

Islamist opposition in the Islamic Republic
Jundullah and the spread of extremist Deobandism in Iran

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English summary

This report examines the Iranian Jundullah movement, a Sunni Muslim terrorist group waging a small-scale war against the Iranian government and operating in the Sistan va Baluchestan region of south-eastern Iran. Created in 2004-5, the group has, during the recent years, intensified its violent campaign against the Iranian authorities, a recent phenomenon being suicide bombings.

The great paradox is that Iran, who has been active in support of different Islamist movements outside her own territory after the revolution, is now faced with serious armed opposition within her own borders. Tehran claims Jundullah enjoys an intimate relationship with the Pakistani Taliban. Although plausible regarding the shift in tactics to suicide operations, the group vehemently denies any connection with regional terrorist networks.

Jundullah is surrounded by secrecy and very little written literature exists about the group. Moreover, Sistan va Baluchestan is virtually closed to foreigners. This report is mostly based on the myriad of internet blogs connected to the group and media reports. While it is not – and it probably never will be – possible to verify most of the information about Jundullah, the phenomenon is interesting as it highlights violent religious tensions inside the Islamic Republic. The group is waging an armed jihad against an Islamic government.

Tehran is anxious to quell information about the group's activities. Not only does the existence of the group highlight the precarious state of security in the region with feeble governmental control over the “wild” south-east of Iran, but it also shows the limits to Islamic unity within the Islamic Republic itself. This deals a blow to the credentials of the revolution and the international revolutionary aspects of the Khomeinist doctrine.

Interestingly, Jundullah challenges the government on two levels. It is a Deobandi movement following Hanifa jurisprudence, opposing the Shi'a Ja'fari School of law. It therefore questions the very pillar of the Iranian government and undermines the principle of Islamic unity, and its central importance in the Iranian state since the Revolution. Secondly, Jundullah is an expression of Baluchi nationalism, thus questioning the territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic. The group operates under two names, namely Jundullah (Soldiers of God), and “jonbesh-e moqavemat-e mardomi-ye Iran” (the popular resistance front of Iran). The dual face of the group thus highlights the fact that the Iranian government is dealing with opposition on two fronts, ethnic and religious.

This report not only describes a violent opposition group within the borders of the Iranian state, but also touches upon a phenomenon which is found in the core of contemporary discussions of modern Islamist terrorism: the transformation of Sunni Islam through the growth and success of the austere Deobandi current, which underlies sectarian strife in a number of Muslim countries, and the displacement of the “heart” of radical Islamism from the Arabian Peninsula to the Indian Subcontinent.

Sammendrag

Denne rapporten omhandler Jundullah, en sunnimuslimsk terrorgruppe som opererer i Sistan Baluchistan, en region i det sørøstlige hjørnet av Iran. Siden opprettelsen i 2004-5 har gruppen ført en stadig mer intens småskalakrig mot iranske myndigheter – nylig har gruppen også utført selvmordsaksjoner.

Det store paradokset er at Iran, som etter revolusjonen direkte og indirekte har støttet muslimske opprørsgrupper med ulik agenda, nå må hankses med væpnet, islamistisk opposisjon innenfor sine egne grenser. Teheran påstår at Jundullah har tette bånd til det pakistanske Taliban. Selv om dette er mulig med tanke på at gruppen nylig har begynt å utføre selvmordsaksjoner, benekter Jundullah ethvert bånd til regionale terroristnettverk.

Lite er kjent om gruppen og mangelen på litteratur er stor. I tillegg er Sistan og Baluchistan så godt som avstengt for utlendinger. Denne rapporten er derfor i stor grad basert på ulike internettblogger som kan knyttes til gruppen, i tillegg til intervjuer og artikler i iransk og internasjonal presse. Det er – og vil sannsynligvis fortsette å være – umulig å bekrefte det meste av informasjonen om Jundullah. Gruppen er imidlertid interessant fordi den tar del i en voldelig religiøs konflikt som er under utvikling i Iran. Gruppen kjemper en væpnet ”Jihad” mot en islamsk stat.

Ikke overraskende sensurerer Teheran det meste av informasjonen om Jundullahs aktiviteter. Gruppens eksistens synes imidlertid å bekrefte at sikkerhetssituasjonen i regionen er prekær og at myndighetene har problemer med å hankses med trafikken over den porøse grensen til Pakistan og Afghanistan; Jundullah bekrefter også at ideen om Islamsk enhet, en av de ideologiske søylene i den revolusjonære iranske staten, er dårlig fundert. Gruppens ”Jihad” mot den Islamske staten utgjør dermed en ideologisk trussel mot det indre politiske og religiøse samholdet i Iran.

Jundullah utfordrer myndighetene på to nivåer. Som en Deobandi-bevegelse basert på Hanifa-retningen i tolkningen av Shari’a utfordrer den selve grunnmuren i den iranske konstitusjonen. I tillegg, som en nasjonalistisk, etnisk bevegelse, utfordrer den Irans territoriale enhet. Gruppen opererer under to navn, ”Jundullah” (Guds soldater) og ”jonbesh-e moqavemat-e mardomi-ye Iran” (Irans folkelige motstandsfront). Gruppens to ansikter viser at Iran dermed må hankses med opposisjon på to fronter; den ene er etnisk, den andre er religiøs.

Denne rapporten omhandler ikke bare en voldelig opposisjonsgruppe innen Irans grenser, men berører også et fenomen i kjerneområdet i studier av moderne islamsk terrorisme: fremveksten av nye voldelige retninger i i Sunni-Islam via veksten i den fundamentalistiske Deobandi-retningen. Denne retningen er sentral i den sekteriske volden som de siste årene har oppstått i flere muslimske land. Et viktig element i dette fenomenet er at det indiske subkontinentet i større grad overtar plassen til den arabiske halvøya som arnestedet til radikale Islamske strømninger.

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I would like to highlight the work of the French historian Stéphane A. Dudoignon on the Sunni question in Iran, and to thank him for very valuable conversations and tips related to the work on Jundullah. Mr. Dudoignon is, to my knowledge, one of a very few with extensive insight in the political and religious realities in Iranian Baluchistan as well as the history of Sunni minorities in the country.

Introduction

On a cold day in late December 2008, the destitute and poverty stricken Iranian town of Saravan, close to the Pakistani border, was rocked by an explosion. A yellow pickup drove up to the gates of the town's police headquarters, and before entering the courtyard, the driver detonated a bomb that tore the pickup apart.

The driver, Abdolghafur Rigi, a man in his twenties, killed two police officers and injured scores more that day.

We are God's army. We are the ones who give deliverance (...) O'ye, children of Islam, rise up in revolution. O'ye righteous community, get ready for self-sacrifice.

The text is the introduction to a series of ten short videos that appeared on an Iranian Sunni activist website a few days later¹. The videos, posted by the Jundullah², a shadowy armed opposition group in the Baluchistan region of Iran, show how Abdolghafur Rigi prepares himself for martyrdom. He says goodbye to what apparently are his parents; his father, white-bearded, his mother in a black chador.

A song, a lone male voice in sentimental minor, begins:

I am Muslim. I am filled by the Qor'an. I am going to the battlefield, to a lonely goodbye.
I am going the way of the Qor'an, to a lonely goodbye.

The videos that follow picture the last hours of Abdolghafur Rigi's life: in a small prayer ring, dressed in military fatigue, in an open-air interview while the sound of machine guns shatters the silence in the Baluchistan mountainous landscape, and Rigi posing with guns, and with masked soldiers, while white confetti rains upon him, accompanied by a combat song in Arabic calling for Jihad and martyrdom.

And then, Rigi all dressed in white, smiling shy in a cloud of white confetti. In the next picture, a close-up of a yellow pickup, where a detonator is attached to a gas tank in the passenger seat. Rigi gets into the car, and waves to the camera.

Rigi's suicide operation against the police headquarters was followed by a second Jundullah attack in March 2009, when Abdolhamid Esfandaki blew himself up in an operation targeting a bus full of Revolutionary Guards, the Regime's elite military force and vanguards of the status quo. The operations mark a new era in the political and religious opposition within the Islamic Republic. Even though Iran has a long history of political violence, this is the first time opposition forces have used suicide operations on Iranian soil.

¹ *Ajans-e khabari-e taftan website*, "Taftan news agency", at www.taftanb.blogspot.com, (presumably a forum for Sunni opposition forces, written in Farsi).

² The series of ten videos is posted by "The Cultural Branch of Jundullah" and is also available on YouTube.

And then, a short time before the contested Iranian presidential elections in June, Jundullah claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that took more than 25 lives in the Ali Ibn Abu Taleb Mosque in Zahedan, one of the largest Shi'a mosques in the city³. The symbolic value of this last operation cannot be underestimated.

What explains such actions within the Islamic Republic? Abdolghafur Rigi's and Abdolhamid Esfandaki's martyrdoms cannot be seen as isolated incidents – Islamist adversaries to the government in Tehran are probably learning from extremist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The sectarian violence which has rocked the Indian Subcontinent during the last decades, the *fitnah* between Sunnis and Shi'as, has apparently spread to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In order to understand why and how Islamist opposition groups like Jundullah have surfaced within the Islamic Republic, it is important to trace two different historic patterns.

The first illustrates how the Islamic Revolution in 1979 actually came at the expense of Islamic Unity and Iranian nationalism. The Revolution has created a strong polarity between the Persian-speaking Shi'a majority and Sunni minorities, living at the edges of Iran. The Sunni provinces in the country are the most neglected and underdeveloped, a situation with destabilizing repercussions. As ethnicity, tribal traditions, and sectarianism have become overlapping and mutually reinforcing cleavages in these regions, the opposition to the government in Tehran is often expressed in religious terms.

The second pattern to trace illustrates how religious life among Sunnis in Iran has transformed during the last decades. *Deobandism*⁴, an austere current in Sunni Islam, being a component in the sectarian blood-bath between Sunnis and Shi'as that has stricken Pakistan, and has spread over the border to Iran to become the main religious current among the Baluch. The rise of Deobandism has added fuel to ethnic and sectarian fire in Iranian Baluchistan and become a factor in the downward spiral of sectarian rife that is unfolding in the region.

1 The region divided

There are perpetual tensions between the centre and the periphery in Iran. Whilst the Persian plateau in the middle of the country and Tehran are home to the Shi'a, Persian-speaking political elite, the border regions are all inhabited by distinct ethnic communities, many of whom are Sunnis. Baluchistan is no exception. Situated in the periphery of Iran, the region is home to some

³ Message in Arabic posted on the Jundullah blog 29 May 2009., <http://junbish.blogspot.com/>

⁴ Deobandism, a revivalism movement, adheres to the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence, and has evolved around the theology of Abu Mansur Maturidi (853-944), who refuted Shi'a Imamism. Deobandis state strong belief in the oneness (*tawhid*) of God as well as following the prophet's Sunna (practices) and those of his companions, opposing innovating religious practices. The preservation of the religion is a central aim in Deobandism, as the current evolved in British India and sought to create a "Muslim community" that could exist within, but separated from, the larger British-dominated society. The main centre for Deobandi thought is the Darululoom seminary in Deoband, India. See website: www.darululoom-deoband.com

1.5 million Baluchis, a particular ethno linguistic group of Sunni confession and nomadic descendant. The same ethnic group is found over the borders into Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Baluchi people circulate across the porous borders between the three countries.

Throughout history, the region has proved largely ungovernable to the civil authorities in Tehran, as traditional Baluch patterns of authority are radically different from the institutionalized government. These differences have translated into historic enmities between the central government and traditional Baluch leaders – but as the latter have been marginalized through external control, violent suppression and forced political change, and as civil authorities have proved incapable of bringing the region into the central government's fold, new and mutually opposing networks of influence are surfacing.



