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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
National Foreign Assessment Center

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MEMORANDUM

## BALUCHISTAN: A PRIMER

Summary

*Pakistan and Iran have long believed that the USSR hopes someday to win control of Baluchistan and thereby gain warm water ports. There is no evidence that the Soviets have taken recent steps to support the Baluchis, but the Baluchis themselves view the major Soviet presence in Afghanistan as intimidating to Pakistan and as a way of extracting concessions from the government in Islamabad.*

*The area in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan inhabited by some three million Baluchi tribesmen is arid, with few natural resources and is important primarily because of its strategic location near oil routes from the Persian Gulf. The society is tribal, and rivalries among its many tribes tend to dominate its politics. The Baluchis have always resented outside control, and if they believed conditions favorable, many would support efforts to win independence. Baluchistan has no good natural harbors and there is only one modern road--in Iran--from the USSR to the coast.*

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*This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Political Analysis and the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Afghanistan Task Force,*

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### The Area and Its People

Baluchistan is an ethnic region spanning the borders of three countries: Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Somewhat over three million people, generally referred to as Baluchis inhabit this area. Around 600,000 live in the Iranian province of Sistan va Baluchistan. A few--perhaps around 25,000--live in scattered areas from the lower Helmand River valley northward to Herat in Afghanistan. In Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, there are more than one million Baluchi speakers, and another 700,000 Brahui speaking tribesmen, who differ from the Baluch in little except language. Almost a million Baluchi speakers are significant minorities in adjoining areas of Sind and Punjab Provinces in Pakistan. Most Baluchi are nomadic herdsmen, some raise fruits and small grains in irrigated oases, and a few are traders or coastal fishermen.

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Baluchistan has a feudal social structure, tribally organized, that emphasizes allegiance to a paramount chief (a sardar) in return for protection and the provision of justice, the tenets of their Sunni Muslim faith, and a tribal code that demands vengeance and retribution for perceived wrongs. On the other hand obligatory hospitality--under certain conditions--is extended to friend and foe alike. These traditions are strongest among the larger, more powerful Baluchi tribes in Pakistan, especially the Marris, the Bugtis, and a related group, the Mengals. There the feudal structure, particularly the leadership system represented by the institution of the sardar has been under attack by the Pakistani government as an obstacle to assimilation of the tribesmen into the mainstream of Pakistani political life.

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Ethnic frictions are part of the rebellious Pakistani Baluchis attitudes. Tensions exist between Baluchis and aggressive Pushtun tribal groups who inhabit the mountains north of Quetta, exacerbated by the influx during the past year of large numbers of refugees from Afghanistan who are also mostly Pushtuns. Baluchis resent the colonial-style overlordship of the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani government, and the massive presence of the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani Army. The Baluchis blame the government--equated to Punjabis--for the economic underdevelopment of Baluchistan, for the dearth of water development projects benefitting Baluchis, and for allowing Punjabi and Sindi settlers to migrate into newly opened irrigation projects in Baluchistan. They also resent the almost total exclusion of Baluchis (and the pre-dominance of Punjabis) in the state government, the local police force, and in other positions of authority. Baluchis feel that the small but growing number of Baluchi college graduates are qualified to fill many of these posts.

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The economic factor has assumed greater importance in recent years. As an ethnic minority in each of the countries, a major Baluchi grievance has been the low level of economic development in tribal territory compared to other areas in each state. In Iran, the development programs of the Shah's government included Baluchi territory, and the jobs created by construction activity (primarily military-related) produced a degree of prosperity that tended to mollify Baluchi demands for autonomy there, though a small but sometimes active expatriate underground movement occasionally was heard from. In Pakistan, Baluchis see most development funds benefitting the army. Quetta is a major Pakistani Army post established by the British as a frontier fort, the location of which controls the passes and routes from the Afghanistan frontier that lead to the Indus plains. Other Pakistani military posts at strategic sites monitor activities of the frequently rebellious local tribesmen. The presence of numerous military bases and installations aggravates Baluchi sensitivities and underlines the role of the military as an army of occupation and as enforcers of martial law.

