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Can ISIS Gain a Foothold in Balochistan?

There is growing evidence that it is trying to do just that.

By Muhammad Akbar Notezai
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On August 28, 2014, Abdul-Rauf Rigi, alleged to be leading a Sunni sectarian organization called Jaish-al-Nasr, was assassinated in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. The motive for his killing could not be ascertained, but Jaish-al-Nasr had been accused by Iranian officials of carrying out attacks on Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Soon after Rigi's assassination in Quetta, Iranian Press TV was claiming that he had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS).

A reliable source told *The Diplomat* that the Jaish-al-Adl is a splinter group of Jundullah, which was spearheaded by Rigi's brother Abdul-Malik. While on a flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan in 2010, Abdul-Malik Rigi was arrested by Iranian authorities and subsequently hanged. The source added that soon after his execution in Iran, Jundullah, which Abdul-Malik Rigi had founded in 2003, split into three groups: the Jaish-al-Adl, the Jaish-al-Nasr, and the Lashker-e-Khorasan.

Iranian authorities have accused Jundullah of carrying out a series of attacks, including a suicide bombing on October 18, 2009, which killed six commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Of the three splinter groups, Jaish-al-Adl is believed to be the stronger, and has been blamed for a number of high profile attacks in the wake of the execution of Abdul-Malik Rigi.

For example, on April 8, 2015, the state-run Iranian news agency of Iran reported that eight Iranian border guards had been killed in clashes with militants near the border with Pakistan. On the same day, Jaish-ul-Adl claimed responsibility for the assault through a Facebook account believed to be linked to the organization. According to media reports, Jaish-al-Adl has accepted responsibility for other attacks on Iranian territory. One of deadliest took place in October 2013, when 14 Iranian guards were killed near the Sarawarn area, which is situated on the border. Jaish-al-Adl said that the attack was in retaliation for an alleged Iranian “massacre” in Syria, and was also in response to atrocities Iran is alleged to have committed against Sunni communities, including Baloch youths.

“The fight here, near the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, is with Jaish-al-Adl, or Army of Justice, a radical group that claims to fight for greater rights Shiite Iran’s ethnic Baluchs and Sunni minority,” noted Scott Peterson in 2014 at *The Christian Science Monitor*. “While there is no known direct connections between the regional agenda of the Islamic State (IS) and Jaish-al-Adl, a recent surge of cross-border attacks along this remote frontier indicates that the Pakistan-based militants are taking inspiration from IS successes in Syria and Iraq.”

“Rigi changed colors after interactions with the banned Pakistani group Sepah-e-Sahaba (SS) in Lyari Town, Karachi. His anti-Iranian stance as a Baloch shifted to one of being anti-Shia. Not too long afterwards, he joined with SS’s breakaway faction, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an anti-Shia al Qaeda linked militant outfit,” wrote the late journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad. “Through this connection, Rigi went to the Afghan province of Zabul but the Taliban refused him entry into their ranks because of their suspicion that he had forged links with U.S. intelligence.”

ISIS Links

Some local analysts believe that the Jundullah splinter groups may have drifted toward ISIS. They cite three reasons: The groups do not have a nucleus; their agenda is sectarian; and they are fighting a Shia state.

Iranian authorities have implicitly held Pakistan responsible for providing shelter to Jundullah militants, a charge Pakistan has vehemently denied. One government official refuted the allegations, pointing out that last year Pakistan also extradited Abdul-Hamid Rigi, younger brother of Abdul-Malik, to Iran. He added that another leader of the group, Abdul-Salam Rigi, was arrested by security forces on the outskirts of Quetta.

According to Rashed Rahman, editor of the *Daily Times*, “Iran has lots of complaints because of Jundullah, which has been operating on the border. The suspicion is that it is a joint U.S.-Pakistan supported movement.” Rahman added that the Baloch in Iran are Sunni, while the state is Shia. “So there has been a conflict there, and sometimes it has taken a sectarian as well nationalist-cum-sectarian form.”

When asked about the relations between Iran and Pakistan, Rahman told *The Diplomat*, “Jundullah has been killing the Revolutionary Guards on the border, and Iran is asking Pakistan to stop this. Pakistan has made promises but has not been able to keep them. So the Iranians are

coming in to catch these people. So, in this context, they have tenuous relations with each other. And this is causing conflict.”

Threatening Messages

A local resident of Awaran district of Balochistan, who requested anonymity, told *The Diplomat* that in August 2014 threatening messages began to be inscribed on local walls. He added that the messages were signed by the Lashker-e-Khorasan, which had told local Zikris and Hindus that they needed to convert to Sunni Islam or die. Following the threatening messages, on August 28, six Zikris were shot dead by unknown armed assailants in their place of worship, called Zikrkhana. Another source meanwhile said noted the Lashker-e-Khorasan is an offshoot of ISIS, and walls in Turbat were also painted in favor of the ISIS in Turbat.

A wall on Inscomb Road of Quetta, very near the chief minister’s house, was painted with the ISIS slogan. Quetta police chief Razaq Cheema told *The Diplomat* that the graffiti was the work of impressionable youth. He insisted that the slogan was not painted by ISIS. When asked about the presence of the Islamic State in Quetta, Cheema denied that the group had a presence, but said that if one was found, the police were strong enough to take action. Cheema also pointed out that militancy in Balochistan is homegrown, and there is no chance of ISIS coming to Balochistan via Afghanistan.

The police officer went on to explain that law enforcement agencies had successfully reduced sectarian violence in Quetta by eliminating the top leadership of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) in the city, with Osman Saifullah Kurd, Mubashir Ahmed Kurd and Mehmood Rind all killed.

