



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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'Camilo': FARC Breakaway Faction Leader Killed in Colombia

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- "Camilo," a hitman and mid-level commander in the FARC's Dagoberto Ramos dissident faction, was found murdered in southwestern Colombia, likely a revenge killing linked to rivalries among FARC breakaway groups. Camilo's death underscores the persistent, violent competition among post-FARC factions, despite the 2016 peace accord.
- Ongoing turf wars over drug trafficking routes continue to drive killings like Camilo's, highlighting the Colombian state's limited control in rural regions such as Cauca.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Spanish: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*; FARC) recently saw the rise of a breakaway faction led by Dagoberto Ramos. This new force opposes the landmark peace agreement between FARC and the Colombian government. Reached in 2016, the agreement provides for the disarmament and reintegration of most FARC combatants, FARC's evolution into a political party that would be guaranteed 10 seats in the country's Congress, and investment in rural agriculture and development programs for neglected areas ([European Union Institute for Security Studies](#), May 18, 2021). An attempt at enshrining the peace treaty by referendum failed due to a lack of popular support, with 50.2 percent of the Colombian population voting against the agreement. The process continued through more traditional lawmaking rather than risk another referendum, and the peace deal was ultimately signed ([BBC](#), October 3, 2016). It was in this environment that the Dagoberto Ramos faction emerged.

One of the most feared Dagoberto Ramos faction members was hitman Tumbo Pacho, better known as "Camilo." Camilo

was from Páez, in the Cauca Department of southwestern Colombia. Cauca has been the focus of the Colombian Armed Forces' operations against Dagoberto Ramos factional leaders ([Fiscalía General de la Nación](#), August 31, 2024).

The Cauca Regional Indigenous Council had accused Camilo of assassinating Professor Emanuel José Oca Cuspián in San Andrés de Pisimbalá in the municipality of Inzá ([El Liberal](#), November 6, 2024). Camilo's motive was likely to undermine the Indigenous Guard, which defends local communities against Dagoberto Ramos's faction's influence. Cuspián was a member of the Indigenous Guard, which focused its efforts primarily on preventing the Dagoberto Ramos faction from trafficking drugs through villages in Cauca.

It is possible that Camilo's role as a hitman and leader who ordered the assassination of Cuspián, among other victims, led to his eventual murder ([Infobae](#), September 25). Camilo's body was found alongside his bodyguard in Calota in northern Cauca with signs of torture, indicating revenge may have been a motive. At the same time, another FARC dissident group, Yair Bermúdez 57th Front (Frente 57), is suspected of being behind the killing of Camilo. This faction is a rival to the Dagoberto Ramos group, with the two fighting over territory in which to conduct illegal operations, like drug trafficking ([Washington Office on Latin America](#), October 17, 2024).

Whatever the precise nature of Camilo's killing, his case highlights the complicated and widespread nature of insurgent violence in Colombia. Even though FARC has officially laid down its weapons, there exist a multitude of dissident FARC factions still operating in the country, in addition to the Marxist National Liberation Army (Spanish: *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*), which has been in peace talks with the Colombia government but is yet to achieve any deal ([German Institute for Global and Area Studies](#), September 23, 2024). The lucrative drug trafficking industry in

Colombia sustains all these factions, while their rivalries catalyze the types of extreme violence and retribution reflected by the career and ultimate death of Camilo himself.

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Mahmoud Hamza: Libyan Power Broker on the Rise

Dario Cristiani

Executive Summary

- Mahmoud Abdulrazzaq Hamza's ascent from civilian to major general reflects Libya's militia-centered state. He built the 444th Brigade into Tripoli's most disciplined force, making himself indispensable to the GNU.
- Hamza is both the enforcer of Abdul Hamid Dbeibah and a potential rival. Dbeibah's enforcer and his potential rival were previously aligned with the Dbeibah Government of National Unity. Hamza's control of territory and intelligence secures the capital but deepens Libya's dependence on personal militia power.
- The general's ascent signifies his continued importance in Libya's military state, positioning him as an ever more influential power broker, object for foreign influence, or even prospective rival to Prime Minister Dbeibah.

