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Double Agent

The Arab Spring has cast new light on resistance in the Middle East. A rare 2007 encounter with the leader of Iran's Jundullah reveals the murky place held by the region's so-called freedom fighters.

BY WILLEM MARX | May 10, 2011 7:00 AM



Abdulmalik Rigi, the former leader of the Sunni Iranian rebel group Jundullah, in Balochistan, 2007.

CREDIT: Willem Marx

A light gray car idled in the dust of the intersection. Rust ran along its running board, and its windshield was tinted black against the sun. I stepped out of my own SUV, said farewell to my driver, Habib, and interpreter, Hakeem, slung my gear over my shoulder, and clambered inside, where the driver and other passengers, dressed in traditional shalwar kameez with swirling baggy pantaloons, greeted me with handshakes and salaams. I quickly surmised I was not the only one to have gone several days without washing.

We spent that night in 2007 in a local safe house, where I was asked to dismantle my phones and camera for a security inspection before bedding down on the carpeted floor. Early the following morning I was driven along the course of a dry riverbed. On the outskirts of the ramshackle city of Turbat we approached a bridge, one of Pakistan's last military checkpoints before the Iranian border. With my bearded foreigner's face hidden by the darkened glass, we were waved through. I started to believe that my rendezvous with Iran's most wanted terrorist was actually going to happen.

My escorts in the gray car were members of Jundullah (Arabic for the "Soldiers of God"), a Sunni militant organization that had for several years been waging a violent but under-reported insurrection against Iran's military and government in the country's southeastern province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan. Their attacks had highlighted the fragility of the Islamic Republic's hold over the non-Persian minority groups—including Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchs and Turkmen—that make up nearly half of the country's population. The group's website has most recently claimed responsibility for a devastating December 2010 [attack](#)^[1] in the port city of Chabahar, which left nearly 40 people dead and more than 80 injured. News photos from the site showed body parts and pools of blood in front of a local mosque, after a suicide bomber blew himself up during a religious procession.

The landscape we careened through was stark, hot, empty; a boulder-strewn valley lined on both sides with craggy ridgelines of dark mauve rock. Balochistan, a region the size of Montana and Wyoming combined, includes parts of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and experiences some of the highest temperatures in the world. The borders here would be described as "porous" by Washington think-tanks, and from what I had already seen the towns were awash with opiates, semi-automatic weapons, long-standing tribal rivalries, and oil smuggling. Days earlier I had filmed a Pakistani border guard smoking crack cocaine, and hours later I was nearly arrested after watching local police demand a bribe from truckers smuggling drums of Iranian crude along a lonely asphalt road.

As far back as back in the spring of 2007, Jundullah had cemented its reputation as a violent militant group after staging several large-scale attacks against Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Just three months before I arrived in the region, Jundullah had launched a bomb attack on a military transport vehicle in the eastern Iranian border city of Zahedan that tore 11 Revolutionary Guards to shreds, provoked newspaper [headlines](#)^[2] globally, and led to condemnation from the United Nations secretary general. The group's young leader, Abdulmalik Rigi, had appeared in several audio recordings posted online railing against the Shia Islamic Republic for its mistreatment of Iran's Baloch minority, who are predominantly Sunni.

Still, Rigi and his comrades had never before spoken to a journalist in the flesh, let alone appeared in front of a television camera, and consequently the group was often described by both Iranian and American media as "shadowy." Rigi's decision to grant me an interview was prompted by an ABC News [story](#)^[3] broadcast in April 2007. *The Secret War Against Iran* was the lead [item](#)^[4] on the network's evening news and reported that Jundullah was being "secretly encouraged and advised by American officials." "Tribal members" from Balochistan apparently formed the basis for the report, but when I had contacted the news consultant behind the story he said he had not actually traveled anywhere near Balochistan. (The man who provided the information for the ABC News report, Alexis Debat, was later [discredited](#)^[5] after writing up imaginary interviews with Kofi Annan, Hillary Clinton, and Michael Bloomberg, among others. Iranian state broadcasters and websites still regularly cite the 2007 ABC News report amid accusations that Jundullah continues to receive support from foreign intelligence agencies.)

