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ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

Query response on Iran: Security situation [a-11755-1]

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Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference in the document or upon request.

An April 2020 country report by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that "security forces exert tight and effective control over most of Iran's territory, with the exception of some border areas", including areas bordering Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq (DFAT, 14 April 2020, p. 21). The situation in the border areas in the country's west (Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan and Khuzestan) and east (Sistan and Baluchistan) was described in a February 2021 Dutch Foreign Ministry report as being "unstable" (BZ, February 2021, p. 16)

Southern Iran (including Sistan and Baluchistan)

Sistan and Baluchistan, a province that borders Pakistan and Afghanistan and is mainly inhabited by Sunni ethnic Baluchis (Al-Arabiya, 24 February 2021), has seen various conflicts involving militant Baluchi factions (of which Jaish al-Adl is the best-known), citizens and the security forces. Many people have been killed or wounded during these conflicts. (BZ, February 2021, p. 22)

A July 2021 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran observed:

"Between 1 January and 27 April 2021, at least 24 couriers were killed and a high number injured because of excessive force by border officials. This includes 10 couriers killed in Sistan va Baluchestan Province by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on 22 February 2021. The incident led to protests in which two people were killed and many others were seriously injured due to the excessive use of live ammunition. It is reported that excessive force is routinely used in anti-narcotics operations in Sistan va Baluchestan. On 10 May 2021, a 5-year-old child was reportedly fatally shot in the head by anti-narcotics police in Iranshahr. The Government responded that border officials did not shoot border couriers acting legally, and that judicial processes would be employed and punishments issued when use of force unintentionally caused injury or death." (UN General Assembly, 16 July 2021, p. 6)

As Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported in February 2021, several people were killed and injured as IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] forces opened fire on informal fuel traders during clashes in Saravan, a city near the Pakistani border (RFE/RL, 23 February 2021). As the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) observed, these protests "began on February 22, 2021, after Iranian border guards shot and killed two fuel traders along the border with Pakistan, setting off widespread protests and road blockages". In ways similar to previous incidences of unrest (Jamestown Foundation, 12 March 2021), the authorities intermittently shut down the internet, "to conceal news of those killings", as the CHRI suggests. (CHRI, 1 March 2021)

Regarding the number of people killed and injured during these events, the same source noted:

“On February 23, the Baloch Activists Campaign (BAC) published a list of 15 confirmed deaths and injuries caused when the IRGC opened fire on fuel transporters at the Saravan border post with Pakistan on February 22. [...] However, CHRI has learned from informed local sources that at least 23 people have been killed by state security forces. In addition, these sources have informed CHRI that many more have been injured, including many critical injuries.” (CHRI, 1 March 2021)

At the same time, the government indicated that only one person was killed (Jamestown Foundation, 12 March 2021).

In March 2021, Saravan became the scene of a deadly bombing that was blamed on an unspecified “terrorist group”:

“One person was killed and three were wounded in a bomb explosion in southeastern Iran, the state news agency IRNA reported, blaming a ‘terrorist group’ linked to Tehran’s enemies. The attack reportedly occurred in the city of Saravan, the site of recent violence, in the restive Sistan-Baluchistan Province. A group ‘linked to global arrogance,’ a phrase that in Iranian media usually describes the United States and its allies, had carried out ‘the explosion at one of Saravan’s squares, leading to one being killed and the injury of three citizens crossing the street,’ IRNA said. Sistan-Baluchistan has a border with Pakistan and its population is mainly Sunni ethnic Baluch. The province has long been a flash point for cross-border attacks by separatists and Sunni militants. The incident came almost one month after deadly confrontations with fuel smugglers in Sistan-Baluchistan. Iranian authorities said two people, including a policeman in Saravan, were killed in those clashes. But the UN Human Rights Office said at least 12 people were reportedly killed, two of them minors, and accused Iranian security forces of using excessive force.” (RFE/RL, 21 March 2021)

The same month, RFE/RL reported that border guards clashed with protesters at the port of Kohstak in the neighbouring southern coastal province of Hormozgan after the border patrol had killed a suspected “smuggler” (informal trader):