“Ever since the National Action Plan (NAP) was implemented in Balochistan, a large number of militants, from various religious outfits, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), have given up their affiliations,” says Kiyya Qadir, an independent journalist based in Islamabad. “After that, they lost their shelters. In this context, they are seemingly in search of a strong nucleus, or a strong militant organization, one that not only gives them ammunition but also power.”

Qadir added that the ISIS presence in Balochistan was a reality, one made possible by the presence of sympathizers in the form of religious fanatics. And some Baloch militant organizations, he said, like the Baloch Musalla Difa Tanzeem (BMDT) and the Balochistan Mutahida Mahaz (BMM), have transmogrified into the Lashkar-e-Khorasan, which has been linked with ISIS.

“Lashkar-e-Khorasan’s presence in Balochistan is not new. They have been threatening a particular sect, the Zikris, for the last two years or more. Meanwhile, members of the TTP have given their allegiance to ISIS publicly through the media, and their influence in Balochistan cannot be denied.”

Abdul Malik Baloch, Balochistan’s chief minister, told reporters that he could not rule out the presence of ISIS militants in Balochistan.

Shahzada Zulfiqar, a veteran journalist based in Quetta, said, “Daesh (ISIS) is a mindset, and people of this mindset are present in Balochistan. In Quetta, pro-ISIS slogans have appeared on the walls, which are barely 15 or 20 yards from the ‘red zone’ (home to many local government officials). In front of the Iranian Consulate, where police and security guards are ever present, walls also show the marks of Daesh. The walls were whitewashed by the police the next day.”

Zulfiqar explained, “If Daesh materializes in Balochistan, it is my opinion, it may be the SSP, the Ahl-e-Sunnat Wai Jamat (ASWJ), the hardliners of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Nazriati (JUI-N) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F), or the TTP, who are pro-jihadis.” However, the state has now zero-tolerance for such elements, he said, pointing to three factors. First, Malik Ishaq, co-founder of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), was killed in a police encounter along with his associates. Second, the killing of Punjab Home Minister Shuja Khanzada, a retired military colonel, in a suicide attack believed to be in retaliation for the death of Ishaq, was widely condemned by the government. And third, following the Zarb-e-Azb operation, elements of the TTP have reportedly moved to northern parts of Balochistan, where they have been arrested in raids ever since the announcement of the National Action Plan (NAP).

In recent months, Balochistan Home Secretary Akbar Durrani is reported to have issued directives to the district administration and police officials in each district to take appropriate and timely measures if they notice any suspicious activity relating to ISIS. However, Durrani was also quoted by local media as saying that he does not agree that ISIS or similar activists exist in large numbers, asking, “Why would they want to announce their presence through wall-chalkings on the main roads of the city?” Yet a report from the Home and Tribal Affairs Department of Balochistan asserted that, “It has been reliably learned that Daesh has proposed to some elements of the LeJ and Ahl-e-Sunnat Wai Jamat (ASWJ) that they join hands in Pakistan. Daesh has also formed a ten-member Strategic Planning Wing.”

According to a Quetta-based intellectual, “If ISIS materialized in Balochistan, minority sects, like the Hazaras and Zikris, will be the victims, just like the Yazidis.”

Swearing Allegiance

High-ranking commanders of the TTP and Jundullah (meaning the offshoot of the TTP, and not the group founded by Abdul-Malik Rigi) have already sworn allegiance to ISIS. In the wake of the major military offensive, Zarb-i-Azb, in North Waziristan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, there have been reports of hundreds of TTP fighters laying low in the northern parts of Balochistan. Paramilitary forces, with the help of law enforcement agencies, have started to crack down on the TTP in this area, as well as in other parts of the country, particularly following the deadly Taliban assault on Peshawar’s Army Public School on December 16, 2014, which killed 150 people, including more than 130 schoolchildren. According to media reports, security forces have arrested suspected Taliban militants and key commanders in different raids in northern Balochistan. Moreover, security forces claim to have killed the al-Qaeda chief of Balochistan and South Punjab, Omar Abdul Latif (alias Luqman), in Balochistan’s Chaghi district, situated on the border with Afghanistan border. As part of the National Action Plan, Sarfraz Bugti, the provincial home minister of Balochistan, noted recently that 4,069 suspects have been arrested in Balochistan.

A senator from Islamabad who did not wish to be named told *The Diplomat* that Balochistan, particularly central Balochistan, has been enveloped in a wave of religious extremism. During the Afghan war, he said, money was pumped into the region, shaking up a society that was not at that point known for its religious extremism. The war brought sectarianism and Wahhabism. Through religious groups operating in the province, he warned, ISIS will develop a foothold in Balochistan.

Some analysts say that ISIS could make inroads into Balochistan via Afghanistan, where the group is also already present. Shahzada Zulfiqar disagrees. He argues that ISIS does not have a strong base in Afghanistan – perhaps a few hundred fighters in the form of hardline Taliban who have now joined ISIS. These men are already fighting on two fronts – against the Taliban and the Afghan government – and as such are not placed to make inroads into Balochistan.

A spokesman for the militant group Jundullah has claimed in recent months that a delegation from ISIS visited the organization's leaders in Balochistan. The spokesman, Fahad Marwat was also reported to have said the purpose of the visit by ISIS was to see how it could work to unite various Pakistani militant groups. Government officials flatly refute these claims. Nonetheless, Balochistan increasingly appears to be a new front in the fight against terrorism.