



National Council of Resistance of Iran
U.S. Representative Office

Iran Protests Briefs

Saravan Uprising

April 2021

Saravan and other Cities in Sistan-Baluchistan Province Erupt in Anti-regime Protests

OVERVIEW

In late February, major protests broke out against the ruling regime in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. The protests erupted in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and demonstrated the society's simmering discontent about the status quo. In recent months, retirees, nurses, laborers, and many other social sectors have constantly risen up to protest against the dire circumstances in Iran.

The immediate cause of the protests in Sistan-Baluchistan was the killing of at least ten impoverished fuel porters by the Iranian regime's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). However, the demonstrations bore the hallmarks of other anti-regime demonstrations, with protesters calling for the mullahs' overthrow.

These protests were not unique and are linked with the broader picture. Like many other areas in Iran, Sistan-Baluchistan is severely impoverished. Ethnic and religious minorities suffer from a gruelling intersection of double discrimination. The situation in this province is a function of the regime's overall domestic and foreign policies, which have been detrimental to average Iranians. The dire economic circumstances compounded by the regime's unbridled corruption, disastrous economic and domestic policies, and brutal oppression, have put more uprisings and popular protests on the horizon, spelling additional domestic threats for the theocratic rulers in the days and months to come.



Impoverished Saravan fuel carriers are block by the IRGC suppressive forces near border with Pakistan.



Saravan is an impoverished city in the southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan Province.

Much like the November 2019 protests nationwide, when the regime killed 1,500 demonstrators, during the Sistan-Baluchistan protests, angry locals stormed IRGC bases and the governor's office. Dozens of people were killed and more wounded, drawing condemnations from the United Nations and international human rights organizations like Amnesty International. The regime also cut access to the internet in the area to more freely suppress the population. Also similar to November 2019, the

protests appeared to have a pronounced organized dimension, which the regime blamed on the main opposition for leading and strengthening them.

The situation of ethnic and religious minorities is a microcosm of the disastrous circumstances in Iran writ large. The Sistan-Baluchistan protests put on display once again both Iranian society's explosive state and also the regime's growing weakness and trepidation in the face of mounting domestic threats.

2021 PROTESTS

The nationwide uprisings in 2018, 2019 and 2020 have shocked the regime, which did not anticipate such powerful eruptions of social rage. As the economic situation worsens by the day, the population moves closer to further eruptions. The regime knows that the only way to prevent another major uprising is through complete and absolute suppression. Yet new outbreaks are taking place in 2021, and more are almost certain to break out, promising to weaken the regime even more.

The Tehran regime's economic mismanagement and institutionalized and rampant corruption levels have devastated the country. Iran consistently ranks among the most corrupt countries on earth, 149 out of 180 countries listed on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index for 2020.¹ Mismanagement, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, have hit the Iranian economy hard, marking one of the deepest recessions in its history.

At least 60 million Iranians (70%) [live below](#) the poverty line.² The currency has [lost](#) half its value in 2020 alone.³ The purchasing power of each Iranian rial has [decreased](#) by about one-third compared to 2011.⁴ Even government sources say that inflation is over 50%. And by March, the [death toll](#) of the coronavirus pandemic is nearing a staggering 240,000, according to opposition tallies.⁵ All this plus deep-seated and endemic corruption and mismanagement have left the economy teetering on the edge of collapse.



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poor traders and porters, killing and injuring many of them in the process.⁸ The IRGC is especially involved in the drug trade, with even the [US Treasury](#) taking notice and designating its Qods Force commanders for overseeing trafficking throughout Iran.⁹



Saravan residents set a suppressive security force's car on fire.

