

The tit-for-tat conflict between Iran and Pakistan

The round of attacks instigated by Iran against Pakistan highlighted questions about the aims of militants in Balochistan – which straddles the Iran–Pakistan border – and whether they are primarily motivated by domestic grievances or serve as tools of foreign influence in the region.

“

The immediate target of Iranian strikes on 16 January 2024 was, Iran claimed, the headquarters of a group called Jaish ul-Adl, or Army of Justice, which calls for the independence of Sistan and Balochistan Province in Iran.

In January 2024, unprecedented cross-border strikes between Iran and Pakistan and focusing on Balochistan raised concerns that ongoing conflicts in the Middle East were expanding eastwards. While tensions have since decreased, the fact that Iran's motives for instigating the round of strikes remain unclear is a source of unease. It is a region replete with conspiracy theories and in which many abide by the axiom 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. The most plausible explanation, when seen alongside the simultaneous Iranian airstrikes against Iraq and Syria, is that Tehran believes, with some justification, that those it targeted are encouraged by anti-Iranian regional and extra-regional actors. The strikes may well have served an additional purpose in sending a warning to its domestic – and potentially restive – Baloch and Kurdish populations.

Sunni and Shia proxy wars

Relations between Iran and Pakistan worsened after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when Shiism became the central organising force for Iran's government, and Islam thus became a divisive issue between the countries. After the secession of Bangladesh from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1971, and particularly during the rule of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who came to power in 1977, Islamabad promoted Islam to consolidate its national identity. Over time, this shifted from an Islamic to a more specifically Sunni identity. In post-revolution Iran, however, promoting Shiism and protecting Shia communities both domestically and externally became paramount. Furthermore, unlike Tehran under the Islamic Republic, Islamabad has retained its close relationship with Washington.

External events fed into the importance of these shifts. Towards the end of 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan's espousal of Sunni Islam had the benefit

of ingratiating the country with Saudi Arabia. In return for allowing, even encouraging, Saudi Arabia's propagation of Wahhabi Islam in Pakistan, Islamabad received money and oil, and its military played a significant role across the Middle East, including protecting religious sites in Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan sees itself as a key defender of Saudi Arabia and is the only nuclear-armed Muslim country. Even though the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia relationship has weakened somewhat over the past decade, Saudi Arabia – along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – has sought to diversify its external partners. At the same time, it is worth noting that Pakistan rejected Saudi Arabia's request to join its alliance against Ansarullah (Houthi) rebels in Yemen in 2015. Today, India's growing strategic ties with the UAE could lead Pakistan to prioritise Saudi Arabia again.

Throughout the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and the United States channelled funding through Pakistan to support Afghan mujahideen groups fighting the Soviet occupation. Later, the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda would emerge from these groups. In turn, Iran recruited Shia Afghans to fight in the Iran–Iraq War. It developed links with Afghan Shia anti-Soviet forces, out of which emerged the Northern Alliance, subsequently backed by the US-led coalition post-9/11. While Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban undermined relations with Iran before 9/11, Pakistan's cooperation with the US made the relationship, if anything, worse. Iran's strategic interests, notably in Afghanistan, frequently correlated with India's, heightening Pakistan's distrust.

This use of proxies has continued. Pakistan has supported anti-Indian militants in Kashmir, while Iranian backing for Shia forces across the Middle East is now most apparent in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Unlike these interventions, however, Iran's activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan have been

defensive rather than expansionist. While the Shia community in Pakistan is sizeable in absolute terms, it is estimated to comprise only around 15–20% of the population, with the vast majority of the population being Sunni.

The use of proxies is, however, a double-edged sword: Sunni extremist groups backed by Saudi Arabia started to emerge in Pakistan in the 1980s. Iran responded by providing support for Shia militants. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan was one of the first victims of the so-called proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. At the same time, while there is often clear evidence of the use of proxies, in many cases potentially justifiable sources of grievance are undermined by claims that militant groups espousing these causes are essentially foreign puppets.

Trading ties

Trade has both positive and negative connotations for the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Iran. In 2023, both countries agreed a five-year plan to raise trade volume to US\$5 billion annually from the current level of around US\$2bn. But accurate figures for trade are elusive because barter trade, legalised in 2023, has long played a major role, as has illicit trade. Pakistan's most important export is rice, though many narcotics – Afghan opiates and methamphetamine – also cross the border.

Market vendors in Balochistan sell numerous Iranian products. Also, much of the province relies on Iranian electricity. In May 2023, the Pakistan Petroleum Dealers Association claimed that 35% of diesel for sale in Pakistan had originated in Iran, smuggled across the border in response to surging inflation. The sale of smuggled Iranian diesel raised tax revenue for Pakistan without straining the country's capital account, given the scarcity of foreign exchange available to pay for above-board international trade. Months later, however, Pakistan – which is fencing its border in agreement with Iran – ordered a crackdown on illegal trade, which irked local Baloch traders. The countries are planning to establish 12 border markets, but this semi-formalisation seems likely to reduce overall trade.

