

A village near Iranshahr in Baluchistan province.

ASLON ARFA

Baluchistan's Rising Militancy

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Baluchistan, a region long associated with instability and armed conflict, straddles the borders of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is home to the largest number of Baluch, at 5 million, and the largest province of Baluchistan, at 43 percent of the country's land mass. In Iran, the Baluch, who are mainly Sunni Muslims, share the province of Sistan and Baluchistan with ethnically different Persians and Sistanis, who are mainly Shi'i Muslims. There are Shi'i Baluch, as well, living in Makran, as the southernmost part of the province is known, especially in a region called Bazman. The province comprises 11.5 percent of Iranian land and has around 2.5 million inhabitants, around 4 percent of the national population.

Iranian Baluchistan's geography, its rugged mountains and vast deserts, has historically isolated the province from the administrative and economic reach of the central state in Tehran. Before the contemporary period, the Baluch of Iran had stronger ties of trade and travel with historical India and, later, Pakistan, than with points west.

The people of the region maintain tribal customs, and *loya jirgas*—councils of tribal elders and Sunni clerics—play a prominent role in politics, including in local elections. These councils traditionally have been the main conduits for Baluch grievances against the state, which are largely socio-economic. The province has the lowest Human Development Index ranking—a UN-derived number measuring life expectancy, literacy, educational attainment and per capita productivity—among Iran's 30 provinces. It suffers as well from high unemployment, a scarcity of potable water and underdeveloped infrastructure. There is no delivery system for natural gas in the province, for instance. In recent years, there has been increasing militancy in Baluchistan, fueled by drug smuggling along the province's 680-mile border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and by worsening ethnic and sectarian strife.

Jondollah

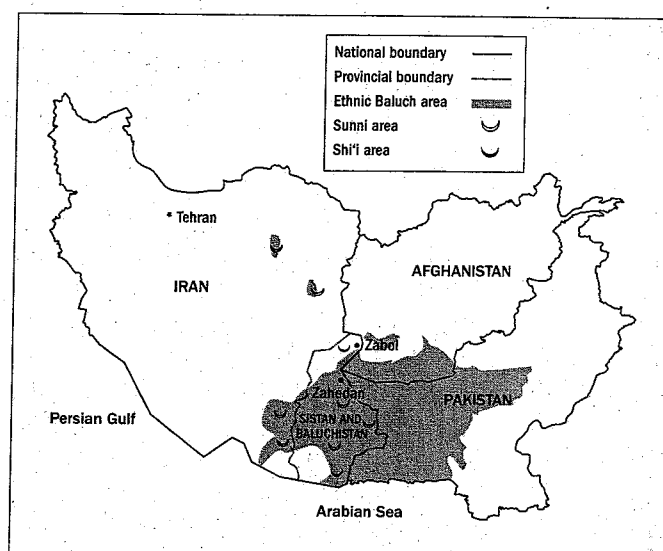
The most prominent of the militant groups operating in Baluchistan is Jondollah (the Army of God), led by

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Abdolmalek Rigi, 28, a member of a powerful Baluch tribe. Rigi studied in a Pakistani madrasa, where he had contact with Islamist militants among Afghan students. Jondollah, which claims upwards of 2,000 men under arms, has mounted periodic attacks on Iranian soldiers and local state officials since 2003, with the pace picking up markedly in 2005.¹ Tehran blames Jondollah for the December 14, 2005 attempt on the life of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Zahedan, the provincial capital. Iranian security officials initially characterized Jondollah as a clique of "drug smuggling bandits," but their attitude changed in late 2005 when the paramilitary group captured nine border guards. The ransom requested was the release of a number of Baluch prisoners condemned by Iranian revolutionary courts to death for "bringing corruption into the world." (Eight of the guards were subsequently released in a likely exchange.) On the night of March 16, 2006, Jondollah fighters dressed as Iranian policemen stopped vehicles carrying local officials and ordinary citizens at a spot called Tasuki, killing 21 and taking several others captive. Jondollah has recently renamed itself the People's Resistance Movement of Iran, and Rigi's followers now call him Emir Abdolmalek Baluch. Through these rhetorical maneuvers, Rigi seeks to present himself and his group as the legitimate voice of the Baluch people of Iran. At his official blog, Rigi overtly threatens anyone who cooperates with the Islamic Republic, sparing neither Shi'i nor Sunni Baluch.²

Jondollah stops short of separatism, repeatedly stating that all it wants is that the Islamic regime treat the Baluch as full citizens and extend to them the same rights that the Shi'i majority in Iran enjoys. In this, the movement's program is consistent with those of Iranian Baluch parties in exile, which usually press for autonomy within Iranian borders, with emphasis upon Baluchi-language education and equal rights for all ethnic groups. The idea of a Greater Baluchistan, with three stars on its flag symbolizing the Baluch of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, is mainly held and supported by Pakistani Baluch, in particular the Baluch Liberation Army.

