

Balochistan's rebels

by Willem Marx

Is the US providing covert support to Baloch rebels in Iran? If so, what does this say about its support for Musharraf in Pakistan?

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The Toyota pick-up truck roared through the green gates into the dusty walled compound and juddered to a halt inches from a small well. Eight figures, their faces swathed in cloth, stood up stiffly from their crouched positions before clambering down. They lifted their weapons gingerly from the floor where they had lain concealed. I counted five semi-automatics, a light machine gun and a green rocket-propelled grenade launcher before the vehicle's driver slammed his door. Iran's most wanted terrorist walked towards me with his hand extended, a dazzlingly white smile beneath a Pashtun hat.

But 24-year-old Abdulmalik Rigi is not Pashtun, he's Baloch--an ethnic minority that straddles an area across southeast Iran, southwest Pakistan and south Afghanistan. In February, the Iranian city of Zahedan was hit by a bomb--for which Rigi claimed responsibility--that killed 11 Revolutionary Guards, and placed Rigi at the top of Tehran's hitlist. A series of American media reports had linked Rigi's guerilla attacks to a wider US-sponsored covert war against Iran. Rigi had agreed to meet me, a western journalist, to publicly refute these allegations, which he says have been levelled against his group by the mullahs of Iran.

Balochistan is a vast expanse of territory separating the middle east from the Indian subcontinent (see below--the Baloch region is coloured pink). The Baloch people are ethnically heterogeneous but united by their language and culture, and their Sunni Islam faith. In the late 19th century, the highly tribal Baloch homeland was carved up by British India, Afghanistan and Persia, and the Baloch have thus never enjoyed a modern sovereign state. Nevertheless, the difficult terrain kept the Baloch relatively isolated, allowing them to preserve a centuries-old cultural heritage, and in both Iran and Pakistan they have offered armed resistance to central government control since the early 20th century.

Today, Afghanistan's chaos has spilled over its southern borders into the contiguous Pakistani and Iranian Balochistan provinces. Afghan refugees have been flooding the northern edges of Pakistan's Baloch territory, while arms and narcotics

smuggling into Iran prop up the local economy among the largely unemployed Baloch youth. Smuggled Iranian oil products fuel swathes of Pakistani Balochistan, and convoys of pick-up trucks--overloaded with diesel barrels--regularly arrive in plain sight at any one of a dozen border towns inside Pakistani territory. (A veteran Baloch guerrilla commander told me that a large part of Abdulmalik Rigi's revenue comes from tolls levied on illicit trade in the area he controls. Rigi denied personal involvement in smuggling, but acknowledged that some members of his organisation might not be so scrupulous).

I witnessed Pakistani policemen accepting bribes from truck drivers carrying several dozen such barrels, but the security forces here are disliked for other reasons. According to Pakistan's Commission for Human Rights, several hundred ethnic Baloch are missing and unaccounted for in the province. Some are human rights activists, political leaders and journalists, but many more are simply ordinary workers picked up at police checkpoints and never heard from again. I met countless families with stories of loved ones who had gone missing, they said, for expressing Baloch nationalist sentiments.

Abdulmalik Rigi and I settled on a shaded mat, surrounded by dwarf palms, at the outskirts of a small village on the mountainous Pakistan-Iran border that had been chosen for our rendezvous. As his eight young fighters sat around, fingering their weapons and laughing at their leader's jokes about "cowardly Iranian soldiers," Rigi told me similar horror stories from Iranian Balochistan, while denying that he was a Washington stooge. He claimed to be fighting for Baloch minority rights, and says he hopes to replace Iran's current theocracy with a federal union, a "United States of Iran." Affable and impassioned, he willingly discussed his group's weapons, tactics and martyred members.

What had driven him to fight the Iranian government? I asked. He told me how at the age of 13 he had come around a corner in Zahedan, his hometown, and seen the corpses of several young men, strung up from an industrial crane. It was a common punishment for "counter-revolutionary" behaviour, he explained, and it compelled him to abandon his urban life and take up arms.

A day later, 800 miles away across inhospitable deserts and dark granite mountains, a separate group of Baloch fighters shared their dinner with me. These men formed part of the growing Baloch Liberation Army, and say they are engaged in a struggle with Pakistan's government for the independence of that country's Baloch minority. Five hours' hike up a narrow ravine, they live with their donkeys and their ageing rifles, occasionally venturing out of their craggy maze to attack military checkpoints. Their commander, a tall man with a green and black cloth masking his face, sat on a rock and held forth on the Balochi hatred of Pakistan's military elite. His fighters had survived overwhelming firepower, he said, including "the helicopter gunships that are provided by America in order to co-operate against Taliban and jihadi organisations."

It was recently reported that Pakistan had suggested a barter deal with the British government: Islamabad would extradite Pakistani citizens allegedly involved in the July 2005 London bombings, and in return the British would hand over a group of Baloch men that President Musharraf has accused of supporting the BLA's increasingly successful insurgency from afar. Until now, the British have refused to co-operate, but meanwhile the US state department has not wavered in its support for Musharraf, despite the continued unrest and repression occurring across Pakistan. Is there an inconsistency in American and British support for the government of Pakistan--with its poor treatment of the Baloch minority--and simultaneous criticism of Iran for similar transgressions? The US has been learning valuable lessons from its earlier support of Islamic mujahedin during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. One is that proxy groups may one day turn around to bite the hand that feeds them. If the CIA really is supporting Rigi's guerrillas in Iran, while simultaneously helping Musharraf's army stifle

the Baloch nationalist insurgency in Pakistan, there may be trouble ahead.

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