



Sunni Militants in Iran: Activities, Ideological Sources and Political Strategies

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Abstract

In this article the activities, ideological and strategic characters of militant Sunni groups in Southeast Iran will be investigated. It will be argued that their ability to survive and their capacity for popularity and action, to a large extent, is associated with strong sense of alienation among the Sunnis in the area, as well as their ethnic and religious networks which exist across borders. These factors have strengthened their positions in the wake of turbulent conditions in adjacent countries, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The militant groups in the area are not homogeneous and vary from quietists and ethnic-religious nationalists to sectarian and global-oriented Jihadists. Nearly all these militants in the marginal corner of Southeast Iran have adopted a strong anti-Shia approach, which was influenced politically and ideologically by radical Deobandis as well as Wahabbis and Salafists. Their strategies have shifted overtime but mostly focused on near enemy. With serious threats imposed by ISIS along western borders, the Shia regime in Iran has become more aware of the dimension of problems in Southeast Iran, particularly the area of Sistan and Baluchistan

Keywords: Iran, Afghanistan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Pakistan, US, NATO, Taliban, al Qaeda, jihadist, Jondollah, Jaish-e-Adl, Sunni, Shia, Laskar-e- Janguhi.

Introduction

The Sunnis constitute about 15% of Iran's population. They settled in different areas, but mainly in Kurdistan along the country's western borders, as well as in Sistan and Baluchistan (Balochistan) along the Southeastern boundaries adjacent to Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Sunnis in Iran strongly believe that they are discriminated against by the Shia government in matters such as building mosques, sharing political power, access to resources, as well as limitations on business and employment opportunities.

Recently, even Ali Younesi¹, the former Minister of Intelligence and currently President Rohani's special assistant in religious and ethnic minority affairs, criticised top Iranian authorities who consider Sunni minorities to be outsiders. This long term systematic alienation policy by the Iranian Shia regime has developed into a damaging process which has given rise to resentment among most Sunnis in Iran. So it has not been unexpected that these Sunnis would show some sympathy towards ISIS in Iraq and Syria².

In Kurdistan there have been radical Sunni groups, such as Ansar al-Islam, with close connections with al-Qaeda and ISIS. But in Iranian Kurdistan, like other Kurdish areas in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, there has been a strong secular ethnic identity which has acted against influence of the Salafist hardline Jihadists. The situation is different along the eastern borders in Sistan and Baluchistan, where secular ethnic traditions are weak

and Sunni religious networks, influenced by troublesome conditions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, are strong.

This is a reason that most influential radical Jihadists have emerged in the Southeast Iran. These groups have been diverse in terms of their religious ideologies, political strategies and actions. In terms of typology, defined by Hegghammer³ the ethnic-religious nation oriented approach is growing, but there are also non-political quietists, sectarian, and global oriented approaches. With the new threats highlighted by extremist anti-Shia Jihadists of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, President Rohani, the new president of Iran has tried to adopt a more moderate policy to improve the Sunnis' conditions and strengthen positions of moderate and quietist Sunnis against radical groups in Southeast and other places in Iran⁴.

This research is mainly based on secondary data, particularly the blogs of these Jihadist groups, available on in Persian. Since the most violent and influential radical groups are concentrated in the Southeast Iran, the focus in this article is on this area, particularly Sistan and Baluchistan. In this article, the process of the radical groups' development along with the sources of their ideological and political strategies will be explained.

Local Enemy or Global One?

Broadly speaking, the Sunni radical groups which operate in Southeast Iran, particularly Sistan, Baluchistan, and Khorasan, follow two different strategies. First, a strategy in which priorities are given to transnational or cross-border enemies.

Second: a strategy in which priorities are given to local or domestic enemies⁵. Similar strategies are used by Sunni militant groups in Pakistan.

The forces which have followed an external-oriented strategy have directed their “jihad” towards enemies beyond the borders. In this case some radical Sunni forces in Southeast Iran regard American-NATO forces and the Afghanistan Government as the main enemies; and Taliban as their main ally. Those who have an internal oriented strategy consider the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran as their main enemy so their jihad is mainly against the Iranian government. In reality there is no such impenetrable border between these two strategies, for the militants share the same goal of achieving an Islamic state or a caliphate run by the Sunni militant forces.

