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The shadow war in Balochistan

By Pepe Escobar
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Just when Iran and [Pakistan](#) had reached a key Pipelineistan breakthrough, regional violence exploded involving, once again, "the greatest prize" Balochistan (Please see [Balochistan is the greatest prize](#), May 9, 2009, [Asia Times Online](#).)

The key question to ask is, as usual, *cui bono?*, or "Who profits?" What's behind this new, bloody intersection of Pipelineistan and the former "global war on terror" - a key theme US President Barack Obama would not dare touch in his [Cairo](#) address on Thursday to the "Muslim world"?

On May 22 in [Tehran](#), Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad finally signed a preliminary agreement, after 14 long years of negotiations, to build the Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline, formerly the Iran-Pakistan-[India](#) (IPI), or "peace pipeline". (The final deal should, in theory, be sealed in less than two weeks.) The decision brazenly defied [Washington's](#) diktat. (Please see [Pipelineistan goes Iran-Pak](#), May 29, 2009, [Asia Times Online](#).)

On May 28 in Zahedan, in Sistan-Balochistan province in Iran, the Pakistan-based, hardcore Sunni, ultra-anti-Shi'ite outfit Jundallah ("Soldiers of God") claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing inside the Amir al-Momenin mosque that killed 25 people and wounded 125.

The timing and the circumstances could not be more suspicious. Tehran simply cannot understand how Islamabad could not contain Jundallah after it has been offered key, on-the-ground intelligence.

Tehran had told the Pakistani ambassador, M B Abbasi, that three Pakistanis - Haji Noti Zehi, Gholam Rasoul Zehi and Zabihollah Naroui - had confessed to smuggling explosives into Iran from Balochistan and passing them over to the suicide bomber. The trio was subsequently hanged in public in Zahedan on May 30.

As for the Iranian ambassador to Pakistan, Mashallah Shakeri, already on March 20 he had publicly accused Islamabad of allowing Balochistan to be a Jundallah base for the destabilization of Iran. Islamabad said "it ain't so", but facts on the ground spelled otherwise. Now it's even more serious, as the future of the IP pipeline is on the line.

How will the Balochis in the Pakistani army react? In Balochistan, the New Great Game in Eurasia is as enigmatic as it gets. There's an enormous discrepancy between some Baloch tribal leaders who live the good life in Karachi (in Sindh) and treat the province as their personal fiefdom, and an extremely destitute population who feels totally alienated by the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani establishment.

The shadowy 'foreign player'

And what does Jundallah really want? Jundallah, also known in Iran as the Rigi group (after its ringleader, Abdul Malik Rigi), is an outfit of Iranian Balochis, who happen to be Sunni and fiercely anti-Shi'ite, who claim to represent their minority's rights in the Iranian southeast province of Sistan-Balochistan.

Their hideout is cross-border, in Pakistani Balochistan. Islamabad has also established they have operating ties with both the ultra-sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan. Tehran directly blames Jundallah for a series of cross-border guerrilla operations that have been going on since 2003, killing mostly Iranian soldiers and border guards.

After the bombing, the diplomatic dance could not but step into overdrive. Islamabad insists it is aligned with Tehran in their regional brand of the war on terror. But Tehran, not beating around the bush, has now explicitly demanded Islamabad to hand over Jundallah supremo Rigi, who is based in Balochistan. Pakistan's Interior Ministry has promised, on the record, to "hunt down" Jundallah.

Although still condemning the Zahedan bombing, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry strangely denies that Iran had sealed off its border with Pakistan. The fact is Tehran did close what they call "the zero point" at the tiny town of Taftan, in the Pakistan-Iran border. Bilateral trade is crucial for the tribal, regional livelihood - after all they are all Baloch "cousins". All the food for the Pakistani Baloch side comes from Iran.

Crucially, Islamabad's tune also has begun to change, in tandem with Tehran, drifting to the "third party" gambit - a foreign player supporting Jundallah's cross-border destabilization campaign, which sabotages any Pakistan-Iran rapprochement and of course the IP.

