

Special Report: The Political, Economic, and Cultural Marginalization of the Baloch in Iran

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By Michał Jagielski

Introduction

The Baloch are an ethnic minority in Iran that inhabits the Eastern province of Sistan and Balochistan. Estimates put the number of Baloch at around 1.5 – 2 million, around 2% – 5% of the country's population. They speak Baloch, a northwestern Iranian language, and have their own distinct traditions. Most of the Baloch are Sunni Muslims, in contrast to the vast Shia majority. The province is the third largest in the country. Yet, it remains the poorest and most underdeveloped region despite its large gold reserves; the Taftan gold mine reportedly holds over 24 million tons of gold ore. The terrain is dominated by deserts and arid land, which leads to seasonal droughts and flooding. The region suffers from high rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, and it is a major stop on the opium and heroin trafficking routes originating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Due to their cultural and religious distinctiveness, the Baloch have been suppressed by all of Iran's administrations. They are given minimal representation in state institutions, face restrictions on cultural and religious expression, and are disproportionately subjected to executions and state violence. The province is highly significant for Iran's geopolitical aspirations, as it offers access to the Gulf of Oman, an important maritime route that has been a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The possibility of including Iran and its southeastern province in the emerging economic corridor has increased tensions between Iran and Pakistan, and within both countries' Balochistan provinces. The two neighbors are competing for China's investment and have accused each other of supporting Baloch separatist movements. Islamabad claims that Iran is allowing the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) to reside in its territory. Simultaneously, Tehran has claimed that Pakistan is turning a blind eye to members of Jaish al-Din operating in the country. [In January 2024](#), the allegations and suspicion turned violent, with both countries exchanging missiles, which killed [11 people in the two Balochistan](#) provinces. Despite the importance of Sistan and Balochistan, the Iranian regime has continued to oppress the Baloch and has opted to target them with genocidal acts instead of improving their lives and incorporating them into the social and political life of the country.

Bloody Friday: The Zahedan Massacre

Bloody Friday, also known as the Zahedan Massacre, occurred on September 30, 2022, and has since become the symbol of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' repression of the Baloch. [The Friday protests took place during a volatile time in Iran](#). Two weeks earlier, on September 16, Mahsa Amini was murdered by the security forces after being detained for allegedly not adhering to the hijab law. The murder caused nationwide protests that also encompassed the provinces of Sistan and Balochistan. News broke out on [Sept. 27 that Colonel Ebrahim Kochazi](#), the police head of Chabahar, allegedly raped a 15-year-old Baloch girl after bringing her into the police station for interrogation. It has been [reported](#) that he was released on bail and transferred to Tehran. The brutality of the act represented the security forces' complete disregard for women's and Balochi lives, causing outrage in the community.

[On Sept. 30, around 12:30 p.m.](#), after attending the Friday prayer at the Great Mosalla of Zahedan, people gathered in front of Zahedan's police station number 16 to protest. [Reports suggest](#) that snipers and IRGC troops were already stationed on rooftops and the surrounding hills 30 minutes before the prayer ended. The shooting began shortly after 12:30 p.m. The state narrative is that the security forces opened fire only after one of the protestors began firing, while others threw Molotov cocktails at the station. Video footage from the day shows protestors throwing rocks, with a few of them attempting to break into the police station, but it contains no recording of the alleged gunman. [Amnesty International](#) obtained leaked documents in which Tehran has instructed its security forces to "severely confront" the protests. The shooting was not limited to the front of the police station. Shots and tear gas were fired in the [Great Mosallah](#), near the [Makki Grand Mosque](#), and the protests expanded to other parts of the city. Over [100 civilians were murdered](#), including women and children, and over 500 sustained serious injuries, [the most casualties in a single day](#) during the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests.

In the days following the massacre, state media and local police representatives claimed that the unrest was caused by ["extremists" and "foreign infiltrators"](#), who had been successfully apprehended. On [Oct. 5, video footage](#) released by the police showed the alleged perpetrators confessing to attacking the police station. As [reported by Haalvsh](#), an independent Iranian human rights organization, security forces have forced people seeking medical assistance at the Khatam Hospital to confess to being members of the Jaish al-Adl group to qualify for surgery. Furthermore, [families of those killed during Bloody Friday have been contacted](#) by state officials who offered monetary incentives for their silence about the killings, and by the Basij militia who pressured them to join their ranks or face legal charges.

Despite the crackdowns, martial law, and severe consequences for protesting, Baloch continued to voice their opposition to the oppression. Protests continued for over a year, taking place every Friday.

