

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The Jaffar Express Hijack and Shrinking State Writ in Balochistan

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S*ummary*

The Jaffar Express hijack has exposed the fact that as far as Balochistan is concerned, the writ of the Pakistani State has shrunk.

Since the forced annexation of Kalat in 1948, Baloch ethno-nationalists have rejected integration into Pakistan, waging a persistent armed struggle for independence. Over the decades, this resistance has unfolded in at least five distinct phases, each aimed at securing an independent Balochistan. The all-powerful security establishment along with the political leadership of the country has unsuccessfully tried to crush the movement at every stage, even with brute military force. The present phase of the armed resistance is remarkably different from all other phases in terms of the leadership, coverage, scope, determination, commitment, intensity, and most importantly, the tactics employed to challenge the writ of the state of Pakistan.

Pakistan’s response has remained largely unchanged—it relies on superior firepower to suppress dissent and sporadically enlists tribal Sardars to quell unrest. While this approach has yielded temporary reprieves, it has failed to deter young Baloch individuals from joining armed groups like the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), led by Bashir Zeb Baloch, and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), under Dr Allah Nazar Baloch.

These two outfits along with other smaller groups have been giving the security establishment quite a tough time in the rugged mountainous terrain of Balochistan. *Pakistan Security Report 2024* claims that Balochistan witnessed an 84 per cent rise in attacks compared to the previous year. There were at least 202 attacks in the province in which 322 people lost their lives, while another 354 got injured.¹ The attacks by BLA and BLF saw a significant 119 per cent rise in 2024. There were at least 171 incidents in the province in which 261 people died and 412 got injured.²

The Hijacking of the Jaffar Express

The year 2025 has proven no less turbulent, with the BLA claiming responsibility for six major attacks, including the audacious hijacking of the Jaffar Express on 11 March.³ This train, linking Quetta, Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad via Sindh, serves as a vital artery for Balochistan’s residents and a key transport route for off-duty security personnel to travel to their homes and posting stations. Possibly, due to this very reason, this rail-route has always been a prime target of Baloch armed groups. However, it was for the first time that an entire train was hijacked and all the passengers were held hostage.

About 450 passengers, including a sizeable number of security personnel, were on board when BLA fighters attacked the train closer to railway Tunnel No. 8, between Paneer and Peshi railway stations in Balochistan.⁴ The BLA issued a press release on 11 March 2025, which *inter alia* stated that the mission was led by its Fidayeen

¹ [“Pakistan Security Report 2024”](#), Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), January 2025.

² Ibid.

³ Saleem Shahid, [“Race to Rescue Jaffar Express Hostages in Balochistan”](#), *Dawn*, 12 March 2025.

⁴ Ibid.

Unit, Majeed Brigade with full operational support from the Fateh Squad, Special Tactical Operations Squad (STOS) and its intelligence wing Zirab.⁵ It added that six military personnel were killed during the operation, whereas over 100 passengers including active-duty personnel from the Pakistan military, police, Anti-Terrorism force (ATS) and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were taken into custody.⁶ The BLA released a good number of women, children and Baloch passengers possibly to claim a moral high ground. The operational viability of keeping such a large number of people hostage for longer period may also have been the reason behind the move to release them unharmed.

In another press release, BLA gave Pakistan a 48-hour ultimatum for the release of ‘Baloch political prisoners, forcibly disappeared persons and national resistance activists’ in exchange for the 214 hostages, while claiming to have killed 30 enemy personnel and injured many more.⁷ On 12 March 2025, BLA issued yet another press release claiming complete control over the train as well as the hostages. It reiterated the 48-hour deadline for prisoner exchange and underlined that:

If Pakistan does not make practical progress on the prisoner exchange within the given ultimatum, all hostages will be presented before the Baloch National Court. There, they will be tried on charges of state atrocities, colonial occupation, genocide, exploitation and involvement in war crimes in Balochistan’.⁸

High Level Rescue Operation

The attack of this magnitude sent a shock-wave throughout the country prompting the Pakistan military to launch a high-level rescue operation to free the hostages. It took Pakistan more than 24 hours to free the hostages. There were significant casualties of active-duty personnel on board the fateful train. The Zarar Company of the Pakistan Army carried out the assessment and planning and finally, its snipers engaged the BLA fighters on 12 March 2025 which led to some hostages slipping away.⁹ The hostages were segregated in different groups based on their ethnic profile and association with the government and security forces. These groups were surrounded by BLA fighters, including suicide bombers.

Drone footage released by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) clearly shows hostages sitting on the ground in at least three separate groups. As per Director

⁵ [“Over Hundred Pakistani Forces Personnel in Our Custody-BLA”](#), Press Release, Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), 11 March 2025.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ [“Occupying Forces Retreat, More than 30 Personnel Eliminated, 48-Hour Ultimatum for Prisoner Exchange-BLA”](#), Press Release, BLA, 11 March 2025.

