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Iran's Sunni militants carve secretive path

Sunni militants in Iran boast of attacks but leave only rumors of Western ties

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Seven years ago, a little-known group called Jundallah emerged in Iran with claims to fight for the rights of minority Sunnis in the unruly tribal areas near the border with Pakistan.

But just last week, Iranian leaders say, this shadowy group with reported connections to countries as diverse as the U.S., Pakistan and Saudi Arabia delivered a devastating attack on Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard. The Oct. 18 suicide bombing in an Iranian border village killed at least 42 people, including top Revolutionary Guard commanders.

The bombing suggests that ambitions by Jundallah — the Soldiers of God — have risen, and that the group is moving toward a wider uprising. Jundallah's attack on a Shiite mosque in May and recent use of suicide bombers could point to the growing influence of militant Islamic groups seeking a Sunni revolt against Shiite control in Iran, experts say.

Recent Jundallah attacks "express a clear will for a definitive rupture with the regime in Tehran," said Stephane Dudoignon, a Paris-based researcher who specializes in the Baluchi region. "It seems to be announcing an unprecedented escalation of violence in the months and years to come."

Last week's bombing also shows how Jundallah has become a magnet for theories and suspicions. Immediately after the attack, leaders in Tehran drew a far-reaching web of accusations linking Jundallah to supporters in Pakistan, Britain and the United States. All three nations quickly rejected the claims.

The rumblings — never clearly confirmed or debunked — span from covert U.S. aid, to indoctrination by Islamic radicals to links to smuggling networks. Reports by regional experts and interviews with security officials, including a former military chief in Pakistan, suggest Jundallah has benefited from U.S. and Pakistani help and, more recently, may have drifted closer to anti-Shiite militants with links to Saudi Arabia.

The claims of Jundallah's outside contacts could not be independently verified. They lend support, however, to long-standing speculation of U.S. and Pakistani encouragement to the group in efforts to rattle Iranian authorities with a low-level rebellion.

Gen. Aslam Beg, a former army chief of staff in Pakistan, told The Associated Press that the border village of Mand has been used as a staging point for U.S. contacts with Jundallah. U.S. aid also was funneled into the region through the Pakistani ports of Kot Kalmat and Jiwani, he alleged.

Beg, who left military service in the early 1990s, gave no other details or definitive timeline on the alleged U.S. links to Jundallah, which operates in one of the most inaccessible areas in the region.

In an article for Time.com, former CIA field officer Robert Baer wrote that the CIA had "sporadic" contact with Jundallah, but it was largely restricted to intelligence.

"A relationship with Jundallah was never formalized," Baer wrote.

An officer with Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, said he could shed no light on Beg's claims. But he added that Pakistan would never allow its territory to be used for attacks against a neighbor.

Officials in Washington and London also reject any links. Shortly after the suicide bombing, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly called claims of U.S. involvement "completely false."

Yet Washington has been less clear on how it views Jundallah. The group has not been placed on any terrorist watch list or designation. Instead, it's been described in various U.S. reports as an "opposition group" or "militant" faction.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal administration deliberations, said a decision on Jundallah could come soon, but declined to elaborate. Options include designating Jundallah a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" or placing it to one of several other terrorism blacklists.

Britain, too, denies any ties and has condemned Jundallah attacks. "They had nothing to do with the U.K.," Britain's Foreign Office said in a statement.

Experts estimate Jundallah has between 250 and 1,000 fighters. They are believed bankrolled by kidnapping-for-ransom plots and smuggling goods, such as subsidized Iranian fuel, into fellow Baluchi tribal areas in Pakistan and southern Afghanistan.

Jundallah's statements in the past have called for greater rights and prosperity for Iran's Baluchi region, which is inaccessible to journalists. But a July report by the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment cites indications that Jundallah has been building ties to Pakistani militant groups, including Lashkar-e-Janghvi and Tehrik-e-Taliban.

Both groups are battling Pakistan's military offensive into its northwestern Waziristan region.

"The story of Jundallah is the story of how an ethnic resistance movement has transformed into a violent sectarian group adopting tactical and ideological elements from the global jihadi movement," said the report.

After last week's suicide blast, Iran sent Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar to Islamabad to press Iran's claims that Pakistan allows Jundallah to operate on its territory — a charge Pakistan denied.

The two countries agreed to set up a joint border monitoring unit. But tensions quickly returned after Pakistan on Monday detained 11 Iranian agents who crossed the rugged border in apparent pursuit of smugglers. Authorities first identified them as Revolutionary Guard members, but then altered the statement to call them only security officers.

Although Pakistan and Iran have pledged cooperation to crack down on Jundallah, the two nations have been deeply at odds on other regional issues.

Pakistan was among the main international backers of Afghanistan's Taliban, which was fiercely opposed by Tehran. Iran even backed the U.S.-aided Northern Alliance that helped topple the Taliban after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Jundallah's rise could be an outgrowth of other tensions between the two nations.

A former police official familiar with the region said the government of former President Gen. Pervez Musharraf gave Jundallah space to operate in 2003 and 2004. It came after Iran contributed intelligence that linked Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan to an international smuggling ring providing nuclear material and technology.

Speaking on condition of anonymity because he feared retribution from Pakistani intelligence, the official said that Musharraf also opened the floodgates to money from Saudi Arabia. The funds were used to build madrassas, or religious schools, in the Baluchi area and elsewhere espousing the austere Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam, the official said.

Pakistan's top Interior Ministry official, Rehman Malik, said Jundallah leader Abdulmalik Rigi was hiding in Afghanistan.

Yet Rigi has given several interviews from Pakistan this year, including one to Al-Arabiya television, claiming it trains its fighters in camps outside Iran. Rigi did not specifically name Pakistan, but most experts believe there are substantial cross-border ties.

"We train 20, 30 or 50 men every month and then send them in. So far we have trained over 2,000 men," Rigi told Al-Arabiya in September. "We're an Islamic Awakening movement. ... We suffer economic problems and very meager resources."

On both sides of the border, ethnic Baluchis are among the poorest and least educated, according to U.N. statistics.

"Apart from the narcotics trafficking, I don't know what they do there," said Christine Fair, regional expert at the RAND Corp.