the diminished power of Iran's neighbours and the belligerence of Israel have all led to a regional power balance that remains to be seen. The main danger for Pakistan in this scenario is a prolonged or renewed conflict that will make its western border a permanent source of instability. In this sense, mediation was an instrument of interest management rather than a contribution to regional order, and Pakistan's domestic and regional security were never separable.¹⁹

3. The Iran Conflict and Its Impact on Baluchistan

The relationship between the 2026 war and the violence in Baluchistan must be stated with care, because it is easily overstated. The war did not create the insurgency, whose origins lie decades in the past, and it is not the leading driver of the escalation recorded across 2026, which this report attributes principally to the endogenous development of the Baloch armed movement and to the domestic grievances set out in Section 9. Its influence reached the province mainly through one demonstrable channel: the cross-border fuel economy, with a second, more modest effect on frontier permeability. This section begins with the borderland the war acted upon, turns to those two channels, and closes with the primary, endogenous explanation for the escalation.

Baluchistan shares a frontier of some 900 kilometres with the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, across which the Baloch population is distributed between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, and on both sides of which armed movements have operated for decades, in Pakistan through recurrent insurgency since 1948 and in Iran through a Baloch militancy dating from the 1980s. Both states have long accused each other of sheltering their opponents: Tehran maintains that Pakistan harbours Jaish al-Adl, founded in 2012 as the successor to Jundullah, while Islamabad maintains that Iran provides sanctuary to the Baluchistan Liberation Army and the Baluchistan Liberation Front. Those accusations produced open cross-border strikes in January

¹⁸ Daud Khattak, "How the Iran War Is Changing Security Dynamics in the Middle East," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 29, 2026; and Ahmed and Dadlani, "Pakistan and the United States-Iran War."

¹⁹ "IntelBrief," The Soufan Center, April 15, 2026; and "The US-Iran War and Its Impact on Pakistan," *Defence Journal*, April 3, 2026.

2024, when Iran hit what it identified as Jaish al-Adl facilities inside Pakistan on 16 January, and Pakistan struck Baloch militant positions inside Iran on 18 January, both governments moving quickly to contain the escalation but revealing how far the two insurgencies had become entangled across the frontier. This entanglement predates 2026, and it is the pre-existing condition upon which any effect of the war operates.

3.1 The Conflict and the Informal Fuel Trade

The clearest and best-supported effect of the conflict on Baluchistan runs through the informal cross-border fuel trade. Frontier districts depend heavily on the traffic in subsidised Iranian fuel, which Pakistani industry sources assessed in 2023 as accounting for around 35 per cent of the diesel sold nationally, within a cross-border trade valued at roughly three billion dollars a year before the war and sustaining tens of thousands of border households for whom no lawful alternative livelihood exists.²⁰

As the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps moved to close the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's formal export channels came under pressure, the shock was transmitted to the frontier. The price of Iranian fuel in Pakistani border towns rose from around 160 to 255 rupees per liter, and traders whose modest daily earnings had evaporated told reporters that if the war continued, they would sit at home with nothing in their hands.²¹ The disruption did not so much contract the trade as drive it further underground: reporting in May 2026 indicated that volumes had increased after the war began, with traffic shifting from five days a week to seven as Iran's formal exports were squeezed and smugglers moved to fill the gap.²² The most plausible reading of these findings together, a livelihood shock at the retail end alongside rising volumes in the illicit channel, is that the war pushed the frontier economy deeper into the informal sector that armed groups are best placed to tax and to protect, at once enriching the protectors and sharpening the grievance of those left without lawful income. This is the one effect of the war that the available evidence sustains with confidence, and it is a bounded one: the war did not create Baloch economic grievance, which is

²⁰ "The Tit-for-Tat Conflict between Iran and Pakistan," *Strategic Comments*; and "How the Iran War Is Disrupting Baluchistan's Economy," *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2026.

²¹ Saadullah Akhter, "War in Iran Disrupts Fuel Smuggling Lifeline in Pakistan's Baluchistan," *Arab News*, March 15, 2026.

²² Daud Khattak, "Iran Is Smuggling Millions of Liters of Fuel to Pakistan Every Day," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 15, 2026.

structural and is examined in Section 9, but it aggravated the borderland's particular vulnerability at a moment of acute national strain.

3.2 The War and Border Permeability

A second and more limited effect runs through the policing of the frontier itself. Sistan and Baluchistan is Iran's poorest and least governed province in ordinary times, and once sustained attack from late February 2026 drew Iranian forces into national defence and a contested succession, Tehran had still fewer resources for a remote south-eastern border. The consequence was not the creation of sanctuary, which already existed on both sides, but a marginal easing of movement along routes already in use, so that crossing, smuggling and coordination became somewhat less constrained. The evidence for even this modest claim is mixed. Militant movement across the border continued through the war rather than surging: Iranian forces reported destroying a Jaish al-Adl cell in the Rask district in April 2026 after its members crossed from Pakistani territory, an episode that shows continued permeability but not a wartime step-change.²³ Consolidation on the Iranian side, moreover, was already underway before the war, Jaish al-Adl having announced in December 2025 that it was joining a broader coalition of Baloch armed groups, so that the organisational development sometimes credited to the war in fact preceded it.²⁴ The permeability effect is therefore real but marginal, and it should not be inflated into a claim that the war opened the frontier.

3.3 The Primary Explanation: Endogenous Escalation

If the war is a marginal and bounded factor, the escalation of 2026 requires a primary explanation, and the evidence points firmly to the endogenous development of the Baloch armed movement itself. The surge is principally the product of organisational change with its own internal timeline: the consolidation of the Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar alliance, the maturation of the BLA's Majeed Brigade and its fidayeen model, the BLF's doctrinal shift towards coordinated multi-target assaults, and the diffusion of armed commercial drones and Afghan-sourced small arms. Each of these developments began before February 2026, and their trajectory reaches back much further,

²³ Debductta Chakraborty, "Iran Hits Terror Group Jaish al-Adl along Pakistan Border as Islamabad Aims to Revive West Asia Peace Talks," ThePrint, April 23, 2026.

²⁴ "Iran Militant Group Jaish al-Adl Announces New Strategy as Attacks Continue," Iran International, December 12, 2025.

to the insurgency's revival in the mid-2000s and its sharp intensification after the launch of CPEC in 2015. An insurgency whose lethality has been climbing for the better part of two decades cannot plausibly have been called into being, or even decisively accelerated, by a war that reached its second phase only in the closing days of February 2026.

Three observations anchor this account, and each is of a kind that a war-centred explanation would struggle to accommodate. The first is that the BLA's largest and most coordinated operation on record, the twelve-district Operation Herof II of 31 January to 6 February 2026, preceded the war's second phase by some three weeks.²⁵ The second is quantitative: the South Asia Terrorism Portal's provincial fatality series compounded at roughly 56 per cent per year between 2022 and 2025, and extrapolating that rate alone, with no external shock whatsoever, places 2026 at near 2,400 provincial fatalities. The arithmetic is deliberately crude and indicative only, but its order of magnitude matters, because it shows that most of what 2026 delivered was already contained in the pre-war trend. The third is the timing of the year's worst violence: the province's two deadliest months, May and July 2026, fell after the conditional ceasefire of 8 April and the June memorandum of understanding, respectively, rather than during the fighting, the opposite of what a mobilising external shock would produce.²⁶

The clearest confirmation came after the guns had fallen silent across the frontier. Far from subsiding once the war ended, the insurgency's operational tempo continued to climb militant attacks across Pakistan rose from 144 in July to 199 in August 2026, the highest monthly figure of the year, and in Baluchistan they rose from 83 to 89 over the same interval even as the provincial death toll fell, the province overtaking Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to become the country's most violent. An insurgency that accelerates after the external shock has passed is one driven by its own logic, not by the war next door.

²⁵ Rahim Nasar, "Operation Herof-2: How Hakkal Media Weaponised the BLA's Narrative Online," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, March 13, 2026.

²⁶ Shomaila Mumtaz, "From Herof 2.0 to Strategic Partnerships: Pakistan's Security and Diplomatic Crossroads," Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, February 8, 2026.

4 The Insurgent Ecosystem: The Baloch Armed Movement

The resurgence of militancy and violence in Baluchistan has not been orchestrated by a single group, but rather by multiple groups operating concurrently in the province, including the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and several smaller splinter groups. The insurgent system as a whole has developed significantly over the last decade, becoming more coordinated, more lethal, more insistent on its targets, and more aware that it can only be defeated by a response that goes beyond military measures.

4.1 The Baluchistan Liberation Army

4.1.1 Origins, Objectives and Proscription

The Baloch Liberation Army was formed in 2000 and is sometimes described as “a resurgence of the 1970s Baloch movements”, initially comprising mostly members of the Bugti and Marri tribes. It explicitly demands an independent Baloch state made up of Baloch-majority areas of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, and its initial grievance is the exploitation of Baluchistan’s mineral and hydrocarbon resources in the absence of economic progress for the people. The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti by the Pakistani army in 2006 marks the start of the continuous violence in the current phase, which was the fifth Baloch insurgency since 1947 (others were in 1948, 1958-59, 1963-69 and 1973-77).²⁷

In July 2019, the BLA was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the United States, and on 31 July 2025, it was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, with the designation published in the Federal Register on 12 August 2025. This includes the constituent formations of the organisation, such as the Majeed Brigade, the Fateh Squad, and the Zephyr Intelligence Research and Analysis Bureau.²⁸ Pakistan has proscribed the organisation under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997.

²⁷ Cynthia I. Ugwu, “Between Insurgency and Terrorism: The Escalating Operational Sophistication of the Baluchistan Liberation Army, 2005–2025,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 37, no. 1 (2026): 83–108.

²⁸ “Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation of Baluchistan Liberation Army,” *Federal Register* 90 (August 12, 2025): 38877; and US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Terrorist Designation of the Majeed Brigade,” August 2025.

4.1.2 Organisational Structure

The BLA no longer acts as a unified guerrilla group but as a differentiated organisation. Majeed Brigade, which Aslam Baloch established after the death of Majeed Langove in 2010, named in memory of two brothers, the former of whom tried to kill Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974, carries out suicide missions and fidayeen operations and is estimated to have 100 to 150 members who operate in different units of logistics, intelligence, and operations. A Special Tactical Operations Squad accompanies the Foreign Affairs Squad to execute specialised missions, the Fateh bureau to carry out intelligence functions, and Hakkal Media to handle the organisation's information operations. The overall strength estimates have also jumped, from 1,000-1,500 fighters in 2022 to the organisation's claims of 5,000-6,000 by the end of 2025, which should be viewed as an aspiration rather than a known number.²⁹

Over time, the group has undergone structural and leadership changes. Early commanders like Balach Marri were tribal leaders and conventional guerrilla fighters. Still, today, under Bashir Zaib Baloch, the leadership is more technically educated and trained, with engineering graduates who can design complex explosive devices, media-trained people who can craft more effective propaganda, and military-trained people who can contribute to tactical planning. In Ugwu's sample of 946 attacks, no other single variable is as correlated with the organisation's capability development as is this change from tribal to educated middle-class leadership.³⁰

4.1.3 Operational Evolution

Between 2005 and 2025, BLA carried out a large number of simple, low-complexity operations to maintain an insurgent presence and utilised more sophisticated options during a small number of set-piece engagements, suggesting a deliberate decision about resource allocation rather than a limitation of capability. The same goes for the targets of attacks – 368 were observed against government or security forces, 153 against infrastructure or business interests, and 115 against private citizens or property, with CPEC-related projects over-represented in the second category. Fifty-five per cent of them were aimed at security forces or government facilities; 30 per cent at

²⁹ Abdul Basit, "The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad," *Terrorism Monitor* 20, no. 13 (July 1, 2022), Jamestown Foundation; and Abdul Basit, "The BLA Becomes South Asia's Most Effective Insurgent Group," *Terrorism Monitor*, October 22, 2025, Jamestown Foundation.