Figure 1: The Baluch homeland (approximate graphics)

1.1 Tribes versus state

Even though the successive Iranian empires have tried to exercise central control over the Baluchi province, the projects have largely failed. The tribes, each one normally numbering a few thousand members⁵ had historically, and until the first half of the 20th century, existed as autonomous political units led by the *Sardar*, the tribal leader with vested authority in his status as warrior leader, resisting every external pressure.

The four main tribes in Baluchistan, the *Rigi*, the *Yarahmadzai*, the *Gamshadzai* and the *Ismailzai*, each of which is further organized into large clans, have throughout history managed to slice up the region into their respective zones of influence, although they frequently turned upon each other. Blood-feuds and violent clashes were common among the tribes; the tribal leaders

⁵ Philip C. Salzman, *Black tents of Baluchistan*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2000, p. 355.

also took opposite views on larger, political questions, and sometimes forged coalitions with forces external to Baluchistan. When British forces in Southern Persia engaged in a campaign against the Yarahmadzai in 1916, the Gamshadzais and Ismailzais engaged against the intruders in a tribal coalition – while the Rigi were on the side of the British, in a bid to undermine Yarahmadzai influence⁶.

If the different tribes were often on bad terms internally, the Baluch had also posed a real security threat to the Persian dynasties for centuries. Tribal militias frequently raided and looted Persian villages in the neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, the process of centralization of Iran under the Pahlavi regime transformed political life in the Baluch community. The tribes were, to a large extent, pacified from the mid-1930s, as the government sought to bring their raids to a halt by undertaking military intrusions into Baluchistan. The policy of the government in Tehran became thereafter control through indirect rule, paying the Sardar an annual and substantial stipend. The tribal leader thus became a client of the government, as well as a broker and negotiator between the tribe and the national administration⁷. Nevertheless, the Sardar continued to function as the representative of the tribe as a corporate body, thereby granting the Baluchi population a large degree of political autonomy⁸.

As the country became increasingly centralized under Tehran, the supremacy of the Persian-speaking shi'as as a political and financial elite at the expense of minority communities became more and more evident. The regime of Reza Shah forcibly settled pastoral nomads and tribal people; his son Mohammad Reza Shah placed the tribes under military control and restricted their movements and land use. On several occasions, the monarch ordered the imprisonment as well as execution of opposing tribal leaders in order to keep the region in check, depriving the tribes of their traditional centres of authority⁹. An intense process of “Persanification” was initiated, and high-speed social and economic reforms were launched. But even if the traditional patterns of political authority in the Baluch homeland changed and the country underwent rapid economic and infrastructural change, socio-economic development came late to the region. The first tractor arrived in Iranian Baluchistan in 1968¹⁰; the region remained underdeveloped and politically dominated by forces perceived as external.

The enmity between centre and periphery translated into a strong resentment of the Pahlavi regime in the Baluch communities, and these joined in the revolutionary euphoria that rocked the country in 1978-1979. But after the fall of the Kingdom and the creation of the Islamic Republic

⁶ Philip C. Salzman, “Adaption and Political Organization in Iranian Baluchestan”, *Ethnology*, Vol. 10, no.4, (October 1971), pp. 433-444.

⁷ Phillip C. Salzman, “Continuity and Change in Baluchi Tribal Leadership”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1973), pp. 428-439.

⁸ Phillip C. Salzman, “Tribal Chiefs as Middlemen: The Politics of Encapsulation in the Middle East”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No.2 (April 1974), pp. 203-210.

⁹ Lois Beck, “Revolutionary Iran and its Tribal People”, *MERIP Reports No. 87: Iran's Revolution: The Rural Dimension* (May 1980), pp. 14-20.

¹⁰ Phillip C. Salzman, “Continuity and Change in Baluchi Tribal Leadership”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1973), pp. 428-439.

through an uneasy alliance between the Shi'a clergy in Qom, traditional financial elites such as the bazaaris and leftist Islamist forces from poor urban neighbourhoods, the patterns of external control from Tehran continued, albeit by other means. As the country was on the edge of disintegration after the implosion of the old regime, Khomeini attempted to reinstate central domination over the regions through the creation of two new institutions under the aegis of the Revolutionary Council in Tehran; the *Komitehs* and the *Revolutionary Guards*. The former, semi-autonomous groups that functioned like local security committees, were usually headed by clerics closely aligned with Qom and known for arbitrary law enforcement and religious zealotry. Wherever the degree of tribal representation was low, the Komitehs quickly took over important governmental functions, such as that of the local gendarmerie. The members also assumed responsibility for enforcing Islamic regulation on social behaviour, with broad powers of arrest and imprisonment¹¹.

Under this new political situation, resentment between tribal authorities and the central government continued; many tribal communities reportedly voted against the creation of an Islamic Republic in the 1979 referendum¹². The Revolutionary Guards found a central role in the running of the Islamic State in the early years after the revolution, often functioning like veritable death squads implementing the orders from Tehran. Guard units engaged in an assassination campaign against Baluch leaders¹³, thus continuing the pattern of forced political transformation of the Baluch community as initiated during the Pahlavi regime.

After the revolution, political life in Iran was thus Islamized – but on the premises of the Persian-speaking Shi'a political elite in Tehran and the new regime's zealot vanguards. The state, Persian nationalism and Shi'a Islam are supposed to be unifying factors. However, as this unity is imposed through force when necessary¹⁴, it has created deep conflicts within the country itself. The creation of the Islamic Republic has therefore added another feature to the uneasy relationship between the centre and the periphery in Iran. Sectarianism¹⁵ suddenly became introduced as an overlapping cleavage to tribalism and ethnicity. The tensions created by these overlapping and mutually reinforcing cleavages have mounted in intensity during the decades since the revolution. During recent years, the level of sectarian violence seems to have been heightened.

¹¹ The Komiteh became in 1991 merged into the national police. See for example Sami Zubaida, "An Islamic State? The Case of Iran", *Middle East Report*, No. 153 (July/ August 1988).

¹² Lois Beck, *Op.cit.* Also Maulawi 'Abd al-'Aziz in Baluchistan, who as we later will see has played a central role in religious developments in the region, voted against the constitution, rejecting the principle of Velayat-e Faqih. Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Un Maulawi contre les Pasdaran?", *Actes Sud, Pensée de Midi*, 2009/1: No.27, pp. 92-100.

¹³ Selig L. Harrison, "Baluch Nationalism and Superpower Rivalry", *International Security*, Vol.5 No.3, Winter 1980-1981.

¹⁴ Abbas William Samii, "The nation and its minorities: ethnicity, unity and state policy in Iran", *Comparative studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX, No. 1&2, 2000.

¹⁵ Understood as hatred and discrimination that arise when importance is attached to a perceived difference between subdivisions within the larger community of believers.

1.2 The Sunni question

Whilst Shi'a Islam is the official religion in Iran, many of the tribal communities and ethnic minorities living at the edge of Iranian territory are of Sunni confession (an estimated 10% of the Iranian population, thus roughly 7 million people, is Sunni). The main current among the Baluch tribes is the Hanafi branch¹⁶. Even if one of the main pillars of the Islamic government in Iran is Islamic universalism and unity regardless of sectarian belonging, the discrimination of confessional and ethnic minorities has, to a large degree, become institutionalized. After the revolution, some ethnic groups – including Baluchi tribal leaders – made demands for a decentralized state with semi-autonomous regions and provinces, demands rejected by Khomeini¹⁷. The current constitution of Iran bears no reference to regional autonomy or self-determinism – on the contrary, regional governors are appointed by the Ministry of Interior.

As the secular regime of the Pahlavis was replaced with an Islamic government, discriminatory practices against the ethnic and religious minorities have been reinforced in another sense. Whilst minority groups such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians have constitutional representation in the Parliament, the Sunnis are not granted the right to representation, as the Islamic Republic, in its very nature, is supposed to be above sectarian differences. Nevertheless, the Iranian state is in its outermost sense a Shi'a state. The constitution states that only an Iranian who is a follower of the Khomeinist Velayat-e Faqih doctrine¹⁸ and the Shi'a Ja'fari school of jurisprudence may take up high offices, something that effectively excludes the Sunni population from any high-level political participation. In addition, the revolution was followed with direct attacks on Sunni religious symbols, as several Sunni mosques in the country were destroyed, and others closed down. In addition, the revolutionary government embarked on a strategy of “persification” and “shi'ification” of Baluchistan, forcibly relocating Baluch people to remote areas while encouraging non-Baluchis from other provinces to replace them throughout the province, using incentives such as free land, government jobs and subsidized housing¹⁹ – a situation that is echoed in Pakistani Baluchistan. The dual Persian and Shi'a monopoly over public life has therefore lead to an increasing polarization between the Shi'a majority and Sunni minorities such as the Baluch.

Observers note that this has been an ongoing historical process during much of the 20th century, beginning even well before the Islamic Revolution:

Since the pacification campaign mounted against the Baluchi tribes in the 1930s, interest in religion and participation in religious practices have greatly increased amongst the tribal

¹⁶ *Pakistan: The worsening conflict in Baluchistan*. Brussels: International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 119, 14 September 2006. The French historian Mr. Stéphane Dudoignon, who organized a series of university lectures in 2009 on the Sunni question in Iran, has in various works tracked down the development of Hanafi and Deobandi currents in Iran.

¹⁷ Beck, Lois: *Op.cit.*

¹⁸ Which state that in the absence of the 12th Shi'a imam, a cleric with perfect insight into the Shi'a Ja'fari School of law shall be the highest political authority in the country.

¹⁹ Abbas William Samii, “The nation and its minorities: ethnicity, unity and state policy in Iran”, *Comparative studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX No. 1&2, 2000.

members. Many of the tribesmen have been trained as mullahs, and the mullahs have obtained an increasing influence over various activities, resulting in an increase of orthodox practices at the expense of traditional ones. There are large collective prayer meetings on the major holidays, large collective religious propaganda and education meetings, and numbers of individual sacral behaviours such as prayer and animal sacrifice, and life-style ceremonies presided over by mullahs. Religious matters have an increasingly high status, and are regarded as having priority over other matters, and deference is paid towards those of religious stature²⁰.

The French historian Stéphane A. Dudoignon argues that the maulawis, the Sunni religious scholars educated in seminaries, were supported by the Reza Shah regime, as in opposition to the *Sardar* leaders of the Baluch tribes they did not advocate ethnic and nationalistic sentiments. With this support, they were able to dispute the influence of the Sardars²¹. The process of Islamic “awakening” among the Baluchi tribes intensified during the 1960s and the 1970s, as Dudoignon points out in his studies²². Philip Salzman, an American anthropologist who has lived among the Yarahmadzai tribe over longer periods, explains that since the tribes have lost military, economic and political independence to the Persians, a vacuum was created in the Baluch identity – a vacuum filled by religion. During the 1960s, senior leaders of the Yarahmadzai undertook *Hajj* for the first time; the sardars also began to financially support maulawis. The tribal leaders built *madrasas* connected to their headquarters and recruited students for the maulawis. Large prayer congregations were led by prayer leaders from outside the tribe on an increasing scale. In addition, many young men were sent to Pakistan for religious education. The growing Islamic awareness led to changes in social life; playing music and listening to the radio became viewed with increasing severity²³.

