

AS US-IRAN THREAT EXCHANGE CONTINUES, PAKISTAN DETAINS THREE IRANIAN BORDER GUARDS

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaqllTmPcKc>[/youtube]

Iran and the US continued to exchange threats over the long holiday weekend. On Saturday night, Barack Obama signed the NDAA, which put into place the ability to enact strong sanctions on banking institutions involved in the sale of Iranian oil. Substantial flexibility is built into the legislation to allow the US to exempt various players in the oil market, so it is still quite uncertain how the sanctions will be implemented. As the video here shows, Iran also test-fired two types of missiles over the weekend prior to the ending of the ten days of naval war games. However, the threats have not ceased, as Iran has now issued a vague warning to the US not to bring the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis, which exited the Persian Gulf on Tuesday, back into the Gulf.

With all of these events taking place, it would be easy to overlook a strange incident on the Iran-Pakistan border on Sunday. Both Iran and Pakistan now say that Pakistan has detained three Iranian border guards who crossed into Pakistan. The guards shot two men who were in a car they were chasing, and one of the men died. The shooting victims are Pakistani nationals.

One of the most detailed accounts appears in the Washington Post via AP:

Pakistani authorities have yet to decide what to do with three Iranian border guards who they say crossed into southwestern Pakistan while chasing after smugglers and killed one them, a

government official said Monday.

The incident occurred Sunday in the Mazah Sar area of Baluchistan province, a desolate, unpopulated region where the border is not clearly marked.

Aalam Farez, a senior government official in Washuk district, where Mazah Sar is located, said the Iranians admitted to inadvertently crossing into Pakistan. But, he said, they claimed the two people they shot – one of whom died – were bystanders and that the people they were chasing escaped.

After the shooting, Pakistani border personnel chased the Iranians back across the border and detained them, Pakistani officials have said. They also seized the surviving gunshot victim and determined both of those who had been shot were petty smugglers.

The Express Tribune (via AFP) adds significant background on the region where this event took place:

The Iranians reached Mazan Sar Mashkail, in Washuk district, three kilometres (1.8miles) inside Pakistan where they opened fire on a vehicle they were chasing, according to officials in Balochistan.

“All three personnel of Iranian border security force were taken into custody for their penetration inside Pakistan and killing a Pakistani national on our soil”, Saeed Ahmad Jamali, Deputy Commissioner of Washuk district told AFP.

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Mazan Sar Mashkail is around 600 kilometres southwest of Quetta, the main town of insurgency hit Baluchistan province, which borders Iran’s Sistan-

Baluchestan province.

Iranian embassy officials in Islamabad were unavailable for comment late Sunday but Iran in the past has blamed a Sunni extremist group, called Jundallah, for launching attacks inside Pakistan [sic] from Sistan-Balochistan.

Jundallah says it is fighting Tehran's Shiite rule to secure rights for Sunni Balochis who form a significant population in Sistan-Balochistan, which borders both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Significantly, this AFP article makes no mention of smuggling, so the smuggling characterization appears only in the AP article, which Mehr News cites in its confirmation of the event. And despite the AP article not mentioning Jundallah, it is possible that both stories are correct, since in addition to its terrorism role, Jundallah also has been accused of drug smuggling. (It seems likely that the AFP article meant to say that Iran has blamed Jundallah for attacks inside Iran rather than Pakistan. Jundallah has claimed responsibility for several attacks, see below.)

The potential involvement of Jundallah is highly significant, as evidence has been presented that the Bush administration provided training and financial support. From ABC in 2007:

A Pakistani tribal militant group responsible for a series of deadly guerrilla raids inside Iran has been secretly encouraged and advised by American officials since 2005, U.S. and Pakistani intelligence sources tell ABC News. The group, called Jundullah, is made up of members of the Baluchi tribe and operates out of the Baluchistan province in Pakistan, just across the border from Iran. It has taken responsibility for the deaths and kidnappings of more than a dozen Iranian

soldiers and officials.

The article went on to describe the group's leader (who was subsequently caught and executed by Iran) as "part drug smuggler.

Seymour Hersh added more in 2008:

The Administration may have been willing to rely on dissident organizations in Iran even when there was reason to believe that the groups had operated against American interests in the past. The use of Baluchi elements, for example, is problematic, Robert Baer, a former C.I.A. clandestine officer who worked for nearly two decades in South Asia and the Middle East, told me. "The Baluchis are Sunni fundamentalists who hate the regime in Tehran, but you can also describe them as Al Qaeda," Baer told me. "These are guys who cut off the heads of nonbelievers—in this case, it's Shiite Iranians. The irony is that we're once again working with Sunni fundamentalists, just as we did in Afghanistan in the nineteen-eighties." Ramzi Yousef, who was convicted for his role in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is considered one of the leading planners of the September 11th attacks, are Baluchi Sunni fundamentalists.

One of the most active and violent anti-regime groups in Iran today is the Jundallah, also known as the Iranian People's Resistance Movement, which describes itself as a resistance force fighting for the rights of Sunnis in Iran. "This is a vicious Salafi organization whose followers attended the same madrassas as the Taliban and Pakistani extremists," Nasr told me. "They are suspected of having links to Al Qaeda and they are also thought to be

| tied to the drug culture.” The Jundallah took responsibility for the bombing of a busload of Revolutionary Guard soldiers in February, 2007. At least eleven Guard members were killed. According to Baer and to press reports, the Jundallah is among the groups in Iran that are benefitting from U.S. support.

Recall that the AP article describes the Iranian border guards as claiming that the men they shot were not the actual suspects they had been chasing but were bystanders and that it is the Pakistani border officials who claim the men shot were smugglers and presumably were the ones being chased. This situation is remarkably similar to the Raymond Davis incident, where Davis gunned down two Pakistani nationals and then claimed that they were trying to rob him while they were on motorcycles and he was in a car, even though the incident looked more like a “hit” on Davis which he managed to reverse. At the very least, by mentioning Jundallah as even potentially involved, AFP has raised the possibility that a group rumored to be backed by the US (even under Obama) would have been active in cross-border activity at a time of very high tension. The relatively short border region between Iran and Pakistan will bear further watching in the near future.