

A New Phase of Resistance and Insurgency in Iranian Baluchistan

By Chris Zambelis

WHILE THE WORLD remains fixated on the political turmoil engulfing Iran following the June 12, 2009 presidential elections, ethnic and sectarian tensions in the country's southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan¹ continue to fester. On May 28, a massive suicide bombing targeting Shi'a worshippers ripped through the Amir al-Momenin mosque in the provincial capital of Zahedan. Ethnic Baluch Sunni insurgents known as Jundallah (Soldiers of God) claimed credit for the attack, making it the latest in a string of increasingly devastating attacks by the obscure militant group since it emerged in 2003.² Abdulraouf Rigi,³ a Jundallah spokesman, said the attack was intended as retaliation for Tehran's execution of a number of Sunni clerics in recent years.⁴ Amid the chaos of the bombing, Jundallah's founder and leader Abdulmalek Rigi called for Sunni clerics in Sistan-Baluchistan to advocate a boycott of the June 12 elections.⁵ In a series of subsequent attacks in Zahedan that Iranian authorities have also linked to Jundallah, armed gunmen attacked President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's campaign headquarters in the restive province on May 29, leaving a number of campaign staff and bystanders

1 The province of Sistan-Baluchistan is often referred to as Iranian Baluchistan. Baluch nationalists sometimes refer to all of the territories where Baluch reside within Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan collectively as "Greater Baluchistan" and the territory in Iran as "West Baluchistan." This article will use the terms Sistan-Baluchistan and Iranian Baluchistan interchangeably.

2 "Cleric: Clues of US, Israel's Involvement in Zahedan Bombing Discernable," Fars News Agency [Tehran], May 29, 2009.

3 It is unclear whether Abdulraouf Rigi is related to Jundallah founder and leader Abdulmalek Rigi. Members of Abdulmalek Rigi's family, including a number of his brothers, have been implicated in previous attacks and other militant activities. In fact, Iranian authorities sometimes refer to Jundallah sarcastically as the "Rigi Group" in an effort to downplay the idea that Jundallah's message resonates outside of a close circle of militants linked to the Rigi family.

4 "Jundallah Claim Responsibility for Bomb Blast," Press TV [Tehran], May 30, 2009.

5 "Leader Urges Vigilance Against Plots," *Iran Daily* [Tehran], May 31, 2009.

wounded.⁶ In another incident, at least five people were killed in an arson attack against a state-run financial center on June 2.⁷

The Iranian security services responded to the May 28 attack by carrying out an extensive crackdown across Sistan-Baluchistan targeting suspected members and supporters of Jundallah. On May 30, Iranian officials publicly hanged three men near the site of the mosque bombing claiming that they had confessed to supplying the attackers with explosives.⁸ Following the execution, Jundallah issued a statement saying that only one of the men executed was in fact a member of the group.⁹ Tensions in the province escalated further when rumors circulated that Molavi Abdolhamid Esmaeli Zehi, Zahedan's leading Sunni cleric, was targeted in an apparent assassination attempt on May 31, presumably by state security officials or pro-regime forces seeking to avenge the mosque bombing.¹⁰ Scuffles that ensued between his entourage and protesters led to some injuries and sparked clashes between civilians and the security forces elsewhere in the province.¹¹ Jundallah itself issued a harsh rebuke of the Sunni cleric's decision to criticize the May 28 mosque attack.

This article will examine the recent history of Baluch nationalism and dissent in Iran, explain how Jundallah has modified its tactics since the end of 2008, and assess whether or not al-Qa`ida may be supporting the Baluch terrorist group.

Baluch Nationalism and Dissent

Iran is a patchwork of diverse ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic communities. Iran's Farsi-speaking, ethnic Persian population—nearly all of whom are Shi'a—represent only a slight majority among Iran's population of

6 "Gunmen Attack' South Iran Election Office," BBC, May 29, 2009.

7 "Arson Attack' Hits Iran's Zahedan," al-Jazeera, June 2, 2009.