This overall situation has been worsened by the regime's suppressive policies in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan. An official in the Supreme Council of Provinces (SCP) [said](#), in this province, some "people have not seen a piece of meat for months and feed themselves with pieces of dried stale bread."⁶ Many people have found the only source of income to be trading fuel. They carry fuel from Iran to neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷ The IRGC, which controls 90 of Iran's 212 official ports of entry and exploits this advantage to [dominate smuggling](#), routinely suppresses and shoots these

The IRGC and regime factions want to control the fuel trade as well. A regime analyst [says](#), “In the smuggling operations of mafia gangs, 100 trucks cross the border with official warrants.”¹⁰ They smuggle 10-15 million liters of fuel every day, the value of which is so great that “if 50 percent of it is curtailed, it would give the county’s economy a yearly \$6 billion boost.”¹¹ For many of the poor people of this region, trading fuel has become the only source of income to put food on the table for their families.

When the IRGC killed a number of these porters in February, on February 22 and 23, 2021, despite the heavy presence of the IRGC forces, protesters [attacked](#) the regime’s centers of corruption and suppression in Saravan. The regime’s security forces opened fire on unarmed civilians, killing and injuring dozens of them. On March 5, the United Nations condemned the killing of at least 23 people.¹²

[According to the United Nations](#), the protests “began on 22 February, when Revolutionary Guards are alleged to have shot and killed at least 10 fuel couriers, known as sookhtbar, in Sistan and Baluchistan Province at the border with Pakistan, after a two-day stand-off triggered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ blocking the road to the city of Saravan.”¹³ The killings triggered demonstrations in several cities across the province, during which the IRGC and security forces fired lethal ammunition at protesters and bystanders.”¹⁴



Over 50 protesters were murdered by the IRGC and other state’s suppressive forces.

Protests continued on February 23. The residents of Keshtegan village from the Bam-Posht district held a rally in front of the IRGC base. [According](#) to the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the IRGC forces opened fire on protesters, killing over 40, and wounding a hundred.¹⁵ The regime cut off or disrupted Saravan’s internet to prevent the news of the uprising from spreading.¹⁶ Previously, during the [nationwide uprising](#) in November 2019, the regime also cut off internet access for most of the country, thereby providing itself the cover for direct IRGC attacks against protesters, which left an estimated [1,500 people dead](#).¹⁷

On [Wednesday](#), February 24, in the Korin-Sarjangal area of Zahedan, the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan Province, people poured into the streets and targeted the local IRGC base.¹⁸ After blocking the road leading to the base, they set fire to several IRGC vehicles. The regime’s forces opened fire on a group of protesters [on Thursday](#), February 25, in Zahedan, and the IRGC’s helicopters were flying over the city, trying to intimidate the public.¹⁹ Yet, Baluchi locals closed the Jask – Chabahar highway and continued their protests.



Saravan resident attack government centers responsible for murder of protesters.

Despite the [heavy presence](#) of the regime’s security forces, young protesters set fire to the IRGC headquarters in Suran county on Thursday night.²⁰ [On February 26](#), locals in Zahedan closed the streets in Khomeini Square at the city entrance.²¹ Simultaneously, the people in Asadabad in Iranshahr [blocked](#) the roads by burning tires to prevent the IRGC and the State Security Force’s entry.²²

On [Saturday](#), February 27, the protests continued. Locals blocked the Zahak transit highway in Zabul to prevent the

repressive forces' movement.²³ They were chanting, “Down with [regime’s Supreme Leader Ali] Khamenei, down with the IRGC.” The regime has arrested hundreds of Baluchi youths and deployed its border Security Force at Saravan’s intersections to prevent protests.

Officials and state-run media outlets were quick to blame the organized democratic opposition Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) for inciting and organizing the anti-regime protests. MEK supporters and Resistance Units inside Iran sent [numerous messages of solidarity](#) with the Baluchi people.²⁴ Simultaneously MEK supporters abroad held several rallies, echoing their voices around the world.



Resistance Units, the domestic network of the MEK, attached posters and handwritten slogans in various cities supporting the Sistan-Baluchistan protesters.

Resistance Units, the domestic network of the MEK, [attached posters and handwritten](#) slogans in various cities supporting the Sistan-Baluchistan protesters.²⁵ The Resistance Units [organized](#) a vast series of activities in Tehran, Tabriz, Kermanshah, Karaj, Qazvin, Kazerun, Sanandaj, and Borujen, in support of the anti-regime protests in Sistan-Baluchistan.²⁶ They wrote graffiti with the slogans “Saravan is not alone,” “Hail to the brave people of Saravan,” “The mullahs will pay for shedding the blood of the brave people of Saravan,” and “Down with the mullahs’ regime; we support Saravan.”



