

# ISAS Brief

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## Terrorism in Balochistan: Shift towards Soft Targets?

*A recent bomb blast in Quetta, capital city of Pakistan's Balochistan province, left over 70 dead and many others injured. It appears that the province's lawyers were on the radar of militant groups. This paper seeks to examine whether there is a shift under way towards soft targets.*

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The largest province of Balochistan occupies 43.6% of Pakistan's territory with an area of 347,190 square kilometres.<sup>2</sup> According to the 1998 Pakistan Census Report, Balochistan had a population of a 6.56 million;<sup>3</sup> recent estimates put the figure at around 13 million. This makes it the most-sparsely inhabited province of Pakistan. The society is largely tribal, it has a literacy rate of 44%, the lowest in Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Balochistan is home to various militant groups which differ in their objectives. The province's capital city Quetta plays host to the "Quetta Shura" – the leaders of the Afghan Taliban. This organisation is allegedly being funded by Pakistan's

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<sup>2</sup> "Government of Balochistan - About Balochistan." *Government of Balochistan*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Aug. 2016. [http://www.balochistan.gov.pk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=37&Itemid=783](http://www.balochistan.gov.pk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=37&Itemid=783)

<sup>3</sup> "Pakistan's 1998 Census Report." *Pakistan Bureau of Statistics*. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, n.d. Web. 14 Aug. 2016. <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/tables/DEMOGRAPHIC%20INDICATORS%20-%201998%20CENSUS.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "Education Woes: Pakistan Misses UN Target with 58% Literacy Rate." *The Express Tribune Education Woes Pakistan Misses UN Target with 58 Literacy Rate Comments*. N.p., 2015. Web. 31 July 2016. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/897995/education-woes-pakistan-misses-un-target-with-58-literacy-rate/>

Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). The Afghan Taliban's apparent link with Pakistan became evident when Mullah Akhtar Mansour, leader of the group, was killed in a United States' drone attack in Balochistan.

There are also strong separatist elements in Balochistan. The Balochistan Liberation Army is a militant organisation based on a Baloch nationalist agenda, reportedly resorting to armed resistance against the alleged exploitation by the Pakistani state. The Balochistan Liberation Army has been a major threat to Chinese and Punjabi engineers working on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that will terminate at Gwadar port.<sup>5</sup> This massive project will add to Pakistan US\$ 46 billion worth of Chinese investment if it's not jeopardised by geopolitical developments in the region<sup>6</sup>. Balochistan is currently ruled by a coalition government consisting of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP). The current Chief Minister of Balochistan Sanaullah Khan Zehri (PML-N), assumed office in December 2015, after his predecessor Abdul Malik Baloch from the PKMAP had resigned as part of a power-sharing agreement between the PML-N and PKMAP.

On 8 August 2016, the Quetta Civil Hospital was attacked by a suicide bomber; at least 70 were killed and dozens of others were injured. Those targeted were mourning the killing of the Balochistan Bar Association President Bilal Kasi who had been shot dead on the morning of this terrorist attack. Those killed and injured were mainly lawyers and journalists who had come to the emergency services ward to pay their respects to the deceased. The massacre at the hospital was followed by a roadside blast that took place on 11 August, targeting Justice Zahoor Shahwani, Judge of the Federal Sharia Court.

Recent terrorist trends seem to indicate that lawyers are being targeted by militant groups. Five days before the suicide-blast at the Quetta hospital, a lawyer Jahanzeb Alvi was shot dead by gunmen; Bilal Kasi condemned this attack and announced a two-day boycott of court proceedings in Balochistan. On 8 June, the University of Balochistan Law College Principal Amanullah Achakzai was shot dead in Quetta's Spiny road area. In the neighbouring province of Sindh, Ovais Ali Shah, the son of Sindh Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, who was also a lawyer in the Sindh High Court, was kidnapped in Karachi on 20 June. The rationale behind the

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<sup>5</sup> "Eight Labourers Kidnapped, Killed in Balochistan." *Dawn*. N.p., 2014. Web. 17 Aug. 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1139152/eight-labourers-kidnapped-killed-in-balochistan>

<sup>6</sup> Shah, Saeed. "China Readies \$46 Billion for Pakistan Trade Route." *WSJ*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-unveil-billions-of-dollars-in-pakistan-investment-1429214705>

targeting of lawyers remains unknown. It is the responsibility of the Pakistani State to recognise the vulnerability of lawyers and take steps to protect them.

Since the reported success of Pakistan's anti-terror operation Zarb-e-Azb there are some signs of a shift towards soft targets. Does this indicate any weakening of the terrorist organisations in Pakistan? This remains to be studied by the authorities and analysts. The recent killing of singer Amjad Sabri as well as the sectarian attacks on Shias, Hazaras and Ahmadi are perhaps a reflection of such a shift. The militants also reportedly indulge in criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom and contract-killings known as "*supari*" in the local language. This trend has also been noticed in an internal security meeting chaired by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif which observed that the "terrorists are now turning their targets away from state institutions out of desperation".<sup>7</sup> There has also been a diversion of militant activities from terrorism to crime.

A faction of the Pakistani Taliban with connection to the Islamic State in Iraq & Syria (ISIS), known as Jamaat-Ul-Arhar has claimed responsibility for the Quetta attack.<sup>8</sup> Balochistan's Chief Minister Sanaullah Zehri has explicitly mentioned in an interview with Geo News that India's intelligence agency, "Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) had funded the Quetta blast and RAW was behind all terrorist activities in Balochistan".<sup>9</sup> However, this attack remains an unsolved mystery. The carnage in Quetta had led to uproar in the Pakistan National Assembly, the opposition was quick to blame the attack on the failure of Pakistan's Army regardless of whoever was responsible for the attack. Prime Minister Sharif and Interior Affairs Minister Chaudhary Nisar Khan both spoke in defence of the Pakistani security establishment.

The Quetta Civil Hospital blast is perhaps indicative of the continuation of the shift from "hard" to "soft" targets. As such this incident should send a strong signal to Pakistan to realign its counter-terrorism strategy, combining largescale military operations executed by the Pakistan Army with a more local-centric approach. Thus the recent security developments should act as a call for the federal government in Islamabad to strengthen provincial paramilitary forces to

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<sup>7</sup> "Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan." *Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2016. [http://www.pmo.gov.pk/press\\_release\\_detail.php?pr\\_id=1492](http://www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_detail.php?pr_id=1492)

<sup>8</sup> Jazeera, Al. "Quetta Attack: ISIL and Taliban Claim Suicide Bombing." - *News from Al Jazeera*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/pakistan-blast-quetta-hospital-lawyer-killed-160808050839643.html>

<sup>9</sup> "RAW behind Terrorist Attacks in Balochistan: CM Zehri." *Geo.tv: Latest News Breaking Pakistan, World, Live Videos*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2016. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/110972-RAW-behind-terrorist-attacks-in-Balochistan-CM-Zehri>

neutralise such enemies of the state. Also local security forces should be better-equipped with ground intelligence which would enable them to encounter these elements. The Pakistan Ministry of Interior Affairs could step in to coordinate inter-provincial cooperation in the field of domestic security. Apart from counter-terrorism, Pakistan's security strategy must also incorporate anti-crime measures to clamp down on extremist attacks which should not be taken lightly as mere criminal activity. The Government of Pakistan has already recognised this new phase of militancy in Pakistan; as such it would have to reshape its national action plan to meet the new challenge as well. As the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu taught us "Know thy enemy, know thy self. A thousand battles, a thousand victories.

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