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Iran's Baloch insurgency and the IS

By Daniele Grassi

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On October 9, a car bomber struck a fortified base near the south-eastern Iranian city of Saravan (Sistan-e-Balochistan province), killing a senior officer and injuring three others. The previous day, another three police officers had lost their lives in an ambush after responding to a false emergency call. Both attacks were claimed by Jaish al-Adl (JAA, Army of Justice), a Sunni terrorist group, which operates in the border area between Iran and Pakistan.

Sistan-e-Balochistan is not new to such episodes of violence. Over the past decade, more than 3,000 Iranian border guards have been killed in gun battles with criminal gangs and terrorist groups operating in this area, but in recent years, the fighting has grown more sectarian, fueling serious concern among the authorities in Tehran.

In 1928, the Independent State of Western Balochistan was annexed to Iran. The country was at that time ruled by Shah Reza Pahlavi, who toppled the Qajar dynasty in a military coup, immediately after the "Persian Constitutional Revolution" that took place between 1905 and 1907.

According to Baloch activists, the Pahlavi dynasty created a centralized system, dominated by

the Persians, forcing the Baloch community and other minorities to fight to protect their rights. In 1979 Iran became an Islamic republic and the shah was forced into exile.

However, the subsequent theocracies continued, and even strengthened the repressive policies adopted in the past, perceiving the Sunni Baloch as a threat to Shi'ite revolution. The Baloch community currently counts about 2 million people, around 2% of the total population.

Sistan-e-Balochistan has the worst indicators of Iran regarding: life expectancy, adult literacy, primary school enrollment, access to improved water sources and sanitation, infant mortality rate. Although it has important natural resources (gas, gold, copper, oil and uranium), the province has the lowest per capita income in Iran: by some estimates, nearly 80% of the Baluch would live under the poverty line. Economic under-development as well as political and cultural repression have fueled an armed opposition, which Iranian authorities have so far not managed to eradicate.

Many observers were persuaded that the capture and the subsequent execution of the leader of Jundallah, Abdelmalek Rigi, in 2010, had dealt a decisive blow to the Baloch insurgency, but the increase in attacks recorded since 2012 has shown that it is still alive and it represents a threat even more dangerous than in the past.

The weakening of Jundallah has indeed favored the fragmentation of the insurgency, with the emergence of a number of groups. Besides JAA, Harakat Ansar Iran (Partisan Movement of Iran) is one of the most prominent. It is responsible for the October 2012 suicide bombing against the mosque of Imam Hussein, in the port city of Chabahar (Sistan-e-Balochistan), which resulted in the deaths of two officers Basij and the wounding of numerous civilians.

It was the first suicide bombing carried out in the country since December 2010, when Jundallah had carried out a similar attack on the same mosque, causing 40 casualties. HAI has since claimed responsibility for a series of attacks including ambushes and attacks against Iranian security forces, made with car bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

JAA as well has been implicated in a series of terrorist attacks. In October 2013, 14 Iranian border guards were killed in an ambush in the town of Rustak, near the town of Saravan. In retaliation, the Iranian authorities executed 16 Baloch people, with charges ranging from terrorism to drug trafficking. In November 2013, the JAA claimed responsibility for the assassination of a public prosecutor in the city of Zabol, located in the north-eastern Sistan-e-Balochistan, near the border with Afghanistan. In February 2014, Jaish al-Adl captured five Iranian border guards: four of them were released in April, while the other one was killed.

Some media reported that the Tehran government released 60 members of JAA in exchange for the four guards. In September, a surprise attack was launched against a central base by a convoy of about 70 insurgents, after that the outer walls had been destroyed with an explosive vehicle. According to an official of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the attackers were repelled only after a long firefight and the arrival of reinforcements from other bases.

JAA is led by Abdulrahim Mulazadeh, who uses the pseudonym of Salah ad-Din al-Farouqi. Among the ranks of JAA, there are elements with links to other terrorist groups operating in the

region (mainly in Pakistan) as well as many former members of Jundallah, and this has led many observers to speculate that the group is merely a renaming of Jundallah.

The use of Pakistani territory as a refuge by JAA is an element of great tension in relations between Tehran and Islamabad. On several occasions, the Iranian authorities have threatened military operations in Pakistan to counter terrorist groups operating over there.

Compared to Jundallah, the new generation of Baloch militants show a greater degree of ideological radicalization, as well as more familiarity with the use of the Internet. The most significant extremist organizations have accounts on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. In an attempt to reach a wider audience, many of these platforms contain material in Persian, Arabic and English.

For the generation of post-Jundallah militants, Salafism plays an increasingly central role. The rhetoric of groups such as HAI and JAA uses strongly anti-Shia tones. The two groups often refer to the Iranian Islamic Republic as a Safavid regime, in reference to the Safavid dynasty which introduced Shiism in Iran, while the followers of the Shi'ite are called "*rawafidh*" (deniers), pejorative definition frequently used by Salafists.

This rhetoric is certainly fueled by the foreign policy pursued by Iran in recent years, in particular by its strong support to the Baathist regime in Syria and to the Shi'ite-led government in Iraq. This fact reinforces the belief that Baloch militants in Iran and its Shi'ite allies in the region are conducting a campaign to destroy the true Islam, the Sunni.

The influence of radical Islam and, in particular, of the Salafi ideology over Baloch militants looks set to become an increasingly important element for the internal dynamics of the Sistan-e-Balochistan province. The rise of sectarian tensions in the region provides fertile ground for the expansion of these ideologies. The geopolitical implications of this trend should not be underestimated, especially in light of the advance of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq.

Contrary to al-Qaeda, which is known to have reached an agreement with the Iranian authorities that guarantees the safety of the country from attacks, in exchange for the possibility to use Iranian territory as a transit corridor, the IS has repeatedly stated the desire to strike Iran. Mohamd Reza Rahmani Fazli, the Iranian interior minister, issued a warning on September 7 saying "*Daesh*" - a pejorative term for IS - was "posed to attack Iran imminently".

On August 28, clashes between IS sympathizers and Iranian security forces were reported near the city of Urmia (West Azerbaijan province) by some Twitter accounts operated by members of the group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Another attack was reported by independent sources always in West Azerbaijan on October 2. In response, dozens alleged terrorists have been arrested in the past few months. According to the Iranian authorities, at least four suicidal attacks have so far been foiled, including a suicide bombing targeting a massive demonstration in Tehran in late July.

As the Islamic State is currently focused on consolidating its territorial gains in Iraq and Syria, an extended terrorist campaign in Iran seems unlikely to happen anytime soon. However, Sistan-

e-Balochistan represents an ideal ground for extremist groups to flourish, especially given its long porous border with Pakistan. It is no coincidence to someone that the escalation of attacks on the Iranian soil has occurred after the election of the pro-Saudi Nawaz Sharif at the head of the Islamabad government. Tehran has never looked so exposed to the jihadist terrorist threat.