As the central government clamped down on rebelling Baluch, several of the tribal leaders went into exile in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani Baluchistan, for a few years²⁴. The tribal Baluchi leaders were not the only ones who sought refuge in Quetta and the surrounding regions at the time. A huge influx of Afghans, fleeing the disintegrating neighbouring country, followed by a growth in extremist networks, has profoundly marked the religious landscape in Pakistani Baluchistan, as we will see a little later.

²⁰ Phillip C. Salzman, “Continuity and Change in Baluchi Tribal Leadership”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1973), pp. 428-439.

²¹ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Un Maulawi contre les Pasdaran?”, *Actes Sud, Pensée de Midi*, 2009/1: No.27, pp. 92-100.

²² See for example Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *Voyage aux pays des Balouches* (Voyage to the Baluch homeland) Paris: Éditions Cartouche, 2009.

²³ Philip C. Salzman, “Politics and Change among the Baluch in Iran”, *Middle East Papers – Harvard Centre for Middle East strategy*, June 2008, p. 7.

²⁴ Salzman, Philip C.: *Black tents of Baluchistan* Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2000, p. 147.

2 Baluchistan: No country for old men

The discriminatory practices against ethnic and religious minorities in Iran are reflected in the low level of economic and political development in the border regions. Baluchistan is today the poorest of all Iranian regions, taking the bottom score on nearly all indexes of economic and human development. Sistan va Baluchistan province is the least literate, least professionally active, as well as having the highest mortality rate of all the Iranian regions²⁵, a sad record it shares with the Baluch province in neighbouring Pakistan, where the literacy rate is almost half the national average, and 47% of the population are living under the poverty line²⁶.

The social hardship is inevitably a factor behind the increase in militant activism in the region, as a call for justice as well as criminal activities merge with Islamist elements, as we will see in this chapter.

2.1 The wild southeast

The generally appalling level of development in Iranian Baluchistan has given a boost to a huge criminal economy. Baluchi tribes have for centuries enjoyed income from smuggling of consumer goods from Oman (the country has a large Baluch population), where the trading communities in some of the cities are almost entirely Baluch. Nevertheless, the porous borders between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the free circulation of tribal people between the countries have facilitated another traffic that is far more lucrative: the trade in heroin and weapons. Today, million-dollar villas are popping up in the outskirts of traditionally poor cities such as Saravan. Observers allege that local, Baluch authorities are not even trying to hide where the sudden richness is coming from – drug smuggling over the border²⁷. The region has become one of the world's main routes for heroin trade; in 2005, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that 60% of all opiates produced in Afghanistan reached markets through Iranian territory²⁸.

The presence of a highly lucrative criminal sector has led to a deterioration of the general security in the region, and clashes between security forces and drug smuggling gangs are common. According to Iranian press, some 3,300 military and police personnel have been killed in clashes with armed smugglers since the revolution in 1979²⁹. The drug smuggling gangs are heavily armed and sometimes function like veritable militias; UN reports tell of sophisticated weapons and equipment such as rocket launchers and night-vision goggles among the gangs³⁰, and that the

²⁵ United Nations Common Country Assessment for the Islamic Republic of Iran 2003.

²⁶ Senate of Pakistan: *Report of Parliamentary Committee on Baluchistan*, November 2005, pp. 10.

²⁷ Conversations with Mr. Stéphane A. Dudoignon, who has carried out several field studies in Iranian Baluchistan. March and April 2009.

²⁸ "Iran: Iran's Drug Problem Goes Beyond Afghan Deluge", *RFE/RL Iran Report*, 07 December 2006.

²⁹ "Drug Smugglers Kill 11 Iranians in Elite Corps", *The New York Times*, 23 July 2007.

³⁰ IRIN (UN Office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs), *Bitter-Sweet Harvest: Afghanistan's New War*. July 2004. Accessible at <http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=21&ReportId=63032&Country=Yes>.

convoys are followed by “armies” of up to 30 men³¹. Drug smugglers operating in this “Golden triangle” between the three countries tell of smuggling convoys of up to 18 S.U.Vs, run by Afghan commanders and equipped with Iranian and Afghan Baluchi fighters. The equipment is often on loan from the Afghan Taliban³², something that indicates a merging of the criminal economy in Baluchistan with Islamist networks over the border, assisted by the widespread tribal networks running across the whole region.

According to observers, a loose alliance of Baluchi tribes, based in Quetta, controls most of the drug traffic through the region. Tribesmen based in Quetta are further cooperating with Afghan Taliban in the trafficking; two of the tribes are mentioned as Rigi and Shahbakhsh³³. The latter, one of the larger and most powerful tribes in Iranian Baluchistan, is also implicated in another highly lucrative business: kidnapping. Both Iranian nationals and foreigners alike have fallen into the hands of members of the tribe – at least six foreigners have been kidnapped in the region between 1999 and 2008³⁴. The Shahbakhsh have further kidnapped Iranian officials, such as the Friday prayer leader in the town of Fahraj, Hojjat ol-Islam Javad Taheri, in the Kerman province, who in 2008 was abducted alongside a Japanese tourist³⁵. The two were liberated on Pakistani territory by Pakistani police, after eight months in detention being held by members of both the Rigi and Shahbakhsh tribes.³⁶ One of the kidnapers, Esmā’il Shahbakhsh, is believed to be the mastermind of the abduction of two Belgian tourists who travelled in the region in August 2007³⁷. As early as 1999, members of the group kidnapped three Italian engineers and later three Spaniard tourists, and sought to trade the hostages for the release of two members of the group³⁸. At the time, there were reports that Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan gave support to the Shahbakhsh group in order to put pressure on Iranian authorities to ease the combat against drug trafficking in the region³⁹.

It is unclear if the Iranian or foreign governments have paid ransom for the abductees, but another rationale behind the spate of kidnappings in the region is apparently to force the Iranian government to liberate detained militants and criminals of the tribes. Esmā’il Shahbakhsh

³¹ UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) in undated document: *Integrated Border Control in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Accessible at <http://www.unodc.org/iran/en/i50.html>.

³² “In the Land of Taliban”, *The New York Times*, 22 October 2006 The journalist, Elizabeth Rubin, used local drug smugglers as the source.

³³ Christopher D. Kondaki, “Taliban, the primer”, *Defence and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, October 2001, p. 6.

³⁴ *Kuwait Times* 15 June 2008.

³⁵ “Emam-e Jame’e Fahraj va tabe’e-ye Japon az dast-e ashraf-e maslah azad shodand” (Fahraj Friday prayer leader and Japanese tourist liberated from armed insurgents), *Fars News Agency*, 14 May 2008.

³⁶ Fars News Agency reports that one of the kidnapers, “Hamid Rigi, brother of Sharvar Malek Rigi (...) was arrested by Pakistani police” (See *ibid*) while Iranian and foreign press earlier has reported that Esmā’il Shahbakhsh has negotiated with the Iranian government on behalf of the group. “Japan Foreign Minister scolds freed backpacker”, *Agence France Presse*, 23 June 2008.

³⁷ “Iran says rebels freed kidnapped Japanese tourist”, *Agence France Presse*, 14 June 2008. Kerman is the region neighbouring Baluchistan.

³⁸ “Bureaucratic fights slow kidnapping solution”, *RFE/RL Iran Report*, 6 September 1999

³⁹ *Ibid*; RFE/RL cites Italian News Agency ANSA 17.08.1999.

reportedly tried to trade the abducted Friday prayer leader and the Japanese tourist for his imprisoned son and other gang members⁴⁰.

2.2 Paramilitary country

The borders between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan are nearly impossible to control, as they run through hundreds of kilometres of empty deserts and unhabited mountains. In addition to drugs and abductees, weapons flow freely across the border area. In Iranian Baluchistan, divine laws have been replaced with the law of the gun.

Faced with this situation, Iranian law enforcers are withdrawing from Baluchistan. On 6 April 2009, Iran's police chief announced that civilian police will pull entirely out of the region⁴¹. The void will thereafter be filled with Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and poorly trained members of the *Basij*, a paramilitary militia under the command of the IRGC and infamous for their religious zealotry. The Basij, which nationally numbers some 11 million members, are acting as extra-legal law enforcement troops echoing the role of the earlier mentioned *Komitehs*, with the military base Rasul-i Akram functioning as the seat for policing efforts in Baluchistan⁴², coordinating the activities of military forces and the militia. In the province, Basij militia members are deployed against drug smugglers⁴³. There is further evidence that the militia is used as a conventional police force in house searches and detentions of suspected Sunni militants⁴⁴. After the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, himself close to the militia, Basij members that had undergone training were given the right to arrest suspects⁴⁵.

As the Basijis and the IRGC become more omnipresent in the region, taking upon civilian tasks, clashes between Tehran's forces and rebels grow in intensity and frequency. Tehran is showing muscle and clamping mercilessly down on rebellion; the Revolutionary Guards were reportedly given the task of liberating the above-mentioned abducted Friday prayer leader, and raided suspected rebel hideouts with military helicopter gunships. Scores were killed, and hospitals in Zahedan, capital of Iranian Baluchistan, reported more than 200 wounded⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ "Freed Japanese hostage returns, wants mother's cooking", *Agence France Presse*, 17 June 2008.

⁴¹ *Press TV*, 06 April 2008. Accessible at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=90601§ionid=351020101>.

⁴² "Iran's Drug Problem Goes Beyond the Afghan Deluge", *RFE/RL*, 07 September 2006.

⁴³ "Iran's Basij – the mainstay of domestic security", *RFE/RL*, 07 December 2008.

⁴⁴ *Rooz Online*,

http://www.roozonline.com/english/archives/2007/02/violence_erupts_in_sistan_and_1.html, quoting "Violence erupts in Sistan and Baluchistan", *Fars News Agency*, 21 February 2007.

⁴⁵ "Mo'aven-e dadsetan-e tehran: niruha-ye basij dar radif-e zabet-e 'amm qarar migirad" (The vice-procurator of Tehran: the Basij get the right to arrest), *ISNA*, 20 August 2005. The commander of the Basij forces, Esmail Ahmadi Moghadam, was at the same time appointed chief of the national police force.

⁴⁶ "Iran's wild east is on the boil", *Gulf News*, 07 May 2008. Equally, governmental projects to stop drugs smuggling and militancy are directly touching upon the Baluch people's traditional free movement within the Baluch region, as Tehran reportedly is making a fence to close off large parts of the border with Pakistan. "Iran erecting wall along the border with Pakistan", *The Hindu*, 02 March 2007. Accessible at <http://www.zeenews.com/South-Asia/2007-03-02/357668news.html>.

With the Basijis and Revolutionary Guards taking law enforcement into their own hands, tensions are running high in the overwhelmingly Sunni Baluchistan. The militia and their commanders in the Revolutionary Guard are by many – including Jundullah – perceived as a primary example of Shi’a Muslim and Persian chauvinism. The situation is echoed in neighbouring Pakistan, where Baluch dissident and separatist groups have waged a low intensity war with the Pakistani government for decades. In Pakistani Baluchistan, provincial security is provided by the Frontier Corps, operating hundreds of checkpoints all over the region, being engaged in anti-drug trafficking, and having the mandate to meddle in sectarian strife⁴⁷. The Frontier Corps, a paramilitary group whose members are recruited from regions outside Baluchistan operates under the auspices of the central government and is accused of severe human rights abuses⁴⁸.

As we will see, the escalating tensions between governmental Iranian forces and Baluch rebels are increasingly expressed in religious terms, but socioeconomic grievances and conflicts between the centre and the periphery do not alone explain the rise of militant Sunni Muslim groups in the Islamic Republic. A look across the border to neighbouring Pakistan is essential to understand how deeply the religious environment in Iranian Baluchistan has transformed, a transformation that has created propitious conditions for a downward spiral of sectarian violence and the rise of Jundullah.

