

Salafism as a National Security Threat for Iran

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Although Tehran worries about internal threats from Salafi jihadists, it may well cooperate with such groups if they attack Western interests.

On February 8, Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), a Salafist armed group in Baluchistan, Iran, announced that it had taken five Iranian soldiers hostage. On December 5, the same group killed three members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In retaliation, the Iranian judiciary immediately executed sixteen imprisoned members of the group.

Iranian officials have long blamed the West for instigating tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. But in recent months, an unusual number of official statements have indicated that Tehran views Salafist or jihadist Islam not only as a threat to its interests in the Middle East, but also as a national security threat that, mixed with ethnic discontent in Baluchistan and Iran's western province of Kurdistan, could turn to violence. For instance, on January 15, Iranian judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani asked the intelligence services and the IRGC to prevent infiltration of Salafists and *takfiris* (heretics) into Iranian territories, pointing to concerns about Kurdistan and Baluchistan becoming potential training grounds or battlegrounds for foreign Salafist fighters (see [PolicyWatch 2150, "The Rise of Persian Salafism," \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-persian-salafism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-persian-salafism) for background on the movement's growth in Iran).

Additional instances of Salafi jihadist activity at home and abroad have unsettled Iranian officials. In October, Iranian media reported that a group of radical Islamists had marched through the streets of Javanrud, in Iranian Kurdistan, with black flags and swords, shouting "Allahu Akbar" and intimidating the locals. According to Kurdpa, the Kurdistan Press Agency, this group aims to assert its presence in the province. In November, the al-Qaeda-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades claimed responsibility for what it described as a double suicide attack on the Iranian mission in southern Beirut, killing twenty-three people, including an Iranian cultural attache. The same group claims it conducted the two bombings that occurred in Beirut just yesterday. Such attacks are likely an outgrowth of rising anti-Shiite sentiment among Sunnis, stoked by Iran and Hezbollah's active support to Bashar al-Assad's

regime in Syria. Now Iranian leaders fear that anti-Shiite acts could proliferate within Iranian territory.

OFFICIAL IRANIAN RELATIONS WITH KURDISH SALAFISTS

Iranian authorities have long harbored an ambiguous attitude toward the country's Kurdish Salafists. On his May 12, 2009, trip to Kurdistan, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued this warning about Salafists: "Who are those who want to destroy the nation's unity? These are [the] enemy's agents...There are many poor and unaware Salafists and Wahhabis who are fed by petrodollars to go here and there and carry on terrorist operations, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other places...Today this Wahhabi Salafist community regards Shiites as infidels...From where does such a wrong idea stem?"

But the Iranian leadership does not view all Salafist groups equally, and its treatment of individual groups can seem inconsistent at times. For example, while the regime has cracked down forcefully on groups such as Kataib Qaed fi Kurdistan and Navadegan Saladin in the past, members of these groups have often cooperated with the regime, and Tehran has been lenient so long as they do not pose a domestic threat. In contrast, members of groups such as Jaish Sahabeh and Ansar al-Islam, which do not cooperate with the regime and use anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian propaganda, are frequently arrested, persecuted, and banned from engaging in their activities.

Meanwhile, despite the significant restrictions placed on Salafist activities and outreach since Khamenei's 2009 trip, several Salafist clerics remain active. These include Mullah Abdolhamid (from Marivan and active in Sanandaj and Javanrud), Mullah Mohammad Alavi (from Saqqez but based in the village of Yekshaveh), Mullah Hadi Hermidol, Mullah Osman Saqqez, and Mullah Hadi Oroomiyeh. In several cities, such as Sanandaj, Salafists also have their Dar al-Quran (House of Quran), in which they distribute books and CDs on Salafism and recruit members. Moreover, rumors suggest that Salafists have run military training camps near Sanandaj and Qasr Shirin.

According to a January 19 investigative report on the Radio Zamaneh website by Iranian journalist Omid Pooyandeh, the Salafist presence in Kurdistan dates back a decade. In 2003, when American forces attacked Ansar al-Islam at its headquarters in Oraman in Iraqi Kurdistan, some of the group's members fled to Iran. The IRGC did not prevent their entrance, likely because Tehran believed they could be useful. According to the report, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi -- a prominent jihadist leader and eventual head of al-Qaeda in Iraq -- spent a few months in Iranian Kurdistan, mobilizing many Baluch and Kurdish Salafi jihadists during his stay.