Among the shifting constellation of armed actors in western Libya, Mahmoud Abdulrazzaq Hamza (Arabic: *الرزاق ع بد محمود حمزة*) has emerged as one of the most consequential figures. Rising from a civilian background with no formal military education before the 2011 revolution to the rank of Major General by 2024, Hamza now commands the 444th Combat Brigade. This force is widely regarded as one of the most disciplined and structured among Tripoli's myriad militias. The 444th Combat Brigade is considered a pillar of stability for the Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah (Arabic: *الحميد ع بد الدببة*), under which he is also the head of GNU military intelligence. Hamza's trajectory encapsulates Libya's broader transformation since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The country has become a state unable to reconstruct coherent armed institutions, with militia leaders evolving into kingmakers, intelligence chiefs, and prospective political actors with regional influence.

Emergence as Military Commander

Born in 1989 in Tripoli's Souq al-Jumaah (Arabic: *الجمعة سوق*) district, a neighborhood long associated with Islamist-leaning militias, Hamza began his adult life far from the military, working in a car mechanic's workshop. With no formal education in the military and no role in Gaddafi's security apparatus, Hamza entered the post-2011 landscape as an ordinary civilian. After the revolution, he quickly became involved in the new armed milieu. Arabic-language sources suggest that Hamza worked with Abdelhakim Belhaj (Arabic: *الاحكيم ع بد لحاج*), the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (Arabic: LIFG). This occurred during Belhaj's tenure as head of the Tripoli Military Council ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), August 15, 2023).

After receiving his initial rank, Hamza's first major integration into a structured organization came in 2013, when he joined the Special Deterrence Force (Arabic: RADA). The RADA is an Islamist-leaning belonging to the Madkhali *madhhab*

(Arabic: *المدخلي المذهب*, school of Islamic jurisprudence) militia led by Abdelraouf Kara (Arabic: *كارة الرووف ع بد*). Within a year, Hamza was promoted to First Lieutenant. In 2017, he established the 20-20 Battalion in Mitiga, which gained prominence. During the Libyan National Army's (LNA) offensive on Tripoli under Khalifa Haftar (Arabic: *خلفه ترف*), Hamza announced in June 2019 that his battalion would participate in Operation "Volcano of Rage" (Arabic: *الانغضب بركان عملة*) to repel the LNA assault. The 20-20 Battalion played a critical role in preventing Haftar's forces from penetrating central Tripoli, positioning Hamza as a frontline commander in the defense of the capital.

In July 2020, Hamza was transferred from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Defense and promoted to captain. This was a pivotal step that formalized his unit within the power structure of the Libyan state. Soon afterward, Hamza changed the name of his unit to the 444th Brigade, whose authority fell under the General Staff of the GNU. Over time, the brigade became one of the most influential armed groups in Tripoli, controlling key strategic areas in western Libya, securing large parts of the capital as well as the cities of Tarhuna (Arabic: *ترهونة*) and Bani Walid, and playing a central role in maintaining security and combating smuggling ([Al Arabiya](#), August 15, 2023).

Political and Military Prominence in Tripoli

Hamza's promotions advanced rapidly from 2020 onward. In 2021, he rose from major to lieutenant colonel; in 2022, he was promoted to colonel; in 2023, to brigadier general; and by 2024, Hamza had attained the rank of major general. Alongside this ascent, he distinguished himself as a mediator of intra-militia conflicts. In 2022, Hamza played a pivotal role during the failed attempt by House of Representatives-appointed Prime Minister Fathi Bashagha (Arabic: *باشاغا ف تحي*) to enter Tripoli and displace Prime Minister Dbeibah. Hamza personally escorted

Bashagha out of the capital through the Nouflein area, preventing what might otherwise have escalated into open war between pro-Dbeibah and pro-Bashagha militias ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), August 15, 2023).

Hamza also intervened in clashes between Interior Ministry-affiliated forces and the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA) in central Tripoli, deploying neutral troops from the 444th Brigade to restore calm. The aftermath of the August 2022 conflict reshaped Tripoli's balance of power. With rival groups liquidated and expelled, the victorious factions consolidated control, expanding both their authority and influence. The 444th Brigade, RADA Special Deterrence Forces (Arabic: [الردع جهاز](#)), and the Stability Support Apparatus (Arabic: [الاستقرار دعم جهاز](#), SSA), the city's most prominent armed groups after the fighting, emerged stronger, but also entangled in an increasingly serious competition for dominance.