“A semiofficial Iranian news agency has reported a clash between border guards and a group of angry protesters near the Strait of Hormuz in southern Iran after a shooting incident. Fars news agency said the border patrol had shot and killed an alleged smuggler aboard a vessel near the port of Kohstak in the coastal Hormozgan Province on March 12 and pursued other boats that fled the area. The area has been the scene of unrest recently, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has sought to crack down on informal trade in the area. Many of those now being labeled ‘smugglers’ and drawing deadly responses from authorities have long been accustomed to lax enforcement of cross-border business in gasoline and other goods. Fars quoted Hormozgan border commander Hossein Dehki as saying guards shot and killed a 31-year-old resident of nearby Sirik while trying to apprehend boats engaged in smuggling. Dehki said news of the shooting attracted protesters who ‘attacked the Hormozgan border guards’ headquarters at the port of Kohstak and damaged a number of the organization’s vessels and naval equipment’ and oil-company vehicles. It also said they had attacked and ‘seriously injured’ several border guards.” (RFE/RL, 13 March 2021)

In April 2021 RFE/RL reported about unverified claims by the IRGC that its forces had dismantled a cell of unspecified alleged “terrorists”:

“Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) said on April 24 that they had dismantled a ‘terrorist’ cell linked to the Islamic republic’s enemies and killed three of its members in the country’s southeast. The IRGC mounted a ‘successful operation’ in Iran’s southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan Province and ambushed the ‘terrorist cell linked to the global arrogance,’ an IRGC statement published on Iranian news sites, said. RFE/RL could not independently verify the claim. Iran generally uses the term ‘global arrogance’ to refer to the United States or its allies. ‘Three of the terrorists were killed and their weapons, ammunition and communications equipment were seized,’ the statement added. The IRGC said the group had ‘entered the area some time ago for sabotage and terrorist operations,’ without providing further details or evidence.” (RFE/RL, 24 April 2021)

In July 2021, GardaWorld, a Canadian private security firm, reported about a suspected militant attack on IRGC forces near the city of Khash:

“Suspected militants attacked an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) base near Khash, Sistan va Baluchestan Province late July 23. The attack reportedly left four IRGC members dead. Local officials have confirmed the incident. Further details are unavailable. Khash is located 185km (116 miles) south of Zahedan, the administrative capital of Sistan va Baluchestan Province. [...] Authorities have not specified which militant group is responsible

for the attack; however, previous militant attacks in the region have been carried out by Jaish-ul-Adl (Army of Justice), a Sunni Baluch nationalist militant group active in eastern Iran.” (GardaWorld, 24 July 2021)

In December 2021, an Al Jazeera article cited Iranian sources reporting about clashes between Iranian forces and what may have been Afghan Taliban in Sistan and Baluchistan Province’s Hirmand county. There were no apparent casualties, but reports claimed that several Iranian outposts were temporarily seized, although this was denied by an IRGC-linked news outlet:

“Clashes erupted between Iranian soldiers and Taliban forces near the Afghanistan-Iran border, but appear to have led to no casualties and was later described as a ‘misunderstanding’. Multiple videos on Wednesday showed Taliban troops mobilising. Gunfire can be heard while one shows Iranian forces firing artillery shells in response to Taliban fire. The semi-official Iranian news agency Tasnim confirmed the battle in the village of Shaghalak in Hirmand county. Tasnim, which has links with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said there are walled areas on Iranian soil near the border with Afghanistan in order to combat smuggling. Some Iranian farmers passed the walls but were still inside Iran’s border when Taliban forces opened fire, thinking its side had been violated, the report said. [...] A video purportedly showed Taliban forces inside an Iranian garrison, with reports claiming several outposts were seized. Tasnim denied the seizure of any facilities, but said ‘some of the published footage was for the early moments of fighting, and border forces now have complete control over the country’s borders’. But a report by the semi-official Fars news website, which also has ties with the IRGC, made no mention of the Taliban, saying smugglers may be at fault. It said there were no casualties and the area is now calm. Mohammad Marashi, security deputy for Sistan and Baluchistan’s governor, told Iranian state television the clashes were not serious, incurred no harm on personnel or property, and had ended. He named Taliban forces as the instigators.” (Al Jazeera, 1 December 2021)

