

# The Policy of Destabilizing Chabahar and Strategic Requirements (Case Study of the North-South Corridor)

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## **Abstract**

Despite Iran's unique geostrategic and geoeconomic position and its location on various transit routes, including the North-South Corridor, sufficient attention has not been paid to this extraordinary capacity. Iran's transit capacity is set to expand, bolstering its economic diplomacy with countries around the world. This expansion is expected to lead to increased dependence on economic cooperation with Iran, thereby reducing the nation's vulnerability to sanctions. However, in recent years, the country has experienced a decline in transit volume. While this downturn can be attributed to sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also closely linked to external actions and sabotage activities, including terrorist attacks on Iranian soil. This research aims to address the question of the objectives pursued by terrorist groups and other rival actors engaged in competition with Iran along the North-South Corridor. The hypothesis posits that the series of terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Jaish al-Adl group in the southeast of Iran suggests that rival countries are covertly supporting small terrorist organizations to destabilize Iran's transport routes in pursuit of their own interests. These interests include marginalizing Iran in the sphere of commercial corridor competition and strengthening their own positions. These actors pursue their agenda by instigating insecurity within Iran's corridors, ultimately discouraging foreign investors from engaging in projects such as those at the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran. Their operations range from targeted and indiscriminate attacks—affecting civilians and military installations alike—to planting mines, explosive traps, and roadside bombs on critical transportation routes. Such actions serve to portray the southeastern regions of Iran, particularly around Chabahar port, as unsafe, thereby significantly undermining and potentially neutralizing the Islamic Republic of Iran's role in global transit. Consequently, as Iran's competitors enhance their influence by developing robust transport fleets and strengthening their presence in key commercial corridors, it is crucial for policymakers and officials to address the security challenges affecting borders, transport fleets, and foreign trade. If these issues remain unresolved, Iran risks being sidelined in the global arena, as the world will not hesitate to seek alternative transit routes.

**Keywords:** Destabilization, North-South Corridor, Jaish al-Adl, Terrorism, Chabahar.

## **Introduction**

Iran occupies a significant strategic position in global trade and transit communications due to its unique geography. It is situated along several important international corridors, including the North-South Corridor, the East-West Corridor, the South Asia Corridor, and the TRACECA Corridor, which are recognized as four major global communication routes. These corridors have created numerous opportunities for Iran to generate foreign exchange and stimulate economic growth, serving as viable alternatives to oil exports. In a context where international trade is increasingly interconnected and mutual dependencies exist among countries in the region, it is only natural for transit activities to flourish. Iran's access to both the North and South Seas, along with its proximity to several landlocked neighboring countries, allows these nations to leverage this opportunity. The country's geographic and geopolitical position has rendered it particularly important in the realm of global cargo transit. Moreover, Iran boasts valuable railway, road, and air communication networks, positioning the nation with a unique economic and commercial asset. However, certain competitors and actors, threatened by the investments made by various countries in southeastern Iran and the port of Chabahar, are seeking ways to undermine Iran's transit advantage. Instances of terrorist attacks in the southeast and covert support for such groups exemplify efforts aimed at diminishing Iran's role within the North-South Corridor.

The importance and necessity of this research arise from the fact that terrorist attacks by the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group in the southeastern region of the country have raised significant concerns about the security of these areas and their implications for the North-South Corridor. Unlike other terrorist incidents in border areas, the attacks on Chabahar are explicitly aimed at preventing this region from becoming the central hub of Sistan and Baluchistan province, as acknowledged by the terrorist group itself. Their strategy seeks to undermine Iran's influence by fostering instability and neglecting its geographical potential, thus ensuring that Iran remains detached from the trajectories of international development and its vital role in the region. This situation will lead to a multitude of political, economic, security, and various other challenges. Conversely, should the Chabahar port be successfully developed and Iran establish a presence in the transit sector, the country could emerge as a key player in regional international trade and play a fundamental role in enhancing security. Therefore, the motivations behind attacks on the "jewel of eastern Iran's development" extend

beyond the actions of a small terrorist group; they are linked to states whose interests may be jeopardized by the advancement and prosperity of the Sistan and Baluchistan region through the strategic port of Chabahar.

### **1. Chabahar Port: Economic and Strategic Significance**

Chabahar Port stands as a strategic asset and is one of Iran's key economic and trade-free zones, located in the southern part of Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. It is the only oceanic port in the country, situated along the coast of the Makran Sea and the Indian Ocean. This distinctive capability enables Chabahar Port to accommodate ocean-sailing vessels. Thus, this port has the potential to become a mega port. Often referred to as the "Golden Gate" to Afghanistan and Central Asia, its location in the Gulf of Chabahar, combined with deep waters and natural indentations, offers an ideal setting for deep-water docks and optimal anchorage for large ships. Chabahar serves as the transit gateway of eastern Iran and provides the closest access point for India, Pakistan, and the landlocked nations of Central Asia—including Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—to open waters. Through Chabahar, Iran connects to the East Asian markets, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Southern Africa. This remarkable feature is unique among the coastal regions of southern Iran and even the neighboring countries along the Persian Gulf.

This region has the potential to significantly contribute to the national economy while serving as a vital support system for the marginalized area of Baluchistan, offering a beacon of hope for its economic, social, and political development. As international transportation expands, the country and its residents will reap substantial benefits. In addition to transit revenues, the North-South International Transport Corridor will foster further infrastructure development, including the establishment of new border inspection facilities, cargo consolidation terminals, and enhanced cooperation between customs and regulatory authorities of the various countries that utilize the corridor.

