


ROUND TABLE

The Security-Development Nexus and the Jina Mahsa Amini Protests in Iran's Border Provinces

Eric Lob 

Florida International University, Miami, United States
Email: elob@fiu.edu

(Received 21 January 2024; accepted 21 January 2024)

Even before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran's border provinces, which contain Arabs, Azeri Turks, Baluch, Kurds, and Turkmen, were marginalized and securitized by the state. These processes and outcomes have created a vicious cycle and self-fulfilling prophecy within the context of the so-called security-development nexus. Iran's peripheral provinces border Iraq and Turkey in the west and Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east. They are located far from Tehran in the inaccessible and inhospitable terrain and climate of mountains and deserts. This geography and topography partially explain why these provinces have been traditionally neglected by the state. Beyond the geographic remoteness and topographic inaccessibility of these provinces, their ethno-religious demographics and marginalization-based grievances, including those that existed during the shah's industrial and urban-focused development drive before the revolution, have fostered local opposition to the state. Most recently, between 2022 and 2023, this opposition has culminated in the Jina Mahsa Amini or Woman, Life, Freedom protests.

The Security-Development Nexus in the Border Provinces

Due to historic distrust and neglect by the state, and compared to Iran's Persian-majority provinces in the center of the country, the peripheral provinces along its borders remain relatively underdeveloped and impoverished. Since the revolution, and due in large part to the efforts of the Islamic Republic's different planning and development organizations such as Construction Jihad, the per capita income and standard of living in all these provinces have improved in absolute terms. Despite these improvements, the development gap between the border and central provinces has not diminished. The same border provinces that have historically ranked low in development are still among the lowest. The provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan (which contain sizable Sunni populations) ranked low, if not lowest, in oil and non-oil per capita income and relative United Nations Human Development Index scores, as of 2015.¹ West Azerbaijan contains Kurdish cities and villages that are presumably poorer and less developed than their Azeri Turkish counterparts.

Additionally, the border provinces have suffered from higher rates of multidimensional poverty, which includes factors other than income, in both urban and rural areas. These rates significantly exceed the national average.² This trend particularly applies to Sistan

¹ Khalaj and Yousefi, "Pahnihbandī-i tawzī'."

² 'Ala'i, "Nishānih."

and Baluchestan and Kurdistan and their female-headed or single-parent households, which as of 2015 had the highest overall and rural poverty rates in the country.³ The multidimensional poverty rankings reveal that the border provinces suffer deficits in many areas that have adversely affected quality of life. These deficits include urban and rural poverty in the areas of employment, education, health, housing, and income. Overall, poverty is widespread in all areas of these provinces, and the negative development and economic situation has necessitated a large-scale intervention by the state to support industry, generate jobs, and raise incomes that has not been fully forthcoming.

The development and income disparities of the border provinces have not been ignored by the state. Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic and its various government planning and development organizations have documented this trend. They also have consistently declared reducing these disparities by improving development and eradicating poverty in peripheral and rural regions a national priority. The latter has been repeatedly stated in the government's five-year development plans since they were first introduced in 1989.⁴ Beyond rhetoric, government organizations have dedicated substantial resources toward advancing these goals. However, due to political and institutional factors, the government's stated priorities have not necessarily translated into tangible and sensible policies that have substantially narrowed these disparities. Peripheral development has not only been intended to bolster the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and deliver on its populist promises to help the deprived (*mahrumin*) and oppressed (*mostaz'afin*). It also has represented an attempt to appease the restless border provinces, which have traditionally been marginalized and have populations who assert nationalist and separatist claims.

Over the years, the Islamic Republic has faced several types of security threats and challenges on its eastern and western borders. These existed even before the revolution. The threats and challenges have periodically materialized as cross-border infiltrations and violent clashes between Iranian security forces and militant groups, including ethnic separatists, Sunni extremists, human traffickers, and weapons and drug smugglers. Iran's rising geopolitical tensions with the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council states have directly impacted its security in these areas due to the military and financial support that these adversaries have purportedly provided to these groups. Regardless of the extent to which this external interference may exist, Tehran has deliberately portrayed the security dilemma in the border provinces as a problem of foreign meddling, to promote and strengthen national unity, downplay internal ethnic and sectarian tensions, and deflect attention away from the role that the state has played in creating and exacerbating these issues before and after the revolution.