India, Iran and Pakistan in the 1990s discussed the creation of a natural-gas pipeline, which could bolster trilateral relations. India, however, withdrew from the project, which has also been hindered by high prices and US sanctions on Iran. Pakistan and Iran signed a deal to complete an Iran–Pakistan pipeline in 2014, but Pakistan's progress has been slow, with US sanctions concerns and internal disagreements weighing on completion. Iran has, most recently in December 2023, threatened Pakistan with an international arbitration claim of US\$18bn should it fail to complete

its section of the pipeline by the new deadline of September 2024. Pakistan has reportedly assured Iran that it intends to complete the pipeline.

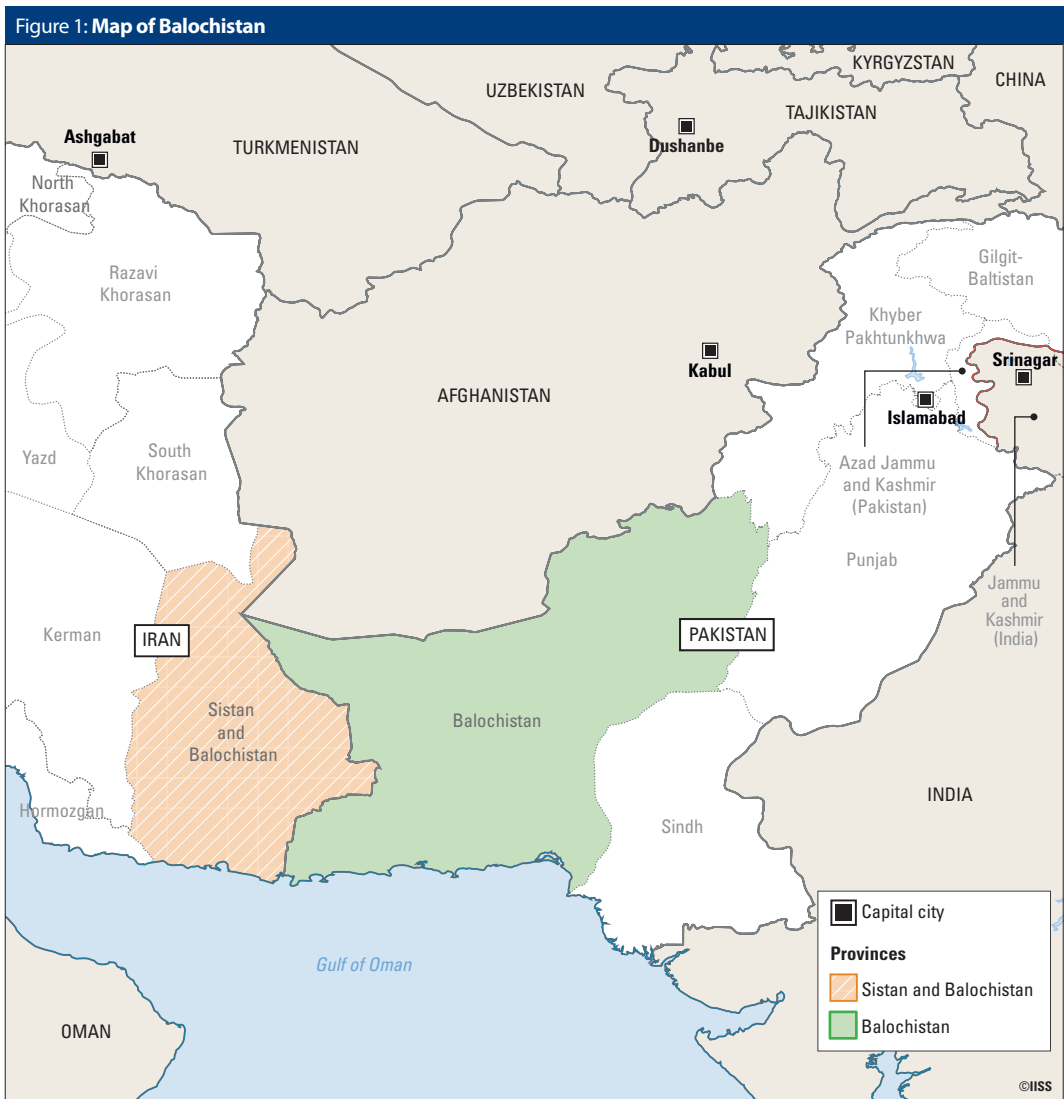
Balochistan

The Baloch population straddles both sides of the border between Iran and Pakistan, with a smaller Baloch population in Afghanistan. Social indicators are poor, and poverty is widespread on both sides of the border despite the region's mineral wealth. In Pakistan, Baloch nationalism has expressed itself through periods of rebellion and insurgency since 1948. Baloch militancy in Iran dates to the 1980s with the establishment, during the Iran–Iraq War, of the Balochi Autonomist Movement.