Maryam Rajavi, NCRI President-elect, hails the courageous Baluchi protesters.

Maryam Rajavi, the president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), hailed the courageous Baluchi protesters. “The uprising of our Baluchi compatriots belongs to all the people of Iran,” Madam Rajavi [tweeted](#), and called on all youths to support the people of Sistan and Baluchistan.²⁷ In Tehran, Resistance Units installed two huge posters echoing the solidarity message of Maryam Rajavi. The activities of the MEK Resistance Units and the main opposition TV channel, Simay Azadi ([Iran NTV](#)), served to connect the Baluchi protests to the wider national uprisings.²⁸

Sobh Sadegh magazine, the official outlet of the IRGC's political deputy, wrote on February 27: "Simultaneous with the events in Saravan, the hashtags 'Saravan,' 'Saravan is not alone,' and 'Bloody Saravan' were shared by some Twitter users, including the MEK leaders. Persian-language media also reported the hashtags."

"The MEK," it added, "is trying to spread these protests in other parts of the country and identify the IRGC as the Baluchi people's economic rival. These are just one aspect of the actions of the [MEK] during the Saravan incident."

Also, on March 3, the state-run *Boultan* news wrote: "The MEK has concluded that due to the increasing influence of Instagram in Iran, they can communicate with Instagram influencers in any way they can and pursue their goals. More than 2,000 MEK members in Albania are trying to pump up rumors and fake news inside Iran."



On March 2, Amnesty International [issued](#) a statement condemning the killing of protesters and calling for an investigation. Testimony from eyewitnesses and victims' families, coupled with video footage geolocated and verified by the organization's Crisis Evidence Lab, confirms that on that day, Revolutionary Guards, stationed at Shamsar military base, used live ammunition against a group of unarmed fuel porters from Iran's impoverished Baluchi minority causing several deaths and injuries. "By opening fire on a group of unarmed people, Iranian security forces have displayed a callous disregard for human life," said Diana Eltahawy, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The recent Sistan-Baluchistan protests put on display - yet again - Iranian society's explosive state and how a spark can trigger the outpouring of widespread anti-regime sentiments and anger. They followed major uprisings in 2019 and 2020 and happen in the midst of other acts of protests by nurses and retirees. Now, it seems every year the regime faces major social upheavals. Which is why Tehran is scrambling to get a deal with the new US administration, fearing that its days are numbered. It tries to cover up its significant domestic weaknesses with empty rhetoric and hollow shows of force. In reality, however, the regime is a glasshouse with cracks surfacing all over its crumbling edifice.

Other characteristics of the recent protests include:

- The protests showed that the regime is weak and the economy is on the verge of collapse;
- The outburst of public anger, which was on vivid display in November 2019, cannot be suppressed, not even during a global pandemic;
- The public targeted the regime's centers of suppression, corruption and theft and demonstrated that they seek regime change;
- Protests rapidly spread across the province, demonstrating the public's readiness to show their rage toward the entire ruling regime and all its factions;
- The uprising received social support from the Iranian people, with some businesses going on strike in solidarity with the uprising;
- The protests were organized and linked to other uprisings around Iran through the broad network of the opposition MEK's Resistance Units;

- Despite its hollow shows of force, the regime's local oppressive forces are not able to control the situation. The regime had to send forces from other cities, revealing its mobilization crisis in the face of a more widespread uprising.

BACKGROUND ON IRAN'S NEGLECTED PROVINCE



Sistan-Baluchistan is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped of Iran's 31 provinces.

Sistan-Baluchistan is situated in the southeast corner of Iran. The province is home to approximately 2.5 to 3 million people. It is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped of Iran's 31 provinces.³⁰ In addition to the regime's overall suppression and crimes against humanity against the Iranian people, most of the residents suffer from acute discrimination for being part of an ethnic and also a religious (Sunni) minority.