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#### Politics in Baluchistan

Political activity in Baluchistan has been confined largely to Pakistani Baluchistan. The Iranian Baluchis, poor, isolated, and with few educated leaders have seldom been affected by the central government, and have depended

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on Tehran's economic aid. It was not until after the fall of the Shah, when the central government appeared to be both a threat to their way of life and vulnerable to Baluch agitation, that the Iranian Baluchis formed their first political party. The Afghan Baluchis, a small minority, have never been politically significant. [redacted]

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Politics in Pakistani Baluchistan is basically a function of group rivalries at different levels. The Pathans in the northern part of the province are against Baluchis in the south; in the south, the Baluchi and the Brahui against the minor ethnic groups and the immigrants from other parts of Pakistan; and among the many Baluch and Brahui tribes and sub-tribes. Besides the Pathans, Pakistani census reports mention 42 Baluchi tribes, 15 Brahui tribes, and 62 belonging to neither ethnic group. Within each tribe, of course, there are also rivalries. [redacted]

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Any political activity is often influenced by all of these rivalries simultaneously. Rivalries within the province have prevented any unified action in the past and outsiders have always found allies among those who were more interested in evening scores with local rivals than in issues of wider concern. [redacted]

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Probably the two basic political issues in Baluchistan are its relations of the tribes with the central government and the role of the tribal chiefs. [redacted]

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Almost everyone in the province would agree that Baluchistan has been the victim of exploitation by the Punjabis and other outsiders. Most political leaders, if given a free choice, would probably opt for independence--as part of a greater Baluchistan--or an extreme form of autonomy within Pakistan. Many of them have recognized, however, that such goals are unrealistic and they have striven for more modest objectives. With substantial outside help--for example from the USSR--or conditions elsewhere that prevented Islamabad from making an effort to hold Baluchistan, they might well try to achieve independence. [redacted]

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The most important factor limiting Baluchi aspirations has been the power of the central government in Islamabad, particularly its willingness to use force if necessary to control the Baluchis. Even were they united, the Baluchi tribesmen would have little chance of winning independence

as long as Islamabad made a serious effort to hold the province. Even during the most serious past tribal rebellions only a small part of the Pakistani armed forces have been required to contain the insurgents. The Pakistanis have been able to control any part of the province they consider important. The tribes have been able to hold out in remote areas, partly because Islamabad has not thought it worth the cost of going after them. [redacted]

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Although some may draw parallels between the success of Afghan insurgents against the regular army there, such parallels can be misleading. The Pakistani army is far more professional, disciplined and better led than the Afghan army was. Unlike the Afghan counterparts, Pakistani troops--primarily Punjabis--have no reason to identify with the tribesmen or sympathize with their causes. Moreover, some of the most valuable parts of the province are in or near Pathan areas, and so unlikely to be seriously affected by a Baluchi revolt. (A Pathan rebellion, in conjunction with the Pathans in the North-West Frontier Province, would be a far more serious threat to Pakistan.) [redacted]

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Baluchi leaders have also been concerned about the viability of an independent Baluchistan, and its vulnerability to outside interference. Additionally, fears that independence would lead to dominance by rival tribes, or by leftists who would ultimately eliminate the tribal system have also tempered the views of the politicians, most of them tribal chiefs. [redacted]

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Although they still seem to speak for Baluchistan, the power of the traditional leaders has been eroding steadily. Student and leftist organizations are becoming more influential. In local elections held last year, Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party for the first time made significant gains in Baluchistan, a vote many interpret as directed against the tribal chiefs. [redacted]

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Although any final decision in Baluchistan is still likely to be made by the tribal leaders, they will probably be under growing pressure from the left and others to do something to win more concessions from Islamabad, or even independence for Baluchistan. The chiefs could react by seeking to bolster their position with support from the central government, but their past history makes it more likely that they will seek help elsewhere. Moreover, their perception

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of the difficulties of achieving independence is changing rapidly, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan bringing potential great power help closer and domestic turmoil in Iran loosening Tehran's hold on its Baluchis. [REDACTED]

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#### The USSR and Warm Water Ports

The Pakistanis have long feared that Russia's age-old interest in securing a warm water port would encourage the Soviets to give all-out backing to an Afghan government effort to secure "independence and freedom" for Pakistani Pushtuns. The fears date back at least to 1956 when Moscow did provide some diplomatic and propaganda backing to Afghanistan when it chose to confront Pakistan on the Pushtunistan issue. Moscow however, appears to have supported the Afghans primarily out of its desire to curry favor with the Afghan government and to intimidate an ally of the US, not out of intrinsic interest in the issue itself.

