INTERNAL/EXTERNAL ASPECTS OF SECURITY

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TERRORISM AND JIHADISM
IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Although from the very beginning of its existence the Islamic Republic of Iran has been regularly accused of supporting international terrorism, including Sunni organizations, this phenomenon is also a significant and growing threat for Tehran itself. In recent years Iran has become a target for the Sunni jihadists of the so-called Islamic State (also known as Daesh). A determination of those radicals allowed the group to create in 2014 its own quasi-state on a large parts of Syria and Iraq, which quickly turned into a threat not only for these two Arab countries, but also for the entire region. This has become a problem also for Iran, which has been considered by the Islamic State as an enemy. The Jihadi propaganda has even announced that in the near future the Shi'ite regime in Tehran would collapse and the Islamic State would take over.

Obviously, such scenario has been unlikely from the beginning, since the majority of Iran's population are Shiites, which automatically sets the limit for the expansion of Sunni radicals who are able to effectively operate only where the erosion of state power appears (Libya, Egypt on the Sinai Peninsula, Syria, Iraq) and if there is no resistance from the local population. Nevertheless, the whole Sunni radicalism is now considered in Iran as a significant challenge to the national security, which has to be dealt with all available means. At the same time Iran has to cope with more traditional threats, posed by ethnic separatists – mainly Arabs, Kurds and the Baloch people – as well as by the MEK (People's Mujahedin of Iran).

Methodically, the paper is based on a critical analysis of both primary and secondary sources, including speeches and news reports. It aim is to analyze main terrorism-related threats to contemporary Iran and to present both their causes and dynamics. The main argument of the paper is that although these challenges are mainly local (provincial), they have a potential to trigger a snowball effects and weaken already a vulnerable stability of the Islamic Republic even further. Moreover, it is argued that decision-makers in Iran do not solve structural problems, but react with a further securitization. A risk is even higher now, when an increasing number of Iranians have become highly dissatisfied with their living conditions. In this context the main research questions are: what are the most important terrorist groups fighting against the Islamic Republic? What they are fighting for? What is a scale of the problem?

SUNNI JIHADISM

Iran's religious composition creates a fertile ground for a violence. Although the majority of the Iranians are Shiites, Sunnis constitute about 10–15% of a total popula-

tion. Most Kurds, Iranian Arabs, Azeris, almost all Baluchis and Turkmen are Sunnis, as well as some Persians: in the southern Iran (provinces of Fars and Hormozgan) and in Khorasan region (north-eastern Iran). A clear manifestation of tensions are the attacks perpetrated by the Sunni terrorists on Shi'ite mosques. This is particularly problematic in the Sistan and Balochistan Province, where in 1994 Sunni teachers were reportedly replaced by Shi'ites. At that time, anti-Shi'ite and anti-government demonstrations by Sunni were organized. In June 1994, during Ashura (one of the holiest days for Shi'ites) a bomb placed at the shrine of Ali al-Ridha (the eighth Imam of Shia) in Mashhad killed at least 25 persons and wounded up to 300.

Some experts believes that Sunni Jihadism "represents one of the most significant threats to Iranian national security since the end of the Iran-Iraq War" (Esfandiary, Tabatai, 2015: 15). As Michael Axworthy rightly noted, "the extreme Wahhabi/Salafi form of Sunni Islam that underpins Islamic State regards Shia Iranians – and, indeed, all Shia Muslims – as heretics and apostates" (Axworthy, 2015). For the Iranian decision-makers Daesh is – similarly to Al-Qae'da years earlier – is an artificial organization established by the United States and the "Zionist regime." Regarding its national security and approach towards so called *takfiris*, Iran declared three "red lines," which – if they were to be crossed by the enemy – would have triggered Tehran's military response: (1) a direct threat to Baghdad; (2) a direct threat to holy Shi'ite shrines in Iran; (3) Presence of any jihadists within 40 kilometers from the Iran-Iraq border (*Firouzabadi*, 2015). At some point Iran even declared that a fall of Karbala and Najaf would result in Iran's direct military intervention in Iraq (*Vakonesh-e Rouhani*, 2014).

At the beginning, however, Iran played down a emergence of the Islamic State and a Jihadi threat to its own security. A sobering moment came on 12 August 2014, when the Jihadists captured an Iraqi town of Jalawla, about 30 kilometers from the Iraqi-Iranian border. Within a few days several hundred Iranian soldiers with tanks entered the Iraqi territory. Iran also provided Iraqi Kurds with arms and supplies. The main goal of this operation was to halt Daesh's offensive and push it back from the Iranian border. Despite those developments, Iranian decision-makers constantly underlined on many occasions that Iran is not threatened by the Jihadists. For instance, in June 2015 General Hassan Firouzabadi (the then Chief-of-Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces) said that the Islamic State would never approach the Iranian border and that the Iranian military is determined to destroy it, if it appears within 40 kilometers from the Iranian soil. Such resolve declaration was coherent with words of Admiral Ali Shamkhani (the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council), who said during a TV interview, that Daesh would never dare to come near the Iranian border (*Firouzabadi*, 2015).

