Trouble on all fronts: Iran shoots refugees, deports millions, and builds border wall

written by Elie Klutstein | 30.10.2024

On Saturday night, amid a large-scale aerial strike by the Israeli military on Iranian targets, the Iranian regime faced another attack on its forces. Though the incident was relatively contained, the number of Iranian casualties reportedly exceeded those from the Israeli strikes.

Ten Iranian border guards were killed in an assault in Sistan and Baluchestan province. According to Iranian claims, these border guards died in combat on a local road against members of Jaish ul-Adl (Army of Justice), a Sunni terrorist group seeking independence for the Baluchi minority. This organization frequently ambushes and plants explosives targeting Iranian and Pakistani security forces.

Sistan and Baluchestan is a persistent trouble spot within Iran, a hotspot of internal conflicts. Just a week before, the area made headlines due to a violent incident in which hundreds of people were killed: Iranian border guards reportedly opened fire on Afghan refugees attempting to cross from Pakistan into Iran, killing approximately 250 people, according to reports.

Initially, Iran denied the incident's occurrence, which had been reported by local human rights organizations. Yet afterwards, Tehran's ambassador to Kabul stated that taking "lawful" action against illegal entry is a legitimate right of all nations, and that border guards are mandated to prevent the entry of unauthorized foreigners. Given that the casualties were Afghan citizens, the Taliban government in Kabul launched an investigation, and the United Nations also sought to look into the incident. UN special rapporteur for human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, expressed concern about its implications.

These two events highlight some of Iran's challenges along its eastern border, particularly at the tri-border area with Afghanistan and Pakistan. This isn't the first incident of Iranian border guards opening fire on refugees trying to cross the border this month. Tehran doesn't publicize these incidents, often denying them

outright, but various reports indicate that at least 13 migrants were killed along the border, in this exact same area.

The issue of Afghan refugees is a sensitive one in Iran. Many have fled Taliban rule in recent years, with estimates suggesting over a million have entered Iran since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Overall, Iran claims to host around six million Afghan refugees, many of whom have escaped war, poverty, and hardship over decades. Even the UN refugee agency estimates about four million Afghans are currently in Iran.

These refugees place a significant strain on Iran, whose economy is already burdened by international sanctions and struggling with internal challenges. Iran also diverts substantial resources to support armed militias and terrorist organizations across the Middle East and beyond. This international support strains local resources, especially with the added burden of feeding millions more.

To address the refugee issue, Iran is not only taking border measures against migrants but actively deporting refugees back to Afghanistan. Reports indicate that only in September, Iran expelled over 100,000 people. Many refugees report being beaten, denied basic access to food and water, and detained in special camps by Iranian authorities.

Taliban officials claim that since the beginning of the year, nearly half a million refugees have entered Afghanistan from Iran, with the rate increasing. Iran has now set an ambitious target to deport two million undocumented Afghan refugees within six months.

However, Iran is not alone in this approach. Both Turkey and Pakistan are also expelling Afghan refugees despite the humanitarian consequences and global outcry. Concerns over the dangers awaiting these refugees back in Afghanistan—economic hardship and potential Taliban persecution—haven't deterred authorities in Tehran, Ankara, or Islamabad from taking these measures. Iran's planned mass deportation program is moving forward, forcibly sending refugees back without judicial oversight or international intervention.

Regional conflict with Pakistan

In the border regions with Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran also faces threats from ethnic separatist movements like the one responsible for killing Iranian border

guards on Saturday.

The Jaish ul-Adl terrorists represent Iran's Baluchi minority, around three percent of the country's population. Alongside Kurds, Sunni Baluchis are among the most persecuted minorities in Iran, which is governed by a Shiite majority. They live in Sistan and Baluchestan in severe poverty, with high unemployment and limited access to basic infrastructure and essential resources such as food and water. Many locals turn to smuggling goods, such as fuel or food, and some are involved in drug trafficking. The conditions in this region have been likened to certain impoverished areas in Africa.

Jaish ul-Adl is perhaps the primary voice of Baluchi dissent and terrorism within Iran. Tehran accuses Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in supporting the organization, with hints of Israeli backing as well. This organization has a bloody history with Iranian security forces: in 2019, for example, Jaish ul-Adl killed 13 officers of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Zahedan, following up with other attacks on Iranian targets.

As recently as September, the group claimed responsibility for two attacks on Iranian police, killing three people. In June, they kidnapped nine individuals linked to the Revolutionary Guards, and in April, they carried out five coordinated attacks on Iranian military bases and other sites.

These escalations prompted Iran to intensify its response. The Iranian military launched drones and missiles into Pakistani territory, targeting what it claimed were extremist training camps linked to Israel. In retaliation, Pakistan carried out a nearly identical strike on Iranian "terrorist targets," resulting in seven Iranian deaths.

This confrontation led to diplomatic repercussions: Pakistan expelled the Iranian ambassador and withdrew its own representative from Tehran, temporarily downgrading relations. Ten days later, however, the crisis was resolved, with both countries restoring diplomatic ties, and Pakistan even inviting Iran's then-Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian for a visit.

Despite this, the diplomatic incident doesn't appear to have soured Pakistan's overall stance towards Iran. Following Israel's airstrikes on Iranian targets, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry issued a harsh condemnation, accusing Israel of full responsibility for escalating regional tensions.

A broader regional and global trend

After its unsuccessful efforts to stem terrorism or mass migration from Afghanistan through attacks on its neighbors, Iran is now taking another approach. Since mid-month, Iran has resorted to crackdowns on refugees and initiated the construction of physical barriers to control its border.

The new initiative began last January, when Iran started building a border fence, wall, and other obstacles along its long eastern border. The project began in Baluchestan with a four-meter-high wall spanning 300 kilometers of Iran's vast border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. The plan aims to cover 1,000 kilometers on each border, with Iran spending an estimated $3 billion on construction, expected to be completed within three years.

According to Iranian military officials, the wall aims to control border crossings and stop Afghan refugees from entering. Commentators suggest that the wall represents a shift in Iran's security strategy, emphasizing defensive measures to manage cross-border threats without escalating to open conflicts, as seen in its recent clashes with Pakistan.

This trend of constructing physical barriers aligns with similar measures worldwide. While modern threats like drones or rockets often bypass physical defenses, walls still provide protection against terrorism, illegal migration, and trafficking. Pakistan, for instance, is considering similar initiatives along its borders with Iran, just as it has along its Afghan border.

Though countries like Israel and the US have faced criticism for building such barriers, this trend continues to grow globally. Despite high costs, walls help control sprawling borders and prevent crises from escalating into broader conflicts.

This situation also underscores Iran's need to manage threats on multiple fronts beyond its ongoing tensions with Israel, including resource demands on defense, personnel, and weapons. Iran recently announced a 200% increase in its defense budget—a huge rise reflecting the complex priorities it must balance amid escalating international sanctions and its nuclear ambitions. With rising pressures, Tehran may soon need to make strategic choices on its long-term focus and capabilities.

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