























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.<sup>57</sup> Basij members enjoyed other more informal benefit also, including relative immunity from criticism or harassment from other Basij.<sup>58</sup> And given the continued recruitment of poor youth, the Basij offer appealing prospects of joining an empowering social network.<sup>59</sup> And the more active and more loyal individuals become in the Basij, the more benefits they receive.<sup>60</sup>

These materialistic motivations for current Basij members appear widely acknowledged among both the Iranian population as well as the Basij.<sup>61</sup> According to a 2005 official Basij survey, 79% of Basij members said the benefits of a Basij membership card influenced their decision to join.<sup>62</sup> Another recent study suggests “personal relationships and social benefits are the primary drivers” of modern Basij membership.<sup>63</sup> The interview of one recent Basij recruit supports this argument: he asserted that the majority of modern recruits are motivated by benefits not beliefs.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> And although the Basij accepts volunteers selectively, vetting is informal and far from intensive.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> This hesitancy provides credence to weaker materialistic motivations among the Basij, or reluctance for individuals to invite disdain 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.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

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.<sup>75</sup>

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.<sup>76</sup> 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]."<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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."<sup>79</sup>

#### 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup>

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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> 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.”<sup>87</sup> In the recent 2019 protest movement security forces killed more than 200 people.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup> It contributed to the 2009 protest, as many saw it as “stolen.”<sup>90</sup> In the 2009 election, opposition candidates and supporters criticized the apparent Basij support of partisan politics, provoking anger and stoking protest.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> Katzman argues that the way the Basij is “pro-active, rather than reactive, in suppressing popular unrest,” reinforces this perception.<sup>93</sup> When things do get hot, the Basij operates in an autonomous and automatic way to suppress dissent, without orders from regime.<sup>94</sup> This autonomy extends to the base level, where commander’s seems free to run policy at will with little uniformity.<sup>95</sup>

## 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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