Some militant groups have shifted over time and space from one strategy to another or even perused a hybrid strategy. Working in a wider network with strong cross border links has given them more flexibility in movement, security and survival, even a higher level of strategic choice. At the same time strategic ties with cross border powers may lead to these groups crossing their ideological red lines and sometimes create sectarian conflicts among them.

Sources of ideas

There is no single source of inspiration for the radical Sunni Islamic forces in Southeast Iran. In one way or another their ideas are based on radical developments in Deobandism, Salafism/Ahl-e Hadithi and Wahabbism. While there have been some Islamists inspired by Muslim Brotherhood and Jamat-e Islami, particularly among more urban educated people, the influence of the Islamists is still limited in the area. To a large degree these militant groups are hostile to the mainstream Islamists such as Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaa't-e Islami, who are considered to be heretic and conformist⁶.

However, it can be said with little doubt that Deobandism has played the most significant role in stimulating the militant groups, both politically and ideologically. In this sense they are Neo-Fundamentalists or Talebanists. The majority of leaders and members of the militant forces have been trained in Deobandi madrasas⁷, but also to a lesser extent in Ahl-e Hadith madrasas, which act under the umbrella of *Wafaq Al Madaris Salafia*. Some even have a Wahabbi educational background.

Networks of radical Deobandi institutions have played an important role in supporting and promoting the radical Jihadi activities. A suicide culture that is already well established in Pakistan and Afghanistan is also important. The same networks of institutions, particularly Deobandi madrasas which act under umbrella of madrasa networks of *Wafaq Al Madaris Al Arabia* in Pakistan, have expanded into Southeast Iran, especially in Baluchistan.

Deobandi madrasas in the subcontinent have been the main source of inspiration for the moulvis, Baluchistan's religious authorities, since the 1920s⁸⁻¹⁰. However, it is a simplistic idea to presume the Deobandi networks are the same and static over time and space. Large sections of Deobandis are still traditional, quietest and conservative. They are reluctant to join or support radical political activities to challenge the existing political establishments¹¹.

Most militant Deobandis in Pakistan started their sectarian activities in the 1980s, and to a large extent drew inspiration from Ayatullah Khomeini and the 1979 Revolution in Iran as a reaction to the emergence of Shia radicalism. Since then, militant Deobandis such as *Sepah-e-Sahabah-e Pakistan*, *Lashkar-e Janguhi*, *Jaish-e-Mohammed*, and more recently Taliban of Pakistan; and to a lesser extent Pakistan's *Ahl-e-Hadithi* forces of *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (now known as *Jamaat-ud-Dawa*), have been the most important sources of inspiration for anti-Shia political groups in Southeast Iran.

The emergence of Taliban in 1990s greatly strengthened the position of radical Deobandis and gave them a clearer political dimension. The Afghan Taliban added an ambiguous Islamic emirate as a new political strategy to the objectives of the previously sectarian Deobandis. While violence and sectarian activities characterised Taliban and their Deobandi allies as brutal forces, there is no evidence to suggest that there was any suicide bombing by the radical Deobandis and Taliban before US-NATO attacks on Afghanistan in 2001.

Through Deobandi networks of moulvis and madrasas, the image of Taliban as “true” Muslims was widespread in Southeast Iran. Sympathy with the Taliban has strengthened in Iranian Sistan and Baluchistan and also in the provinces of Khorasan. According to some observers, some groups or individuals often collected donations in the Sunni mosques to support Jihad in Afghanistan. The Baluch moulvis in many cases have admired and idealised Jihadi suicide attacks in Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya and Iraq and even in some cases have persuaded the young Baluch to join the Jihad.

From 1980s, through the same networks, Baluch Jihadis, from Iranian Baluchistan have participated in Jihad in Afghanistan where they received military training. Some of these Jihadis were killed in Afghanistan, for example Abdolrabb-e Syedzadeh and Musa Damani who were seminary students in Pakistan¹². Others returned to Baluchistan, Iran, where they initiated and led a new brand of radical activities with clearer political ambition. They also maintained their communications with wider networks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Who are The Sunni Radical groups in southeast Iran?

