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Jundallah and the Geopolitics of Energy

By Muhammad Sahimi

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On Oct. 18, the Jundallah (God's Brigade) terrorist group, based in Pakistan's Balochistan province, on the border with Iran, mounted two terrorist attacks inside Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province. One was a suicide attack, and the other was an ambush on a car carrying a group of soldiers. The coordinated attacks killed 42 people and injured dozens more. Five senior commanders of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Iran's elite military unit, were killed, including Brig. Gen. Nourali Shoushtari, deputy commander of the IRGC's ground forces.

Jundallah has also taken responsibility for the bombing of a bus carrying IRGC soldiers in February 2007. At least 11 soldiers were killed in that attack. Jundallah has carried out several other terrorist operations in Iran that have killed many policemen and civilians.

Iran immediately blamed the United States for having a hand in the attacks. Ali Larijani, the speaker of Iran's parliament, said, "If they [the U.S.] want relations with Iran, they must be frank [in admitting their responsibility]. We consider the recent terrorist measure the outcomes of the U.S. measure." For years Iran has been making similar charges against the U.S. and Britain, accusing them of trying to incite ethnic tensions within Iran in order to cause instability.

The mainstream media in the U.S. tends to dismiss Iran's charges. After Iran's rigged presidential election of June 12 and the loss of legitimacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government in the eyes of a majority of Iranians, the mainstream media may be even more inclined to be dismissive of Iran's accusations.

But regardless of Iran's internal political situation, there is ample evidence that the George W. Bush administration was deeply involved in funding Jundallah. While it is not clear what the policy of the Obama administration is regarding Jundallah (the State Department flatly rejected Iran's accusations), it is unlikely that the CIA's direct or indirect support for Jundallah has ended.

In February 2007, Dick Cheney traveled to Pakistan and met with then-president Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Pakistani government sources said that the secret campaign against Iran by Jundallah was on the agenda when the two met. In an interview later that month, Cheney referred to the Jundallah terrorists as "guerrillas" in order to give them legitimacy.

But despite its claims, Jundallah is a sectarian, not liberation, movement. It is made of Sunni extremists who hate the Shi'ites, and its goal is to foment conflict between the two sects.

There is a movement in Pakistani Balochistan against the discrimination that the Baloch people suffer at the hands of the central government. The Baloch minority (totaling about 1 million) in Iran has also been discriminated against, although the Iranian government has been trying to improve the economy there. But Jundallah is not part of either struggle. Jundallah is simply a Sunni Salafi group of the Taliban or al-Qaeda variety, believed by many to have links to both groups and to be involved in drug trafficking as well. Since 1979, [at least 3,000 Iranian policemen have been killed by the drug traffickers in the region.](#)

On Feb. 25, 2007, the London *Telegraph* [reported](#), "America is secretly funding militant ethnic separatist groups in Iran in an attempt to pile pressure on the Islamic regime to give up its nuclear program. ... Such incidents [of violence] have been carried out by the Kurds in the west, the Azeris in the northwest, the Ahwazi Arabs in the southwest, and the Baluchis in the southeast. ... Funding for their separatist causes comes directly from the CIA's classified budget but is now 'no great secret,' according to one former high-ranking CIA official in Washington."

According to the *Telegraph*, Fred Burton, a former U.S. State department counterterrorism agent, supported the assertion, saying, "The latest attacks inside Iran fall in line with U.S. efforts to supply and train Iran's ethnic minorities to destabilize the Iranian regime."

In April 2007, ABC News [reported](#) that according to Pakistani and U.S. intelligence officials, the Jundallah group "has been secretly encouraged and advised by American officials since 2005." According to the report, the "U.S. relationship with Jundallah is arranged so that the U.S. provides no funding to the group, which would require an official presidential order or 'finding' as well as congressional oversight." The money for Jundallah was funneled to its leader, Abdel Malik Regi, through Iranian exiles who have connections with European and Gulf states.

In an interview with National Public Radio on June 30, 2008, Seymour Hersh [explained](#) how the Bush administration's policy of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" led the U.S. to support Jundallah and the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, or MEK, an Iranian exile group listed as a terrorist organization by the State Department, both of which have clear records of terrorist activities.