3 Deobandi developments

Sectarian strife is a well-known feature of political life in Pakistan, where the cleavages between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims run deep. The military coup of general Zia ul Haq in 1977 was followed by a thorough Islamizing process of all aspects of public life in the country, such as the imposition of Islamic taxes. The general advocated *Deobandism*, an austere reformist branch of Sunni Islam based on Hanafi fiqh originating in British India, and which has proved immensely popular in Pakistan. Among the ideological pillars in the branch is the oneness of God, in opposition to the Imamism of Shi’a Islam, as well as rejection of innovation⁴⁹ – thus antagonistic to the perpetual *itjihad* (independent interpretation of legal sources), central in the Shi’a clerical hierarchy.

With the support of Zia ul Haq, and in a multi-sectarian environment such as that of Pakistan, the Deobandi branch has for various reasons become radicalized. Early on the branch adopted a firebrand anti-Shi’a stance. A fatwa from 1940 issued from Darul Uloom in Deoband, the “mother seminary” in Uttar Pradesh, India, declared Shi’a Muslims as *kafir*, infidels. Pakistani Sunni clerics later endorsed the fatwa⁵⁰. Several groups have since engaged in violent sectarian

⁴⁷ Senate of Pakistan, *Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Baluchistan*. November 2005, pp. 11.

⁴⁸ “In Remote Pakistan Province, a Civil War Festers”, *The New York Times*, 02 April 2006.

⁴⁹ “The Tack”, article posted on the *Darul Uloom webpage*, http://darululoom-deoband.com/english/aboutdarululoom/the_tack.htm. Accessed 14.04.09.

⁵⁰ S.V.R. Nasr, “The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No.1 (February 2000), pp. 139-180. Citing Muhammad Munir, *From Jinnah to Zia*. Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1979, p. 46.

strife, with Shi'a Muslims being the main target – many are equally active supporters of, not to mention recruiters to, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Jihadism and anti-Shi'a violence have thus merged⁵¹. *Sipah-e Sahaba*, one of the main Deobandi and anti-Shi'a movements in Pakistan, has since its creation in 1985 targeted Iranian interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan⁵² – with connections to main Deobandi madrasas in Pakistani Baluchistan, it might seem as if the movement has had an impact on developments in Iran as well.

3.1 “Deobandization” of Pakistani Baluchistan

Even though the Baluch people sometimes are pictured as liberal in religious terms and alienated by extremist currents in Pakistan⁵³, radical Islamism has also taken deep roots in the Pakistani Baluch community. Due to the instability in Afghanistan, which shares a long border with the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, the frontier parts of the region have, during the last decades, become “Pashtonized” – at the time due to the influx of Afghan nationals, and as the consequence of a process of intended “Pashtonization” by the Pakistani government to counter Baluch nationalism and separatism⁵⁴. As the demographic situation in the region has changed, so has the political arena. Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam (Fazlur Rehman), the main Deobandi party in Pakistan, is one of the strongest parties in the province, and has for years led the provincial government. With a Deobandi party in power, the number of Deobandi madrasas has grown steadily, with financial support from the provincial government.

Other forces, sometimes opposite, have also contributed to the rise of Deobandi extremism in the Baluchistan province. Karachi, Pakistan's largest city situated on the edges of Baluchistan and mainly a Baluch city, has become a hotbed of radical Deobandi religious institutions. Karachi has during recent years been one of the main stages for sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'a as well as bloody clashes between Deobandis and the Barelvi branch of Pakistani Sunnism. In Karachi alone, there were in 2004 an estimated 1,500 Deobandi madrasas, and some of the largest have close ties with extremist anti-Shia movements such as Sipah-e Sahaba⁵⁵. Large urban madrasa networks are again sponsoring the construction and running of like-minded madrasas in rural provinces, often with former students of larger madrasas founding their own teaching institutions in their local environments⁵⁶. Some of the largest Deobandi institutions also run

⁵¹ Maryam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Réseaux islamistes – La connexion afghano-pakistanaise*. Paris: Hachette Littérature, 2004, pp. 29.

⁵² Animesh Roul, “Sipah-e Sahaba: Fomenting sectarian violence in Pakistan”, *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation), Volume 3, Issue 2, 26 January 2005.

⁵³ See for example “Pakistan: the worsening conflict in Baluchistan”, Brussels: International Crisis Group, Report, 14 September 2006.

⁵⁴ The government has for example given Pakistani identity cards to Afghan Pashtuns, allowing them to vote in Pakistani elections. “Pakistan: The Forgotten Conflict on Baluchistan”. Brussels: International Crisis Group, Asia Briefing No. 69, 22 October 2007.

⁵⁵ International Crisis Group citing Wafaq al-Madaris (the Madrasa federation): “Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism”. Brussels: International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 130, 29 March 2007.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Sectarianism in Pakistan: the Radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni Identities”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No.3, July 1998.

outlets in Baluchistan, with huge popularity. One of the largest Darul Oloom madrasas in the region enrolls annually 1,500 boarders and another 1,000 day-boys⁵⁷.

The region also became caught in the middle of the eight-year long war between Iraq and Iran (1980-88). During this period Iraq sponsored a large number of anti-Iranian madrasas in Pakistan. At the same time, the Iranians embarked on a “Shi’a empowerment” strategy in Pakistan, something that triggered harsh Sunni responses. During the process, extremist Sunni Ulema were able to reach out to a region so far untouched by sectarian tensions. “If you look at where the most [Sunni] madrasas were constructed [in Baluchistan], you will realise that they form a wall blocking off Iran from Pakistan”, a Pakistani Baluch politician states in an interview with the International Crisis Group⁵⁸.

The growth in the extremist network has not only fuelled sectarian violence in the region – it has also proved to be a crucial factor in the regrouping and renewed strength of Taliban, which launches attacks into Afghanistan from its Quetta headquarters⁵⁹. Local sources estimate that as many as 10,000 Taliban fighters are present in the Baluchistan province⁶⁰, while the local population reportedly serve as a pool of recruits⁶¹. With the region becoming increasingly volatile under the grip of Deobandi networks, the religious sentiments among the Baluch population are also transforming. Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the leader of the extremist Lal Masjid mosque, a religious complex in Islamabad stormed by military forces in mid-2007, was for example of Baluch descent.⁶² Also, many students enrolled in the madrasas connected to the mosque were drawn from the tribal areas in North West Frontier Province and the Baluch regions of Pakistan. Observers today tell of Pashto recruiters, bussing Baluchi youths to “centers of religious learning” (probably camps of indoctrination and / or training) outside Baluchistan.⁶³

⁵⁷ William Dalrymple, “Inside Islam’s “Terror Schools””, *New Statesman*, 28 March 2005.

⁵⁸ “The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan”. Brussels: International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 95, 18 April 2005.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* The Crisis Group here cites an official in the Human Rights Corps of Pakistan, and K. Alan Kronstadt, “Pakistan-US Relations”, US Congressional Research Service Report, 06 June 2007.

⁶⁰ “In the land of the Taliban”, *The New York Times*, 22 October 2006. The journalist cites Maulawi Mohammadin, a cleric from the Afghan Helmand province, operating in Quetta.

⁶¹ “Baluchistan feeds Taliban’s growing power”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 May 2006. Accessible at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/05/31/MNGT1J4ULII.DTL>

⁶² Qandeel Siddique, *The Red Mosque operation and its impact on the growth of the Pakistani Taliban*. Kjeller: FFI, FFI Research Report No.2008/01915. Accessible on http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00115/Qandeel_Siddique_-_115418a.pdf. The first leader of the mosque, Abdul Rashid Ghazi’s father Maulana Muhammad Abdullah, had the support of Zia ul-Haq as he mobilized popular sentiments against the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. (Bhutto was executed under President Zia ul-Haq’s regime.) Maulana Abdullah later became involved in sectarian politics with Sipah-e-Sahaba, a hard-line and vehemently anti-Shiite Deobandi movement, and motivated thousands of people for Jihad in Afghanistan. See also “The Road to Lal Masjid and its Aftermath”, *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation), Volume 5, Issue 14 (19 July 2007).

⁶³ French anthropologist Jean During in a presentation at La Maison de Sciences de l’Homme, Paris, 02 April 2009, in a seminary organized and led by Stéphane A. Dudoignon.

Equally important; several of the madrasas stress that the students engage in *tablighi* (proselytizing missions) for which the students receive a special stipend⁶⁴, thereby bypassing the institutionalized clergy and the boundaries determined by the mosques, seemingly also a central feature in Jundullah. Not only has the Deobandi movement developed solid roots in Pakistani Baluchistan – but also in neighboring Iran the current is today the main branch of Sunni Islam. As the tribal networks are crucial to the trafficking of arms and drugs between the three countries, they transit and diffuse religious ideas and ideologies over borders as well.

3.2 Networks without boundaries: the spread of Deobandism

As shown above, Sunni orthodoxy and Deobandi extremism surfaced gradually among the Iranian Baluch during the 20th century as a reaction to the aggressive “persianization” and later “Shi’ification” by the Iranian regime. Religiosity became an important identity maker and a political factor in the deteriorating relationship between Baluch society and succeeding governments in Iran, reinforced by ethnicity and the uncompromising challenges the central government posed to tribal traditions.

The tribal networks running across the border have been essential in exporting religious ideas from Pakistan to Iran. The mullahs of the Baluchi tribes in Pakistan and Iran⁶⁵ were historically almost exclusively trained in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, and thus exposed to radical ideas and sectarian strife that has unfolded in those countries during the last century. Equally, Iranian Baluch leaders sought refuge in Pakistani Quetta during the violent struggle that followed the Iranian Revolution – a period when Deobandism increasingly dominated the religious environment in Pakistan and a wave of Afghan refugees, many of whom advocated Pashto regionalism and ultraconservative Islamism, tipped the demographic balance in the region.

It is thus not surprising that the religious developments in Iranian Baluchistan largely echo those of neighboring countries. New elements in Baluch religiosity have rather recently been introduced; the concept of *Tabligh* appeared for the first time in the late 1960s, when large gatherings for the purpose of teaching Islamic rituals and ideas were organized. The proselytizing movement *Tablighi-e Jama’at*, urging a return to the life of the Prophet and his disciples, rapidly became very popular among the Baluch, with an important centre in Saravan, close to the Pakistani border⁶⁶. At the same time, prayers in Arabic were introduced among Baluch tribesmen as foreign-trained mullahs deemed the Baluchi language as not suitable for prayers⁶⁷. As the sectarian tensions unfolded in Pakistan, and as the new revolutionary regime in Iran embarked on an aggressive Shi’a advocacy campaign in all spheres of the society, a growing anti-Shi’a sentiment took roots among the Iranian Baluchs. As writes Philip Salzman:

⁶⁴ “Pakistan: Karachi’s Madrasas and Violent Extremism”, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Un Maulawi contre les Pasdaran?”, *Actes Sud, Pensée de Midi*, 2009/1: No.27, pp. 92-100.

⁶⁶ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *Voyage aux pays des Balouches* (Voyage to the Baluch homeland). Paris: Éditions Cartouche, 2009.

⁶⁷ Salzman, “Black tents of Baluchistan”. *Op cit.* pp. 342-343

The Sunni Sarhadi (northern) Baluch did not think much of the deviant and mistaken Shi'a Islam of the Persians. The Sarhadi tent dwellers were not really sure that they wanted to grant the Shi'a Persians status as real Muslims. (They) even expressed doubts that the Shi'a Persians would be admitted to heaven⁶⁸.