The most significant militant Sunni groups in Iranian Baluchistan in chronological order can be identified as:

Moneem Group, *Hezb-e Forqan* (HF), *Sepah-e Rasulullah* (SR), *Jondollah* (JA), *Sepah-e Sahaba-Iran* (SSI), *Jaishul-Husain* (Army of Husain), "*Jaish-ul-Adl*" (Army of Justice), *Harkat-e Ansar-e Iran* (HAI) and *Jaish-e Nasr* (JN) (Army of Victory). With the exception of JA, there is no comprehensive and reliable information about these militant groups. Thus, despite the use of carefully selected sources, confirmation of the following information is not possible¹⁰. These groups in one way or another had connections with radical groups such as *Sepah-e Sahabah* and *Lashkar-e Janguhi* in Pakistan and also Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. All of the groups were involved in violent armed activities against the Iranian Regime.

Abdul Moneem group

Also known as Abu Salman group or even Yusuf group. This was a shadowy group believed to be one of the earliest militant Sunni Jihadi groups which emerged in the area under the leadership of a person called Abdul Moneem¹³. The significance of this militant group can be seen in two ways. First, this group started attacking the most important Shia shrine in Iran. Second, it had connections with international Jihadi networks which were not clearly known as al-Qaeda at the time.

It was reported that 26 people were killed and over 200 were injured in the explosion of Imam Reza's Shrine, Mashhad, on 26th June 1994 (Rigi, 2010). Sunni radicals tried to justify this attack as revenge for the 1993 destruction of the Sunni Mosque of Sheikh Faiz¹⁴. The Iranian government, under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, connected this attack to *Mojahedin Khalq-Iran* Organisation for political reasons. At the same time the government arrested a number of Baluch Sunni activists in Sistan and Baluchistan. Some of these detainees had connections with small Islamist groups which were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood or Jama'at-e Islami.

The global dimension of this activity is related to the fact that Ramzi Ahmed Yousef was not only involved in it but may even have planned it. It is believed that Abdul Moneem is a younger brother of Abdul Monem (also called Abdul Moneem Arish or Abu Salman). Ramzi Yousef (Abdul Basit Balochi, Mahmoud Kareem, alias Ramzi Ahmed Yousef) is the famous global Jihadist who, in 1993, exploded the World Trade Centre in New York. In July 1993, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef in cooperation with *Sepah-e Sahabah Pakistan* also attempted to kill Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto¹⁵.

Ramzi Yousef was arrested in Pakistan in 1995 and was sent to the USA. However, many other members of his extended family continued their Jihadi activities at regional and global dimensions. The most prominent member of this extraordinary family was Sheikh Khaled Mohammad. Sheikh Khaled Mohammad, who is considered the principal architect of 9/11 attacks, is the uncle of Ramzi Yousef. It is believed that Sheikh Mohammad's three brothers, Zahed, Abed and Aref¹⁴, were also involved in Jihad in Afghanistan. Sheikh Mohammad was

arrested in Rawalpindi, Pakistan on 1st March 2003 and sent to the USA¹⁶.

Masrab Arochi, a nephew of Sheikh Khaled Mohammed, another Jihadi militant arrested in June 2004 in Karachi, is likely to be the same Abdul Moneem mentioned previously¹⁷. It was revealed by Pakistani police that Arochi along with 8 others was training in South Wazirestan. This is approximately the same time when Abdolmalek Rigi began establishing the Iranian Jondollah. It is also believed that Abdolmalek Rigi was also in Wazirestan, but there is no evidence of any connection between Abdolmalek Rigi and Arochi.

Because these high ranked Al-Qaeda strategists originate from Baluchistan, they are highly respected by radical religious activists in Southeast Iran. This particular family had emigrated from Baluchistan to Kuwait where they spent their youth. They are believed to be from Kishkour-Sarbaz in Iranian Baluchistan, close to Pakistan borders.