The difference from the exiled parties lies in Jondollah's emphasis on religious, as opposed to ethnic, identity. In his frequent media interviews, Rigi defines the goal of his movement as defending Sunnis. Appearing on the al-'Arabiyya satellite network on October 24, 2008, he claimed to be fighting for the rights of all Sunnis in Iran—Kurds and Arabs as well as Baluch.³ The regime has responded to such rhetoric and the violent incidents by stepping up its military presence in Sistan and Baluchistan, and accusing the United States, Britain, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia of backing Jondollah to sow sectarian discord in the Islamic Republic. Such allegations have surfaced most recently in a report on the Nahrayn Net news website, affiliated with the Shi'i Islamist movement of Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq, quoting unidentified sources in Peshawar, Pakistan to the effect that the Saudi security apparatus bankrolls Jondollah operations.



The fact that al-'Arabiyya, a Saudi-owned channel, broadcast the interview with Rigi, and footage of a Jondollah execution of an Iranian border guard, is also cited by Iranian sources as evidence of a Saudi link.

Ever since Britain drew the borders dividing Baluchistan, outside powers have tried to use ethnic tensions in the Iranian portion to their advantage.⁴ On the occasions when the Shah supported the Kurds of Iraq against the Baathist regime, for example, Baghdad would retaliate with assistance to rebellious Baluch tribes in Iran (and Kurdish ones as well). The role of Pakistan has been particularly important. With their long history of armed struggle and clear desire for independence, Pakistani Baluch have served as mentors of a sort to their Iranian counterparts—or at least so Tehran has feared. In the past, Tehran and Islamabad have traded allegations that one was stirring up trouble in the other's Baluchistan province, though in the 1970s Iran also sent helicopters to the Pakistani military to quash Baluch insurrections. Since the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Iran has been particularly wary of US-Pakistani plots to play the Baluchistan card. The mutual suspicions are deepened by the parallel projects in both Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan to develop Arabian Sea ports for Central Asian oil and gas.⁵ Finally, Jondollah is accused of cooperating with al-Qaeda, though they have always denied it.

Roots of Unrest

Whatever the extent of foreign meddling, the roots of the new Sunni militancy among the Baluch of Iran are domestic. Historically, unrest in Baluchistan has revolved around religion, rather than ethnic factors like language.

After the revolution of 1979, Sunni clerics in Baluchistan emulated the new Islamic Republic in infusing politics with religious fervor. They headed up opposition to an early draft of the Islamic Republic's constitution containing

the provision that only Shi'a could run for the presidency, leading to violent confrontations with troops sent from the capital. Another factor strengthening the political role of the Sunni clergy was that the revolutionary government did not recognize tribal leaders (*sardars*) as representatives of the Baluch. Several *sardars* left the country to live in exile, and clerics filled the vacuum. Leftist and liberal ideas found some purchase among students and the elite, but not among the more pious general public.

Baluch have participated heavily in the Islamic Republic's elections. Local council and parliamentary elections always see high turnout because of ethnic competition between candidates. In presidential elections, especially when President Mohammad Khatami first ran for office in 1997, turnout in Sistan and Baluchistan was higher than elsewhere, likely due to Khatami's promise to equalize citizenship rights regardless of creed and ethnicity. In the presidential election of 2005, the reformist candidate, Mostafa Moin, promised to redress ethnic grievances and appoint Sunni cabinet members. His largest percentage of the vote came in Sistan and Baluchistan. Of the 874,353 votes cast in the province, 479,125 went to Moin. President Ahmadinejad got 47,070.