At the same time the Iranian media started to publish contradictory to above-mentioned big words reports on terrorist cells which were allegedly destroyed by the security apparatus. Those numerous reports, which cannot be independently verified, included information on the Daesh group in the Kermanshah Province, neutralized in November 2015. In December 2015 at least 53 persons accused of hosting pro-Daesh websites were detained (*Enhedam-e teamhaye*, 2015; *Teamhaiee*, 2015). In August 2016 armed clashes in the Kermanshah province were reported (*Halakat-e*, 2016). In August 2017 the Iranian authorities announced that during previous four years more than 120 terrorist cells were destroyed and large stockpiles of arms and ammo were

seized. (*Ghazipour*, 2017).[1] Iran's official narrative has remain the same – Tehran directly links the Sunni Jihadism with states which are hostile to the Islamic Republic. For example, General Ali Jafari (commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, IRGC) said that terrorists caught in Iran were sent by the United States, while intelligence minister Mahmoud Alavi added that the Daesh cells, which were destroyed in Iran, are "a protégé of the US and Israel" (*Cyber Police*, 2015).

A scale of a Jihadi threat to Iran became visible on June 7, 2017, when five members of Daesh, originating from Iran's Kurdistan, carried out simultaneous attacks in Tehran. As always in such cases, targets were not random. First of all, an attack on a capital city has a symbolic meaning – it is a blow to the enemy's heart. Two particular targets also had very symbolic meaning – the Parliament is a symbol of the republic and a state, while the Mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini is a symbol of the Islamic revolution and ideology. 17 people lost their lives and 43 people were injured. Although for prestige reasons, the state authorities – including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – disregarded the scale and significance of the incident, it was undoubtedly the most spectacular and brazen act of political terror against the Islamic Republic since June 1981, when the explosion killed many political and military decision-makers. The reaction of the Islamic Republic to 2017 attack was typical for this state – the events were used to suppress the opposition, arrests in Tehran, Kerman, Kurdistan and Azerbaijan West were carried out. During the operation to detain the suspects, "a huge amount of weapons, bomb materials, explosive belts, communication equipment and forged documents were also found" (*Iran says*, 2017). Iran also launched several ground-to-ground ballistic missiles at Daesh's headquarters in the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor. Saudi Arabia, and later also Israel and the United States, were accused (*Farmandeh-ye*, 2017). No doubt it was a tremendous failure of the Iranian security system and a demonstration of a threat from the Jihadi movement.

The Jihadi threat to Iran is much broader that Daesh, which has finally been largely neutralized. This is particularly visible in the south-eastern part of the country, where – as Hoshang Noraiee pointed out – several ideological inspirations are present and remain influential. Apart from Salafism and Wahhabism, he mentions Deobandism. At the same time, he states that although Iranian jihadists are to a certain extent inspired by movements such as the Muslim Brothers or Jamaa't-e Islami, "to a large degree these militant groups are hostile to the mainstream Islamists [...], who are considered to be heretic and conformist" (Noraiee, 2015: 80).

Many ideological inspirations come into Iran from Pakistan. A threat is posed by several other groups, such as Ansar Al-Furqan, which is a Sunni, Baloch terrorist organization. It was reportedly established in December 2013 by a merger of two similar organizations: Belochi Harakat Al-Ansar and Pashtuni Hizbul-Furqan. Ansar Al-Furqan is accused of cooperation with various Sunni Jihadi organizations, including Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Jeish Muhammad in Iraq. It is claimed by the Iranian authorities that Ansar Al-Furqan and its associates have close ties with the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan and that is cooperates with the Taliban (*Qatar Dar*, 2013). The group, in addition to claiming attacks on Iranian targets in the Sistan

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[1] In June 2016 an elimination of "several terrorist groups" in Khuzestan was announced by Farhad Afsharia, provincial head of judiciary (*Shenasai*, 2016).

and Beluchestan Province, admitted to destroying a pipeline in the "occupied Arab land" in the Khuzestan Province (Alahwazi, 2015). A brash attack was carried out in December 2018 when a police station near a Chabahar port (Sistan and Beluchistan Province) was attacked – a suicide bombing resulted in two security officers killed and at least 48 others – including many civilians – wounded.

Another group reportedly existing and operating in Iran is Tawhid va-Jihad. A name of this Sunni-Salafi group appeared in some press releases published by the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence – it was said that this group had been active for years and is responsible for many crimes, including several murders (*Sad-o Do Nafar*, 2016; *Hukm-e aedam*, 2016). However, since then no additional information has been released by the Iranians.