Due to their ethnic affiliation, this family has been a source of pride not just for Jihadi Religious groups but also for some ethnic secular Baluch nationalists. Some nationalists argue that they have raised the name of Baluchistan so they deserve to be regarded as heroes. As a mark of respect, these nationalists refer to them by their first names as "Yousef" and "Khaled". There are other Baluch nationalists who reject the nature of their activities but consider their talents as a proof that the Baluch have the capacity and potential to create their own successful independent state.

There are secular nationalists who completely reject the idea by arguing that militant Jihadis are not Baluch and the Baluch are naturally against such kind of atrocities. From the nationalist point of view, many consider these strategists purely as nationalists and deny their Jihadist approach.

Hezb-e Alforqan(HF)

Also known as the Alforqan Party or *Sazman-e Hezb-e Ahl-e Sunnat-e Iran*, this group was founded and led by Moulvi Abdoljalil Qanbarzahi (also called Abu Shahid or Moulvi Salhulddin) in the second half of the 1990s.

Moulvi Qanbarzahi, who had very little secular education, started his religious education in the Deobandi Madrasa of Darul-Ulum in Zahedan. Later he went to Pakistan to continue his education and training in other madrasas such as Badrul-Ulum Madrasa in Rahimyarkhan in Multan and Kohat. He finally attended Darul-Ulum Karachi, one of the most prestigious Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan. In Pakistan he joined *Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Ahl-e Sunnat-e Iran* which had been established by Moulvi Abdolmalek Mollazadeh and a few other Iranian Sunni Moulvis and seminary students.

This organisation pursued an anti-Shia approach but in general was a moderate organisation and was in line with Mujahedin groups in Afghanistan. They had no clear programme for armed jihad against Iranian Government. This organisation published a newsletter called "Azan-e Mojahed" in Pakistan. Moulvi Abdolmalek Mollazadeh was killed in a terrorist act, possibly by Iranian security forces in Karachi. Moulvi Habibullah Husainbor, who was another activist and a founder of this organization, was arrested when he went to Iran. After being released, he suddenly disappeared. His relatives and friends believe that he was kidnapped by Iranian security forces.

According to Moulvi Qanbarzahi's biography written by Moulvi Ebrahim Safizadeh¹⁸, Qanbarzahi then went to Afghanistan and took part as a commander in Jihad against the Russians in Lugar. After Russian forces withdrew from Afghanistan, Moulvi Qanbarzahi as an experienced Jihadi returned to Iran.

Qanbarzahi settled in Noukchah and Chah Zard-e Domak, a village around Zahedan, and started teaching in a madrasa. He preached jihad there and then also established a new madrasa. He trained his students to join jihad in the meantime. He established HF with the participation of his students Abdolqader Abdollahzahi (Omarshah) and Abdulshakoor Shahbakhsh. HF emerged as an armed Jihadi group influenced by Taliban and Al Qaeda. This group moved to Nimroz province, Afghanistan, and started to develop a close relationship with Taliban.

Supported by Taliban, HF spread their activities along the borders of Afghanistan and Iran by building further contacts with Sunni Jihadis from Khorasan. AHF also expanded their activities in Herat, Qandahar and Helmand. HF also established a base in Kuh-e Malek, Helmand. While they were sporadically penetrating the borders and organizing skirmishes against Iranian security forces, they mainly focused on supporting Taliban in Afghanistan. Being tied with conservative and traditional perspectives on technology as earlier Taliban were, HF was unable to use global satellites and internet efficiently to publicise their operations.

When HF were very much involved in supporting Taliban or possibly identifying Shia in Afghanistan, Taliban captured Mazar-e Sharif and attacked the Diplomatic Premise of Iran (embassy) and killed nine of the Iranian diplomatic staff, including a reporter¹⁹. Whether HF was involved or not is not clear, but surely they had cheered Taliban's massacre in which the head of diplomats Naser Rigi, a Sunni Baluch from Zahedan, was also killed. When HF was active in Herat, Al-Zarqawi was also present in the area but it is not clear if there was any connection between them. However after the US invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi escaped and stayed with his Iranian Sunni friends²⁰.

As a result of the US-NATO's heavy bombardment of Afghanistan by, HF's base in Koh-e Malek in Helmand was destroyed. According to Moulvi Safizadeh, about 40 members

of HF were killed and many were injured, but Moulvi Qanbarzahi survived¹³. Since then HF could not recover enough to act as an important force. Some of their members eventually split or joined JA, which would become the most formidable Jihadi group in Southeast Iran.