The emergence and development of Chabahar Port in Hormozgan represent a significant solution for reducing reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, along with the potential revenues generated from its role as a transit route. Chabahar in Iran, Gwadar in Pakistan, Dubai in the UAE, the Bab ul-Mandeb Strait, and the African coast along the Red Sea are all intrinsically linked to the fate of the Middle Eastern economy and play a crucial role in global

trade.

In 2008, the significance of the Makran region was highlighted for the first time in the speeches of the Supreme Leader. Since then, the development of these coastal areas has consistently been addressed in official discussions and meetings. However, progress on the project has been notably sluggish. Ultimately, in January 2024, the cabinet approved the general outlines of the plan.

## **2. Destabilization of Chabahar in the Context of the North-South Corridor**

### **2-1. Terrorist Groups**

The ethnic conflicts with the central government in Sistan and Baluchistan have a longstanding history, encompassing both armed and unarmed factions. This article primarily addresses the armed terrorist groups involved in this context. Generally, these armed terrorist groups can be categorized as follows:

**1- Al-Mun'im** Following the events of the early days of the revolution, which were marked by significant destruction, dissolution, and inactivity among groups such as the "United Baloch Front," "Baloch Battle," and the Red Star (Bami Star), the 1990s emerged as a period characterized by the re-emergence and escalation of terrorist organizations in Sistan and Baluchistan province, as well as the eastern regions of the country. These groups adopted jihadist and religious identities, claiming to have been formed to safeguard the rights of Sunni Muslims and the Baloch people. The terrorist faction linked to Abdul Mun'im Arish represented the first wave of extremist fighters in southeastern Iran. Abdul Mun'im, the brother of Ramzi Yousef—the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks and a perpetrator in the bombing of the Imam Reza Shrine in 1994—also played a role in the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in collaboration with Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan in July 1993. But the truth is that Abdul Mun'im's family holds Pakistani citizenship, and there are not any references in Western or non-Iranian sources that characterize him or his group as Iranian. In June 2004, Abdul Mun'im was arrested in Karachi (Habibi & Ghorbani, 2017), an event that likely contributed to the operational decline and potential dissolution of this group (Kaveiani et al., 2018, p. 127).

**2- Al-Furqan Party:** In the summer of 1996, a group of young Baloch from various tribes in Iranian Baluchistan—including Shah Bakhsh, Qanbarzehi, Rigi, and Shahnawazi—came together under

the leadership of Mullah Jalil Qanbarzehi, also known as Salahuddin, who had previously collaborated with the Taliban. They formed this group in Nimroz province, Afghanistan, with financial support and backing from Mullah Rasul, the governor of Nimroz. Additionally, they received weapons and military equipment from Wali Shah Wali, the Taliban's military commander in the region, to conduct armed activities within the Islamic Republic of Iran. This group officially announced its formation in late 1996 while based in Nimroz, operating across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Due to financial challenges, they became involved in various illicit activities, including drug trafficking and kidnapping, in both Pakistan and Iran. While foreign intelligence services managed the group's operations on a global level, Mullah Jalil Qanbarzehi, son of Nur Mohammad, known as Salahuddin or Haji, assumed local leadership within the country, particularly in Sistan and Baluchistan province (Rahmani Saeed: 2015). In 2014, this group merged with the Ansar Iran Movement, leading to the establishment of a new entity called Ansar al-Furqan. On June 18, 2017, Mullah Jalil Qanbarzehi was killed in an operation conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces and the Quds Base. One of the group's final terrorist activities was the attack on the Chabahar County Police Command on December 6, 2018 (Kaveiani et al., 2018, p. 127).

**3- Jundullah:** The Jundullah terrorist group was founded in 2003. The Jundullah terrorist group is the predecessor of Jaish al-Adl. In the following years, Jundullah began and intensified its activities in the eastern and southeastern regions of the country based on an Al-Qaeda-Taliban model. Under the leadership of Abdul Majid Rigi, known as Abdul Malik Rigi, this group adopted a violent Takfiri, anti-Shia, and anti-Iranian discourse and carried out a wide range of armed operations against security forces and ordinary Shia and Sunni citizens. During this period, the killing and injuring of more than a thousand people in the province is the group's legacy. Abdul Malik Rigi studied in Pakistani religious schools and had a history of armed and violent actions from the age of 23 (Akramiyan & Hoseinizadeh, 2020, p. 89). The Jundullah group was mainly composed of Sunni Iranian Baloch.

This group declared its objective as advocating for the rights of the Baloch people and Sunni Muslims in Baluchistan while emphasizing that it was not a separatist organization. Iranian authorities labeled this group as "bandits" involved in fuel and drug smuggling, and they designated Jundullah a terrorist organization

linked to Al-Qaeda, as they had killed numerous Iranian military personnel and civilians. Abdul Malik Rigi, a member of the Rigi tribe, was arrested and subsequently executed by the Islamic Republic. Following his arrest, the group announced that Mohammad Zahir Baloch had been appointed as their new leader. Shortly thereafter, the group was dissolved by its members, leading to the formation of new organizations. Between 2005 and 2010, this group conducted 24 terrorist operations, resulting in 210 fatalities and 496 injuries. Among their deadliest actions were the suicide attacks on the Grand Mosque of Zahedan and the Ali Ibn Abi Talib Mosque in the same city. The group's criminal activities also included the tragic Tasouki incident and the bombing during the Tasua ceremony in Chabahar (Kaveiani et al., 2018, p. 126).