Underdevelopment and poverty aside, the border provinces' ethno-religious composition, transnational connections, irredentist claims, and porous boundaries have contributed to the emergence and proliferation of local movements and militias that employ political violence to advance and achieve their goals. In addition to its concerns surrounding ethnic separatism, the Islamic Republic's political and security establishment has become increasingly apprehensive about al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other transnational, militant Sunni groups who consider Shi'a to be heretics. These groups received widespread attention in 2017 after the ISIS-claimed attacks on the Iranian parliament and Khomeini's mausoleum in Tehran. These attacks led to the arrests of Iranian Kurdish and Azeri Turkish citizens from the country's western border provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan. The arrests were followed by an attack on a military parade in Ahvaz, Khuzestan, in 2018. They provoked an intense debate in the government and media on the ostensible connection between the poor socioeconomic conditions of the border provinces and the willingness of some of their youth and other residents to join and support violent extremist groups.

³ Khalaj and Yousefi, "Pahnihbandi-i tawzi'."

⁴ Ghaderi, Taghvaei, and Shafaghi, "An Analysis."

In response to these real and perceived threats in the border provinces, the Islamic Republic has subjected them to heightened securitization. Even before the revolution under the shah, this scenario existed in these provinces, and the gendarmeries established a large presence. Between 1979 and 1982, when political agitation and armed rebellion erupted and intensified in the provinces, which felt increasingly marginalized by the Persian and Shi'i-centric state, the IRGC forcefully intervened on the side of the local gendarmeries and police by arresting suspected counterrevolutionaries, confiscating weapons, and clashing with rebel groups.⁵ During this period, Construction Jihad delivered development projects and services to these provinces to help subdue them.⁶ Although the Islamic Republic quelled the initial unrest, the latter quickly reappeared in these provinces as the division of labor between security and development narrowed. This trend became particularly pronounced during the reformist and centrist presidencies of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021). In spite of their efforts to restrain the political and economic ambitions of the IRGC, it infiltrated government development organizations like Construction Mobilization.⁷ The IRGC also implemented development projects in the border provinces through its Progress and Development Headquarters.⁸ Beyond development, the IRGC maintained and expanded its security presence by opening bases in these provinces to conduct military operations inside and across their borders.⁹

The Jina Mahsa Amini Protests in the Border Provinces

In the border provinces, the popular discontent surrounding relative underdevelopment and impoverishment has been exacerbated by numerous real and perceived grievances toward the state that transcend economics or greed. They include the forced relocation and ethnic redistribution of minority populations; attempts to persuade religious minorities to convert to Shi'ism and pledge allegiance to the supreme leader; legal restrictions on non-Shi'a in employment, education, and other domains of civic life; and other forms of political, social, religious, cultural, linguistic, and legal discrimination. These grievances have not only fueled political violence, but also civil disobedience and passive resistance. They culminated in the Jina Mahsa Amini or Woman, Life, Freedom (a popular Kurdish slogan) protests that started in Kurdistan and spread to other parts of Iran in 2022. During the protests, out of a total of 537 reported casualties as of April 4, 2023, Sistan and Baluchestan (134), Kurdistan (57), and West Azerbaijan (56), alongside Tehran (69), sustained the highest numbers.¹⁰ It should be noted that the casualties in West Azerbaijan were disproportionately Kurdish. In all three provinces, their casualties were the consequence of greater protest participation and state repression.

Compared with the Persian-majority provinces in the center of the country, the ethnic-minority ones along the periphery participated more in the Jina Mahsa Amini or Woman, Life, Freedom protests, for a longer period. The trigger for this participation was the fact that Jina Mahsa Amini was a 22-year-old woman of Kurdish descent who had died after being detained by the morality police on accusations of improperly wearing the hijab. The injustice and outrage surrounding her death deeply resonated with Iran's Kurds, Baluch, and other ethnic groups, especially among their women and youth. As an underlying cause, their emotions and actions were aggravated by decades of the above-mentioned economic, political, and sociocultural marginalization and subordination by the state.

⁵ Forozan, *The Military*, 108.

⁶ Nateq-Nuri, *Khātirāt-i Ḥujjat al-Islām*, 196.

⁷ Lob, "Development," 34.

⁸ "Tashkīl-i qarārgāh-i pīshraft," Iranian University Students News.

⁹ See, for example, Fassih, Bergman, and Schmitt, "Iran's Attack"; and "IRGC Opens New Airbase," Rudaw.net.

¹⁰ "Report on 200 Days," Iran Human Rights.

