

AMBIGUOUS INFRASTRUCTURES OF BORDER FLUXES

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Abstract:

Balochistan is the largest and the most precarious province of Pakistan. Along with cross-border Iranian Balochistan-Sistan province, it is the homeland of the Balochi people, whose territory has been divided by the national frontier. Through occasional insurgency acts, Balochi strive for regaining their independency from Islamabad, that has been exploiting the province in economical, material and social senses. The violence of the state, manifesting itself as negligence, induced Balochs to engage in 'illicit' – though commonly acknowledged and tolerated by the state - practices. Informal trade, border smuggling and human trafficking - have become one of the few ways to survive in the economic misery of this desertic land. Effectively, the intertwinement of inner local urgencies with outer (geo)political conditions determined a very particular local means of how to get by. This research aims to investigate phenomenon of smuggling as well as various kinds of border infrastructures that has been perpetuating fluxes across the Iran - Pakistani national border. The paper will begin with recognizing the socio-economical context in which the Balochistan province is situated. The proper research will start by examining the physicality of infrastructure body understood by its material means. On the other hand, less tangible, fluid kind of 'infrastructures' will be examined afterwards – the ones understood as abstract yet functioning systems of interests, dependencies, exceptions and special relationships that perpetuate around local actors: smugglers, animals, state(s) agents, various (often independent) law enforcement groups. Eventually, after effectuating this 'verbal mapping', the overall condition of border fluxes, with special attention to its infrastructure(s), will be conceptualized in the theoretical framework, referencing, inter alia, to the notions of *agencement*¹ or *infrastructure of people*². The research therefore positions itself in a multi-disciplinary scope, deriving not only from spatial domains such as architecture or urbanism but also, even more importantly, from various social sciences such as ethnography, sociology, anthropology and politics. Hence, the sources of the paper comprise trans-disciplinary works, often operating on the edge of the above disciplines as well as include diverse media types such as books, official reports, online articles, Instagram posts or YouTube videos.

Keywords:

Balochistan, smuggling, informal trade, Balochi, Iran-Pakistan border

¹ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1988).

² Simone AbdouMaliq, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture*, no. 2004):407-29, <http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/1946/>

Introduction



Off road route frequented by oil smugglers across desartic area of Mashkel.
source:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu8KblqAos0&ab_channel=AhmedBadini

The phenomenon of border fluxes in Balochistan appears to find its vivid reference to the socio-political emphasis that sits in the core of 'Emergent Border Conditions in Eurasia' scope of interests. Being hardly accessible (in particular for non-locals) - as the result of the geological, political, environmental circumstances - the examined area holds (architecturally) peripheral nature, therefore unveiling uncommon potential for exploring experimental understandings of the spatial situations that occurs there. For the same reasons, the research, in consequence, demands a very particular investigative approach, drawing a reference to even forensic practice.

The theoretical framework of the research will base on the two concepts being most crucial for the cross-border fluxes, namely infrastructure and informal economy. Infrastructure within contemporary architectural discourse has been theorized mainly in the context of development. It has been established as a material, visible artifact of progress, mainly in terms of technological one. However, what distinguishes infrastructure from technologies is, as Brian Larkin argues, that they 'are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems'³ or defines it on an even more abstract level – 'infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter'.⁴ The latter definition will serve to frame the phenomenon of smuggling through the Pakistan-Iran border.

Another key concept indispensable for grasping the below-described set of socio-spatial situations is the notion of the informal economy and the way it function. Regardless of the specific location, the informal economy most usually finds its relation to migration schemes and political transitions. Informal markets usually are able to operate thanks to special relationships and interests between

³ Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. October 2013, 2013):<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>

⁴ Ibid.

different actors, which more specifically has been framed as an archipelago economy. This type of trade is especially relevant for the case of Balochistan, where the 'social infrastructure', understood as a web of socio-spatial connections, enables smugglers to seamlessly tackle various barriers, including the most important one – the national frontier.