**4- Jaish al-Adl:** Following the arrest of Abdul Malik Rigi and his brother Abdul Hamid, along with the deaths of several leaders of the Jundullah group in Iran and Pakistan, the remaining members of this terrorist organization continued their activities unabated. For nearly eight years, they have operated under the banner of Jaish al-Adl, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, actively destabilizing the eastern borders of Iran and conducting terrorist operations in Sistan and Baluchistan province, often utilizing Pakistani territory. Since 2012, the leadership of this group has been held by Abdul Rahim Mullah Zadeh, also known as Salahuddin Farooqi, from Rask County in southern Sistan and Baluchistan province. His brother was arrested and executed for his role in the assassination of Mullah Mustafa Jangi Zehi, the head of the Basij base in Sarbaz County. Following this, Farooqi fled to Pakistan and established Jaish al-Adl. He has been referred to as the "Second Rigi" and operates in the border regions of Iran and Pakistan. The terrorist group positions itself as the "defender of Sunni Muslims" and, under this premise, has carried out numerous attacks against Iranian military forces, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The group's charter outlines one of its strategic goals as the overthrow of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Notable attacks attributed to this group include the martyrdom of eight border guards on April 6, 2015, the capture of 14 border guards on October 16, 2018, the assault on an IRGC morning assembly in Nikshahr on February 2, 2019, and a suicide attack on a bus transporting IRGC Quds Base forces on the Khash-Zahedan Road on February 13, 2019 (Kaveiani & et al., 2018, p. 128).

Jaish al-Adl is organized into three military branches, each operating in distinct geographical areas. The Abdul Malik Mullah

Zadeh group is active in Sarbaz and Rask, while the Sheikh Ziaei group operates in the Saravan region. The Mullah Nematollah Touhidi faction is based in Mirjaveh and Zahedan, utilizing the Pakistani border for evasion and concealment. The primary responsibility for Jaish al-Adl's operations rests with the Abdul Malik and Sheikh Ziaei branches in Saravan and Sarbaz, where they conduct terrorist activities employing guerrilla tactics, remote-controlled explosives, and roadside mines. Significant operations conducted by these groups between 2013 and 2019 include bombings in urban areas such as Zahedan and Chabahar, numerous assaults on police stations and patrols, ambushes targeting military and police vehicles and personnel, as well as the use of handmade and radio-controlled roadside mines. Additionally, they have attacked border watchtowers and attempted to infiltrate and seize police stations, engaged in kidnappings, and participated in drug trafficking, among other activities (Akramiyan & Hoseinizadeh, 2020, p. 92). To date, this group has executed 17 terrorist operations within the province, the most recent being the attack on April 4, 2024, in Rask, Chabahar, and Sarbaz, which resulted in the deaths of 11 military and police personnel.

**5- MKO (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization):** Historically, the MKO has provided financial support, political backing, logistical aid, and training to Rigi's group. Abdul Malik Rigi himself engaged in dialogues and meetings with various elements and commanders of this organization, expressing his willingness to collaborate in establishing a new terrorist group under the name of the Mujahedin Armed Forces Organization. The MKO's support for separatist and Takfiri terrorists in southeastern Iran extended beyond Jundullah. Following Rigi's sentence and the subsequent fragmentation of his terrorist group, which led to the formation of a new group called Jaish al-Adl, the MKO redirected its support towards this organization. Jaish al-Adl has since inflicted casualties among numerous compatriots, police, military personnel, and soldiers in Sistan and Baluchistan province. Despite this, the MKO typically refers to members of this group, which is designated as a terrorist organization in several countries, as Baloch Mujahideen and Brave Sons. The terrorist attacks carried out by Jaish al-Adl are extensively reported and supported by MKO media. A notable instance is the attack on the Qaleh Bid police station on March 3, 2021, which resulted in the martyrdom of several military personnel; this event was highlighted by the MKO, which referred to the Jaish al-Adl attackers as Baloch heroes. The MKO media has

consistently provided coverage of all Jaish al-Adl terrorist activities, criticizing and condemning the actions of our nation's military forces against these terrorists. Following a significant military operation by Iran in January 2024 targeting the headquarters of this group in Pakistan, the MKO issued a statement declaring: "The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization strongly condemns the attack on Jaish al-Adl fighters who are fighting for justice and freedom in Iran" (Farheekhtegan, 2024). This despised organization, notorious for assassinating 12,000 Iranian citizens, has repeatedly lauded the actions of the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group, which contributes to regional insecurity. Additionally, some former MKO figures have allegedly provided specialized training in espionage and the establishment of terrorist organizations to members of Jaish al-Adl.