After the protests had started outside of Kasra hospital in Tehran where Amini had been pronounced dead on September 16, 2022, they quickly spread to the border provinces. The next day in Kurdistan, the protests erupted during and after Amini's funeral in her hometown of Saqqez and continued for months in the capital of Sanandaj and other cities in the province. By late September, they spread to West Azerbaijan, Sistan and Baluchestan, and at least fourteen other of Iran's thirty-one provinces.¹¹ During the remainder of the year and into the following one, the protests targeted central and local authorities, such as the supreme leader, provincial governors, and police chiefs. In addition to marching toward and congregating around the offices of local authorities, the protestors removed their hijabs, chanted antigovernment slogans, called for and carried out general strikes, cursed at and tore down posters of the supreme leader and other officials, burned tires and threw rocks at riot police, and attacked and destroyed government buildings and vehicles.

The higher participation in the protests of the border provinces caused them to suffer more casualties. The latter also resulted from the historical securitization of these provinces by the state, which repressed their protesters and other citizens with greater brutality and impunity. This repression came in the form of the security forces killing and injuring hundreds of protestors and other civilians, including children, with tear gas and live ammunition. It was accompanied by warnings and threats of violence, mass arrests, internet and electricity outages, and school and university closures.

In Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan, this repression culminated in large-scale crackdowns that further fueled the protests and casualties. In Sistan and Baluchestan's capital of Zahedan, on September 30, the security forces shot and killed dozens of protestors and other civilians, including Friday prayer worshippers, and wounded hundreds more, in a mass casualty event known as the Zahedan massacre, or bloody Friday.¹² On November 18 and 19, in response to major protests in cities across Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan, particularly those with Sunni Kurds, the security forces sent helicopters and armored vehicles, used machine guns and live ammunition, and raided homes.¹³ The state repression of Kurds also extended to exiled Iranian Kurdish opposition parties in Iraq in the form of drone and missile attacks against them and their potential disarmament and relocation.¹⁴

The heightened repression of the protests in the border provinces did not come without a cost for the Islamic Republic. In fact, considering the presumed correlation or causality between repression and radicalization, the protests intensified after their participants had been ruthlessly killed by the state and religiously commemorated by society. In October and November, the protests intensified in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchestan, following the forty-day mourning periods of Amini's death and the victims of the Zahedan massacre, respectively.¹⁵

Compared with the protests in the Persian-majority center of the country, the uprising along the ethnic periphery did not just persist with greater frequency and intensity, but also had longevity due to historical grievances and higher casualties. By mid-to-late December, as the protests approached and reached one hundred days (the longest in the Islamic Republic's history), hundreds of people continued coming to the streets in Sistan and Baluchestan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan, as organizers called for more protests through early January.¹⁶ On February 17, which marked the fortieth day of mourning for two men, including one Kurd, who had been executed by the state for purportedly killing

¹¹ Lipin, "Iran Protests."

¹² Wintour, "'Women, Life, Liberty'."

¹³ Williams, "Activists."

¹⁴ Salim, "Kurdish Exiles"; "Iran Says," Reuters.

¹⁵ Wintour, "Iran's Security Forces"; "Hundreds of Iranians," VOA.

¹⁶ "Iran Protests," VOA; Ghobadi, "Iran Protests"; Fitzpatrick, Coles, Moore, and Kagan, "Iran Crisis."

Basijis at the protests, the latter resumed in Kurdistan after weeks of inactivity.¹⁷ On March 16, as the protests reached the six-month mark, and as many around Iran subsided, they continued to rage each week in Sistan and Baluchestan, a trend that persisted throughout the month.¹⁸

Conclusion

To conclude, in the eyes of the Iranian state and segments of society, and within the framework of the so-called security-development nexus, the underdeveloped and impoverished border provinces have remained susceptible to cross-border infiltration, political opposition, and violent resistance by ethnic separatists, religious extremists, weapons and drug smugglers, and transnational militants such as ISIS. In response to these real and perceived threats, and to reduce local discontent, the Islamic Republic has attempted to ameliorate development and alleviate poverty in these provinces. However, their continued underdevelopment and impoverishment compared with the center, combined with persistent political and sociocultural discrimination, have precipitated and perpetuated popular dissatisfaction. This has created a vicious cycle of social protest and state repression, culminating, most recently, in high participation and high casualty numbers during the Jina Mahsa Amini or Woman, Life, Freedom protests.