The deaths of Moulvi Qanbarzahi and Hamzah Sarwani, Qanbarzahi's close colleague, was announced by Al-forqan's spokesperson Ali Haidar on 21st March 2012. It was not clear where, how, and by whom Moulvi Qanbarzahi was killed²¹. In a short biography written by Moulvi Safizadeh, there is no detail about the relationship of HF with Taliban and Al Qaeda. It has been claimed that Moulvi Qanbarzahi had a tremendous influence on the other Baluch Jihadists such as the leader of *Sepah-e Rasulallah*, Moulabakhsh Derakhshan; and the leader of *Jondollah*, Abdolmalek Rigi.

Sepah-e Rasulallah

Known as Army of the Prophet, SR, or *Sazeman-e-Mobarezan-e Sepah-e-Rasulullah*, this group was established by Moulabakhsh Derakhshan in the 1990s. Moulabakhsh Derakhshan had developed connections with *Sepah-e Sahabah-e Pakistan* and *Lashkar-e Jhangui* (Army of the Prophet's Companions) after living in Pakistan for some time. He may have connected with other Jihadi groups who were spreading hatred against Shia and Barelavis and involved in killing Shia and Sufi supporters in Pakistan, even Quetta, Baluchistan. Moulabakhsh Derakhshan at some point had contact with Mulla Kamalkhan Salahzahi, who had become famous for heavy clashes with Iranian security forces in Gornag.

Armian²² states that Mulla Kamalkhan Salahzahi, who was born in 1954, was a resident of Gornag, a small village between Sarbaz and Iranshahr. Iranian security forces attacked the Village in November 1999 to arrest Mulla Kamal Khan as a drug trafficker. In armed clashes a considerable number of security forces were killed. It was reported that security forces later ruined the village. Mulla Kamal Khan denied any connection with drug traffickers and viewed himself as a social and political activist who sought justice and fairness in Baluchistan.

It is very likely that this group cooperated closely with Moulvi Qanbarzahi and then HF to provide Al-Qaeda members with cross border human trafficking facilities in a strategic location²³. When the Allied forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Al-Qaeda networks came under heavy attack. The routes through Pakistan became very risky for Arab militants. Southeast Iran appeared to be the safest route for radical Arabs to escape to the Gulf countries and also to Iraq. After Moulabakhsh Derakhshan's death by Iranian security forces, his brother Wahed Bakhsh Derkhsah became the group's leader. Later on this group announced that they had joined JA under the leadership of Abdolmalek Rigi. Since there is no written evidence about the activities of this group, it is difficult to clarify its strategy

beyond what is listed here, but the activities certainly had much influence on Abdolmalek Rigi who left LS and later founded Jondollah.

Jondollah (Jundallah or Jundullah) (Army of God)

This group is also known as 'The Popular Resistance Movement of Iran' (The Iranian People's Resistance Movement). It was established by Abdolmalek Rigi and it started armed struggle in Southeast Iran around 2004. JA emerged as the most formidable violent ethnic-religious militant force in the area's recent history. It captured global media attention by demonstrating the beheading of prisoners in the earlier stage of its activities.

By introducing suicide bombing into conflicts, JA attracted further global attention. Similar to Zarqawi's operations in Iraq, JA used suicide attacks to cause colossal damage and mass killing among security forces and innocent civilians in Shia places of worship. Jondollah carried out its first suicide car bombing in Sistan and Baluchistan province on 29th December 2008. This suicide attack, which targeted a base of Iranian security forces in Saravan City, was carried out by Abdulghafoor Rigi a teenage brother of Abdolmalek Rigi.

When Abdolmalek Rigi was involved in trading smuggled goods and human trafficking between Zahedan and Chahbahar in his youth, he joined SR. Then as an ambitious Jihadi, Abdolmalek Rigi split from SR and as a Talib (seminary student) entered a Deobandi Madrasa of A'in-ululum in Gosht in Saravan City. He was soon pushed to leave or may have even been expelled from the Madrasa because of the tensions and risks he caused. Politically-oriented, he went to Pakistan and entered Jamia Farooqia, or Bennuri, both well-known Deobandi Madrasas in Karachi²⁴.