In late 2003, some of the Ansar al-Islam members remaining in Iran formed the group Kataib Qaed fi Kurdistan with Iranian Salafists. Its goal was to enter Iraqi Kurdistan and wage jihad there, and it conducted several operations across the border, purportedly including a failed 2005 assassination attempt against Mullah Bakhtiar, a Patriotic Union of Kurdistan official. At one point, and for reasons unknown, the Iranian regime barred the group from any further activities, arrested its leader, and reportedly sentenced him to thirteen years in jail; he is believed to be in Tehran's Evin Prison today. Following the crackdown, many members moved to Afghanistan, and the group has since split into several other groups, such as Navadegan Saladin and Jaish Sahabeh, which have established strong connections to other Salafists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Zamaneh report -- which drew from interviews with Kurdish activists who spent time in prison with Salafists -- claims that many members of these two groups have been arrested by Iranian officials.

Overall, Kurdish sources set the number of imprisoned Salafists at about 300. They also say that the Iranian regime has killed about 250 Salafists since 2001.

SALAFI JIHADISTS IN BALUCHISTAN AND OTHER AREAS

Before Jaish al-Adl began operating in 2013, another Baluch group, known as Jundallah and led by Abdol Malek Riggi, was conducting terrorist operations in Baluchistan by kidnapping soldiers and IRGC members, beheading them, and posting the videos online. Despite the group's small size, it posed a serious security concern to the Iranian

government for years until 2009, when Riggi was arrested by Iranian intelligence and executed shortly thereafter. Some Baluch analysts believe that Jundallah, contrary to the group's claims, was motivated by ethnic rather than religious discrimination. Some analysts suspect further that earnings from drug smuggling provided a financial motivation for the group. Whatever the true driver behind their activity, Jundallah and Jaish al-Adl have both used Salafi jihadist rhetoric targeting Shiites and the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian government's actions against what it views as threatening Salafi jihadist activity continue today. According to a report by Herana, a human rights news agency, nineteen Arab Sunnis were arrested in Khuzestan in July 2013 because they wanted to perform their own Eid al-Fitr prayer. And on December 4, four Sunni Arabs were executed in Khuzestan on charges of creating an "Ahrar Brigade" -- "an armed group that acts against national security and conducts military operations," according to the government.

U.S.-IRANIAN CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Some analysts in Washington have suggested a common interest for Iran and the United States in fighting Salafi jihadists, even if they view this threat in a different light. But there is a soft spot in such analysis: the potential for Salafi jihadists to concentrate their efforts against U.S. interests. In such cases, the Iranian regime may well accommodate and even assist these groups, as it did against U.S. interests during the Iraq war. Indeed, Iranian cooperation with al-Qaeda appears to continue on some level, as seen in the U.S. Treasury Department's February 5 designation of senior al-Qaeda member Jafar al-Uzbeki. According to the release announcing the designation, Uzbeki is part of an al-Qaeda network operating from Iran that has also moved fighters into Pakistan and Afghanistan "and operates there with the knowledge of Iranian authorities." The department added that this network "uses Iran as a transit point for moving funding and foreign fighters through Turkey to support al Qaeda-affiliated elements inside Syria."

Iran's leadership does not fundamentally object to the Salafi jihadist ideology of using violence to achieve a group's goals. Rather, it objects to Salafi jihadists because it sees them as allies of the West. When such groups use violence to threaten the regional interests of the United States and its allies, Iran is unbothered. But when such groups turn against Iran's interests -- as Salafists have done in the Syrian war, and as Jaish al-Adl has done in Baluchistan -- Tehran sees them as a necessary target for attack.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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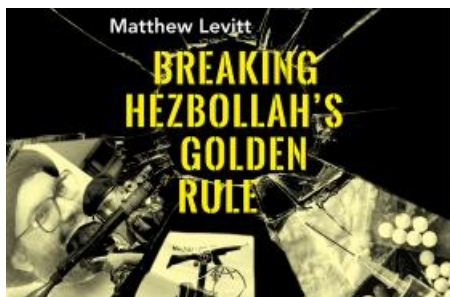
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