

# BALUCHISTAN, THE INVISIBLE WAR

## Politics, natural resources and war in remote Pakistan

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This article was first published in [Arena magazine](#), no. 91, October-November 2007, pp 36-38.

Even my Pakistani friends warned me about Balochistan, and not without reason. In the days immediately before I was to catch the train to Quetta, the provincial capital near Pakistan's borders with Afghanistan and Iran, 'terrorists' detonated a bomb in a shopping plaza in the city's military cantonment and fired rockets at two of the regular express trains below the Bolan Pass.



*Quetta 2006: a troubled city rimmed by razor ridges. Photo by M. Findlay.*

No group immediately claimed responsibility for these attacks but there was no shortage of suspects. The Afghan and Pakistan Taliban are active in Quetta's Pashtun communities and in some of the province's madrasahs and, according to Afghanistan's President Karzai, the Taliban's one-eyed Commander of the Faithful, Mullah Mohammad Omar, was in the city around the time of my visit: indeed,

Afghan intelligence agents insisted that he was staying in Quetta as the guest of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). CIA agents were also claiming that Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had spent time with their supporters in Balochistan over the past year. And then there were the many local Wahabi and Deobandi Islamist groups who regularly attack Shia communities, particularly the resident Hazaras; as well as militant Uighar nationalists from Xingjiang Autonomous Region in western China or Uyghuristan, who target Chinese installations in Balochistan. But the most likely perpetrators were home grown 'terrorists', members of the clandestine Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) who are fighting an undeclared resource war against the Federal Government which is all but invisible from Australia.

I'd been in Pakistan long enough to realise that such daily acts of 'terrorism' are part of the background noise of living in this conflicted country and represented no particular threat to me. But express trains and railway tracks are easy targets in the asymmetrical struggle the BLA is engaged in so I heeded my friends' warnings to some extent: I flew to Quetta instead of indulging my passion for rail travel. And I'm now very glad I did, because the view of Balochistan from 34000 feet is stupendous. A great mountain plateau rises suddenly and intimidatingly from the Indus Valley like a fortress wall, and behind it row upon brazen row of razor-edged ridges sweep down from the Hindu Kush to fan out across the desert and march inexorably on towards the Arabian Sea and Iran. The mountain range I was flying over is the

setting for countless stories about a ruler of a faraway kingdom who is honoured in Muslim, Jewish and Christian scriptures as a patriarch and prophet of great wisdom: Suleiman or Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. And somewhere down there, 34,000 feet below me in his eponymous mountain range, was a soaring twin-peaked mountain known as Takht-i Suleiman, the Throne of Solomon.

*The graves of Shia martyrs killed in terrorist attacks by Sunni extremists. Such sectarian violence remains a constant threat, especially for Quetta's minority Hazara community. Photo by Merrill Findlay.*



In Islamabad, Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Delhi, Tehran and Kabul, as in the tribal fortresses of Hazrat Sulieman's mountains, countless conflicting stories are circulating about who owns Balochistan's resources, what should be done with them, who should control them and who should benefit. Every aspiring neo-coloniser, oil mogul and pipeline manufacturer wants a bit of Balochistan, or at least the opportunity of exploiting both the province's natural resources and its compelling proximity to other oil and gas reserves and supply lines.

In the plush offices of the capitals such narratives are translated into bilateral agreements, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), joint ventures, exploration licences and billion dollar contracts, and are materialised on the ground as pipelines, ports, highways, railroads, airfields, mines, oil and gas rigs and refineries and, most importantly, as money transfers, all those transit and protection fees and royalty payments to interested parties. One such deal between the governments of Pakistan and the United States, signed immediately after the fall of the Shah's regime in neighbouring Iran, facilitated construction of new ports and airfields on Balochistan's Makran coast overlooking the entrance to the Persian Gulf. Another more recent agreement with US Central Command gave American forces exclusive access to the coastal airfield at Pasni for Operation Enduring Freedom (their joint invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001), and use of the remote former British RAF air base at Dalbandin near the Balochistan border with Afghanistan and Iran plus the smaller Shamsi airfield built for Saudi sheiks. Other deals have given Texas-based companies substantial interests in Balochistan's oil and gas fields; and Australian companies, such as Pasmenco Ltd, have also been busy in Balochistan in recent years.