³⁰ Ugwu, "Between Insurgency and Terrorism," 96.

economic infrastructure; and 15 per cent at foreigners, a pattern that steers clear of jihadists' deliberate attacks on civilians to maintain their ethno-nationalist legitimacy claim.³¹

4.1.4 Female Combatants

Since 2022, the BLA has been systematically inducting women operatives, and this practice is now followed throughout the Baloch armed movement. A schoolteacher, Shari Baloch, who was thirty years old and had two children, was responsible for the suicide attack on the Confucius Institute at Karachi University on 27 April 2022 that resulted in the death of three Chinese teachers, along with the Pakistani driver of the vehicle, but no Pakistani students. In June of 2023, Sumaiya Qalandrani Baloch, a 25-year-old computer science student, attacked a military convoy in Turbat. The opposing BLA-Azad group later replicated this attack, and in November 2025, the Baluchistan Liberation Front carried it out when Zareena Rafiq of its Sado Operational Battalion attacked the Frontier Corps headquarters in Nokundi, Chagai district.³²

Three factors could explain this development. From an operational standpoint, female bombers can evade security measures designed for male bombers, and three out of three female bombers' operations scored higher in sophistication than comparable male bombers' operations. The image of these women as martyrs is rhetorically positioned not as religious martyrs but as "educated mothers" giving a secular national sacrifice; this fits with the organisation's nationalist ideology and is meant to make it easier to recruit more women. In a social sense, the predominantly middle-class education that the Baloch female operatives listed to date suggests that the insurgency has gone beyond its tribal foundation and now transcends the gender barrier, as well.³³

4.1.5 Major Operations

The Jaffar Express, hijacked on March 11, 2025, had around 33 fighters who blew off the track near Bolan, laid it in a tunnel, and captured some four hundred people, including military and police officers, who were identified by the fighters based on previous intelligence. The attackers communicated with the train, cut communications, held a standoff for about 36 hours, released

³¹ Ugwu, "Between Insurgency and Terrorism," 93, 98.

³² Abdul Basit, "Use of Female Suicide Bombers Spreads across Baloch Militant Groups," *The Diplomat*, January 23, 2026; and Sibgha Hadi, "BLA's Rising Female Fighters: The Recruitment Strategy," *Stratheia*, March 2, 2025.

³³ Ugwu, "Between Insurgency and Terrorism," 94; and Basit, "Use of Female Suicide Bombers."

statements and video throughout the episode, and scored the highest rank on each factor of operational sophistication. There are huge discrepancies in casualty figures, with Pakistani authorities stating that 31 civilians and three security personnel were killed while all 33 attackers were killed, but the BLA claimed to have taken and killed 214 hostages, a figure not yet verified.³⁴

The BLA marked a significant step up in scale and coordination with Operation Herof-2, carried out from 31 January to 6 February 2026 in the districts of Quetta, Nushki, Mastung, Kalat, Kharan, Panjgur, Washuk, Turbat, Kech, and Gwadar. The organisation mobilised the Majeed Brigade, the Fateh Squad, and the Special Tactical Operations Squad, which includes female suicide bombers and fighters, and Hakkal Media broadcast imagery, video and audio simultaneously on Telegram, Instagram and X, thus creating narrative control ahead of official counterstatements. Pakistan's counteroperation, dubbed Radd-ul-Fitna-1, has been formally concluded on 5 February, and in the process, 216 militants, 22 security personnel and 36 civilians have been killed. The BLA's own figures of 362 "security personnel" killed compared to 93 of its own fighters killed are significantly higher and have been described by independent monitors as 'inflated and unconfirmed'.³⁵

³⁴ Ugwu, "Between Insurgency and Terrorism," 94–95.

³⁵ Nasar, "Operation Herof-2: How Hakkal Media Weaponised the BLA's Narrative Online," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, March 13, 2026; and Aamir Latif, "Army 'Successfully' Completes First Phase of Operation in Southwestern Pakistan, Kills 216 Militants," Anadolu Agency, February 5, 2026.

Figure 2: The Baluchistan Liberation Army: Major Operations, 2011–2026.

Sources: Ugwu (2026); Basit (2022, 2025); Nasar (2026). Casualty figures are as reported and contested in several cases.

4.2 The Baluchistan Liberation Front

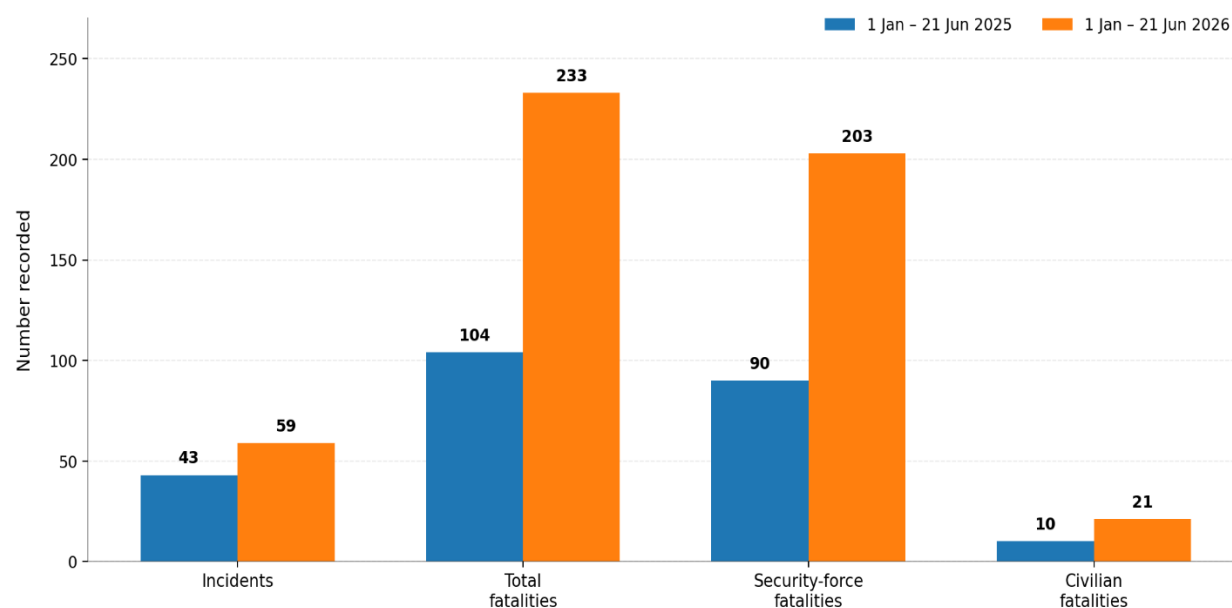
The Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF) is the most active force behind the escalation of 2026, although the BLA is the more prominent organisation. When the physician Dr Allah Nazar Baloch took command in 2003, he reorganised the group under a central command. He formed special units, such as a Sniper Tactical Team, an intelligence wing, and the Qurban Unit (fight to death). Pakistan banned the group in July 2010 under the Anti-Terrorism Act, but it has still kept a significant operational capability. On 13 June, its main operation in 2026 involved the simultaneous attack on military positions, police establishments and Levies facilities at Naal in Khuzdar district, where 33 security personnel were killed, and in which they set up road blocks on the main roads, including the CPEC, to cut off the area.³⁶

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, between 1 January and 21 June, the BLF was linked to 59 incidents, including the deaths of 233 persons (21 civilians, 203 security force personnel and 9 militants). The portal reported 43 incidents during the same time last year and 104 deaths, meaning that incidents increased by 37 per cent and deaths by more than 100 per cent during the same time this year. In January 2026, the organisation published its annual report, which classified 2025 as a pivotal year for its ‘national resistance’, citing its presence in the province’s coastal, urban and mountainous regions.³⁷

³⁶ Mantosh Kumar Singh, “The New Face of Baloch Insurgency: BLF’s Tactical Transformation,” *Sri Lanka Guardian*, June 23, 2026.

³⁷ South Asia Terrorism Portal data as presented in Mantosh Kumar Singh, “Pakistan: The Emerging Baluchistan Liberation Front Threat,” *Eurasia Review*, June 22, 2026.

Figure 3: Baluchistan Liberation Front incidents and fatalities, 1 January to 21 June 2025 compared with 2026.



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal, partial dataset (to 21 June 2026).

The organisation’s own annual report, issued in January 2026, described 2025 as a decisive year for what it termed the national resistance and claimed to have carried out operations across the coastal, urban and mountainous regions of the province.³⁸

4.3 BRAS And the Logic of Consolidation

Individual groups are increasingly working within a coordinating framework. The Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) alliance was established on 10 November 2018, comprising the Baluchistan Liberation Front and BLA-Jeeyand, and later added the Baloch Republican Guards, a faction of the Baloch Republican Army, and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army. It is not a unified command, but rather a coordination mechanism for insurgent operations, which includes joint planning, shared logistics, and joint concentration of effort in multi-district operations; according to the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, 204 attacks were jointly claimed by the BRAS

³⁸ Singh, “The Emerging Baluchistan Liberation Front Threat.”

in 2024 alone.³⁹ One might argue that it is a strategic decision with significant implications, as it reflects both a professionalising movement and a capacity to synchronise operations over vast and challenging terrain and a conscious pivot in strategy from attritional harassment to operations that demonstrate reach. It also suggests that the escalation had an organisational logic of its own, distinct from regional events, thus supporting the endogenous account of the escalation rather than the war-centred one.

4.4 The China Dimension: CPEC, Gwadar and the Internationalised Target Set

One unique and significant characteristic of the Baloch insurgency is its direct attack on Chinese interests and nationals. The campaign is very conscious, and it internationalises a conflict that otherwise may have stayed a domestic security issue. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was officially opened in April 2015, with an initial investment commitment of \$46 billion, later increased to \$62 billion, with around \$25 billion spent on completed projects. It is supposed to link Kashgar (in China's Xinjiang region) with the deep-sea port of Gwadar on the Baluchistan coast.⁴⁰ The BLA sees the corridor as a manifestation of the resource paradox, which involves a massive investment that, according to the movement, enriches Baloch resources and securitises Baloch territory in exchange for employment and profits to outsiders.⁴¹

This has led to an ongoing anti-China campaign. From 2021 to 2025, at least 22 Chinese nationals lost their lives in attacks in Pakistan, and many more were injured, compared to 20 killed and 34 injured in 14 attacks during a similar period reported by Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority.⁴² It also contains details of the November 2018 attack on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi (no Chinese nationals were killed, but 4 people were), the July 2021 Dasu bus bombing (9 Chinese engineers were killed), the April 2022 attack on the Confucius Institute at Karachi University (no Chinese nationals were killed) and an attack near Karachi airport on 6 October 2024

³⁹ Ayush Verma, Imtiaz Baloch, and Riccardo Valle, "The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 18, no. 4 (April 2025), Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

⁴⁰ Eldar Mamedov, "Beyond Bricks and Mortar: CPEC 2.0's Make-or-Break Moment," *Dawn*, July 17, 2026; and David Sacks, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Hard Reality Greet's BRI's Signature Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, March 30, 2021.

