

# Balochistan Liberation Army

## AT A GLANCE

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## HOW TO CITE

Mapping Militants Project (MMP). “Balochistan Liberation Army.” Last modified February 2019. <https://mappingmilitants.org/node/343>

## SUMMARY

**Formed:** 2000

**Disbanded:** Group is active.

**First Attack:** July 22, 2000: The BLA claimed responsibility for a bomb that was placed in a market in Quetta, Balochistan. (7 killed, 25 wounded).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** November 23, 2018: BLA militants attempted to storm the Chinese consulate in Karachi. (7 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is an ethnonationalist militant organization, comprised mostly of Marri and Bugti tribe members, fighting against the Pakistani government for greater regional autonomy for the province of Balochistan. The organization was founded in 2000 and has used IEDs, mortar strikes, ethnic genocide, and small arms attacks against Pakistani government affiliates, Punjabi, and foreign workers in Balochistan.

## NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is a Baloch ethnonationalist militant organization fighting against the Pakistani government for greater regional autonomy for the province of Balochistan.<sup>3</sup> The group seeks independence from Pakistan and to rid the region from foreign exploitation and intervention. The BLA strives for the creation of a

sovereign state of Greater Balochistan, which would include Pakistan, Iranian and Afghanistan Balochistan territories.<sup>4</sup> The group has continually demanded that the Pakistani government invest greater economic resources in the region and stop exploiting Balochistan's natural resources.

Although the group officially was founded in 2000, the media and some analysts speculate that the group is a resurgence of prior Baloch ethnonationalist insurgencies, more specifically the Independent Balochistan Movement of 1973 to 1977.<sup>5</sup> The BLA is the oldest and the most dangerous among all Baloch groups operating in Balochistan.<sup>6</sup> Most BLA members are drawn from the Marri or Bugti tribes. It is speculated that the BLA may also recruit political youth activists.<sup>7</sup>

The BLA formed in the summer of 2000 in response to growing resentment in Balochistan over the perceived government monopoly of Balochistan's natural resources and unequal allocation of jobs to Punjabis over Balochi natives.<sup>8</sup> The organization was first recognized after it claimed credit for a series of bombings in markets and railways that targeted Pakistani soldiers and police.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the rest of the summer, the BLA claimed eight more attacks. These attacks targeted Pakistani military locations and personnel using mortar strikes.<sup>10</sup> The BLA has regularly employed this tactic of small scale bombing throughout its lifetime. Following its founding, the BLA's activities, particularly from 2000-2003, are undocumented. However, in May 2003, the BLA carried out a string of attacks, killing police and non-native Baloch residents. The following year, the BLA attacked Chinese foreign workers that were involved in government sponsored mega-development projects. These attacks captured the attention of the media and signaled the group's willingness to attack foreigners with the intention of drawing Pakistani government attention.<sup>11</sup> The Pakistani government responded to these attacks by deploying an estimated 20,000 additional troops to Balochistan.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the government's military presence, the BLA's attacks continued throughout 2003 and into the summer of 2004 with car bombs and numerous IED attacks. In 2005, the group carried out an attack on Camp Kohlu, which at the time was housing Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. The Pakistani government considered the BLA's actions to be an attempt against the president's life. This attack motivated the government to label the BLA as a terrorist organization in 2006.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the Pakistani government began to more actively target the BLA, particularly alleged BLA leaders. This strategy is still in use by Pakistani security forces today.<sup>14</sup> On August 26, 2006, the government killed alleged leader Sardar Akbar Khan Bugti. Similarly, on November 21, 2007, government forces killed Mir Balaach Marri.<sup>15</sup> The two alleged leaders were considered to be some of the most influential people in Balochistan. According to the Pakistani Human Rights Commission, these strikes against the BLA may have been formulated to incite more violence from the militant organization, which could then be used by the government to justify further intervention in Balochistan.<sup>16</sup>

Around the same time, the Pakistani government gave China a forty-year lease on the port of Gwadar, located in southern Balochistan. The BLA and many Balochis interpreted the lease as another Pakistani government effort to colonize Balochistan.<sup>17</sup> The deal was

publicly used by the BLA as evidence of the validity of its grievances with the Pakistani government.