ETHNIC-DRIVEN TERRORISM

Iran has always been an example of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-race state with all associated advantages and disadvantages. An influence and autonomy of local ethnic groups, once relatively strong, were severely limited in the 1920s, when troops of Reza Khan (later known as Reza Shah Pahlavi), suppressed numerous rebellions, including those in Khuzestan, Balochistan, Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. Current ethnic composition of Iran is very complicated and complex. There are no reliable statistical data but it is estimated that the Persian people constitutes 37–61% of the Iranian population. Despite such large discrepancy it is legitimate to draw an important conclusion – the Persian people, although they are the largest ethnic group in Iran, have no absolute domination over others. It means that any Persian-driven policy, including a preference of the Persian culture and a language, might encounter a natural and strong resistance from other ethnic group, for instance the Azeris (roughly 16% of the Iranian population), Arabs (2–3%), or Kurds (7–8%). Contemporary Iran is a home to many other groups and nations, including Assyrian people, Armenians, Georgians, Jews, Afghanis, Circassians and Mandaeans.

Kurdistan

Iran has 6–7 million Kurdish citizens, who live mainly in three provinces: Kurdistan, Khorasan and Kermanshah. Apart from religious differences (Sunnis vs. Shiites), there are other as well, including linguistic, cultural and social-political. Differences in a level of living conditions also play their role – Kurds (who belong to an Iranian ethnic group) are generally poorer than citizens of the Islamic Republic living in larger cities. At the same time Kurds live in an extremely sensitive and strategic area – any centrifugal tendencies are considered by successive governments in Tehran as a direct and serious threat to national security, including its territorial integrity. The independence of Kurdistan would mean Iran's loss of these lands and could become a dangerous inspiration to other ethnic minorities. Secondly, Iran would then lose a precious security buffer. A geopolitical and existential meaning of Kurdistan for Iran was em-

phasized by Ali Akbar Velayati (former Minister of Foreign Affairs, now Expediency Discernment Council's President of Center for Strategic Research): "if the Kurdish independence referendum had been successful, we would soon have Israeli tanks at the borders of Kermanshah" (*Agar*, 2018). Although these words are simply an exaggeration, some legitimate strategic logic behind them is a fact. Even now, when Kurdistan is not fully independent and remains under control of regional capitals (Ankara, Tehran, Damascus, Baghdad), it is a place of a presence and geopolitical penetrations (however limited) of the United States, Israel and the Islamic State.

Anti-Iranian centrifugal tendencies among the Kurds have a very long history. Apart from relatively successful Simko Shikak, who with the Ottoman support had been able to resist the Qajars between 1918–1922 (Bruinessen, 1983: 364–400; Yildiz, Taysi, 2007; Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield, 2010) and a failed revolt of Mohammad Rashid between 1941–1944, it is sufficient to mention an uprising which erupted in 1967. This event – despite its quick suppression by the Iranian military – showed that independence aspiration of Iranian Kurds are very strong and they will shake Iran's security and stability from time to time. Political violence returned to Iranian Kurdistan in 1979, when local leaders – in a response to an imminent collapse of the Shah's regime – joined the Islamic Revolution. Armed clashes erupted in three provinces: West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah (Kermanshahan). Fights were reported also in a city of Paveh, from where came four of five perpetrators of the 2017 Tehran attacks.

In recent years, partially due to the revival of Kurdish independence aspirations as a result of the Syrian Civil War, the Iranian Kurds have intensified their armed struggle against the central government. In August 2013 the first large armed clash war reported. According to PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party) seven Iranian soldiers were killed. In September 2014 six Iranians were reportedly killed. In May 2015 a similar clash resulted in death of several fighters of PJAK and KDPI (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan). In June of the same year KDPI's militants reportedly killed six IRGC soldiers. In April 2016 Iranian forces were attacked near Sanandaj. In May up to ten Iranian soldiers were reportedly killed (Grojean, 2017: 327–329). In June another clash occurred – this time PJAK's members were ambushed by the Iranian security forces. Two days later Tehran's forces clashed near a town of Oshnavieh (West Azerbaijan Province) with members of Komala (Revolutionary Workers' Society of Iranian Kurdistan) – a left-wing party established in 1969. It was reported that during this incident six IRGC soldiers, including a commander, were killed. At the same time further casualties were reported in Sarwabad (Kurdistan Province) and once again in Oshnavieh – this time they were a result of KDPI's militant activities. Armed operations were carried out also later – in November 2017 eight Iranians, including five security forces members, were reportedly killed.

