

No. 04e/2026

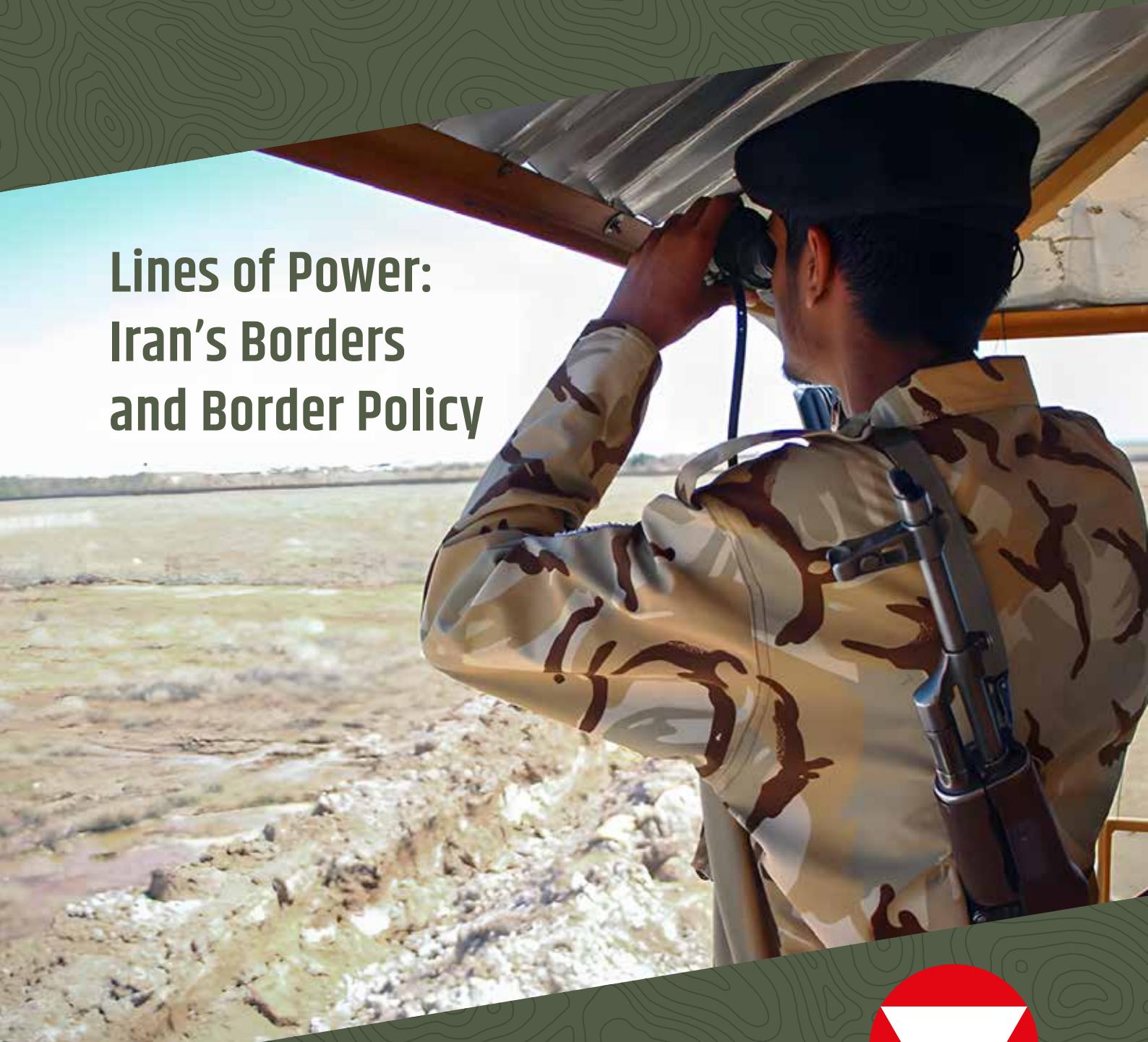


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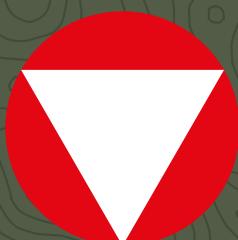


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Lines of Power: Iran's Borders and Border Policy



EINSATZBEREIT FÜR ÖSTERREICH
BUNDESHEER.AT



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Image: MoD Austria/HBF



**Institute for Peace Support
and Conflict Management**

No. 04e/2026

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KRISEN | KRIEGE | KONFLIKTE

Publication date:
January 2026

Cover picture:
Marzbani soldier guarding the border.
Location unknown. Source: IRNA

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Iran, with its diversity, geopolitical position, and security-political challenges, offers a complex example of state border management. The country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity not only shapes its societal structures, but also the way in which the state defines and controls its borders. In the border regions, where national, cultural, and religious affiliations converge, special dynamics develop which harbour both opportunities for development and a potential for conflict.

Hence, Iran's border policy is much more than an institution safeguarding its security. It constitutes the interface between state administration, local society and geopolitical realities. The problems at the borders reflect the tensions between the centre and the periphery, as well as between sovereignty and transnational interdependencies.

The Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy sets great store by empirical analyses of processes relevant to security. This publication deals with the interface between border protection, security policy and ethnic diversity. It investigates how state institutions and local actors influence each other and what role geopolitical factors play in the stability of Iran's border regions.