⁸ [“Complete Control Over Jaffar Express Maintained - Pakistani State Has Only 24 Hours Left to Exchange Prisoners - BLA”](#), Press Release, BLA, 12 March 2025.

⁹ ISPR Official, [“DG ISPR Press Conference”](#), YouTube, 14 March 2025.

General (DG) ISPR, Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, the Zarar Company first identified the suicide bombers and then the snipers killed them in one go.¹⁰ After this, the rescue team entered into the area from the engine side and started clearing train coaches one by one. Soon, they were able to eliminate the BLA fighters present on the ground and rescued the remaining hostages.

Inconsistent and Exaggerated Claims

The claims made by both the BLA and the Pakistan Army indicate factual inconsistencies and exaggeration. There is a mismatch of the casualty figures given out by both. BLA first claimed that it had taken over 100 active duty personnel and then it went on to revise the figure to 182 and finally claimed to have executed all 214 hostages as Pakistan did not accept their demands.¹¹ In a joint press conference of DG, ISPR and Chief Minister Balochistan on 14 March 2025, it was claimed that a total of 354 hostages including 37 injured were rescued, whereas 26 got killed by BLA including 18 armed forces personnel.¹²

DG, ISPR also claimed that 33 BLA fighters were killed during the operation. This was strongly countered by BLA through its press release issued on 14 March 2025. Contrary to Pakistan Army’s claim, the BLA press release categorically stated that it executed a total of 214 enemy personnel and lost 12 of its fighters including five Fidayeen belonging to Majeed Brigade.¹³

Given the history of secrecy maintained by the state apparatus in Pakistan, Balochistan is considered by many analysts as an information black-hole due to which it is quite difficult to arrive at a definitive number of casualties each side suffered during the train hijack by BLA and the rescue operation launched by the military. However, as per interviews conducted by *BBC Urdu* with a few hostages, who somehow escaped from captivity, BLA’s claim in terms of casualties of hostages appears to be closer to the reality compared to that of Pakistan Army.

One of the interviewees, Allah Diya, who had fled with few others, told that as the darkness fell upon the area, BLA fighters started killing hostages in groups of 10, 15, 20, and three,¹⁴ confirming the fact that there were a lot of armed forces personnel among the hostages. One personnel pleaded with the BLA fighters to leave him because he had small girl child at home, but he was not spared. After this, many hostages ran away and did not even look back, as the Baloch fighters went on spraying bullets on them.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Press Releases issued by BLA on 11 March, 12 March, 13 March and 14 March 2025.

¹² ISPR Official, “[DG ISPR Press Conference](#)”, no. 9.

¹³ “[All 214 Hostages Executed, Battle is Still Ongoing - BLA](#)”, Press Release, BLA, 14 March 2025.

¹⁴ “[Jaffar Express Attack: Some People Escaped and Survived to Tell the Tales](#)”, *BBC Urdu YouTube*, 13 March 2025.

Another interviewee, Mahboob Hussain stated that there was a blast after which the train got derailed and this was followed by a 30-minute armed engagement between BLA fighters and security personnel deployed on the train. After some time, the passengers were asked to come out of the train and a number of BLA fighters left for the mountains, saying that their job was done.¹⁵ Afterwards, those on the ground started killing hostages in groups of five and 10, which continued throughout the intervening night of 11–12 March. This suggests that casualty figures may have been much higher than what Pakistan has officially accepted.

The Blame Game

There is hardly any doubt that Pakistan’s deepening internal security crisis has a direct link with its policy of using non-state actors as strategic assets and foreign policy tools against neighbouring countries in the region including India and Afghanistan. Whenever there is any significant internal security challenge, Pakistan’s politico-security elites habitually point fingers outside. Instead of introspection, they resort to ‘Blame Thy Neighbour’ approach to divert public attention from their own failures.

Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson, Shafqat Ali Khan in his weekly media briefing on 13 March categorically stated that “India is involved in sponsoring terrorism against Pakistan...We have evidence of calls being traced to Afghanistan.”¹⁶ On 14 March 2025, in response to media queries, the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Randhir Jaiswal rejected the “baseless allegations” and stated:

‘... The whole world knows where the epicenter of global terrorism lies. Pakistan should look inwards instead of pointing fingers and shifting the blame for its own internal problems and failures on to others.’¹⁷

Conclusion

The Jaffar Express hijack and subsequent killing of active-duty armed forces personnel have exposed the fact that as far as Balochistan is concerned, the writ of the Pakistani State has shrunk. This is happening at a time when a resurgent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has already upped the ante and announced its *Al-Khandaq Opertions*. In such a situation, instead of adopting diversionary tactics and putting the blame on neighbours for its own failures, Pakistan needs to seriously introspect and adopt necessary measures to deal with the deteriorating internal security situation.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ [“Transcript of the Media Briefing by the Spokesperson Thursday, 13 March 2025”](#), Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Islamabad, Pakistan, 13 March 2025.

¹⁷ [“Official Spokesperson’s Response to Media Queries Regarding Remarks Made by the Pakistan Side”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 14 March 2025.

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