

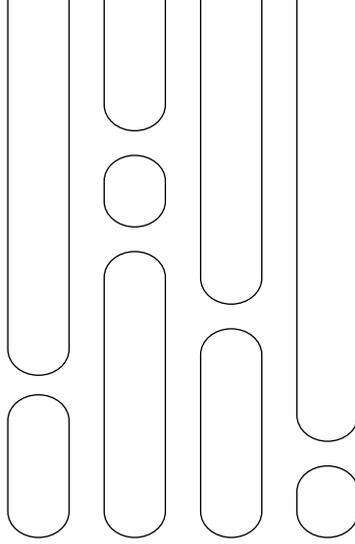
REPORT

BALUCHISTAN PROTESTS: AN UPRISING AGAINST EXCLUSION AND INJUSTICE

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In the midst of the popular protests rocking several Iranian cities for more than two weeks over the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini, the Iranian government has stepped up its crackdown on Balochi protesters in Sistan and Balochistan Province bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan. The government diverted the course of popular protests in a geopolitically significant area into bloody clashes between security forces and Balochi protesters, resulting in 63 deaths and 270 wounded among the Balochi protesters. It is a high number of deaths when compared to the death toll in the rest of the protesting provinces (91 deaths) and also when compared to the death toll in each province. This high number of deaths distinguishes the protests in Sistan and Balochistan from the rest of the protests, giving them added significance in the eyes of observers of Iranian affairs. It also raises questions about the interpretations and motivations of the security escalation against the Balochi protesters, as well as the relationship between the government's escalation against the Balochi protesters and its policies pursued to thwart and repress the country's protest movements that break out from time to time.

Features of Escalation Between Security Forces and Balochi Protesters

Massive protests broke out in Sistan and Baluchistan as part of the wider protest movement that has been convulsing Iran for more than two consecutive weeks. The backdrop of the protests includes reasons directly related to the killing of Amini at the hands of the morality police. Popular discontent with the country's deteriorating living, economic and social conditions, as well as policies of repression, exclusion, marginalization, lack of justice and class discrimination, have all contributed to the protests' expansion. However, according to Balochi activists, these clashes have significantly escalated in Sistan and Balochistan. On September 2022, 30, citizens gathered around Zahedan police station in protest against the rape of a -15year-old Balochi girl by a police officer and in support of nationwide anti-government protests. This contradicts the government's account, which accused rioters and separatists (in reference to the Balochi dissenter group Jaish al-Adl) of attacking the police station with the intent of seizing control.

The police, for their part, claimed that one of the detainees admitted that weapons were distributed to anonymous elements in front of him. However, the office of senior Sunni scholar Molavi Abdulhamid Ismaeelzahi provided a different account, claiming that some young men chanted slogans following the Friday prayer. A small group of them headed to the police station and hurled stones at it. The police responded by opening fire, killing and injuring dozens.

The Policies of Marginalization and Exclusion Pursued Against Balochis by the Iranian Government

Since taking power in Iran more than four decades ago, the Iran's post-revolutionary power structure has pursued policies of exclusion and marginalization consistent with the clerical government's discrimination against all those who are not of Persian ethnicity or do not belong to the Shiite sect. The government even pursues these policies against Shiites and Persians who oppose it both at home and abroad. The Balochis are treated similarly to the other minorities who are excluded and marginalized by the Iranian government, and are subjected to the most heinous security measures when it comes to encircling and suppressing their protests. Foremost among the government's draconian practices against the Balochis are the following:

- **Political exclusion:** This is widely regarded as a key practice by the Iranian government toward minorities in general, and Balochis in particular. Sistan and Balochistan is politically excluded by the Iranian Constitution, which prohibits Sunnis from holding senior political positions. Even the governors in this ethnic minority province are always appointed from those of Persian origin, despite the fact that Balochis make up the majority. Other minorities who practice Shiism include Kurds and Sassanians. The population of this vast area is overwhelmingly Sunni.

- **Economic marginalization:** Like the other border provinces inhabited by minorities such as Arabs and Kurds, the province gets a very limited share of development projects compared to Tehran and the northern provinces. Among the most striking ironies is that, despite the fact that Sistan and Balochistan Province, the second-largest province after Kerman among 31 Iranian provinces, is home to massive natural resources such as oil, gas, gold, uranium and copper, the province's citizens face dire economic and living conditions as well as high rates of poverty, economic underdevelopment, and illiteracy. Furthermore, the region ranks low in terms of eradicating illiteracy, opening primary schools, access to drinking water and sanitation. This region also suffers from alarming infant mortality rates. According to 2021 estimates, the region also has the lowest per capita income rate, with nearly 80 percent of Balochis living below the poverty line. As a result, the region was ranked last in the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index in 2021. The region has been hit with waves of severe drought over the last year as a result of the government's policies and climate change, resulting in a scarcity of resources and widespread poverty among citizens.