It seems that in recent years, Iranian security forces have managed to back the Kurdish insurgents in a corner. They were forced to move their safe heavens to Iraq. Since 2018, when Iran used artillery against PDKI's fighters, attacked a Kurdish base in northern Iraq, and declared that some Kurdish groups were destroyed, fewer attacks recorded (*Enhedam-e*, 2018). The Islamic Republic was able to took the initiative, which was illustrated by aerial strikes carried out in September 2022, when Iran attacked an Iranian-Kurdish opposition group in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq.

Nevertheless, while an immediate terrorist threat has decreased, a crisis potential in the region remains high. After all, social, political and economic causes of public discontent have not been resolved by the government. The best evidence are large protests, which swept Iran in 2022, particularly in Kurdistan.

Khuzestan

Many of Iran's problems focus in areas inhabited by the Arab community. In his article published by *"Al Arabiya English"* Khalaf Ahmad Al Habtoor wrote about "five million Arabs struggling to survive under the Persian yoke" (*Arab Ahwaz*, 2015). Without a doubt this region is abundant of dangerous tensions: ethnic (Arabs versus Persians), religious (Sunnis versus Shi'ites), but also economic (poor peripheries versus relatively rich metropolis). At the same it is shaken by various challenges, such as an increasing problem with a water access. Khuzestan remains vulnerable to a potential penetration of third parties – such as Saudi Arabia. This region would be the most likely area of foreign land invasion in case of an open war against Iran. Currently Khuzestan, called by local Arabs either Al-Ahvaz or Arabistan, is a mix of ethnic groups and nations – Arabs, Lurs, Qashqai, Afshar, Armenians and of course Persian. The Arab population, of which roughly half are Shi'ites, has approximately 1.5 million (2% of Iran's total population).[2] The Arab language is their mother tongue, while Persian is their second language. In Khuzestan Arabs constitute roughly 34% of population. For Tehran this is one of the most strategic provinces – here a nation of Iran and its identity were born and here majority of energy industry is located (90%). Khuzestan is also important in terms of agriculture. As former IRGC Commander General Yahya Rahim Safavi said, "the Khuzestan Province is a hearth of Iran and any threat to it is at the same time a threat to the Islamic Revolution and Iranian nation" (*Tahdidat-e*, 2018).

Jasim al-Tamimi, a former member of the Iranian Parliament and the Secretary General of the Islamic Wefagh Party, who was later reportedly denied a right to participate in election, at some point became a voice of local Arab community, which draws attention to major problems, including – at least according to its narrative – brutal suppression or ethnic and political autonomy of Arabs, persecutions, Persianization,[3] discrimination, brutality of security forces, and economic poverty. Local Arab activists protest also against "Persian nationalism" and supremacy (Alahwazi, 2017). They state that "openly grotesquely racist policies, the Ahwazi people were very deliberately weakened, losing any possibility of economic and social stability. These apartheid policies of successive Iranian regimes mean that Ahwazi people are still forbidden from giving their children Arab names or from wearing Arab dress, with the ultimate goal of eradicating all Arab identity and subsuming the Ahwazi people into simply another part of the Persian nationalist whole" (Alahwazi, 2015).

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[2] Michael Segall gives a number of 3 million Arabs in Khuzestan (Segall, 2016), while according to Arab sources, there are 8–10 million Arabs living there (Alahwazi, 2015).

[3] Alireza Asgharzadeh considered this as a "colonization of a mind" (Asgharzadeh, 2007: 129–155).

This perceived exclusion and discrimination give birth to violence. For instance, between 2005–2006 Ahvaz was shaken by a series of bomb explosions. At least 25 persons were killed, while 220 were injured. In 2011, in a response to the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, local Arab population protested against the authorities. A dozen people were killed. Many were arrested, while several were sentenced to death and then reportedly executed. In 2015 some attacks against security forces were carried out. According to the Arab opposition, this was a reaction to "oppression and persecution since 1925," "Persian occupation" and Iran's "crimes" against "the Arab Ahwazi people and other non-Persians in other countries e.g. Syria, Iraq, Yemen" (*Ahwazi Arab*, 2016). In early 2017 a new wave of discontent erupted – at the beginning protesters focused on living and economic issues but very soon demonstrations became more political and openly anti-governmental. The Iranian authorities deployed additional security forces to the Khuzestan Province. Very similar events occurred in April 2018 – this time with fatalities. Other factors have contributed to unresolved political and economic issues, including increasing water scarcity, high pollution and general environmental degradation, which in turn leads to increased salinity, more frequent sandstorms and numerous shortages of electricity. According to activists from Khuzestan, problems of this kind are deliberately generated by the authorities of the Islamic Republic (Hamid, 2018; Alahwazi, 2018). Local militants attacks symbols of central authorities in Tehran – buildings of local administration, security forces and foremost energy infrastructure, including oil pipelines, which transport local crude oil to other provinces. Those attacks are aimed at weakening economic potential of the Islamic Republic and at changing Tehran's policy, which is – according to Arab separatists – "based on the elimination of the national identity of Arabs, and also to some degree, other nationalities such as the Turks, Kurds, Baluchis and Turkmen" (*Remarks of Mr. Karim Bani-Said*, 2014).