This rivalry came to the surface openly a year later. In 2023, RADA detained Hamza at Mitiga International Airport as he prepared to board a flight to Istanbul. The arrest sparked heavy clashes between the 444th Brigade and RADA fighters across Tripoli, grounding flights, diverting air traffic to Misrata, and resulting in numerous casualties ([Al-Mashhad Libya](#), August 14, 2023). The crisis ended through mediation, with Hamza handed over to the SSA. The episode highlighted both his vulnerability, since rival militias could still detain him, and his significance, as his capture alone was sufficient to paralyze the capital.

In May, reports emerged of the death of Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, or "Ghneiwa" (Arabic: [غنيوة](#); [غنيوة](#); [غنيوة](#)), head of the Stability Support Apparatus (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 2019). This occurred following a meeting with Hamza at the 444th Brigade's headquarters and after an armed clash broke out during the encounter ([Al Wasat](#); [Middle East Eye](#), May 13). The event was seismic: Ghneiwa had

long been one of Tripoli's most entrenched militia leaders, controlling the Abu Salim district. His death not only removed a major problem for the rule of Dbeibah and a key rival to Hamza, but further reshaped the balance of power within Tripoli's militia networks. Hamza's involvement, whether direct or circumstantial, signaled the consolidation of his role as Tripoli's dominant security figure.

Relationship with Dbeibah

As analyzed above, the relationship between Hamza and interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah illustrates the paradoxes of power in Tripoli. For Dbeibah, Hamza is both an indispensable ally and a potential rival: indispensable because the 444th Brigade is among the most organized and disciplined armed groups in western Libya, controlling extensive territory and enabling Dbeibah to govern. Conversely, the group could be a rival because Hamza's influence derives primarily from his autonomous military power rather than from state institutions.

This alliance was formally cemented in March 2024, when Dbeibah appointed Hamza Director of Military Intelligence ([Fawasel Media](#), March 31, 2024). The appointment underscored the Prime Minister's dependence on militia leaders to safeguard his position and project authority. This dynamic does not suggest serious civilian political control over military forces. Rather, the reliance of Tripoli's prime ministers on militia support has been a defining feature of Libya's political order since the establishment of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in late 2015, which preceded the GNU. Fayez al-Sarraj (Arabic: [فايز السراج](#)), Dbeibah's predecessor, could only begin operating in Tripoli once the city's four dominant militias—the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade (TRB), the al-Nawasi Brigade, al-Kikli's Abu Salim Central Force, and RADA—granted him protection.

Dbeibah is not as weak as al-Sarraj, owing to his considerable personal wealth and ties

to militias from his hometown of Misrata (Arabic: مصراتة). Nonetheless, Dbeibah remains dependent on armed groups, even if they are nominally integrated into state structures. In recent years, Dbeibah has relied heavily on Hamza and other commanders, such as Emad Trabelsi and Abdulsalam Al-Zoubi (names in Arabic: عماد الزويي السلام عبد; الطرابلسي), to consolidate his position ([Libya Review](#), November 7, 2022; [The Libya Observer](#), July 21, 2024). The killing of al-Kikli in 2025 marked the culmination of this process, further elevating Hamza. Yet Hamza's authority rests not on institutional subordination but on his independent command of men and weapons. Paradoxically, al-Kikli's death revealed that it is Dbeibah who depends on Hamza, rather than the other way around. Their relationship thus embodies both the survival strategy of a prime minister reliant on militia backing and the dangerous personalization of security in western Libya.

International Dimensions

Hamza's rise has inevitably attracted international scrutiny. Some observers suggest that the United States views him as a potential linchpin in western Libya and draw comparisons to Ahmed al-Sharaa in Syria, the former radical figure now recast as the new, modern, and reasonably tolerant Syrian President, who has been supported by Western actors (as shown at the September UN General Assembly). According to these claims, American intelligence circles may be positioning Hamza to assume a leading role in Libya's political-military landscape, portraying him as a "Libyan version" of al-Sharaa ([al-Manshar News](#), May 12). However, this comparison is not particularly convincing. While Hamza may have an Islamist background, as evidenced by his early ties to Abdelhakim Belhaj and later to Kara's RADA, he resembles many other Libyan militia leaders. Framing Hamza as analogous to al-Sharaa is therefore a stretch and largely misleading. A more relevant point of comparison lies in Hamza's connection to Türkiye. His rise is

thus closely intertwined with Ankara's expanding role in western Libya.