Similar mega-agreements have been signed by the Government of Pakistan with the People's Republic of China. State-owned companies, including the China Harbour Engineering Company, have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the deep water sea port at Gwadar in a deal which reportedly also includes provisions for a Chinese naval base. Chinese interests are developing much of the urban infrastructure within this new port city, as well as a new coastal highway from Gwadar to Karachi, and in the process thousands of ethnic Baloch and other groups are being displaced from their ancestral lands. Other Chinese investments include an oil refinery complex near the new port, a road from the port to the Indus Highway to join the Karakoram Highway and on into the Xingjiang Autonomous Region, and a giant copper mine at Saindak in the far northwest of Balochistan. An agreement to build a railway track from the coast to Central Asia's oil and gas fields through Xinjiang has also been signed by the governments of China, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kurgistan and Uzbekistan, and a pipeline from Gwadar to Xinjiang is on the drawing boards as I write. It is these Chinese mega-projects and the people associated with them that are the targets for Uighar militancy in Balochistan.

A north-south pipeline from the Caspian Basin oil and gas fields through Afghanistan and Balochistan has been mooted since at least the mid-1990s. The Argentinean company Bidas was the first to officially propose this route. Soon after, Central Asia Gas (CentGas), a multinational consortium led by the Californian-based oil company Unocol, announced that it too would build a pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Balochistan. Unocol withdrew from their commitment in 1998 amid controversy about the company's relationship with the Taliban, but the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have since

signed a treaty to expedite construction of a pipeline to the coast as soon as the Afghan conflict ceases. Vested interests in India and Iran are also keen to thread pipelines across Balochistan and transit agreements have already been negotiated with the Pakistan government, although Washington is pressuring the governments of both India and Pakistan to abandon any proposals which could benefit Iran. Meanwhile Russia's President Vladimir Putin has announced that the Russian state oil giant Gazprom is ready to invest millions in a pipeline between Iran and India and to possibly extend it into China's Yunnan province. To add to the geopolitical complexity of the region, India is investing in a modern deep water port at Chabahar in Iran's eastern province of Sistan-e-Balochistan which would directly compete for trade with Gwadar; and the Indian Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has opened a shorter land route to Chabahar through western Afghanistan to funnel Central Asian trade away from Pakistan. And then, of course, there is the Pakistan Government's secret Special Weapons Facility in tribal lands in the mountains of north western Balochistan, close to the borders with Afghanistan and Iran.



*Oil tanker heading towards Afghanistan through the Bolan Pass south of Quetta. Photo by Merrill Findlay, 2006.*

In Islamabad, Beijing, Washington, Moscow, Tehran and Delhi such mega-projects are hailed as strategic investments in the region's future, but this is not necessarily so in Balochistan, where questions about who owns the province's natural resources, who controls them and who benefits from economic development remain unresolved. A justifiable sense of injustice is thus driving the BLA's insurgency in Hazrat