The accompanying vocabulary that is often being used to describe the cross-border fluxes in the works treating on socio-spatial theory, such as barriers, membranes, apertures, flows, disjunctions, etc. interestingly suggest a non-direct, yet recognizable parallel to scientific, not seldomly even medical dictionary, drawing an intrinsic link on the span between social and scientific. Such a narrative manner will be further embraced in this essay, introduced in the titles of these chapters that rather elucidate the actual phenomena, and precedes solely the theoretical substance of the paper.

Neglected body

Balochistan, comprised within triangle bordering both with Iran - at the West - and Afghanistan - on the North, occupies as much as 44 percent of Pakistani land area being the largest province of the country. The region homes two ethnic groups - the Baloch and the Pashtuns. Comparing with the rest of Pakistan, a gaze at various social indicators proves the complexity of the situation in Balochistan⁵, in terms of its underdevelopment. These indicators consider not only the educational aspects, as, for instance, female literacy (15% versus 33% in entire Pakistan) but also, and primarily, lack of access to even more basic utilities as sanitation (7% vs 18%) or electricity (25% vs 75%).⁶ Surprisingly the extent and scale of this misery find its reflection even in the content of formal documents issued by the Government of Balochistan. 'Balochistan is distinct from rest of Pakistan not only geographically but also in its sufferings and the treatment meted out to it (...) No one wants to be aware of suffocation of people in Balochistan...'.⁷

The economic, social, political violence that spreads across the region finds its origins primarily in multiple conflicts on various scales and levels. These include competition between different tribes' interests, sectarian conflicts, ethnic complexities, and finally, constant insurgency and terror acts of Balochi national separatists aimed at Islamabad-run state representatives. The latest has its roots in 1948 when Pakistan incorporated the state of Kalat, which comprises most of today's Baluchistan province. It is argued that from the very beginning of their rules, Pakistani have considered these terrains almost as a colony.⁸ This attitude, which can be seen as persisting until now, has mainly occurred in extraction of material as well as social resources without, or with extremely scarce, investments in local infrastructure (limited to devices facilitating the exploitation⁹). By this, not only the physical infrastructures are meant, but also the social ones, such as: education or healthcare¹⁰. The most apparent extraction has been undergone both at sea, where extensive fishing occurs, and

⁵ Tilak Devasher, *Pakistan the Balochistan Conundrum* (2019).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Investment Opportunities", GWADAR DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, accessed 29 November, 2020, <http://www.gda.gov.pk/investment-opportunities/>

¹⁰ KHAWAR ABBAS, "Socio-Economic Impacts of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec) at Community Level. A Case Study of Gwadar Pakistan.," (University of Agder, 2019).

on the northern part of the region rich in mines.¹¹ To even larger extent, extraction has accelerated since Islamabad had entered into several agreements with Chinese government. The farthest-reaching effect of these, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), resulted in constructing an extensive system of infrastructure meant to logistically link Pakistan to western China.¹²

Acknowledging above contexts pose necessary in order to further apprehend the nature of border fluxes. These, despite operating in a very specific, self-sufficient system, remain however a consequence of broad political, economic, and social bonds that leaves no other choice for the local population than to engage in - what is often unjustly called from the external perspective of a western observer - the 'grey economy'.¹³ The analysis of the proper border fluxes should be however preceded by examining the various ethic, political and material conditions that sums up for the actual physical construct of the border.