## **2-2. Key External Actors and Their Motives**

It has been consistently observed that the United States and the Zionist regime provide support to various terrorist groups. Recently, for instance, the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group shared a cryptocurrency gateway on their official channel to solicit financial assistance. Following this, Israeli channels and groups began to disseminate the cryptocurrency gateway, accompanied by a message stating: "This electronic wallet belongs to freedom fighters battling against the terrorists of the Islamic Republic of Iran and conducting their operations within Iran; support them as much as you can." There is substantial evidence to indicate that this terrorist group, which primarily operates in the southeastern region of the country, receives full backing from the Zionist regime, as demonstrated by their activities. The state-run Voice of America (VOA) network also referred to these terrorist actions merely as "Jaish al-Adl group's attack on two military bases in Chabahar and Rask," while the BBC Persian network, by inviting separatist figures, tried to give these terrorist attacks a different political meaning and portray these anti-human actions as human rights issues. However, the most obvious is the clear support and joy of media and accounts affiliated with the Zionist regime. For instance, the well-known "Terror Alarm" account presented a heroic image of these terrorists to declare their support for them. The name of the Israeli foreign intelligence agency (Mossad) also appears in the case of this evil group. According to revelations, Mossad recruited many members of Jundullah, which later changed its name to Jaish al-Adl, after a meeting in London. Following this meeting, Jundullah members collaborated with Mossad officers on a joint operational plan called

"False Flag."

Consequently, both the United States and the Zionist regime, motivated by their opposition to Iran, are unlikely to hesitate in supporting the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group through their strategy of escalating conflict. Washington is committed to employing any means necessary to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from enhancing its regional standing, particularly in the economic sector. For instance, it has enforced extensive sanctions aimed at reducing Iran's oil sales revenue to zero. This approach is similarly applied to trade corridors and the income generated from them. While the United States previously authorized the former Afghan government and India—due to geopolitical competition with China—to invest in and utilize the Chabahar port, this permission was contingent upon their presence in Afghanistan and their desire to bolster the government they backed. Given the current circumstances following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it seems logical that the U.S. has prioritized destabilizing eastern Iran through the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group.

Conversely, following the onset of Operation Al-Aqsa Storm on October 7, the Zionist regime has sought to exert pressure on nations that support the Palestinian people and fighters, particularly targeting the Islamic Republic of Iran. This has been accomplished through its allies and various terrorist groups. In the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, the Zionist regime has conducted multiple attacks against Iran, utilizing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), ISIS, and Jaish al-Adl in an effort to curb support for Palestinian fighters. Currently, the operation assigned to Jaish al-Adl aims to destabilize Chabahar, thereby undermining Iran's security and hindering its participation in the North-South Corridor.

Chabahar, situated in the impoverished and arid province of Sistan and Baluchistan, has the potential to compete with Pakistan's Gwadar Port along the Arabian Sea. This region is a point of contention between India and Pakistan as well as between India and China. Additionally, the Afghan government aims to decrease its reliance on Pakistan by supporting the development of Chabahar, although Washington does not particularly appreciate this intention. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia views Pakistan, and to some extent Afghanistan, as strategic bases for itself and the US to implement divisive strategies among Iran's ethnic minorities, thereby capitalizing on the destabilization of eastern Iran. For months before the renewed U.S. sanctions against Iran, Saudi Arabia sought to obstruct the construction and investment efforts of the South Korean

company POSCO, thereby impeding progress on the Chabahar project. POSCO, in which Saudi Arabia holds a 38% stake, had previously entered into a \$1.6 billion agreement with the Iranian Pars Kohan Steel Company to establish a steel plant in Chabahar. However, this project was contingent on board approval. Following increasing tensions between Riyadh and Tehran—particularly regarding Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon—POSCO informed the Iranian side that it would be completely withdrawing from all projects in Iran or associated with Iran due to pressure from its shareholders.

Around the same time, an Indian official, despite initially characterizing the Chabahar development project as strategic for New Delhi, unexpectedly altered his stance, declaring the project's continuation economically unjustifiable. He stated that the Indian government could not remain optimistic about moving forward and covering the initial costs. As a result, the successful implementation of this construction and investment initiative was halted not due to a lack of private sector investment but rather due to Saudi Arabia's political influence and its pressure on both Korean and even Indian stakeholders. Consequently, the Indian government was compelled to inform the Iranian management of the Chabahar project last week about their withdrawal from the prepayment of \$8.52 million for this contract amid external pressures.

Furthermore, some analysts suggest that Chabahar Port, in light of the region's geopolitical dynamics, could pose a significant challenge to the ports of Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman. Located on the Indian Ocean coastline, Chabahar Port has the potential to enable the Islamic Republic of Iran to achieve self-sufficiency from the maritime terminals of other Persian Gulf nations once it is fully completed and equipped. Iran's integration into the international trade and commerce system relies on the development of essential infrastructure that had previously been overlooked; until now, none of the country's ports possessed the capacity to accommodate and unload large commercial vessels. Consequently, a substantial portion of Iran's trade was dependent on the UAE's Jebel Ali Port.

Conversely, the UAE's involvement in the Yemen conflict, which aimed at gaining control over the Al-Hudaydah Port and the Bab-ul-Mandeb Strait, has met with failure due to resistance from the Ansarullah forces. As a result, the UAE views the development of Chabahar as a warning sign for its ports, including Jebel Ali. Consequently, the UAE may find a strategic advantage in the

instability surrounding Chabahar. This situation could challenge nations that have historically dominated trade exchanges in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Persian Gulf through Dubai's Jebel Ali Port.

The competition among regional ports, alongside the intense political tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has prompted Saudi Arabia to pursue a regional hegemony aimed at diminishing Iran's (and Qatar's) influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Consequently, Riyadh is motivated by commercial, military, and geopolitical factors to impede the development of this port while simultaneously seeking to enhance its regional presence through various channels—from the Horn of Africa to the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is working to solidify its positions in Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Djibouti to ensure it does not miss opportunities to counter Chabahar.