This connection aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between territoriality, security, and societal diversity in modern Iran and to make latest research findings accessible to a wider audience.

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Borders as tug-of-war zones between the great powers

Iran's history reflects territorial and geopolitical rivalries that continue to shape its borders and security strategy to this day.

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Over the past two hundred years, Iran has lost significant parts of its historical territory and has had to accept numerous borders redrawn by force, which perpetuate ethnic and religious divisions to this day. These territorial secessions include the three states of the South Caucasus – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia – as well as Afghanistan, parts of present-day Iraq, and most recently Bahrain. Viewing these losses as the result of both internal weaknesses and external interventions remains a defining element of how Iran sees itself socio-politically to this day.

Iran's geopolitical situation has always demanded close attention. Historically, the country has served as an intersection between various zones of influence and competing empires, repeatedly becoming the scene of geostrategic tensions. Its position along key transport routes between Central Asia, South Asia, the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean has attracted external interests and interventions for centuries. Long before the age of modern nation states, the land bridge that is Iran became the focus of imperial rivalries – whether as a strategic transit corridor or as a zone of geopolitical competition.

The discovery of extensive oil and natural gas reserves between the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf further exacerbated these geopolitical rivalries. Controversial maritime borders, access to strategically important ports in the Gulf of Oman, and control of the Strait of Hormuz increasingly became the focus of global power politics. These historical developments have had a decisive influence on Iran's current borders and continue to determine the country's geostrategic dynamics to this day. A detailed analysis of the borders and the associated policies and politics is therefore essential to understanding Iran's security and geopolitical challenges.

The Iran-Pakistan border area.





The Aras border between Iran and Armenia and between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Neighbouring states of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Iran's geopolitical situation is largely determined by its diverse neighbours and complex border relations.



The Parviz Khan border crossing between Iran and Iraq.



Iranian side of the border area with Afghanistan.

Iran shares land and water borders with 15 countries, with a total border length of approximately 9,000 kilometres, of which approximately 6,000 kilometres are land and river borders shared with seven neighbouring countries:

- In the north: Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia
- In the west: Türkiye and Iraq
- In the east: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Iran has approximately 2,400 kilometres of maritime borders along the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. As a Caspian Sea littoral state, Iran shares only a maritime border with Kazakhstan and Russia, and maritime and land borders with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

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no.	neighbour state	land border (km)	river border (km)	sea border (km)	TOTAL (km)
1	Pakistan	751	227	–	978
2	Afghanistan	709	236	–	945
3	Turkmenistan	798	407	780 *)	1205 *)
4	Kazakhstan	–	–		*)
5	Russia	–	–		*)
6	Azerbaijan (incl. Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic)	175	584		759 *)
7	Armenia	48	–	–	48
8	Turkey	545	35	–	580
9	Iraq	1258	351	–	1609
10	Kuwait	–	–	144	144
11	Saudi Arabia	–	–	258	258
12	Qatar	–	–	268	268
13	Bahrain	–	–	27	27
14	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	–	–	330	330
15	Oman	–	–	227	227

*) Note: As the final demarcation of the maritime borders in the Caspian Sea between the five coastal states (Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) has not yet been fully clarified under international law, no precise information is available on the length of the respective bilateral maritime borders. Therefore, the table shows the total length of Iran's coastline as 780 km for all Caspian littoral states in order to present the geographical situation consistently.



Incheh Borun border trade market at the Iranian-Turkmen border.

Iran has maritime borders in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman. In the Persian Gulf, it borders Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. There are disputes with some of these states – particularly Iraq, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates – as to the exact course of the maritime border and the sovereignty of certain territories. From the perspective of the United Arab Emirates, the strategically important islands of Greater Tumb, Lesser Tumb, and Abu Musa, which have been under Iranian control since 1971, are (considered) Iranian-occupied lies, while Tehran regards them as an integral part of its national territory. In the Strait of Hormuz, Iran shares a maritime border with Oman. In the Gulf of Oman, Iran also borders Oman and, indirectly, the United Arab Emirates, which hold coastal areas there.

Iran holds an extensive network of official border stations (*istgah-e marzi*) that serve both passenger transport and trade in goods with neighbouring countries. This border infrastructure includes border crossings for passenger traffic (*payane-ye marzi-ye mosafir*), freight terminals (*payane-ye marzi-ye kala*), and a number of smaller border markets (*bazarche-ye marzi*), through which a significant part of cross-border traffic and regional trade is conducted.

The strategic importance of these crossing points has steadily increased in recent decades, as they not only serve economic functions but also boast growing security and geopolitical relevance. Iran currently has around 20 border crossings for passenger traffic and around 50 freight terminals along its national borders. Their number has increased significantly since 1979: from nine border crossings at the beginning of the Islamic Republic, within four decades the number rose to 38 modernised border terminals

in 2020. This illustrates a gradual institutional expansion of Iranian border management.

At the same time, despite this quantitative expansion, there are still considerable deficits regarding quality. The infrastructure at many border stations remains inadequate, which is particularly evident in security-sensitive and economically important border regions. A striking example is the province of Sistan-Baluchestan: although it is one of Iran's busiest border areas – in terms of both formal and informal trade – many of its border crossings are technically underdeveloped, logically overstretched, and inadequately overseen. These structural weaknesses have a direct impact on security, economic development, and the state's ability to control the region.