⁴¹ "Baluchistan: CPEC, Anti-China Sentiment and the Way Ahead," *South Asia @ LSE*, May 19, 2025.

⁴² Daud Khattak, "Attacks on Chinese Projects Test China-Pakistan 'Iron Brotherhood' in Baluchistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 25, 2026.

(two Chinese nationals were killed), all of which were claimed by the BLA.⁴³ The organisation has now issued repeated public ultimatums to Beijing, starting with a 2019 video to President Xi Jinping urging China to make a hasty retreat from Baluchistan and again following the bombing of the Confucius Institute in 2022 and in August this year.⁴⁴ In June 2026, the BLF's attack at Naal was coordinated and also blocked the CPEC route, while the BLA operations in Quetta and Gwadar also targeted and reached the corridor districts directly in January and February 2026.

The increased violence and militancy have the following consequences: First, it brings the conflict into the international arena, involving a great power and testing its patience with Pakistan's security performance, which is clearly wearing thin and influencing Islamabad's calculations. Second, it increases the risk of failure; CPEC's security is linked to Pakistan's most crucial strategic partnership, and its continued attacks are not only putting the investment at risk but also eroding confidence. Third, a Jamestown Foundation assessment noted that an early sign of the cross-border dynamic of the 2026 war was that the June 2025 Israel–Iran confrontation sparked Pakistan's concerns about Iranian and Pakistani Baloch militants working together to sabotage the corridor.⁴⁵ The impact is already visible in investment decisions: in April, development at Reko Diq was postponed because of security concerns, and in July, operations at Saindak were put on hold.⁴⁶

4.5 The Regenerative Capacity of The Insurgency

The insurgent ecosystem matters more than weapons and tactics in replacing fighters it loses. The losses inflicted by the Pakistani security forces are very heavy. On February 4, 2026, the Chief Minister of Baluchistan, Sarfraz Bugti, reported that security operations in the province had resulted in the deaths of over 700 militants in the past year, while 2025 was the deadliest year for militants across the country, according to data from the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security

⁴³ “Gunmen Attack Chinese Consulate in Karachi,” Al Jazeera, November 23, 2018; “9 Chinese Engineers among 12 Killed in ‘Attack’ near Dasu Hydropower Plant,” *Dawn*, July 14, 2021; and “2 Chinese Workers Killed in Karachi Blast Claimed by Baluch Separatists,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 7, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/karachi-china-blast-baloch/33148764.html>.

⁴⁴ Khattak, “Attacks on Chinese Projects.”

⁴⁵ “Amid Geopolitical Tensions, Baloch Militant Attacks Undermine Sino-Pakistan Projects,” Jamestown Foundation, July 30, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/amid-geopolitical-tensions-baloch-militant-attacks-undermine-sino-pakistan-projects/>.

⁴⁶ Barrick Mining Corporation, “Barrick Provides an Update on Reko Diq,” news release, April 2, 2026, <https://www.barrick.com/English/news/news-details/2026/barrick-provides-an-update-on-reko-diq/default.aspx>; and “Pakistan's Largest Chinese Mine Warns It May Cease Operations,” *Business Recorder*, July 15, 2026.

Studies. But the insurgency was not abated in 2026; it grew. An organisation that loses hundreds of fighters is tapping into a vast pool of recruits while becoming even more dangerous.⁴⁷

5 The TTP Dimension: Safe Havens in Afghanistan and Sectarian Violence

One of the main characteristics of the 2026 escalation is that it is a simultaneous pressure from organisations which have incompatible objectives. This section discusses the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, its safe havens in Afghanistan, the question of convergence between the Baloch armed movement and it, and a sectarian current which goes in two directions and that security analysis of Baluchistan has largely ignored. Here, the TTP is treated as a separate issue with its own logic. It is a jihadist movement fighting the Pakistani state away from its Afghan sanctuary and is dealt with in this report because it is a target of the Pakistani state in parallel to the ethno-nationalist Baloch insurgency that is the main topic of this report, and not necessarily because it is part of the same causal story as the war in Iran.

5.1 The Question of Operational Convergence

The BLA and the TTP are a product of diverse traditions. The former is ethnos, a secular, largely Balochist movement for Baloch self-determination, and the latter is a jihadist movement that wants to establish the Islamic order that it wants and to undo the Pakistani state's operations in the tribal districts. Over the years, these strands operated in parallel, sometimes in tension.

They often move at different speeds and talk about convergence at the fringes; statements of such convergence must be handled carefully since the evidentiary record is not as robust as is sometimes claimed. Analytical literature has cited shared training facilities in Walikot and Shorabak and a general alignment of interests, based on reports from United Nations Security Council monitoring.⁴⁸ In his presser at Baluchistan on July 8, 2026, after the most lethal week of the year in Baluchistan, the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) placed the Hanna Urak and Ziarat attacks in the hands of the TTP and the attacks in Bela and Winder in the hands

⁴⁷ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90; and Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–95.

⁴⁸ Usman Anwar, "Emerging TTP–BLA Nexus and Its Implications for Pakistan's Security Landscape," *The Diplomatic Insight*, February 4, 2026, <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/ttp-bla-nexus-pak-security-landscape/>.

of the BLA, effectively as parallel attacks, not as a joint offensive.⁴⁹ Thus, during this same timeframe, the Pakistani army was simultaneously under pressure from both militant organisations, and it launched Operation Shaban against both, not that the two launched a combined operation.⁵⁰

In early July 2026, it was reported that Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a faction, had broken off from the TTP and re-established itself as an independent entity (third time after 2014 and 2017), but the Pakistani media emphasised that the split was still an analytical choice rather than a fact.⁵¹

5.2 Safe Havens in Afghanistan

Pakistan has presented a case against the Afghan Taliban administration at the United Nations (UN). In August 2025, during the presentation on Pakistan's level 3 designations to the UN Security Council, Pakistan's Permanent Representative noted that the TTP, with its 6000 fighters, is the largest UN-designated terrorist group operating from Afghan soil.⁵² The other claim that the TTP is the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan is based on estimates by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which has estimated the size of the TTP between 6,000 and 6,500 fighters.⁵³ Islamabad has been saying that the Afghan Taliban government has not denied the TTP freedom of movement across the border despite its denials.

This grievance has led to a significant decline in the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship since October 2025, marked by repeated intrusions by the Pakistani military into Afghan land and escalating tensions on both sides. There is an established and high human toll, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reporting 372 civilians killed and 397 injured in cross-border attacks from 1 January to 31 March 2026, the highest quarterly death and injury toll the mission has seen since 2011, with 64 per cent of the casualties caused by airstrikes

⁴⁹ "38 Security Personnel Martyred, 54 Terrorists Neutralised in Recent Baluchistan Attacks: DG ISPR," *Dawn*, July 8, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2013868>.

⁵⁰ Umair Jamal, "Pakistan's Operation Shaban Targets Both the TTP and BLA in Baluchistan," *The Diplomat*, July 15, 2026.

⁵¹ Shahabullah Yousafzai, "Jamaat-ul-Ahrar's Reported Third Split from TTP Raises Questions over Internal Divisions," *Express Tribune*, July 4, 2026.

⁵² Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, "Statement by Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations, at the UN Security Council Briefing on Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts," Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, August 20, 2025.

⁵³ Hassan Belal Zaidi, "'TTP Now Largest Terror Group in Afghanistan'," *Dawn*, July 12, 2024.

and 35 per cent by indirect cross-border fire.⁵⁴ For Baluchistan, the Afghan dimension matters because it shares a long border with Afghanistan. After all, TTP networks infiltrate its northern and eastern districts, and any contact with Baloch groups would provide Afghan sanctuary to violence far to the south.

5.3 Simultaneous Pressure Across Three Frontiers

An interwoven matrix of threats awaits Pakistan on its western border: Baloch separatists in Iran and jihadist militants in Afghanistan, and an unresolved eastern border with India. As the Afghan flank faltered, so did the Iranian front. It could be argued that three frontiers were affected concurrently, and a state which has to divide finite aviation and ground forces among theatres which have only one thing in common: a border on which they operate, must make those divisions. The division can be seen in July 2026: the army launched Operation Shaban in several districts of Baluchistan and continued the operations on the Afghan border, and the month recorded the highest death toll for the security forces since January 2023.⁵⁵

5.4 The Sectarian Dimension: ISKP And Iran-Linked Formations

Alongside the ethno-nationalist and anti-state jihadist strands runs a third, sectarian current, and it runs in both directions. There is, of course, another sectarian current operating side by side with the ethno-nationalist and anti-state jihadist current, and it is two-way. One is Sunni jihadist violence against Shia and other minority groups, with Islamic State Khorasan Province being the main force. Most importantly, its strike was not in Baluchistan but in the capital – the Khadija-Tul-Kubra Mosque was bombed in Islamabad on 6 February 2026, claiming at least 31 lives; responsibility for the strike was claimed on its Telegram channel on the same evening.⁵⁶ That attack, along with attacks in Bajaur and Bannu, was the immediate catalyst for Pakistan's late-February incursions across the border into Afghanistan and is thus a part of the same escalatory spiral this report documents. Moreover, ISKP rivals, and occasionally draws recruits from, the TTP, so that pressure on one jihadist network does not simply lead to a decrease in threat.

⁵⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Human Rights Service, *Cross-Border Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan: January–March 2026* (Kabul: UNAMA, May 2026).

⁵⁵ Jamal, "Pakistan's Operation Shaban Targets Both the TTP and BLA in Baluchistan."

⁵⁶ "At Least 31 Killed, Dozens Wounded in Suicide Blast at Islamabad Mosque," Al Jazeera, February 6, 2026.

There has been less attention to the fact that Baluchistan is directly linked with the Iran war. About 15-20 per cent of Pakistan's population is Shia, and Shia groups recruited from among them have had combat experience in other countries and are backed by Iran. In April 2024, Pakistan designated the Iranian-backed Zainebiyoun Brigade, which is made up of Pakistani Shia communities and deployed to Syria, as a terrorist group. It mentions that it recruited in Parachinar, Karachi, Gilgit-Baltistan, and, notably for this report, Quetta, where a charitable foundation is cited as a cover for IRG members. Counter-terrorism efforts against the network continued throughout 2025, and reports in 2026 revealed that newer groups had emerged, such as Lashkar-e-Sarullah, that were part of the network.⁵⁷

The importance for Baluchistan is regarding the possibility of convergence amidst the scenario of regional escalation. Quetta serves as a staging post for a Shia group that is connected to Tehran, and it is also a ground for Baloch separatist and TTP activities. Pakistan has signed defence pacts with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Saudi pact having mutual-defence clauses; if the war should escalate to include those countries, it would be hard for Pakistan to remain a mediator, as it would be under pressure to join the war as a party, rather than an impartial third party, and its role as a mediator between Tehran and Washington may be compromised. If a regionalised war were to break out and set in motion the sectarian mechanism, it would add a third type of armed actor to a province already fought over by two other groups, one-armed combat team with foreign experience and known external support. The result would not be the end of the insurgency but rather the complication of the situation in a province in which the state's ability to deal with one armed challenge is already in doubt.