It is essential to recognize that, although the Chabahar development plan was signed prior to the second phase of intensified US sanctions on Iran, the port has now emerged as a focal point for various political disputes in Asia and the Middle East, as well as commercial rivalries among conflicting stakeholders. It is poised to play a crucial role in the geopolitical and economic face-off involving China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Central Asian nations, as well as the United States, regardless of the current escalation of sanctions (Nasiri, 2018). As previously noted, Chabahar Port stands out as Iran's most crucial transit asset within the North-South International Corridor. Its strategic location offers the potential to evolve into a commercial hub for a diverse range of transit activities, including goods and energy. The advancement of Chabahar, along with the eastern part of the country, could position Iran as a trans-regional power with enhanced strategic maritime capabilities and increased mobility across international waters. Furthermore, the advantageous location of Sistan and Baluchistan provinces plays a crucial role in facilitating the transit of goods, energy, gas, and electricity to neighboring countries, underscoring its significant importance for the economic development of our nation.

There exists a strategic risk for Iran: if the development of Chabahar Port and the North-South International Corridor encounters delays, Pakistan's Gwadar Port could become the focal point, causing Iran to potentially forfeit a significant opportunity to establish a transit link between Europe and Central Asia with South and Southeast Asia. Conversely, advancing the development of this port would enhance Iran's stature in international trade and transit, as well

as improve its geostrategic access to open waters, ultimately benefiting the domestic economy. The facilitation of trade and job creation, both during the process of equipping and developing the port and after its completion, would represent substantial achievements (Shah Mohammadi, 2017, p. 130). In his article titled "The Return of Marco Polo's World and the U.S. Military Response," Robert Kaplan emphasizes that if Iran and India successfully develop Chabahar Port, the port of Gwadar and the China-Pakistan Corridor could potentially be challenged, as well as their interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan (Kaplan, 2017, p. 23).

Furthermore, Pakistan's ongoing territorial disputes and rivalry with India, along with the tensions between China and India, contribute to a widespread belief that Pakistanis are disinclined to allow Chabahar Port to operate in a manner that would impact Gwadar. Consequently, the influx of Chinese investment into Gwadar and India's initiatives to advance Chabahar has intensified competition between the two parties.

Some individuals believe that this hypothesis may be a conspiracy aimed at undermining the relations between Tehran and Islamabad. Respectively, the Chinese have proposed a more pragmatic solution, asserting that Gwadar and Chabahar should be viewed as partners rather than competitors. To facilitate this partnership, a railway line is planned to be constructed from Gwadar to Chabahar Port. This railway will extend from Chabahar Port to Afghanistan, passing through the Mimak border in Zabul, Iranshahr, and Zahedan, before entering Afghanistan. Once there, it will diverge into two branches: one heading south toward Kandahar and the other north toward Herat. Additionally, another branch from Zahedan is proposed to lead toward Birjand, South Khorasan, and Razavi Khorasan, ultimately connecting to the Turkmenistan railway line. Should this plan come to fruition, it would link Iran to the Central Asian countries, paving a route toward China. Although infrastructure exists on the other side, progress in Birjand, Mashhad, and Zahedan has been limited, yet efforts are underway to establish this connection as swiftly as possible.

From this vantage point, the Chinese view Gwadar and Chabahar as potential partners rather than rivals. Should the railway line be constructed by the Chinese, it would facilitate the transportation of imported goods, ultimately benefiting both Iran and Pakistan (Molazehi, 2024). Pakistani officials regard the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a cornerstone of their robust relationship with China, highlighting its significance in advancing Pakistan's agenda

for enhancing regional connectivity and sustainable development. This corridor has the potential to greatly improve various aspects of Pakistan's infrastructure, partially addressing the electricity shortage and creating tens of thousands of new jobs.

Gwadar, strategically situated at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Sea, was once an abandoned port but has since been revitalized as part of the economic corridor development between two countries. Full operations commenced in 2021, and Pakistani officials now regard Gwadar as the "flagship" of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Despite this status, Gwadar has yet to fulfill its potential and has not emerged as a regional transit and transshipment hub. The port has not significantly boosted the local economy, enhanced Pakistan's global connectivity, or provided China with direct access to the Indian Ocean as anticipated. Political instability and security concerns pose risks to the Gwadar project and could undermine the potential of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Additionally, the project faces a myriad of challenges, including delays, corruption allegations, and incidents of terrorism.

### **3. Iran's Role in the North-South Corridor: Strategic Opportunities and Challenges**

Among the three global transportation corridors, two traverse Iran, highlighting a significant advantage for the eastern part of the country. Chabahar serves as the southernmost point of the world's East-West Corridor. This corridor originates from the "Silk Road Gateway" in China, connecting to the heart of China's economy in Guangdong province, and extends into Southeast Asia. It then enters India, passing through major cities such as Kolkata, Nagpur, Jaipur, Hyderabad, and continuing to Karachi and Bin Qasim before arriving at Chabahar.

The North-South Corridor represents a comprehensive transit route that includes multiple sub-corridors. Key sub-corridors traversing Iran consist of: Chabahar Port to Afghanistan (road and rail, contingent upon the completion of the Khaf-Herat railway), Chabahar Port to Sarakhs and Central Asia, Bandar Abbas to Central Asia (via rail, road, and sea from Amirabad Port), Bandar Abbas to the Caucasus and Russia (by road, rail, and sea from Anzali Port, pending the completion of the Rasht-Anzali-Astara railway), and Bandar Abbas to Turkey (by road and rail). It is essential to expedite the construction of two railway routes—Chabahar-Sarakhs and Qazvin-Rasht-Astara—to finalize this corridor and enhance the country's transportation infrastructure. The

Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, along with the Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructure Company, should prioritize the development of economically viable transit railway routes.