In September of 2008, the BLA, the Balochistan Liberation Front, the Baloch Republican Army, and the government of Pakistan declared a ceasefire. The ceasefire was made with the understanding that the Pakistani government would meet with the three groups for negotiations. However, the BLA withdrew from the ceasefire in January 2009 because it was upset that the Pakistani government had made no meaningful attempts to begin negotiations.<sup>18</sup> On April 15, 2009 during an interview on a Pakistani news station, alleged leader Brahamdagh Khan Bugti urged Baloch people to kill any non-native Baloch residing in Balochistan whether they were military or civilian.<sup>19</sup> Following Bugti's interview, targeted killings of Punjabi civilians broke out in Balochistan. The BLA claimed credit for inciting the violence, but it is unclear if the killings were carried out by Baloch residents responding to the BLA's calls for violence or if the killings were carried out directly by the BLA. According to the BLA, an estimated 500 Punjabis were killed following Bugti's television interview. Many of the Punjabi killed were multi-generational residents of Balochistan.<sup>20</sup> In addition to this ethnic cleansing from 2009-2012, the BLA continued to carry out various attacks against Pakistani government affiliates, including military personnel, policemen, government officials, and school teachers.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, the BLA claimed responsibility for the attack on the national heritage site and historic summer home of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

In 2014, alleged BLA leader Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri died of natural causes. Following his death, Marri's six sons fought over control of the BLA. It is believed that three of the sons left the BLA to help create a splinter group called the United Baloch Army (UBA). The feuding brothers have not been identified, and there is little information on which brothers remained in the BLA and which left to establish the UBA.<sup>23</sup> The two groups have clashed on and off the battlefield. On November 3, 2016, for example, the United Baloch Army accused the BLA of killing one of its commanders, Ali Sher and detaining four of its fighters.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to its ongoing conflict with the UBA, the BLA has also remained active in carrying out attacks against the Pakistani government. In April 2017, 500 militants belonging to various banned Baloch militant organizations, including the BLA, surrendered themselves to Pakistani authorities. This came after the government announced a political reconciliation program in Balochistan that would provide compensation, jobs, education, and security to militants who surrendered themselves to authorities.<sup>25</sup> As of 2018, the group has focused its attention on ridding Balochistan of Chinese and Pakistani influence. The group believes that the Pakistani government is working with foreign states, such as China, in order to continue to exploit natural resources in the region. A senior commander of the BLA accused China and Pakistan of plundering the country's natural resources and perpetrating atrocities on Baloch in order to eliminate Baloch identity. In November 2018, the BLA opened fire on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in the hope of damaging Sino-Pakistani relations amidst the development of new international agreements. This attack is considered one of their most notable and large-scale attacks in recent times.<sup>26</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP

The BLA does not publicize its leaders, and most alleged leaders actively deny affiliation with the group. Analysts speculate that the BLA's leadership is comprised of Marri and Bugti tribe members.

**Sardar Akbar Khan Bugti** (2000-August 26, 2006): Akbar Bugti was the former Chief Minister of Balochistan.<sup>27</sup> He is considered one of the grandfathers of the organization and was killed by a Pakistani security forces operation on August 26, 2006.

**Mir Balaach Marri** (unknown-November 21, 2007): Balaach Marri, a former provincial parliament member, allegedly used his political influence to gain support from the local community for the BLA.<sup>28</sup> It is unclear when he may have taken control of the BLA. Pakistani security forces carried out numerous attacks against Balaach Marri, and he was eventually killed by what was believed to be a Pakistani security forces operation on November 21, 2007.

**Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri** (unknown-June 2014): Khair Bakhsh Marri was involved with the 1970's insurgency in Balochistan and has been called "the godfather" of the Baloch armed movement. He was a key figure in the BLA until he died from natural causes in June 2014.<sup>29</sup>

**Brahamdagh Khan Bugti** (unknown-unknown): Brahamdagh Bugti was an alleged BLA leader. He is most known for calling for the killing of all non-native residents of Balochistan in a live television interview. The Pakistani government alleged that Brahamdagh Bugti helped bring back the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) after leaving the BLA.<sup>30</sup>

**Bijar Khan** (unknown-July 2015): Bijar Khan was an alleged leader of the BLA. He was killed in a government raid that took place in July 2015.<sup>31</sup>

**Aslam "Achu"** (unknown-2018): An alleged chief of a subgroup of BLA, Aslam was responsible for the 2018 Chinese consulate attack. The BLA confirmed that Aslam died in a suicide attack in December 2018.<sup>32</sup>

### B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

### C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 500 (Institute for the Study of Violent Groups)<sup>33</sup>

- 1,000-2,000 (Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency)<sup>34</sup>

#### **D. RESOURCES**

Pakistani intelligence agencies have accused Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad, Afghanistan, of providing covert arms, financial support, and training to the BLA in an attempt to destabilize Pakistan and block Chinese influence in Balochistan.<sup>35</sup> However, some analysts argue that such interference would be against Indian interests, as India, like Pakistan, also seeks to profit from Balochistan's oil and gas resources.<sup>36</sup>

