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THE BASIJ: FISSURES BETWEEN IRAN'S CITIZEN SOLDIERS AND CITIZENS

by

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Abstract

Understanding the internal security apparatus of an autocratic regime provides insights into the regime's stability and staying power. For in domestic unrest, the loyalty and effectiveness of the internal security apparatus means the difference between regime collapse and regime survival. Iran is no different. For Iran, the internal security apparatus is the Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed. In Farsi, the name is *Sazeman-e Basij-e Mostazafan*, or Basij (mobilization) for short. But as a regime security apparatus, the Basij began in a unique manner as a populist militia. The Basij evolved into its internal security role from popularly supported roles as citizen soldiers in the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War. However, the Basij beginning clashes with the modern Basij role as an oppressive internal security organization. And the intervening evolution of the Basij created fissures between Basij and population that translate into regime vulnerabilities; understanding these fissures provides insights into the staying-power of the Iranian regime. This paper briefly traces the history of the Basij in terms of its relationship to the Iranian population. The history of the Basij is divided into three eras: the Iran-Iraq War, the post-war reconstruction period until 2005, and 2005 forward when the Basij made dramatic gains in power. The paper then turns to three specific fissures between the Basij and Iranian population and explores their implications.

The Basij: Fissures Between Iran's Citizen Soldiers and Citizens

The Basij began in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and continues to claim legitimacy based on this origin as a populist movement involved in the Revolution. The eventual Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomini, exerted personal effort to form the Basij as a militia of Iranian commoners defending the Revolution.[2] In fact, the initial cadre of the Basij and its parent organization, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), served in Islamic armed militias opposing the Shah. These men came from poor, uneducated, religiously conservative backgrounds to fight the Shah. Their ranks swelled towards the end of the Revolution in a wave of popular support.[3] As the Revolution coalesced, these men formally instituted the Basij in 1980 in subordination to the IRGC to defend Iran from both internal and external physical and moral threats.[4]

Basij History: Legacy of Belief and Sacrifice in the Iran-Iraq War

By the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the Basij had grown significantly and the demographic became increasingly young (as young as ten), poor, rural, uneducated, ethnic Persian, and ideologically motivated.[5] Early in the war, the Basij organization played an important role in mobilizing the Iranian population for war.[6] These Basij volunteers deployed for three months to the front, and according to some estimates contributed as much as 75% of Iran's soldiers in the war.[7] Many volunteers served essentially as cannon fodder, participating in human wave attacks on Iraqi positions.

The Basij fought loyally in the worst conditions. In the 1982 Iranian offensive, 90,000 generally unarmed Basij attacked entrenched Iraqi troops, repeatedly crossing minefields and assaulting fortified positions in an operation that lasted almost a month.[8] In the 1984 Iranian offensive, between 50,000 and 150,000 mostly Basij soldiers assaulted entrenched Iraqi positions across salt flats and marshes.[9] As many as 20,000 died, many drowning.[10] In the 1986 Iranian

offensive up to 60,000 attacked fortified positions to be mowed down in Iraqi kill zones with as many as 12,000 casualties.[11] Accurate casualty numbers simply do not exist, but the war resulted in at least 200,000 Iranian dead and 400,000 wounded. The Basij suffered at least 43% of these casualties.[12]

The Iranian regime manipulated and exploited young Basij members during the war through indoctrination programs and developed true believers in the cause.[13] Their patriotism and religious zeal motivated their defense of the country in the repeated offensives invading Iraq, relying on human wave tactics year after year. The scale of Basij involvement in human wave attacks indicates a genuine motivation to answer Khomeini's call to export the revolution.[14] Even IRGC and Basij senior leaders fought and died in the offensives.[15] Although morale and recruiting fell towards the end of the war, Basij human wave attacks continued to the very end.[16] Even then, IRGC leadership opposed the 1988 peace deal, despite the clear and horrible stalemate.[17] But on the whole, as Steven Ward argues, the war showed "the Iranian military's greatest asset was the individual soldier's willingness to fight and die."[18] The continuous human wave attacks combined with leader's unwillingness to accept peace in 1988 demonstrates the zeal of the organization. But the horrible experience of the war unavoidably traumatized survivors and shaped the organization. The patriotism and sacrifice during the war closely tied Basij both to the state and the population.