► **Iran's most important border crossing points are shown in a two-page map in the centre of this publication (p 14-15).**

Imam Khomeini Port.



Continuity and change in Iranian border security

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Between institutional reform and security-political stability, Iran's border management has undergone a remarkable historical development.

Throughout history, the security of Iran's borders has been maintained in differing ways. In earlier centuries, this task was mainly in the hands of local forces – in particular border tribes, loyal and battle-hardened, which acted on behalf of the central government and administered the border areas

according to the principle of mutual obligations. Regular forces were only deployed by the central government in the event of external threats, such as to repel foreign invasions or regional conflicts.

With the emergence of modern state structures in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the gradual stabilisation of



Iranian border guards (marzban) in the eastern border regions, probably in the late 1970s.

internationally recognised borders – often through bilateral agreements – the system of border security also changed. Responsibility for border control and administration became increasingly formalised and transferred to state institutions. Responsibility was far from permanent, however, and contested by various state actors. Throughout the 20th century,



Image: Telegram Channel Marzbani, Border Guard Organisation



Image: Wikipedia

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Border protection in the Pahlavi era

responsibility shifted several times between the military, the gendarmerie, state security agencies, and later specialised border guard forces. This institutional fragmentation continues to shape the Iranian border regime today and reflects the tension between central government authority and regional control.

At the beginning of the Pahlavi monarchy there was no consolidated border security organisation yet. Security continued to be provided by local border troops (*yegan-ha-ye marzi*) or by border tribes (*ashayer-e sarhaddi*). If conflicts arose between border residents on either side of the border, they were settled in the local offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*edare-ye kargozari-ye maham-e kharejeh*).

According to historical sources, during the last meeting of the then Iranian Prime Minister Seyyed Ziaoddin in May 1921, it was decided to allocate 2,500 tomans (approx. USD 11,000) per month for the recruitment of 200 horsemen and camel drivers. Under the command of Amir Shokatolmolk Alam, governor of Sistan and Qaenat, and under the military and financial control of the state financial authority, these were to form a unit which would ensure the security of trade routes until regular gendarmerie forces were established.



Members of the coastal guard units (*daryabani*) of the Iranian border guard forces during an inspection.

Shortly thereafter, the then Minister of War, Reza Khan, issued an order to disband the local cavalry. The order stipulated that in future all security and protective tasks should be carried out exclusively by the regular armed forces (*qoshun*) or the gendarmerie. All forms of local or tribal-based

border troops were abolished, their salaries discontinued, and the remaining forces were permitted to serve under the command of the army for the time being only.

In 1922, a commission of high-ranking officers was formed to organise

conscription. This led to the standardisation of the armed forces: the terms 'Gendarmerie' and 'Cossack Brigade' (*brigad-e Qazaq*) were dropped and replaced with the uniform term 'Army' (*ar-tesh*). At the same time, the first structured border posts were established in the

Vessel of the Iranian coastal guard units (*daryabani*) on patrol.





Khorramshahr Port in southwestern Iran.

border regions. In 1923, the Gendarmerie was placed under the authority of the War Ministry. Ali Agha Khan Sardar Rafat took over as commander. At the same time, responsibility for securing the border regions from the Soviet to the Afghan border section – including Birjand, Torbat, Kashmar, Sabzevar, Neyshabur, Semnan, Samalqan, and Jajarm – was transferred to the Eastern Division (*lashkar-e sharq*).

After the establishment of a unified Iranian Army in 1928, border security was gradually transferred to military units. Furthermore, with the aim of improving centralisation, a separate department for 'border commissioners' (*komissar-ha-ye sarhadi*) was established within the Army's defence staff by 1927. During this period, the border commissioners carried out their task by establishing permanent border posts (*pasgah-e marzi*). Transit agreements were concluded with neighbouring states, whose implementation was the responsibility of the commissioners without, however, the authority to determine borderlines. From 1935, the term 'border commissioners' was replaced by 'border supervisors' (*kalantar-e marz*). They were given extended powers and were also assigned political and economic tasks in the border regions.

In the final years of Reza Shah's reign, greater attention was paid to establishing an independent border management. Between 1940 and 1941, border guards were given their own budget, financed by the Interior Ministry. During these years, the provincial and district administrations (Interior Ministry) as well as Army units and Gendarmerie posts (War Ministry) monitored

the developments in the border regions. During this period, the governors of border towns were responsible for border security. In most districts, communication was limited to telegraphy; only the divisions had radio connections to Central Army Command in Tehran.

In September 1942, the 'Directorate General of Security' (*edare-ye kolle amniye*)

**Border observation tower in Piranshahr
(in the Kurdish areas of West Azerbaijan Province).**



Image: Tasnim News



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Rimdan border crossing, Sistan-Baluchestan Province, on the border with Pakistan.

was renamed the 'Directorate General of the Gendarmerie' (*edare-ye kolle zhandameri*). In November 1942, the border guards were finally detached from the Army and placed under the authority of the national Gendarmerie. A total of 24 border guard

offices were established along the borders, divided into 12 border guards first-class (including Qasr-e Shirin, Khorramshahr, Susangerd, Now sud, Bojnourd, Jolfa, Kalibar, Sarakhs, Kalat, Atrak, Astara, Rezaiyeh/Urumia) and several offices second-class (e.g., Zabol, Qaen, Mehran).

