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Jundullah a wedge between Iran, Pakistan

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Far from the headlines of the mainstream media, the border between Iran and Pakistan is heating up to epic proportions. In recent months, cross-border raids by a Balochistan-based terrorist group, Jundullah, targeting Iranian security personnel and civilians, has plunged bilateral relations to unprecedented depths.

But Jundullah isn't just the prime mover for the internal security crisis in southeastern Iran. It also threatens to become the key to the survival of the Taliban on the border between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

On May 28, a suicide bomber blew himself up inside the Ameer al-Momenin mosque in Zahedan, capital of Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province, killing 25 people and injuring 130 others. Since the attack took place during a Shi'ite festival, it incensed Tehran. It was carried out by a member of Jundullah (which is a Baloch insurgent group, not to be confused with Jundallah, a pan-Pakistan offshoot of Baitullah Mehsud's Taliban faction).

The Zahedan attack followed months of ever-bolder attacks by Jundullah inside Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province, including the kidnap of 21 Iranian truck drivers in August 2007 into Pakistan (later freed by Pakistani forces), the kidnapping of Iranian border troops, 16 of whom were executed on camera in December 2008, some gruesomely through decapitation, and the first suicide bombing in Iran's history in December 2008. In November 2008, Jundullah's hand or collaboration was suspected in the kidnap of an Iranian diplomat in Peshawar. Occupied by the war against the Taliban, Islamabad at times seemed intransigent to Iranian appeals to crack down on Jundullah activities in the Makran highlands that straddle the 1,000 kilometer border between Pakistan and Iran.

The Zahedan attack therefore proved to be a watershed of sorts in bilateral relations. Tehran apparently had alerted Islamabad in advance about the possibility of the attack and requested the latter's authorities crack down on Jundullah on Pakistani territory as a pre-emptive measure. Hence, when the Zahedan attack happened, Iran made unprecedented diplomatic maneuvers. It not only lodged a strong protest with Islamabad, but the Iranian ambassador to

Pakistan called a press conference and lambasted the Pakistani authorities for inaction.

Within days, Iran closed its border with Pakistan. Bilateral relations plunged to unprecedented depths. For Pakistan, which has border disputes and hostile relations with two of its three neighbors - India and Afghanistan - the Iranian moves could not have come at a worse time.

Pakistan felt particularly misunderstood since, after the civilian government came to power in 2008, it had initiated some amount of internal action against Jundullah - although this action was largely confined to the urban areas in Pakistan rather than the border areas from where Jundullah operated.

The government of President Asif Ali Zardari had also handed over to Iran Abdel Hamid Rigi, the captured brother of Jundullah leader Abdel Malik Rigi. Some very deft diplomacy as well as the distraction of the Iranian elections arrested the crisis from deterioration. But it remains a fact that although there is some amount of understanding between Islamabad and Tehran in tackling the group, this cooperation is far from translating into effective intelligence-sharing or cross-border operational coordination.

On the other hand, Iran has been ruthless in cracking down on the group in Sistan-Balochistan, executing a number of Jundullah prisoners, including Abdel Hamid Rigi, this year, after a well-orchestrated confession by the latter. The Iranian state did not spare even relatives of the Rigi family living in the country. Yet, Jundullah only appears to have grown bolder and more reckless with every Iranian crackdown. In fact, a number of bold attacks and hostage-takings in Iran last year were expressly for the purpose of forcing Iran to free the group's activists.

Jundullah, which at times calls itself the "People's Resistance Movement of Iran", came into prominence around 2003. It was allegedly founded by Nek Mohammed Wazir, a former Pakistani Taliban leader. Its current leader, Abdel Malik Rigi, was educated in southern Pakistani port city of Karachi in the same *madrassa* (seminary) as a majority of the Pakistani Taliban leadership and he claims to have fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. The group says that it is fighting for the rights of Iran's roughly 4 million Balochs, which it claims have been suppressed by the Shi'ite regime in Tehran.

The group started by targeting important elements of the Iranian state presence in Sistan-Balochistan province, particularly the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, but has since carried out suicide attacks against civilian targets. Critics say that Jundullah is a sectarian Sunni-chauvinist group that claims an ethnic agenda. They also say that even as a Baloch insurgency rages inside Pakistan itself, Jundullah has shown little enthusiasm to join it so far, and has focused on fighting for Balochs only in Iran.