The most active group is the Mohiuddin al Nasser Martyrs Brigade, which is an armed wing of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA) – it was established in 1999. The group claim responsibility for majority of local acts of terror, including six bombs between 2005–2006. It also claimed responsibility for the 2018 Ahvaz military parade attack. It is believed that Ansar al-Furqan is also active in Khuzestan – the group has announced a formation of the Ahwaz Martyrs Brigade, allegedly responsible for bombing an oil pipeline in Ahvaz in December 2017. There are some other armed groups as well, but their status, strength, activities and relations remain unknown. These include the Free Ahwaz Brigade (*Kata'ib Ahrar al Ahwaz*); Al-Faruq Brigade (*Kata'ib al-Faruq*) allegedly responsible for attacking at least two oil pipelines; and the Hawks of Ahvaz (*Suqour al-Ahvaz*), which are believed behind a large fire that destroyed the Bu Ali Sina Petrochemical Complex at Bandar-e Mahshahr in June 2016 (*Ahvaz bombings*, 2005; *Gozaresh-e*, 2016).[4] The group later explained that it was a reaction to "Iran's repressive policy against the Arab minority in Ahvaz, including ongoing arrests, trials, executions, and expulsions of young people in the area" (Speyer, 2016).

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[4] According to the Iranian authorities, a leakage was a cause of a fire (*Nashti Dar*, 2016; *Vakonosh-e*, 2017).

The Iranian authorities claim that although some mismanagements in the Khuzestan Province actually occurred, a threat to security is rather low. According to Tehran, violence in the region is marginal and artificial – it is inspired by some "counter-revolutionary groups from Iraq, which were sent to Iran from a region, where the Americans and the British are present" (*Ahvaz bombings*, 2005; *Raeese komisine*, 2018). This public disregard of a threat turned out to be a great mistake on September 22, 2018, when four dressed in military uniform men fired upon a military parade in Ahvaz – at least 25 persons, including civilians, were killed, while 60 were wounded.[5]

While Iranian forces have managed to reduce a scale of security challenges in Kurdistan, a situation in Khuzestan remains tense. For instance, in July 2021 gunmen opened fire on a police patrol (one killed, one injured), while another group ambushed a police car (four officers were injured). In September 2022 a fire erupted at oil well. Here too, social discontent remains very high and is systematically growing. The government has not tackled any of structural causes of public anger. Tehran's reaction once again was typical – further militarization. IRGC General Safavi suggested that additional troops had to be deployed in Khuzestan since all problems in the province are inflicted by foreign countries, whose aim is to create a division between the Islamic authorities in Tehran and society (*Tahdidat-e Jadid*, 2018).

Sistan and Beluchestan

The province is located in south-eastern Iran, lying along the Gulf of Oman near the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, with a total population of roughly 3 million people. It is inhabited mainly by the Baloch people (approximately 1.8 million people living in this region, and 2% of the country's population), who live in various countries, including Pakistan (approximately 7.3 million) and Afghanistan (350,000) (Czulda, 2017: 137–152). The Baloch people might feel alienated in Iran for three reasons. First, while the majority of Iranians are Shi'ites, the Baloch people are predominantly Sunnis (approximately 10 million Sunni Iranians live in the country). Second, they do not belong to the Persian ethnic group (although they are – just like the Persians – considered as the Iranian peoples). Third, the Baloch people speak their own Baloch language. At least some members of the group feel that, in Iran, they are discriminated against in terms of religion, politics and the economy, which only makes their antipathy towards the central government in Tehran and their feeling of otherness stronger.

Beik Mohammadi calls Sistan and Balochistan "geographically isolated," as well as "one of the most deprived regions in Iran," for several reasons, including its significant distance from Tehran and other developed cities, the lack of precipitation, the desert climate, a severe shortage of crop land, soil salinity and the lack of drinking water (Mohammadi, 2006: 493, 501–503). The province is considered to be one of the least developed regions, with significant social and economic problems such as illiteracy,

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[5] A responsibility of this attack was also claimed by local Arab groups and by the so called Islamic State.

unemployment and poverty – 70% of the local population is believed to live below the poverty line (its per capita income is the lowest in Iran) and 66% of the province's population has no access to drinking water.[6] Due to its distance from urban centres, the province does not have any significant industry,[7] while its geographical location has enabled the local population (then and now) to resist central authorities and remain more affiliated to Balochs in Pakistan and Afghanistan than to other Iranian citizens.

