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Jundallah arrest proves timely for Iran

By M K Bhadrakumar

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TEHRAN - If the snow-covered Elbruz mountains rising just north of Tehran took on an extra glint in the bright wintry sunshine on Wednesday, there was good reason. It was the morning after the dramatic capture of the 31-year-old leader of the dreaded Pakistan-based terrorist group Jundallah, Abdulmalik Rigi, in a stunning operation by Iranian intelligence.

The Soureh Cinema Institute in Tehran and Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance are already contemplating making a movie about the capture of Rigi, who headed Jundallah (Soldiers of God), a Sunni insurgent group that operates mostly in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Balochistan against the Shi'ite regime.

The operation had all the ingredients of a thriller. From available details, Iranian intelligence, which has been stalking Rigi for months, grabbed him while he was on a flight from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Kyrgyzstan. The aircraft was forced to land in Bandar Abbas, in southern Iran, where Rigi and an accomplice were forcibly deplaned.

However, Rigi's capture has wider ramifications going well beyond the stuff of high drama. For one thing, the Iranian public was dazzled by the intelligence operation and it has provided a morale boost at a critical juncture when the West is besieging Iran over its nuclear program and the political class in Tehran is more polarized than at any time in the three decades of the Islamic Republic.

Ironically, the Iranian performance stands out in sharp contrast with the fallout from the Israeli intelligence operation in Dubai in the UAE to assassinate prominent Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh on January 19. (See [Dubai hit exposes Hamas' weaknesses](#), Asia Times Online, February 23) Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar made this clear when he said, "Such an operation by the Islamic Republic's security forces indicates that the country's intelligence and security have the upper hand in the region."

No doubt, Iranian public opinion will identify with this mood of self-confidence, no matter the political persuasions of various factions at this current juncture as regards the ruling establishment.

In turn, that would have implications for the United States-Iran standoff. But that is only one aspect. The fact is that Tehran has put Washington on the back foot at a critical juncture. Rigi is bound to spill the beans - he may already have begun - and much is going to surface about the covert activities by the US forces based in Afghanistan to subvert Iran by hobnobbing with Jundallah, which, incidentally, is also known to have links with al-Qaeda.

Rigi apparently had a meeting with his US mentors in an American base just a day before his journey to the UAE. It seems he was traveling with a fake Afghan passport provided by the Americans. A lot of highly embarrassing details are trickling in already that will be eagerly lapped up by the so-called "Arab street" and which will make the entire American position on the situation around Iran look rather weak.

The American doublespeak on terrorism comes out all too starkly. The big question is whether Pakistan played a helpful role in Rigi's capture. Iranian officials flatly insist that Rigi's capture was "fully carried out" by Iranian agencies, including its "management, operation and planning" and the credit goes "solely to our country's security and task forces".

Iranian Intelligence Minister Hojjatoleslam Heydar Moslehi, who is also an influential clerical figure, has stated categorically that "no other country had a share in this success".

But Persian is a highly nuanced language. What is significant is that while Iranian officials have unhesitatingly pointed their finger at the US as Rigi's top mentor, there has not been a single reference direct or implied about Pakistan that could be construed as critical or unfriendly. This must be noted as on several occasions in recent months Iranian officials publicly expressed their anguish that Pakistani intelligence was involved with Jundallah in one way or another, and that Islamabad was not doing enough to live up to its claims of being a friendly neighbor.

Tehran repeatedly passed on intelligence and urged Islamabad to extradite Rigi following the deadly attack by Jundallah in Sistan-Balochistan province in October, which resulted in the killing of 42 people, including several high-ranking Iranian military commanders.

On balance, Islamabad seems to have implied that it did cooperate with Tehran on Rigi's

capture. The Pakistani ambassador in Tehran, Mohammad Baksh Abbasi, took the unusual step of "underlining Islamabad's support" for Rigi's arrest. Abbasi held a press conference to affirm, "Rigi's arrest showed that there is no place for Iran's enemies in Pakistan." Shorn of diplomatese, Abbasi claimed a share of the credit that Tehran was bent on exclusively hogging. But Maslehi was plainly dismissive about any Pakistani role.

If there was a Pakistani role in Rigi's capture there would be deep implications for regional security. Most certainly, Islamabad could claim reciprocal "goodwill" from Iran, such as accommodating its own interests in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iranian officials have made it clear that Tehran is not indebted to anyone, including Pakistan.

Tehran remains deeply concerned about the US strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role in it. In the Iranian estimation, the US strategy aims at consolidating a long-term North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Equally, Pakistan's growing ties with NATO as the alliance's South Asian "pillar" have not escaped Iranian attention. There is no denying the fact that NATO-Pakistan ties are fast assuming a strategic character and have exceeded the immediate requirements of practical cooperation in Afghanistan.

Tehran is equally apprehensive that the US's long-term strategy is to become the "umpire" or arbiter of Asian security involving four major powers neighboring Afghanistan - Iran, India, Russia and China - by exploiting the contradictions in the region. Tehran estimates that Pakistan is collaborating with this and is in many ways becoming a beneficiary of it.

Therefore, Tehran will follow a two-track policy on the Jundallah-Pakistan nexus. On the one hand, it would like to persuade Islamabad at all available levels to be cooperative in curbing the activities of terrorist elements operating out of Pakistani soil. However, Tehran cannot be naive enough to imagine that the Jundallah terrorists are "non-state actors" based in Pakistan and Afghanistan over whom the security establishment in Islamabad has no control.

Tehran would prefer not to harp on about that sensitive aspect and will instead cajole and persuade the Pakistani intelligence and military to be cooperative in countering terrorism directed against Iran from Pakistani soil.

The Rigi episode brings out the complexity of Iran-Pakistan relations in the fight against terrorism. The bottom line is that Iran's interests in Afghanistan are far too fundamental to be bartered away under any circumstances