

# Baloch Insurgency and Challenges to the Islamic Republic of Iran

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# Baloch Insurgency and Challenges to the Islamic Republic of Iran

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The present paper deals with several issues. In the first section, a short introduction of Baloch insurgency shall be presented. The second one deals briefly with the goals of insurgency. The third part describes the measures taken by the Islamic Republic against the Baloch insurgency. And, in the fourth section, the focus will be shifted on the Baloch insurgency's response to the central government's measures. The fifth section gives an analysis of the roots and causes of Baloch insurgency. And, the sixth section which is the concluding part deals with a number of suggestions to challenge the problem.

## Introduction

Balochistan, officially known as the province of Sistan and Balochistan, is one of the thirty provinces of Iran. It is in the southeast of the country, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan. The province is the largest in Iran; it consists of over 11 per cent of the total area of the country with an area of 181,785 km. The province comprises two sections, Sistan in the north and Balochistan in the south. In the south, east and west of Sistan and Balochistan, the inhabitants are mostly Baloch and speak Balochi. Balochistan today is the most underdeveloped and poorest of Iran's regions, though government of the Islamic Republic has been trying to reverse this situation by implementing new plans, such as the creation of the Chabahar free trade zone. Balochistan is mainly home to the Baloch Sunnis of Iran; they make up about 3 to 4 million of the population. The society is known to be a *Mullah* dominated region. Modern politics, in fact, in this part of the country is a recent phenomenon; it is barely half a century old.

## A profile of Baloch insurgency

Since 1928, the year when modern government established in Balochistan, two highly organized political movements have emerged in the country. The first was developed before the Islamic Republic. It was called the Balochistan Liberation Front (1964-1979) which rose against the central government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>1</sup> The second one which is the theme of the paper emerged under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although there have been a number of major Baloch insurgencies since the 1979 revolution in Iran, most of them have been non-political in nature. For example, throughout the years notorious Baloch smugglers have been fighting against the forces of the Islamic Republic in Balochistan. How-

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ever, a well organized ethno-religious insurgency, carrying political motives has appeared for the first time in 2004 in the history of the Islamic state, to challenge the authority of the government in Balochistan.

## Goals of Baloch insurgency

In 2004, a rebellious Baloch group called *Jundallah* emerged and made its appearance in Balochistan of Iran. *Jundallah* is an insurgent Sunni Islamic organization based in the entire Balochistan irrespective of its political boundaries; its members are spread in the Baloch populated regions of Afghanistan, in Iranian Balochistan, and in the Pakistani Balochistan. The group claims to be fighting for the rights

of the Sunni Muslim in Iran. It is believed to have hundreds of professional fighters and claims to have killed more than 500 Iranian soldiers.<sup>2</sup> The group has been identified as a terrorist organization by the Islamic Republic. Iranian authorities believe that it is linked to the Al-Qaeda. But, *Jundollah* adamantly denies any connections to the Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. Yet, a number of independent sources have substantiated the American support to *Jundollah*. The group was allegedly headed by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (originally a Baloch) the Al-Qaeda's operational commander of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, who was arrested in Pakistan in 2003. Abdol Malek Rigi, the leader of the organization was also arrested and reportedly executed in Tehran in 2010.

*Jundollah* was renamed as the 'People's Resistance Movement of Iran' soon after its establishment. After this nominal change, for a while, member insurgents adopted a relatively non-violent approach. For instance, earlier they used to follow the Taliban tactics. In this regard, in 2006, a CD was distributed by *Jundollah* in which a member of the group beheads a man. The scene of the beheading had a very bad impression in the country, causing a strong feeling of dislike and disapproval of the act. Also, earlier, *Jundollah's* focus was on Iranian Baloch rights only. But, after the adoption of the new name 'People Resistance Movement of Iran,' *Jundollah* relatively changed its methods. For example, it stopped the beheading practice and the focus shifted towards Iranian rights as a whole including those of both the Shias and the Sunnis. Behind this development that softened the behaviour of *Jundollah* lies a reason. The group gradually began to establish some connections with the Iranian exiles in Europe and America. There is a strong possibility that the opposition based in London have caused *Jundollah* to soften its approach by applying rela-

tively non-violent methods. The intention perhaps was to win over the Baloch masses by stabilizing the *Jundollah's* popular bases in Balochistan. However, the attempt failed, *Jundollah* cannot be regarded as a non-violent organization. In a number of his interviews with the media, such as the *Voice of America*, Rigi (the former leader of the organization) constantly had asked the Baloch and other Iranians to join his organization against the Islamic Republic; saying that he would resist and would try his best to overthrow the government.

