Attacks on Iranian Revolutionary Guards kill 42

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Two bombings in the eastern Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan on Sunday near the border with Pakistan killed at least 42 people, including six high-ranking members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and injured dozens more.

The first explosion appears to have involved a suicide bomber who targetted a meeting of Shiite and Sunni tribal leaders in the Pishin district close to the Pakistani border. While the Iranian population as a whole is predominantly Shiite, the estimated 2 to 3 million ethnic Baluchis in the poverty-stricken province are primarily Sunni.

Senior IRGC officers were present at the gathering—the Shiite-Sunni Tribes' Solidarity Conference—in a bid to patch up longstanding sectarian tensions. Those killed included Brigadier General Nour-Ali Shoushtari, the national deputy commander of IRGC ground forces, and Brigadier General Rajab-Ali Mohammadzadeh, the provincial commander. In the second attack, an IRGC convoy in the same district was hit by a roadside bomb, killing several provincial commanders.

According to the British-based *Telegraph*, General Shoushtari was a senior figure in the IRGC's Quds Force, which the Pentagon has repeatedly accused of providing weapons and training to insurgents fighting against the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Shoushtari had close ties to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since before the 1979 Iranian revolution and was put in charge of the Sistan-Baluchistan province in March.

Amid growing unrest, the IRGC has assumed responsibility for security in Sistan-Baluchistan in recent years and cracked down hard on Sunni Baluchi separatists, including the Islamist militia Jundallah, which was probably responsible for Sunday's attacks. Jundallah is believed to have ties with the Taliban and other Islamist groups in neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The bombings are the most prominent attack by Jundallah. Others include the kidnapping of Iranian soldiers in December 2006 and a car bombing in February 2007 that killed 11 IRGC members in the town of Zahedan. In May, a suicide bombing targetted a Shiite mosque in Zahedan, killing 25 people.

Jundallah has been able to exploit widespread local resentment over religious and ethnic discrimination as well as endemic unemployment and poverty. The province is one of the country's most economically backward. Casualties from yesterday's bombings had to be transported more than 250 kilometres as the Pishin district lacked proper medical facilities.

Poverty levels in the province are estimated at anywhere between 45 and 75 percent of the population. Illiteracy rates are the worst in the country. Smuggling and drug running are rife. Local Sunni Baluchis hold very few of the province's top posts.

Sunday's attacks took place at a particularly sensitive time. Talks began yesterday in Vienna between the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—and Iran over Tehran's nuclear programs. The meeting follows initial top-level negotiations by the same parties in Geneva on October 1.

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At the Geneva meeting, Iran agreed in principle to export most of its present stock of low-enriched uranium for further enrichment and processing in Russia and France, to provide fuel rods for its research reactor in Tehran. The Vienna talks, which are due to conclude today, are to work out the legal and technical details of the arrangement, which is regarded as a key first test of the negotiating process.

Top Iranian officials immediately accused Pakistan, the US and Britain of complicity in the bombings. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad cautiously declared that Tehran had evidence that "some security agents in Pakistan" had been cooperating with Jundallah and called on Islamabad to arrest those responsible and hand them over. While denying any Pakistani involvement, President Asif Ali Zardari has reportedly agreed to a timetable to confront Jundallah, which is believed to operate from bases inside Pakistan.

Influential parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani directly accused Washington, saying that Iran considered the attack "to be the result of US action. This is the sign of America's animosity against our country." US State Department spokesman Ian Kelly dismissed the allegations as "completely false", adding "we condemn this act of terrorism".

While the Obama administration appears to have no immediate motive for the attacks, it cannot be ruled out that the US might have had a hand in Sunday's bombings. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 2007 and 2008, veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, among others, accused the Bush administration of establishing ties not only with Baluchi separatists, but opposition groups based among Iran's Azeri, Kurdish and Arab minorities, in a bid to destabilise the Iranian regime.

Commenting on Sunday's bombings, the US-based think tank Stratfor, which has close ties to the military and intelligence establishment, concluded: "Though it remains unclear whether Jundallah was acting alone in carrying out these attacks, it not a far stretch to assume that the group has received foreign backing in recent years that has allowed it to significantly escalate its militant campaign against the regime. At the same time, the United States is likely to be more cautious in this delicate stage of negotiations with Tehran."

It is quite possible that Jundallah took advantage of continuing turmoil in the Iranian political establishment following the country's presidential election in June to inflict a heavy blow on the security apparatus in Sistan-Baluchistan province. It would not be the first time that US support for Islamist militants has backfired at a later date. The escalating war over the border in Afghanistan and Pakistan against the US is being led by militants armed and trained in the 1980s as part of the CIA's "covert" war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

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