

Is the Bush administration behind the bombings in Iran?

Peter Symonds
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Two bombings this week in Zahedan in southeastern Iran are the latest in a series of incidents involving armed opposition groups based among the country's ethnic minorities. The most recent attacks again raise questions about the activities of the US military and CIA inside Iran as the Bush administration intensifies its preparations for war.

The first blast killed at least 11 members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) who were travelling in a bus from their housing compound to a military base. After forcing the bus to stop, the attackers triggered explosives packed in a car. Another 31 people were injured in the explosion. A further bombing, followed by sustained clashes between police and an armed group, was reported yesterday.

Jundallah, a Sunni extremist group based among Iran's Baluch minority, claimed responsibility for the Wednesday bombing. Iranian police have already rounded up some 65 people allegedly connected to the organisation, along with explosives and weapons. Zahedan is the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan province, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan and is home to Iran's estimated 1-2 million ethnic Baluchis.

According to provincial police chief Brigadier General Mohammad Ghafari: "A video seized from the rebels confirms their attachment to opposition groups and some countries' intelligence services such as America and Britain." An unnamed Iranian official told the Islamic Republic News Agency yesterday that one of those arrested had confessed that the attack was part of US plans to provoke unrest in Iran. "This person who was behind the bombing confessed that those who trained them spoke in English," he said.

The Iranian authorities have provided no definitive proof of US or British involvement with Jundallah. Neither the video nor any further evidence has been released. However, the attack on the IRGC bus took place amid a propaganda campaign being waged by the Bush administration accusing the IRGC's Quds Force of arming anti-US insurgents in Iraq. President Bush has vowed to break up alleged Iranian networks and authorised the US military to kill or capture

Iranian agents.

US officials insist that American forces are targeting Iranian agents inside Iraq, not in Iran itself. No more credibility should be placed in these denials than in US claims that it has no plans for attacking Iran. Over the past year, the Bush administration has boosted its funding for "regime change" in Iran, including support for Iranian opposition groups. Moreover, there are growing signs that Washington is taking an active interest in exploiting unrest among Iran's numerous ethnic minorities and may be covertly assisting armed groups such as Jundallah.

An article in the latest issue of the *Washington Quarterly* entitled "Iran's ethnic tinderbox" noted: "According to exiled Iranian activists reportedly involved in a classified US research project, the US Department of Defense is presently examining the depth and nature of ethnic grievances against the Islamic theocracy. The Pentagon is reportedly especially interested in whether Iran would be prone to a violent fragmentation along the same kinds of fault lines that are splitting Iraq and that helped to tear apart the Soviet Union with the collapse of communism."

Veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh, who has many contacts in the American intelligence establishment, published several articles in the *New Yorker* last year pointing to US activities inside Iran. In an article last November entitled "The Next Act: Is a damaged Administration less likely to attack Iran, or more?" he wrote:

"In the past six months, Israel and the United States have also been working together with a Kurdish resistance group known as the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan. The group has been conducting clandestine cross-border forays into Iran, I was told by a government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon civilian leadership, as 'part of an effort to explore alternative means of applying pressure on Iran.' The Pentagon has established covert relationships with Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi tribesmen and has encouraged their efforts to undermine the regime's authority in northern and southeastern Iran."

Various opposition parties and organisations exist among

Iran's ethnic minorities that have legitimate grievances about the anti-democratic methods used not only by the current theocratic Shiite regime, but by the previous US-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi to suppress dissent. Such groups not only point to religious, language and ethnic discrimination, but to economic neglect.

Most Baluchis, for instance, belong to the Sunni Islamic sect—a minority in predominantly Shiite Iran. The province of Sistan-Baluchistan is one of the most economically backward in the country. Large areas are mountainous or desert, and Iranian security forces have fought a long-running war to halt smuggling and drug running across the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unemployment is estimated to be 30-50 percent, which is high even by Iranian standards, and poverty is widespread.

Jundallah is a shadowy organisation formed in 2003 and led by a 23-year-old, Abdulmalak Rigi. Iranian officials allege that it has links with Al Qaeda but have provided no proof. Even if true, such a connection does not preclude the group's involvement with US intelligence, which was responsible for helping to establish Al Qaeda in the 1980s in its holy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Jundallah almost certainly has connections with armed Baluch separatists fighting in Pakistan.

Over the past year, Jundallah has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on Iranian officials and security forces. In an interview with the British-based *Telegraph* in January 2006, spokesman Abdul Hameed Reeki boasted that the group had 1,000 trained fighters. While denying any connection with the US or Pakistani governments, he made a definite appeal for Western aid. Jundallah fighters, he declared, had the dedication needed to defeat the Iranian army—particularly if some help were to prove forthcoming from the West.

Reeki's appeal reflects the venal calculations of sections of the Baluch elite who, like their counterparts among Iran's Azeri, Kurdish, Arab and other minorities, are considering the potential benefits of aligning themselves with Washington in a military conflict with Iran. US support for such layers has the potential to create an even greater catastrophe than in neighbouring Iraq, where the American-led invasion has triggered an escalating sectarian civil war.

In its comment on Wednesday's bombing, Stratfor certainly considered "this latest attack against IRGC guards was likely carried out by armed Baluch nationalists who have received a boost in support from Western intelligence agencies." The think tank, which has close connections to US intelligence and military circles, went on to point to an escalating covert war being waged by the US and Israel to destabilise the Iranian regime.

"The US-Iranian standoff over Iraq has reached a high

level of intensity. While the hard-line rhetoric and steps toward negotiations absorb the media's attention, a covert war being played out between Iran on the one side, and the United States and Israel on the other, will escalate further. While Israel appears to be focused on decapitating Iran's nuclear program through targeted assassinations, the United States has likely ramped up support for Iran's variety of oppressed minorities in an attempt to push the Iranian regime towards a negotiated settlement over Iraq," Stratfor wrote.

Israel's "targeting assassinations" is a reference to the suspicious death last month of top Iranian nuclear scientist Ardeshtir Hassanpour. In an article entitled "Israeli Covert Operations in Iran", Stratfor noted that while the official announcement—a week after the scientist's death—claimed Hassanpour died of overexposure to radiation, the details were murky. Citing "Stratfor sources close to Israeli intelligence", the article declared that "Hassanpour was in fact a Mossad target" and pointed to allegations of Mossad's involvement in the killing of top Iraqi scientists during the 1980s.

While no proof has surfaced of the direct involvement of American intelligence agencies in the latest bombing in Zahedan, the US is certainly engaged in inflaming ethnic and political opposition inside Iran. Stratfor offers the rather benign interpretation that the purpose of such reckless and illegal activities is simply to press Tehran to reach a negotiated settlement with the US over its list of demands. Even if that were the case, the US military build-up in the Persian Gulf, its propaganda campaign and tightening economic restrictions against Iran—along with its covert activities inside the country—all serve to heighten a conflict that could rapidly spiral out of control.



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