In July, Hamza led the GNU delegation to the International Defense Industry Fair (IDEF) in Istanbul, where he met with the Turkish Chief of General Staff and senior defense industry officials ([Ean Libya](#), July 23). During the same period, Saddam Haftar (Arabic: د ف تر صدام), widely viewed as Khalifa Haftar's heir apparent, was in attendance, after he attended another defense fair the year before, an obvious display of how Türkiye is now playing on both tables ([MEPA News](#), October 23, 2024; [The Libya Observer](#), July 23). While Hamza's presence at IDEF signaled Ankara's recognition of him as a legitimate state counterpart, he cannot be considered primarily "Türkiye's man" on the ground. That role appears more closely associated with Abdulsalam al-Zoubi, the current Undersecretary for Defense, who maintains particularly close ties with Turkish officials ([Facebook/دكومتنا](#), July 10).

Conclusion

Mahmoud Hamza's trajectory reflects the fragmentation and personalization of security in western Libya. Rising from being an ordinary civilian to major general and director of Military Intelligence, Hamza's authority stems less from state institutions than from command over disciplined forces and shifting alliances. His ties to Dbeibah underscore the paradox of a prime minister dependent on militias, while his interactions with Türkiye and international actors highlight his growing regional relevance.

Yet Hamza's ascent also exposes Libya's vulnerability. Having power concentrated in militia leaders risks perpetuating cycles of rivalry, undermining attempts at state-building, and ensuring that stability in Tripoli remains inherently precarious. In fact, stability in the Libyan capital rests less on functioning institutions, coherent chains of command, or the rule of law than on an informal balance of power among rival militia leaders. The relative calm of recent

years has been sustained not by state authority but by tacit understandings between groups like the 444th Brigade and the SSA. The current peace is inherently fragile. These understandings depend on temporary alignments of interest and the willingness of commanders to avoid direct confrontation. The sudden explosion of violence linked to the killing of Al-Kikli is a case in point. Hamza is one of, if not the most important pillar, of this precarious order.

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Özgür Altun: Turkish Media Mastermind for IS–KP Arrested

Animesh Roul

Executive Summary

- Özgür Altun, a Turkish national and leading propagandist for IS–KP, was arrested in Pakistan after years of orchestrating the group's online media, recruitment, and logistics networks. His detention marks a major setback for IS–KP's transnational communications and recruitment efforts across Turkey, Central Asia, and Europe.
- Altun's evolution from a radical activist in Istanbul to IS–KP's digital strategist illustrates the movement's ability to draw on educated foreign operatives to globalize its reach.

Özgür Altun, also known as Abu Yasir al-Turki (Arabic: *أبو ياسر التركي*), a key operative of Islamic State–Khorasan

Province (IS–KP), was arrested on June 1 at an undisclosed location in Balochistan, near the Afghan border. The operation was conducted jointly by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Türkiye's intelligence organization, the Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MİT) ([Anadolu Agency](#), June 1). As one of the highest-ranking Turkish nationals in IS–KP, Altun, known by various pseudonyms, such as "Hasan Han" and "Muhammet Han," was deeply involved in the group's propaganda and logistics apparatus. In addition, he recruited and moved militants and supplies across Europe and Central Asia, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan ([Daily Sabah](#), June 5).

On July 8, Altun's wife, Ayse Altun, was also detained in Pakistan and subsequently extradited to Türkiye. She is accused of facilitating financial transactions via cryptocurrency to support jihadist activities, particularly sending money to Islamic State (IS) provinces in Iraq and Syria and IS women and families in conflict zones ([Cumhuriyet](#), July 8). Turkish authorities have confirmed that both Altun and his wife were integral to IS–KP's media and financial operations, including digital outreach and funding flows that bolstered the group's transnational capabilities.

Path to Extremism

According to Turkish sources, Altun was born in Bayburt, northeastern Türkiye, in 1984. Following this, Altun moved to the Ümraniye district of Istanbul for his education, where he was admitted to the Biology Department at Istanbul University. He never completed his studies. Instead, Altun worked in textile sales for several years ([Halk TV](#), June 2). Altun's first known run-in with the law occurred in 2014, when he was indicted alongside 66 others in an IS-related case in Istanbul.