(Ex-)membrane



Right: a concrete wall built by Iran. source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7wxq2vbAHc&ab_channel=PakistanTube
Left: new barbed wire fence being constructed by Pakistan, source: <https://mapio.net/pic/p-20939133/>

The Iran-Pakistan border stretches about 900 kilometers through a mostly deserts mountainous landscape, in between Pakistani Balochistan and Iranian Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. Ethnically speaking, the national border divides the historically uniform territory of the Balochi people. For many years, the border remained porous, enabling locals to trade relatively freely and therefore make their existence possible.¹⁴ This, however, has started to gradually change when several investments meant to seal the border evolved. In 2007, the Iranian government, willing to stop cross border drug inflow from Pakistan territory, commenced to erect '700km long, 90cm thick and 3m high concrete wall, fortified with steel rods',¹⁵ spreading from Taftan up to the Mand in Turbat district. Along with the wall itself, the project included earth embankments and ditches. Every couple of kilometers the wall has been punctuated either with an observation tower or a fortified base

¹¹ Devasher, *Pakistan the Balochistan Conundrum*.

¹² "Introduction", China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, accessed 29 November, 2020, <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

¹³ "Grey Market", financial-dictionary, accessed December 22, 2020, <https://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Grey+economy>

¹⁴ "Delineated Border", Topological Atlas, accessed 10 November, 2020, <https://topologicalatlas.net/pakistaniran>

¹⁵ "Iran-Pakistan Border", Wikipedia, accessed 14 November, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Pakistan_border

including one or several buildings surrounded by a ditch. The entire system has been communicated with one road strictly following the fortification belt. Interestingly, despite the evident importance of border permeability for the Baloch people, the project encountered no opposition from the Pakistani government.¹⁶ Without surprise, this only embittered the relations between the Balochi people and the state.¹⁷ According to governmental statements, 'the fencing will improve the economy and legal trade between the two neighboring countries'.¹⁸ It is presumed, however, that the real main reason for erecting another multimillion barrier is the fear of not being able to suppress Balochi independence rebellions.¹⁹ Despite more and more unified substance of the fortifications, when observing the satellite photographs, one can easily grasp several interruptions within it. These, occurring every dozen kilometers, originate mainly in natural phenomena, namely the seasonal streams and rivers that have been penetrating the border for years before anyone thinking of materializing any physical instance of the political border.

Apart from natural ones, however, there are obviously another, man-made planned interruptions of the border, namely road crossings.

(II) legal apertures



Left: interior of a grocery shop in Taftan, Right: small shops at the Taftan village, source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLB4raJDfPM&ab_channel=Balochistan%3ALandofBeauty

Although there are multiple crossings at the Pakistani-Iranian frontier, only the Taftan-Mirjaveh remains official.²⁰ The crossing is infamous mostly for its significance related to human trafficking. Its main route departs from 600km (about 12 hours) distant province capital – Quetta, and leads through, as called by natives, 'London Road' that terminates at Zahedan on the Iranian side.²¹

According to the official trade agreements, Taftan-Mirjaveh remains the only crossing where commodities can be legally transited. Though, the notion of (il)legality in this particular context

¹⁶ E. G. H. Joffé and Richard N. Schofield, *Geographic Realities in the Middle East and North Africa : State, Oil and Agriculture* (2021).

¹⁷ "Pakistan to Fence Border with Iran", Anadolu Agency, accessed 2020, 17 November, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-to-fence-border-with-iran/1422980>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "The Longest Border Crossing in the World", Lost With Purpose, accessed 1 November, 2020, <https://www.lostwithpurpose.com/the-longest-border-crossing-in-the-world/>

²¹ Ibid.

becomes very slippery. Interestingly, the goods become considered traded illegally as soon as Iranian-origin ones reach beyond the limits of Chaghai district.²² Nevertheless, despite trade being officially allowed to be practiced merely between families inhabiting border areas, the crossing is being extensively used by smugglers coming from remote parts of the country. At Taftan checkpoint, in fact, two gates of different nature operate – a tax-free one, as well as FIA's (Federal Investigation Agency) gate, through which Pakistan exports and imports only taxed goods.²³ Apart from the actual border crossing facilities, the town of Taftan hosts what can be described as a 'duty-free' zone that gathers shops with Iranian-origin (mostly alimentary) goods.