At the same time, various intolerant policies have boosted the appeal of a Sunni radicalism that is considerably more skeptical of the institutions of the Islamic Republic. Most dramatic has been the demolition of Sunni sacred spaces. In 1993, the state ordered the destruction of the Sheikh Feiz mosque in Mashhad on the pretext that it stood in the way of municipal development projects. Sheikh Feiz was a center of networking for Sunni clergy from Iran and Afghanistan. In September 2007, the state demolished the Abu Hanifa mosque in Azimabad, the second largest Sunni religious seminary in the province, supposedly because it lacked a proper license. Hundreds of men and women had their religious study interrupted. The clerics running the seminary do not deny the license problem, but they point out that Abu Hanifa had operated for 17 years as a branch of the seminary in Zahedan, Dar ul-Ulum, without a word from the state. Sunni MPs addressed a letter to Ahmadinejad demanding an official investigation. The Sunni clergy and other opposition forces also criticized the government. But no explanation—let alone an apology—was forthcoming, and state-controlled media outlets did not find the incident newsworthy. In an open message of condolence, Abdolmalek Rigi blamed Sunni clerics for emboldening the government by being silent in the face of government repression and executions of Sunnis and Baluch activists.

The closure of religious education institutions for Sunnis in Iran, ironically enough, compels many Sunnis to seek places in Pakistani and Saudi Arabian seminaries, where they are exposed to political views far more radical than what they would encounter at home.

The state's cultural policies have fared no better than others. In 2003, for example, the state started a regional TV network

named Hamoun after a river in the Sistani part of the province. As Sistan covers only 8 percent of the province's territory, Baluch took umbrage at the apparent slight to their presence on the political map. Insult was added to injury when the network failed to broadcast in the Baluchi language, beamed out only the Shi'i version of the call to prayer and ignored news of Sunni religious ceremonies and Friday sermons. Commentators regularly express the views that Baluchistan "belongs" to Sistan, the network routinely broadcasts Shi'i mourning processions—considered sacrilegious by Sunnis—and Sunnis are encouraged to convert to Shi'ism. Baluch are so alienated by this network that they mockingly call it Zabol, after the largest city in Sistan. State TV officials say they are opening regional networks to avoid centralization and empower local producers and artists. But in practice the move has sharpened the Baluch feeling of religious and ethnic discrimination at the hands of Iran's clerical regime. It hardly escapes notice, for instance, that Shi'i Baluch have a better chance of attaining high political and managerial office in the province.

Drug Trafficking

The long border with Pakistan and Afghanistan puts Iranian Baluchistan squarely in the route of the international drug trade. The state has lately fortified all Iranian borders—particularly in the regions of Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Baluchistan—with ditches, barrier walls, thermal imaging cameras, barbed wire and additional patrols. But in spite of the intensified border security, the Iranian Center Against Drugs has recorded steep increases in drug trafficking. According to the provincial police chief, 60 percent more drug shipments were confiscated from smugglers during March-December 2008 than during the same months in 2007. He continued that this jump reflects not more effective police work, but the escalating rewards of the drug smuggling endeavor.

In some parts, particularly in urban slums, drugs are traded with scant precaution. Shirabad, a marginal neighborhood in Zahedan with a largely Baluch population, is known as an open-air drug market, as well as a magnet for undocumented Afghan immigrants, and locals avoid the area if they can. The neighborhood is packed with small houses known as *patoqs* that are rented as drug dens by groups of almost 30 people. The drug trafficking problem feeds a cycle of deprivation, poverty and lack of access to proper health facilities that is exacerbated by intentional state neglect, especially since hardline conservatives retook the organs of the state in 2004 and 2005.

Smuggling is not limited to illegal drugs, but extends to other profitable items such as gasoline—not to mention the trafficking in undocumented Afghans, who will pay to flee their even more desolate country. Given the high unemployment rate, and recurring droughts that make pastoral and agricultural activity more difficult than usual in this arid region, smuggling is one of the only options available to locals for making ends meet. Women and children engage in it, as well as men. The

province's reputation as a hub of smuggling and drug abuse has further isolated it from the rest of the country. Its many natural and archaeological attractions welcome few tourists, Iranian or international.

Citizenship, Women and Civil Society

Baluch, especially women, face a host of problems that are unique to this region, or do not exist to the same extent in other regions. A significant number of people lack proper state documentation, including the all-important birth certificate, which is crucial for access to public services like schools, health clinics and state-subsidized loans. This problem has complex roots. Some trace it to the 1930s, when Reza Shah ordered forced unveiling of women and sedentarization of tribes. To escape this oppression, some Baluch tribes migrated into Pakistan and Afghanistan. When Reza Shah was deposed, they returned to Iran, but could not prove their Iranian nationality and could not acquire state documentation. Another source of the problem lies in the intermarriage between Iranian women and Afghan men. By Iranian law, the children of such marriages are not Iranian nationals.