Suliman's resource rich mountains. The three or four million people who identify as Baloch make up less than 4 per cent of Pakistan's diverse population, but in the sparsely settled province that bears their name they represent around 45 per cent of the estimated population of around seven million. Official statistics indicate that there are more than enough reasons for the Baloch and the Balochistan province's other ethnic groups to feel aggrieved. Somewhere between three and five million people in Balochistan, including a very large percentage of ethnic Baloch, subsist well below Pakistan's poverty line and have little access to basic amenities, including safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, electricity or even to the province's own natural gas, and the literacy rate amongst females in Balochistan, for example, is just 27 per cent overall and significantly lower in tribal Baloch communities. Even ethnic Baloch who reject violence agree with the BLA that their homeland has been invaded and occupied by outsiders, that their people have been marginalised and dispossessed of their tribal lands and that their resources have been expropriated to benefit the people of Punjab and Sindh provinces and serve the strategic interests of the US and China. Imported Chinese workers, migrants from other provinces and refugees are reaping the benefits of the mega-projects now underway, including the Gwadar port and the development of fossil fuel reserves, at the expense of ethnic Baloch, they claim. Baloch nationalists also insist with some justification that Balochistan was forcibly annexed by Pakistan after Partition in 1947, and that subsequent governments have consistently resorted to the use of overwhelming military forces to suppress resistance rather than attempt to negotiate an equitable political settlement. Pakistan's President General Musharaff has warned that anyone who challenges the government's authority in Balochistan or elsewhere 'would be crushed with full force', and he now has the means to act upon this threat: the millions of dollars of military hardware

supplied to Pakistan by the US to defend its very porous border with Afghanistan in the name of the 'War on Terror'.

As I quietly sipped my tea at 34000 feet and gazed out the aircraft window at the rugged homelands of the Marri and Bugti Baloch tribes below me, their Mulk Balochi, I knew that on this day, as on any other in recent times, more Baloch civilians would be killed, injured, 'disappeared' or displaced by Pakistan's security forces in this undeclared war; that more children's lives would be stunted by poverty, neglect and war-induced hunger and malnutrition, and that, in a society in which a woman without a husband almost ceases to exist as a human being, more women would be widowed and more children left fatherless. But I also knew that a new generation of savvy young insurgents, the sons and grandsons of tribesmen who had fought both the British and the Pakistan governments in past insurgencies, were planning their next attack. I imagined them in their long robes and medieval turbans, their Kalashnikovs slung over their shoulders or resting on their laps, their heavy machine and anti-aircraft guns and RPG-7s (Russian-designed handheld anti-tank grenade launchers) carefully camouflaged. On an ammo or landmine crate somewhere close by there would also be two other weapons that are indispensable to guerilla fighters in this part of the world: a radio tuned to the BBC's South Asia Service or to Voice of America, and a satellite phone. *New York Times* journalist Carlotta Gall visited one of the secret farari (rebel) camps in March 2006, and observed jet fighters and surveillance planes overhead and long-range artillery shells being fired from the surrounding ridges. Gall also presented evidence which confirmed that Pakistani military forces were using US-manufactured weapons against Baloch civilians.

One of the young guerrillas Gall interviewed was 25 year old Brahamdag Khan Bugti, who had been in the mountains for the past four years. According to some stories, he was a BLA commander. 'We are showing our bitterness,' young Brahamdag Bugti told her. 'We are fighting the government to show we are not happy with you and you should leave our homeland'. Brahamdag's grandfather, the 79 year old Oxford educated feudal chieftain, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, was also hiding in the mountains. From the relative safety of his rock shelter the Nawab repeated the Baloch mantra: 'The dispute is about the national rights of the Baluch ... and if the government accepted these rights then there would be no dispute'. By the time I flew over his tribal domain seven months later, the Nawab was dead.

Nawab Muhammad Akbar Shahbaz Khan Bugti, to give him his full name, was an anachronism in many ways, a relic from a patriarchal and feudal past, whose life story illuminates many of the cultural dimensions and political paradoxes of this conflict. Over his long political career Nawab Bugti had served once as Governor of Balochistan and twice as Chief Minister in the provincial parliament. He had been a Minister for State (Interior) and Minister for Defence in the national Parliament in Islamabad, and in 2006 he was also still head of the Jamhoori Watan Party or Republican National Party he founded in the 1990s. Bugti must have felt invincible and, for most of his long life, he was. Gall interviewed him several months after Musharaf launched his 'full-scale military campaign' against the BLA. By that time the Nawab's family stronghold, the town of Dera Bugti, had been all but abandoned. More than 20,000 people, or 85 per cent of the population, had fled in long caravans of donkey carts, trucks and vans to escape the bombing raids and assaults by Pakistani military and paramilitary forces. The Nawab escaped with his grandsons and other members of his family to continue the armed resistance in the mountains because, as he told a *Time* magazine correspondent by satellite phone in May 2006 'Instead of a slow death in bed, I'd rather death come to me while I'm fighting for a purpose'.

