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Iran trapped in a ring of unrest

By Mahan Abedin
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Sunday's suicide bomb attack on a conference hall in the Pishin region of Iran's vast Sistan and Balochistan province is by all accounts a major blow against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the most important military and security institution in the country.

It is now known that at least 42 people were killed in the attack, among them four of the most senior commanders of the IRGC. They include Generals Noor Ali Shooshtari (the deputy commander of IRGC land forces), Rajab Ali Mohammad-Zadeh (the commander of IRGC forces in the Sistan and Balochistan province), Hossein Moradi (commander of the IRGC garrison in the county of Iranshahr) and Ali Alavian (the commander of the IRGC's "Sarallah" Corps - a prestigious infantry unit). This is the biggest blow against the IRGC since the days of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

The loss of Noor Ali Shooshtari is particularly significant, since aside from his role as the deputy commander of IRGC land forces at a national level, recently he had taken direct control over all IRGC operations in the volatile southeast of the country. According to IRGC sources, for the past five months, Shooshtari had acted as the effective military governor of Sistan and Balochistan province, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan and which is a major center of activity for organized criminals, secessionists and other political and religious extremists.

In this unofficial capacity as military governor, Shooshtari had presided over attempts to involve as many local actors as possible in the large-scale effort to bring security to the volatile province. The large gathering on Sunday was the fifth meeting of its kind and was designed to deepen ties between competing tribal elders and rival Shi'ite and Sunni groups in the province.

Contrary to some local and international reporting, Shooshtari had not been a member or commander in the IRGC's fabled Quds Corps, the foreign special operations unit of the

Revolutionary Guards. The confusion may have arisen because of Shooshtari's ties to the Quds garrison (no relation to the Quds Corps), which is one of the main national operational headquarters of the IRGC.

Details of the early morning attack are still sketchy, but IRGC sources now rule out a second suicide bomber. The lone suicide bomber is believed to have hid explosives on his body and detonated them as he approached the senior IRGC commanders. The sheer scale of the loss has led some Iranian and international media to speculate about a "sophisticated" operation, but all the available information in the local media and information supplied by IRGC and intelligence sources in Tehran point to a simple and straight-forward suicide bomb attack.

The meeting had been semi-open and the tribal elders had been encouraged to bring relatives to the gathering. It seems that neither the IRGC nor the local branch of the Ministry of Intelligence had subjected the list of participants to forensic and exhaustive vetting. Indeed, one source has told me that the list of participants had been changing up until Saturday evening, thereby giving the Sunni militant group, Jundallah, plenty of opportunity to sneak in a suicide bomber.

The same source contends that body searches of the participants had been "perfunctory" at best and that some tribal elders and their guests had not been body searched at all.

This spectacular terrorist attack brings lax IRGC security into sharp relief. The weaknesses may be less institutional and more bound up with the culture of senior IRGC commanders who feel compelled to project physical courage and take extraordinary risks with their personal security. But in a highly volatile and dangerous environment like Sistan and Balochistan, where the IRGC has been burdened with a complex set of security, political, social and administrative tasks, security consciousness must override any other consideration.

At a broader strategic level, this attack exposes the Iranian government's lack of strategic vision and action. While the United States may not have directed this terrorist attack, the fact is that the emergence of suicide bombings in Sistan and Balochistan is a recent phenomenon that is entirely connected to the prevailing regional strategic environment, which has been shaped for the most part by the Americans.

To counter this threat successfully, the Iranian government needs to articulate an alternative strategic vision for the region and develop and implement more complex policies on the outstanding issues in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Jundallah: An overstated threat

The Iranian establishment's strong reaction to the terrorist attack must be understood not only in the context of the scale of the loss but also its symbolism. The IRGC is not only the most important military and security institution of the country; it is also the most important institution to have emerged from the Islamic Revolution of 1979, from both practical and symbolic points of view.

The Revolutionary Guards may not be the most popular institution right now, owing to the post-election disturbances in June, where the Basij (the paramilitary arm of the IRGC) played the leading role in suppressing rioters and protesters alike. But to hardcore supporters of the Islamic regime, the IRGC is nothing less than a hallowed institution; an attack on the IRGC is considered an assault on the heart and soul of the Islamic Republic. The IRGC is deemed to

represent the military will of the Islamic Revolution and the readiness of Iranian Islamists to safeguard the achievements of the Islamic Revolution, through force of arms if necessary.