Areas near the Iraqi border

According to Reuters, “there are frequent clashes along Iran’s border with northern Iraq between Iranian security forces and Kurdish militant groups such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), which has links to Kurdish PKK insurgents in Turkey.” (Reuters, 10. August 2021)

In April 2021, Iran’s Tasnim News Agency (TNA) reported that two IRGC members and two members of a “counterrevolutionary” group labelled by the IRGC as “terrorist” were killed during clashes in Marivan County of Kurdistan Province. The source also quoted the IRGC as saying that a number of counterrevolutionaries were wounded while “the remaining members fled due to the border conditions in the area” (TNA, 22 April 2021).

Areas near the Turkish border

A May 2021 RFE/RL article reported that a deadly shoot-out took place as the IRGC dismantled a militant cell in Salmas West Azerbaijan Province:

“Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces on May 11 killed seven militants and dismantled their cell in the country’s northwest near the border with Turkey, Iran’s state-run IRNA news agency reported. Two members of the IRGC were also reportedly killed in the shoot-out. IRNA reported that the ‘group of terrorists’ had entered Iran illegally from Turkey. The clash took place around noon in the city of Salmas in Iran’s West Azerbaijan Province, according to the report. The city is located about 650 kilometers northwest of the capital Tehran. There was no independent confirmation of the clash. The area has seen occasional fighting between Iranian forces and Kurdish separatists as well as militants linked to the extremist Islamic State group. In November 2020, unidentified gunmen killed three and wounded two Iranian border guards in the province.” (RFE/RL, 11 May 2021)

Protests in Khuzestan and other provinces

In July 2021, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that popular protests against worsening living conditions erupted in Khuzestan and several other provinces and that a number of people were killed or arrested in the ensuing crackdown by security forces:

“Since July 15, 2021, Iranians have protested deteriorating living conditions in Khuzestan and several other provinces, including Isfahan, Lorestan, Eastern Azerbaijan, Tehran, and Karaj. As of July 28, human rights groups have verified the identities of at least nine people who were shot dead or died of injuries during the protests, including a 17-year-old boy, in Khuzestan and Lorestan provinces. Iranian government officials have announced the death of three

protesters and a police officer during the protests. Videos shared on social media from protests in cities in Khuzestan show security officials shooting firearms and teargas toward protesters.

On July 15, people in dozens of towns and cities in Khuzestan province, which has a large ethnic Arab population, took to the streets for several nights to protest not having clean water for days. Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) identified six victims and at least 171 people arrested during the protests. Unconfirmed reports indicate the number of deaths and arrests may be higher. Amnesty International and Radio Zamaneh news outlet have published the names of three more people who were killed during the protests.” (HRW, 29 July 2021)

A July 2021 report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) provides the following details about the situation in Khuzestan:

“[H]undreds of citizens, including children, [...] have taken to the streets of more than a dozen cities and towns in the western Khuzestan Province, including the capital, Ahvaz, for five consecutive nights to demand access to potable water. The protests turned deadly shortly after they started on July 15, with local authorities blaming the death of a 30-year-old man described as a passerby on ‘rioters’ firing in the air, though opposition sources have accused security forces of causing the death. [...] Amateur videos posted online appear to show a heavy police presence using tear gas to disperse protesters in several cities. Gunshots are heard in some of the videos, while in others protesters appear to be burning tires to block streets and are throwing rocks at security forces. [...]

Nabi Nissi, a journalist in the region, told the reformist Iranian daily Etemad that demonstrations in Susangerd were largely peaceful, adding that the deployment of riot police led to ‘tensions.’ ‘When the police forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps were tolerant toward the people, nothing happened,’ Nissi said. ‘Unfortunately, when the special units entered the city they took action, which unfortunately led to physical clashes and shooting.’ [...] The protests come amid rising public frustration over a decimated economy that has been crushed by crippling U.S. sanctions. There has also been public anger over power cuts, brownouts, and a slow vaccination campaign amid a surge in the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in recent weeks. [...] The province also saw protests over water shortages and pollution in February 2017 and July 2018 when many chanted anti-establishment slogans.” (RFE/RL, 20 July 2021)

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