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[REDACTED] The Afghans, not necessarily with Soviet encouragement, have been involved for years with separatists across the border, and some separatist leaders who fled to Afghanistan in the early 1970s are still in Kabul. [REDACTED]

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There is no evidence in the aftermath of the Soviet interventions in Afghanistan that either the Soviets or Afghans have been in contact with the Baluchis or that they have otherwise provided them support. Pakistan is aware, however, that Soviet troops in the Qandahar area are only 200 kilometers from Quetta in the heart of Pakistani Baluchistan.

[REDACTED] some Baluchi leaders see the nearby Soviet presence as intimidating to the Pakistanis and thus providing them an opportunity to press Pakistan for much greater autonomy. [REDACTED]

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The Soviet military movement into Afghanistan revives speculation concerning the century-old Russian quest for a warm-water port. Although the Baluchi coastline, extending for nearly 1,000 kilometers, lacks good natural harbors, it does have several small ports currently used by local fishing boats and by sea-going dhows that serve points in the Persian Gulf. [REDACTED]

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### Ports

The best port for development along the Baluchistan coast is at Chah Bahar in the Iranian province of Baluchistan va Sistan. The former Shah had envisioned a small naval facility there from which shipping in the Gulf of Oman could be monitored and that would augment Iran's major naval base at Bandar Abaas on the Strait of Hormuz. Although the naval installations and port improvements necessary for it never got beyond the planning stage, considerable work was completed on the airbase. The approximately 3,000-meter runways are operable, though only limited support facilities had been completed. [redacted]

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The major advantage of Chah Bahar over other ports on the Baluchi coast is that during the summer monsoon the sea approaches to Chah Bahar experience more subdued sea conditions. Nevertheless, much of the embayment at Chah Bahar is open to onshore surf, and heavy surf is typical of the northern shore of the bay. Some protection for anchorages is afforded by headlands on either side of the bay, at the small town of Chah Bahar on the east side, and at Konarak on the west side where the naval facility was to have been constructed. Depths in the bay range up to six fathoms. [redacted]

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The Baluchi ports in Pakistan, principally at Gwadar and Pasni, are less promising for development. Only small fishing settlements are located there, they lack good road access, and heavy sea conditions frequently preclude their use during the southwest monsoon months. The ferry supply ship between Karachi and Gwadar, for example, does not operate during the summer months. [redacted]

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### Access Routes

Access to the Baluchistan coast from Afghanistan is limited to an eastern and western route separated by several hundred kilometers of difficult and largely uninhabited country possessing no through north-to-south roads. The eastern route from southeastern Afghanistan connects Qandahar, via Quetta, to Karachi; the western route leads from Herat in western Afghanistan to Mashhad in Iran, then southward to Chah Bahar. [redacted]

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The best road access from southeastern Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean is the paved all-weather route from Qandahar via Chaman to Quetta in Pakistan, and thence to Karachi.



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A railroad parallels the route within Pakistan. This is a principal route for Afghanistan's imports and exports.

The western route from Afghanistan to Chah Bahar runs from Herat to Mashhad in Iran along a segment of the Pan-Asian highway (Istanbul to Dacca in Bangladesh), thence southward over an all-weather road to Chah Bahar via Zahedan and Iranshahr. The section of the road between Chah Bahar and Zahedan in Baluchistan via Nikshahr, Iranshahr, and Kash--a distance of about 845 kilometers--was completed several years ago. Thus, all-weather roads provide a connection with the rail terminus at Kushka in the Soviet Union by a relatively direct route to the limited capacity port at Chah Bahar on the Indian Ocean overlooking the Gulf of Oman. [redacted]

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An alternate route branches from the main road north of Zahedan. From here to the border town of Zabol, a distance of about 128 kilometers, the road was being improved. Some sections have been upgraded to two lanes, with a bituminous surface, but the remainder is still under construction. In Afghanistan, the first 20 kilometers of the road between the Iran border and Delaram is one-lane, but has been improved by bituminous surface treatment. The carrying capacity of the route in Afghanistan is low. [redacted]

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Between the two major routes no through north-to-south roads exist. This is the heart of Baluchistan where the terrain alternates between sandy to salt-baked clay basins and low east-west trending mountain ranges that generally parallel the coast. Lack of water and searing heat and high-velocity winds in summer added to its moonscape appearance have deterred development in spite of its location as a historic bridge between the Middle East and the sub-continent of India. There is, however, one modern east-west route. A road and a railroad traverse the region between Quetta and the Iranian border, where the road continues into the Iranian portion of Baluchistan at the transport junction at Zahedan. [redacted]

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