8 "Iran Hangs Three Over Mosque Blast," al-Jazeera, May 30, 2009.

9 "Unrest Mounts in Zahedan," Rooz Online [Paris], June 2, 2009.

10 In a possible attempt to downplay the incident and reduce sectarian tension, the cleric later refuted reports that he was the target of an assassination attempt.

11 "Unrest Mounts in Zahedan."

approximately 70 million. The rest of the country's population is composed of an array of minority communities, including a large ethnic Azeri population—which makes up at least a quarter of Iran's population—ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans, Lors, Baluch, Armenians, Jews and others. In spite of Iran's mosaic of cultural identities, Iranians representing different backgrounds tend to share a sense of national identity rooted in feelings of pride and collective consciousness of Iran's ancient heritage.

At the same time, a number of ethno-sectarian and linguistic minority groups in Iran perceive the ethnic Persian-dominated Shi'a Islamist structure of operating a deliberate policy of subjugation, discrimination, and repression.¹² Iran's ethnic Baluch minority boasts a culture and a historical narrative that is imbued with a sense of collective persecution at the hands of colonial and modern regional powers; this has left the Baluch people divided among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and without a country of their own.¹³ Moreover, ethnic Baluch in Iran, who number between one and four million and belong to the Sunni faith, inhabit one of the country's most underdeveloped and impoverished regions.¹⁴ The region is also a hotbed of cross-border smuggling of drugs, arms, and other contraband. Due to the difficulty in managing the region through traditional administrative and institutional means, Tehran has instead

12 Significantly, the issue of ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iran was brought to the fore during the recent presidential campaign. Opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, an ethnic Azeri himself, sought to tap into the simmering resentments of Iranian minorities by promising greater rights and opportunities. In an effort to win over the support of Iranian Baluch and other Sunni minorities, for instance, Mousavi promised to permit Iranian Sunnis to construct their own mosque in Tehran. For more details, see Shahin Abbasov, "Iran: Azeris Cautious About Supporting Native Son Mousavi in Tehran Political Fight," EurasiaNet, June 23, 2009; Nahid Siamdoust, "Can Iran's Minorities Help Oust Ahmadinejad?" *Time Magazine*, May 30, 2009.

13 The Baluch nationalist narrative often portrays the plight of the Baluch alongside that of the Kurds of the Middle East. In this regard, much like the Kurds, the Baluch have also been dispersed and divided across hostile borders.

14 Chris Zambelis, "Violence and Rebellion in Iranian Balochistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:3 (2006).

relied on heavy-handed repression to ensure order, an approach that has fed resentment toward the state.¹⁵

According to Jundallah leader Abdulmalek Rigi, his group has taken up arms in an effort to highlight the plight of the Baluch people in Iran, who he sees as victims of an ongoing “genocide.”¹⁶ He has also claimed that in spite of Iranian accusations, Jundallah is not an independence movement nor does it have a radical sectarian agenda.¹⁷ Rigi has even said that he is an “Iranian” and that his only goal is to improve the lives of his people as Iranians.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is likely that ethnic Baluch in Iran look to their kin across the border in Pakistan’s Baluchistan Province—which is home to the world’s largest Baluch population and a decades-long insurgency against Islamabad—as a source of inspiration and possibly material support.¹⁹

A Shift in Tactics and Targets

Until recently, Jundallah’s violent campaign has generally featured ambushes, abductions, and bombings against Iranian security forces across Sistan-Baluchistan and symbols of the ruling regime, especially officials and facilities associated with the various branches of the security services. Jundallah’s decision to target a prominent Shi`a mosque in Zahedan signifies a new and more dangerous phase in the insurgent group’s war against the Iranian government. The latest attack was against a purely

15 For an overview of the human rights situation in Sistan-Baluchistan, see Amnesty International, “Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Baluchi Minority,” September 17, 2007.