For him, as for many others, Jihadist madrasas were not only covers or "safe houses", and appropriate places for training and recruiting jihadists, but also for gaining religious prestige and the title of Moulvi (priest). Most importantly, many madrasas in Pakistan were used as the safest contact points for current and potential jihadists. Being in Pakistan for a few years, he had gained plenty of experience and possibly military training in Wazirestan and other places.

It seems that Rigi had become more sceptical about joining "Global jihad", so he decided to localise his strategy by returning to Iranian Baluchistan and establishing a new militant Jihadi organisation there. In about 2004-2005 he founded his own political organisation with his other companions and an older brother, Moulvi Abdolerauf Rigi. This brother was a Deobandi teaching staff in a Madrasa in Nahook village, Saravan. The founding members included Haji Mohammad Zaher, then the leader, and Nosrati Nahooki, who would later sign announcements on behalf of Mohammad Zaher²⁴.

JA succeeded in persuading many other radical Jihadists and also religious nationalists in Southeast Iran to join and strengthen their radical activities against security forces of the Iranian Shia regime. The process of strategic localisation and highlighting of Sunni Muslims' issues, especially in Baluchistan, attracted the attention of ethnic nationalists as well. Baluch ethnic nationalists abroad, particularly in Europe and the USA, used communication facilities to spread JA's issue worldwide, but this also pushed JA to pay more attention to the Baluch's ethnic issues. The hybrid religious-ethnic ideology of JA gained wide support among both ethnic and religious radicals, but JA always denied the presence of any nationalist-ethnic approach in their Islamic ideology.

Apart from a number of other huge attacks on Security forces, JA carried out 5 suicide attacks in total, three of them were carried out in Shia places of worship. These operations were carried out by 7 suicide attackers, many of whom were seminary students and had little secular education.



Figure-1
Saifulrahman Chahbahari and Hesan Khashi, Jondollah's
suicide attackers in Chah Bahar

Ideologically JA was influenced by radical Deobandis in Pakistan, but field action brought them in contact with Salafi-Wahhabi ideological sources and strategists to gain support to justify their violent activities against Shias. This was because Salafi-Wahhabi militants have developed more systematic anti-Shia literature than the Deobandi-Hanafi approach.

In spite of many institutional and cultural links that the previous radical groups had developed with Global Jihadists in area, there is no evidence of jihadist suicide bombing in Iran before JA's suicide attacks. Despite Jondollah's rhetoric, all suicide attacks remained limited to local areas in Iranian Baluchistan rather than anywhere else in Iran or across borders. However, JA actively used cross borders networks, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, to facilitate attacks and find safe shelters for themselves.

There is little evidence to prove that JA had close links with Al-Qaeda. JA consistently denied any relationship with Al-Qaeda and Taliban but never condemned the atrocities committed by them. Kamal Narui, then spokesperson of JA, stated that there were many differences between JA and Al-Qaeda in means and objectives. JA was portrayed as a moderate Islamic movement which struggled for the freedom of the Sunni community and Iranian Baluchistan, while Al-Qaeda had international objectives²⁵.

Al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda, praised the Baluch for their jihadi activities in his message on 22 February 2009. Dr al-Zawahiri in his message to the growing Jihadi awakening on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Yemen, had asked jihadists not to be less than their brothers in the defiant Pashtun and Baluch tribes who confounded America and the Crusaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan²⁶.

This statement may be taken as strong evidence suggesting that there are Sunni Baluch militants closely working with Al-Qaeda networks. However, it is not clear who these militant groups or individuals are and where they are based. The Baluch mentioned by Al-Zawahiri can include not only the militant groups in Southeast Iran but also militant Sunni Baluch in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the Pakistani part of Baluchistan, Baluch and Brahui militant Sunnis affiliated to *Sepah-e Sahabah Pakistan*, *Lashkar-e Janguhi* and Pakistan's Taliban have been rapidly growing in number.