Between 1946 and 1947, border management was reallocated several times between the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of War, and the Gendarmerie. Due to structural problems and conflicts of competence – for example, between military commanders and judicial authorities regarding smuggling, illegal border crossings and security offences – it was finally decided to assign border management permanently to the Gendarmerie. In October 1963, with the approval of parliament and a royal decree by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, border management was finally transferred back to the Gendarmerie (*rokn-e 3/G3*). It was institutionalised as the 'Border

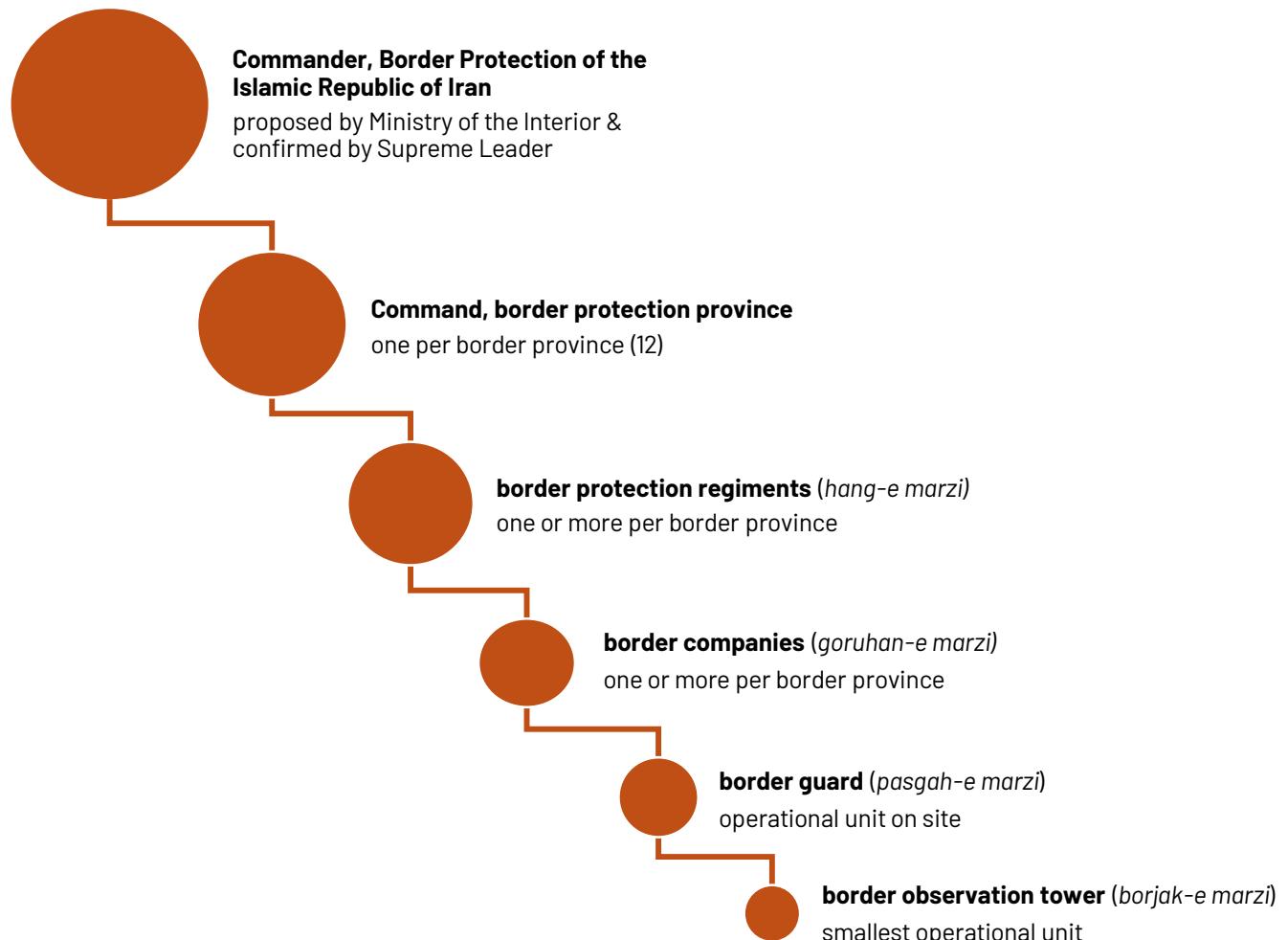
Department' (*dayere-ye marzi*) and placed under the authority of the border regiments. From 1965 onwards, this structure was further expanded. The Border Department was transformed into a 'Border Protection Directorate' (*edare-ye marzban*) and established as a permanent organisational unit within the national Gendarmerie. At that time, the organisation boasted 27 border managements first-class, 56 border managements second-class, and a total of 637 border posts.

Border protection policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

In many respects, the border protection policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows institutional and security-political continuity with the Pahlavi era. From the final transfer of border management to the



Coat of arms of the
Border Guard Command
of the Islamic Republic of Iran



Structure of the Border Guard Organisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

(Graphic: Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management)

Gendarmerie in 1963 until the establishment of the Law Enforcement Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran (*Niru-ye Entezami, NAJA*) in 1991, the Gendarmerie remained the central actor in matters of border security. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Committee intermittently worked together with the Gendarmerie units before border protection was integrated into the structures of the NAJA in the course of comprehensive institutional reforms.