Baluchistan has historically been a patchwork of different currents within Sunni Islam, with Sufi brotherhoods centered on *pirs*⁶⁹ being one of the main elements in popular Baluch religion. But as the Sufi-influenced Barelvi current in Pakistan⁷⁰ has lost ground to the Deobandi branch, the same evolution has taken place in Iranian Baluchistan; Deobandism is today the main religious branch of the Sunnis in this volatile eastern corner of Iran.

Deobandism was originally created in British India, in order to establish a religious and legal framework for the Indian Muslims within which the Muslim identity and belief could be preserved, at the same time as living in an "infidel" state⁷¹. This rationale finds an echo in Iranian Baluchistan where the Sunnis are under pressure from the Shi'a political elite, and where Deobandism provides a way to cope with life within an "infidel" state. Interestingly enough, the Shahbakhsh tribe is once again playing a leading role.

3.3 Drugs and Deobandism: the role of the Shahbakhsh

As noted above, members of the Shahbakhsh tribe are highly active in the criminal economy of Baluchistan, being heavily engaged in both drugs and kidnapping. Nevertheless, the tribe has also been profoundly involved in the spread of Deobandi ideas amongst the Sunnis.

The religious identity amongst the Shahbakhsh seems to be strong, as the tribe has on a number of occasions mounted rebellions with the Koran in their hands. Having a history of revolt against British influence in the region, the Shahbakhsh tribe has also been engaged in Islamist militancy against other local religious customs since the 1930s. During this period, tribal leaders declared Jihad on the Dhikri sect of Sufis, a jihad inspired by the then religious head of the tribe, Maulana Abd al-Aziz Mullazada. The Shahbakhsh were thus a crucial component in a process of homogenization of religious life in Baluchistan⁷². From then on, the tribe has further played a central role in the transformation of Sunni religiosity in the region, being the major proponents of

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁶⁹ A *Pir* is the leader of a Sufi Tariqa (religious order), who initiates the followers to the gnosis of Islam, i.e. the esoteric and mystical sides of the religion.

⁷⁰ The Barelvi movement is a Sufi Tariqa (religious order) that evolved around Maulana Ahmad Rida Khan in the 19th century. An important feature in the movement is the belief in saints, as well as rites associated with worshipping the dead. The movement is accused of innovation of new religious beliefs by the Deobandi as well as by Wahhabis – Saudi Arabia's Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa has for example declared that Muslims should not pray behind the Barelwis, the reason being the perceived innovation and disbelief advocated by the group. The committee's Fatwa concerning the movement state that Barelwism is based on *Kufr* (disbelief) and *Bid'ah* (innovation). See fatwa online: www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/creed/deviants/0010517_5.htm.

⁷¹ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: the trail of political Islam*. London, I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2002.

⁷² Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *Voyage aux pays des Balouches* (Voyage to the Baluch homeland) Paris: Éditions Cartouche, 2009.

the spread of the Deobandi thought in Baluchistan. Maulana Abd al-Aziz Mullahzada succeeded in imposing himself as the religious authority of the Baluch, and gradually as a religious authority over all the ethnically diverse Sunni communities in the whole country. In 1971 he founded the Darul Uloom in Zahedan⁷³, and became the motor behind a wave of construction of Deobandi madrasas all over the region⁷⁴.

The Shahbakhsh are also leading other madrasas in the region. Maulavi Hafez Mohammad Ali, the head of the Abu Hanifa madrasa in the outskirts of Zabol, an ethnically diverse city with a large Pashto population in a lawless corner close to the Afghan border, is a member of the Shahbakhsh tribe⁷⁵.

Maulana Abd al-Aziz Mullahzada in Iran took an increasingly political role after the Islamic Revolution, when he took the leadership of a clerically-oriented political faction that primarily sought to safeguard the religious rights of the Baluch⁷⁶. The religious influence of the Shahbakhsh lineage has ever since translated into political influence. After the death of Maulana Mullahzada in 1987, his son Maulavi Abdul Hamid took over the reins of the Darul Oloom and is today the *Sheikh ol-Islam* of Zahedan, the “Sunni Capital” of Iran. He is the *de facto* religious head of a huge network of Sunni institutions in the region, which today numbers more than 4,000 mosques, 70 Sunni seminaries and 120 madrasas⁷⁷. 40 of the seminaries are directly under the auspices of Zahedan Darul Oloom⁷⁸; today the main Sunni mosque in Iran, drawing students from all over Central Asia⁷⁹. Huge annual gatherings are attracting thousands of Sunni scholars from Iran and the neighboring countries. It has seemingly tight connections with the Darul Oloom in Karachi, the president of which is also the chief Deobandi mufti of Pakistan, and who encourages the students to engage in *tablighi*⁸⁰. The Iranian “twin”, who directly runs a network of madrasas within and outside Zahedan, draws foreign guest lecturers, such as the previous principal of the Islamic University in Islamabad, doctor Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi⁸¹, ex-minister of religious

⁷³ The name itself implies the Deobandi nature of the madrasa, as it is the same as the “original” Deobandi learning complex in Deoband, India, where the branch was founded.

⁷⁴ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Zahedan vs. Qom? Les sunnites d’Iran et l’émergence du Baloutchistan comme foyer de droit hanafite, sous la monarchie Pahlavi”, in Denise Aigle, Isabelle Charleux, Vincent Goossaert, Roberte Hamayon, eds., *Hommages à Françoise Aubin*, St. Augustin : Monumenta Serica Institute, 2009. (Not yet published).

⁷⁵ “Dastgiri-ye barkhi az bastegan-e modir-e masjid-e emam abuhanifa” (Detention of some of the relatives of the Emam Abuhanifa mosque principal), *SunniOnline* 09 August 2008. SunniOnline is the information service of the Zahedan Dar ol-Oloom complex.

⁷⁶ Selig S. Harrison, “Baluch Nationalism and Superpower Rivalry”, *International Security*, Vol. 5, No.3, Winter 1980-1981.

⁷⁷ “Profile: Southern Iranian Sunni seminaries, Mowlavi Abdolhamid”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, 14 November 2007.

⁷⁸ “Darulooloom-e Zahedan”, article posted on www.sunnionline.net.

⁷⁹ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Un Maulawi contre les Pasharan?”, *Actes Sud, Pensée de Midi*, 2009/1: No.27, pp. 92-100.

⁸⁰ “Pakistan: Karachi’s Madrasas and Violent Extremism”. *Op. cit.* SunniOnline, run by the madrasa, has links to Darul Uloom in Karachi as well as several other Deobandi institutions.

⁸¹ “Doktor Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi mehman-e darolooloom-e Zahedan” (Doctor Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi is the guest of Zahedan Darul Uloom), www.sunnionline.net, 24 March 2009.

affairs in Pakistan.⁸² Ghazi, who has published a number of books on Deobandi history, has on a number of occasions taken controversial positions, such as supporting Palestinian suicide attacks⁸³ and strongly supporting the declaration of the Ahmadiyya sect as non-Muslims⁸⁴. Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the pro-Taliban leader of the JUI, has also been guest in graduation ceremonies at the Zahedan Darul Uloom⁸⁵.

The school principal and *Sheikh ol-Eslam* of Zahedan, Maulavi Abdul Hamid is a frequent critic of the provincial and central authorities, which he criticizes for poor management. The messages of groups such as Jundullah are further echoed in the message of the Sheikh, as he demands a fairer share of Sunni representation in the running of Iran⁸⁶. Nevertheless, Iranian Sunni mosques and madrasas are funded by the Iranian government and dependent on Tehran for their survival. Sunni scholars in Iran can therefore not be too vocal in their opposition to Tehran, and not overtly supportive of radical groups such as Jundullah. As the BBC writes:

On many occasions Abdolhamid has been under pressure from both the government and the anti-government Baluchi ethnic armed groups to distance himself from the other side⁸⁷.

The Sunni clergy must therefore watch their steps carefully. Nevertheless, with recent clampdowns on other Sunni communities in other provinces and a violent escalation between Basijis and rebels in Iranian Baluchistan⁸⁸, the clergy is under pressure.

In this political and religious environment, extremist groups such as Jundullah are surfacing.

4 Jundullah: Ethnic opposition turns religious

There is a myriad of small armed opposition groups operating in Baluchistan – most of whom are hard to distinguish from criminal gangs. But following the evolution in Jundullah's blogs, it seems as if the movement is capable of absorbing other groups in the region. As Jundullah merges with other groups, its profile is transforming – from that of a largely ethnic and nationalist movement confined to the tribe of the leadership, to an intertribal movement with a more overtly sectarian profile.

⁸² “Vested interests twisted my statement about Qadianis – Mahmood Ghazi”, *Pakistan Press International*, 12 September 2009.

⁸³ “Pakistan minister says no further role in Government”, *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, 10 July 2002.

⁸⁴ “Vested interests twisted my statement about Qadianis – Mahmood Ghazi”, *Pakistan Press International*, 12 September 2009.

⁸⁵ “Thousands of Muslims Stress Solidarity”, *Iran Daily*, 12 August 2007. Accessible on <http://www.iran-daily.com/1386/2914/html/index.htm>.

⁸⁶ “Profile: Southern Iranian Sunni seminaries, Mowlavi Abdolhamid”, *op.cit.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ In 2008 there were clampdowns and detentions of Sunni followers in Kurdistan, Zanjan province and Baluchistan, respectively. See www.sunnionline.net.

4.1 A family affair?

At the outset, the Jundullah group seemed to be a phenomenon mostly confined to the Rigi tribe, one of the large Baluchi tribes, and apparently deeply implicated in the criminal economy in the region, as shown above. The founder and the leader of the group is Abdolmalek Rigi, also known under the *nom de guerre* Abdolmalek Baluch. The 27-year-old is also titled “Rahbar-e Enghelab-e Baluch”, *the leader of the Baluch revolution*, a play on the title of the Supreme leader of Iran - the leader of the Islamic Revolution⁸⁹. In other postings on the group’s blog, the leader takes the title “Emir”⁹⁰, thus picturing himself as the leader of a community of believers. According to The Guardian, citing Rigi’s brother, the young man created the group after another brother and an uncle were killed in separate encounters with Iranian police⁹¹. From the outset, Jundullah thus bore the features of being a personal vendetta against the authorities, operating according to the Baluch tradition of blood revenge. Several of the other central members of the group seem to be close relatives of Rigi, at least within the same tribe. His brother Abdolghafur Rigi, who became the group’s first suicide bomber, appears in videos to have had a central role. Another brother and earlier spokesman of the group, Abdolhamid Rigi, was arrested in Quetta in 2007 as he tried to cross the border to Afghanistan with false identity papers. Rigi was later handed over to Iranian authorities⁹². Also, during an apparent shootout in the Chahjamal seminary in Iranshahr between security forces and reported Jundullah members, two Rigis were reportedly killed⁹³. If the victims in the shootout were indeed Jundullah members as claimed by the official press, it could indicate ties between the lay extremist movement and Sunni clerics.

Little is known about the leader, other than that he was born into a middle-class family⁹⁴, and may have been born in Gasht, a small town between Saravan and Zahedan in an area which has traditionally been pastoral land of the Rigi tribe⁹⁵. In the same town he attended a Sunni Seminary from which he dropped out – according to Iranian press expelled due to his extremist views – after only a year⁹⁶. The Jundullah leader has therefore low religious credentials. However, Abdolmalek Rigi tells in an interview with the Pakistani news magazine *Herald* that he, during his youth, was active in the Deobandi movement of *Tablighi Jamaat* and that he

⁸⁹ From a blog run by a group called “Fedayan-e Baluch”, that fights for the “Sunni rights and practices and Baluch people”. See <http://fedaeiyan.blogfa.com/87092.aspx>.

