

“Yet another Stan? Talibanisation and Islamic Radicalism in Balochistan and Southwest Asia”

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The noted Pakistani journalist, Najam Sethi, in a televised Urdu interview attempted to reason with Hyarbyar Marri, the London-domiciled scion of the Bugti tribe, that there are both ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ Panjabis to the allegation posed by the former as to why are Panjabis not just squatting and siphoning the resources of his province, Pakistan’s largest geographically and sparsest demographically, but, essentially, ‘finishing off his national identity’².

Paradigmatic then to trace a trajectory to the Panjabi hegemon as the locus of long-standing grievances. But, Sethi and Myarri, two Pakistani Sunnis were, insofar as an orientalist as myself is concerned, engaged in a dialogue of the deaf. It is but symptomatic of centre-state relations predicated on contested sovereignty, alienation, irredentism and regional aspirations that were and remain a canker across the subcontinent (Balochistan, Balawaristan, Bangladesh, Eelam, Kashmir, Khalistan, Nagaland) and its near abroad (Iran’s Khuzistan, Kurdistan and Seistan va Balochistan; and China’s Uyghuristan).

The historical ambivalence of Baloch tribal elites who expediently but not enthusiastically joined the new dominion is evinced in the blur between ethnic and confessional belonging demonstrated by them and their then Sunni, Hanafi compatriots from the eastern Bengali wing which seceded in 1971. It is, as pointed out above, also noticeable in the homonymous province, also Iran’s largest, of that Islamic republic’s Seistan and Balochistan, whose restive Sunnis have felt the harsh hand of a Twelver Shia majority which suppresses or downplays outright opposition or assertions of socio-cultural autonomy as a threat to the 1979 revolution and the living misery of a Muslim republic spawned by it.

The confrontational lines are clear, even cursorily to a chance observer, what with other atavistic, sectarian struggles now being played out across other Muslim lands such as Bahrain, Iraq and Syria. Present-day Pakistan’s Balochistan, like erstwhile East Pakistan, is principally Sunni with a conspicuous Twelver Shia (Hazara) community inhabiting the environs of Quetta. The establishment bats on a sticky wicket: it is less unable and more unwilling to tackle domestic, non-Baloch, Sunni terrorists intent on decimating an already outraged, humiliated, impoverished, provincial citizenry; and it is flat-footed in imaginatively weaning away Baloch, Sunni dissidents espousing a nationalist line who, ironically, take a cue from the *Qaid-e Azam* whose *raison d’être* for an Indian Muslim homeland was postulated on their non-negotiable recognition as not a minority but a nation. Indira Gandhi’s response at the end of 1971, when

¹ Disclaimer: The views expressed herein by the author neither imply nor insinuate the orientation, suggestion or thinking of the university, school or affiliated research and regional study centres.

² ‘Interview with Hyarbyar Marri: Najam Sethi special’. *Dunya TV*, July 4 2009. *YouTube* 2009. Web. 20 February 2013.

queried about her views on the two-nation theory, was that it lay in the Bay of Bengal. A champagne socialist Sindhi, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—whose political ambition and personal contumacy in no mean measure led to the dismemberment of Pakistan—and the Shah of Pahlavi Iran, both Twelver Shi'is, put paid to any such ambitions harboured by Balochs 'attempting to do a Bengal' some forty years ago.

It is a truism which, in the post-9/11 era, merits rehearsal here in that no drone attacks occur across Balochistan or its provincial capital where not a few of the Taleban leadership are comfortably ensconced — Quetta, unsurprisingly, is rife with ISI agents. Shuja Nawaz, brother of a former army chief of staff, General Asif Nawaz, narrates in his authoritative account³ that most ISI personnel were seldom seen at the agency's Aabpara headquarters in Islamabad but away at prayers, barnstorming across Central Asia in the early to mid 1990s to establish 'safe houses' or embark on causes for the glory of Islam. A decade on, and a year before the Abbotabad showdown, Prime Minister Cameron declared that Pakistan 'is looking both ways'. In that very year, 2010, LSE's Matthew Waldman published a foregone conclusion for his report consisted of interviews with some ten Taleban commanders, all of whom remarked, with frontier forthrightness, about the presence of ISI 'participants or observers' on the Quetta Shura Council.

This is only natural considering that General Kayani exclaimed that his security obsession remains India. Herein lies the nub: the ISI, not a wit wiser, despite Abbotabad, PNS Mehran, Hamza Camp and, make no mistake, audacious attacks assuredly in the offing, throws no caution to an ill wind which blows a blowback. This neurotic, pernicious, self-destructive 'strategic depth' fixation about India—and the military, still seething, because memories are longer in the orient than occident, even a generation later, about Bengal '71—is worth paying any and every price including the internal coherence and cohesion of the armed forces to say nothing, existentially, of Pakistan. And Balochistan, therefore, is one among Pakistan's badlands alongside the tribal areas. What complicates the Baloch scenario is that the Russians, Chinese, Indians and Iranians do not look at these disgruntled natives nestled between a strategically located littoral and a mineral-rich hinterland with sheep eyes. The Sino-Pakistani impress has, for now, come to stay. Beijing, the archetypal colonial trader—a role it has sought long given justified Sinitic hubris—of the southern hemisphere is not hesitant about dealing with Islamabad so long as its own Sunni, Uyghur dissidents hailing from Xinjiang receive neither spiritual nor strategic sustenance from ISI-subservient outfits and camps dotted across the NWFP, southern Panjab or Northern Areas — Pakistan cannot afford to lose goodwill in a region where its Uzbek, Iranian and Chinese neighbours have privately admonished Islamabad about aiding and abetting their peripatetic insurgents, whether salafist or jihadist, both of whom, thanks to the ISI's outreach programme, find a homestead in Pakistan.

To return to the title: is the international community keen on welcoming yet another Stan in the global comity? Balochistan's Muslim and non-Muslim neighbours are, in a word, not. The former are decidedly uneasy of yet another 'brother' Muslim entrant in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC)—the very picture of an impotent talking-shop—and the latter, especially India, including its Hindu hawks, are not

³ S. Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its army, and the war within* (Karachi, 2008), pp. 48-49.

thrilled at seeing a nuclear Pakistan balkanised. (Congress and its Nehru had, on the eve of partition, decided to 'cut off the head in order to get rid of the headache'. The rider was that the provinces contracting out of the Indian union could neither return severed nor together as a polity seeking equal parity in a restructured confederation.) Kashmir, for instance, is going nowhere — definitely not to the General Assembly or OIC for it need not be overemphasised that no Indian administration will compromise on a province through which the headwaters—and lifeline—of northern India, partly, and Pakistan, entirely, flow.

So is an independent client state in the pipeline?⁴ Just what will the Baloch bring to the table as a balanced, well-oiled, Makrani pivot for southwest Afghanistan and southwest Asia is a task for the futurist, not orientalist. It remains to be seen if the Baloch, fractious, reactionary, poorly-equipped, politically inarticulate feudatories (in sharp contrast to metropolitan, literate, activist Bengalis) are dependable, responsible players. *Hazhava sar! ki che gon-datha?*⁵ But, first things first — can Kayani deliver Haqqani?

⁴ Pun intended.

⁵ M. L. Dames, *Popular poetry of the Baloches*, vol. II (London, 1907), p. 39. Transl. 'Wonderful head! What idea has overtaken you?'