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Asia Times Online

Iran's spies show how it's done

By Mahan Abedin
3/12/2010

The dramatic arrest of Abdulmalik Rigi, Iran's most wanted man, on February 23 continues to be shrouded in mystery. But with information and insights gleaned from security sources in Tehran, Asia Times Online can reveal some of the most intricate background details leading to this stunning arrest.

The imagery - and the concomitant political message - was compelling. The image of a young man being surrounded by balaclava-clad security officers by the side of a small commercial plane was designed to send the strongest possible message to Western intelligence services, their political masters and the Western public in general. If the West led by the mighty United States has failed in its nearly nine-year pursuit of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, embattled Iran managed to get its man with minimal political and economic cost.

Aside from frustrating American subversion efforts in Iran's southeast, the capture of the Jundallah leader sends an unmistakable message that in the intelligence wars of the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran has once again seized the initiative. The repercussions of this will be felt across all spheres and at all levels, boosting Iran's diplomatic and political posture in the region, and thus making the country less vulnerable to American and Israeli bullying.

Rigi: Downfall of a terrorist

How a young man of 31 years with little formal education became the most serious and proximate security threat to the Islamic Republic is undoubtedly the most interesting dimension of ethnic politics in post-revolutionary Iran. The story of Rigi is still littered with unanswered questions. Security sources in Tehran contend that he has been cooperative in custody and surely

enough there was no obvious hint of duress or coercion in his hastily-arranged "confession" that was aired on Iran's Press TV two days after his arrest. (See [The demise of a 'good-for-nothing bandit'](#), Asia Times Online, March 13.)

From an ideological point of view, the emergence of the Sunni militant Jundallah group is undoubtedly tied to the geopolitical and ideological concussions that have engulfed the region since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American-led military intervention in Afghanistan.

Iranian authorities believed their country to be immune from the kind of Sunni militant terrorism that had plagued neighboring countries, in particular Pakistan and Iraq. The idea that Shi'ite-majority Iran with its deep-rooted culture and civilization and strong sense of national identity and cohesion could fall victim to indigenous practitioners of this retrograde and savage form of terrorism hadn't even crossed the minds of many Iranian security officials. This is not so much a failure at the intelligence and security levels, but an indication of profound cultural arrogance and misplaced self-assuredness.

Jundallah is believed to have emerged in a coherent form in 2003, its organizational origins rooted in the twin security threats unique to the Sistan and Balochistan province, namely organized crime and a small but vocal secessionist movement. Balochi separatism, in different forms and guises, has been an irritant to the modern Iranian nation-state since the 19th century.

In recent decades what started out as a tribal revolt against the perceived intrusions of the central government developed distinctly ethnic and religious overtones, with self-declared champions of the Baloch people bemoaning the so-called Persian and Shi'ite character of the Iranian state.

On the surface, the victory of the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the country's transition from an absolute monarchy to a semi-democratic Islamic Republic was a body-blow to the small numbers of militant secessionists in Balochistan, as well as elsewhere, in particular Iran's Kurdish regions in the northwest, insofar as the Islamic Republic promoted more inclusive notions of nationality and citizenship.

But beneath the surface old grievances continued to fester - reinforced by years of central government neglect of local infrastructure - and accentuated by perceived sectarian policies. This is the backdrop to the emergence of Jundallah, which unlike previous generations of Baloch nationalists, openly embraced a religious and at times sectarian rhetoric, projecting itself as a Sunni Islamic movement at war with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Jundallah's strong religious and sectarian rhetoric, coupled with its tactics of suicide bombings and beheadings (painfully reminiscent of the atrocities perpetrated by Sunni jihadi groups in neighboring Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan), was a major shock to Iranian security officials, who by 2004 had begun to realize the extent of the problem, and quickly took remedial action.

The Islamic Republic prides itself on having efficient and adaptive security and intelligence services. Iranian officials often cite the successful experience of these agencies in countering a broad range of security and intelligence threats, including terrorism by left-wing and secessionist

groups and intense espionage and subversion activities by Western intelligence services, over the past 30 years to underscore their skills and capabilities. It seems that the full gamut of these capabilities was deployed against Jundallah and its local allies in Iran and Pakistan to great effect, to the extent that the group is now for all intents and purposes decapitated and probably a spent force.

Using old tribal espionage networks established decades ago, the Ministry of Intelligence successfully penetrated Jundallah, recruiting many of its members, including top commanders. Although security sources in Tehran decline to comment on the matter, sources close to Jundallah-centered investigations in Tehran and Zahedan (capital of Sistan and Balochistan province) claim that the Ministry of Intelligence had recruited Rigi's younger brother, Abdulhamid.

Certainly, the behavior of Abdulhamid Rigi and the leniency afforded him by Iranian security and judicial authorities has raised many questions and lends credence to the suspicion that Abdulhamid was recruited as an agent, probably in late 2007.

Despite having been tried and sentenced to death for several murders, Abdulhamid has regularly given interviews to Iranian media since his ostensible "arrest" in 2008. In these interviews he has claimed to have met American diplomats and secret agents in Karachi and Islamabad in Pakistan, thus buttressing the unflinching belief of Iranian intelligence chiefs that Jundallah has had a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tail all along.

Skillfully using former senior leaders of terrorist and insurgent groups as a means of putting pressure on these groups and sabotaging their morale is a tried and tested trademark of the Iranian intelligence services. The same tactics have been used extensively and highly effectively against a number of other terrorist organizations, most notably the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organization, which ranked as the country's number one security threat during the 1980s and much of the 1990s.

But there is something distinctly unusual about Abdulhamid Rigi's media appearances insofar as he seems more like an enthusiastic and skillful prop for his new masters rather than a captured and broken terrorist leader.