Immediately after each attack against the forces of the Islamic Republic, the leaders of the organization give a brief about the attacks in their interviews with the Iranian and international media. In one of his interviews, Rigi had claimed that "he has formed a people movement and that he does not attack the civilians; rather his targets are the Iranian security and intelligence personnel and also whoever cooperates with the security agencies, including the Baloch." In his interviews, Rigi had also claimed that his organization "does not have any foreign support; rather it is the Baloch who finance him." However, the Iranian government rejects this and holds that *Jundollah* belongs to the US. Iran accuses the United States of backing *Jundollah*, possibly from the Pakistani territory with Islamabad's support, though Pakistani officials strongly deny this. Some Baloch elites, like a number of leading Sunni clerics, hold a different view, believing that the emergence of groups like *Jundollah* is the result of the undesirable policies in Balochistan. In cases, according to them, government forces had stopped and shot innocent Baloch without any legal instruction. As a matter of fact, such incidents in Balochistan can be responsible for the emergence of insurgency.<sup>3</sup>

## Measures taken by the Islamic Republic against Baloch Insurgency

As a result of *Jundollah's* calculated attacks on Iranian security forces in Balochestan, the Islamic Republic has taken some severe measures against *Jundollah* or whoever holds any association with the organization. In this respect, government has launched a series of campaigns against the rebellion, using its strong arm methods, which include assassination, arrest, torture, and execution, in order to put down any real or potential resistance to the establishment.

Many Baloch insurgents have been arrested and executed by the regime. Mostly, measures have been of a military nature and not diplomatic ones. One of the most important recent achievements was the arrest and execution of the two leading members, Abdol Malek Rigi and Abdol Hamid Rigi.

### Reaction to the Islamic Republic's military measures

As a reaction, however, the Baloch rebellious groups such as *Jundollah* have engaged themselves in armed resistance against the Iranian government, killing the forces on the grounds of defending and revenging the rights of the innocent Baloch. On the other hand, a number of Baloch political activists in exile had started their fight with the regime by publishing articles against the policies of the Islamic Republic in Balochestan.<sup>4</sup> In their various reports, they have tried to project the Baloch victims as innocent people. Besides, in order to highlight the crisis, a number of foreign-based Baloch political groups began to organize demonstrations in different cities of Europe. For instance, a demonstration held on May 21, 2006 outside the British Prime Minister's house in London, where

a large number of Baloch gathered to denounce the state's bombardment of some villages in Balochestan.<sup>5</sup> In addition, *Jundollah* reacted more violently by adopting new methods such as suicide bombings. In fact, suicide attacks have not been common in Iran; it is since 2009 that Baloch insurgents have been using this method in Balochestan. They have targeted two Shia mosques in Zahedan in 2009 and 2010 where hundreds of people including children were killed.

### Roots of Baloch Insurgency in Iran

Several issues are responsible for the emergence of Baloch insurgency in Iran. The politicization of Islam resulted in ideological differences between the Shias and Sunnis. The development, in turn, has had an impact on other issues such as lack of equal treatment in employment. This has widened the gap of national unity. Although government has tried

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to fight the problem, methods of fighting the problem has not been appropriately carried out. For example, Iran's assimilation policy has failed to make Iran a strong nation. Rather it has pushed the Baloch in the margins. The circumstances have led many Baloch to opt for a decentralized Iran, as well as, caused a few to consider the theory of an independent Balochestan. These, however, are explained further in the following paragraphs.

**Politicization of Islam:** The politicization of Islam is deeply rooted in Iranian society especially since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The Islamic symbols, slogans, ideology, and organizations are the prominent features of Iranian politics. Islam remains a major political force both in state politics and in Baloch society. In

state politics, Shia Islam has dominated the socio-political organization of the country. Similarly, in the Baloch society, Sunni Islam has overshadowed the culture. As a result of this development, a number of ideological differences emerged between the Shias and Sunnis; at times they attack the religious beliefs of each other.