⁹⁰ For example, in a posting dated 15.03.09: http://junbish.blogspot.com/2009_03_01_archive.html.

⁹¹ “We will cut them until Iran begs for mercy”, The Guardian 17 January 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/1507890/We-will-cut-them-until-Iran-asks-for-mercy.html>.

⁹² “Action against Jundullah soon”, *The Nation*, 24 July 2008. Abdolhamid Rigi had earlier given interviews regarding Jundullah’s mission, the only time someone from the group except Abdolmalek Rigi has given interviews. The Guardian (17.01.06) refer in the interview to Abdolhamid as the “group’s chief spokesman”.

⁹³ Report by *Sistan va Baluchistan Hamun TV*, 06 April 2008. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus unit, 07 April 2008.

⁹⁴ “We want a government in Iran that guarantees equal rights for every citizen”, *The Herald* (Pakistan), September 2008.

⁹⁵ In the early 1900s the American geographer C.P. Skrine visited the area, and described Gwarkuh, a mountain close to Gasht, as an important camping place for the Rigi tribe. C.P. Skrine, “The Highlands of Persian Baluchistan”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 78, No. 4, October 1931.

⁹⁶ “Iran MP warns Pakistan against “Terrorist group’s” activities”, *Fars News Agency*, 08 December 2008.

enjoyed preaching – an activity he undertook also outside Baluchistan, as Rigi was briefly jailed in Iranian Kurdistan for preaching activities⁹⁷. It seems probable that several members of the Rigi tribe were engaged in proselytizing. In a curious but illustrating story, the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* reported in 2000 that five Iranians had been detained in the town of Dolutepe for “activism aimed at supporting the Shari’a order”. The Iranians had reportedly addressed several mosques in the area prior to their detention. Three of the arrested men were Rigis⁹⁸.

Not only confined to the Rigi tribe, the Tabligh seems to be an important feature in the internal organization of Jundullah. In several videos posted on the Internet, Rigi play an active role in discussion groups centred on Holy Scriptures. In another video, Rigi leads the Morning Prayer before an attack on a military convoy, praying before the other members of the group⁹⁹, even though his poor religious training normally would prescribe a more passive role.

As for the internal organization of the group, little is known. Jundullah has established its own media arm, a “political office”¹⁰⁰, as well as an intelligence division¹⁰¹. The group rarely mentions specific Sunni clergymen apart from one, a defunct, militant cleric called *Mulana Mohammad ‘Amr Sarbazi* (Jundullah accuses the Iranian government of having orchestrated his murder) who seems to have had a strong influence on the group. Jundullah mentions that he often diffused Fatwas calling for Jihad against the Iranian regime, and that his “(bullet) magazine was never empty”¹⁰². Jundullah says in a message dated 14.05.07 that it operates from a *houze*, a term often used for religious seminaries, some 85 kilometers from Saravan¹⁰³, something that could indicate that the group indeed follows the guidelines of radical Sunni clerics.

4.2 Weapons, training and financing

Even though Rigi denies using Pakistani territory to stage operations in Iran, this is probably not the case. It is telling that the group’s leader meets with journalists inside Pakistani territory. The fact that the brother Abdolhamid Rigi was arrested in Quetta also suggests that Jundullah moves across the borders. According to Baluchi sources, members of the group have received training in Waziristan, the Pakistani tribal areas¹⁰⁴. Arrested alleged Jundullah members shown in “confessions” on Iranian TV have also stated that the group has been trained in Pakistan by either “English-speaking” or “Arabic-speaking” individuals¹⁰⁵.

⁹⁷ Rigi in an October 17, 2008 interview with the Dubai-based Al Arabiyya TV. Interview cited in “Baluchi rebel boss says he’s ready for peace”, *International Iran Times* (Washington), 07 November 2008.

⁹⁸ *Milliyet* (Turkey) Ankara edition, 22 April 2000, translation by BBC world services.

⁹⁹ All videos posted on www.taftanb.blogspot.com. Accessed several times in the period 10 February to 10 April 2009.

¹⁰⁰ As told on the blog in a message dated 24 Bahman 1385, and the videos of the preparations of Abdulghafour Rigi’s suicide operation.

¹⁰¹ Undated message, September 2007: http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007_09_01_archive.html.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007_05_01_archive.html.

¹⁰⁴ According to Willem Marx, American-Dutch journalist. Conversations and emails in March 2009.

¹⁰⁵ As these “confessions” are not a reliable source of information, this is impossible to verify.

Rigi has, in interviews with foreign press, denied that the group enjoys ties with other movements across the border.¹⁰⁶ Certain elements may nevertheless tell us that this might be untrue. The group has on several occasions used improvised explosive devices in their attacks, a method frequently used by militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Indeed, the group mentions in the blog that it had its own bomb-maker expert, a certain “Uthman”, which is an unusual name in Baluchistan, but more common in the Sindh region of Pakistan and amongst the Pakistani Mohajirs (Muslim settlers from India)¹⁰⁷. The man, called “Ostad-e Uthman” (Professor Uthman) was killed by Iranian forces in October 2008¹⁰⁸. In the blog he is referred to as one of the “isatedza” (plural of Arabic istadz; master or professor), something that could indicate that the person had a certain ideological influence over the group. There is also a possibility that he was Iranian of other ethnic origin, possibly Kurd¹⁰⁹, as Rigi has never denied that the group attracts fighters from other regions of Iran¹¹⁰. What is nevertheless clear is that the Rigi have moral supporters in other regions of the country. On the Taftan website, rebels from the Ahwaz area close to the Iraqi border post greetings to the group, praising the success of Jundullah operations. It might further be significant that many of the members of the group seemingly use *noms de guerre*, another common feature in other jihadist organizations.

The group makes use of heavy weaponry and sophisticated equipment, and even claims to have shot down a governmental Cobra helicopter¹¹¹. Videos posted on the internet show how members of the group train with rocket launchers – in newspaper articles it is further mentioned that the group use satellite phones in communications¹¹². It is unknown from where the group gets the

¹⁰⁶ The Jundullah strategy thus differs considerably from that of Pakistani Baluch nationalists and separatists, who have teamed up with Islamist rebels from the Chinese Xinjiang province to coordinate attacks on Chinese workers engaged by the Pakistani government in Baluchistan. See for example Niazi, Tarique, “The Ongoing Baluch Insurgency in Pakistan”, *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation), Vol. 3, Issue 11.

¹⁰⁷ According to Stéphane Dudoignon the name is also common amongst Pakistani clergy. Email dated 09 April 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Communiqué posted on Jundullah website 10.10.08.

¹⁰⁹ Stéphane Dudoignon writes that Deobandi madrasas became heavily present in Kurdistan during the 1970s. See Stéphane A. Dudoignon, “Un Maulawi contre les Pasdaran?”, *Actes Sud, Pensée de Midi*, 2009/1, No.27, pp. 92-100. Deobandism is present in larger cities in northern Iran such as in Urmia, a city with an important Kurdish Sunni community. Link found on Sunni Online, Zahedan Darul Uloom: http://www.sunnionline.us/farsi/54765/%d9%85%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%b1%d8%b3_%d9%88_%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%a7%da%a9%d8%b2_%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%85%db%8c/. There have also been incidents of sectarian strife in Kurdistan – the Friday prayer leader in one of the Sunni mosques in the city of Mahabad was killed by unknown assailants last year. See “Teror-e nafarjam-e dadsetan-e Khahsh-e Iran” (unsuccessful attempt on the public prosecutor in Khahsh in Iran), *BBC Persian*, 29 September 2008.

¹¹⁰ Rigi was asked by Al Arabiyya in an interview if non-Baluchis were active in the group. Rigi answered: “We have our brother Sunnis from Khorasan, Kordestan, and from all over the country. They fight for the causes that are of concern to the Sunnis”, *Al Arabiyya*, 17 October 2008. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 23 October 2008.

¹¹¹ Communiqué posted on Jundullah website 26 December 2008.

¹¹² “We will cut them until Iran begs for mercy”, *The Telegraph*, 17 January 2006.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/1507890/We-will-cut-them-until-Iran-asks-for-mercy.html>.

weapons and the financial means to equip 600 fighters – even though it claims to frequently raid military installations and convoys to take the weaponry.

Rigi claims that the men in the group are never paid, but supported by their families¹¹³ – while *Tabnak*, an Iranian news agency that often seems unusually well informed, has claimed that local petrol station owners are funding the group as payment for protection of fuel smuggling from Iranian Baluchistan to Pakistan and Afghanistan¹¹⁴. The Iranian authorities further point an accusing finger at Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and USA, as well as at the Iranian Diaspora. While some of these allegations seem highly improbable (especially as Iran usually claims that “foreign powers” are guilty whenever there is instability in the country), others are difficult to verify.

4.3 Capabilities and operations

From its inception, Jundullah seems to have been able to develop significant firepower as well as a large organization. Rigi says he started with a group of only 30 armed men. If true, the size of the group must have increased more than 20 times since its inception in 2004/5. Jundullah now claims to have some 600 fighters, and Rigi alleges that the group has trained 2000 men¹¹⁵. He boasts that the group enjoys such a huge popularity that he has to turn down would-be fighters due to a lack of arms and training capabilities¹¹⁶.

Attacks and clashes with military forces have occurred virtually over the whole eastern part of the Iranian Baluchistan region, as illustrated in the map on the next page. This highlights the fact that the group is capable of moving freely over longer distances and that its operations are not confined to the immediate border regions. The spate of kidnappings on the road between Bam and Zahedan during recent years shows that Baluch militants are not only operating within the Sistan va Baluchistan region. There have also been attacks outside the region; including one on a mourning procession for killed Revolutionary Guards as far north as in Torbat-e Jam, a city close to Mashhad in the northeastern corner of the country and on the road to Herat in Afghanistan¹¹⁷. Jundullah may have been the perpetrator of the attack. The group may also have been involved in an attack on a convoy of cars carrying the region’s governor in Tasuki outside Zabol in 2006 where 22 people including civilians were killed, an operation for which the group first claimed

¹¹³ Rigi in an interview with a Pakistani monthly magazine. See “We want a government in Iran that guarantees equal rights for every citizen”, *The Herald*, September 2008.

¹¹⁴ “Khashaf-e bozorgtarin manba’-e mali-e abdolmalik rigi dar Iran!” (The most important means of finance for Abdolmalek Rigi in Iran discovered!), *Tabnak*, 15 October 2007, Accessible at <http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=42>. As there is a steady, very important stream of illegal smuggling of fuel out of Iran, where the price is among the world’s lowest, the claim seems probable.

¹¹⁵ “Iran Sunni Jundollah leader vows to mount operations in Tehran”, *Al Arabiyya*, 17 October 2008. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 23 October 2008.

¹¹⁶ Rigi in an interview with a Pakistani monthly magazine. See “We want a government in Iran that guarantees equal rights for every citizen”, *The Herald*, September 2008.

¹¹⁷ “Intelligence minister comments on BBC activities in Iran”, *Islamic Student’s News Agency*, 14 January 2009. Transcription by BBC Monitoring World Media 14 January 2009.

and then denied responsibility¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, on the Taftan News webpage, a video is posted under the heading “amaliat-e efekhar-e afarin-e Tasuki” (the successful, honorable operation at Tasuki), clearly showing how the group prepares an operation, while Rigi leads a prayer in front of his men¹¹⁹.



Figure 2: Jundullah attacks and clashes with Iranian military forces

So far, it seems as if Baluchistan is the main battleground in Jundullah’s small-scale war against the Iranian authorities. Rigi nevertheless claims that the group plans operations in the Iranian capital Tehran:

We are trying hard to expand our area of operations to include the whole of Iran and we pray to God to make us successful in carrying out operations in Tehran itself¹²⁰.