16 Maryam Kashani, “Interview With the Commander of Jundallah and His Hostage,” Rooz Online, May 14, 2006.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Among other things, Jundallah regularly exploits the porous border and harsh terrain along the Iranian-Pakistani frontier to circumvent both Iranian and Pakistani authorities. Jundallah often brings those it abducts into Pakistani territory, at least temporarily, suggesting that the group maintains some level of operational infrastructure in Pakistani Baluchistan. Moreover, a number of Jundallah members, including Abdulhamid Rigi, who is one of Abdulmalek Rigi’s brothers, were arrested in Quetta, the capital of Pakistani Baluchistan, before being extradited to Iran in June 2008. See “16 Iranian Police Taken Hostage,” Press TV, June 14, 2008; “Rigi Brother Extradited,” *Iran Daily*, June 15, 2008.

civilian²⁰ target that claimed the lives of at least 25 worshippers and injured more than 125. Significantly, the attack occurred while worshippers mourned the death of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima—an important day of mourning for Shi`a Muslims and a national holiday in Iran—at the second largest Shi`a mosque in the predominantly Sunni Muslim city and region. The potential impact of the attack on the June 12 elections also likely figured into Jundallah’s calculus. The timing of the high-profile attack—occurring as it did in the run up to the elections—in addition to the other disturbances in Sistan-Baluchistan also likely linked to Jundallah suggest that the militants intended to escalate their campaign against the regime with the knowledge that the world was following events in Iran closely. This strategy draws international attention to the Baluch cause and exerts pressure on the regime during a period of heightened political awareness in Iran.²¹

In addition to its recent strike against a civilian target, the attack against the mosque also marked the successful execution of Jundallah’s second suicide bombing. The first suicide bombing occurred on December 28, 2008 when

20 In spite of the fact that all of the victims are believed to be civilians and that the mosque was clearly a civilian target, Jundallah spokesman Abdulraouf Rigi stated that the bomber was in fact targeting members of the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other special security units who he says were conducting a secret meeting inside of the mosque. This statement indicates that, in spite of its recent actions, Jundallah may still be sensitive to accusations that it is resorting to wanton attacks against civilians. See “‘Gunmen Attack’ South Iran Election Office,” BBC, May 29, 2009.

21 In an apparently unrelated incident a few days following the mosque bombing, Iranian security officials reported that they had defused a homemade bomb planted on a Tehran-bound Kish Air passenger airline that had departed from Ahvaz, the capital of Iran’s southwestern province of Khuzestan located along the Iran-Iraq border. In addition to being home to most of Iran’s oil wealth and significant natural gas deposits, Khuzestan is also home to most of Iran’s ethnic Arab minority. Ahvaz and other locations within the province have witnessed attacks by ethnic Arab nationalist groups. Additionally, Arab nationalists often refer to Khuzestan as Arabistan. Tehran often accuses groups such as Jundallah of collaborating with other insurgent movements operating across Iran, to include ethnic Arab separatists. For more details about the airline incident, see “Iran Defuses Bomb on Tehran-Bound Plane,” Press TV, May 31, 2009.

Abdulghafoor Rigi, a Jundallah member who also happened to be another one of leader Abdulmalek Rigi’s brothers, rammed an explosives-laden vehicle into the headquarters of Iran’s joint police and anti-narcotics unit in Saravan, killing four police officers and injuring scores more.²² While mentioning that suicide bombings are not compatible with Baluch values, Baluch nationalist sources claim that the decision by Abdulghafoor Rigi to execute a suicide bombing meant to serve as an act of symbolism that would hopefully inspire fiercer resistance by Iranian Baluch against the regime.²³

The introduction of suicide bombings into Jundallah’s arsenal along with a willingness to target civilians must clearly be of concern to Tehran. Aside from the myriad operational challenges posed by having to defend against determined suicide bombers, let alone defending against suicide bombers intent on striking soft targets such as mosques, Iranian authorities are also concerned about the spread of al-Qa`ida-style radicalism within the Baluch nationalist movement; suicide bombers have become the hallmark of al-Qa`ida’s contribution to the insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and most recently Pakistan.