Initially tried but not detained, phone intercepts later revealed Altun's ideological alignment with IS. His call records indicated that he once spoke to a Turkish IS member in Syria about sending a toy

truck to the latter's son, expressing hope the child would grow up to carry out a suicide attack. In another intercepted conversation in January 2015, Altun referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as "our state" and the Iraqi city of Mosul as its "capital," while denouncing Turks as apostates for abandoning the caliphate in 1924 ([Halk TV](#), June 2).

Altun was later detained again in 2016 in connection with the IS-linked "Ribat Training Center" in Sultanbeyli, where children were being indoctrinated using toy weapons and extremist curricula ([Stockholm Center for Freedom](#), April 24, 2017; [ODA TV](#), June 2). Digital evidence retrieved from Altun's computer included IS propaganda videos, articles from IS's magazine *Rumiyah*, and other incriminating manuals and materials related to the Al-Hayat Media Center. Collectively, these underscored Altun's role as a committed propagandist and ideologue for Islamic State.

Altun was linked to an IS-affiliated mosque involved in surveillance and reconnaissance activities targeting sensitive Turkish institutions, including the Grand National Assembly and various political party headquarters. Following his release from detention in mid-June 2017, along with 11 co-defendants, Altun reportedly traveled first to Syria and then to Afghanistan in 2018, where he established ties with IS-KP. Afterward, Altun emerged as a key figure in IS-KP's media and logistics operations ([SoL News](#), June 2). According to pro-Taliban media "Al-Mirsaad," Altun was also imprisoned in Kabul for some time and later escaped during the mass prison breaches that occurred after the fall of Kabul in August 2021. He reportedly resumed his militant activities in Afghanistan until 2023, when he fled to the Mastung area of Balochistan in Pakistan amid intensified operations launched by the Taliban targeting senior IS-Khorasan leadership ([Al-Mirsaad](#), June 2).

Leading the Digital Jihad

Within IS's covert yet pervasive digital ecosystem, Altun operated under the alias "Khorasan Lion," emerging as one of IS-KP's most influential online propagandists and a central figure in its digital outreach. He moderated encrypted forums, coordinated media production, and expanded Turkish- and English-language propaganda via al-Azaim Media. Altun also played a key role in producing the *Voice of Khorasan* magazine and managing social media and messaging channels (e.g., RocketChat and Telegram) to recruit and incite followers.

Altun was instrumental in recruiting militants, mostly from Türkiye and Azerbaijan, into IS-KP's fold ([Al-Mirsaad](#), June 2). According to Turkish intelligence, he organized the cross-border transit of recruits from Europe and Central Asia into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Altun also motivated "lone wolves" around the world to carry out terror attacks by disseminating jihadist ideology and operational guidance online ([Daily Sabah](#), June 5).

This combination of propaganda dissemination and hands-on facilitation of foreign fighter travel made Altun a lynchpin in IS-KP's transnational expansion efforts. Altun also allegedly helped order attacks on civilian and cultural targets in Türkiye and Europe, including concert venues, demonstrating his operational significance beyond propaganda ([Ahaber](#), June 1).

Conclusion

Altun has been classified in Türkiye's "orange" category of most-wanted terrorists, with a bounty of up to eight million Turkish lira (approx. \$200,000). This indicates he has been considered to be a high-level threat ([Nabd.com](#); [Onur Guler](#), June 1). Altun's arrest was a major setback for IS-KP's online presence and logistics. Now, IS-KP's media activities are disrupted, with production coming out of

al-Azaim's English and Turkish outlets slowing down.

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Mahal Baloch: Legacy of Female Suicide Bomber Amid U.S. Blacklisting

Kiyya Baloch

Executive Summary

- The U.S. designation of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and its Majeed Brigade as Foreign Terrorist Organizations on August 11 marks a major shift in international recognition of the Baloch insurgency as a threat. The blacklisting isolates the BLA internationally and reflects eroded Western sympathy for Baloch nationalist causes.
- The decision follows a year of increasingly lethal BLA attacks, including the 2024 suicide bombing by law student Mahal Baloch, which signaled the group's turn toward high-profile, female-led suicide operations.