**Demands of the Baloch:** A history of thirty-two years (1979-2011) indicates that some major demands of Baloch, as expected by them, have not been satisfactorily fulfilled by the central government of Iran. For example, one of the current demands of the Baloch is to allow them to have a key role in the administration of Balochistan. Another recent demand by the Baloch from the central government is to allow them to participate in the central administration, demanding the presence of at least one Baloch minister in the central cabinet. Freedom of religion has been a core demand. Sunni clerics have been demanding for more religious maneuvers. Recently, some Baloch, particularly the Sunni clerics, have asked the government to allow them to build a mosque for the Sunnis in non-Sunni populated provinces of Iran, especially in Tehran. The demand has not been granted so far. Mainly because the issue is considered to be a politically motivated matter and not a religious one; this can damage the religious integrity, as also the hold of the establishment.<sup>6</sup> The Baloch, particularly those who are in exile have projected the Islamic Republic as a state which backs "discrimination between Sunni and Shia." Many Baloch are of the opinion that discrimination in employment exists in the nature of the Islamic government. In any case, the major reason for discrimination between Sunni and Shia in high offices such as leader-

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ship and presidency is the presence of the ideological differences between the two groups. It is clearly mentioned in Article 115 of the Constitution, where it explains the essential characteristics and qualifications of the presidential candidate.

**National unity and Islamic integrity:** To a large extent, the policies of the central government have failed to bridge the gap of ideological differences between the Sunnis and the Shias. The Islamic Republic's supreme authorities are fully aware of this phenomenon that is why after 28 years in 2007 on the first day of Noroz, the leader in a televised message addressed the Iranian nation and marked the year 2007 as a year of "national unity and Islamic integrity." The issue of national unity and Islamic integrity, however, cannot be developed without carefully calculated mutual cooperation. Majority of Baloch clerics are Deobandian, whereas the ruling Shias in Iran belong to the Shia *Jafari Athna Ashari* sect of Islam. In any event, between *Deobandian* and *Shiaism* there are fundamental differences of opinion.

**Iran's mono-ethnic approach:** The different central governments of Iran have pursued a policy of assimilation and the same is true with the current government. In Iran, Baloch culture and language is relegated to their homes and cannot be used for other than local purposes. Iranian history is being taught from the perspective of Iranian nationalism and Islamic teachings; therefore, majority of Baloch, including the students, are unaware of their history. Thus, the state emphasizes the nationalization of the entire Iranian society and the Islamization of the culture. The result of these policies, however, is not the establishment of a

strong nation-state. The different Iranian groups such as the Kurds, Arabs, and Baloch occasionally react to the assimilation process. The way the Baloch students enthusiastically celebrate their own graduation parties every year can be taken as a prime example. Besides, resistance to the central government's assimilation policy assumed a violent proportion especially when it became evident for the Baloch that they do not get fair and equal treatment. Military clashes between the Iranian Baloch Jundollah and the Islamic Republic, can be referred to as a notable example. However, the process of assimilation of the Baloch by the state administration has not been always against their interest, rather they have benefited too. For example, in comparison with the Baloch of Afghanistan or the Baloch of Pakistan, Iranian Baloch of Iran have a far better view on societal values such as the role of female gender. The Baloch women of Iran particularly the educated ones, have more freedom in economic, social, and political spheres. These changes though are not up to the standard expectations, has resulted from the influence of Persian culture. The limited role of Iranian Baloch women participation in the society is evident especially in the third decade of the Islamic Republic.

**Autonomy or Independence:** One cannot easily assess the exact nature of the political inclination of Iranian Baloch, simply because many of them may hide their real motives or emotions, due to security reasons. However, a generalization can shed some lights on Baloch political inclination. In the early months of the Islamic revolution, for example, when the Islamic Constitution recognized only Shiaism as

the state religion and Farsi as the only official language, Molavi Abdol Aziz (former religious leader of the Iranian Baloch) expressed his opposition in the following way, "We are not secessionist. And, it is not in our interest to be independent in all fields. Our goal is to see that Baloch make their own decisions in cultural and political fields, instead of being forced to accept decisions made in Tehran. We want to choose our own governor general, governors, and administrators (although not military officials). That is what the Baloch mean by au-