Speaking of figures, according to the report of the International Journal of Agriculture & Biology, it is estimated that the total value of goods being imported either to Pakistan or Iran through the border is respectively around Pak. Rs. 5,915 (\$ 37,12) and 29,923 (\$187,80) million per year.²⁴ The products being smuggled most frequently are processed food, fresh and dried fruits, spices, vegetables, biscuits, broiler, eggs. As far as non-edible products are concerned these are mostly 'petroleum and its products, electronic goods, carpets, tiles, plastic made household items, blankets, candles, tarcoal, scrap, cosmetics, soaps, dishwasher, washing powder, sui gas lamps, veterinary medicines and pesticides'.²⁵

Among these commodities, one especially demands violent sacrifices and generate most profitable business for the smuggling bosses. In the state of negligence, oil and diesel remain particular liquids of vitality for Balochi strive for surviving.

Capillaries, veins, and the artery



Left: Donkeys used by smugglers. Right: A group of Zamyads in Jodar

Source: <https://www.southpunjabnews.com/2019/06/the-iranian-smugglers-trafficking-fuel.html>

Taking into account that fuel price in Pakistan is approximately twice as high as behind the frontier, a fact that petroleum plays probably most crucial role in the local border-economies cannot stand for a

²² "Trade or Smuggling?", Farman Kakar, accessed 12 November, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/560666-trade-smuggling>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Saif Asif Khan, "Trade Routes through Pakistan's Western Border Countless Opportunities, Limitless Rewards," *Pakistan Horizon* Vol. 67, No. 3/4 (July-October 2014), pp. 43-70 (28 pages), no. 2014):<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44988710?seq=1>

²⁵ Ibid.

surprise. Consequently, in a year, as much as about 26.4 million gallons of fuel are estimated to illegally depart from Iranian Sistan and Balochistan province.²⁶ To understand the smuggling phenomenon properly, it needs to be conceived as a subdivided set of phenomena that occur on various scales, each of posing a distinctive characteristic.

The smallest scale smuggling occurs between families living in the villages alongside the border, whose size is often limited to only several houses. In such cases, it is very common that the smuggled goods are straightaway consumed by a smuggler's family or being sold to the neighbors. That way, commodities are not further participating in a larger, country-scale system. It is especially in the context of the small scale smuggling, that the border's porosities, its small disruptions, have always played a vital role in the families' strive for getting by.

What pose as nodes of a greater transit system are road crossings. Starting from the north these are: Taftan, Kuhak, Pishin-Mand, or Gabd-Kumb (Kuldan) crossing.²⁷ Through these openings, not only food, alcohol, electronics, or oil, but also drugs (coming as far as from Afghanistan) penetrate, to then spread across the entire country.²⁸ At the seaside areas, several jetties pointing Gwadar Bay function as nodes of naval oil smuggling - whether with small motorboats or larger ships, bringing petroleum from Chabahar port or its neighboring villages to Pakistan and then further (mainly to Muscat or Somalia).

All above, however, could be perceived as of minor importance in relation to the central, largest smuggling off-road route, where the most important oil mafias operate, with its culmination in desertic, mountainous Jodar area.²⁹ The convoys of smugglers are easily recognizable as they usually drive Toyota trucks or Zamyads - produced in Teheran blue pick-ups. Tax-free, these are not registered, therefore it is impossible to estimate how many are moving across the country. On both sides of the border, the business bosses - *arbabs* - who usually possess around 20 of these cars, communicate with each other negotiating the prices and commissioning the orders for the oil. Departing from Dalbandin, where most of them reside, they form 6-7 car convoys, (each car carrying about 2 220 - 2 700 liters of fuel or oil in blue tanks or barrels) and drive along London Road up to the village of Gat, from where they get off-road on the West, through the vast area of Hamun-e-Mashkel periodic lake. After long hours of drive, smugglers arrive to Jodar border where they take place in the long queue among other Zamyads. The smugglers spend night in their cars, to then, as the morning comes, be first to bribe Pakistani Frontier Corps and enter the Jodar area - the 'market place' where the petroleum is traded. On the other side of the frontier, Iranian Balochs - the sellers, endeavor a risky journey through the mountains after tanking at the fuel depots. In the mountains, donkeys are used to carry oil tanks and barrels - the areas have been mined, therefore the animals are let to pass first.³⁰

²⁶ "Iranian Smugglers Trafficking Fuel into Pakistan", southpunjabnews.com, accessed 13 November, 2020, <https://www.southpunjabnews.com/2019/06/the-iranian-smugglers-trafficking-fuel.html>

²⁷ Wikipedia, "Iran-Pakistan Border".