Basij History: Post-War Evolution in Role and Image

After the war, Iran faced the dual challenges of managing the large IRGC and Basij organizations no longer needed for war and supporting the war veterans. Again the Basij benefited from the personal patronage of the Supreme Leader, now Khamenei. He formed a special welfare organization, the Basij Cooperative Foundation, for financial, social, and

academic support of the Basij; additionally, the government renamed the Basij, promoted it to a branch in the IRGC, and gave it new leadership, replacing civilian clerics with leaders from IRGC ranks.[19] These moves solidified a post-war existence for the Basij. During this period the Basij became Iran's morality police and riot police, as well as political and cultural enforcers penetrating all sectors of society. This gradual, but deliberate, evolution out of the practical need to employ a large population of veterans, also reflected the ambitions of both Khamenei and Basij leaders. Because Khamenei lacked the secure grip on power his charismatic predecessor enjoyed, he sought to make the Basij a more mature and robust state security apparatus.[20] Ostovar notes that most of the Basij war veterans "felt that they had sacrificed more for the Islamic Republic than any other group and therefore demanded a leading voice in state affairs."[21] Combined, these dynamics drove the Basij to expand into internal security roles.

Starting in 1991, the Basij became a morality police, in an effort to combat waning revolutionary spirit.[22] This new mission drove both organizational changes and new laws providing the Basij legal authority as civil enforcers.[23] Although the original mission of the Basij included internal security, that mission expanded greatly beginning in 1990 with the creation of specialized battalions of war veterans to put down protests.[24] The IRGC deliberately expanded this counter-riot mission so that by 1994, the Basij grew from 36 to 800 of these specialized battalions, called Ashoura (male) and Alzahra (female) Battalions.[25] In 1999, the Basij flexed this capability, and set an important precedent when it suppressed a student uprising in Tehran.[26] Finally, by 2000, the Basij began to lead Iran's "soft war," the term used for cultural information war against any perceived threats to the regime, developing contingents for individual elements of society.[27] Just as the Basij served as shock troops on the battlefields of Iraq, they assumed a similar role the regime's "soft war."

The sponsorship the Basij received during this period from the Supreme Leader and conservative faction of Iranian political elite unavoidably caused Basij loyalty and relationship to the population to evolve. Basij members became more pragmatic and political in their loyalty. Originally, the Basij promoted its image as "supporting the oppressed," as an organization of the poor common people.[28] But its growing internal security role and influence challenged this image. So the Basij evolved from patriotic defenders, representative of the population, to a partisan political police. This politicization of the Basij intensified in response to reformist gains in Iranian politics. This reinforced a cycle in which the Basij increasingly mobilized as political activists and in return received increasing support and funding from the regime.[29]

Basij History: 2005 Forward, Growing Power and Fissures

The 2005 the election of ex-Basij member Mahmud Ahmadinejad to the presidency, perhaps better than anything else signified a new era of power for the Basij. The cycle of Basij political mobilization begetting further political sponsorship dramatically accelerated after Ahmadinejad's election, bringing the Basij unprecedented levels of power and wealth. During this period the IRGC and Basij power became increasingly intertwined and interdependent with the Khamenei's authority by developing into an informal but distinct political group.[30] This group developed a distinctive, deeply nationalistic, and authoritarian political ideology, more pragmatic and less clerical in its leadership.[31]

One indication of the Basij evolution and accumulation of power is the growth in size and scope of the Basij. The opaque nature of the Iranian regime inhibits a precise accounting of Basij membership, but by all accounts the numbers of the Basij grew dramatically. At the close of the Iran-Iraq War the Basij was about 500,000 strong.[32] Today, Basij leaders boast of 20 million members, though between three and five million is more likely, including part-time members.[33]

Part of this growth derives from continued growth of the Ashoura and Alzahra internal security battalions, which grew by 500 between 2005 and 2007 to a strength of 2,500.[34] But overall growth resulted more from the organization expanding into specialized social groups, which began in the post-war period.