If it is true that the group steadily attracts new recruits, it seems plausible that Rigi and his men may be in a position to target cities outside Baluchistan. The timeline of operations shows that the group is becoming more daring – targeting both military convoys and casernes.

Timeline of operations

- Jundullah become known to the outside world for the first time on 20th of June 2005, when the Dubai TV channel Al Arabiyya reports that “an unknown organization calling itself Jundullah” gives them a video of an Iranian officer, Shahab Mansouri, taken hostage by the group. Jundullah gives the Iranian government three weeks to release members of the group from prison, otherwise Mansouri will be killed.

¹¹⁸ TV programme showing “confessions” of alleged Jundullah members, *Sistan va Baluchistan TV*, 16 March 2007. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 20 March 2007.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.taftanb.blogspot.com/>.

- A bit more than three weeks later, on the 12th of July, the TV channel reports says it has received a videotape showing the execution of Shahab Mansouri, and that Rigi appears in an earlier tape, interrogating the hostage.
- On 4 January 2006, nine Iranian border guards are taken hostage by Jundullah. The group demands in a video sent to Al Arabiyya the release from prison of 16 of its members.
- On the 17 March 2006, the group carries out the famous Tasuki attack on the convoy carrying the governor of Sistan va Baluchistan province. The governor is later reported injured, but alive¹²¹.
- About one month later, Jundullah claims responsibility for the killing of an “officer of the Revolutionary Guard responsible for the Higher Political Committee of the Revolutionary Guard in the area of Zahedan”, showing that the group is aiming at higher ranking security officials in the region.
- On 13 May 2006, twelve people are killed at a roadblock on the Zabol-Zahedan highway. It is reported that Iranian security forces have received a call from Jundullah claiming responsibility. However, Abdolmalek Rigi later denies involvement in the attack in an interview with BBC Persian.
- In mid-December 2006, the Interior Ministry says the group is behind an explosion killing one person in Zahedan. The bomb went off close to the office of the regional governor.
- On 14 February 2007, Jundullah attracts world media attention by claiming responsibility for a car bomb that kills 11 Revolutionary Guards on a bus in Zahedan¹²².
- Later, the group continues to aim at Guards and policemen, such as in a high-profile kidnapping operation in June 2008 when Jundullah captured 16 border guards and later killed them¹²³.
- In their blog, the group claims responsibility for an ambush killing 50 Revolutionary Guards on 12 October 2008, near the Dumag area. A few days later Jundullah claims to have killed 43 Guards in clashes in a mountainous area, saying that information about the incidents is censored by the Iranian authorities¹²⁴.
- The spate of kidnappings and ambushes seems to grow steadily throughout 2008 and 2009, and according to the group the rate of success is high. The group claims to have executed more than 200 prisoners after “investigation” into their cases¹²⁵; the group has apparently established its own “tribunal” to judge its prisoners.

¹²⁰ “Iran Sunni Jundollah leader vows to mount operations in Tehran”, *Al Arabiyya*, 17 October 2008. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 23 October 2008.

¹²¹ “Bandits kill 21 in attack on motorcade in Iran”, *China People’s Daily*, 18 March 2006.

¹²² The timeline until 14 February 2007 was prepared by BBC Monitoring research, 15 February 2007.

¹²³ “Iran says rebel group killed 16 policemen”, *Agence France Presse*, 04 December 2008.

¹²⁴ Communiqués dated 12 October 2008 and 15 October 2008.

¹²⁵ “We want a government in Iran that guarantees equal rights for every citizen”, *The Herald* (Pakistan), September 2008.

5 *Fitnah* in Baluchistan?

Rigi states in interviews that the group wants

A government in Iran that guarantees equal rights for every citizen (...) we demand that the Iranian government respect our rights and then we will give up the armed struggle. But I am sure that the government will never do that¹²⁶.

Unlike Pakistani Baluch rebels, who want full separation from Pakistan and the creation of a Baluch ethnic state¹²⁷, Rigi says he does not make any territorial claims. At the same time, the leader says the group is established to “protect our *ulema* [scholars] and mosques and defend the rights of the Sunni community all over Iran. That is the most important pillar of our organization. It is a constant principle recorded in the charter of the organization.”¹²⁸ Jundullah is therefore a primary example of how a nationalist agenda has merged with religious motivation in a movement that resorts to violence. But if Jundullah was initially a “family affair” motivated by revenge and largely confined within the Rigi tribe, recent developments strongly suggest that the group is undergoing a significant transformation. New members seem to add a new religious and hard-line dimension to the activities of Jundullah.

5.1 *Shahbakhsh* revisited: new extremist elements in Jundullah?

Jundullah has on different occasions merged with other armed resistance groups, such as one under the Arab name *alhaqq nahzat ‘edalat*, the Righteous Movement of Justice, who according to the Jundullah blog has been engaged in “cultural and political activities” – but whose website contains links to the extremist Taftan blog as well as the Darul Oloom in Zahedan¹²⁹. Some months later, the group announced a merger with the *Sazman-e Mobarezin-e Sepah-e Rasul Allah* (the Association of Fighters of the Prophet’s Army) under the leadership of Hajji Vahedbakhsh Derakhshan¹³⁰. The name of the group immediately recalls that of *Sipah-e Sahaba*, The Army of the Companions of the Prophet, the Pakistani Deobandi movement with a long history of involvement in sectarian strife and killings.

Jundullah’s absorption of other groups suggests that its sectarian profile will be strengthened. The story of Jundullah is the story of a dangerous mix of ethnic nationalism, criminal activities and jihadi currents – and the incorporation of new members seems to radicalize the movement.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ See for example Tarique Niazi, “The Ongoing Baluch Insurgency in Pakistan”, *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation) Vol. 3, Issue 11.

¹²⁸ “Iran Sunni Jundollah leader vows to mount operations in Tehran”, *Al Arabiyya*, 17 October 2008. Transcription by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 23 October 2008.

¹²⁹ The website of the group is <http://watwajahi.blogfa.com/>.

¹³⁰ Undated message, August 2007, http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007_08_01_archive.html.

If the Rigis have been particularly active in the Tabligh movement in Iran, the Shahbakhshs have been central in the development of institutionalized Deobandism in Baluchistan. It now seems as though the two groups are merging, adding an inter-tribal feature to Jundullah. Late in September 2008, Jundullah mentions in its blog that the group merged with two other armed opposition groups, led by *Hajj Ne'matollah Shahbakhsh* and *Hajj Khodabakhsh Shahbakhsh*, respectively¹³¹. The Hajj Ne'matollah Shahbakhsh group is, according to Radio Baluch, called "Sazman-e Mobarezin-e Sistan va Baluchistan" (Sistan and Baluchistan Combat Association)¹³².

It is too early to say if the Shahbakhsh have added a more radical feature to the movement, but one important, recent incident probably highlights such a possibility. Just before the holy month of Ramadan, on 27 August 2008, Basiji forces equipped with bulldozers razed the Abu Hanifa mosque and madrasa in Azimabad, a suburb of Zabol in the northern part of Baluchistan¹³³. The mosque and madrasa housed ancient Holy Scriptures, and videos posted on the Taftan news agency webpage shows people picking up torn pages from the Koran from the ruins and the sewage¹³⁴.

The Abu Hanifa mosque and madrasa was run by a member of the Shahbakhsh tribe, Maulavi Hafez Mohammad Ali, and under the auspices of the Darul Oloom in Zahedan. Just after the operation, two brothers of the Maulavi, Abdulrahman Shahbakhsh and Noor Mohammad Shahbakhsh, were arrested, uncertain on what charges¹³⁵. In a furious message posted on the Jundullah blog, Abdolmalek Rigi swears revenge, and says that the "jihad will never end"¹³⁶. A few weeks later, Rigi announces the merging with the Shahbakhsh groups. Then, on the 14th of October 2008, a man called Naser Shahbakhsh was killed in a clash with military forces. According to the blog, Naser Shahbakhsh, brother of Dara Shahbakhsh, leader of yet another armed group¹³⁷, had been a member since the merger. Naser Shahbakhsh was killed alongside a member of the Rigi tribe, Nader Rigi. Once again, revenge is promised.

The revenge astonished everyone. In late December 2008, Abdulghader Rigi, the younger brother of Jundullah's leader, drove his yellow pickup to the gates of the military headquarters in Saravan and detonated two tons of TNT, becoming the group's very first suicide bomber in Jundullah's war on the Iranian government. The group said that the operation was a revenge for the razing of the Abu Hanifa mosque and seminary in Zabol. In the videos posted on the Internet after the

¹³¹ www.junbish.blogspot.com (the official blog of the group since June 2008), 29 September 2008.

¹³² Radio Baluch FM is broadcast from a Baluchi exile community in Stockholm, Sweden. Undated article called *Haqiqat chist?* (What is the truth?), accessible at http://www.radiobalochi.org/BH_Rights/HaghiqatChist_s_s_zahedan070821.html.

¹³³ "Baluchis intensify rebellion in Iran", *Asia Times Online*, 20 February 2009. Accessible at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KB20Ak02.html. The story is further referred to on the Jundullah webpage.

¹³⁴ Video named "Shahid Abdulghafur 1", posted on Taftan.

¹³⁵ "Takhrib-e madrese-ye dini-e emam abuhanifa-ye 'azimabad-e Zahedan" (Destroying of the Emam Abuhanifa religious madrasa in Azimabad in Zahedan), *SunniOnline*, 27 August 2008.

¹³⁶ Message dated 27.08.08, the same date as the razing of the mosque and madrasa.

¹³⁷ Radio Baluch: Undated article called *Haqiqat chist?* (What is the truth?).

suicide operation, Jihadi songs, so-called *Nashids*, accompany the preparations of the martyr-to-be. The same songs are used in similar videos by Al-Qaida and other groups.¹³⁸

While difficult to verify as none of the webpages of Baluchi armed groups contain links to foreign armed groups, this might indicate that the group indeed is in touch with other networks across the border – or at least that the group is learning from the campaigns of such groups.

5.2 A sectarian strife

In some of its propaganda, Jundullah uses the name National Resistance Front of Iran, apparently in an attempt to attract some international sympathy to its cause. Overall, however, its propaganda recalls a cause transcending the Baluch minority issues. In a curious posting on the blog, Abdolmalek Rigi commemorates the murder of the Kurdish activist Abdolrahman Qassemloou by Iranian agents, expressing sympathy with the Kurdish cause¹³⁹. In another, following an alleged air raid on villages in the Rudmahi mountains close to Zahedan, Rigi calls on “international organizations such as the UN and the EU” to intervene in the conflict between the Baluch and the Iranian government¹⁴⁰. In an English posting on 2 February 2007¹⁴¹, Jundullah denies links with foreign groups and countries, and stresses that it has adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

That seems less compatible with the fact that the group often executes its hostages, sometimes by brutal methods such as decapitation. While Jundullah in earlier postings stressed its nationalist nature, it now seems as if this element is being overshadowed by the second column in the movement: that of an Islamist uprising, mimicking the practices of extremist networks in Pakistan, and using a religious language in order to attract fellow Muslim sympathy to their cause. The term “Jihad”, used in the blog of the group, is telling: the group notably states that “faith and Jihad are the only means to achieve honor, freedom and justice”¹⁴². It also claims on its website that it has taken up arms to defend “the righteous Muslim belief” (*din-e haqq-e Moslem*). The movement constantly calls the Iranian government “regim-e jahl” (regime of ignorance), a religiously laden expression that connotes un-Islamic behavior. It further says that the regime’s forces are “godless Safavids” – the expression recalling that Iran was a largely Sunni country before the Safavid Empire established Shi’a-Islam in the early 16th century. Another expression used about the government is “taghut”; which means “tyrants” and denotes an enemy of God¹⁴³.