6 Terrorism Trends: Casualties and Major Operations, 2022 To 2026

As Section 1 notes, the figures are drawn from monitors whose methodologies differ materially, and they should be read as indicative of scale and trend rather than as precise or mutually reconcilable counts. Series from different monitors are not combined. Insurgent claims, state

⁵⁷ Osama Ahmad, "Pakistan Bans Iran-Backed Zainebiyoun Brigade amid Regional Turmoil," *Terrorism Monitor* 23, no. 1 (March 25, 2025), Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/pakistan-bans-iran-backed-zainebiyoun-brigade-amid-regional-turmoil/>; Naimat Khan, "Pakistan Detains Suspected Militants of Sectarian Zainebiyoun Brigade," Arab News, October 23, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2619947/pakistan>; and Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "How the Iran War Will Reconfigure Militancy in Baluchistan," *The Diplomat*, March 26, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/how-the-iran-war-will-reconfigure-militancy-in-Baluchistan/>.

claims and third-party tallies frequently diverge, and this divergence is itself part of the story. The data on either side of 28 February 2026 are used in what follows to test the war's effect rather than to presume it: were the war the principal driver of the escalation, the series should display a marked and sustained rise after that date, and the record examined below indicates that they do not, the escalation instead continuing a trajectory established well before the war's second phase.

6.1 Pakistan as the Most Affected by Terrorism in 2026

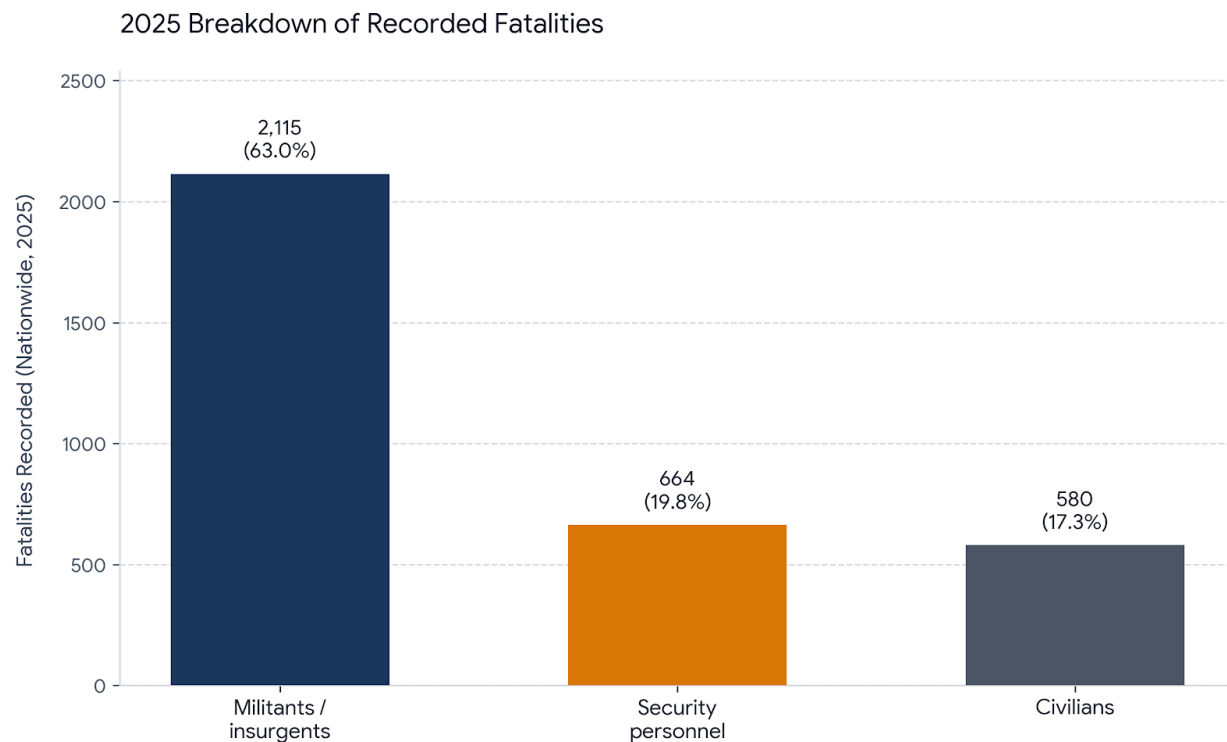
In 2026, Pakistan became the top country in the world on the index for the first time in its history, where it suffered from the highest level of terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index 2026 indicated that total deaths from terrorist attacks in Pakistan increased by nearly 6 per cent in 2025 as compared to 2024, rising from 1,098 to 1,139, despite a slight decrease in the number of attacks. According to the index, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are the worst-hit provinces, with more than 74 per cent of the terrorist attacks and 67 per cent of deaths in the country occurring in these two provinces.⁵⁸

According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, which includes insurgent and terrorist violence and every action taken by security forces in addition to militant violence, 2025 was the bloodiest year ever. It also revised its figures for the past year, which were published on 5th January 2026, showing 2,138 militants and insurgents killed, 667 members of the security forces, 580 civilians and 28 members of peace committees, totalling 3,413 dead in 1,066 attacks recorded, up 74 per cent on 2024.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, March 2026).

⁵⁹ Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, "Pakistan's 2025 Counterterrorism Toll Surges 74%."

Figure 4: Structure of Conflict Fatalities in Pakistan, 2025.



Source: Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies annual dataset, 2025.

6.2 The Provincial Series

According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, the province of Baluchistan experienced a 26 per cent increase in terrorist attacks compared to 2024, totalling 254 incidents, resulting in 419 deaths and 607 injuries, amounting to 1,026 casualties in 2025. Using a broader definition that includes insurgent and counter-insurgent deaths, the South Asia Terrorism Portal shows a steeper curve: 406 in 2022, 466 in 2023, 774 in 2024 and 1,534 in 2025.⁶⁰

6.3 The Monthly Record For 2026

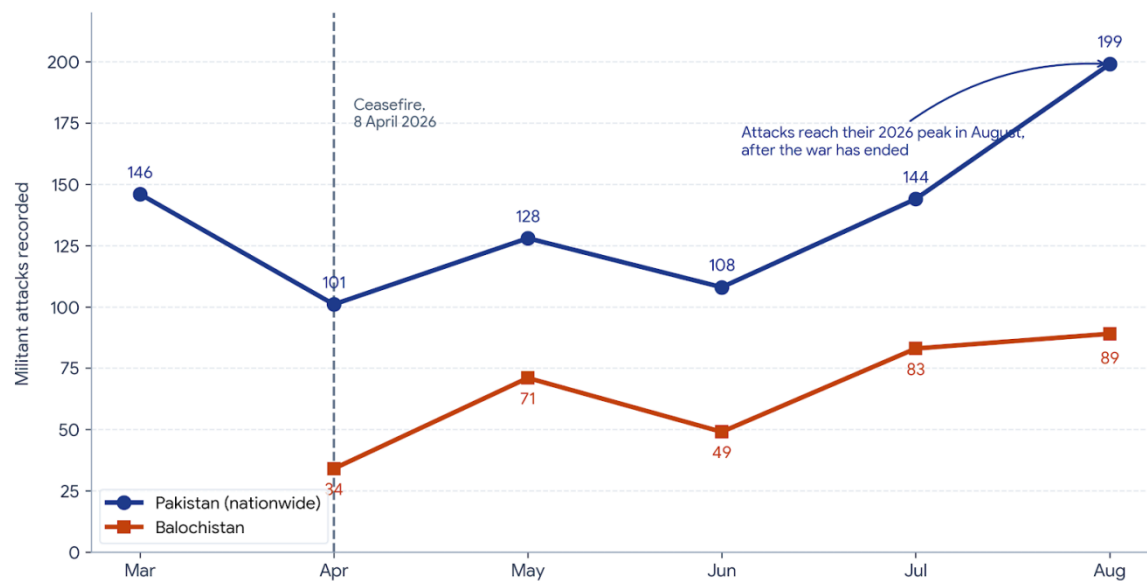
The second phase of the war opened on 28 February 2026, the conditional ceasefire took effect on 8 April, and the memorandum of understanding followed in mid-June. If the war had driven the

⁶⁰ Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, “Persistent Instability in Baluchistan,” *South Asia Intelligence Review*, May 19, 2026, <https://slguardian.org/persistent-instability-in-Baluchistan/>; and Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, “Unending Carnage in Baluchistan,” *South Asia Intelligence Review*, January 14, 2025, <https://slguardian.org/unending-carnage-in-Baluchistan/>.

escalation, the province's violence should have peaked during the fighting; instead, it peaked afterwards, in May and July, once the guns across the frontier had fallen silent. Two qualifications apply. The dip in the national series in April coincided with a major Pakistani counter-terrorism campaign, Operation Ghazab lil Haq, so that part of the reduction may reflect state action rather than reduced militant intent, and a single year of monthly data cannot by itself separate an endogenous trajectory from a lagged external effect. Neither qualification, however, disturbs the central pattern, which the incident record renders more clearly than the fatality record does.

Measured by incidents rather than deaths, as the volatility of casualty counts requires, the escalation did not end with the war but accelerated through the summer. Militant attacks across Pakistan rose from 144 in July to 199 in August 2026, an increase of 38 per cent and the highest monthly total of the year, even as the human toll of those attacks fell; in Baluchistan attacks rose from 83 to 89 over the same period, and the province overtook Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to become the country's most violent, a distinction it had not previously held. The significance of the rise lies less in the raw count than in its coordination, its lethality and its concentration in a single province: Baluchistan holds about six per cent of Pakistan's population, yet in the first week of July 2026 it accounted for 94 per cent of the country's conflict-related deaths. This concentration tracks the insurgency's opposition to CPEC far more closely than it tracks any event in Iran, with the heaviest violence continuing to fall on the corridor's routes, its security escorts and its associated infrastructure.

Figure 5. Militant attacks by month, March to August 2026



Source: Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) monthly releases. Figures are militant attacks; April is PICSS's revised count.

Monthly militant attacks, nationwide and in Baluchistan (PICSS). The tempo climbs after the ceasefire, reaching its 2026 peak in August, once the war across the frontier has ended.

6.4 A Chronology of Major Attacks

Table 2 below lists a timeline of the major attacks in and around Baluchistan from late 2024 through mid-2026. It is far from complete, but it reflects the best operations which typify the size and nature of the escalation and its geographical distribution.