Bibliography

- "Hundreds of Iranians Protest in the Country's Southeast." VOA. November 11, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/6831044.html>.
- "Iran: Protests Erupt for First Time in Weeks." DW, February 17, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-protests-erupt-for-first-time-in-weeks/a-64744890>.
- "Iran Protests Continue Friday As Unrest Enters Fourth Month." VOA. December 16, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-protests-continue-friday-as-unrest-enters-fourth-month-/6879753.html>.
- "Iran Says Iraq Has Agreed to Disarm and Relocate Kurdistan Militants." Reuters. August 28, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-iraq-has-agreed-disarm-relocate-kurdistan-militants-2023-08-28>.
- "IRGC Opens New Airbase in Southeast Iran." Rudaw.net. May 11, 2023. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/11052023>.
- "Report on 200 Days of Protest Repression/List of at Risk Protesters." Iran Human Rights. April 4, 2023. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5795>.
- "*Tashkil-i qarārgāh-i pishraft va ābādānī-i sipāh* [The Establishment of the IRGC Progress and Development Headquarters]." Iranian University Students News. October 30, 2016. <http://iusnews.ir/fa/news-details/214515>.
- 'Ala'i, Sara. "*Nishānih va piyāmadhā-i faqr dar Īrān* [Indicators and Consequences of Poverty in Iran]." *Aftab Yazd*. December 12, 2016.
- Esfandiari, Golnaz. "'I Will Keep Protesting': Anti-Regime Demonstrations Continue to Rock Iran's Baluchistan, Even As Nationwide Rallies Subside." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. March 24, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-protests-baluchistan-antiregime-crackdown/32333082.html>.
- Fassihi, Farnaz, Ronen Bergman, and Eric Schmitt. "Iran's Attack Was Response to Secret Israeli Attack on Drone Site." *New York Times*. March 16, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/world/middleeast/iran-israel-attack-drone-site.html>.
- Fitzpatrick, Kitaneh, Zachary Coles, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan. "Iran Crisis Update, December 28." Institute for the Study of War. December 28, 2022. <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/iran-crisis-update-december-28>.
- Forozan, Hesam. *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Ghaderi, Mohammad Reza, Masoud Taghvaei, and Sirous Shafaghi. "An Analysis of Management of Regional Development in Iran." *International Review* 1/2 (2017): 36–44.
- Ghobadi, Parham. "Iran Protests: 'No Going Back' As Unrest Hits 100 Days." BBC News. December 26, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64062900>.

¹⁷ "Iran," DW.

¹⁸ Makooi, "Iran's Baloch Population"; Esfandiari, "'I Will Keep Protesting.'"

- Khalaj, Sakineh and Ali Yousefi. "Pahnihbandī-i tawzī' va shīdat-i faqr-i chandbandī dar manātiq-i shahrī va rūstāyī-i Īrān [Mapping the Incidence and Intensity of Multidimensional Poverty in Iran's Urban and Rural Areas]." *Journal of Spatial Planning* 18, no. 4 (2015): 49–70.
- Lipin, Michael. "Iran Protests against Woman's Death in Hijab Case Spread to 16 Provinces." VOA. September 20, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-protests-against-woman-s-death-in-hijab-case-spread-to-16-provinces-/6756363.html>.
- Lob, Eric. "Development, Mobilization and War: The Iranian Construction Jihad, Construction Mobilization and Trench Builders Association (1979–2013)." *Middle East Critique* 26, no. 1 (2017): 25–44.
- Makooi, Bahar. "Iran's Baloch Population Leads Anti-Regime Protests Six Months after Mahsa Amini's Death." France 24. March 16, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20230316-iran-s-baloch-population-lead-anti-regime-protests-six-months-after-mahsa-amini-s-death>.
- Nateq-Nuri, 'Ali Akbar. *Khātirāt-i Ḥujjat al-Islām va al-Muslimīn 'Alī Ākbar Nātiq-Nūrī* [The Memoirs of Hojjatoleslam 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri]. Tehran: Islamic Revolution Document Center, 2003.
- Salim, Salar. "Kurdish Exiles Back Iran Protests but Deny Organizing Them." AP News. September 30, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/iran-elon-musk-spacex-middle-east-iraq-fa3128213ded6d2eb2310949ff16a971>.
- Williams, Stuart. "Activists Fear Major Iran Crackdown in Kurdish-Populated Town." *Al-Monitor*. November 20, 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/activists-fear-major-iran-crackdown-kurdish-populated-town#ixzz8A0nZRi93>.
- Wintour, Patrick. "'Women, Life, Liberty': Iranian Civil Rights Protests Spread Worldwide." *The Guardian*. October 1, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/01/women-life-liberty-iranian-civil-rights-protests-spread-worldwide>.
- Wintour, Patrick. "Iran's Security Forces Reportedly Open Fire As Thousands Mourn Mahsa Amini." *The Guardian*. October 26, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/26/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-grave-crackdown-kurdish-death>.

Eric Lob is an associate professor of politics and international relations at Florida International University and a non-resident scholar with the Middle East Institute's Iran Program. He is the author of *Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).