

Tehran aTTacks: Da'ish surfaces in the isl amic republ ic

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On Wednesday 7th June 2017, two terrorist attacks were carried out in Tehran – one targeting the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) and the other the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, killing at least 17 people and wounding over forty. This is the first major terrorist attack since the 1980s when the ability of the home-grown Mujahidin-e Khalq to operate in the Islamic Republic was systematically curtailed to the point of non-existence. Public response from Tehran appears to be one of being stunned and of disbelief, not least because of the symbolic nature of the two attacks – the one on the mausoleum of Imam Khomeini is meant warrants being read as on the Islamic character of regime; the one on the Majlis being presumably an assault on the republican character. The attacks have been claimed by Da'ish, taking the conflict from Syria and Iraq (where they are now being battered by a large array of forces which include those from Iran) right into the heart of the Islamic Republic. For the regime in Tehran, though, the most disturbing piece of information seems to be that all the four terrorists killed and five detained down by the security forces are Iranian – exposing a vulnerability that hardly anyone had suspected in quite some time.

According to preliminary bits of sketchy information surfacing in Iranian media, it would seem that all the five neutralised terrorists were hardened by the conflict in Iraq, where they are believed to have fought on the side of Da'ish. Further, even though the full names have not been disclosed by the Iranian security establishment, it is being let out that the suspects were in all probability Iranian Sunnis. If this preliminary reading actually stands closer scrutiny, it would cause Tehran some worry in

the foreseeable future, regardless of whether there are any follow-up attacks.

Few observers would have readily suspected that the Da'ish would be able to meaningfully penetrate into the Islamic Republic. Even when it was at the height of its power in 2015-16 having established its “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, Iran appeared fairly unassailable before the Da'ish onslaught, being a country that was overwhelmingly Shi'i (90% of its population, as against 9% Sunni) – hence not presenting as many opportunities of ideological solidarity with any serious opportunities of regime change, unlike Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, etc. This was reflected in hardly any Iranian nationals being identified among Da'ish combatants, unlike from any other country in its neighbourhood. If the Iranian establishment suffered from any complacency on this count, it is now certain that it would no longer.

The Islamic Republic has only 9% of its people subscribing to Sunni Islam – and almost none known to subscribe to the *takfiri* variety of ideology purportedly pushed by Da'ish, that looks at any deviation from its own approach to Islam as nothing short of heresy (therefore punishable with death). But as in any other country where the Da'ish has managed to surface, the answer lies not so much in terms of ideological congruence (the pull factor) as in disaffection with the incumbent regime (the push factor). In that respect Tehran has vulnerabilities running along both religious and ethno-linguistic fault lines – while its ideological orientation in favour of Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ism makes the Islamic Republic of Iran not a cosy place to be Sunni (or Christian, Jewish or Baha'i), the significant preponderance of the

Persian people has caused some disaffection among ethno-linguistic groupings like the Azeris, Arabs, Afghans, Baloch, Kurds and Turkic people.

It is noteworthy that the Sunnis in Iran are concentrated in three principal ethnic and regional clusters – the Kurds in the north-west (10% of the total population), the Turkomans and Afghans in the north-east (around 3%) and the Baloch in the south-east (around 2%). Too little information is out in the public domain as yet about the perpetrators, but if existing patterns in the country's politics are anything to go by, it is unlikely that the largest among the disaffected Sunni population in Iran, the Kurds, would look towards the Da'ish in Iran while fellow Kurds are fighting them hard in Iraq and even in Syria. Although lone wolf activities are always possible, the chances of any Sunni Kurdish group crossing the floor towards Da'ish can be ruled out with some degree of certitude. Additionally, neither the Turkoman nor the Afghan components of the Iranian population are known to have insurgent or refractory tendencies despite their major grievances against the Islamic Republic and how it has treated them.

The Baloch, however, are quite a different matter. Concentrated in the province of Seistan wa Balochstan, the Baloch people of Iran have been pushed progressively to the margins of society and economy in their part of the country all through the 20th century. Even after the Islamic Republic toppled the Pahlavi monarchy, the Baloch have felt continually marginalized – hence laying the foundations of what has now emerged as a potentially secessionist Baloch nationalism, often working in tandem with their counterparts in Pakistan. Tehran has fuelled this sense of Baloch disgruntlement by encouraging large numbers of non-Baloch people in the province, especially in the urban conurbation of Zahedan.

There are no definite leads yet about whether some Baloch individuals or groups are behind

the terrorist outrage in Tehran. However, if there is any fertile ground on which an organisation like the Da'ish could feed upon in the Islamic Republic, the likelihood of their approaching the Baloch are much higher than any other single group. And the inverse is also true – of all the segments of the Iranian population disgruntled with the Islamic Republic, the Baloch nationalists are the most likely group who might want to be roped in by the Da'ish. So far as the Da'ish is concerned, having a disgruntled group inside the Islamic Republic carry out terrorist outrages is meant as a kind of payback for Iranian involvement in Syria and Iraq; for the Baloch, any financial or logistical support from outside would shore up a cause that has not had any remarkable success, therefore little traction financially or politically.

A final word by way of a non-sequitur. The rise of the spectre of Da'ish in Iran might strengthen the hands of the more hard-line elements in the Iranian regime, whose involvement in Syria and Iraq the reformist President Rouhani was aiming at reducing. The hardliners are likely now to press for even greater involvement in a bid to weaken the Da'ish in its "home turf." The Da'ish may thus actually have undermined itself by opening a second front against Tehran inside Iran. However, any hard-line taken against the Baloch question at home in Iran may push a disgruntled group of people over the edge towards insurgency. Whether the Islamic Republic now cracks down hard on Baloch nationalism behind the smokescreen of "terrorism," or chooses to continue to give its people the air of a stable and unflappable establishment (as evident from the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei's dismissal of the outrages as mere fireworks) would determine how Baloch nationalism would fare in the short to medium terms.

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