To further complicate the situation, the state allows deaths to be recorded without proper identification being presented for the deceased. The result is a thriving black market for fake IDs in Baluchistan. When a Baluch with proper documents dies, his or her relatives sell the card instead of nullifying it. Many Afghan immigrants are thus able to acquire citizenship overnight. This phenomenon means that none of the official census data from Sistan and Baluchistan is reliable—another obstacle to the province's efforts to secure an equitable share of government resources.

But the main locus of the ID problem is the practice known as Baluch marriage and divorce, resulting in commonlaw unions that are legally registered nowhere. Though Islamic law permits this form of marriage and divorce, because it is not sanctioned by the state, the children of such marriages cannot be recognized as full Iranian citizens. The Women's Rights Protection Office of the Justice Ministry recently publicized a study establishing that not a single marriage in the Korin district of Zahedan is legally registered.⁶ To appreciate the magnitude of this news, one has to mention that Korin is comprised of more than a hundred villages and small settlements. The children of a marriage that is not legally registered will not receive a national ID card, even if their parents have cards. Their education will therefore end at elementary school, because after that they need documentation to prove their nationality. The practice of unregistered divorce, furthermore, puts women at an enormous disadvantage. Whenever a man feels like it, he can divorce his wife by uttering the sentence. He does not have to register the divorce anywhere. In such cases, women lose their rights to child custody and inheritance, and even to cash payments from charitable government organizations.

Polygamy, a common practice among Baluch, and particularly among the poor, is a humiliating experience for many women that can have dire economic consequences for the whole family. Having many children is a sign of social standing, and birth control is rare among the poor. A Baluch man will sometimes be supporting more than ten children. When a poor man remarries, his first wife has to support the children of the original union. Most commonly, women try to do this with needlework and tailoring. This cycle of poverty and discrimination is accelerated by traditions such as arranged marriage at an early age and marrying off young girls to older men.

Ethnic, religious, economic and gender issues conspire to deny education to many Baluch girls. Girls who lack national identification cards cannot attend secondary school. But many Baluch families may decide not to send their daughters to school at all because of unsafe roads or conservative mores. New boarding schools do not completely solve this problem because the girls' labor is needed at home. As in other parts of Iran, the number of female university students in Baluchistan is nevertheless on the rise, and Baluch women are not passive victims of a repressive culture. But the stealthy advance of religious radicalism has made women more vulnerable—even as the radicals, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, justify their militancy as defense of female honor. In his communiqués, Abdolmalek Rigi has often said—very dubiously—that Jondollah's armed attacks are revenge for the rape of Baluch women by state agents.

As elsewhere in Iran, women have sometimes found legal, economic and educational recourse through civil society institutions. In 2006, the director of the local branch of the National Youth Organization announced that there were 90 non-governmental organizations in the province. This number included Baluch and non-Baluch organizations as well as charitable foundations that usually engage in religious activities supportive of the central government. In the past three years, however, both types of NGO have been on the decline, despite their vital roles in lifting economic, health and educational indices and in promoting women's rights. The state tends to view NGOs everywhere with suspicion, as hostile institutions spreading alien ideas. In Baluchistan, the government accuses these organizations of collaboration with Jondollah. In any case, civil society in Iranian Baluchistan has been overshadowed by the rise of Sunni militancy and the growing overlap between religious and ethnic demands. ■

Endnotes

1 For a timeline, see Alex Vatanka, "The Making of an Insurgency in Iran's Balochistan Province," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 1, 2006.

2 The blog is at <http://junbish.blogspot.com/>. [Persian]

3 See the interview online at www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/10/24/58838.html. [Arabic]

4 Hamid Ahmadi, *Ethnicity and Ethnic Nationalism in Iran* (Tehran: Nei Publications, 2002). [Persian]

5 For background, see Frédéric Grare, *Pakistan: The Resurgence of Baluch Nationalism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2006), pp. 9–11.

6 The Islamic Republic News Agency covered the study at <http://www2.irna.ir/fa/news/view/menu-155/8707139799155749.htm>. [Persian]