The Basij developed at least 20 subordinate Basij organizations that recruit and maintain membership across Iranian society based on residency, profession, age, or gender.[35] Members of these organization do not necessarily serve in Basij security functions, but they expand Basij influence nonetheless. Membership in these groups may only require part-time work involving little more than indoctrination in, and avocation for, the Basij and regime in the specific segment of society. As of 2013, these groups operated from 47,000 local bases across the country.[36] This network spread geographically into every neighborhood, and in important aspects of society not only resulted in massive growth in size, but also influence to co-opt or coerce the population. Symbolizing a move to an increasingly political mission, the Basij name changed again from 'force' back to 'organization' in 2009.[37]

One example of these specialized groups that contributed to the growth of the Basij is the Professor's Basij Organization (PBO). Originally established in 2001, the PBO sought to employ veteran professors from the Iran-Iraq War as well as increase cultural influence.[38] But in 2005 the organization expanded dramatically with the election of PBO member Ahmadinejad to the Presidency and the subsequent appointment of PBO members to over half of the cabinet positions.[39] Ahmadinejad's term led to a purge of professors and consolidation of power for the PBO with 90% of deans fired and replaced.[40] This created professional incentives for all professors to join the PBO, so membership ballooned from 1,200 in 2004 to 20,000 in 2010.[41] The PBO exerted strong social coercion in Iranian academia, a front in the 'soft war' to confront

any dissention as well as normalize indoctrination as a matter of nation-wide 'humanities' studies.[42]

Another indication of growing Basij power is growing political power. In 2001 the Basij explicitly mobilized to support allied candidates in the Tehran city council, resulting in winning a majority of seats. [43] Basij involvement in politics paid great dividends in the 2004 parliamentary election, with 91 of 152 new members from Basij or IRGC backgrounds.[44] Basij also played an instrumental role in the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005.[45] This continued in the 2008 parliamentary election and the 2009 presidential election resulting in another win for Ahmadinejad.[46]

In concert with its growing size and political influence, Basij wealth also grew. Its formal budget expanded with increasing sponsorship by the Iranian government. In 2005, the Basij received over $350 million just for security battalion equipment.[47] The Basij overall budget ballooned, increasing 200% in 2008, and an additional 200% in 2009.[48] But much of the Basij wealth came from a privatization of former state assets given to Basij associates starting in 2010. Out of 70 billion dollars in privatized assets, 86% was transferred to pseudo-state entities including the IRGC and Basij.[49] In this way privatization efforts transferred massive amounts of wealth to IRGC, Basij, and their allies.[50] During the same period the Mehr Iranian Economic Investment Company, a Basij subsidiary, became one of the most active entities on the Tehran Stock Exchange.[51]

The Basij gained much greater status, rising from a ready and willing state servant to a major political actor. The ambition and sense of entitlement of Basij Iran-Iraq War veterans drove its consolidation of wealth was as a manifestation of social contract under which the state owed the Basij.[52] According to IRGC and Basij mythology, "they won the Islamic Revolution on

the streets of Iran and fought the Iran-Iraq war on the front, and consequentially have the right to rule Iran."[53] This period demonstrates how Basij leaders secured their ruler status, as individuals rose up the ranks to fill government posts and shape policy friendly to the organization.[54] They argued for their natural fitness to rule as much as serve Iran. Even during the Iran-Iraq War and Revolution, the IRGC and Basij recognized no civilian authority aside from the supreme leader. Even then, because of the chaotic nature of the environment, Basij leaders established an institutional norm of autonomy in using force.[55] The Basij along with the Guard see themselves as peers and co-founders of the revolution, along with the clerics. This drives the Basij to resist any civilian control besides the supreme leader.[56] However, the consolidation of power and wealth exacerbated the decaying image of the Basij, widening the gap between the Basij and the population.

The evolving role and power of the Basij bred resentment in the population. The modern Basij organization conflicts with the image of the legacy Basij. The populist beginning of the Basij bought respect for the member's patriotic sacrifice. But recent Basij wealth, power, and oppression of the population contradicts that image. In a way, the Basij evolved from the organization of the oppressed into an organization for oppressing. This dissonance provokes several fissures between the Basij and population: perceived materialistic, opportunist motivations, growing disparity in economic status, and perceived hypocritical and repressive methods.