Ideology and symbolism aside, the IRGC plays the leading role in the military and security spheres. Iran is the only country in the world to operate two completely independent military commands; one by the regular military and the other by the IRGC, which maintains its own army, navy and air force. Weakening the IRGC does not only imperil the Islamic regime, it also has a detrimental effect on internal security and Iranian territorial integrity.

Notwithstanding the severity of the attack, the strong reaction by Iranian politicians and the overstated desire to wreak retribution runs the risk of inflating Jundallah and drawing yet more disaffected people in the province towards the terrorist outfit.

Jundallah, which also styles itself as the "People's Resistance Movement of Iran", is a small terrorist outfit that emerged on the scene in late 2003 and early 2004. While the group has conducted numerous low-scale hit-and-run attacks it has up to now only conducted nine major or well-planned terrorist operations. Aside from the latest attack, the most significant have been the so-called "Tasooki" massacre in March 2005 when Jundallah militants set up fake road blocks and killed 22 people, most of whom were civilians; a February 2007 attack on a bus carrying IRGC personnel, killing 18 Revolutionary Guards; the mass abduction of 16 personnel of the Law Enforcement Agency (Nirooyeh Entezami) in June 2008 and their transfer to Pakistan (the fate of the abductees is not clear but they are thought to have been killed in Pakistan); and the bombing of a Shi'ite mosque in Zahedan (capital of Sistan and Balochistan province) in May 2009 which killed at least 25 worshippers.

The group's success in carrying out spectacular terrorist operations has not been matched by the elucidation of a clear and cohesive ideology. Indeed, the group's spokesmen (who often appear on Saudi-owned satellite broadcasters, particularly al-Arabiyah) outline an inconsistent and confused narrative; at times projecting clearly secessionist demands and at other times merely calling for autonomy.

Similarly, at times the group's spokesmen bemoan the Iranian government's alleged discriminatory policies towards Balochi Sunnis and at other times they exhibit clear hostility towards Shi'ite Muslims as a whole. In one extraordinary telephone interview in May 2006, Abdolmalek Rigi (the founder and leader of Jundallah) told Rooz (an online news and commentary outlet run by the more radical wing of the Iranian reformist movement) that he considered himself an "Iranian" and that Baloch grievances must be settled within the boundaries of present-day Iran.

While Jundallah deploys suicide bombers and its supporters at times express hatred towards Shi'ite Muslims, there is little else that connects it to so-called militant Sunni extremist groups operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Inside Sistan and Balochistan, the group does not enjoy widespread popular support, but hardcore and veteran Baloch nationalists (who tend to be secular for the most part) have extended moral and practical support, albeit grudgingly. Jundallah also enjoys rhetorical support from small exiled Baloch nationalist groups, particularly in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway.

Iranian counter-terrorism and counter-intelligence efforts have succeeded in containing the group and driving it across the border into Pakistan. The Iranians have arrested hundreds of

members and supporters of Jundallah in recent years and tried and executed dozens of them for terrorism-related offences.

Intelligence sources in Tehran contend that most of the "effective" members of the group (including Rigi's brother Abdul-Hamid) are currently in detention, where they have disclosed significant amounts of information. Based on this information, the IRGC has conducted operations on the eastern fringes of the province and put in place security arrangements that have made it harder for the group to conduct regular hit-and-run operations across the border.

Moreover, the Ministry of Intelligence has also been involved, in the form of recruiting and placing agents inside the group as part of a broader effort of sabotaging Jundallah's long-term aspirations and constraining its operational environment.

According to intelligence sources in Tehran, evidence of Jundallah's links to American secret agents and Pakistani state actors, in particular agents of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is numerous and beyond dispute. American secret agents, namely agents of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and highly specialized and secret branches of the United States military, have met key Jundallah operatives and commanders on numerous occasions in remote hideouts on the western fringes of Pakistani Balochistan. Moreover, the Americans have supplied the group with communication devices, in particular encrypted laptops, and large sums of cash in the form of US dollar notes.

More intriguingly, the training received by Jundallah militants in Pakistan is far more intelligence-oriented than the type of military and indoctrination training provided by Pakistani extremist groups. Details of the training - coupled with confessions by detained members - have led Iranian investigators to conclude that Jundallah has received training in ISI facilities by ISI trainers.