Table 2: Chronology of Major Attacks in and Around Baluchistan, November 2024 to July 2026

Date	Location	Event	Reported outcome
9 Nov 2024	Quetta railway station	BLA Majeed Brigade suicide bombing	26 killed, incl. 16 security personnel; 61 injured
11–12 Mar 2025	Bolan Pass, Sibi	Jaffar Express hijacking; Operation Green Bolan	State: 31 killed plus 33 attackers. BLA claim: 214 hostages executed (unverified)
31 Jan–6 Feb 2026	Twelve districts	BLA “Operation Herof-2”; Pakistani counter-operation Radd-ul-Fitna-1	State: 216 militants, 22 security personnel, 36 civilians killed. BLA claim: 362 security personnel killed (unverified)

6 Feb 2026	Islamabad	Khadija Tul Kubra mosque bombing; ISKP claimed	At least 31 worshippers killed
May 2026	Rakhni, Barkhan	BLF operation against alleged state-linked auxiliaries	9 killed (BLF claim; independently unverified)
24 May 2026	Near Quetta	BLA vehicle-borne suicide attack on troop train	29 killed; 102 injured (Pakistan Railways)
13 Jun 2026	Naal, Khuzdar	BLF coordinated assault on military, police and levies posts.	33 security personnel killed
4–8 Jul 2026	Hanna Urak, Ziarat, Bela, Winder	Concurrent TTP and BLA attacks; Operation Shaban followed	38 security personnel killed and 54 militants killed (DG ISPR); 42 dead in total reported

6.5 Limitations of the Quantitative Record

Four cautions apply when reading these figures. First, numbers vary by source and method, and the difference between state and insurgent figures can be very large. In January and February of 2026, the Pakistani military claimed that it had killed 216 militants, while the BLA claimed to have killed 362 security personnel, but neither claim has been independently verified.

Second, casualty figures from current theatres of war where media access is limited are provisional, and initial numbers are regularly revised. The Quetta train bombing on 24 May 2026 was initially claimed to have resulted in at least 24 fatalities, which was later revised and confirmed by Pakistan Railways to be 29 fatalities and 102 injured.⁶¹

Third, there are several well-reported incidents that rely on statements by proscribed organisations that have not been independently confirmed. For example, the BLF killing of alleged pro-state

⁶¹ “Pakistan Railways Confirms 29 Fatalities in Quetta Train Bombing,” *Railway News*, May 25, 2026, <https://railwaynews.net/pakistan-railways-confirms-29-fatalities-quetta-train-bombing.html>; and “Train Bomb in Pakistan’s Baloch Region: Why Violence Is on the Rise,” *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/25/train-bomb-in-pakistans-baloch-region-why-violence-is-on-the-rise>.

auxiliaries in May 2026 in Rakhni is a partisan claim, which is presented here as such.⁶² Fourth, and most important analytically, the numbers show escalation but not its cause.

7 Pakistan's Kinetic Response: Operations and Cross-Border Strikes

The Pakistani State, confronted with the resurgence of insurgency, has reacted overwhelmingly by force. This section will consider that response, the use of force, its international counterstrikes in Afghanistan, and its clear limitations. However, it is not as if Pakistan should cease to protect its citizens and its soldiers: a State facing mass casualty attacks on trains and police stations has a right to respond and a duty to do so. The argument is that pressure alone has not brought about security and that its 'pressure by itself' policy opens the door to further grievances that perpetuate the insurgency.

7.1 Pakistan's Counter-Insurgency Campaign in Baluchistan

In Baluchistan, the security forces have been busy in intelligence-led operations, cordon and search operations, and, more recently, air and helicopter-based strikes on areas of militant activity during 2025 and 2026. The size of the loss to the militants, as enumerated in Sections 4.5 and 6.1, reflects a campaign fought at a high level of intensity over two years. The pace did not slacken in 2026. Pakistan has concluded its counter-operation against the BLA's January attack, dubbed Radd-ul-Fitna-1. After the attacks of 4-8 July, the army launched Operation Shaban in various districts of Baluchistan simultaneously with the Frontier Corps and the provincial police, and it was reported by Radio Pakistan that 91 militants had been killed by 16 July, and a figure of 129 circulated in the press that combined Operation Shaban with parallel intelligence-driven operations.⁶³

The trend of the past two years remains worrisome, each new surge of operations followed not by a lasting drop in violence but by a new escalation, and the insurgency itself has suffered very heavy

⁶² "BLF Kills 9 Members of Death Squads in Rakhni," *Organiser*, May 9, 2026, <https://organiser.org/2026/05/09/352638/world/sohabatpur-blf-kills-9-members-of-death-squads-in-rakhni-damages-4-electricity-towers-gas-pipeline-blown-up/>.

⁶³ "Baluchistan: 91 Terrorists Killed in Operation Shaban," Radio Pakistan, July 16, 2026, <https://www.radio.gov.pk/16-07-2026/Baluchistan-91-terrorists-killed-in-operation-shaban>; and "Operation Shaban Toll Reaches 129 after Three More Militants Killed in Baluchistan," *Pakistan Today*, July 16, 2026, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2026/07/16/operation-shaban-toll-reaches-129-after-three-more-militants-killed-in-Baluchistan>. See also, Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, "Militant Attacks, Security Operations Make July Deadliest Month of 2026."

losses and emerged more coordinated and more lethal. This is the empirical signature of a political rather than military conflict.

7.2 The Extension of Operations into Afghanistan

The kinetic response has expanded significantly into Afghanistan. Characterisations of ‘rounds’ of conflict since October 2025 should be viewed with caution because the chronology of events has been dense and the escalation continuous rather than episodic: The International Crisis Group calls the entire sequence one of ‘escalating phases of a single worsening relationship’.⁶⁴

Pakistan’s air force has conducted seven strikes in Nangarhar and Paktika against seven camps on the night of 21–22 February 2026 in response to multiple instances of suicide bombing in Pakistan, such as the 6 February 2026 attack on a mosque in Islamabad. At least 70 militants were killed and a further 70 wounded in Pakistan, with state media claiming as many as 80 casualties; according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), at least 13 civilians were killed in Nangarhar, and the Afghan Red Crescent (ARC) reported 18 civilian deaths.⁶⁵ On 25–26 February, the Afghan response to Pakistan’s initial strikes was to take place overnight, with the second and larger wave of Pakistan’s strikes on 26–27 February hitting Kabul, Khost, Paktika and Laghman, prompting the Defence Minister to declare that the two countries were in a state of open war.⁶⁶ The campaign was named Operation Ghazab lil Haq while the Afghan Taliban named their campaign Operation Rad-ul Zulm.

On 24 December 2024, Pakistan’s military targeted infrastructure of the TTP in Barmal district in Paktika, Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of 52 civilians, including over 20 children, as reported by UNICEF. Additional attacks occurred on the night of 9th-10th June 2026 in Kunar, Khost and Paktika, with the Afghan Taliban claiming 13 civilian fatalities (11 of which were children) and

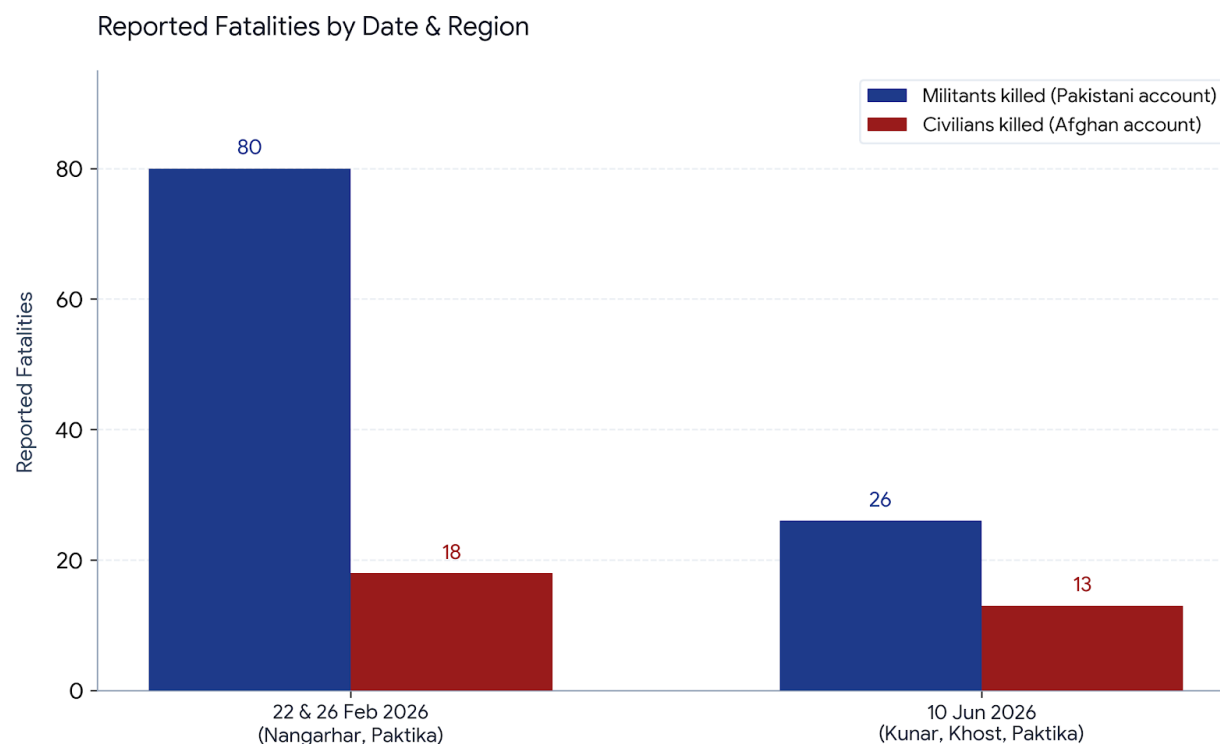
⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge on the Afghan Border*, Asia Report no. 354 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 27, 2026), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/pakistan-afghanistan/354-pakistan-responding-militant-surge-afghan-border>.

⁶⁵ “Pakistan Claims at Least 70 Fighters Killed in Strikes along Afghan Border,” Al Jazeera, February 23, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/23/pakistan-claims-at-least-70-fighters-killed-in-strikes-along-afghan-border>.

⁶⁶ Associated Press, “Pakistan Says It Is Now in ‘Open War’ with Afghanistan after Cross-Border Strikes,” NPR, February 26, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/02/26/g-s1-111783/airstrikes-afghanistan-pakistan-qatar-ceasefire>.

Pakistan claiming 26 fighters.⁶⁷ On 28 June, Pakistan launched a ground operation on the border and “calibrated strikes” killed another 29 militants.⁶⁸

Figure 6: Contested Casualty Claims Arising from Pakistani Strikes in Afghanistan, 2026.



Sources: Pakistani official statements; Afghan (Taliban) authorities, as reported by Reuters, AFP and Al Jazeera.

Neither set of claims has been independently verified; the figure represents the dispute rather than an established record.

This difference between the accounts is at the heart of the strategic impact of the strikes. In Pakistan, it talks about “precision action” against terrorists, based on intelligence; in Afghanistan, civilians and children are reported dead by authorities and international agencies. Regardless of

⁶⁷ “Pakistan Claims Killing 26 Afghan Fighters; Taliban Says Civilians Killed,” Al Jazeera, June 10, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/10/afghanistan-says-pakistan-air-raids-killed-13-people-including-children>.

⁶⁸ Munir Ahmed and Suzan Fraser, “Pakistan Says It Carried Out Ground Operation, Strikes along Afghan Border, Killing 29 Militants,” Associated Press / PBS News, June 28, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/pakistan-says-it-carried-out-ground-operation-strikes-along-afghan-border-killing-29-militants>. See also, Afghan Witness, “Pakistan Air Strikes in Afghanistan Mark Significant Policy Shift,” Centre for Information Resilience, January 16, 2025, <https://www.info-res.org/afghan-witness/reports/pakistan-air-strikes-in-afghanistan-mark-significant-policy-shift/>.

what actually may have happened in any specific instance, civilians' perception of harm is what fuels Afghan anger, the tense bilateral dynamic, and a propaganda tool for the militants. UNAMA's quarterly civilian dead count of 372 for cross-border hostilities brings credibility to Afghan complaints, while Pakistan's fundamental security worry of TTP's sanctuaries is real.