Amid the Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the Ukraine conflict, the North-South International Transport Corridor is emerging as a viable option for facilitating trade between India and Russia in the context of escalating geopolitical challenges. The transportation of goods between the two nations via this corridor takes less than 25 days, significantly shorter than the approximately 40 days required through traditional routes. One of the corridor's key advantages is the mutual interest of two major economic powers—India and Russia—in leveraging the Iran route for their economic exchanges. As a result, this corridor has enhanced trade between India and Russia through Iran. To support this initiative, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) established a development working group for the North-South International Transport Corridor in early April 2023, deploying 300 vessels for cargo transport along the route. Furthermore, between May and July 2023, IRISL successfully transported around 3,000 tons of goods and 114 containers via the North-South International Transport Corridor. Currently, the majority of the goods transported through Iran on this route consist of commercial shipments between Russia and India.

India, as an emerging power, has actively engaged in efforts and diplomacy to enhance its global influence. The country aims to rank as the world's third-largest economy, following the United States and China, by the year 2030. A pivotal aspect of achieving this objective is its participation in and utilization of international corridors and initiatives to strengthen its geoeconomic position. A notable example of this strategy is India's interest in investing in Iran's Chabahar Port as a counter to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which is being developed by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative's Maritime Silk Road.

Countering Gwadar Port holds significant geoeconomic value for New Delhi, as it serves as a strategic tool to challenge Pakistan, its longstanding rival, and to some extent, to curb China's assertive expansionism, which India identifies as its primary regional competitor. This issue was of such importance that India successfully obtained a sanction waiver for Chabahar Port from the Trump administration, exempting it from US sanctions. However, despite these waivers, development at Chabahar Port has been

hampered by ongoing challenges related to financial transactions and the presence of Indian companies in the region, which are still affected by sanctions.

Prior to Trump's sanctions, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tehran in May 2016, he met with Hassan Rouhani, the then-President of Iran, coinciding with a visit from Ashraf Ghani, the then-President of Afghanistan. This meeting led to a tripartite agreement among the three nations aimed at establishing an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. A key component of the agreement was the construction of the Chabahar-Zahedan railway, which was part of the "Transit Corridor in the Tripartite Agreement between India, Iran, and Afghanistan." The Indian State Railway Construction Company (IRCON) pledged to handle all services related to construction and financing for the project, which was estimated to cost around \$1.6 billion. However, India ultimately failed to meet its commitments. Indian officials stated that while the U.S. had granted a sanctions waiver for both Chabahar Port and the railway to Zahedan, challenges arose in finding equipment suppliers and partners due to concerns regarding sanctions.

In 2020, when India had effectively halted its oil imports from Iran, leading to a cooling of relations between the two nations. In July of that year, the Indian newspaper "The Hindu" reported that delays from the Indian side in securing funding and initiating projects had resulted in Iran excluding India from the Chabahar development plan, opting to move forward independently. In response to this development, officials from the Indian embassy in Tehran affirmed New Delhi's commitment to funding and constructing the railway. However, just a week prior, Mohammad Islami, who was then the Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, had inaugurated the 628-kilometer railway connecting Chabahar to Zahedan.

At the time, many believed that India's exclusion from the Chabahar port project was a consequence of the 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Plan between Iran and China, which is valued at \$400 billion. There were concerns that Iran would soon replace India with China, but this outcome did not materialize.

Despite numerous challenges, including the cumbersome and often pointless internal bureaucracy in Iran and the pressure of sanctions, which significantly hindered India's meaningful involvement in the development of Chabahar port, the emergence of the Taliban extremist group in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 further complicated the situation. This rise to power introduced

uncertainty in regional security due to the strained relations between the Taliban and India. As a result, India's access to Central Asia through Afghanistan faced a significant deadlock. Although India recognized the strategic importance of Chabahar, the insecurity stemming from the Taliban's presence amplified doubts about its commitment to the port's development and adversely impacted its motivations.

The signing of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor agreement during the G20 summit in New Delhi in the summer of 2023 aimed to connect India to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and then to the Greek port of Piraeus, ultimately facilitating access to the rest of Europe. This development reinforced the perception that India may have officially and practically shifted away from the benefits of the Chabahar port, attributed to existing challenges, while seeking to bolster its geoeconomic position through this new corridor in competition with regional rivals like China and Pakistan. Furthermore, U.S. policies, along with those of many of Iran's neighbors, have largely focused on excluding Iran from significant global corridors, effectively aiming to transform it into a geopolitical black hole. However, the attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent disproportionate and reckless response, which escalated tensions in the region to a critical and unresolved conflict, has cast doubts on the viability of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. Some experts contend that the project was permanently shelved following the Hamas attack. However, the reality is that while the attack may have delayed the project and raised concerns about its implementation, it is improbable that it will be easily abandoned. The ongoing competition between the U.S. and China, along with the rivalry between India and China, positions the corridor as a strategic countermeasure to China's Belt and Road Initiative, particularly its maritime silk road component. Considering the positions of the U.S. and regional countries—who have yet to remove the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel from their agenda—it is likely that the implementation of the corridor will commence as soon as the conflict subsides. Furthermore, the Biden administration's commitment to eliminating and dismantling Hamas, despite its differences with Netanyahu's far-right government, can be viewed as a strategy to mitigate future risks to the corridor's progress by addressing the threat posed by Hamas.