The type of training undergone by Jundallah members is closely related to secret intelligence activity, including conducting and deterring surveillance; constructing and managing cellular activity; communicating via encrypted laptops (the encryption is multi-layered and crucially it is bespoke, which is not widely commercially available); gathering and reporting information in quick time and in hostile environments; and counter-interrogation techniques.

In addition, the militants had undergone rudimentary military training and acquired the skills needed to conduct assassinations, mass kidnapping, preparing and deploying car bombs, and crucially, recruiting, priming and deploying suicide bombers.

Significantly, Iranian investigators have not detected overt direction by either Pakistani or American agents. Moreover, it is believed that the group's more low-key attacks (in particular hit-and-run attacks across the border) are more a reaction to pressure applied by organized crime gangs than any other factor.

Jundallah has strong ties to Pakistani, Afghan and Iranian Baloch drug barons and other organized criminals. Enabling a more permissive environment for organized criminals - for instance by distracting Iranian border guards, the Law Enforcement Agency and the IRGC in hit-and-run attacks - brings in much-needed cash and is believed to be the group's biggest source of finance.

Balochistan: A strategic conundrum

In recent years, the Iranian government and Iranian civil society have grappled with the problem of how to resolve or at least alleviate the manifold problems in Sistan and Balochistan. The disaffected people in the under-developed province are partially right to point out that both state and society were roused into action as a result of one unpopular group's terrorist actions.

Owing to the sheer complexity of the problems - and the threat posed to local community cohesion by Jundallah terrorism - the provincial government was forced to cede much of its authority to the IRGC, which has a proven track record of restoring security and stability to troubled border provinces both through military strength and crucially the establishment of community-based security architectures.

But Sistan and Balochistan poses a set of historical and strategic challenges that the IRGC - despite its best efforts - is unlikely to be able to overcome on its own. The province has been a headache for the modern Iranian nation-state for the past century and any multi-faceted strategic response must take stock of this troubled historical heritage.

Arguably the biggest local challenge is organized crime, in particular the daily transit of narcotics across the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. In September 2007, a senior Iranian intelligence officer told this author that in a meeting with a top Pakistani Balochi drug baron in 2003 in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, the Iranians were offered a tantalizing deal. For unmolested trafficking of narcotics across the Iran-Pakistan border, the drug lords were willing to pay the Iranian government an annual tax of US\$1 billion; promised not to distribute any of the contraband within Iran and pledged to hunt down and kill "enemies of the state" (namely armed Iranian Balochi secessionists) in Pakistani Balochistan.

Interestingly, the meeting had been brokered by the ISI; and only took place after Pakistani guarantees that they would prevent hostile American surveillance. The senior intelligence officer told this author that his curt response to the offer by the drug baron was that "I deal with God, not with you".

This account is credible considering that Jundallah emerged on the scene at around the same time and has forged very strong ties to an assortment of Iranian, Pakistani and Afghan organized crime gangs.

Beyond addressing the challenges and adverse dynamics inside Sistan and Balochistan, the Iranian government must address the very serious challenges posed by the evolving regional strategic environment. While Jundallah thrives on its relationship with organized crime gangs, its suicide bombing operations and overtly sectarian rhetoric is a direct consequence of the havoc unleashed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by American policies after the September 11, 2001, assault on the United States

Whether the Americans direct Jundallah to conduct terrorist operations in Iran is irrelevant at this point. What is significant is that they have created a strategic environment in which such attacks are both practically and ideologically possible, and no doubt - and notwithstanding perfunctory condemnation of terrorist acts - the Americans rub their hands with glee every time there is a major terrorist incident in Iran.

To emerge victorious in the long term, the Iranian government would be well advised to

articulate and implement an alternative strategic vision for the region. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack the previous Iranian government led by the liberal reformist Mohammad Khatami hastily condemned the attack and through its words created the impression that the Islamic Republic acquiesced to an American-led intervention in Afghanistan. This has led many regional actors - including those who are potentially Iran's allies - to claim that the Iranians "collaborated" with the United States. While any real collaboration was likely minimal, the impression has endured and inflicted significant damage on the prestige of the Islamic Republic.

While Iran has little in common with the Taliban in Afghanistan and an assortment of extremist outfits in Pakistan, the crucial point is that these actors do not pose a strategic threat to the Islamic Republic. In any case, articulating opposition to American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led operations in the region do not amount to condoning the actions of their immediate opponents. The long and arduous route to defeating organized criminals, armed secessionists and political and religious extremists in Sistan and Balochistan lies in actively lobbying for the exit of foreign forces from the region.