En route to Pakistan I had arranged to meet some Iranian Baloch based in the United Arab Emirates, a short hop across the Arabian Gulf from Iran's Sistan-va-Baluchestan province. I suspected some of them might have ties to Rigi, who was variously described by the Iranian authorities as an al-Qaida lieutenant or a powerful narcotics trafficker. The men I met in the emirate of Sharjah were angry about the ABC report, released just days before our encounter. "He needs no money from the CIA, he makes

plenty from smuggling and kidnap ransom,” explained one elderly bearded man over a lunch of fried chicken and naan. He called himself Jumma Khan and claimed to have commanded a previous Baloch insurgent group during the Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s, with weapons and cash provided by his benefactor Saddam Hussein. (It was Jumma Khan who eventually brokered my interview with Rigi.)

I recalled this conversation on my drive with the four young men from Jundullah, which, after two jarring hours, led us to a small cluster of mud-brick homes that I reckoned to be around 25 miles from the Iran border. Minutes later a pickup truck roared into the compound where we sat waiting. Crouched in the back were half a dozen more Jundullah fighters sporting AK-47s and RPGs. The driver dismounted from the cab and approached me, smiling broadly. I recognized him from the grainy photos I had seen online; it was Rigi.

He was a slender man with a short trimmed beard, crisp white clothes, and an enthusiastic handshake. We drove a short distance to a date palm plantation on the edge of the settlement, and while sentries watched from the tree line, he invited me to sit with him and half a dozen others on a shaded mat. His fingers were well manicured and his smile revealed exceptionally white teeth. He appeared to be a dashing young guerrilla commander straight out of central casting, even though I had seen poor-quality video recordings of him personally beheading a man with a kitchen knife. He told me he was 23 years old, married with three young children, and that his six brothers and both parents lived with him “in the mountains.”

Speaking in a mixture of Farsi and Baloch dialect through an interpreter the group had provided, Rigi answered my questions about attacks his group had made on Iran’s “cowardly” forces. He checked tactics off with his fingers, “encirclement ambushes, hit-and-runs, hand-to-hand combat.” He bragged about the weapons at his disposal, “Kalashnikov, M16, cannon, heavy weapons,” and added that his fighters also possessed several Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles.

According to Rigi, his group, which he’d recently re-branded the “People’s Resistance Movement of Iran”—less Islamist, more Maoist—was essentially a coalition of older Baloch insurgent groups. He had decided to challenge the Iranian government as a teenager, after he stumbled upon the corpses of eight young Baloch men strung up from a crane in the center of his hometown, Zahedan. He attended high school for a while and appeared articulate and literate, citing several manuals on insurgent warfare he had studied. He played down the religious aspect of his group’s ideology and seemed at pains to emphasize his Baloch nationalist credentials. During time he’d spent in southern Afghanistan, he explained, local Taliban commanders had clashed with Jundullah on several occasions, and so his fighters now traveled back and forth only between Iran and Pakistan. A question I posed about support from Pakistani authorities was met with silence, but he grew animated when I mentioned the CIA, leaning forward and raising his voice. “We haven’t had any secret relations with any intelligence service.”

But long after the interview, I was able to confirm independently that Rigi had in fact met face to face with U.S. officials to discuss his activities inside Iran, though no money had ever changed hands. Instead, just as Rigi had asserted during our conversation, I learned that significant funds were finding their way to Jundullah from Baloch refugees living in European countries like Sweden. “Our weakness is only the lack of equipment,” Rigi had told me wistfully. “If we had equipment, we would have conducted 10 operations a day.”

Jundullah’s attacks on Iran continued after this interview, throughout 2008 and 2009. One of Rigi’s brothers, Abdul-Ghafoor, was **reportedly**^[6] the suicide bomber in an attack on a military headquarters in the town of Saravan in December 2008. It was the first time a suicide bomber had acted against the Islamic Republic. There followed a similar suicide **attack**^[7] in May 2009 against a mosque in Zahedan, which killed 30 and wounded more than 120. The greatest affront to the Iranian military establishment came next, the deadliest attack inside Iran for almost 30 years. A bombing in Zahedan **targeted**^[8] a meeting of Baloch tribal leaders and Iranian military officials in late 2009, killing 40 people, including 15 Revolutionary Guards. It particularly embarrassed the state’s security agencies since the No. 2 commander of the Revolutionary Guards died in the blast.