One does not need to share Tehran's national security worries to identify this foreign player: Washington, which not by accident supports a rival pipeline to IP, the ever-troubled Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, the raison d'être for the US involvement in Afghanistan. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said as much, "We consider Rigi's network linked with some foreign forces in Afghanistan." And he added Iran had plenty of "evidence".

Both Washington and Islamabad have tended to ignore Jundallah's anti-Iran activities. Well, not really, because under the George W Bush-era Jundallah was co-opted by US intelligence for regime change purposes in Iran. As for the Pakistani angle, will the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) finally move against Jundallah, as it seems to be moving against

Baitullah Mehsud's Taliban? In principle, this should be a no-brainer; according to the Fars News Agency, the chief of the Iranian Armed Forces, General Hassan Firouzabadi, informed Islamabad of Rigi's exact location.

At a Monday seminar in Quetta, the capital of Pakistani Balochistan, organized by the Awami National Party, influential Balochis made clear they would not allow for Taliban and al-Qaeda to thrive in Balochistan, and they urged Pashtuns living in the province to do the same. One has to wonder whether this show of unity against terrorist tactics applies to the Iranian Balochis of Jundallah as well.

It gets much more complicated. Balochistan has been flooded by Pashtun refugees for 30 years (the break-up of the province is now roughly 50/50). Many have been cannon fodder not only for the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan but also for the jihad in Kashmir and of course for the Taliban, in Afghanistan during the 1990s and lately the Pakistani Taliban. Secular Balochis charge that Punjabi-based Islamabad has always encouraged this refugee wave to bolster its own agenda: to undermine secular Baloch nationalism.

So, what is now happening in the Pashtun North-West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas because of the Pakistani army onslaught - a powerful sense of alienation - has already happened in Balochistan. Islamabad now has to confront not only Baloch nationalism but Pashtun nationalism as well.

All-out shadow war

With or without using Jundallah for its own Iran-destabilizing agenda, Washington's "shadow war" is about to hit Balochistan full speed ahead. It will mirror an already ongoing shadow war - which is the ISI war against Baloch nationalists; as Balochistan is virtually controlled by Islamabad's intelligence agencies, Islamabad cannot but systematically turn Balochis into victims of "targeted assassinations". For Islamabad, ethnic-based separatism is - in echoes of Israel - an "existential threat". Islamabad's reckless actions have only managed to turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Instead of watching him meet that paragon of democracy, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, and cozy up with perennial Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, the "Muslim world" would rather benefit from Obama explaining first-hand what a shadow war in Muslim lands is all about.

By mid-summer, Obama's Afghan surge in troops will be in position. A new, US mega-base in the "desert of death" in Helmand province, in southern Afghanistan, will be operational. The base happens to be a stone's throw from the Iran-Afghan border, and just across the border from Pakistani Balochistan. It's the ideal, strategic base for an extended, tri-border (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) General David Petraeus-coined counter-insurgency splash.

Ultra-shadowy task forces, "Hell from above" drone war, Hellfire missiles, the merciless logic of privatization and "covertization" of war, the Pentagon's "secret operational capabilities" to "locate, target and kill key individuals in extremist groups" - all this cannot but fester in this tri-border area.

Philip Alston of the United Nations Human Rights Council has been an almost isolated voice denouncing US shadow, "targeted assassination" teams working out of Afghan bases in Kandahar and Nangarhar, and allied with wily, local militias. The victims are mostly Afghan civilians. In Balochistan, the available "local militia" will always be Jundallah. The base will

be in the Afghan "desert of death". In the absence of Taliban or al-Qaeda, victims of "decapitation" are plenty of Iranians across the border.

How better to apply Petraeus' tactics than to expand these teams into destabilizing Iran and preventing Iran and Pakistan from closer integration via a key Pipelineistan node - an integration that also benefits [China](#)?

That is achievable with a Balochistan mired in chaos. From the Pentagon's point of view, China profiting from the Baloch port of Gwadar to be supplied with Iranian gas is anathema. Islamabad may not be allowed by Washington to take out Jundallah after all. Shadowplay rules.