SKIRMISHES ALONG IRAN-PAKISTAN BORDER HAVE INCREASED SINCE OCTOBER INCIDENT

Recall that back in October, near the town of Saravan in southeastern Iran, 14 Iranian border guards were killed by attackers who had infiltrated from the adjacent border with Pakistan. Iran retaliated very quickly, executing 16 prisoners the next day. A previously unknown group, Jaish al-Adl, claimed responsibility and has since been described as a radical Sunni Wahhabi group with ties to Jundallah.

We learn today from Fars News that skirmishes with Iranian border guards have continued since that attack, with as many as 100 attacks having taken place since March and up to two a day since the October incident:

> Lieutenant Commander of Iran's Border Guard Force Brigadier General Ahmad Garavand vowed tough battle against any kind of terrorist move along the country's borders, and said the border guards have repelled tens of terrorist attacks against the country.
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> General Garavand pointed to constant clashes between the Iranian border guards and outlaws, and said, "We have had 100 clashes since the beginning of this (Iranian) year (started March 20) and 2 border clashes per day on average after the recent terrorist attacks in Saravan."

It would appear that the border guards are facing a budget crisis (perhaps a product of US sanctions?):

> Meantime, Garavand reiterated that the

> government should earmark more budget for sealing the country's borders, and said, "Only 28 percent of the required budget for sealing the borders has been allocated in the past months."

Where the article goes next is a very interesting development. I had missed this bit of news in the original aftermath of the October incident, but Garavand mentions that the IRGC has vowed to take action in response:

> After the attack the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in a statement vowed to take action against.

Perhaps this is just a natural outcome of the budget limitations of the border guards, but it seems more likely to me that this is a significant step that indicates just how seriously Iran views these border incidents. And right on cue, we have reports today by both Fars News and Mehr News that the IRGC took action to free two hostages who had been captured near the border. From the Fars story:

> The Quds Forces of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) released the two hostages that had been taken by a group of outlaws in Southeastern Iran yesterday.
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> On Monday night a group of bandits took two Iranian citizens hostage in the city of Iranshahr in the Sistan and Balouchestan province.
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> Some hours later in early Tuesday morning, the captured civilians were released in an IRGC surprise operation which left three bandits dead and 3 others injured.

So we now have not just the IRGC, but the elite Quds force that reports directly to Khamenei involved in today's incident. Considering how

much further inside the border Iranshahr is compared to Saravan, it is not too surprising that border guards were not involved, but the presence of the Quds force suggests to me that the unidentified hostages were of very high importance to Iran. Here is a map showing the various locations that have been discussed:



Returning to the Mehr News article describing the ongoing border skirmishes, we get more of the statement from IRGC issued just after the Saravan attack on who is behind these attacks and why they are viewed as coming at such an important moment:

> "Under the present crucial juncture that the Islamic establishment is going through a sensitive historical juncture and is trying to gain a major achievement in area of nuclear talks strategic achievement, terrorist actions under the command and support of the spy agencies of the arrogant and colonial powers will not be able to harm the sincere and determined will of the Iranian nation," parts of IRGC statement read.
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> "The Sirkan (in Saravan of Sistan and Baluchestan) crime should remind the alleged advocates of global terrorism and those interested in establishing ties with the Islamic Republic that the Iranian nation has never been unaware of the masterminds of plots who direct terrorist acts by the counterrevolutionary forces against it

> and it will consider it in its strategic calculations through monitoring and realistic analysis," the statement added.

It is very interesting that "advocates of global terrorism" would be mentioned here. As I had discussed in my post on the October incident, the phrase "radical Sunni Wahhabi" group immediately brings to mind Saudi Arabia as the accused (although of course Israel also fits virtually any accusation of evil by Iran). By the same token, "advocates of global terrorism" would fit as well, since the radical groups funded by the Saudis engage in global terrorism. Western groups, especially the US and UK ("arrogant and colonial") also appear to be part of the suspect pool and this looks like a very direct warning to the US to curb the activities of the CIA in Iran if the US is truly interested in "establishing ties with the Islamic Republic". Now that actual bilateral talks are known to have occurred between the US and Iran, the CIA must now fear having Iran provide evidence to US negotiators of CIA involvement in these border incidents.

But the statement here goes further, and just as I speculated in October, the ongoing negotiations on Iran's nuclear technology have now been cited as the likely target of these border skirmishes. (And I still wonder if the slain deputy minister was involved in negotiations.) By linking the incidents to the nuclear negotiations, Iran is now saying that those behind the incidents are against a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue.

Keep watching this border area, it will remain vitally important.