It is also believed that the BLA has benefited from weapons leftover from prior conflicts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran.<sup>37</sup> Due to high community support for autonomy and independence from people of the Balochistan, many analysts suspect that a large amount of the BLA's income and weapons supply has come from donations from the Baloch people.<sup>38</sup> Baloch leaders have also claimed that financial contributions from the Baloch diaspora make it possible to procure arms and ammunition through the black market.<sup>39</sup>

Experts have also speculated that smuggling could also be a large source of income for the BLA. Balochistan is a key smuggling route for many products, and a very large portion of the world's opium has passed through its borders.<sup>40</sup>

#### **E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS**

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The BLA is headquartered in the mountains of the western province of Balochistan in Pakistan. Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province. It shares a border with Iran and Afghanistan to the west, the Arabian Sea to the south, and the Indian Sindh and Punjab provinces to the east.

### **STRATEGY**

#### **A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS**

The BLA seeks greater regional autonomy of Balochistan from Pakistan. The group believes that the foundation that Pakistan was built on – that all Muslims are created equal – is wrong. Instead, ethnic identity should take precedence over religious identity.<sup>41</sup> Specifically, the BLA fight to protect the Baloch people, an ethnic group that comprises the majority of the population in Balochistan.<sup>42</sup>

The group seeks to rid Balochistan of foreign influence, specifically from the Chinese and Pakistani government. BLA command has stated that foreign governments have stripped Balochistan of natural resources in an attempt to get rid of Baloch identity.

Further, the BLA believes that the central government of Pakistan inequitably distributes the profits from these natural resources and prioritizes the employment of Punjabis.

## **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

While the BLA has no formal political organization, it garners sympathy and occasionally open support from many Balochi political parties including the National Party and the Students Organization.<sup>43</sup>

## **C. TARGETS AND TACTICS**

The BLA has used a variety of tactics to achieve its goal of gaining greater regional autonomy. These tactics include car bombs, mortar strikes, rocket strikes, IEDs, landmines, grenades, kidnappings, and small-arms attacks. The BLA largely targets Pakistani government affiliates and interests, including natural gas pipelines, oil fields, civilian and soldiers working for the government.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the group has encouraged and engaged in ethnic cleansing against Balochistan residents with Punjabi heritage and ties.<sup>45</sup> The BLA also utilizes social media to share nationalist propaganda and further disseminate its message.

## **MAJOR ATTACKS**

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

**July 22, 2000:** The BLA claimed responsibility for a bomb that was placed in a market in Quetta, Balochistan (7 killed, 25 wounded).<sup>46</sup>

**May 2003:** The BLA carried out a string of attacks, killing police and non-native Baloch residents (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>47</sup>

**Summer 2004:** The BLA attacked Chinese foreign-workers involved with the Pakistani government's mega-development projects (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>48</sup>

**December 14, 2005:** BLA combatants launched six rockets at a paramilitary camp in Kohlu that then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was visiting. Though Musharraf was unharmed, the Pakistani government labeled the attack an attempt on his life and initiated a sweeping army operation in retaliation (0 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>49</sup>

**April 19, 2009:** Alleged BLA leader Brahamdagh Khan Bugti called for Baloch natives to kill non-native residents of Balochistan. The BLA claims that these attacks took the lives of about 500 Punjabis (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>50</sup>

**June 14, 2009:** Masked BLA gunmen shot dead Anwar Baig, a schoolteacher in

Kalat who had opposed the recitation of the Baloch anthem in schools. This killing was part of a larger campaign against educators who were seen to be sympathetic to the Pakistani state (1 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>51</sup>

**July 30, 2009:** BLA attackers kidnapped 19 Pakistani police personnel in Sui. In addition to the kidnapped personnel, BLA militants also killed 1 police officer and injured 16. Over the course of three weeks, the BLA's captors killed all but one of the kidnapped policemen (19 killed, 16 wounded).<sup>52</sup>

**November 22, 2011:** BLA insurgents attacked government security personnel who were guarding a private coal mine in the northern Musakhel district (14 killed, 10 wounded).<sup>53</sup>

**December 31, 2011:** BLA militants placed a car bomb outside the house of a former minister of state, Mir Naseer Mengal (13 killed, 30 wounded).<sup>54</sup>

**June 13, 2013:** BLA militants claimed responsibility for a rocket attack and raid on the summer home of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The Pakistan flag had also been replaced by a BLA flag on the property (1 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>55</sup>

**June 30, 2015:** BLA militants attacked the United Baloch Army's Karam Khan Camp in the Peer Masori area (20 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>56</sup>