On August 11, the United States added the Baloch Liberation Army (Balochi: **د لښکر آزادستان**, or BLA) and its suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade, to its Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list. The statement indicated that this was because of recent attacks, including the deadly hijacking of the Jaffar Express train in March. Likewise, officials expressed that the aim of the designation is to cut off BLA funds, isolate

the group internationally, and make supporting the group illegal in the United States ([U.S. Department of State](#), August 11).

The statement comes amid a period of escalation of the Baloch insurgency as the groups involved use more deadly and destructive tactics. The most defining example of this shift came in 2024, when the BLA announced that Mahal Baloch (Balochi: **د لښکر آزادستان**), a 23-year-old law student from Gwadar, carried out a suicide bombing in the Lasbela District in Balochistan Province (Balochi: **د لاسبېل**). Only around 77 miles away from Pakistan's southern commercial hub of Karachi, Mahal Baloch's operation in Lasbela marked a turning point in the insurgency.

Female Suicide Bomber Brings Controversy to the BLA

"Neither China nor Pakistan can stop this. Goodbye, comrades; we will meet again. Long live Balochistan." These were the final words of Mahal Baloch ([The Balochistan Post](#), September 3, 2024). On August 26, 2024, dressed in a black traditional Balochi dress with a scarf on her head, she sat in the front seat of a car, making a victory sign and delivering a video message, only hours before ramming a car into the security forces camp's main entrance gate in Lasbela. The explosive-laden car that she used to carry out the attack damaged the paramilitary Frontier Corps headquarters in the territory ([Dawn](#), September 12, 2024).

"I have chosen the path of General Aslam Baloch, Shari, and Somaiyah Baloch" (names in Urdu: **اسلم بالوچ؛ شاری د لښکر آزادستان؛ سومايه د لښکر آزادستان**), the young woman could be heard proclaiming in the video. These names refer to the former chief of the BLA and two prior female Baloch suicide bombers, who carried out attacks in April 2022 and June 2023 against Pakistani security forces and Karachi University's Confucius Institute ([The Balochistan Post](#), September 3, 2024). The BLA later gave Mahal Baloch the symbolic nickname "Zilan Kurd" (Balochi:

کرد دڙان from Kurdish), after a female Kurdish militant who carried out a suicide attack against Turkish soldiers during a flag-raising ceremony in Dersim on June 30, 1996 ([X/@KiyyaBaloch](#), August 26, 2024).

Operation Herof

Mahal, who is now widely referred to by BLA supporters as Zilan, was not the only attacker. Rizwan Baloch (Balochi: رضوان بدلوچ), another suicide bomber, targeted a second gate of the military camp with a similar attack. Following the blasts, six additional suicide bombers infiltrated the military complex. The BLA claimed that its fighters maintained control of the camp for 20 hours and allegedly killed 68 military personnel, although state authorities denied this. Altogether, the BLA claimed that 10 *fidayeen* (from Arabic: فداييون, "self-sacrificers" or insurgents) participated in "Operation Herof," which killed 130 personnel of Pakistan's security forces in a total of 44 attacks across Balochistan.

The BLA has called its significant uptick in attacks "Operation Herof" (Balochi: آپريشن هرڦ, translated as "Operation Black Storm") ([The Balochistan Post](#), August 27, 2024). Pakistani authorities reported that around 70 people have been killed in the operation, of whom 21 were insurgents ([BBC Urdu](#), August 26, 2024). The BLA marked the first anniversary of Operation Herof on August 26. In a video message, BLA chief Bashir Zaib (Balochi: زيب بدشير), a former student turned guerrilla, warned that "Herof II is coming" and that this next campaign would drive the enemy out of Balochistan ([The Balochistan Post](#), August 26).

Mahal's Childhood and Anti-Chinese Sentiment

Mahal was from Pakistan's emerging city of Gwadar, where the People's Republic of China (PRC) has invested billions of dollars in developing a port, an international airport, and free economic zones. The poor

coastal city is often referred to as the "crown jewel" of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship project of the PRC's One Belt One Road Initiative, which has come under attack by Baloch militants in recent years. The U.S. State Department's press release mentioned the BLA's activities in Gwadar, noting that in 2024, the BLA claimed responsibility for suicide attacks near the airport in Karachi and the Gwadar Port Authority Complex ([X/@KiyyaBaloch](#), August 26, 2024; [U.S. Department of State](#), August 11). Many Baloch people accuse the PRC of exploiting the region's natural resources and controlling local maritime activities (an important aspect of the local economy), depriving the Baloch population of the benefits of their own area's wealth.