■ **Security apparatus solutions:** Secession of regions where non-Persian residents constitute the majority of the population is an obsession of Iranian leaders. As a result, when dealing with the crises that these regions face, including the Sunni-majority Sistan and Balochistan Province, Iran's fearsome security apparatuses prioritize solutions that rely primarily on repression, detention and extrajudicial killings.

This iron fist policy has given rise to several armed dissenter groups in Sistan and Balochistan. In previous decades, these organizations fought for independence and the establishment of a separate Balochi state on historical grounds. However, militant organizations with religious and jihadi leanings have emerged in recent decades, with some of them actively operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which border Iran's Sistan and Balochistan Province and have social extensions in this border triangle. Jundullah, Jaish al-Adl, Ansar al-Furqan, the League of Sunnis in Iran, the Organization of Liberating Western Balochistan and the Balochistan People's Party are among the most prominent anti-government militant organizations in this region.

Most of these organizations were involved in numerous clashes with Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which resulted in the assassination of many IRGC members and leaders, most recently the commander of the IRGC in the province. Iran is dismantling some of these armed groups. However, they quickly reconstitute and reemerge with new names and leaders.

Motivations and Dimensions of the Iranian Government's Escalation Against Balochi Protesters

The Iranian government, through the IRGC, the paramilitary wing tasked with putting down the protests in Sistan and Balochistan, pursued an escalatory security approach (repression, arrests, teargas, and live bullets) against the Balochi protesters, in contrast to a milder escalation against protesters in the other Iranian provinces that saw popular protests following the killing of Amini. This is due to a variety of factors, including:

■ **The separatist nature of the protests:** One of the most notable aspects of the government's approach to the 2022 protests is its attempt to give protesters' demands a separatist tone, particularly in provinces with a majority of non-Persians. There are several indications of this, including the government's escalation of violence against protesters in Iran's Kurdistan Province, Amini's hometown. Under the pretext of supporting protesters in Iran's Kurdistan Province, the government waged military campaigns against dissenting Iranian groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. The government has also intensified its crackdown on Balochi protesters in

Sistan and Balochistan in order to minimize the significance of the protests and demolish the narrative that the demands are popular, making them appear as separatist demands to international audiences. This gives the government more leeway for repression, exclusion and marginalization on the one hand, while also feeding the conspiracy theory that the protesters are incited by foreign powers on the other. The government also attempts to limit the scope of the protests and prevent the formation of new protesting enclaves.

■ **The Geopolitical significance of Balochistan:** The Iranian government is concerned that the escalation of protests and the Balochi separatist inclination will create a fault line that will reduce the government’s significance in Iran’s global strategies. This region represents several levers for Iran, particularly when it comes to extending energy pipelines and transboundary international projects. The region has a strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea, stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to Karachi, Pakistan (see Map 1). It connects Central and Southern Asia to the Middle East, making it a strategic hub for major world powers looking to build projects, commercial and economic ports, and energy pipelines. The significance of the Chabahar and Gwadar ports in the region emerges at this point, as they fall within the scope of the US-Chinese conflict in the Indian Ocean, Central and South Asia. This is in addition to the fact that the region holds vast reserves of minerals that attract international powers, such as oil, gas, uranium, gold, silver, coal, and platinum. As a result, the region provides Iran with powerful levers against regional and international actors which it uses to bolster its regional policies and international positions on outstanding issues with the West. Therefore, the government will not accept turning it into a fault line that affects its powerful levers.

Map 1: The Borders of Sistan and Balochistan Province (Delineated in Red)



Given that ethnic Balochis are spread across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, reactions to the protests in the Balochistan region were closely monitored. The Pakistani reaction ranged from deep anger among the Sunni majority on social media to a lack of coverage of the events by major Pakistani media outlets. Perhaps this is due to the fact that some pro-Iran figures hold senior positions in Pakistan's media industry. Furthermore, state officials have refrained from making any statements about what is going on in Balochistan. In general, Pakistanis are criticizing what they see as a crackdown and persecution of Balochis by the Iranian authorities because of their religious affiliations. According to eyewitnesses, security measures on the Iranian-Pakistani border have been tightened due to concerns that the Pakistani Balochis will react to what is going on in Sistan and Balochistan. The reaction on the Afghan border was unclear, with the exception of a protest by some Afghan women in front of the Iranian embassy in Kabul in response to the killing of Amini. They have expressed their support for the Iranian people's nationwide uprising.

Conclusion

The security approach has been the hallmark of the Iranian government's policies in dealing with the crisis of popular protests raging in various Iranian provinces since September 2022 ,14. The government's security approach was clearly visible in how it dealt with non-Persian protesters, particularly in Sistan and Balochistan, with 50 protesters killed in a single day. The government's hasty accusation of Balochi armed groups' involvement in the events as well as its use of excessive force against Balochi protesters represents an attempt by the government to achieve several goals, including influencing the course of the protests rocking several Iranian cities following the killing of Amini; and sending a message to the outside world that protests in Balochistan are not popular but separatist. This is in addition to promoting its version of events, which is that the protests in Iran are being instigated by outside powers (a conspiracy theory) in order to harm the Iranian state and topple the Iranian government.



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