While the USA, European countries and the UN Security Council regarded JA as a terrorist group, JA, at least before the capture of Abdolmalek Rigi by the Iranian security forces, never criticised the USA and the western countries outright. When Rigi was captured, Jondollah accused American, British, and Israeli intelligence services of cooperating with Iranian security forces in capturing Abdolmalek Rigi.

There is also no evidence to suggest that JA was ever criticised by Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Then how JA could be trusted by the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, while remaining silent about the USA and NATO's invasion into Afghanistan and Iraq borders? JA had frequently and made use of Palestinian suicide attacks on ordinary Israeli citizens to justify their own attacks on ordinary Shia mourners as "occupiers" of Islamic Baluchistan. However, the leaks from CIA as revealed by Mark Perry²⁷ seem to indicate that Israeli under "False Flag" had developed connections with JA.

Crisis in JA and after

After the capture and execution of Abdolmalek Rigi, it was less than six months when JA entered a serious crisis. The reasons were not just about the brutal and widespread arrests, imprisonment and executions of JA's members and their relatives by the Iranian regime, but also because of sectarian and brutal actions carried out by JA against ordinary people. While Iranian security forces and the courts denied the suspects any basic

human rights, JA committed atrocities and spread hatred against innocent Shia Muslims and Zabolis.

On the basis of allegations of collaboration with Iranian security forces or expression of their ideas against JA, JA kidnapped, killed and threatened many Baluch families. Their actions also generated a lot of conflict with influential conservative and moderate Baluchistan Moulvis, including Moulvi Abdolhamid Ismailzahi.

After the last suicide attack in December 2010, there have been no important operations conducted by JA. They have released a few announcements as of this article's publication. In an announcement released to mourn Moulvi Abdoljalil Qanbarzahi's death in March 2012, Naser Nosrati Nahooki had signed on behalf of Mohammad Zaher, who was reported to be travelling²⁸. One of the last announcements was published in August 2012, in which JA had rejected affiliation of two other jihadi groups, *Jaishul-Husain* (JH)²⁹ and *Harkat-e Ansar-e Iran* (HAI)³⁰ and had warned these groups not to use statements, pictures and Abdolmalek Rigi's name on their sites³¹. This shows a degree of uncertainties and disintegration that has developed inside these radical groups in Southeast Iran.

From the crisis that started in late 2010, many other radical Jihadist such as *Sepah-e Sahaba-e Iran*, *Jaishul-Husain* (Army of Husain), *Jaish-ul-Adl*³³ (Army of Justice) under the leadership of a person called Salah-ul Din Farooqi, and also *Harkat-e Ansar-e Iran*³⁴ ("Movement of The fighters of Iran" or "Movement of Helpers of Iran") (HAI) emerged (Ansar Fighters Movement, 2012).

HAI accepted responsibility for a suicide attempt in Chahbahar Port in Southeast Iran. This operation which targeted a militia Base (Basij) as HAI reported, or a mosque as Iranian News agency reported, happened on 19th October 2012. Whether this was a suicide attack or not was not clear but a 19-year-old man, called "Hamzae Saravani" by HAI, was killed during a clash with Iranian security forces. He was found wearing an explosive vest³⁵. Following this attack, Yaser Maskotani introduced himself in an announcement as *amir* of HAI and referred to the attackers as followers of Abdolmalek Rigi. Yaser seems to be a popular pseudonym among Jihadists. For example, the death of a man called Yaser (Shanbehzahi), described as a founding member of Jondollah had been previously reported with this false name.

The leadership of Jondollah who had rejected HAI simply as an internet "unknown" and possibly a group connected with foreign forces (possibly al-Qaeda or Taliban) kept silent about this operation. The SSI, meanwhile, congratulated HAI for this action. Many of these groups were small but by using internet they rapidly built their networks and spread Jihadist ideas. They all have defined their organizations as armed Sunni Jihadists against the Shia regime in Iran. All of them admire Abdolmalek Rigi as a great leader and an inspirational character and use his pictures, video clips and statements on their sites.