Large numbers of Iranian border police and several Revolutionary Guards were kidnapped by the group over several years; the lucky ones were ransomed, but the rest were executed. A former member of Jundullah I contacted shortly after that attack, by this time hiding in Pakistan, said he had left the organization because there was an increasingly influential faction that supported sectarian violence against civilians as well as state employees. “They are religious, and I am more secular,” he explained.

Almost three years after my meeting with Rigi in Balochistan I was on assignment in a very different desert with another group of armed young men: the American military on patrol just south of Kirkuk, Iraq. One evening I got word from a Baloch friend in Pakistan that Abdulmalik Rigi had been captured. On a painfully slow U.S. Army Internet connection I watched a video of a wiry figure being bundled out of a small plane by masked security officials, while newswires carried quotes from senior Iranian officials crowing about his arrest.

The Iranian government account claimed Rigi had boarded a flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan, where he was allegedly intending to meet with a senior American military official, possibly Defense Secretary Robert Gates or CentCom’s commander Gen. David Petraeus, who was recently **tapped**^[9] to head the CIA. The plane was then apparently intercepted over Iranian airspace by a pair of fighter jets and forced to land. But under scrutiny certain elements of this story failed to add up, and I later learned from sources in the Pakistani province of Balochistan that Rigi had been betrayed to Pakistani authorities, who in turn had handed him over to Iran.

Days later an edited video confession appeared on Iranian state television, in which a tired-looking Rigi described meetings his group had held with American officials in Dubai. His older brother Abdulhamid had been captured the previous year and made several similar appearances on Iranian news channels, talking about his brother’s relationship with foreign intelligence organizations.

Having followed news stories about Jundullah over the years, I had repeatedly encountered Iranian military commanders claiming that Rigi had been killed in a skirmish with security forces. But on June 20, 2010, he was finally **executed**^[10] in Tehran’s Evin prison, having been found guilty on several dozen counts of kidnapping, murder, assassination attempts, drugs trafficking, and

armed robbery. Last November the United States **designated** ^[11] Jundullah as a foreign terrorist organization.

Just days after his capture the group had announced its new leader, and in July 2010 Jundullah claimed responsibility for large explosions that killed nearly 30 and injured nearly 200 outside the main Shia mosque in Zahedan. The December 2010 explosion took place during a Shia procession in the days leading up to holy festival of Ashura, which celebrates the sacrifice of Imam Hossein, grandson of the prophet Muhammad. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt in a crowd of local fishermen in the balmy port city of Chabahar, at the southern edge of the Sistan-va-Baluchestan province, and shortly afterward a photo and message from the bomber were posted on Jundullah's blog.

Though the United States, Great Britain, and other European countries denounced the bombing, the speaker of the Iranian parliament Ali Larijani once again repeated the assertion that the intelligence agencies of Israel and the United States were behind such attacks. "They are funded by the U.S. and Israeli intelligence service," he was quoted as saying by the Iranian Mehr News agency. From what I had seen, this seemed highly unlikely. But given Jundullah's record of deadly attacks against both military and civilian targets, and the country's patchwork of religious and ethnic groups, many of whom chafe under Persian domination and religious Shiite rule, the Islamic Republic of Iran will struggle to banish the paranoia.

Willem Marx is a freelance writer and TV reporter based in London. His work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times and Harper's.

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[3] story: http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/04/abc_news_exclus.html

[4] item: <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video?id=3005348>

[5] discredited: <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2007/09/21/06>

[6] reportedly: <http://www.payvand.com/news/08/dec/1309.html>

[7] attack: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/07/15/us-iran-bomb-idUSTRE66E58N20100715>

[8] targeted: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/18/iran-revolutionary-guard-suicide-bomb>

[9] tapped: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/general-david-petraeus-cia-leon-panetta-pentagon-major/story?id=13470031>

[10] executed: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/20/world/la-fg-iran-rigi-20100621>

[11] designated: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

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