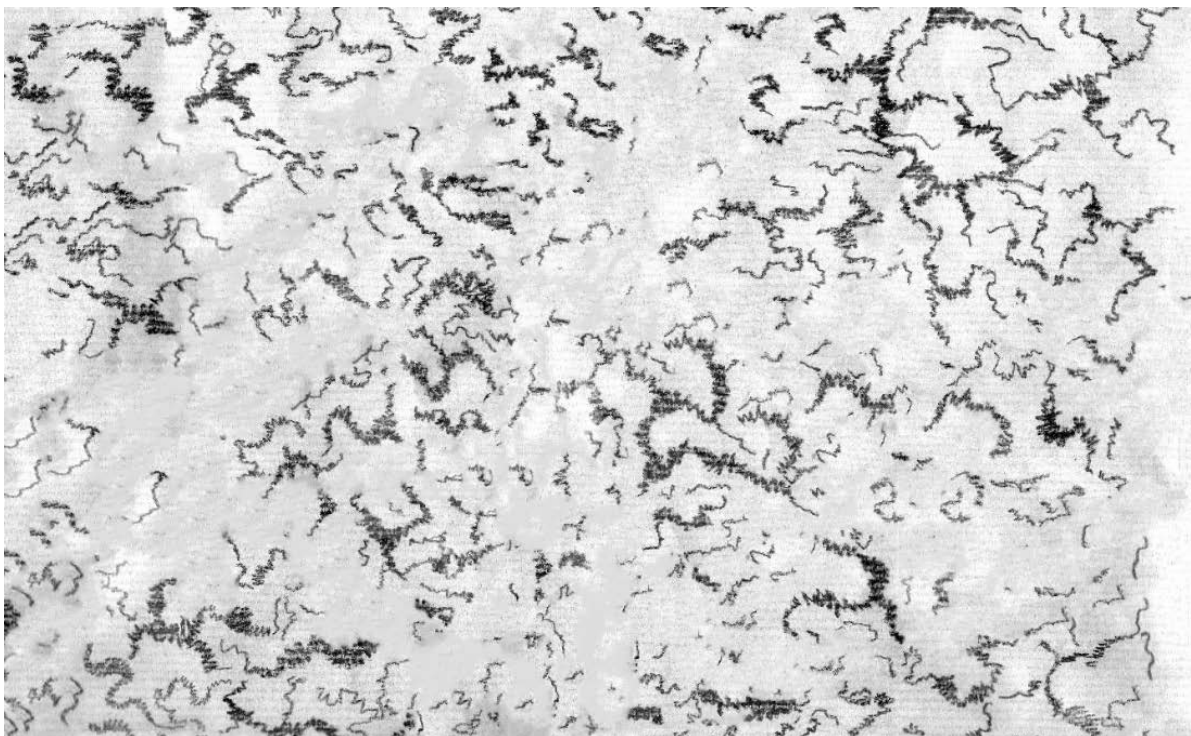
²⁸ "The Iran-Pakistan Border Barrier", Martin W. Lewis, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.geocurrents.info/geopolitics/the-iran-pakistan-border-barrier>

²⁹ "Oil, Sweat and Tears", Muhammad Akbar Notezai, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1489874>

³⁰ Ibid.