7.3 The Limits of the Kinetic Approach

The cross-border strikes reflect the larger conundrum of Pakistan's kinetic posture. They might be able to disrupt certain networks, but they have not been able to curtail the spread of violence, and they come at a cost, one that accumulates over time: they risk diplomatic fissures in Kabul, alienating border populations, and using civilian casualties as recruiting fodder for the very groups they are trying to defeat. This is the same within Baluchistan. Operations that drag innocent civilians into the conflict along with the guilty, that resort to methods like forced disappearance, or that suspect the whole population is more likely to create grievance than to kill fighters.

7.4 Sovereignty, International Law and the Strategic Cost of Extraterritorial Force

Cross-border strikes extend beyond tactical consequences and raise legal and legitimacy questions with strategic implications.

The United Nations Charter, article 2(4), prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state, and article 51 recognises the inherent right of self-defense in the event of an armed attack.⁶⁹ In its own justification, Pakistan has described its attacks as a countermeasure of self-defence, as the Afghan government is either "unwilling or unable" to deal with the threat. The status of that doctrine in customary international law is undecided and subject to debate. Its most prominent advocate admits that states have not widely adopted it and suggests a method for providing a firmer foundation for it in state practice; a major critical survey of the doctrine finds that it has not yet crystallised as customary law.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Charter of the United Nations*, arts. 2(4), 51, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

⁷⁰ Ashley S. Deeks, "Unwilling or Unable": Toward a Normative Framework for Extraterritorial Self-Defense," *Virginia Journal of International Law* 52, no. 3 (2012): 483–550; Olivier Corten, "The 'Unwilling or Unable' Test: Has It Been, and Could It Be, Accepted?," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 29, no. 3 (2016): 777–99; and Elizabeth Wilmshurst, *Principles of International Law on the Use of Force by States in Self-Defence*, Chatham House ILP WP 05/01 (London: Chatham House, October 2005).

The strategic stakes in this tension are high because each cross-border strike gives militants an argument that the state is capable of killing across the border and is unable to protect at home; it makes diplomacy with the Afghan government and other countries harder for Pakistan; and it could potentially entrench a precedent of cross-border force that could be directed at Pakistan as easily as at others. A doctrine that fundamentally uses repeated strikes outside the country as its tool of choice against sanctuary states offers long-term legitimacy in exchange for short-term disruption. That's not a case for doing nothing to real sanctuaries but proof that the sanctuary issue is first and foremost diplomatic and political and that it has to be negotiated with Kabul rather than pursued through an open-ended campaign with high civilian costs and declining strategic dividends.

8 Proliferation, Emerging Technology and the Illicit Economy of War

When it comes to weapons, technologies, money, and expertise, armed conflict redistributes these resources most quickly to actors least accountable for their use. This war of 2026 has reached a point where a significant material surplus from the 2021 Afghan collapse already exists, and its main impact has been to accelerate multiple material flows simultaneously. Each will be discussed in turn, with a conclusion on how they all combine to create pressure.

8.1 The Diffusion of Armed Commercial Drones

The most important technological change is the introduction of the armed commercial drone. According to the data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, 110 quadcopter attacks were reported in the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, which resulted in the deaths of 89 people and injuries to at least 259 others, between 21 October 2024 in the Tirah Valley of Khyber district and 12 July 2026. The pace is picking up quickly; the six months ending in June 2026 saw at least 60 incidents, 36 deaths and 178 injuries, compared with 49 incidents, 46 deaths and 10 injuries for all of 2025 and 13 incidents, 13 deaths and 10 injuries for the first half of 2025.⁷¹

Secondly, Pakistan officially reported 410 incidents involving quadcopters and drones in 2025, roughly 10 per cent of the 5,397 incidents recorded that year. On the other hand, SATP counts attacks reported in open sources involving drones used for purposes known to have resulted in

⁷¹ Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, "Pakistan: Quadcopter Proliferation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," *South Asia Intelligence Review*, July 14, 2026, <https://slguardian.org/khyber-pakhtunkhwa-quadcopter-proliferation/>.

casualties; the official count is a military incident count that includes drone sightings, intercepts, aborted or non-lethal drops, and unattributed drone-related incidents across all theatres.⁷²

The technology is enticing for insurgents and hard to thwart. Various commercial quadcopters and first-person-view (FPV) drones are readily available, inexpensive, and easy to convert into mortar rounds or other makeshift munitions. They evade checkpoints and fortified positions that have long been the backbone of security forces; they enable sophisticated, precise strikes on specific targets; and they provide aerial footage used for recruitment and propaganda. The drone is as deadly as the suicide bomber and roadside device, without the human and material expenses, and was a technology former groups used to rely on.

This shift has not spared Baluchistan, and the aerial domain is now disputed between both sides. A drone attack by the security forces resulted in the killing of four BLF fighters at Zamuran, Kech district, on 8 January 2026, and the killing of one soldier and the wounding of 16 BLF fighters at Mangochar, Kalat district, on 7 July 2026.⁷³ The link to the broader war is one of diffusion: it is regionally normalising drone warfare, sharing technical expertise on the battlefield through drone footage and forums, and smuggling parts down the same supply routes that transport fuel and arms. A militant anti-drone capability has already started to take shape.⁷⁴ The forward risk is that as the drone-savvy Iran on the western border gets fuller of the associated technology and know-how, it will be able to move up the capability ladder from the improvised quadcopters to longer-range, faster, and more autonomous systems.

8.2 Small Arms and the Afghan Materiel Surplus

Drones are the new threat; the enabling one is the large number of advanced small arms. The 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan left a significant number of armaments behind. The United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction says that as of August 2021, the United States Department of Defence reported about \$7.1 billion in United States-financed defence

⁷² Rahim Nasar, “Quadcopter Drones Reshaping Pakistan’s Militant Landscape (Part One),” *Terrorism Monitor* 24, no. 5 (March 13, 2026), Jamestown Foundation.

⁷³ Mohanty, “Quadcopter Proliferation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.”

⁷⁴ Imtiaz Baloch, “From Defence to Offence: How Anti-Drone Technologies Are Empowering Militants,” Global Network on Extremism and Technology, January 23, 2026.

articles still in Afghanistan but expressly warned that it is not clear whether that is the case.⁷⁵ The Taliban seized close to one million items of advanced military equipment, and roughly half are now unaccounted for.⁷⁶

There has been a burgeoning black market in Afghanistan for items like assault rifles such as the M4 and M16, sniper rifles, machine guns, night vision and military communications equipment, which have been sold to the area's militants. The principal beneficiaries are identified as the TTP and BLA. Night-vision gear and precision optics enable militants to strike effectively at night, when regular checkpoint security is ill-equipped to counter an asymmetric threat. Militants have used this advanced equipment in attacks on LEAs, giving them a technological edge.

8.3 Fuel Smuggling, Hawala and Terror Finance

In May 2024, an assessment prepared by two Pakistani intelligence agencies indicated that more than \$1 billion in Iranian fuel was being smuggled into Pakistan annually, including as much as 6 million liters of fuel per day, 14 per cent of Pakistan's annual consumption, via an estimated 2,000 vehicles and 1,300 boats, through the hawala, the informal and largely untraceable value-transfer system used by armed groups.⁷⁷ The smuggling economy is a revenue stream from which armed groups extract taxes, provide protection and derive benefits, and its persistence gives them funds; and the hawala networks that clear and settle the fuel trade are the same networks that move terror finance, with the result that the difference between a smuggler's remittance and a militant's salary becomes indistinct.

In April 2026, the U.S. Treasury identified nine ships and several corporate entities in a network moving Iranian oil to Venezuela, to be used to benefit the IRGC-Qods Force and ultimately Hizballah.⁷⁸ On top of that record of documented financial support for the TTP leadership by the Afghan Taliban, including a payment of three million Afghanis (about \$43,000) per month to the family of the TTP leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, was recorded by the United Nations Analytical

⁷⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *U.S.-Provided Funds and Equipment to Afghanistan*, SIGAR 23-04-IP (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, November 2022).

⁷⁶ "50 Per Cent of US Weapons 'Lost, Sold or Smuggled to Militants': BBC," *Dawn*, April 19, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1905209/>.

⁷⁷ Khattak, "Iran Is Smuggling Millions of Liters of Fuel."

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Economic Fury Targets Illicit Oil Smuggling Network Run by Iranian Regime Elite," press release SB0443, April 15, 2026.

Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the information of one member state.⁷⁹ Pakistan's long-standing problems with the international financial-monitoring watchdogs over precisely these same networks illustrate the challenge of intercepting the money.

8.4 Youth Grievance as a Compounding Vulnerability

The final flow that the war exacerbates is the least tangible and maybe the most destabilising. The area has recently been a source of inspiration for mobilised youth and what they can achieve. Sri Lanka in 2022, Bangladesh in 2024 and Nepal in September 2025 have seen governments toppled by youth-led movements: In Sri Lanka, the government was ousted in 2022 after the youth mobilised against it; in Bangladesh, the government has been overthrown by a youth-led movement in 2024, and in Nepal, a ban on social media on 4 September and public outrage over elite privilege brought the youth into the streets, leading to the burning of the parliament building and the resignation of the prime minister on 8 September. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have reported at least 76 deaths and over 2,000 wounded; as of early 2026, there has been no report on any findings by a national commission of inquiry.⁸⁰

Pakistan has the youngest population in the region, an economy in chronic distress and a deeply connected online youth. Those who read Section 10 will be aware of the distressing situation already prevailing in Baluchistan. What this report must warn is that a youth upheaval in Pakistan would not happen – as in Nepal – in a civic space that is otherwise disarmed. It would take place in provinces already full of automatic weapons, drones and organised armed groups that would be able to exploit, infiltrate or hijack it. In Baluchistan or the tribal districts, a wave of protest might cost dozens of lives, and the line between protest and insurgency might be even more indistinct.

8.5 Compound Pressure and Its Exploitation by External Actors

All of these trends are challenging in their own right. Still, the confluence of all of these in one place and at one time creates the analytical problem, as Pakistan faces the proliferation of drones, the ready availability of sophisticated small arms, the growth of an underground war economy and

⁷⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2025/71, February 6, 2025, para. 93.

⁸⁰ Amnesty International, “Nepal: Widespread Failings Responsible for Excessive Use of Force and Unlawful Killings in ‘Gen-Z’ Protests,” December 8, 2025; and Human Rights Watch, “Nepal: Publish Reports on Violent Crackdowns on Protests,” February 12, 2026.

a latent youth grievance while simultaneously dealing with a fragile external financial position, constant political instability, three unstable borders and the stress that recurrent attacks put on Pakistan's deal with China. This combination of pressures forms what hostile actors are organised around: they can impose costs on Pakistan without building an insurgency from scratch; they need to supply, fund, and amplify what the region's illicit flows already offer. The vulnerabilities are not a product of the war itself but a combination of vulnerabilities exacerbated during the conflict, increasing the opportunity for an external player to intervene. The report then turns to that adversary and the evidence and bounds of the case against it.