In 1983, the border battalions were reorganised: battalion commanders served as first-rank border guards (*marzban-e daraje 1*), company commanders as second-rank border guards (*marzban-e daraje 2*), while platoons and their personnel were stationed at border posts. In 1984, the National Security Council transferred surveillance of a 300-kilometre section of the southeastern border to the Revolutionary Committee as part of its fight against smuggling and drug trafficking, before this responsibility was returned to the Gendarmerie in 1990.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian border troops carried out their military and specialised tasks. They systematically documented all violations

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Branch insignia of the Iranian Border Guard.



Turkmenistan



Image: Wikimedia



Iranian border guards in Bushehr Province.

► continued from page 13

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committed by the Iraqi side and submitted them in the form of 224 official reports to political and military authorities.

This documentation later formed an important basis for the UN Security Council's condemnation of Iraq under international law. In addition, the border

troops of the former Gendarmerie were the first force to oppose the Iraqi attacks and initiate the defence of the Iranian borders.

In 1991, the merger of the Revolutionary Committee, the Gendarmerie, and the Police created the unified Law Enforcement Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the

NAJA (*Niru-ye Entezami*). Border protection was integrated into the security department as the 'Directorate General for Border Protection' (*edare-ye kolle marzbani*). In accordance with Article 3, Section 1 of the 1991 law, the core tasks of the NAJA have since then included the control and surveillance of the state borders, the implementation of international treaties and protocols, and the protection of the rights of the state and the border population. The border regions were divided into first and second-class sections, and each border post was assigned a border tower (*borjak-e marzi*) for nine men, i.e., an infantry squad.

A fundamental reorganisation took place in 2000 at the suggestion of the relevant institutions and with the approval of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. With the creation of the 'Border Guard Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran' (*farmandehi-ye marzbani*) as an independent operational unit within the NAJA, a central gap in the structure was closed.

Border regiments (*hang-ha-ye marzi*) took over responsibility for the land borders,

Image: Wikimedia

Border guards in West Azerbaijan Province.





Image: Wikimedia

Border patrol on the Iranian-Pakistani border.

while special coastal protection bases were established at the sea borders. These had companies, posts, and observation towers which were hierarchically integrated.

The new system focused on expanding and evenly distributing border posts and towers, taking into account geographical and topographical conditions. In addition, coastal protection units (*paygah-e darya-bani*) were modernised with state-of-the art boats, advanced border control technologies were introduced, and specialist personnel was recruited.

In 2008/2009, members of parliament defined the tasks and powers of the Border Guard Command in 28 points. These include, in particular: exercising state authority in border areas, ensuring security, safety, and order, monitoring and controlling the borders, and directly monitoring and repelling limited military attacks. Other tasks include delaying enemy operations until regular armed forces arrive, cooperating with military units in border defence, and conducting reconnaissance, i.e., gathering and reporting security-related information from border regions. Cooperation between border guards and armed forces in times

of peace, crisis, and war is carried out in accordance with guidelines established by the Armed Forces General Staff.

In addition, border guards are responsible for dealing with cross-border conflicts between residents on either side of the border, as well as issues relating to agricultural use of land, water resources,

and traditional irrigation systems in accordance with existing border agreements. Other responsibilities include dealing with illegal border crossings, arrests of Iranian citizens by the border authorities of neighbouring countries, and the prosecution of persons from neighbouring countries who committed crimes on the Iranian border and subsequently fled.

Urumiye Border Regiment in West Azerbaijan Province.



Image: Wikimedia

Border protection and the issues of ethnic groups in Iran

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Iran's border policy is caught between security-political imperatives and the ethnic diversity of the border regions.

While Iran's state border protection institutions developed over time organisationally and as regards security policy, an independent dynamic also unfolded within the population of the border regions. The state's concepts of border control and territorial security were not always in line with the socio-cultural realities of local border communities. Only by taking these local dynamics into account can a realistic picture of the tug-of-war between the state and the periphery be gained, as well as of the conflicts arising from the particular demographic composition of the border areas.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a multi-ethnic state whose diversity of linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities poses, from

a central government perspective, a challenge to the country's model of integration and control. In addition, most ethnic minorities are concentrated in border regions, where they maintain close cultural, linguistic, family, and religious ties with populations across state borders.

The Sunni ethnic group of the Baloch live in southeastern Iran, particularly in the province of Sistan and Baluchistan. Their ethnic relatives, who are also Sunni Baloch, live beyond the Iranian border – in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and parts of Afghanistan. There have long been religious, social, and economic ties between the Iranian Baloch and the Hanafi-Sunni networks in Pakistan and Afghanistan, some of which extend as far as Central Asia.



Parts of the Iran-Pakistan border.



Border crossing between Iran and Pakistan (Taftan/Mirjaveh).