In a July 2008 article in *The New Yorker*, Hersh [quoted](#) Robert Baer, a former CIA clandestine officer who worked for nearly two decades in South Asia and the Middle East as saying, "The Baluchis are Sunni fundamentalists who hate the regime in Tehran, but you can also describe them as al-Qaeda. These are guys who cut off the heads of nonbelievers – in this case, it's Shi'ite Iranians. The irony is that we're once again working with Sunni fundamentalists, just as we did in Afghanistan in the 1980s."

In a symposium on U.S.-Iran relations that the author helped organized in October 2008 at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, Baer made the same statements.

Former Pakistani army chief retired Gen. Mirza Aslam Baig also [confirmed](#) that the U.S. supports Jundallah and uses it to destabilize Iran. Baig was deeply involved when the Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) supported the Taliban. Baig is part of Pakistan's ruling oligarchy, so he knows something about what goes down in South and Central Asia and the Greater Middle East

In his July 2008 article, Hersh also said that the MEK received arms and intelligence, directly or indirectly, from the U.S., and that the Kurdish party PJAK (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan), "which has also been reported to be covertly supported by the United States," has been operating against Iran from bases in northern Iraq for at least three years.

In the fall of 2005, there was a series of bombings in Iran's oil-rich province of Khuzestan bordering southern Iraq, which was occupied by British forces. The bombings killed many innocent people. The Iranian government accused Britain and the U.S. of being behind the terrorist attacks. In his article, Hersh also mentioned possible U.S. support for the so-called Khuzestan separatists (who exist only in the imaginations of American policymakers).

"Arabizing" Khuzestan and separating it from Iran [has always been a goal of Britain](#). British Arabists have long supported Arab nationalist activities against Iran, in particular in Khuzestan.

A good example is what happened when Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. Iraq's goal was to annex Khuzestan. The BBC news network, as well as the rest of the Western mainstream media, provided full coverage of the Iraqi invasion in the first week, with two key claims: (a) Iran's resistance would collapse quickly, and (b) the Arabs of Khuzestan fully supported the invasion. Both proved to be totally unfounded. In fact, the vast majority of Iranian Arabs not only did not support Saddam, but were in fact at the forefront of resistance to the Iraqi invaders.

It seems that the Bush administration (and its allies) tried very hard, through a covert program, to destabilize Iran by inciting its ethnic and religious minorities. The policy of the Obama administration toward the program is not clear. But President Obama has always stated that when it comes to Iran, "All options are on the table." So why should anyone believe that this particular option has been taken off the table?

There is another important aspect of the problem that the public is not well aware of. Since the 1990s, the U.S. has supported the construction of a pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan and the Indian Ocean, in order to transport natural gas from that region to international markets. Though the political instability and mountainous terrain of Afghanistan make it much easier and more economical to construct the pipeline through Iran, the U.S. has always opposed such a route.

Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan native and the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, and the United Nations during the Bush administration, [was a consultant to the Unocal oil company in the 1990s](#). With Khalilzad's help, UNOCAL (which has since been bought by Chevron) lobbied the Clinton administration very strongly to give it permission to construct the

pipeline. The Clinton administration supported the project, but when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, the project was postponed.

But Iran and Pakistan have signed an agreement to construct a pipeline from southern Iran to Pakistan for transporting Iran's natural gas to Pakistan. Initially, the pipeline was supposed to continue to India, but under pressure by the Bush administration, India withdrew from the project.

If constructed, the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, which has been dubbed "[the peace pipeline](#)," will be in direct competition with the pipeline through Afghanistan, if and when that pipeline is constructed. Instability in Iran's Baluchestan will scare away potential investors in the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, and may prevent its construction altogether. These facts play an important role in Jundallah's attack on Iran, but the mainstream media has ignored them.

Like a great majority of Iranians and Iranian-Americans, I believe that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government has no legitimacy, but the fact remains that the U.S. and its allies have been trying for years to incite Iran's ethnic and religious minorities in order to destabilize it. To do so, the U.S. has not hesitated to use terrorist groups, such as Jundallah and PJAK, despite its so-called war on terror. When religious fanaticism mixes with the geopolitics of energy resources, the results are heinous.