Militarization and Occupation

The IRGC, the Basij, and the Quds forces have been a [constant presence in Balochistan since the 2000s](#), but their activities have intensified in the last three years. The official reason given by the state for occupying Balochistan is the threat posed by Jaish al-Adl, an anti-Shia Islamist militant group established in 2012 by former members of Jundullah and led by [Abdolrahim Mullahzadeh](#). The group claims to be advocating for the rights of the Baloch and has engaged in numerous terrorist attacks against Iranian security forces, [killing 23 people in 2023 alone](#). The group has been designated as a [terrorist organization](#) by both Iran and the US. The most notable attacks conducted by Jaish al-Adl in recent years took place in [December 2023](#), when an attack on a police station in Rask killed 11 officers. In [April 2024](#), 10 security personnel were killed. In [July 2025](#), attackers stormed a courthouse, killing six civilians and wounding 22.

The Bloody Friday Massacre, the consistent threat of Jaish al-Adl attacks, the 12-Day War with Israel, and the protests that erupted after the killing of Mahsa Amini have caused Tehran to increase oppressive security measures and further militarize the region. Beginning in 2022, after the "Life, Women, Freedom" protests, [checkpoints became more common around major cities](#). Their number increased further following the 12-Day War with Israel. State officials claim that checkpoints serve as a tool for identifying foreign spies and are contributing to the security of the country. In reality, due to an almost absolute impunity given to security personnel amid heightened tensions, the checkpoints set up in marginalized regions have caused a [spike in civilian deaths](#). According to Iran's law, the use of lethal weapons is permissible only in instances when a ["flagrant crime" occurs](#), or when the investigated individual possesses a firearm. Despite those requirements, the Basij and the IRGC personnel have repeatedly [opened fire on civilians who did not pose a real threat](#). The securitized nature of the State's actions in Balochistan has permitted the security personnel to brutally oppress the Baloch under the guise of battling Jaish al-Adl.

In addition to establishing new security checkpoints, Iran has been utilizing advanced surveillance technology to infiltrate the lives of the Baloch. Balochistan's skies are being monitored by [drones and military helicopters](#). The state has introduced additional measures to monitor women's adherence to the Islamic dress code, such as drone surveillance, cameras on the country's major highways, and the ["Nazer" app](#), which lets users to report people's violation of the hijab law. The app allows users to include information such as license plates, time, date, and location of the "perpetrator," who is then informed of the violation and its consequences. These measures encourage people to report on their fellow citizens, which contributes to the environment of fear and mistrust, where communities are fractured and daily life is marked by suspicion.

Like other ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, the Baloch have been targeted with extrajudicial killings, unwarranted arrests, and home raids. The security forces' activities in Balochistan [follow a common pattern](#). After identifying a figure that is important for the community, armed officials storm their house without a warrant, search the property, arrest them and, at times, members of their family, usually males, on fabricated claims of espionage or collaboration with Jaish al-Adl. They transport them to an undisclosed location, where they suffer from human rights abuses and are refused independent legal help. Furthermore, as reported by [Amnesty International](#) and [Javid Rehman, the UN Special Rapporteur](#) on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Baloch are disproportionately targeted with the death penalty. According to Rehman's report, 147 out of the 582 people executed in 2022 belonged to the Balochi minority. The Baloch [make up around 2% of Iran's population](#), yet they constitute [25% of the people who were sentenced to the death penalty](#).

On Sept. 30, Balochistan commemorates the victims of state brutality on the anniversary of the Zahedan massacre. In 2023, in the weeks leading up to the anniversary, [Zahedan witnessed an increase in security personnel and checkpoints](#) throughout the city. In preparation, [the IRGC and the Basij put the Makki Mosque under siege](#). They put up barricades on the streets surrounding the Mosque, blocked cars from entering, and severely limited internet access in the city. On Sept. 29, 2023, the anniversary of the Zahedan Massacre, security forces stopped and searched every person trying to enter the Mosque and arrested many, including 32 children. Despite the significant presence of security forces, people exited the Makki Mosque after the Friday prayer and began their peaceful protest. [As reported by Human Rights Watch](#), the IRGC and the Basij fired tear gas, targeted the civilians' upper bodies with "birdshot" shotgun shells and rubber bullets, beat people with batons, and used lethal force in the form of machine guns against unarmed protesters. Reportedly, [23 people were injured](#), including children. On Oct. 20, 2023, during the weekly protests, similar events occurred. The [Mosque was put under siege](#), with [snipers placed on the rooftops surrounding the area](#). People were beaten, arrested, and transported to detention centers. Furthermore, [security forces conducted raids on buildings](#), claiming that their residents threw rocks at them.

The systematic targeting of the Baloch showcases how Tehran uses counterinsurgency and security arguments to conduct collective punishment against an already marginalized community. By framing the entire region as a security threat, the state justifies actions that, in theory, are aimed at combating militias but, in reality, serve to suppress basic civil liberties. The repeated cycles of raids, checkpoints, and violent crackdowns on peaceful protests reveal a pattern in which the state relies on coercion and violent repression.