Oil smuggling, particularly at its largest intensity described above, holds the label of a highly criminalized business. However, when zooming out on a larger cross-territorial scale, we may evidence a much more vast and at least comparable murky system. It is said that even 'more than 50% of narcotics produced in Afghanistan are transited via the Pak-Iran route to international markets'.³¹ In order to avoid risk, after having penetrated the Afghan-Pakistan border, large-scale smugglers disperse their commodity. Mostly these are private homes in the nearby or remote villages that are being rented to deposit rather insignificant amounts of drugs. After some time, the goods continue on their way across the country. From time to time it occurs that some members of the stocking families are more actively engaged in the process chain, becoming passers or dealers.³²

The living infrastructure



Diagrammatic imaginary of fluxes structure occurring within spatial practices of informal trade.

If the above-described practices are seen as operating with the use of material infrastructure, it is even more vital to recognize its social infrastructure. By this notion (not distant from what AbdouMaliq Simone verbalized as infrastructure of people³³) the whole set of intertwined constantly fluid social relations that propel a mobile system is understood. Depending on the trade's final target, intensity, scale, or morphology of the physical context in which it perpetuates, living

³¹ "Pakistani Officials Eye Fence as Solution to Iran-Based Militants", Abdul Ghani Kakar, accessed https://pakistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_pf/features/2019/03/28/feature-01

³² Notezai, "Oil, Sweat and Tears".

³³ AbdouMaliq, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg."

components of these infrastructures intertwine with the physical ones, generating a fluid, ephemeral systemic set of phenomena, acquiring quasi-rhizomatic nature.

Particularly when observing the circumstances of the oil smuggling, its functioning can be argued to have a very systemic, repetitive nature, comparable to a large living network. Taking the Jodar case, it possess attributes of a systemic imaginary, perpetuating a whole inventory of inherent characteristics, circumstances, and artifacts. The route consists of multiple living nodes (re)drawing special connections within consecutive steps – *arbabs* remotely placing their orders; individual smugglers forming gangs that execute these orders, driving specially adapted uniform vehicles, by their way using premises of informal 'hotels', converting animals to both vehicles and safety devices, finally purchasing the access to the actual market that is being in fact unofficially orchestrated by the agency of the paramilitary corps. The entire process operates under the ambiguous and often inconsistent relation towards smuggling of various law enforcement groups that, despite official stigmatization of smuggling by the state, participate within it as guards, guides, or even conductors or competitors. Depending on the circumstances or the particular narrative, the police pose either as an enemy or ally; the state performs as prosecutor or participant; buyers turn into beings sellers, employers temporarily transmutes to employees. In parallel, most of them constantly alternate between being acknowledged as either 'poor' or 'criminal'. This exchangeability of the actors' roles, fluid unstable relation between them brings in a reference to, what Deleuze and Guattari framed as, the *agencement*, in which the components can be 'displaced and replaced within and among other bodies, thus approaching systems through relations of exteriority'.³⁴ The heterogeneity of the smuggling network elements, either human and non-human ones, is characteristic for this term's framework. Accordingly, in the theory of assemblage, the division between social-material becomes blurred.³⁵

To summarize - very spontaneous and disordered as may seem at first glance, the smuggling practices, when well scrutinized, reveal a whole spectrum of complexities and orders within its operational systemic structures. These living structures not only entwine with the material, traditionally understood, infrastructure, but also – what becomes the crucial argument of the research - pose as self-contained independent social 'living' infrastructures. These, accommodating engagement of living matter, acquires the identity of a device that not only generates life-giving fluxes but also perpetuates and sustains existence of life in itself, in the hostile mountainous desertic lands of Balochistan. Finally, economical self-sustaining of these trade corridors gives upon a question the actual role of the state, as well as cross-national scale emerging projects, that Balochi are forced to be part of.

³⁴ "Assemblage (Philosophy)", Wikipedia, accessed December 22, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assemblage_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assemblage_(philosophy))

³⁵ Colin McFarlane Ben Anderson, "Assemblage and Geography," *Area*, no. 2, 2011):124-27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41240473>

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