A similar situation can be found in the northeast of the country, where Persian-speaking Sunni Hanafis live, whose family ties extend as far as Afghanistan. Northern Iran – North Khorasan and the southern coast of the Caspian Sea – is home to the Sunni Turkmen minority, which is ethnically and culturally closely linked to the Turkmen in Turkmenistan. The northwest of Iran is populated by predominantly Shiite Iranian Azerbaijanis (Azeri), who maintain strong historical and cultural ties to the Republic of Azerbaijan. Finally, the Kurdish ethnic group, which has extensive ties to the Kurds in northern Iraq, lives along the western border of the country. The southwestern province of Khuzestan is home to Iran's Arab population, which is both Shiite and Sunni and has tribal ties to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

This constellation has led to a development in which ethnic and religious issues in Iran have become closely connected with territorial issues. From the perspective of the security apparatus,

ethnic groups in border regions are not only seen as a potential challenge to Persian-Shiite national identity, but also as a risk to the country's territorial integrity. Historically, ethno-national movements demanding autonomy or political self-determination have emerged in almost all border regions. These developments have led to the border areas being considered security-politically sensitive. The ethnic minorities in these areas are often viewed from a security perspective ("security gaze" *negah-e amniyat*). This means that they are subject to greater state surveillance and control than other groups of the population.

At the same time, there is a paradoxical situation: many of these ethnic groups have historically played a core role in the protection of the borders and in trade in the border regions. They boasted local knowledge, tribal networks, and geographical experience which were important for securing the borders. Nevertheless, the increasing centralisation of the administration



Image: Wikimedia

Border crossing between Iran and Iraq.

and the security-political posture vis-à-vis these ethnic groups led to tensions. While their cooperation continues to be imperative for border security, mistrust and surveillance on the part of the state have strained relations between the centre and the periphery.

A characteristic problem of border regions is the combination of political marginalisation, economic underdevelopment,

and security-political pressure. This is particularly evident in Sistan and Baluchestan. In 2022, this province had the highest execution rate per capita in Iran - 39 executions per a million people. According to the organisation Iran Human Rights, at least 174 Baloch prisoners were executed in 2022 alone, accounting for approximately 30 percent of all executions in the country. In addition, official statistics from the Iranian Ministry of Labour

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Mirjaveh border crossing between Iran and Pakistan.



Image: Nody.ir

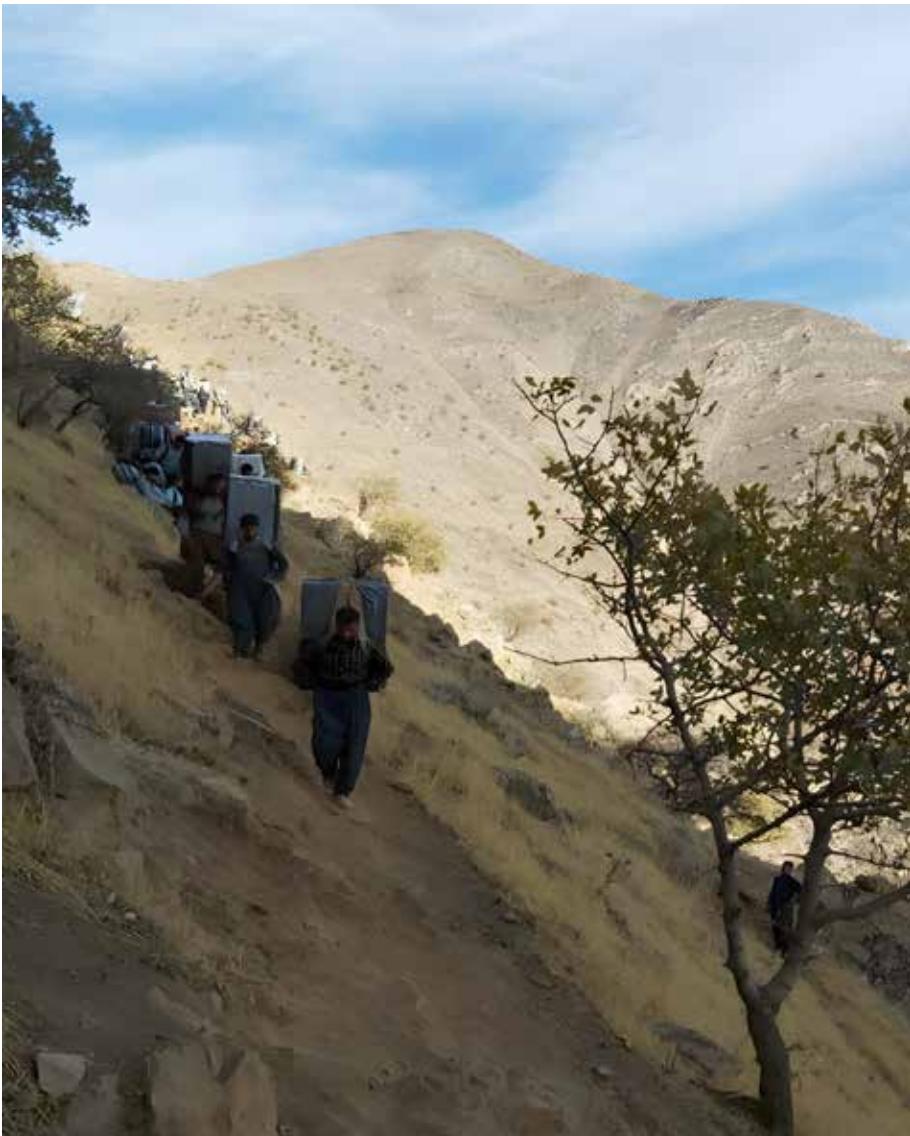


Image: private collection

Kulbar in the mountains of Kurdistan.