8.6 The External Factors: Indian Influence and Exploitation

The Pakistani government is consistent, and at the highest levels, it claims that India is responsible for funding Baloch insurgency and other militant groups to destabilise Pakistan internally. The most prominent is the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, who was arrested on 3 March 2016 in the Mashkel area of Baluchistan and whom they identified as an officer of the Indian Navy working for the Research and Analysis Wing under an assumed identity. Pakistan released a recorded statement in which Jadhav confessed to cultivating ties with Baloch insurgent groups, and a military court sentenced him to death in April 2017.⁸¹

In addition to the Jadhav case, Pakistan has filed successive cases with the United Nations. A dossier on the alleged Indian interference and involvement in terrorism in Baluchistan, the former tribal areas and Karachi, was presented to the Secretary-General by the Permanent Representative of Pakistan in January 2017.⁸² On 14 November 2020, the Foreign Minister and the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations presented a second, detailed dossier publicly in Islamabad, alleging that India was sponsoring Baloch insurgents to destabilise CPEC and that it wanted to bring together the Baloch separatist organisations and TTP splinter groups and form a coalition between them. The permanent representative of Pakistan (PR) in Geneva said that the

⁸¹ "Pakistan Army Sentences Indian 'Spy' to Death," Al Jazeera, April 10, 2017.

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Hands Over Dossier on Indian Interference and Terrorism in Pakistan to UN Secretary General," January 6, 2017.

material contained 21 training camps in India and 66 in Afghanistan, which was “irrefutable evidence” of a “systematic campaign” to destabilise Pakistan.⁸³

9 The Internal Factors of Grievances Leading to Violence and Insurgency in Baluchistan

This report assesses that the insurgency in Baluchistan is fundamentally a sociopolitical issue, created by the failure of governance, economic deprivation, and the denial of the Baloch their due share in their own province. The Iran war imposed peripheral and confined pressure at the border, mainly via the fuel economy, illicit trade, unchecked borders, and security situation.

9.1 Natural Resources Endowment and Economic Outcomes

Baluchistan is one of the clearest examples anywhere of the resource curse. Occupying 347,190 square kilometres, 43.6 per cent of the national landmass, and containing 14.89 million people, or 6.2 per cent of Pakistan’s population, it not only contains significant reserves of natural gas, copper, gold and coal, but also a strategic coastline, and is at the same time the poorest and least developed province of the country.⁸⁴ The industrialisation of Pakistan ran on the Sui gas field, discovered in the 1950s, which decades later remained the backbone of the country; still, much of Baluchistan itself did not have a dependable gas and electricity supply.

The flagship extractive projects of the province can be referred to as the paradox rather than the solution, such as Barrick Mining holding 50 per cent, federal state-owned enterprises 25 per cent and the Government of Baluchistan (province) 25 per cent of the Reko Diq copper-gold project, with the province as a 15 per cent fully funded and 10 per cent free-carried 25 per cent share, so that the province receives dividends and royalties without any capital contribution. This is a materially better deal for Baluchistan than its previous deals. However, in April 2026 Barrick reported that it was halting development and embarking on a full-scale project review through mid-2027 and that it was experiencing an upsurge in security threats and that it was making serious

⁸³ Anwar Iqbal and Naveed Siddiqui, “Pakistan Shares Dossier on India’s ‘Terror Campaign’ with UN Secretary General,” *Dawn*, November 25, 2020.

⁸⁴ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *7th Population and Housing Census 2023: Provincial Census Report, Baluchistan* (Islamabad: PBS, 2023).

forecasts of dramatic rises in capital budget.⁸⁵ The Saindak copper-gold project is another issue: there are conflicting reports about the amount of the revenue split, with the 2021 lease extension described as increasing Baluchistan royalty to 6.5 per cent of sales revenue, whereas provincial interlocutors reported to a Human Rights Commission of Pakistan fact-finding mission that the provincial share had reduced to 2 per cent in 2025. The managing director of the project cautioned in July 2026 that operations would halt within a month due to insecurity that had stalled cargo transport.⁸⁶

For many Baloch, the province's role as an extractor, not a development partner, is the root complaint, and it is the platform on which the BLA has placed CPEC squarely in the line of fire. The 2026 action introduces another, often underestimated angle: insecurity has now become a deferral of the investment meant to address the grievance, creating a self-reinforcing process in which violence precludes development that could reduce violence.

9.2 Poverty and Economic Deprivation Factor

According to the Household Integrated Economic Survey 2024-25, the Pakistan Economic Survey 2025 reports that Baluchistan has an income poverty rate of 47.0 per cent, compared with 28.9 per cent nationally; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has 35.3 per cent; Sindh has 32.6 per cent; and Punjab has 23.3 per cent. Nationally, poverty increased from 21.9 per cent in 2018-19. In rural areas, poverty is 36.2 per cent, compared with 17.4 per cent in urban areas.⁸⁷

According to research by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, based on the PSLM 201920 data, the headcount of multidimensional poverty in Baluchistan is 70.5 per cent against a national average of 39.5 per cent, with a deprivation intensity of 53.6 per cent, the highest in the federation and the first rise in fifteen years. The previous national exercise using 2014-15 data

⁸⁵ Barrick Mining Corporation, “Barrick Provides an Update on Reko Diq.”

⁸⁶ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Baluchistan’s Crisis of Trust: An HRCP Fact-Finding Report* (Lahore: HRCP, 2025); and “Pakistan’s Largest Chinese Mine Warns It May Cease Operations,” *Business Recorder*, July 15, 2026.

⁸⁷ Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Finance, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2025–26*, chap. 16, “Social Protection.”

gave Baluchistan 71.2 per cent. No provincial measurement of multidimensional poverty is more current than 2019-20, so the worst deprivation figures in this report predate the period it covers.⁸⁸

9.3 Political Exclusion and the Contested Accession

Baloch nationalists refer to the province's accession as the source of their grievance. On 4 August 1947, Pakistan, Britain and the Khan of Kalat signed a standstill agreement; Kalat declared its independence on 15 August 1947; and the Khan signed an instrument of accession in March 1948. The historiography is disputed on several issues: whether there was internal tension between the standstill agreement's recognition of Kalat as an independent state and Pakistan's claim to succession to British rights; whether the Kalat legislature's rejection of accession was overcome; and whether the Shahi Jirga process in British Baluchistan was a significant exercise of consent.⁸⁹ The insurgencies have re-occurred over the decades, in 1948, 1958–59, 1963–69, 1973–77, and since the beginning of the 2000s, again, because the reaction to the feeling that political marginalisation and economic exploitation go hand in hand is insurgency.

The current stage has been worsened by the fact that the state tends to equate Baloch dissent with terrorism and, reportedly, human rights issues. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan had accepted 10,607 cases throughout the country and closed 8,770 cases as of 31 July 2025, and there were more than 1,800 cases left unresolved, and 379 additional cases were registered in 2024 alone.⁹⁰ In the case of Baluchistan, provincial police records provided to a 2025 fact-finding mission of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported 356 cases in July 2025, of which 116 had been traced, and 192 had not been solved, with 46 more cases in 2025; the parallel documentation of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee documented 752 cases, 546 of which were still missing, 181 released and 25 confirmed dead in custody.⁹¹ The difference

⁸⁸ Nasir Iqbal and Henna Ahsan, *Multidimensional Poverty in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2024); and Government of Pakistan and United Nations Development Programme, *Multidimensional Poverty in Pakistan* (Islamabad: UNDP Pakistan, June 20, 2016).

⁸⁹ Martin Axmann, *Back to the Future: The Khanate of Kalat and the Genesis of Baloch Nationalism, 1915–1955* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Yaqoob Khan Bangash, *A Princely Affair: The Accession and Integration of the Princely States of Pakistan, 1947–1955* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁹⁰ “70 Cases of Missing Persons Disposed of within a Month,” *Dawn*, August 9, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1929674>.

⁹¹ Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Baluchistan's Crisis of Trust*.

between official and civil society numbers indicates people's lack of confidence in the institutions tasked with solving the problem.

9.4 Governance Failure and the Problem of Transmission

Baluchistan gets 9.09 per cent of the net divisible pool under the Seventh National Finance Commission Award, with the largest share of royalty and surcharge transfers; FY2025²⁶ budgeted transfers to the provinces were Rs743 billion out of Rs8.2 trillion. On a per capita basis, this is the highest provincial allocation in the federation.⁹²

The criticism is not that the federation withholds money from Baluchistan, but that it does not reach citizens. This distinction is crucial for policy design, since it implies that transfer increases through existing structures alone will have no impact. The 2025 mission of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan noted provincial interlocutors describing systemic marginalisation in resource management. It failed service delivery, involving the provincial administration and its political economy as much as the centre. Baluchistan faces a twofold bind: it is underserved by the federation on political voice and resource control and by its own political class on delivery.

9.4 Electoral Legitimacy and the Closure of Political Space

Politically grounded insurgency cannot be resolved through an institution the population does not consider legitimate, and the 2024 general election failed to provide that legitimacy. The initial observation report made by the Free and Fair Election Network named two systemic issues: the delay in the release of the initial results by the Election Commission, which it claimed casts doubts on the credibility of the result, and the nationwide shutdown of cellular and internet connections on polling day, which overturned real-time transparency. In Baluchistan, the turnout was estimated at 44 per cent, and preliminary results in some constituencies were overturned within 24 hours, leading to sit-ins by supporters on both sides of the political spectrum.⁹³

On 3 September 2024, Sardar Akhtar Jan Mengal of the Baluchistan National Party (Mengal) submitted his resignation to the National Assembly, saying the situation in Baluchistan had forced

⁹² “[Provinces to Receive Record Rs8.2tr under NFC Award](#),” *Dawn*, June 11, 2025.

⁹³ Free and Fair Election Network, *Preliminary Election Observation Report of General Election 2024* (Islamabad: FAFEN, February 10, 2024); and “Upsets, Protests as Baluchistan Wakes Up to Revised Results,” *Dawn*, February 10, 2024.

him to do so and that he faced hostility whenever he tried to speak or protest. The Speaker did not accept the resignation until 11 February 2026, 17 months later.⁹⁴ It is important to understand that the Baloch nationalist dropping out of parliament, and the institution itself being unable to handle his resignation for over a year and a half, makes it harder to sustain the argument that political paths exist.

9.6 The Peaceful Movement and the Criminalisation of Dissent

The state's most serious strategic mistake in managing Baluchistan may be its approach to peaceful disobedience, where it draws the line between political complaint and armed action. With the insurgent groups, Baluchistan has generated a large non-violent civil-rights movement, most notably the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, which has mobilised around forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and economic injustice, and is also notable for the role of women and the youth in it. It arose as a mass movement following the abduction on 29 October 2023 and the custodial murder of twenty-year-old Balaach Mola Bakhsh in Turbat. In the winter of 2023-24, the march, led by about four hundred participants, about half women and children, travelled about 1,500 kilometres, starting in Turbat in the Kech district and ending in Islamabad, maintaining a thirty-two-day sit-in outside the National Press Club. It is the main organiser of a physician, Dr Mahrang Baloch, whose own father disappeared in 2009 and was found dead in 2011.⁹⁵

The effect of enforced disappearance is the creation of a special political constituency: the women who have become the embodiments of the missing, who enter political life in one of the roles that the state did not even expect to have and could hardly delegitimise. The fact that women lead the Baloch protest movement in significant numbers, and that the insurgency is also initiating the use of women as combatants, indicates the same underlying change in Baloch political society and is an indication that a state response tuned to the male political actor is addressing the wrong problem.