The Hamas attack on October 7 has seemingly reinforced the perspective among Indian officials that, given the unpredictability of such events and the associated geopolitical risks, it is prudent for New

Delhi to also prioritize the Chabahar port route. This strategy aims to bolster India's position during crises, enhancing its geoeconomic power while mitigating risks. In this context, the Indian ambassador to Armenia remarked at the "New Regional Realities and Crossroads of Peace" conference in Yerevan that the Indian government has reached a pivotal decision to invest in the development of the Chabahar port, recognizing the significance of regional connectivity. He added, "New Delhi intends to facilitate Armenia's utilization of the Chabahar port. We are streamlining the port's accessibility for Armenia to help it navigate its challenges, especially since it is a landlocked country." Based on what has been said, this stance by the Indian ambassador should be interpreted as a renewed emphasis on the importance of the Chabahar port for India. On the other hand, India's emphasis on assisting Armenia through the Chabahar port could be a reaction to the close relations between Baku and Pakistan, which is Delhi's traditional rival in the Caucasus. India has decided to support Armenia to both strengthen its presence in the Caucasus and counter Pakistan. This presents a significant opportunity for Iran to not only pressure India for more serious participation in the Chabahar port development project but also to use India's leverage to enhance its own influence in the Caucasus.

Despite the potential benefits that this corridor could offer to Iran, numerous challenges have persisted along the way. Notably, recurring terrorist attacks in Chabahar and ongoing insecurity in the region represent significant security obstacles to the development of this port and the full realization of its potential within the North-South Corridor. Iran contends that Jaish al-Adl receives support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while criticizing Pakistan for not taking adequate measures to rein in this group, which operates freely on its soil. Meanwhile, Pakistan is grappling with its own Baloch separatist insurgency, asserting that some of these groups find refuge in Iran. These dynamics suggest a continuation of destabilization efforts aimed at the Chabahar corridor, which seek to undermine investment initiatives in the area. Terrorist organizations have explicitly stated their intention to obstruct investment in the Chabahar port.

In light of this, the Indian ambassador's remarks should be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the Chabahar port's increasing significance for India. Additionally, India's focus on assisting Armenia through the Chabahar port could be a strategic response to the strengthening ties between Baku and Pakistan, India's longstanding rival in the Caucasus. This indicates New Delhi's

commitment to supporting Armenia in order to solidify its presence in the region and counter Pakistan's influence. Consequently, this situation presents a notable opportunity for Iran to encourage India to engage more seriously in the development project of the Chabahar port, leveraging India's influence to enhance its standing in the Caucasus.

Despite the opportunities this corridor can bring to Iran, there have always been numerous challenges along the way. As mentioned, repeated terrorist attacks on Chabahar and the continuation of insecurity there are among the biggest security challenges facing the development of this port and utilizing its potential in the North-South Corridor. Iran believes that Jaish al-Adl is supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with Pakistan taking no action to control this group, thereby facilitating its activities on Pakistani soil. However, Pakistan is also trying to manage the Baloch separatist insurgency within its own territory, claiming that some of these groups are sheltered in Iran. These factors indicate the continuation of corridor destabilization policies in Chabahar to disrupt investment processes there. Terrorists have explicitly stated that their goal is to prevent investment in Chabahar port.

Furthermore, the inadequate road and rail infrastructure presents a significant challenge to the development of Chabahar. The high costs associated with maritime container transport to this port, combined with the lack of rail and air connectivity, hinder Chabahar Port's ability to fully realize its trade potential. Given the ongoing insecurity in the region, along with the incomplete 628-kilometer railway linking Chabahar to Zahedan and the Rasht-Astara railway, it appears that Iran may miss out on opportunities within regional transit corridors in the medium term. As long as development remains a non-priority for the Islamic Republic, it is likely that neighboring countries will seize the opportunity for their own national interests. Considering the regional dynamics, unless the Islamic Republic actively addresses the challenges faced by Sistan and Baluchistan and prioritizes development in this area through both infrastructural and strategic measures, security concerns in Chabahar will continue, and the port's development plans are unlikely to progress as intended.

Over the years, various strategies and procedures have been developed and implemented by national and regional managers to counteract the anti-security actions of terrorist groups, or at least to limit their activities. However, the ongoing repetition, frequency, and escalation of such actions in this region reveal the inadequacy

of these strategies. Consequently, the oppressed provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan have become a battleground for the violent activities and influence of terrorist organizations. The most recent incident involved a terrorist attack on military and law enforcement installations in the cities of Rask and Chabahar, leading to clashes with security forces, resulting in the tragic loss of several border guards and personnel. Just a day or two following this heinous act, additional security forces in the region fell victim to further terrorist attacks. This vicious cycle has persisted in Sistan and Baluchistan for years and, despite numerous selfless efforts, remains unbroken.

Current strategies aimed at ensuring security and combating terrorist groups have, in many instances, been effective in preventing and containing these threats. However, the volume and scope of actions undertaken by proxy terrorist groups—systematically equipped and supported by regional and trans-regional powers—have evolved in ways that call for more robust countermeasures and preventive actions. Despite the design and successful implementation of various strategies and procedures to combat these groups, and the ongoing monitoring of their plans by security forces and border guards, the increasing frequency and escalation of attacks underscore the need for adaptive countermeasures and tactics in response to the heightened support and backing these groups receive from their adversaries.