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tonomy."<sup>7</sup> In similar situations the same presentations have been aired by different Baloch elites of the society. More important, however, are the words of Abdol Malik Rigi (former leader of Baloch insurgency) once the most wanted man in Iran. In his different interviews Rigi had declared himself as an Iranian and Iran as his home; he had denied harbouring separatist aspirations. <sup>8</sup> Despite that, however, due to number of reasons secessionism may not benefit the Baloch. Firstly, the entire Baloch population is around

3 per cent in Iran and that Balochestan is the poorest region of the country. Secondly, the number of educated Baloch is insignificant and the majority of Baloch are not politically mature. Thirdly, a majority of Baloch are traditional, religious-minded people who cannot stand on their own feet in the competitive world without foreign support. In addition to these factors, majority of the foreign-based Baloch who are in Europe or North America, prefer a federal Iran rather than an independent Balochestan.

## Challenging the Problem

In order to minimize the gap between the state administration and the Baloch there are a number of suggestions which, shall be dealt with under the following sections. In this regard, there are two different aspects, the Baloch approach and the state approach.

**Baloch approach:** Baloch are living in a sovereign state under the umbrella of the Islamic Republic, which like any other state, holds its respective legal framework. Its Constitution is based on the Shia Islamic ideology, which may not satisfy the international requirements set up by the liberal democracies of the West. As a result, Islamic Republic may consider many of the issues, which are not being favoured by the state, expediential. Secondly, since Balochistan is part of the country the administration of the entire region cannot fall only into the hands of the Baloch alone; the Baloch should lower their expectations. Thirdly, for the Baloch, the first and foremost necessity is proper education. Throughout the history of the land, education has failed to play its due role. Both foreign and domestic exploitations under the previous regimes had been responsible for the lack of development in Balochistan. The Sunni clerics, as the leading elite of Baloch society, should go for reforms in their methods of teachings; they should not be authoritarian in their approach. They should propagate Islamic principles in such a way to eradicate or reduce the societal problems. Fourthly, Baloch should make their presence more active and meaningful in the overall organization of the society to the extent that central government may realize their significant presence. Under such conditions only Baloch can carry much weight in the administration.

**State approach:** On the other hand, however, the Islamic Republic of Iran must have certain responsibilities to tackle the internal crisis

peacefully and diplomatically especially when it highly believes in the intellectual power of its supreme leadership. As stipulated in Article 109 of the Constitution, supreme leader must possess a proper political and social insight and power of administration to lead the country. In other words, the belief is that the most qualified man in Iran can lead the Islamic Republic. As far as the case with Baloch is concerned, the Islamic Republic requires more flexibility. It does not need to introduce new laws or bypass the Constitution; rather to serve the purpose it has to cash in on the flexibility of its Constitution. Thus, within the existing legal framework it can practice the following.

First, the Islamic Republic under its Constitution can encourage political and cultural developments in the Sunni-dominated regions such as Balochistan. In this respect, Article 19 of the Constitution states, "The people of Iran, of whatever tribe and clan, shall enjoy equal rights, and color, race, language and the like shall not be a privilege."<sup>9</sup>

Second, the Islamic Republic may allow the Baloch to have a vital role in the political administration of Balochistan. Article 3 of the Constitution says that "the Islamic Republic is required to provide political and civil liberties within the framework of law, to eliminate undesirable discrimination, and to create equal opportunities for all in all material fields or otherwise."<sup>10</sup> Under the legal framework, Islamic Republic can allow and encourage Baloch to enjoy their cultural and social activities such as the establishment of their own academic and cultural institutions. In this regard, this freedom has been given to the Baloch in the Constitution, where it says, "The common and official language and script of the people of Iran is Farsi. Official documents, correspondence and texts as well as textbooks must be in this language and script. However, the use of local and

ethnic languages in the press and mass media or the teaching of their literatures in schools, along with Farsi, shall be free."<sup>11</sup>

Third, the government can also look upon the Sunnis and the Shias as equal without discrimination in employment. For example, Article 23 states that "investigation of one's beliefs shall be prohibited and no one may be offended or reprimanded simply because of having a certain belief." Besides, government can appoint reliable agencies to check the behaviour of those public institutions which practice discrimination and nepotism in employment.