Outside Involvement?

Iran regularly accuses outside forces of fomenting internal dissent to destabilize the Shi`a Islamist regime from within. A popular claim out of Tehran implicates the intelligence services of foreign powers led by the United States and its allies in, among other charges, actively supporting Jundallah’s armed campaign through the provision of funds, arms and training.²⁴ Iran also sees the United States and its allies behind the array of violent ethno-sectarian insurrectionist movements and other militant opposition forces operating on Iranian soil and beyond Iran’s borders. Iran is

22 Nazila Fathi, “Rare Suicide Bombing in Iran Kills 4,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2008.

23 Reza Hossein Borr, “The Armed Struggle in the Eastern Parts of Iran Entered a New Phase When the First Suicide Mission Was Carried Out in a Military Base in Saravan, Baluchistan, on 29 December 08,” January 1, 2009, available at www.thebaluch.com/O10109_report.php.

24 “Jundallah Claim Responsibility for Bomb Blast,” Press TV, May 30, 2009.

convinced that any potential American or Israeli invasion of its territory would begin by supporting active insurgencies on its soil.

Iran has also accused Pakistan of supporting Jundallah even though the two countries have a shared interest in quelling Baluch nationalist aspirations and have a history of cooperating to crush Baluch uprisings.²⁵ In an apparent effort to downplay the group's organic base of support among ethnic Baluch in Iranian Baluchistan, Tehran also frequently refers to Jundallah as a "Pakistan-based" movement.²⁶

Additionally, Tehran accuses Jundallah of receiving support from al-Qa`ida and the Taliban. Given the Sunni faith of its members and the increasingly Islamist tone of its discourse, Iran has suggested that al-Qa`ida and its Taliban allies in neighboring Pakistani Baluchistan are behind Jundallah's war against Tehran. In a public statement condemning the mosque attack during Friday prayers the day following the carnage, Ayatollah Sayyed Ahmad Khatami, an influential cleric close to Ahmadinejad and the ultra-conservative ruling establishment, singled out both the United States and Israel in the attack, along with "evil Salafists"—a reference to Jundallah's alleged ties to al-Qa`ida and possibly elements in Saudi Arabia, a rival of Iran—all of whom are presumably intent on sowing divisions between Shi`a and Sunni in Iran.²⁷ There is clearly a political motive behind Iranian discourse that accuses Jundallah of joining forces with al-Qa`ida or other outside forces. For Tehran, associating Jundallah with al-Qa`ida helps to delegitimize the group's cause.²⁸

²⁵ The Iranians have said that even if Pakistan is not supporting Jundallah, it is at least turning a blind eye while the United States supports the group from Pakistani territory.

²⁶ Iran even went as far as to summon Pakistan's ambassador in Tehran to protest what Iran sees as Jundallah's association with radical elements and supporters over the border in Pakistani Baluchistan. See "Iran Summons Pakistani Envoy Over Zahedan Terror Attack," *Tehran Times*, May 31, 2009.

²⁷ "Suspects in Zahedan Attack Arrested," *Tehran Times*, May 30, 2009.

²⁸ In a related point, Iranian authorities sometimes refer to Jundallah as Jund al-Shaytan (Soldiers of Satan) in a further attempt to undermine the group's reputation.

Nevertheless, observers of Iranian politics often raise concerns about the possible spread of al-Qa`ida's influence within Iran and the ethnic Baluch nationalist movement.²⁹ Proponents of this theory argue that Jundallah's ideology may have evolved from a strictly nationalist one emphasizing the assertion of ethnic Baluch national identity, culture, and religion within an Iranian context that guarantees greater rights and opportunities to a radical Islamist-oriented ideology that is influenced by al-Qa`ida's brand of extremism. Additionally, the strategic space occupied by Jundallah in southeastern Iran adjacent to Pakistani Baluchistan—a region where the Taliban's influence has experienced a marked rise in recent years—may prove to be beneficial for al-Qa`ida's plans for Pakistan, as it provides another base to operate against Islamabad and the United States outside of the tribal areas. As a result, al-Qa`ida could see in Jundallah an opportunity to gain a foothold in Iran. Jundallah's use of suicide bombings and its apparent willingness to expand its operations against soft civilian targets also bears the hallmark of what some observers see as proof of an al-Qa`ida hand behind Jundallah.