Baloch nationalism and armed struggle are rooted deeply in the history of Balochistan – the people identify themselves "as part of an ancient tradition separate from that of Iran's Persian ethnicity" (*In depth*, 2009). and as a nation that is distinct from its neighbour's history. The Baloch independent movement was ultimately crushed by the United Kingdom and Persia; therefore, in the late-19th century, the region was divided between the United Kingdom, Persia and Afghanistan. Violence returned to the region in 1979, when fights between the Sunni Balochs and Shia Sistanis escalated into gun battles. The most recent phase of the armed struggle started in 2005, when the local insurgents joined the fight that had been carried on by their kin in Pakistan for many years. In that year, the motorcade of the then Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was ambushed. A few months later, Balochi insurgents killed 21 civilians in a road blockade. In 2007, a car bomb killed 18 members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, while, in 2009, a suicide bomber killed 43 people, including General Noor Ali Shooshtari (Deputy Commander of the IRGC's ground forces) and several other high-ranking military officials, wounding 150 others. In response, Tehran initiated a broad operation and additional police and military units were deployed to the province. Intelligence officers started a hunting operation to find and apprehend the leaders of the resistance.

Finally, in February 2010, the leader of the armed resistance, Abdolmalek Rigi, was captured. The then 27-year-old Balochi explained that the main reason behind the armed campaign was his personal traumatic experience, as well as a conviction of the discrimination and injustice perpetrated by the authorities. His main goal was, according to his own statement, to protect the local population from "despotic religious government." Tehran has a different opinion; the insurgents are considered by Iran as either "terrorists" or "the armed bandits" (*Iran Arrests 3*, 2015). Such clear-cut labels seem understandable, since local fighters attack Iranian border posts, trains, infrastructure, buildings or even Shia mosques, which are considered symbols of the Shia oppression and dominance (an explosion in 2009 killed 25 people, and a 2010 twin suicide-bomb attack left 27 dead). Despite a relative low scale of current violence, the conflict poses a real threat to Iran's internal stability and security.

During the first phase, the most important group fighting the central government was Jundallah (*"Soldiers of God"*), established in 2003. The majority of Jundallah's members recruited from Sunni religious communities and from the tribe of Abdol-

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[6] Such numbers were confirmed officially by Hamidreza Pashang, Member of the Iranian Parliament from the Sistan and Balochistan province (*Sistan Baluchistan MP*, 2015).

[7] From the economic point of view, the most strategically important area is the Chabahar port, with its free-trade zone. India is a country investing there, as it would give the country access to Afghanistan while bypassing Pakistan.

malek Rigi. Its declared goal was not the independence of a state, either secular or re-
ligious, but the fight for the rights of Sunnis in Iran (Hersh, 2008). After the group was
destroyed in 2011 by Iranian forces, its remaining members established Jaish ul-Adl
(*"Army of Justice"*), which has been continuing the armed tradition of its predeces-
sors. According to the group's own statement, it is fighting for Baloch religious and
national rights (Hussain, 2013). The first attack by this group took place in October
2013, when 14 Iranian border guards were killed and six more were injured. In the
official statement, the group explained that "this successful operation is an answer to
the violent crimes" of the IRGC in the "Islamic land of Syria and is also an answer for
oppression and crimes the regime has committed against the oppressed Sunnis of Iran"
(Karami, 2013).

Several major attacks have occurred since then, including the murder of an Iranian
prosecutor in November 2013 and an audacious attack in February 2014 when five
Iranian border guards were kidnapped and taken into Pakistan (four were freed and one
was killed). The best illustration of the scale of the problem, as well as of the determi-
nation and power of local armed cells, is an attack carried out by Jaish ul-Adl – which
remains lightly armed infantry without any heavy weaponry – in September 2014, on
a border base. In response, Iran announced that it would deploy its military aircraft
to Sistan and Balochistan to "counter outlaws and terrorist groups" (*Iran's Military*,
2014). The Iranian military also responded with a series of armed incursions into Pa-
kistani territory, as well as with a reported shelling of Balochi villages in Pakistan.
Pakistan is still being accused by Iran of failing to curb Islamist militants operating
from its soil. Moreover, Tehran repeats its threats to target terrorist bases "wherever
they are" (*Iran threatens*, 2017).