Identifying the channels and opportunities for local recruitment by these groups, infiltrating the human and managerial structures of terrorists, executing deception and containment operations, and designing proactive and preventive measures are just a few of the essential strategies that can disrupt the destabilization plans of terrorists and their supporters.

It is essential to emphasize that the perpetrators of these violent attacks receive ongoing training and support from regional security services as well as global powers. The planning, coordination, and execution of these operations are unquestionably orchestrated by those external forces, and the defending forces recognize that their primary adversaries in this conflict are these foreign entities. Nevertheless, a critical aspect of combating terrorism involves addressing the factors that lead some citizens to gravitate towards these dangerous and intimidating groups. These organizations exploit the prevalent poverty and underdevelopment in the region as part of their strategy.

There are several factors contributing to Sistan and Baluchistan's emergence as a hotspot for terrorist groups, with economic

deprivation and underdevelopment playing a crucial role. This province has consistently been identified as the most deprived or among the most deprived in Iran, based on a variety of indicators. Official statistics reveal that nearly half of the population lives in poverty. Assessments by the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare indicate that the deprivation index—measuring access to housing, water, energy, education, health, and financial services—in Sistan and Baluchistan stands at 62%, the highest among all Iranian provinces. Additionally, it has the highest unemployment rate in the country, and its illiteracy rate is among the highest as well. As a result of these challenging conditions, many individuals who are recruited by terrorist organizations are driven more by economic and livelihood concerns than by ideological or doctrinal motivations. Therefore, addressing poverty and unemployment is essential for significantly reducing the factors that lead to terrorist recruitment.

Furthermore, in addition to internal challenges and the relentless demands of various factions within the province, numerous destabilization factors in Sistan and Baluchistan are exacerbated by conditions at the eastern borders and the negative impacts of neighboring countries. Regrettably, the inability of Pakistan's intelligence services to effectively address border outlaws, along with some supportive tendencies for anti-Iranian militants within Pakistan's security apparatus, contributes significantly to the situation. The lack of central government control in certain provincial areas, particularly along the border with Iran, the presence of Western intelligence agents from countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. in the region, and the unstable security landscape in Afghanistan are additional external factors that have a detrimental impact on regional security.

The activities of rogue gangs, including political outlaws, organized crime members, and drug trafficking syndicates operating in border regions, have contributed to significant challenges in maintaining security. The lack of effective cooperation in extraditing fugitive criminals from Pakistan, combined with the intermingling of populations on both sides of the border, has led to various detrimental consequences. These issues foster an environment conducive to ethnic separatism, widespread unemployment, and severe economic deprivation in Pakistani Baluchistan, all of which generate a range of criminal activities in Iran. Together, these factors intertwine to create a landscape of insecurity and lawlessness in Sistan and Baluchistan.

The activities of groups affiliated with Salafi and Takfiri movements, which exacerbate religious sectarianism, alongside the support provided by U.S. and U.K. intelligence services and certain regional nations, contribute to the destabilization of security at the eastern borders. These entities often encourage separatist sentiments within Iranian and Pakistani ethnic groups. Therefore, it is crucial to implement not only hard measures but also soft strategies. In terms of soft measures, short-term programs such as increasing the province's development and cultural budget, as well as improving the appointment and promotion processes for provincial managers, can be beneficial. Additionally, the following medium- and long-term programs can play a pivotal role in predicting, preventing, and effectively countering the threats posed by terrorist organizations.

- 1- Establishing Scientific Centers, Religious Schools, and Seminaries in Sistan and Baluchistan Province to Mitigate Religious and Sectarian Conflicts and Promote Salafism:
- 2- Leveraging international resources to enhance the economic conditions of the region.
- 3- Implementing educational and training initiatives tailored to the cultural context of the province.
- 4- Employing appropriate diplomatic and legal strategies to address the influence of Western nations that, while advocating for human rights, indirectly facilitate terrorism in the region through financial, ideological, and material support.
- 5- Capitalizing on the constructive stance of the new governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to forge a joint coalition aimed at countering the ideological foundations of extremist Islamic groups in the area, while exploring the feasibility of establishing a collaborative military unit to combat regional terrorism.

Introducing targeted educational initiatives to improve cyber literacy among management, employees of executive bodies, and the general populace (Kaveiani et al., 2018, p. 135).

## **Conclusion**

The North-South Corridor represents a significant economic opportunity for Iran, capable of generating substantial income through transit routes while simultaneously enhancing the country's political influence. Sistan and Baluchistan province, notably the Chabahar Free Zone, stands out as a crucial strategic area for national security. Establishing it as the eastern axis of development offers the Islamic Republic considerable geoeconomic and geopolitical advantages. By transforming Iran into a global transit

hub, not only can sanctions be mitigated, but regional collaboration in favor of Iran can also be promoted through increased commercial and recreational tourism.

However, it is important to recognize the close interconnection between development and security, with stability often regarded as a foundational aspect of the development process. Recent terrorist incidents in Chabahar and Rask highlight the vulnerabilities posed by their proximity to border areas, which facilitate the movement of terrorists across borders for attacks. Therefore, it is critical to prioritize security measures, strengthen border controls, and enhance protective measures with a focused and serious approach.

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