The immediate target of Iranian strikes on 16 January 2024 was, Iran claimed, the headquarters of a group called Jaish ul-Adl, or Army of Justice, which calls for the independence of Sistan and Balochistan Province in Iran. Pakistan responded two days later by targeting, it said, the Balochistan Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front in Iran. These groups have primarily targeted security forces in Balochistan but have also targeted Chinese nationals, particularly those involved in the construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan. Baloch militants highlight their distinctive identity and minority status; in Iran, they emphasise that they are Sunni, while in Pakistan, they emphasise their Baloch ethnicity.

Jaish ul-Adl was founded in 2012 when it targeted Iranian security forces, including police, border guards and members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps along with government officials. In December 2023, the group attacked a police station in Sistan and Balochistan, killing 11 police officers. The day after the Iranian missile strikes, the group claimed to have killed the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Sistan and Balochistan, along with two soldiers. In response, Iran has hanged numerous alleged members of the group.

Jaish ul-Adl evolved from an older group called Jundullah, or Soldiers of God, which has similar aspirations and approaches. Many details regarding Jundullah, banned by several Western countries, are unclear, including its size, its internal structure and the scale of its involvement in criminal activities, though it is widely thought to have traded opiates from Afghanistan for smuggled Iranian diesel. Founded by Abdolmalek Rigi around 2003, the group historically targeted Iranian security forces and Shia mosques. It was also responsible for a failed assassination attempt on the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in 2005. Iran captured Rigi, allegedly with Pakistani assistance, early in 2010 and hanged him a few months later.



Source: IISS

Proxy wars

Iran seems certain that Jaish ul-Adl has foreign support, which would help explain Iran's motives for its recent attacks. One of Tehran's many claims about the group is that it is a descendant of the Balochi Autonomist Movement, which was supported, if not outright established, by Iraq to destabilise Iran.

The US has denied allegations made by various Western media outlets, including ABC News in 2007, that it secretly encouraged Jundullah to destabilise Iran. *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2012 further confused the picture by alleging that officers with the Israeli Mossad intelligence agency, purporting to be US Central Intelligence Agency agents, had recruited members of Jundullah to fight Iran.

Whatever the truth behind these allegations, which by association extend to Jundullah's successor, Jaish ul-Adl, Iran seems to believe them. This

offers important context for understanding why Iran's armed forces attacked Pakistan along with Iraq, Syria and groups that Iran believes have foreign backing. Islamabad, by contrast, appears to believe that Tehran simply miscalculated in launching the strikes.

Iran targeted what it described as Mossad's spy headquarters in Erbil, Iraq. The attack in Syria allegedly targeted the members of the Islamic State (ISIS) responsible for a bomb attack on a commemorative service on 3 January 2024, which killed around 100 people. The service was for the former head of Iran's Quds Force, Major-General Qasem Soleimani, who was killed four years earlier by a US drone strike. Iran claimed later that one of the attackers had trained in Afghanistan and entered Iran from that country. Regardless of the scale of foreign intervention in anti-Iranian actions, in this murky world, what actors believe may be more insightful than demonstrable reality.

Outlook

The day after the Pakistani strikes, both countries reaffirmed their 'brotherly' relations. China, which has significant interests in both

countries, offered to play a 'constructive role' in reducing hostilities and may have attempted to serve as an intermediary.

Tensions will probably now further subside. Iran faces a range of domestic and regional challenges, while post-election Pakistan faces its own uncertainties. There is no conclusive evidence that either country actively supports Baloch militants in the other country. The fact that both sides' border areas are relatively un-governed, with a history of illicit activity and domestic grievances, provides a better explanation for ongoing militancy than the 'foreign hand' hypothesis. It is even possible that the breakdown in relations resulting from the 24 January strikes could trigger joint future action

against militant groups and ultimately improve bilateral relations.

If Baloch militants are primarily motivated by domestic grievances, then an ongoing effort to formalise border trade is likely to increase resentment in their community, particularly in the absence of offering alternative livelihoods. Just over a week after the strikes, unidentified gunmen killed nine Pakistani labourers in Iran near its border with Pakistan. Even if Iran and Pakistan want de-escalation, further attacks by Baloch militants – or attributed to them – in either country could undermine this aspiration.