Fissure: From Idealist to Materialistic Opportunist

The growing perception of the Basij leaders as hypocritical, and materialistic opportunists stimulates popular anger. Although the post-war measures to support and empower the Basij met reconstruction and regime power consolidation goals, it unavoidably changed the motivations of

members toward increasingly material rewards. After the Iran-Iraq War, new laws provided many formal benefits including avoidance of mandatory military conscription, career opportunities, preferential treatment in university enrollment, loan access, increased welfare access, subsidized housing, and sponsored pilgrimages.[57] Basij members enjoyed other more informal benefit also, including relative immunity from criticism or harassment from other Basij.[58] And given the continued recruitment of poor youth, the Basij offer appealing prospects of joining an empowering social network.[59] And the more active and more loyal individuals become in the Basij, the more benefits they receive.[60]

These materialistic motivations for current Basij members appear widely acknowledged among both the Iranian population as well as the Basij.[61] According to a 2005 official Basij survey, 79% of Basij members said the benefits of a Basij membership card influenced their decision to join.[62] Another recent study suggests "personal relationships and social benefits are the primary drivers" of modern Basij membership.[63] The interview of one recent Basij recruit supports this argument: he asserted that the majority of modern recruits are motivated by benefits not beliefs.[64] In fact, in a 2007 survey of Basij members 66% said non-ideological reasons motivated friends to join, whereas 96% of the same members said ideology was their primary motivator, indicating that while non-ideological motivations have risen, an expectation of ideological motivation remains.[65] And although the Basij accepts volunteers selectively, vetting is informal and far from intensive.[66] The Basij are not pure mercenaries, and still pursue ideological motivations, especially in the marginalized traditional demographic. However, Basij legitimacy as ideological purist has undeniably declined.[67]

This conflicted image between the traditional ideological motivations and more modern materialistic motivations manifests in several ways. Even early on, a 1994 poll of Basij indicated

55% believed their prestige had fallen since the Iran-Iraq War.[68] Furthermore, despite renewed focus on recruiting young Basij to replenish the ranks, and maintain the image of a popular and youthful organization, the Basij struggle to attract their targeted percentages of young people. According to recent official Basij numbers, membership of children and teenagers fell 20% below the 50% target. Given Iran's large young population, these numbers indicate a lack of wide appeal.[69] For the young that do join, the traditional Basij demographic still holds. According to recent though limited surveys, Basij recruits came from poorer, rural backgrounds from religious families.[70] Additionally, reports of lackluster Basij performance also suggests a negative Basij image and declining motivation to perform duties. During the 2009 protest of the presidential election, some Basij failed to perform suppression or counter-protest responsibilities.[71] This hesitancy provides credence to weaker materialistic motivations among the Basij, or reluctance for individuals to invite distain of friends and family among the wider population.

Fissure: Growing Economic Disparity

Another fissure between the Basij and the general Iranian population is the growing wealth disparity. And although many of the Basij benefits trace back to social welfare provided after the Iran-Iraq war, they grew beyond welfare projects into a patronage system exclusively available to Basij members. In 2003, by law, Basij members receive preferential hiring treatment for government positions, and one source estimates that Basij members constitute 65% of Iranian government employees.[72] The Basij enjoy the same preferential treatment in higher education admission with 40% of undergraduate and 20% of post-graduate positions by law reserved for Basij members.[73] And although most part-time Basij serve unpaid, some part-time members do receive a small salary—not insignificant in the context of Iran's troubled economy.[74]

Beyond benefits to individual members, the Basij organization also controls enormous wealth. The Basij welfare organization, the Basij Cooperative Foundation, evolved from a veteran-oriented welfare organization to a conglomerate that monopolizes in several sectors of the Iranian economy. As of 2007, the Basij Cooperative Foundation owned as many as 1,400 companies. It became the biggest Iranian private bank, and dominated the real-estate market and construction industry in Iran.[75]

Contrasting this wealth to the fragile position of the Iranian economy and the resulting troubles for the average Iranian, understandably the population increasingly resent the Basij. For example, unemployment in Iran is between 20% and 30% for Iranian's without the Basij benefits.[76] In this context, the Basij claim it uses its wealth to support the population rings hollow. The benefits of members creates resentment from non-members. This image of the Basij deliberately amassing wealth at the expense of the population "created a popular opposition movement against them [the Basij]."[77] The gas subsidy protest in fall of 2019 provides the most recent and stark example of population recognition of the disparity. The announcements the government would cut gas subsidies to the entire population led to violent demonstrations across most provinces. Protestors attacked symbols of the state, including military bases, gas stations, and banks.[78] While the gas subsidy reduction provoked the demonstrations against the state, anger against the Basij also played a role. Therefore, the original popularity of the Basij due to its Iran-Iraq War legacy has eroded, while the Basij wealth grows and the "the populist façade wears off."[79]