Despite the region's strategic position and proximity to potentially lucrative trade routes as well as its extraordinary natural resources and untapped mineral deposits, Baluchi communities are exceptionally impoverished, and their lives worsened by the brutal oppression.

The people of the province live in shocking conditions. For example, a parliamentary deputy, Alim Yar Mohammadi, himself a regime puppet, had to admit in 2018 that 75% of the province's population was struggling with food poverty.³¹ "The people of this province's villages don't have adequate drinking water or even bread. By any standards they are living in deplorable conditions. ... Even in the city of Zahedan more than 350,000 people are suffering from a shortage of running water, and water trucks provide for many parts of the city," Yar Mohammadi said.

There is an astonishing under-provision of basic infrastructure in many parts of Iran. Services like roads, education, health care, [drinking water](#), among many others, are also lacking, which has essentially meant that Sistan-Baluchistan has been completely neglected by the regime. Regime authorities have confessed that the amount of water available in some rural areas of the province is only enough to "keep people alive", while in some cases, people are forced to drink water from large ditches used by animals.³² An estimated two thirds of the province lacks access to clean drinking water.³³



Poverty-stricken residents of Sistan-Baluchistan Province rely on jobs like carrying fuel to survive. They are frequently suppressed by the security forces.

Unemployment rates are drastic. As of May 2020, in some parts of the region, unemployment reaches some of the highest levels in the world, ranging between 40% to 60%, based on the regime's own [engineered data](#).³⁴ According to the regime's own [media outlets](#), the situation in Sistan-Baluchistan is "bitter" and "shocking:" There are "no factories" in the province. "Unemployment has forced young people in most cities and villages to turn to drugs," "cemeteries are full of

drug-addicted youth," and "hungry kids have no energy to study."³⁵ According to the state-run *Mostaghel* daily, "The border provinces of Iran are under special security supervision due to their Sunni communities. Border provinces, like the suburbs of large cities, suffer from poverty. ... These provinces have been literally eliminated from the country's industry and trade spheres."³⁶ According to the regime's statistics, out of the top 20 Iranian cities with the highest unemployment rates, 18 are in Arab, Kurdish and Baluchi areas.³⁷



The Saravan protests bore the hallmarks of other anti-regime demonstrations, with protesters calling for the mullahs' overthrow.

Sistan-Baluchistan has the lowest literacy rate in the country.³⁸ Dropout rates for girls are reportedly 60 per cent by the fifth grade level.³⁹ State media [report](#) that at least 120,000 girls and boys in the province were deprived of education due to poverty in 2018.⁴⁰ The province has the [lowest](#) life expectancy in Iran, according to state data.⁴¹ Contributing to this is the under-provision of health clinics.⁴² It has also ranked among the world's [most polluted](#), according to the World Health Organization.⁴³

Many Baluchi citizens are essentially stateless, do not possess any government-issued documentation and are automatically deprived of even the minimally provisioned government services. Without proof of citizenship, they face barriers to accessing social assistance and public services such as health care and education.⁴⁴ They also cannot obtain water, electricity or telephone services.⁴⁵ According to the regime's state media, there are tens of thousands of people currently living in this situation.⁴⁶

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About NCRI-US

The National Council of Resistance of Iran-US Representative Office (NCRI-US) acts as the Washington office for Iran's parliament-in-exile, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which is dedicated to the establishment of a democratic, secular, non-nuclear republic in Iran. NCRI-US, registered as a non-profit tax-exempt organization, has been instrumental in exposing the nuclear weapons program of Iran, including the sites in Natanz, and Arak, the biological and chemical weapons program of Iran, as well as its ambitious ballistic missile program. NCRI-US has also exposed the terrorist network of the regime, including its involvement in the bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the Jewish Community Center in Argentina, its fueling of sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria, and its malign activities in other parts of the Middle East. Our office has provided information on the human rights violations in Iran, extensive anti-government demonstrations, and the movement for democratic change in Iran.