When peaceful mobilisations take place, the state responds by criminalising it. Dr Mahrang Baloch was arrested on 22 March 2025 for protesting in Quetta, where three protesters were shot dead by the security forces, and detained under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance

⁹⁴ “Akhtar Mengal Resigns from National Assembly Citing ‘Prevailing Situation in Baluchistan’,” *Dawn*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1856648>; and “NA Speaker Accepts 2024 Resignation of BNP-M Chief Akhtar Mengal,” *Dawn*, February 11, 2026.

⁹⁵ “‘Kill and Dump Policy’: Baloch Protest Man’s Custodial Murder in Pakistan,” *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2024.

1960. She and Sibghatullah Shahji were sentenced for the offences of terrorism, murder, sedition and incitement by an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC), which sat within the Hudda Jail, not in open court, on 22 June 2026, for killing a security official during an attack on a Baloch gathering in Gwadar in July 2024.⁹⁶ Both defendants were acquitted in a secret trial that was rushed, Amnesty International said, adding that there was no direct evidence linking them to the killing, and the verdict was an affront to the right to a fair trial. On 8 July 2026, nine United Nations special-procedure mandates issued a joint statement calling the punishment a “travesty of justice” due to an “unfair trial” and alleging that counter-terrorism laws had been misused to quell peaceful protest. While it’s impossible to verify the reports in March 2025 of Dr Baloch’s nomination for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, she was certainly named on both the TIME100 Next list for 2024 and the BBC’s 100 Women list for the same year.⁹⁷

This has strategic implications: when a state shuts off peaceful and political means of expressing grievances, it does not end the grievance; it drives it into the remaining means. Each time a peaceful activist is jailed for a “terrorism” charge, the state argues that it is right, there is no political solution, and the gun is the only solution that is heard. A strategy with any intention of bringing an end to the insurgency would reserve and involve the peaceful movement as the most important asset it has – a choice they can make other than choosing violence. It’s not only a breach of rights, but the committing state pays a strategic blunder and the price.

10 Towards National Consensus: A Policy Framework

Baluchistan’s problem is political and can only be addressed through political means based on democratic processes and national consensus. In the past few years, Pakistan has proven it has the diplomatic skills to maintain negotiations between opposing powers under pressure, as seen in its mediation efforts between the U.S. and Iran. This is the time, this report suggests, for Islamabad to focus on similar efforts on its own soil. The analogy and the qualification differ, and one qualification should be introduced before the framework is set out. The role of a mediator between

⁹⁶ Amnesty International, “Pakistan: Authorities Must Immediately Release Baloch Activists Handed Life Sentences following Secret Trial,” June 24, 2026.

⁹⁷ Norwegian Nobel Institute, “Nomination and Selection of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates”; and “BBC Names Pakistan’s Mahrang Baloch, Hadiqa Kiani among 100 Most Inspiring Women in 2024,” Arab News, December 3, 2024.

two parties differs greatly from that of a third party not involved in either. Mediating between two different parties, with the state as a third party with no stake in either party's domestic legitimacy, is a different task from resolving an internal dispute in which the state itself is a party. What forms of institutional capacity does mediation show by maintaining a channel for continued dialogue, by demonstrating willingness to compromise without negating their own dignity, and by hanging in there when early rounds of negotiation don't pan out? The framework outlined below comprises a series of policy frameworks, each placed under the auspices of a responsible institution, a timeline, and a measure to evaluate progress. Without these elements, frameworks are easier to write but offer no grounds to hold any institution to account.

10.1 The Empowerment of Local Political Setup

The policy towards Baluchistan has long been driven by the security establishment, and elected institutions have minimal input into policymaking. An insurgency rooted in political exclusion cannot be addressed with a solution that excludes the province's political voice. Restoring the legitimate, elected provincial government and assembly is essential to restoring legitimacy. Still, the legitimacy of those institutions is also contested, as Section 10 will detail, after the 2024 election. The framework is in place, as the 18th Amendment of 2010 transferred significant legislative and administrative power to the provinces. The problem with the Baloch complaint is that the security apparatus's dominance has hollowed out provincial governance. Electoral integrity should thus be a key focus of any credible programme, starting with the release of constituency-level results data for the 2024 Baluchistan elections and the disposal of pending election tribunal cases.

10.2 Building a National Consensus on Baluchistan

The crisis in Baluchistan is not only a provincial problem but a national one that requires consensus among political parties and between provinces. Pakistan has successfully achieved cross-party unity in times of high crisis, and this consensus should be translated into a long-term and structural consensus of all the major political parties as well as the establishment that the grievances of Baluchistan are legitimate for negotiation, that Baluchistan is a nation of citizens to be won, and that Baluchistan's future will be determined through politics.

10.3 Mechanisms for Fiscal Fairness That Reach Baloch Citizens

Baluchistan has received the highest per capita amount despite the Seventh NFC Award; the issue is the lack of its utilisation in services. Recommendations based on increasing transfer volumes will therefore be ineffective. Transparency on provincial spending, published third-party audits of development spending, and evidence of a link between resource revenues and local benefit will be needed, as well as best practices such as Resource and CPEC contracts containing guarantees for local jobs with published compliance data, and a public accounting of Reko Diq and Saindak revenues and disbursements.

10.4 Mechanism for Recompile and Ending the Practices That Alienate

Collective punishment of communities, blurring the lines between political dissent and terrorism and militancy, and forced disappearances aren't just human rights issues; they're strategic mistakes that are adding to the insurgents' ranks. There would be no record of missing persons with published caseloads, timelines, and outcomes, and there would be a clear distinction between armed militants and political dissenters, both within the law and in practice, that would be very effective in addressing some of the strongest recruiting arguments to be had by the BLA and the BLF. This is directly related to one administrative reform. Levies have the largest jurisdiction in Baluchistan, and it is not related to police jurisdiction, a colonial legacy. This leaves vast areas without investigative and prosecutorial power, compelling the state to resort to military measures out of necessity. Expanding regular policing, with the training and supervision it entails, would give it a new target to shoot for.

10.5 Mechanism for Dialogue and Negotiated De-Escalation

Not all insurgents can be turned around, and the state should be able to deal with those who are prepared to engage in violence. However, history has taught us that just a military solution does not usually resolve an insurgency, especially in Pakistan. The only practical way to a lasting settlement is a calibrated approach that is firm in its demands for irreconcilable solutions while maintaining a credible channel toward reconcilable ones. Pakistan has tried this in various forms, and it should explain why it failed. Constitutional, political and economic concessions were offered in the package of 2009 Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Baluchistan, but announced without the involvement of the nationalist parties they were supposed to reconcile with, and were not, to the main extent,

implemented; the reconciliation and surrender programme that commenced in mid-2015 gradually integrated individual fighters without engaging with the political question that generated them; and the insurgency grew faster than the programme could ever catch up. Both collapsed because they fought a man when they should have fought a political leadership.⁹⁸

10.6 Mechanism for Border Security and Management

Pakistan should employ diplomacy and deterrence to deal with its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. A first for Iran is institutionalising cooperation between border security agencies and expanding on the avenues that remained open during the crisis in January 2024. One warning that is not immediately apparent is that the formalisation of cross-border trade without alternative livelihoods will inevitably lead to a rise in resentment among the frontier communities, who live off an informal fuel economy. In effect, the order of these measures is more important than the purpose for which they are being implemented. The first is to seek a negotiated solution with Afghanistan on the sanctuary issue, as the constant cross-border strikes have clearly made no headway in resolving this issue and have soured the relationship.

10.7 Engaging China as a Stakeholder in the Political Settlement

Beijing emerges as a key player, whose forbearance is waning and whose investments are being postponed for security reasons. China is now pressuring Islamabad towards greater force protection. A more fruitful approach would be to present the political settlement as a requirement for investment security and to seek China's support for local employment and benefit-sharing clauses in CPEC contracts that benefit China by maintaining project continuity and Baluchistan through tangible gains.

11. Conclusion

This report set out to answer whether the war in Iran is inciting insurgency in Baluchistan, and the evidence supports a clear, if carefully bounded, answer. The insurgency's main drivers are local, and the war has had only indirect and limited effects. It is not the cause of the insurgency, and it

⁹⁸ "Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Baluchistan: Reform Package Stopped in Its Tracks," *Express Tribune*, April 24, 2011; and Ben Smith, *Baluchistan: Pakistan's Forgotten Conflict*, Standard Note SN06106 (London: House of Commons Library, 2011).

is not the main reason for the escalation of 2026; to treat it as either would not merely outrun the evidence but mislead, directing the search for remedies away from the domestic choices in which the remedy in fact lies.

The war's demonstrable effect on the province is real but narrow. It runs, above all, through the borderland fuel economy, where the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the dislocation of Iran's exports raised prices, eroded frontier livelihoods and drove the cross-border trade further into the illicit channels that armed groups tax and protect. A second and more modest effect followed from the weakening of Iranian control along the frontier. Beyond these, the wider claims sometimes advanced, of strategic distraction and of destabilising displacement, are not sustained by the record. It is worth recalling why Pakistan involved itself in the war at all: as a mediator it acted from a clear reading of its own interests, seeking to prevent a protracted regional conflict that would have destabilised its western border, disrupted the energy supplies and Gulf remittances on which its economy depends, and heightened the risk of sectarian mobilisation at home. That same capacity for patient negotiation is what its situation in Baluchistan now demands.

The evidence that disciplines the argument has been reported, not suppressed. The largest coordinated insurgent operation on record in the province preceded the war's second phase by three weeks; the two deadliest months of the year fell after the ceasefire rather than during the fighting; the provincial trend was already compounding sharply before 2026; and, most tellingly, the tempo of violence continued to climb after the war ended, militant attacks nationwide rising from 144 in July to 199 in August and Baluchistan overtaking Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as the country's most violent province. An insurgency that accelerates once the external shock has passed is being driven by its own logic. That logic has been building since the mid-2000s, and it is domestic: Baluchistan's deprivation indicators are the worst in the federation; its accession remains historically contested; its own parties dispute the result of the 2024 election; and the leaders of its peaceful movement have been prosecuted as terrorists. India may well seek to exploit this instability, and Pakistan's concern is not to be dismissed, but the public evidentiary record does not establish sponsorship, and the greater danger is that the war next door and the foreign hand become alibis that displace responsibility from where it belongs.

The way forward is therefore political rather than primarily military. Pakistan has shown, in its mediation between Washington and Tehran, that it can broker agreement between adversaries

through patience and persistence; the task now is to bring a comparable effort home, to restore the primacy of elected representatives, to make fiscal transfers reach citizens rather than intermediaries, to end the practices that manufacture grievance, to open a credible channel of negotiation, and to manage the frontiers through diplomacy as much as through force. Baluchistan is a political question first and a security question second. Addressed on those terms, it admits of resolution; addressed through force alone, it will persist, and the next external shock, whatever its origin, will find in the province's unresolved grievances the same ready tinder that the war in Iran found in 2026.



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