Fissure: Hypocritical Morality Policing and Dissent Repression

Another fissure between the Basij and the population is resentment over morality policing and protest repression methods. After the Iran-Iraq War, the Basij embraced policing the

population using checkpoints or street patrols for religious infractions such as inappropriate mixed company, alcohol, music, and female dress.[80] Iran employs young and underqualified Basij as enforcers for this practice, although common in Islamic and authoritarian Middle East regimes. Basij morality police include both part-time and full-time volunteers, about two-thirds of whom do not have high school diplomas.[81] Although the Basij do set standards for selection and require a minimal two-day training, the local and decentralized nature of the Basij means it fails to enforce uniform standards.[82] This breeds resentment among older, better educated, and even religious people. Added to the perceptions of materialistic motivations of modern Basij members, this method of morality policing appears particularly hypocritical and incites resentment.[83] Some Basij leadership have recognized the negative impact of the morality police on prestige: in 2008, an IRGC commander wanted some morality policing responsibilities transferred to law enforcement.[84]

Compounding this resentment, the Basij suppress protests with brutal heavy-handed methods. The Basij capability and role in protest repression grew over the years, so did the scale and its brutality. Several early examples of Basij brutality include: Qazvin in 1993, Islamshahr in 1994, Tehran student protest in 1999 and 2003, and the 2007 gas prices protest.[85] The government responded to the large-scale protests against fraud in the 2009 presidential election by mobilizing the Basij, who employed great brutality that earned the Basij much more popular resentment.[86] Besides Basij brutality, the people despised the Basij as a politically partisan militia repressing its political opponents. These methods "cause a hatred of the Basijis."[87] In the recent 2019 protest movement security forces killed more than 200 people.[88]

As the Basij become increasingly politically partisan, they provoke more anger. As early as the 1996 parliamentary election, Basij leaders encouraged their members to vote for

conservative candidates, which included IRGC members.[89] It contributed to the 2009 protest, as many saw it as "stolen."[90] In the 2009 election, opposition candidates and supporters criticized the apparent Basij support of partisan politics, provoking anger and stoking protest.[91] The combination of scale, Basij brutality, and appearance of Basij partisan control and profit from the election sealed the perception among many Iranians of the Basij responsibility for their suffering.[92] Katzman argues that the way the Basij is "pro-active, rather than reactive, in suppressing popular unrest," reinforces this perception.[93] When things do get hot, the Basij operates in an autonomous and automatic way to suppress dissention, without orders from regime.[94] This autonomy extends to the base level, where commander's seems free to run policy at will with little uniformity.[95]

Conclusion

The degraded public view of the Basij represents a weaknesses in an otherwise dominating state security apparatus. The Basij itself is not weak. Its size, wealth, political power, and penetration of Iranian society gives the Basij wide influence in coercing or co-opting the Iranian population. But this domination of Iranian society created fissures and increasing unpopularity. Its legacy of patriotism and sacrifice has fallen to a new image of exploitation and oppression; the legacy of poor commoners now competes with the image of increasingly rich and powerful oppressors. The Basij evolved from serving as guardians of the state, to become the state itself. Now the Basij support of the regime seems based less on the ideas of the 1979 Revolution, and more based on mutual survival. The Iranian regime could not survive without the Basij, and the Basij could not survive without the Iranian regime.

This conflicted Basij image and new reality has several implications. First, the increasingly close marriage of the Basij to the regime restricts the Basij from negotiations or

concessions with popular Iranian protests. This will lead to escalating future violent conflicts between the Basij and the Iranian population. Second, since Basij loyalty and effectiveness depends heavily on the material benefits of membership, any reduction of Basij benefits to rank and file members would seriously undercut Basij strength. Third, should Basij material benefits become threatened, the Basij could fail to overcome popular resentment of its repressive methods and wealth disparity. However, fourth, the Basij legacy as a populist militia cannot be discounted. As long as the Basij focuses internally, Basij popular legacy and popularity will likely continue to decline. However, an external threat such as a U.S. military action risks re-focusing the Basij externally to revive their populist legacy.

Endnotes

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