In 2018 a number of incursion of Pakistan-based militants into Iran have report-
edly increased. Several armed clashes and at least two bombs explosions – one near
Mirjaveh and one near Chabahar – were reported. In October between 10–14 IRGC
troops were ambushed, kidnapped and driven to Pakistan, where – as Frederic Grare
warns – "Islamization is currently experiencing a qualitative change […] Radicaliza-
tion is on the rise and sectarian groups have stepped up their activities in the region.
The number of sectarian killings has increased almost exponentially over the past few
years in a province traditionally known for its deeply entrenched secularism" (Grare,
2013). Hoshang Noraiee adds that "religion in Balochistan has thus become stronger
and more radicalized in the past 25 years" (Noraiee, 2008: 361–362). This will inevi-
tably impact bilateral relations and shape Iran's approach towards Pakistan. Especially
if Iran carries out its threat and once again attacks militants' sanctuaries in Pakistan,
whose commitment to solve this issue is not considered in Tehran as serious and sin-
cere (*Rais-e stadkoll-e*, 2018).

In March 2021 a vehicle belonging to IRGC was attacked, while in January 2022
Balochi militants assaulted Pakistani military post and killed at least ten soldiers. The
attackers reportedly escaped back to Iran, who was once again blamed by Islamabad.
In April 2022 gunmen opened fire on a car with Brigadier General Hossein Almassi,
an IRGC's commander. In September 2022 a police station was attacked near Zahedan.
19 people, including four IRGC's members, while 32 soldiers were wounded by uni-
dentified perpetrators.

CONCLUSIONS

Although all phenomena of armed violence in Iran are usually local with a limited nationwide impact, and they represent conflicts of low intensity, a risk of moving those tensions and violence to a higher level shall not be underestimated by the authorities of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand the Iranian security forces actually reduced a scale of the problem – particularly in Kurdistan and Khuzestan, where a number of attacks went down in recent years. On the other hand, however, socially, economically and politically Iran has becoming more and more a powder keg – with numerous overlapping and unresolved structural problems.

A warning signal for the security services of the Islamic Republic must be also a fact that at least several hundred Iranian and Iraqi Kurds have joined Jihadi militias in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. As it was already said, perpetrators of a bloody terrorist attack in Tehran in June 2017 came from the Iranian province of Kermanshah. In other words, a Sunni threat to security of both the Iranian citizens and the authorities of the Islamic Republic is real and is located within a territory of Iran. A presence of followers of the so-called Islamic States west of Iran – in Syria and Iraq – only intensifies a problem. Despite the fact that Daesh's was significantly neutralized in Syria and Iraq, Jihadi fighters remain active in various parts of the region, including in neighboring Afghanistan, where the vision of a so called Vilayet Khorasan is still alive. This, in turn, will contribute to the further destabilization of the eastern border of Iran, including the Sistan and Beluchistan Province, and will complicate relations between Iran and Pakistan even further.

Obviously, local militants – whether motivated by religion or nationalism – will never gain the strength and influence compare to those of the Taliban, who were able to conquer Kabul in 1996 and once again in 2021. Iranian anti-governmental guerillas will never be powerful enough to enter Tehran and topple the Islamic Republic. Not only they have very limited capabilities but also goals – these are mostly local. An ambition of those armed groups is not to seize power in Tehran but rather to throw off its yoke regionally. Also a coordinated cooperation among those groups, for example between the Kurds and Balochs, is not very likely. However, a violence carried out by those armed groups against central authorities might at some point become a spark, a snowball which cannot be controlled, resulting in unpredictable consequences – especially if domestic chaos is inspired and fueled by foreign countries, for whom those anti-Tehran, separatist movements are a good tool to either weaken or – in the best scenario for them – to topple the Islamic Republic. It is sufficient to mention Saddam Hussein, who followed this logic between 1979–1980, when he supported a so called Democratic Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Arabistan, responsible not only for seizing hostages in the Iranian embassy in London but most likely also for a series of attacks on the Iranian soil. Iraq itself, particularly wars in 1991 and 2003, is also a good example for Tehran – then the enemies of Saddam Hussein played Shia and Kurdish cards very efficiently against the regime in Baghdad. In case of a war against Iran, this mechanism, i.e. to support anti-governmental ethnic groups, would be used again for sure.

Such phenomena as strongly outlined ethnic, political and economic differences (particularly if they are unfavorable for minorities), a small degree of local authority and political-social participation on a province level, as well as a sense of injustice and discrimina-

tion (even if this feeling is false), create a perfect ground for political violence. As Alam Saleh noted, a complex situation is inflamed by "Tehran's reliance on the securitization of ethnic tensions, and its method of dealing with the issue through coercive measures, has led to a greater intensification of societal insecurity and, as a result, to an undermining of Iran's territorial integrity" (Saleh, 2013: 166). It pushes local groups into further militarization – for them this is a defensive reaction to the actions of the government, who in turn reacts with further securitization and militarization. As a result, neither the state nor the minorities are safer. In this regard a situation in Iran seems to be getting worse.