Economic Control and Resource Capture

Sistan and Balochistan is the country's poorest province. Estimates put the number of people [living below the poverty line at 64% in urban and 77% in rural areas](#). The region has the highest [national illiteracy, school dropouts](#), and [infant mortality rates](#), and it suffers from insufficient access to basic healthcare. [Twelve out of the 26 counties](#) in Sistan and Balochistan are in the top 20 of the poorest areas in Iran. The province suffers from one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, with 30% of people between the ages of 15 and 24 experiencing trouble finding employment. Balochistan is also experiencing severe water shortages due to environmental degradation and insufficient investment. The harsh weather, compounded with climate change, has prolonged the duration of droughts, simultaneously causing more frequent and severe seasonal flooding. More than a [third of villages in the province do not have adequate water facilities](#), and only a quarter of the households have access to sewage facilities. The shortages have led to inconsistent access to drinkable water, causing it to become subject to governmental misconduct and corruption. Due to the inadequate infrastructure, well drilling has become the method of choice for dealing with water scarcity. The extreme increase in the number of wells has significantly [impacted the natural groundwater levels](#) and is actively contributing to droughts.

In addition to experiencing intentional underdevelopment of their province, the Baloch are often denied access to basic services such as banking, schools, and healthcare. Due to the region's low urbanization rate, many individuals living on ancestral land do not possess the funds to go through the bureaucratic process of [obtaining a national ID card](#). In turn, they become even more marginalized and are further denied the scarce opportunities for socio-economic upward mobility left to them.

Balochistan suffers from chronic underdevelopment, limited job and education opportunities, insufficient health care, and a lack of adequate infrastructure. The region has been intentionally set back by the regime, despite occasional attempts to address the issues. In 2003, during a visit to the province, the Supreme Leader Khamenei described Balochistan as "[the key to the development of eastern Iran](#)," subsequently motivating private investors and members of the government to create several infrastructure projects. Despite an apparent interest in investing in the region, the results have been insignificant, failing to address the most pressing issues of the Baloch.

Recently, Tehran has been focusing its Balochistan investments in Makran. The southeastern part of the country is vital due to its strategic position. Makran offers access to international waters. In the event of a war, it would allow Iran to import crucial equipment and materials. As a result of its importance, Tehran has created the [Makran Development Plan](#), a project focused on constructing numerous residential buildings and military bases, improving the state's monitoring and security capabilities along the coast, and resettling 6-11 million government loyalists to the area. [Rouhollah Akbari](#), assistant to the Minister of Roads and Urban Development, has said that 27 new settlements

will be created in Makran and the wider region. The [CEO of Iran's New Town Development Company](#), a firm that has already begun constructing new settlements, stated in an interview that 8% of Iran's population should live in them. Currently, only 2% live in the area. The Makran Development Plan serves two purposes. First, it provides Tehran with easier access to international waters and gives it more control over the country's coast. Second, it allows the regime to change the social fabric of the region. Balochistan's social composition will drastically shift with the arrival of 6-11 million Shia government loyalists. The regime's de facto social engineering project will strip away the remaining resources of the Balochi population. The creation of 27 new settlements will increase the cost of living in the area, without providing real opportunity for upward socio-economic mobility for the native population. Many of the indigenous Baloch living in the area are battling poverty, are nomadic or semi-nomadic, and often [live off their ancestral lands](#). Expanding urban centers, rising cost of living, and the presence of hostile military forces will eventually drive the local population away from their place of birth.

A similar pattern can be observed when analyzing the gold mine in [Taftan](#). The immense profits generated by the mine, which holds around 24 million tons of gold reserves, have not been used to develop Sistan and Balochistan. Instead, they went to private investors and government officials. The Mahan Company, which is part of the initiative and works closely with the IRGC, has engaged in land grabs in the region, [confiscating 4,000 hectares of land in the Dashtiari area](#). Furthermore, over 3,000 hectares of land in Sirk have been confiscated under the premise of retaking "national lands." Government officials are refusing to issue ownership documents to the Baloch, making land grabs easier. In 2024 alone, [36 homes and religious sites have been demolished](#) in Sistan and Balochistan, laying the ground for the implementation of the Makran Development Plan.

The perilous economic situation in Balochistan has forced some people to become [Soukhtbar](#), fuel carriers. The occupation is mostly taken up by young men, [some under 15 years of age](#), who carry fuel in cans and canisters across the border into Pakistan. The crossing is accompanied by difficult terrain, military checkpoints, and gunfire. Furthermore, economic sanctions on Iran and the inflation experienced by the country have led to [the emergence of fuel mafias](#) who control the supply flow and make a profit on the struggles of the Soukhtbar. The estimated amount of fuel being smuggled through the border stands at [10 to 40 million liters a day](#).