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and Social Affairs show that Sistan and Baluchestan is one of the provinces with the highest poverty rate and the highest social deprivation index.

While about 30 percent of Iranian households nationwide live below the poverty line, this figure exceeds 50 percent in Sistan and Baluchestan. This means that in 2022, over 1.5 million people in this province – more than half of the population – lived below the absolute poverty line. The region also has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. These structural problems have far-reaching societal consequences, such as rising crime rates, widespread drug addiction, child labour, and high child and maternal mortality rates. Many young people are forced to leave school and seek work in dangerous and illegal activities, such as fuel smuggling.

In addition, there are cross-border economic activities which the state classifies as smuggling and prosecutes under

criminal law, but which often constitute the only survival strategy in light of structural poverty and a lack of economic prospects in the affected regions. In Iranian Kurdistan, on the border with Iraq, so-called *kulbar* (from the Kurdish *kul* = back, *bar* = to carry) transport goods on foot across difficult mountain terrain. This activity, which over the past two decades has developed into a widespread form of informal economic activity, is increasingly viewed by state security authorities as a security risk. The Islamic Republic has responded with increased border controls and repressive measures, which have led to frequent violent incidents. According to a 2019 United Nations report, there are up to 84,000 *kulbar* in Iranian Kurdistan. In 2018, 75 of them were killed and 117 injured – partly by fire from Iranian border guards, partly by accidents in the dangerous mountain regions.

A similar phenomenon exists in Sistan and Baluchestan: the *sukhtbaran* (*sukht* = fuel) transport large quantities of diesel in their vehicles or on motorcycles across the border to Pakistan,



Image: private collection

A *shuti* driver filling his vehicle with gas oil.

where the fuel is sold at higher prices and often in US dollars. This is a suicidal activity. Due to the high speeds and explosive cargo, the *sukhtbaran*'s vehicles are popularly referred to as "moving bombs" (*bomb-e motaharrek*). According to 2017 state media reports, around 100 million litres of fuel were smuggled out of Sistan and Baluchestan every month. The state authorities responded with tighter border controls and punitive measures, but were unable to curb smuggling effectively, as it is the only source of income for many families. The religious authorities of the Sunni Baloch expressed sympathy for the *sukhtbaran* and blamed the government for the economic misery in the region. Among the local population, killed/slain *sukhtbaran* are sometimes referred to as "martyrs of bread" (*shahid-e nan*) – an expression which illustrates the socio-economic dimension of this problem.

Similar forms of mobility and informal economic activity can also be found in Iran's southern and southeastern border provinces. This is where the so-called *shuti* drivers work – a

socio-economic phenomenon which has become a part of everyday cross-border trade. *Shuti* (from the Persian *shut* – "to push/throw quickly," figuratively "to drive fast") refers to drivers, often women, who use specially modified private vehicles – frequently Peugeot 405, Peugeot Pars, Samand, or Citroën Xantia – to transport goods or people across provincial borders at high speeds in order to bypass government checkpoints. These vehicles are often modified for higher loads (raised rear axles) and travel at extreme speeds of over 180 km/h, in some cases up to 260 km/h. To evade security forces, *shuti* usually drive at night, use manipulated or illegible license plates, and avoid regular road checks.

In the southeastern provinces, particularly in Sistan-Baluchestan, *shuti* networks are involved not only in the smuggling of consumer goods, but also in the transport of Afghan migrants and refugees, as well as subsidised Iranian fuel – especially diesel. Reports indicate that the activities of these networks have increased as a result of political instability in Afghanistan and the



Sukhtbar convoys in the Iran-Pakistan border area.

Taliban's seizure of power. High speeds, risky escape routes, and poor road infrastructure regularly lead to serious traffic accidents with numerous deaths and injuries, affecting not only the drivers themselves, but also passengers and innocent bystanders.

In the wake of increasing national and international criticism of the repressive measures against the border populations, the Iranian Interior Ministry introduced new regulations pertaining to economic activities in border areas in August 2017. The aim was to defuse conflicts between local communities and security forces by granting parts of the population working informally a limited legal basis for border trade. In this context, the term *pilevar*, meaning "small trader," was introduced to recognise and regulate certain forms of small-scale trade officially. As a result, around 9,000 *kulbar* were registered to transport goods on defined routes legally instead of using risky mountain paths and risking criminal prosecution.

Similar programmes to regulate cross-border economic activities have also been implemented in other border regions.

In the province of Sistan-Baluchestan, the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) initiated the so-called *razzaghi* project, which primarily focuses on cross-border fuel trade. As part of this project, residents who live within a 20-kilometre border area and transport diesel fuel – the *sukhtbaran* – are registered and issued with a "razzaghi license." This entitles them to purchase and resell state-allocated quantities of subsidised fuel. Officially, the project aims to "prevent illegal capital outflows, reduce traffic accidents, legalise fuel trade, and create stable employment opportunities in border areas."

However, several reports and local investigations indicate that the actual impact of the *razzaghi* project is controversial. Critics argue that government programmes of this kind serve less to promote economic development in border regions than to establish a form of controlled economy. Instead of creating sustainable employment alternatives, such measures further legitimise informal and risky trading practices without solving the socio-economic problems of the border population, such as unemployment, underdevelopment, and lack of infrastructure.