Open letters clearly show the scale of the problem and the fact that it is noticeable by those Iranians who are not Shi'ite Persians. For instance, one of such letters was sent by Sunni activists in October 2012 to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In August 2017 Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, a Sunni clergy residing in the Sistan and Beluchistan Province, once labelled as "a spiritual leader for Iran's Sunni minority" (Sharafedin, 2016), also sent a similar letter. An year later he sent a letter to Ali Al-Sistani, a leader of Iraqi Shi'ites. He complained about "deep discrimination" of Sunnites, including "lack of religious freedom" and "lack of access to governmental jobs for Sunnis" (*Abdolhamid Darbareh-ye*, 2018; *Gelay-ye Molavi*, 2018). He urged Al-Sistani to act as a mediator (*Abdolhamid Dar*, 2018). Leaving aside whether these accusations are true or not, Ismaeelzahi – whose the authorities reportedly several times forbade to leave Zahedan – pointy concluded that without an agreement between Sunnis and Shi'ites a lasting peace and security in the Middle East cannot be achieved. Alam Saleh was right, when he warned that "the more the state ignores ethnic expectations, the more frustrated the deprived groups become" (Saleh, 2013: 146). It can be added that at the same time it increases a crisis potential which at some point will be erupt like a volcano – with great power and at unpredictable moment.

It this context it is irrelevant whether discrimination actually occurs or not, because the very sense of alienation and discrimination is sufficient to create a belief in deep injustice and to create an above-mentioned potential of violence. Such moods can be intentionally and instrumentally fueled both by local groups, willing to gain new supporters, or by third countries. This is a very likely scenario, which is obvious when geostrategic logic and history are taken into account (Pattanayak, 2011: 37). As Rainer Bauböck noted, "a national minority that is not granted an adequate form of self-government may turn to an external homeland state for protection of its rights" (Bauböck, 2007: 101). In case of Iran such states – demiurges acting behind a stage through proxy organizations and funds – are most likely Saudi Arabia, the United States or Israel, who are keen to use every possible opportunity to strike the Islamic Republic on its sensitive spot. In an extreme form a domino effect could lead not only to the end of the Islamic Republic but even the end of Iran within the state borders that we now know.

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ABSTRACT

Although from the very beginning of its existence the Islamic Republic of Iran has been regularly accused of supporting international terrorism, including Sunni organizations, this phenomenon is also a significant and growing threat for Tehran itself. In recent years Iran has become a target for the Sunni jihadists, who have even announced that in the near future the Shi'ite regime in Tehran would collapse and the Islamic State would take over. At the same time Iran has to cope with more traditional threats, posed by ethnic separatists – mainly Arabs, Kurds and the Baloch people – as well as by the MEK (People's Mujahedin of Iran).

This paper analyzes main terrorism-related threats to contemporary Iran and to present both their causes and dynamics. The main argument of the paper is that although these challenges are mainly local (provincial), they have a potential to trigger a snowball effects and can weaken already a vulnerable stability of the Islamic Republic even further. Moreover, it is argued that decision-makers in Iran do not solve structural problems, but react with a further securitization. A risk is even higher now, when an increasing number of Iranians have become highly dissatisfied with their living conditions.

Key words: Iran, terrorism, separatism, security, Jihadism

TERRORYZM I DŻIHADYZM W ISLAMSKIEJ REPUBLICE IRANU

STRESZCZENIE

Chociaż od samego początku swojego istnienia Islamska Republika Iranu regularnie oskarżana jest o wspieranie międzynarodowego terroryzmu, w tym organizacji sunnickich, zjawisko to stanowi istotne i narastające zagrożenie również dla Teheranu. W ostatnich latach Iran stał się celem sunnickich dżihadystów, którzy ogłosili nawet, iż w najbliższej przyszłości szyicki reżim w Teheranie upadnie, a władzę przejmie Państwo Islamskie. Jednocześnie Iran musi radzić sobie także z bardziej tradycyjnymi zagrożeniami, których źródłem są etniczne separatyzmy – głównie ze strony Arabów, Kurdów i Beludżów, ale również MEK (Mudżahedinów Ludowych). Niniejszy artykuł analizuje główne zagrożenia związane z terroryzmem dla współczesnego Iranu i prezentuje zarówno ich przyczyny, jak i dynamikę. Zasadniczym stwierdzeniem artykułu jest, iż chociaż wyzwania te są głównie lokalne (prowincjonalne), to mają potencjał zainicjowania efektu śnieżnej kuli i mogą jeszcze bardziej osłabiać i tak już wrażliwą na kryzysy stabilność Republiki Islamskiej. Co więcej, uważa się, że decydenci Iranu nie rozwiązują problemów strukturalnych, lecz odpowiadają pogłębiającą się sekurytyzacją. Ryzyko staje się jeszcze większe teraz, gdy coraz większa liczba Irańczyków staje się niezadowolona z poziomu życia.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, terroryzm, separatyzm, bezpieczeństwo, dżihadyzm