While security sources in Tehran decline to be drawn on Abdulhamid's precise relationship with the Ministry of Intelligence, they admit that his help was invaluable in tracking his brother's movements and unearthing his extensive ties to the CIA. According to these sources, Iranian intelligence had been monitoring Abdulmalik Rigi round the clock since August 2009, but moving against him was difficult due to strong American backing and the fear of exposing invaluable methods and agents.

But the major suicide bombing on October 18, 2009, which targeted a conference hall in the Pishin area of Sistan and Balochistan where senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders were hosting a reconciliation meeting with local tribal elders, killing dozens of IRGC officers, including the deputy commander of the Guards' land forces, forced a decisive move against Rigi.

While the Ministry of Intelligence was not overly enthusiastic about ensnaring Rigi prematurely - for fear of compromising intelligence operations targeting Rigi's American masters in Pakistan and Afghanistan - the IRGC (which is now the dominant power in Sistan and Balochistan) brought sufficient pressure to bear, finally resulting in Rigi's capture in late February.

Security sources in Tehran are keen to highlight Abdulmalik Rigi's jet-set lifestyle, describing constant travel between Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Islamabad, Kabul and Central Asian capitals since early 2006. On the day of Rigi's arrest, Minister of Intelligence Heidar Moslehi appeared at a carefully arranged press conference giving details on Rigi's contacts and movements.

According to the intelligence minister, Rigi had even traveled to the British overseas territory of Gibraltar, from where he was allegedly moved to a European country, presumably to meet top Western intelligence chiefs. While independent verification of these claims is next to impossible, these carefully managed leaks are best understood as a means of inflicting sufficient public relations damage to Western intelligence without revealing anything solid by way of methods and knowledge.

In any event, security sources in Tehran tell Asia Times Online that they have "massive" amounts of information and documents in their possession that link Jundallah to the CIA and specialized branches of the United States military operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They also claim that the CIA had prior knowledge of the suicide bombing in Pishin in October (which was a massive blow against the IRGC) but there is an ongoing debate within security circles in Tehran as to whether the Americans had actively instigated the terrorist attack.

The outcome of this debate may well have serious repercussions, possibly prompting IRGC Qods force retaliation against American secret agents operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The IRGC Qods force is believed to have identified every noteworthy component of American intelligence activity in the region and the Qods force has the capability to strike a deadly blow against American intelligence assets in the region and beyond.

The precise details surrounding Abdulmalik Rigi's arrest are the subject of considerable debate. The Iranian government is content for confusion to prevail, especially since it feels it has succeeded in achieving two immediate post-arrest public relations objectives; to depict the operation as an all-Iranian affair (with no assistance rendered by any foreign intelligence service) and to paint Rigi as an American agent.

Notwithstanding the existence of several plausible theories surrounding Rigi's arrest, the bulk of the speculation has centered on Kyrgyzstan Airways flight QH454 en route to Bishkek from Dubai. According to most Iranian media reports, Iranian jets forced the plane to land before arresting Rigi with at least one accomplice. [Kyrgyz authorities initially confirmed the arrests but then protested to Iran for forcing the plane to land and denied that any passengers were missing once the plane had landed at its destination.](#)

Security sources in Tehran depict Abdulmalik Rigi as quiet and withdrawn. They describe a

resourceful operative who despite lack of any formal education was able to develop a sophisticated relationship with the CIA and the US military, as well as the intelligence services of Pakistan, the UAE and "several" Central Asian states.

But they are also keen to downplay his physical daring and maintain that Rigi lacks physical courage and that his reluctance to place himself in "dangerous scenarios" had caused friction in Jundallah. This information ties in with accounts from journalist sources in Tehran who claim that Rigi's brother, Abdulhamid, fell out with him because of his increasing penchant for the "good" life and his reluctance to take part in operations.

Iran strikes back

By any standard, Abdulmalik Rigi's arrest is a major success for the Islamic Republic's intelligence services. This dramatic operation has boosted the morale of Islamic Republic loyalists throughout the Middle East and caused considerable dismay and embarrassment to Iran's Western enemies.

The arrest came in the wake of the assassinations of Iranian physicist Massoud Ali Mohammadi in Tehran in early January and legendary Hamas commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai later that month. While investigations into Mohammadi's assassination (by a remote-controlled bomb) are ongoing, Iranian authorities have already pointed an accusing finger at America and Israel, without providing much by way of evidence.

In the case of Mabhouh, although the Dubai police moved quickly to identify the assassins (who are widely believed to belong to the Israeli intelligence service Mossad), Iranian security chiefs believe the assassination could not have occurred without some complicity by UAE political and security chiefs.

The Iranians believe that at the very least high UAE officials had enabled the Mossad operation by creating a permissive operational environment for the Israeli spy service in Dubai. Although Mabhouh was not scheduled to meet Iranians in Dubai, he is believed to have had strong ties to the Iranian security establishment and this same establishment believes that the assassination was designed to send a strong signal to Iran and its allies.

Despite the amateurish way the assassination was carried out, it was nonetheless a morale boost for the Israelis and the Americans and was interpreted as such in Tehran. However, Rigi's arrest once again tipped the balance of confidence in favor of the Iranians, especially since, unlike Mabhouh's assassination, the operation was carried out with flawless precision and efficiency and moreover it was neither immoral nor did it violate any international laws.

Whether the Islamic Republic will be able to reap the full political and diplomatic dividends of this major intelligence success will depend on large measure to what extent Iranian policymakers can think imaginatively about all the conflict points between Iran and the United States, especially in regards to policy towards Pakistan and Afghanistan and the nuclear standoff. It will also depend on to what extent Iran can keep up the momentum of this success in the intelligence and security sphere with a view to continuing to deter Israeli military aggression, either against Lebanon or Syria, or far less likely against Iran itself.