

Iranian Regime Arrests Top Sunni Militant Leader

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The short video shown on Iranian state-run TV was dramatic. It showed masked Iranian security men boarding what appeared to be a private jet on Tuesday morning, and arresting one of the most hunted opposition leaders in Iran, Sunni militant leader Abdulmalik Rigi.

Rigi is the leader of Jundollah, aka the People's Resistance Movement of Iran, a Balouchi group operating in southeastern Iran along the border of Pakistan that has launched violent attacks against Iranian Revolutionary Guards convoys and other government officials. The Iranian regime calls him a "notorious terrorist" and claims he is receiving support from the United States.

According to the regime's English-language network, Press TV, Rigi was arrested "in one of Iran's southern ports" when his jet was forced to land while taking him from Kyrgyzstan to Dubai.

But the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting network said he was "caught abroad and brought to the country on Tuesday morning," suggesting that the footage was not of Rigi's own plane but of a government plane sent to pick him up somewhere else.

Sources close to Jundollah tell Newsmax that Rigi "made a mistake to go to Afghanistan," where regime agents were tailing him and eventually tracked him down. Press TV alleged that he was caught "in possession of a U.S.-issued forged Afghan passport," and had visited a "U.S. base in Afghanistan 24 hours before his capture."

On its Web site, Jundollah claimed that the United States gave the Iranian regime intelligence on Rigi's flight that allowed the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force to force his plane to land while overflying Iran en route from Kyrgyzstan to Dubai.

"If it turns out there was cooperation between the United States and the Iranian regime for the arrest of Rigi, then all of the opposition is in danger," said Roozbeh Farahanipour, the leader of Marzapor Gohar, a secular opposition group that is calling for regime change through a national nonviolent protest movement.

Like many Iranian opposition leaders, Farahanipour fled Iran and now lives as a political refugee in the United States. "If this is true, then I and other opposition leaders could be deported," he told Newsmax.

Iranian intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi claimed that he had a photograph of Rigi visiting a U.S. base in Afghanistan just 24 hours before his capture, and alleged that Rigi had met with the NATO military chief in Afghanistan in April 2008.

A spokesman for U.S. Central Command called those allegations "Iranian propaganda," and said that claims the United States had provided support to Jundollah were "patently false."

Jundollah first came onto the scene in 2003 and has made a number of high-profile attacks on Iranian security forces in Iranian Balouchistan. Many of the attacks were extremely bloody.

The Balouchi minority in Iran is predominantly Sunni Muslim, and has endured religious, economic and political persecution from the very start of the Islamic Republic in 1979. For example, although there are close to 1 million Sunni Muslims living in Tehran, the regime has never given them a permit to build a single mosque.

Young Balouchis are not allowed to attend university and are barred from government jobs. "The only thing we ask of the Iranian government is to be treated as citizens," Rigi told an interview on Al-Arabiya TV in October 2008. "We want to have the same rights as the Iranian Shiite people. That's it."

Amanollah Khan Rigi is a distant relative of the Jundollah leader who lives in the United States. He doubted that the arrest would have much impact on the movement or the grievances of young Balouchis.

"There are many other Abdulmaliks," he told Newsmax. "This revolt will go on until the regime changes its policies. It's not just in Balouchistan. Look how many people they have killed in Tehran. It's going on all over Iran."

The Jundollah Web site states that Abdulmalik Rigi had been speaking with government intermediaries in recent weeks, to negotiate some kind of truce in Balouchistan. "If you kill us with guns, we will kill you with guns," he reportedly told them. "If you treat us as a civil group, we will put down our arms and behave as a civil group."

"He is viewed as a hero in Balouchistan," Amanollah Khan Rigi said of his relative.

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