For instance, the group said that the Zahedan attack was done to protest a Tehran-imposed festival which the group alleges falsely attributed martyrdom to Fatima, the prophet's daughter - an ancient dispute in Islamic history. In contemporary Iran, where nationalism and sectarian loyalty have been conveniently entwined by Tehran, Jundullah's statement amounted to treason and heresy at the same time.

But in reality, a closer analysis of Jundullah propaganda suggests the group actually masquerades its ethnic struggle in a sectarian guise, perhaps to win greater support within

Pakistan. Abdel Malik Rigi also tries to not endanger his sanctuary by stressing that he is not engaged in any anti-Pakistan activity and is solely focused on Iran.

But for all practical purposes, Jundullah's zeal has begun to translate into greater sectarian violence. The Shi'ite-Sunni sectarian divide between Pakistan and Iran, which was obvious during the Afghan civil war in which both sides ran/supported proxies (the Taliban by Pakistan and the Hazaras by Iran), persists to date and Jundullah is seen by Iran as an extension of it.

Tehran has alleged in recent years that Jundullah is being run by Pakistan on behalf of the US to destabilize the regime in Tehran. (In 2007, there were controversial reports in some Western media outlets that the George W Bush administration was funding Jundullah covertly to further the agenda of "regime change". One report said that the Bush administration's objective was to gain leverage over Tehran, given Iranian sponsorship of insurgent groups in Iraq. Yet another said that Jundullah had been helpful to the US in tracking movements of al-Qaeda in the notoriously dangerous Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan border region)

But, Tehran has also alleged that Jundullah is allied with al-Qaeda. Tehran's continuing confrontation with the international community has contributed to its failure in mustering international support against Jundullah. This in turn has allowed Jundullah to solicit funding from sympathetic Baloch emigres in Europe and the Gulf.

In any event, Tehran's fears about a "Western conspiracy" against it have only gained ground in recent weeks, after Abdel Malik Rigi said in an interview that he received intelligence support from the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, an Iranian dissident group that has a history of terrorist acts against the Islamic republic (and was responsible for crippling Ayatollah Ruhollah Khamenei in a bombing in the early 1980s).

Apart from fomenting cross-border tensions with Iran, Jundullah has now become an active internal security threat for Pakistan. A raid mounted on a safe house by Pakistani police in January 2008 in their search for the Iranian diplomat who was kidnapped from Peshawar unexpectedly captured several cadres of the TTP and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a well-known anti-Shi'ite sectarian group. Jundullah has also been implicated in narcotics smuggling across the border.

Pakistani media recently quoted analysts who feel that given the Pakistani army's ongoing offensive against Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan, his cadres may flee into Balochistan and join forces with Jundullah to mount a stand there against Pakistani troops. In fact, of all the groups in Pakistan's border region, it is Jundullah which has the terrain knowledge, tactical capacity and ideological indoctrination that could even render true Pakistan's fears that the US-led operation in Helmand province of Afghanistan could lead to a spillover of some of the Afghan Taliban into Balochistan.

Jundullah has to be fought and defeated in Pakistan to avert the nightmare scenario of a tie-up with the Taliban and Balochistan becoming a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Estimates of Jundullah's cadre range from 700 to 1,000, with up to 200 cadres fighting in the border region. While the group is comparatively small by itself, its ability to infiltrate urban environments in Pakistan cannot be underestimated. Nor can its propensity to use suicide bombing be taken lightly. Jundullah has also openly threatened the gas pipelines being built

from Iran into Pakistan, which would imperil Pakistan's energy security.

Further, a repeat of the Zahedan attack inside Iran would almost certainly bring Iran and Pakistan to the brink of war. For the Iranian regime, which is still reeling from the post-election protests, such a *causus belli* (with all its sectarian connotations) would also help consolidate its control on the country. Hence, controlling Jundullah's cross-border movements is an urgent necessity for Pakistan and for the US. Going after Jundullah would indeed preempt a clear and rising threat to security of the region.