

IRAN-PAKISTAN STRIKES: THE DEEP TERROR LINKS EMERGING AMIDST RISING CONFLICT IN WEST ASIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On January 16, through a combination of missile and drone strikes, Iran claimed to have destroyed bases of the Jaish-al-Adl (JAA) terror group in border areas of Kooch Sabz in Balochistan, Pakistan. The Iranian Foreign Minister clarified that the strikes did not target Pakistan or its nationals, only fighters who had been mounting serious attacks inside Iran. He cited a deadly attack on a police station in Rask in the neighbouring province of Sistan-Baluchistan by JAA on December 15, which resulted in over 18 casualties. The next day, while Pakistan was mounting diplomatic retaliations, JAA again claimed the assassination of three Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials, including Colonel Hossein-Ali Javdanfar, commander of the Sistan-Baluchistan Corps of the Quds force.

On January 18, Pakistan forces, using drones and rockets, carried out strikes against “hideouts” of the Baloch Liberation Front (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLF) inside Iran which they accused of recent attacks in Pakistan. Since then, the two neighbours, nudged by China, Turkey and others are seen moving towards dialogue and diplomacy. However, Iranian strikes into Pakistan on January 16 and into Iraq and Syria a day earlier suggest deeper links amongst groups and threats they pose to the region and beyond.

The JAA, a Sunni Baloch group of Iran — earlier known as Jundallah — was founded around 2002 by Abdolmalek Regi, who was executed by Iran in 2010. Following deadly suicide attacks in Iran in 2009-10, the US designated Jundallah as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in November 2010 and amended the designation in 2019 to rename it as the JAA. Though the JAA describes itself as the Baloch Resistance of Iran, it is not believed to have any visible links with the Baloch resistance groups of Pakistan. For years, Iran and Pakistan have been accusing each other of sheltering groups and carrying out cross-border raids in “hot pursuit” in the border areas.

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 may have initially raised the prospects of Taliban support to the JAA against Iran for leverage. However, Iran has been consistently warning only Pakistan. The deep divide between the Taliban and the Pakistan army may have reassured Iran that there is much likelihood of the JAA getting support from the Taliban against Iran. However, the strikes in Pakistan also demonstrate Iranian “over the horizon” capability to Afghanistan. Though Iran chose to refer to the Rask attack as the trigger for the strikes, the JAA has mounted a series of serious attacks in Iran since 2017, especially on security forces. The group seemed to have upped the ante in recent months, frequently targeting border guards, military posts, police stations and security patrols. In 2023, the JAA also began posting long videos featuring IRGC cells supposedly active outside Iran and claiming attacks on such cells.

In parallel, Iran has been facing growing propaganda by Daesh and greater intent to attack. Iran has made several interdictions in this regard. The most prominent of these was in September when it claimed to have prevented over 30 simultaneous bombings across Iran by arresting Daesh-linked operatives — some with links in Syria, the Kurdish region of Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. On January 3, Iran witnessed the deadliest twin suicide attacks in Kerman, in which over 100 people were killed and scores were injured. Daesh claimed the attacks and Iran vowed to take revenge.

With quick arrests of reported supporters of the Kerman plot, Iranian officials identified a Tajik national known by his alias Abdollah Tajiki as the ringleader and bomb-maker, who they claimed had entered Iran by mid-December from the southeast border of Iran. After making the bombs, he had left before the attacks. The officials also reportedly identified one of the bombers as a 24-year-old with the surname Bozrov who had dual Tajik and Israeli nationalities and believed he had come to Iran from the south-eastern border after months of training by Daesh in Afghanistan. Thus, the Kerman plot seemed to have highlighted the facilitation networks for Daesh in the south-eastern border along Pakistan and connections with potential Daesh trainers in some parts of Afghanistan.

Interestingly, Iran has in the past accused the JAA of cooperation with Kurdish separatists and the JAA has criticised Iran for its intervention in Syria. Following a suicide attack by the JAA on an IRGC convoy in February 2019 resulting in over 47 casualties, though warning Pakistan, IRGC Commander in Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari accused Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US and Israel of conspiring for such attacks in Iran.

On January 15, Iran mounted missile attacks into Erbil in the Kurdish area of Iraq, apparently killing a well-known Kurdish real estate developer and some civilians. Iran described the site as the “espionage headquarters of Mossad”, responsible for attacks on IRGC targets in the region. Do back-to-back strikes by Iran indicate that groups are coordinating across Af-Pak and the Middle East? Though a deeper probe is needed, it is clear that Iran has demonstrated its resolve in chasing targets across Af-Pak as well as the Middle East. This surely raises the threat perception for the region and beyond.

As for Pakistan, a single retaliatory strike against the so-called hub of Baloch groups is unlikely to make much difference to its dire security situation. In 2023, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed over 881 attacks and 2,193 casualties of security forces, while the BLA claimed 247 attacks and 422 casualties of security forces. Pakistan forces have mounted several air strikes and drone strikes into Afghanistan to eliminate TTP hideouts but with no tangible outcome. Already facing hostilities along the Afghan and Indian borders, Pakistan forces seem to have limited bandwidth for direct action.

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