Iran's border areas: between conflict and peace

Geopolitical interests, state control, and local networks make Iran's border regions dynamic zones between stability and conflict.

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AS

in many other countries, Iran's borders are ambivalent political spaces. They can facilitate economic and social exchange processes, but at the

same time they can also act as potential lines of conflict. A look at Iran's border policy shows that the Islamic Republic treats border areas very differently: while stable cooperation mechanisms regarding trade and transit exist, for example, on the border with Turkmenistan, other

border regions, particularly Sistan and Baluchestan in the southeast, are marked by tensions between security forces and groups of the local population.

A key structural feature of Iranian border regions is their chronic socio-economic underdevelopment. From a

Iranian border guards in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan.



Image: Nasim News/Wikimedia



Image: Admedia Telegram Channel

Members of Jaish al-Adl in the Iran-Pakistan border region.

security-political perspective, the state views border areas as potentially vulnerable spaces that could be destabilised by external influences.

This has led to key infrastructure projects – such as industrial development zones, transport routes, and economic investments – being deliberately kept at a distance from the immediate border area. Paradoxically, this security-political logic has created new risks: persistent poverty, a lack of economic prospects, and the social marginalisation of large sections of the border population have contributed to these regions becoming security-political problem areas themselves.

The ethnic and religious diversity of the border regions further reinforces this dynamic. Demands by local elites for economic and security-political participation or administrative decentralisation are repeatedly interpreted by parts of the Tehran political establishment as a threat to national unity and quickly labelled separatism. This was most recently evident in the debate surrounding reform proposals by incumbent President Masoud Pezeshkian, who himself comes from a border region and has Azerbaijani and Kurdish roots. His proposals for greater decentralisation and

more decision-making power for provincial governors were sharply criticised by nationalist forces and portrayed as a risk to the country's territorial integrity.

Concerns about the country's territorial integrity are also fuelled by regional security developments. Instability

and the activities of armed Baloch groups on the border with Pakistan – above all Jaish al-Adl – have considerably strained Iran's security situation. In recent years, Jaish al-Adl, which emerged from the former group Jundallah, has developed from a religious Islamist organisation into a more nationalist-oriented militant movement. Its operations, particularly in the years 2022–2024, were increasingly directed against Iranian security forces in Sistan and Baluchestan. From the perspective of the security authorities, the potential cooperation between these groups and Baloch networks in Pakistan is a serious security-political scenario.

Tehran also critically monitors political developments in other border regions where there are currently no open conflicts. These include, for example, the borders with Türkiye and the Republic of Azerbaijan. In particular, plans to establish the so-called Zangezur Corridor in the South Caucasus – promoted by international actors and supported by Azerbaijan and Türkiye – are closely monitored by Iran from a security-political perspective, as they could weaken Iran's direct land access to Armenia and thus its geostrategic position in the Caucasus. At the same time, the military presence of Kurdish



Image: Wikimedia

in Afghanistan following the return of the Taliban, the continued existence of transnational Sunni jihadist networks such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP),

groups in northern Iraq is regarded as a security threat, which has already led to several Iranian military operations across the border.

Iran is undergoing a period of profound transformation in both its domestic and foreign policy. Regional developments, geopolitical power shifts, as well as socio-political dynamics within the country increasingly affect border policy. Borders are therefore not just territorial dividing

lines, but sensitive political spaces characterised by an escalating relationship between the centre and the periphery, the state and society, as well as security and development.

Whether borders become areas of peace or zones of conflict largely depends on the political strategy pursued. A border policy focused exclusively on security reinforces exclusion, tensions, and social insecurity – and thus increases the risk of

internal and external conflicts in the long term. In contrast, approaches promoting economic development, political participation, and regional networking can stabilise border areas and contribute to domestic and regional peace. The future of Iran's border regions will thus be a key indicator of whether Iran manages its territorial challenges defensively – or whether it develops its borders into strategic areas for peacekeeping, stability, and trust.

Border crossing between Iran and Türkiye.



CONTENT

Debates on territorial sovereignty and border policy tend to focus on Western nation states, with non-Western contexts largely ignored. Iran represents a unique case study in this context: the country shares land and sea borders with fifteen states; the total length of its borders is around 9,000 kilometres, of which around 6,000 kilometres are land and river borders. This geographical location makes Iran a hub for diverse regional and geopolitical processes – and at the same time a hotspot for security-political challenges. Iran's border regions, which are home to diverse ethnic groups, offer insight into the relationship between state, society and territory. They illustrate how border protection, national security and ethnic identity are linked in a complex manner. This publication analyses the development, structure, and political significance of Iranian border policy in the context of security, sovereignty, and social diversity. It invites readers to rethink Iran's borders not only as lines of separation, but also as spaces for social and political interaction.

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Image: NDA Austria



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All publications of the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy can be downloaded free of charge here:



Legal Disclosure:

Publisher and media owner:
Federal Ministry of Defence, Rossauer Laende 1, A-1090 Vienna
Production: Armed Forces Printing Centre, A-1030 Vienna
Editorial office: National Defence Academy, Stiftgasse 2a, A-1070 Vienna
Represented by LTG Erich Csitkovits, Commandant
Cover picture: IRNA
Year of publication: 2026
1st edition: 300 copies

No. 04e/2026

KONTEXT

JOURNAL OF THE IFK/LVAK