**May 13, 2017:** BLA militants on motorbikes opened fire on construction workers in Gwadar, Balochistan (10 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>57</sup>

**August 14, 2017:** BLA militants claimed responsibility for an IED attack in Harnai, Balochistan. The attack was directed at members of the Frontier Corps, a Pakistani paramilitary border force (8 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>58</sup>

**November 23, 2018:** BLA militants attempted to storm the Chinese consulate in Karachi (7 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>59</sup>

## INTERACTIONS

### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- April 2006: Pakistan List of Terrorist Organizations<sup>60</sup>
- July 17, 2006: U.K. List of Proscribed Group:<sup>61</sup>

The groups behavior was described as terrorism by the U.S. Department of State on April 30, 2007.<sup>62</sup> However, the group has not been officially designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Government.

### B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

There is significant support in Balochistan for an independent Baloch state.<sup>63</sup> As a result, the ethnonationalist groups in Balochistan receive support from the local population. While the majority of Balochistan residents distance themselves publicly from the BLA, sympathizers and supporters can be found throughout the community.<sup>64</sup> Although some residents find BLA tactics distasteful, others feel that the BLA and similar organizations are fighting for their interests.<sup>65</sup>

The majority of the BLA leadership is comprised of the Marri and Bugti tribes. These two tribes hold significant political power in Balochistan and disseminate nationalist views that are in line with some BLA sentiments.<sup>66</sup> Some BLA leaders have been known to hold political office in Balochistan.

### **C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS**

The BLA is one of multiple insurgent groups fighting for the autonomy of Balochistan province. The Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), the Balochistan Republican Army (BRA), Lashkar-e-Balochistan (LeB), and the Jhalawan Baloch Tiger are also active in the region. The BLA and BLF are the strongest and most influential militant groups operating in Balochistan.<sup>67</sup> There has been no confirmed coordination between the BLA and other Baloch or non-Baloch groups. Some groups' leaders have claimed that the different militant organizations operating in Balochistan have almost identical goals but operate independently of one another.<sup>68</sup>

While the BLA has not actively cooperated with other militant organizations, individual members have gone on to establish other groups. Alleged BLA leader, Brahamdagh Khan Bugti, reportedly led the BLA for several years until he left to help form the Balochistan Liberation Front.<sup>69</sup> In addition, following the death of Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri in June 2014, a leadership dispute among Bakhsh Marri's sons led some to leave the organization and form the United Baloch Army (UBA). It is unknown which brothers were involved with which of the two groups.<sup>70</sup> As of November 2016, the two groups were still fighting one another as the BLA pushed to eliminate the UBA.<sup>71</sup>

### **D. STATE SPONSORS/EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

Pakistani intelligence agencies accuse Indian consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad, Afghanistan, of providing covert arms, financial support, and training to the BLA in an attempt to destabilize Pakistan and block Chinese influence in Balochistan.<sup>72</sup> However, some analysts argue that such interference would be against Indian interests, as India, like Pakistan, also seeks to profit from Balochi oil and gas resources.<sup>73</sup>

Pakistani politicians have also claimed that U.S. and British intelligence agencies are supporting the Balochi rebellion in order to sabotage a proposed oil pipeline that could undermine U.S. control of Gulf oil.<sup>74</sup> The U.K. has harbored Hyrbyair Marri, an alleged BLA leader by the Pakistani government, as a refugee.<sup>75</sup>



The Pakistani government launched a program in 2017 that provided compensation for militants that surrendered to authorities. In this program, the government agreed to provide compensation, jobs, education and security to members of certain banned organizations including the BLA.<sup>76</sup>

## MAPS

- Pakistan

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<sup>1</sup> Global Terrorism Database, Incident #200007220002. 11 April 2012

<sup>2</sup> Desk, News. "Terrorist Organisation BLA Responds over Media Reports of Death of Commander Aslam Achu in Afghanistan." *Times of Islamabad*, Times of Islamabad, 26 Dec. 2018, timesofislamabad.com/27-Dec-2018/terrorist-organisation-bla-responds-over-media-reports-of-death-of-commander-aslam-achu-in-afghanistan.

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<sup>9</sup> Global Terrorism Database, Incident #200007220002. 11 April 2012

<sup>10</sup> "Balochistan Liberation Army." *The National Baloch Media RSS*. Web. 2 July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> "Balochistan Liberation Army." *The National Baloch Media RSS*. Web. 2 July 2015; Grare, Frederic "The Resurgence of Baluch Nationalism," working paper in, "Pakistan: The State of the Union," Center for International Policy, April 2009, 52.

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