The central government has taken steps to control the flow of fuel under the guise of aiding the local population. In 2014, it began constructing watch towers and barriers, and it [delegated the responsibility of border security to the IRGC](#). Border officials now determine who qualifies as poor and decide whether they can continue to transport fuel, subsequently giving the IRGC full control over the flow of resources. Additionally, Tehran has introduced [the Razaq card](#), a permission given to inhabitants of the border region to carry and sell Iranian fuel. The Razaq card was supposed to serve as a way to legalize the occupation of fuel carriers, but in reality, it serves as another tool for exploitation. Holders of the card were supposed to receive quotas and profits from the sales. However, [the government quickly decided that instead of giving money to the carriers, it would use the profits to invest in the development of the region](#), promises that did not materialize in real improvements.

In addition to having their limited earnings taken away by the government, fuel carriers face brutal treatment from the security forces. [On Feb. 22, 2021](#), a group of Soukhtbars was protesting in front of the IRGC border checkpoint in Saravan, demanding the reopening of the border crossing. In response, the security personnel opened fire, killing 10 and injuring dozens. Families of the victims were denied access to their loved ones' bodies. [The survivors were pressed to sign statements that absolved the IRGC](#) troops from any responsibility for the shooting. In response to the killings, Mohammed Hadi Marashi, Deputy Security Officer of the province, issued a statement saying that the shooting was conducted by Pakistani border guards and that the protesters were members of Jaish al-Adl. In [July 2023](#), the village of Prikor experienced heavy floods, which trapped many fuel carriers. The government did not respond to the crisis. [Haalvsh has reported that 366 fuel carriers died in 2023](#). In the first six months of 2024, the number of casualties rose by [3% compared to the previous year](#).

Psychological and Cultural Suppression

The Baloch, being mostly Sunni and speaking their own language, have experienced widespread religious and linguistic discrimination. The Iranian state has been created on [Shia ideology and](#)

[severely restricts the ability of other religions to participate in the political life](#) of the country. [Article 115 of the Iranian Constitution](#) does not allow non-Shias to hold the office of President of the Republic. Only under the current President Pezeshkian has a Sunni Baloch been appointed as the [local governor of the province](#). Previously, the Baloch were, and still are, extremely underrepresented on the local and national level. Conversion from Shia to Sunni Islam is strictly prohibited, people who undergo the process are [branded as "Murtad"](#), apostates. Converts from Sunni Islam, however, are celebrated and interviewed on national TV. The Sunnis, particularly the Baloch, have become the main targets of state religious crackdowns in recent years. [Sunni mosques and religious schools in the region have been demolished, and Sunni clergy have been put in prison](#).

Despite the Constitution recognizing minority languages, Farsi is the only language allowed in schools and institutions. [Publications in Balochi have been outlawed](#) and can result in severe prison sentences. With classes not being taught in their mother tongue, children in Balochistan are forced to either adapt or be left without proper education, which is already hard to obtain due to the small number of schools and personnel shortages. The high number of school dropouts ([60% of girls do not finish their education](#)) is caused by the remoteness of most schools from the children's homes and by the linguistic obstacles put up by the state. Furthermore, the acceptance rate of the Baloch into universities is extremely low, which subsequently bars members of the community from obtaining better-paying jobs.

Tehran has made constant attempts at dividing Sistan and Balochistan into smaller administrative bodies and incorporating parts of the region into other provinces. The reason for [administrative engineering is to limit the Baloch's chances for creating a cohesive community](#) capable of representing the interests of its people. [In 2024, the Iranian regime revisited the idea of dividing Sistan and Balochistan into separate bodies](#). The plan includes giving administrative power over the newly created regions to government loyalists from other ethnic groups. The plans are aimed at further restricting the Baloch's ability for mobilization, and cultural and religious expression through replacing "Balochistan" with an ethnic-neutral name, subsequently erasing the ethnic identity of the region from the map and vocabulary.

Conclusion

Sistan and Balochistan Province has been the victim of persistent attempts by the Iranian regime to oppress the Baloch and limit their capacity for mobilization. Bloody Friday is a manifestation of the brutality employed to silence dissent and part of a broader attempt to militarize, exploit, and repress the Baloch. The events and policies described in this report are not isolated instances of ethnic persecution, but rather a strategy created to eradicate the Baloch. Tehran frames its policies as a response to the perceived terrorist threat, the subsequent instability, and severe underdevelopment, yet their true nature is vastly different. Militarization has normalized violence at security checkpoints, justified extreme surveillance, and allowed security forces to engage in extrajudicial killings and arrests, subsequently introducing insecurity into the province's day-to-day life. Development projects such as the Makran Development Plan are presented as opportunities, but they actually facilitate social engineering and resource exploitation. Religious discrimination, cultural suppression, and administrative restructuring aim to destroy the cultural identity and the communities of the Baloch. Furthermore, these policies deny the Baloch the possibility of participating in the political, social, and economic life of the country.