Fourth, in order to eradicate political tensions in Balochistan, there is no need for the central government to allocate millions of dollars in the region. The central government can negotiate with influential and faithful Baloch, respect them, and empower them with limited authority to tackle security matters in the province. The government should appoint reliable and experienced people to look after matters justly. Unfortunately, this has not happened so far.

Fifth, in a sensitive Sunni-populated area like Balochistan, on key positions such as governorship, the government should appoint neither dogmatic Shias nor fanatical Sunnis; it should go for moderate, experienced, and trustworthy local figures; because, fanatical people look upon matters through their narrow-minded visions. In Balochistan, all those religious issues which have a threat potential to national security should be discouraged. For example, instead of arranging conflicting programmes like encouraging the Sunnis to become Shia, the government should work on unified programmes, focusing on those religious issues that do not ignite dispute between the Shias and the Sunnis. In doing so, government does

not need to allocate huge funds; rather it needs diplomacy.

Sixth, the Iranian administration should better lean towards a federal system of governance rather than a totally centralized one, because under a federal system the burden and responsibility of the central government can be minimized to a great extent. The administration of Balochistan, though not totally, should partly be handed over to the loyal, enlightened, capable and qualified Baloch. This policy will be helpful for the Islamic Republic itself; it can minimize the security concerns of the state in Balochistan.

Seventh, Balochistan is situated in a highly sensitive zone. Ideological differences, if not controlled, can explode any time. Politics of violence can trigger a chain reaction and so cannot be regarded as a suitable prescription. Thus, in order to postpone or fight the Western strategies, it is in the interest of the Islamic Republic to revise her policies towards the Iranian minorities and adopt a more flexible relationship with them.

Finally, better diplomacy on the part of the Islamic state towards the Baloch can change the atmosphere for good; it can challenge the opposition. The opposition can find no reasonable grounds to fight the policies of the Islamic Republic in Balochistan, providing that, government absorbs the Baloch into its political system. In turn, when the Baloch feel the accommodating attitude of the administration, they may not come under the influence of the opposition; rather they may cooperate with a friendly government in preserving the security.

## Notes

(1) On the activities of "Balochestan Liberation Front" in Iran, two authors have dealt with the issue. Hossainbor Mohammad Hassan, Iran & Its Nationalities: the Case of Baloch Nationalism, Pakistani Adab Publications, Karachi, 2000, pp. 152-164. And, Harrison, Selig S, In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baloch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations, New York, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981, pp.107-108.

(2)"Jundollah's policies, activities, and reports", since 2005, at <http://www.jonbeshmardomiran.blogspot.com>

(3) "Interview with Molavi Ahmad Narooie", 2007, at <http://www.sunnionline.net>

(4) The following are few of the main opposition groups which are active against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Baloch Society of North America; Balochistan United Front (federal republican); Balochestan National Movement-Iran (Balochistan Raji Zrombesh); And, Radio Balochi FM, News Agency of Balochestan Human Rights Activists Association.

(5) The demonstration was addressed by Abdollah Baloch of BAC, by Hasel Bezanjo,

general secretary of national party (East Balochestan), and Shama Is'haq of NP (East Balochestan); the incident took place on May 21, 2006.

(6) Hojatoleslam Solemani, "Get together: supreme leadership representative office and Baloch students", presented at the first annual conference on the Islamic unity session, Leadership Office branch, Zahedan, 2008.

(7) Hossainbor Mohammad Hassan, Iran & Its Nationalities: The Case of Baloch Nationalism, Pakistani Adab Publication, Karachi, 2000, p. 168.

(8) Abdol Malek Rigi's speech, minutes before his attack on Iranian security forces, at Tassoki, is available at [youtube.com/watch?v=417-DvjWWdM](http://youtube.com/watch?v=417-DvjWWdM)

(9) M.Z. Samimi Kia, "rights of the nation," the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (with all amendments up to 1989), Directorate-General of International Agreements 1995,, Office of Print & Distribution of D.G.S.L.R.,Tehran, 1989, p. 15.

(10) Ibid., p. 11.

(11) M.Z. Samimi Kia, no. 9.