Mahal came from a family with a political background. Her father had served as chairman of a local union council in Gwadar, one of her uncles had been the mayor of Gwadar, and a second uncle held a senior government position. Her family had no history of militancy or opposition to the government, and Mahal Baloch's career track in law was typical for her family. However, her Instagram posts shared images of books like *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, a translation of Fidel Castro's *History Will Absolve Me*, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, and works by Franz Kafka, strongly suggesting she was interested in revolutionary ideas, political struggle, and existential literature, which influenced her actions ([BBC Urdu](#), August 28, 2024).

Controversy Over Mahal's Mission

The recent rise of young, educated Baloch women joining armed groups, especially the BLA, has drawn Washington's attention. It has also put the BLA and its Majeed Brigade on the U.S. FTO list. At the same time, this trend has sparked debate in Baloch society. The BLA's use of women in destructive attacks against military targets has shaken Pakistani security forces and challenged the idea that the Baloch insurgency is a low-level conflict. Under Bashir Zaib, the BLA has adopted

more extreme and radical methods, marking a shift in the two-decade-long Baloch insurgency (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), May 20, 2022). The BLA's use of women in violence has also worried some supporters of the Baloch movement, who think it is moving away from traditional methods of militancy toward more radical ideas of insurgency.

Some argue that the tactic of using young women as suicide bombers undermines the Baloch movement's secular and nationalist values. Likewise, there are concerns that these tactics diminish support for Baloch rights activists who peacefully protest against forced disappearances and human rights abuses in Balochistan by the Pakistani government ([Nayadaur](#), September 4, 2024). Malik Siraj Akbar (Balochi: اکبر سراج ملک), an exiled Baloch journalist and author, expressed dismay in his 2024 blog *The Dark Age of Baloch Nationalism* at what he considered the "hypocrisy" of normalizing suicide bombings by Baloch women under the banner of nationalism, pointing out that if a religious extremist group had employed female suicide bombers, the condemnation would have been swift and severe ([The Baloch Hal](#), September 9, 2024).

Others fear that the BLA's actions could prompt harsher crackdowns against Baloch women like those already used against Baloch men. Further, with the BLA and its Majeed Brigade listed by the United States as FTOs, some rights activists and diaspora members are debating the future of international support for the Baloch cause, expressing concern that these tactics could deter Western rights groups and governments sympathetic to them from working to help the Baloch people. Operation Herof could potentially convince the PRC, United Nations, and international financial watchdogs like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to label the BLA as terrorists ([Nikkei Asia](#), August 20).

However, BLA leader Zaib appears to care little about international opinion. Among Baloch insurgents, many believe Western

countries, including the United States, have supported armed groups with women fighters, including Kurdish Peshmerga in Syria. They also argue the West handed Afghanistan to Taliban suicide bombers, lifted the FTO status on the Haqqani network, and removed a \$10 million bounty on current Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Given this reality, those who support Baloch militancy do not believe that attacks by female bombers represent an anomaly that would isolate them internationally.

Conclusion

For the BLA, female suicide bombings draw wide attention both at home and abroad. They increase the intensity of the conflict and show that women have joined the Baloch insurgency. Women are motivated to join groups like the BLA because of violence against the Baloch people by the state, making it easier for such groups to recruit female fighters.

This raises the question of whether using suicide bombers (especially women, which implicate the broader society) will help or hurt the Baloch cause. By using such tactics, the BLA blurs the line between nationalist resistance and terrorism, potentially hurting the Baloch struggle internationally. Locally, this approach may attract more young people, even as it increases tensions with the Pakistani government.

A funeral prayer in absentia for 23-year-old Mahal was held in Gwadar. It drew a large crowd of youth, including women, indicating that the BLA is succeeding in gaining local support ([The Balochistan Post](#), August 31, 2024). While a long-desired international intervention may only occur if the conflict becomes more severe, the reality in Balochistan—defined by anger over economic and political marginalization and security abuses—creates the conditions for "Zilan Kurd" to last as an enduring symbol of struggle.

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