Figure-2
Hamza Saravani attacker in Chahbahar (HAI)³²

Among these groups *Sepah-e Sahabah-e-Iran* (SII) has been the oldest one, having announced its foundation on 14th March 2011 as “the military branch.” This announcement was signed by a man called Commandar Mohammad Baluch³⁶. SSI considers the group loyal to JA’s ideas. They may have chosen the name of *Sepah-e-Sahabah Iran* to show some ideological affiliation to *Sepah-e-Sahabah-e Pakistan*. By concentrating on identifying and punishing internal enemies, they are similar to *Lashkar-e Janguhi*.

Once SSI claimed that they had been involved in an explosion of gas pipes near Qom in central Iran but they have mainly focused on kidnapping and punishing Sunni Baluch who were labelled as traitors. For example, SSI has revealed in its September announcement that they have killed Nader Shahbakhsh, a local Sunni Baluch, on basis of collaboration with Iranian intelligence agencies³⁷.

Jaish-e Adl (Jaish al-Adl) (JAD)

JAD had absorbed the core commanders of JA and emerged as the strongest and most popular militant organisation to date. They have been very active in kidnapping and attacking security forces along the Iran-Pakistan border. JAD has not used suicide attacks but it is not clear if they have abandoned it due to strategic reasons or if they lack volunteers willing to do so.

Among the activities which have been ascribed to JAD, a concentration of activity was noticeable in 2012. One incident was related to the killing of Moulvi Mostafa Jangizahi on 12

January that year³⁸. Jangizahi was a cleric who had criticised JA and may have had close ties with the Iranian government. He had previously been threatened by JA and even once escaped an attack on his house. Following this murder, two local Baluch clerics, Moulvi Fateh Mohammad Naqshbandi and his son Moulvi Abdolghaffar Naqshbandi, were arrested by Iranian security forces³⁹. This arrest led to a May protest, in Rask, a town close to Pakistan-Iran borders.

Since then, JAD has claimed involvement in many attacks on security forces within Sistan and Baluchistan, especially along the borders of Iran-Pakistan. Kidnapping, hostage taking, and punishment of opponents have been frequently reported by *Jaish-e Adl*.

JAD in general adopted a more moderate and less anti-Shia approach, and to some extent has further moved towards Baluch ethnic nationalism. However, JAD has threatened non-Baluch such as Zabolis (Shia residents of Sistan) to leave the Baluch-Sunni dominated area, or else wait for the consequences. It is believed that the killing of several Zaboli teachers is related to JAD, however they have not clearly accepted any responsibility for this event.

Jaish-e Adl split into two factions and *Jaish-e al Nasr* under leadership of Moulvi Abdulrauf Rigi, Abdolmalek Rigi's brother and a founder of Jondollah and then spokesperson of *Jaish al-Adl*, announced itself as the true follower of Abdolmalek Rigi and Jondollah. Disputes between *Jaish-e-Adl* and *Jaish-e-Nasr* (*Jaish-al-Nasr*) erupted into threats and intimidation, and finally led to a mysterious killing of Abdulrauf Rigi in Quetta⁴⁰⁻⁴¹.

Conclusion

The Southeast area of Iran, which is adjacent to Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been the most fertile ground for the emergence of radical Jihadists and ethno-religious groups. Treatment of the Sunnis as second class citizen by the Iranian Shia regime, internally has been an important factor in alienating the Sunnis and creating a basis for radicals to grow in the area.

These radical groups have not been homogeneous in terms of ideological sources, political strategies and methods of actions. They have been influenced by radical Deobandis on one hand and Wahabbi-Salafists on the other. However most of them have focused on near enemy, some groups like al-Forqan has pursued a regional strategy and supported Taliban in Afghanistan. Nearly all of them, including the most popular groups such as Jondollah and to some extent their successor Jaish-e Adl, have been anti-Shia. They have also effectively used cross border ethnic and religious networks to increase their support, facilitate their plans, organise their attacks inside Iran and increase the level of security for their members and organisations.

The recent emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq has increased the level of security concerns in this area and put an

enormous amount of pressure on president Rohani's government to undertake some reformist measures. Containing the disfranchised Sunnis in local political governance has been a necessary solution by the government's advisers, however the most conservative Shia radicals, who control key areas of power, resist against any reform in this respect.

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