



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 20, 2024

## Pakistan Conducts Airstrikes on Militant Group on Iranian Soil, Stokes Regional Tensions

On January 18, Pakistan acknowledged that it had [conducted a series of airstrikes](#) on “terrorist hideouts” in southern Iran, maintaining that its “precision” operation neutralized various militants. The attack came after Tehran admitted its own raids on another terrorist group based in Pakistan.

“Several explosions” were reported from various sites around the city of Saravan, an unnamed Iranian official told the state-linked IRNA news agency. Another source said the strikes “injured several people,” based on reports by Mehr News Agency. The Hindustan Times and other Indian media reported that “Baloch separatist camps situated inside Iranian territory” were targeted in the raids.



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For their part, Iranian officials, cited by local media, said that explosions in the Sistan-o-Balochistan province had killed seven non-Iranian nationals, including three women and four children. Tehran has also demanded an “immediate explanation” from Pakistan about the strikes, Iranian broadcaster Press TV reported, quoting an anonymous informed source.

Islamabad’s Foreign Ministry confirmed the military action, declaring the mission a success, while pledging to “take all necessary steps to preserve the safety and security of its people.”

“This morning, Pakistan undertook a series of highly coordinated and specifically targeted precision military strikes against terrorist hideouts in Sistan-o-Balochistan province of Iran. A number of terrorists were killed during the Intelligence-based operation — codenamed ‘Marg Bar Sarmachar,’” the ministry said in a statement.

The Foreign Ministry proceeded to elaborate that it had voiced “serious concerns” to Iran in recent years over “safe havens and sanctuaries enjoyed by Pakistani origin terrorists” based in Iranian territory, but claimed that Tehran had failed to act on the complaints. Pakistan posited that it “fully respects” Iran’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and that preserving Pakistan’s security was the “sole objective” of the strikes on January 18.

Islamabad’s attack comes after Iran claimed responsibility for missile and drone attacks on Pakistani Balochistan on January 16, which it said targeted the Jaish al-Adli terrorist group. At the time, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian highlighted that the attack had only targeted Iranian “terrorists” and not Pakistani citizens.

Iran’s operation, however, riled Pakistan, which recalled its ambassador to the country while cautioning Tehran of “serious consequences.” In addition to recalling its own diplomat, Pakistan has banned his Iranian counterpart from returning to Islamabad after his current trip to his home country, the



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ministerial statement said. All high-level bilateral visits have been suspended.

“Last night’s unprovoked and blatant breach of Pakistan’s sovereignty by Iran is a violation of international law and the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Mumtaz Baloch said in a televised address on January 17, adding, “Pakistan reserves the right to respond to this illegal act.”

Iran had condemned Jaish al-Adl militants for storming a police station in its southern province of Sistan and Baluchistan last month, which reportedly left 11 police officers dead, as per Tasnim News. Also called the “Army of Justice,” the armed separatist group operates on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border and has claimed responsibility for a series of previous attacks on Iranian targets.

Both strikes come at a time of escalated tensions in the Middle East, fueled by the Hamas-Israel conflict. Earlier this week, Iran also launched strikes on what it described as an Israeli “espionage center” in Iraq — which landed near the U.S. consulate — as well as Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) terrorists in Syria. The fusillade came after two previous blasts in Iran that claimed the lives of dozens of people, as per statements by Tehran.

Two explosions killed almost 100 people in Kerman on January 3, as people congregated to honor the late General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by the United States in 2020. Islamic State claimed credit for the strikes. Last month, another suicide bombing in the town of Rask killed 11 Iranian police. The suicide bombing was blamed on the Jaish al-Adl group.

“In response to the recent crimes of the terrorist groups that unjustly martyred a group of our dear compatriots in Kerman and Rask, we have identified gathering places of commanders and elements of ISIS related to recent terrorist operations in the occupied territories of Syria and destroyed them by firing a number of ballistic missiles,” the IRGC said in a statement.

Speaking to CNBC in Davos, Switzerland, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the [strikes in Iraq and Syria](#) were “in line with combating terrorism and legitimate self-defense.” The major intensification of animosities in the region came days after Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Tehran, where he discussed the situation in Gaza and the continuing attacks on vital shipping routes passing through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with his counterpart. Jaishankar also met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. The Indian Foreign Ministry on January 17 commented on Iran’s strikes in Pakistan’s Balochistan province, targeting the military bases of what it called an “Iranian terrorist group” on Pakistani soil.

In a statement late on the night of January 17, New Delhi said, “we understand actions that countries take in their self-defense,” which was perceived as “backing” Iran by the Indian media.

While the Indian Foreign Ministry alluded to the escalation as a bilateral “matter” between Iran and Pakistan, it maintained its “uncompromising position of zero tolerance towards terrorism.”

In October last year, Bloomberg reported that New Delhi is setting up a drone surveillance system along its borders to ward off “surprise attacks,” after Palestinian terrorist group Hamas staged a surprise attack on Israeli settlements on October 7, killing more than 1,400 people and taking more than 200 hostages.

The Indian military is hoping to have the system up and running along some parts of the frontier as early as May 2024, the sources said.

The new network, which will cost India \$500 million annually, could cover all of its borders within 18



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months, the Bloomberg report pointed out. The system will consist of solar-powered High-Altitude Pseudo Satellite drones, which can operate around the clock. They can also act as radar systems, beaming images to local command centers.

Once the system is up and running, it will continuously track the entire 14,000 miles that make up India's land borders and coastline.

Previously, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh also told a military conference in New Delhi that the country's armed forces should gear up to face "unconventional and asymmetric warfare, including hybrid war" as both will feature in conflicts of the future. India's militar planning and formulation of strategy should take the possibility of hybrid war into consideration, the minister warned the Indian Army's senior leadership.

"We must keep learning from the incidents to include the global ones ... in present [but] also in past. Expect the unexpected and thereby plan, strategize and prepare accordingly," Singh said.

India has also experienced surprise terrorist assaults similar to the one conducted by Hamas. In 2008, the country's financial capital Mumbai was targeted by Pakistani militants, who carried out 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks over a four-day period, killing 166 people and wounding hundreds. The attack, referred to as "11/26" since it happened on November 26, showed [gaps](#) in India's national security ecosystem, as per specialists at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF).



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