That satellite phone may have ensured that his wish was fulfilled. On 26 August 2006, after Pakistan intelligence units intercepted phone signals and fixed his position in the Sulieman mountains near Kohlu, the Nawab's hideout was surrounded. The battle continued over three days. Both sides were well armed but only one possessed US helicopter gunships and F-16s. According to some accounts the fighter jets were armed with 'deep penetration' cluster bombs and/or laser guided missiles, and the helicopters with napalm. The official story released to the media was that Bugti died when the roof of the cave he was hiding in collapsed. No mention was made of cluster bombs and/or laser guided missiles and/or napalm in the media releases. The 'facts' of the Nawab's death may never be established but, as riots and strikes broke out in Quetta and other cities in protest, and as hundreds of known and suspected Baloch activists were arrested and imprisoned, the facts of the battle soon became irrelevant. To the

farari Nawab Bugti is already a shaheed, a martyr, and he might now be more of a threat to President Musharaf dead than he ever was alive.



*Barren but resource rich Baloch homelands.  
Photo by Merrill Findlay, 2006.*

There are many other more global dimensions to this conflict, of course. The Baloch tribal lands extend to the Iranian Plateau and south to the Arabian Sea, spanning Pakistan's borders with both Iran and Afghanistan. Baloch nationalists in all three countries dream of one day uniting their Mulk Balochi within a single sovereign Greater Balochistan, as their linguistic cousins, the Kurds, dream of a Greater Kurdistan straddling

the borders of Turkey, Iraq and Iran, and the Pakhtuns of a Greater Pakhtunistan stretching across the Durrand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

From a Baloch perspective the conflict is about tribal rights, equity, justice, economics, identity, history and, ultimately, about sovereignty. There is no doubt that Balochistan has been neglected by generations of ruling elites, including the late Nawab Bugti and his extended family. The province's shameful statistics tell this story all too well. But the twenty-first century barged into Balochistan regardless. What we are witnessing now is an already familiar dynamic: 'Turkistan, Afghanistan, Transcaucasia and Persia — to many these words breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of vicissitudes and of moribund romance,' observed Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India and the man responsible for 'settling' the borders of British Balochistan more than a century ago. 'To me, I confess, they are as pieces on a chess-board upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world'.

Since the 1830s this dynamic has been known as the Great Game. The cartography of the region has changed since then, as have some of the players, but the goal remains the same. Great Britain, once the only superpower, has been replaced by its former colony, the USA; Czarist Russia has found a more presidential Czar to press its hegemonic claims; and China has won a place at the chess board through the sheer brute strength of its economy. The British East India Company, whose interests were propitiated in the first round of this 'Game', has been superseded by the global oil majors, while the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and their neighbours, and Pakistan and its neighbours, India, Iran and Afghanistan, are all playing as proxies for their more powerful allies. In this current iteration of the Great Game the chess board is the entire region, and the ethnic Baloch, like the people of Afghanistan, are pawns. Baloch nationalists, like the Afghan Taliban, have been quick to seize their historic moment, however: 'We want our rights,' the Khan of Kalat, Mir Suleman Dawood Khan, whose ancestors were players in the first round and who now claims Baloch identity, told journalists in 2004. 'If we don't get them, we will be a major player in the Great Game Part II'.

'We have conquered all the area which is now our homelands,' Baloch nationalists sing in one of their anthems. 'It is real and true Balochistan. If we are separated and demarcated, then so what, this is a temporary division, our soul is one. We will destroy these ways. We are like a rain and a storm'.

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*She visited Pakistan in October-November 2006 to research a book on refugees, asylum seekers and migration. Merrill would like to thank the many people who assisted her on this journey.*