The group and governmental forces seem to be trapped in a downward spiral of violence and retaliation, with increasing sectarian overtones as both parties attack religious symbols of the other. On 18 February 2009, the group claimed responsibility for a bomb that went off in the Al

¹³⁸ According to a Jihadi video analyst at the FFI (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment).

¹³⁹ Posting 12.07.08: http://junbish.blogspot.com/2008_07_01_archive.html.

¹⁴⁰ Posting 13.10.08: http://junbish.blogspot.com/2008_10_01_archive.htm.

¹⁴¹ http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007_03_01_archive.html.

¹⁴² http://junbish.blogspot.com/2008_08_01_archive.html.

¹⁴³ For example in undated message, July 2007:
http://jonbeshmardom.blogspot.com/2007_07_01_archive.html.

Qadir mosque in Zahedan, an operation where 20 kilo C4 was used, but without causing casualties¹⁴⁴. The group justified the action by claiming the mosque was a “Basij hangout”¹⁴⁵. Members of the religious judiciary are also targeted. The group has claimed responsibility for the assassination of the judge Ebrahim Karimi, killed in Saravan in June 2008¹⁴⁶, the reason being that he “had the blood of young Baluchs on his hands”¹⁴⁷, an action condemned by Sunni clerics such as the principal of Saravan seminary.¹⁴⁸ In another incident, for which the group has not claimed responsibility, Hojjat ol-Islam Ali Ebadi, a Basij religious authority in the town of Khash, was gunned down¹⁴⁹, while the public prosecutor of the city, Fazlollah Shahbazi, was targeted by armed men some months earlier, but escaped with his life.¹⁵⁰ The year before, Shi’a preacher Mahdi Tavakkoli was killed by unknown assailants in the same city.¹⁵¹

Other actions by seemingly zealot Shi’a groups add fuel to the fire, as Sunni clerics and seminaries are being targeted. The destruction of the mosque in Zabol had a profound impact on Jundullah, as it triggered the suicide operation some months later. The targeting of Sunni clerics by vigilant gangs goes back to well before the creation of Jundullah; during the parliamentary elections of 1996, two clerics were murdered. Two years later, the prayer leader of a Sunni mosque in the town of Miyankang was killed. In the spring of 2000, a Sunni seminarian from Birjand, north of Baluchistan, was beaten, set on fire and killed in Zahedan¹⁵². And the sectarian violence in the region continues; in late 2007, Darul Oloom in Zahedan claimed that “unidentified armed forces had entered the Mohammadiyyeh Seminary in Zabol, opened fire and forced the students and scholars to leave the seminary” in order to close down the school¹⁵³. Darul Oloom has further reported that one of its scholars, Imanallah Gomshadzahi, was attacked with a knife and seriously wounded in the head by unknown assailants when he came home from evening prayer¹⁵⁴. On 10 November 2008, Molavi Sheikh Ali Dehviri was gunned down and killed in Saravan by two unknown men on a motorcycle in an operation that recalls earlier attacks on regime opponents.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁴ “Enfejar-e bomb dar yeki az masajed-e shi’ian dar shahr-e zahedan” (bomb explosion in one of the Shi’a mosques in Zahedan), *Al Arabiyya*, 18 February 2009: Accessible at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/02/18/66726.html>.

¹⁴⁵ http://junbish.blogspot.com/2009_02_01_archive.html.

¹⁴⁶ “Tashyi’ peykar-e pak-e qazi-e dadgostari-e Saravan” (Procession of the body of the judge in Saravan tribunal), *Ettela’at*, 18 June 2008.

¹⁴⁷ http://junbish.blogspot.com/2008_06_01_archive.html.

¹⁴⁸ “Tashyi’ peykar-e pak-e qazi-e dadgostari-e Saravan”, *op cit*.

¹⁴⁹ “Cleric gunned down in southeast Iran”, *Press TV*, 06 April 2009..

¹⁵⁰ “Teror-e nafarjam-e dasetan-e khahsh dar Iran” (unsuccessful attempt on the public prosecutor on Khahsh in Iran), *BBC Persian*, 29 September 2008

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁵² Abbas William Samii, “The nation and its minorities: ethnicity, unity and state policy in Iran”, *Comparative studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XX, No. 1&2, 2000.

¹⁵³ *SunniOnline*, 02 November 2007, cited by “Profile: Southern Iranian Sunni seminaries, Mowlavi Abdolhamid”, BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, 14 November 2007

¹⁵⁴ “Su’-ye qessad be jan-e yeki az asatid-e darulooloom-e zahedan” (attempt on the life of one of the scholars at Darul Oloom in Zahedan), *SunniOnline*, 10 February 2009.

¹⁵⁵ “Ruhani-e sunni dar Zahedan teror shod” (Sunni cleric killed in Zahedan), *BBC Persian*, 11 November 2008.

Murders and extra-judicial killings thus seem to harden the stance between the Sunni population and Shi'a vigilante groups, but the Iranian government has also explicitly targeted the Sunni religious community. After the previously mentioned shootout in Chahjamal seminary in Iranshahr, the two Sunni clerics Moulavi Abdolghods Mollahzahi and Moulavi Mohammad Yusef Sohrabi were sentenced to death and executed by hanging. The same year, the clerics Moulavi Khalilollah Zare'i and Hafez Salahoddin were hanged in Zahedan prison. The sentences bore clearly religious references, as the clerics were judged for *Moharebeh*, enmity with God, and *Mofsedeh fi'l arz*, corruption on earth. A large number of other Sunni clerics have been arrested and given prison sentences for igniting sectarian tensions¹⁵⁶.

The harsh governmental response to the extremist networks in Baluchistan has therefore added to the burgeoning sectarian strife in the region. When targeting religious figures, the Iranian government is also targeting community leaders, recalling earlier campaigns against tribal elders in the first years after the revolution. When the religious Sunni establishment is silenced, opposition to the government will increasingly be expressed through lay activist movements such as Jundullah, bypassing other institutions in the Sunni community.

6 An Islamic awakening – consequences and conclusions

The story of Jundullah is the story of how an ethnic resistance movement has transformed into a violent sectarian group adopting tactical and ideological elements from the global Jihadi movement. It is at the same time the story of the limits to Islamic Unity, as claimed by the Iranian state. From a humble beginning of 30 armed men in a movement that bore the hallmark of a personal vendetta, Jundullah has reportedly grown to a group of several hundred fighters, encompassing different opposition groups. As there are signs that the fight might spread beyond Baluchistan to other regions in Iran, such a movement is inevitably posing a serious challenge to the Iranian government. The fact that the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij are taking over the role of civilian authorities in policing and other areas of jurisdiction must be interpreted as a sign that the government is fighting an enemy regarded as deadly serious. Big economic projects such as the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline as well as a planned pipeline from the north to the south are underway in the region. If inspired by Pakistani Baluch separatist groups, that constantly blow up such pipelines, Jundullah could threaten projects of great economic and symbolic importance to the Iranian government.

When Abdolghafour Rigi became a suicide bomber in late December 2008, it was the result of a long process that has transformed religious life in the Sunni communities in Iran. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 did indeed lead to an Islamic awakening among the Sunni minorities in that and surrounding countries – albeit contrary to the intentions of the Islamic government in Tehran. As the Revolution was increasingly seen as exclusively Shi'a and Persian, universal Iranian nationalism has been replaced with Sunni extremist and Baluchi nationalist currents

¹⁵⁶ “Aqliatha-ye qomi va dini dar sal-e 1387” (Tribal and religious opposition in 1387), *BBC Persian*, 06 April 2009. Accessible on http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/lg/iran/2009/03/090406_minorities_1387.shtml

opposed to the hegemony of the Shi'a clergy. Jundullah's demand of a greater share for Sunnis in the running of the country cannot be met within the framework of Iran's constitution.

As the Sunni clergy in the region is a "hostage" of the state, being dependent on governmental funding for Sunni seminaries and mosques, a complex patchwork of movements based on ethnicity, confession and tribal traditions has occurred, bypassing the institutionalized religious establishment. Fuelled by the large criminal economy in the region, these movements target law enforcement forces and officials engaged in the fight against drug trafficking. As Iranian police and security forces are also seen as major agents of Shi'a zealotry and chauvinism opposed to the Sunni identity in the population, a dangerous mix of Jihadi currents, nationalism and criminal activities occurs.

But this is only one part of the story, as the developments in the Sunni community in Baluchistan mirror those in neighbouring Pakistan. Deobandism, an austere and vehemently anti-Shia branch of Sunni Islam has grown to be one of the main religious currents in Pakistan, exercising significant influence across the border via tribal networks. Extremist groups such as Jundullah are seemingly copying the practices and discourse of Pakistani movements. As the same ideas are also spreading to other ethnic minorities of Sunni confession in the country, alliances between the porous borders regions are formed, highlighted by the fact that Jundullah apparently also attracts non-Baluch fighters. There are several signs of influence from the global Jihadi movement, for example the use of songs also used by groups such as Al Qaida and the use of improvised explosive devices. Jundullah's cause could very well prove to attract foreign fighters in the future.

The political consequences of the Jundullah phenomenon are therefore apparent on several levels. One immediate consequence is the risks Jundullah poses to the security in the region, as the low-scale war seems to be highly successful from Jundullah's point of view. During the last year there has been a significant spate in deadly attacks – recently also by suicide bombers, until now unheard of in Iran. The conflict is for the time being contained within the borders of Baluchistan. But if Jundullah succeeds in bringing its operations to Tehran, the situation could prove difficult to control.

The group has also dealt a blow to one of the very pillars of the Islamic Revolution; the idea of Islamic Unity, with an all-encompassing state elevated over sectarian differences. For the time being, Iran finds itself isolated from the International community by sanctions and political rows but strives to establish alliances with Sunni countries. This policy could prove increasingly difficult as the political and religious situation of the Sunni communities inside the country is dire. On the more practical level, the situation translates into a process where the clergy is pushed aside by militia networks. Civil authorities in Baluchistan are marginalized by the uncontrollable situation, replaced by Revolutionary Guards and Basijis, groups famous for their Shi'a religious zealotry and heavy-handed policies. In the ongoing conflict between Sunni and Shi'a activists, clergymen and religious institutions on both sides are targeted.

An ethnic conflict has turned sectarian. The Islamic Republic is dealing with a Jihad within its own borders. The governmental suppression of the Baluchi people in Zahedan that followed after the suicide bombing in early June 2009 was intense. There are reports of summary detentions and executions – Jundullah claims in its blog that none of the executed men were connected to the suicide operations.

On 12 June 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “won” a comfortable victory in the presidential elections, elections that seem to have been rigged. While today it is too early to say anything about the consequences and outcome of the political crisis that has followed the election, a new Ahmadinejad period could indeed accentuate the tensions in Baluchistan. The suicide bombing of the Ali Ibn Abu Taleb mosque in Zahedan, one of the largest in the city and belonging to regime notables that originate in Tehran, is of enormous symbolic importance and exposes the regime’s feeble control. It is not unlikely that the rigging of the elections, giving Ahmadinejad a renewed mandate, could also be motivated by the need for a strong and streamlined government to bring Baluchistan back into its fold. In that sense, the Baluchi uprising of Jundullah has succeeded in bringing about political changes in the Islamic Republic – but not at all in the sense Abdolghafur Rigi and his companions wish.

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