Moreover, al-Qa`ida has demonstrated an impressive ability over the years to exploit and bolster protracted insurgencies in places as diverse as Algeria, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In this context, the brand of violent Salafist Islam that shapes al-Qa`ida's worldview detests Shi`a Muslims, seeing them and by extension the Shi`a Islamist regime in Tehran essentially as heretics and unbelievers.³⁰

In spite of these claims, there is no evidence to support the theory that al-Qa`ida is supporting Jundallah. Moreover, although some observers suggest that al-Qa`ida may be mounting a covert campaign against Iran through Jundallah and the larger ethnic Baluch

²⁹ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Al-Qaeda Seeks a New Alliance," *Asia Times Online*, May 21, 2009.

³⁰ While there is no evidence linking al-Qa`ida to Jundallah, violent Salafist militants do pay attention to Iran, especially on the internet. The official website of the Sons of Sunna Iran is a case in point, located at www.sunnairan.wordpress.com.

nationalist cause, it is important to note that al-Qa`ida's regional allies and franchises tend to boast of their association with al-Qa`ida and their commitment to its global cause as opposed to downplaying or concealing such links. In fact, in February 2007 Jundallah seemed keen on downplaying its ethno-sectarian character and refuting allegations of its links to radical Sunni Islamists such as al-Qa`ida by adopting a more secular-oriented label: the People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI).³¹ Furthermore, while strong ideological differences divide al-Qa`ida and Iran, there is little evidence to suggest that Iran has ever figured prominently as an al-Qa`ida target. Al-Qa`ida's priority has always been to target the United States and its interests and allies abroad. Given the current state of geopolitics in the greater Middle East, tensions between the United States and Iran currently work to al-Qa`ida's benefit. In contrast, an effort by al-Qa`ida to target Iran through Jundallah or other channels would present an opening for closer cooperation between the United States and Iran, to include cooperation against al-Qa`ida itself and its allies in the region.

The nature of Jundallah's links to the Taliban in Pakistani Baluchistan, on the other hand, is less clear. Jundallah and ethnic Baluch insurgents operating in Pakistani Baluchistan are known to profit from the smuggling of drugs, arms, and other contraband. Afghanistan supplies more than 90% of the world's opium; Iran, particularly Sistan-Baluchistan, plays a critical role in the smuggling of the narcotic to international markets.³² In light of Jundallah's widely known ties to smuggling in Iranian Baluchistan, it is likely that the group (along with other Iranian drug smugglers) crosses paths with the Taliban. Jundallah's contacts with the Taliban are most likely based on jointly profiting from the illicit trade and smuggling as opposed to ideology.

Conclusion

While there is no evidence linking Jundallah to al-Qa`ida or other radical Sunni Islamist extremist movements

³¹ Chris Zambelis, "Baloch Nationalists Up The Ante In Iran," *Terrorism Focus* 4:3 (2007).

³² "U.N. Hails Iran for Curbing Flow of Afghan Heroin," Reuters, May 21, 2009.

with a global agenda, the group's apparent willingness to execute suicide bombings and other attacks against civilian targets will remain a cause for serious concern in Iran. To date, Jundallah's violent activities appear to be confined exclusively to Sistan-Baluchistan. Given the group's steady escalation in terms of its execution of tactics and choice of targets in recent months, the next step in Jundallah's evolution may result in attacks outside of Iranian Baluchistan. Indeed, the international focus on Iran during the run up to the recent elections and the attention paid to minority issues during the campaign may have also emboldened the group to escalate its fight. In the meantime, violence and instability in Iranian Baluchistan will continue to present a series of challenges to the Islamist regime in Tehran.

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