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TAKING BACK THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The IRGC Provincial Guard's Mission to Re-Islamize Iran

During 2019, the Islamic Republic of Iran erupted in nearly simultaneous public protests in cities across the country. Thousands of citizens stopped traffic along major highways, marched, and shouted complaints about the gasoline price hike that had ostensibly sparked the demonstrations in the first place. They also aired their broader complaints against the leadership. Indeed, more than forty years after the country's Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime has become more repressive than ever, with an apparatus that attempts to reach into every facet of life and society. The protests, for their part, were brutally quelled through force. This was a familiar experience for Iranians seeking to express their displeasure.

Scholars and journalists have produced a growing body of literature on political repression in Iran and the regime's oppressive tools, including the police and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in general.[1]

But these studies focus mainly on the IRGC's military and security role and its five official divisions: the IRGC Ground Forces (IRGC-GF), Aerospace Force (IRGC-ASF), Navy (IRGCN), Qods Force (IRGC-QF),[2] and Basij organization.[3] Only a handful of studies cover the IRGC's role in *political* suppression and maintaining state control, leaving a gap in the current literature regarding the tools the organization would use to put down a major uprising, one more widespread and forceful than the 2019 protests.

Specifically, the IRGC Provincial Guard (IRGC-PG; *Sepah-e Ostani*), which was established in 2008, merits a closer look.[4] Various questions arise: Why and how was the IRGC-PG developed? How are its units structured? What is the relationship between the Provincial Guard's chain of command and that of the IRGC-GF and the Basij? What are the main foundations of the Provincial Guard? All these answers point to the more significant question: How does the Provincial Guard help the regime control society in the face of mass dissatisfaction and resentment?

This paper aims to fill the gap just described—through an examination of the Provincial Guard's establishment, transformation, structures, and functions, as well as by probing the ramifications for the Islamic Republic should the PG continue to reach so deeply into so much of Iranian society.

EVOLUTION OF THE IRGC

The Provincial Guard can best be understood through the lens of the broader IRGC. This is because the same political calculations that first shaped the IRGC are mirrored in the PG's own complicated structure today. This complex structure is intentional and necessary, according to its creators, meant to mold Iran and its people just as its parent IRGC does.

Shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the revolutionary regime created the IRGC on May 5, 1979, to protect itself against a possible coup by Iran's conventional army, the Artesh. At the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, in September 1980, the IRGC was rapidly expanded to include ten departments. It incorporated the National Mobilization (*Basij-e Melli*), which was created independently several months earlier, on April 30, 1980. The Basij became one of the IRGC's units and was renamed the "Downtrodden or Oppressed Mobilization" (*Basij-e Mostazafan*) in 1981. Moreover, the war necessitated the division of the Guard into three branches (air force, ground force, and navy), parallel to the Artesh, on September 17, 1985. The IRGC could no longer simply perform the function of protecting the clergy given the war against a formidable external adversary.

Despite calls by some politicians, including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, for the IRGC to be dissolved and merged with the Artesh at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Guard was instead expanded into five branches thanks to support from its newly selected leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Both the Artesh and the IRGC fell under the coordination of the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS).[5]

Since 1990, the IRGC has added one new branch, the Qods (Jerusalem) Force, which was shaped from the ashes of several bodies involved in exporting the revolution, such as the IRGC Office of Liberation Movements—which supported liberation movements around the world and in particular those of Palestinian groups seeking to destroy Israel—and the IRGC Ramazan Headquarters, established in 1982 to coordinate IRGC operations inside Iraq, drawing mainly on Iraqi Shia and Kurdish opposition groups.[6] The Qods Force was established, in short, to implement the regime's regional and international policies, export its revolution, and defend its regional interests.[7]

Closer to home, the Downtrodden Basij unit was upgraded and renamed the Basij Resistance Force.[8] The goal was twofold. First was to build a social base for Ayatollah Khamenei, who suffered from a lack of religious and charismatic authority held by his

predecessor, the Islamic Republic's founding leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Second was to maintain the regime's social and political order through moral policing and the suppression of internal dissidents. An account from one enforcer indicates how this could play out:

> It was just to have fun to tease a rich *sousol* (effeminate) kid of north Tehran. With some of my other Basiji friends, we jumped in a car and drove to Sharake Gharb or Miydan Mohseni, we put a stop checkpoint sign up, and annoyed "rich kids" in their *kharji* [foreign] cars, and if one had a beautiful girl in his car, we teased him even more. Sometimes, if we didn't like one, we cut his hair to belittle him before the girl.[9]

To achieve the regime's political goals, the Basij structure was dramatically expanded, including through the creation of Basij Resistance Areas to manage provincial-level Basij forces. For the purpose of suppressing internal unrest, the Basij also established security/military battalions called Ashura and al-Zahra, for male and female Basij members respectively, from 1991 onward. The Basij was a major tool in Ayatollah Khamenei's domestic political repertoire in the second decade after the 1979 revolution—namely, the control of pragmatists (embodied in the Kargozaran Party) and reformists (*eslahtalaban*).

A NEW THREAT CALCULUS FOR THE REGIME

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2005, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, changed the Islamic Republic's threat perceptions and "accelerated the pace of Iranian military change at the cognitive, doctrinal and organizational levels."[10] Iran's old enemies—the Taliban along the eastern border and Iraq's Baath regime to the west—were replaced by the United States, a technologically superior power that President George W. Bush declared to be part of the "axis of evil" in a 2002 speech.

To prepare for this new dynamic, "Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters," a high-level military command with equal status to the AFGS, was tasked with redesigning Iran's military doctrine based on the threat of facing a superior military with a high sensitivity to casualties.[11] Unlike the AFGS, which is more of an administrative headquarters responsible for managing and controlling Iran's armed forces during peacetime (e.g., coordinating training and logistics), Khatam al-Anbia is an operational command that takes control of Iran's armed forces during war.

In a speech to Iran's military commanders around the year 2000, Ayatollah Khamenei said that "military strategists should formulate, design, and prepare their warfare doctrine based on the possibility of confrontation with the United States. The first precondition to design a suitable warfare plan is to hold the belief that one can create such a new plan."[12] In addition to the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters, the Artesh and the IRGC created their own strategic research centers to help redesign Iran's military doctrine. Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari was appointed head of the IRGC Center for Strategic Research with the task of developing new plans for possible confrontations with the United States, as well as countering new and emerging security threats to the Islamic Republic, such as "colored revolutions," based on civil disobedience and other nonviolent means.

Iranian military strategists were shocked by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and particularly by the rapid collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime—a regime Iran had failed to defeat during an eight-year war. In their study of the 2003 Iraq war, Iranian strategists observed certain elements that contributed to the quick U.S. victory, mostly associated with the superiority of U.S. military weaponry and capabilities. But also, the U.S. and coalition military strategy defeated the Iraqi armed forces by bypassing areas of dense population, swiftly reaching the capital (Baghdad), and causing the collapse of enemy resistance.[13]

Based on these lessons, and focused specifically on a possible confrontation with the United States, the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters produced a new doctrine, called the "territorial defense doctrine," based on Iran's strengths and weakness. While Iran's military was technologically inferior to the U.S. military, Iran was perceived to have the upper hand in terms of "geography, strategic depth, and public willingness to accept casualties."[14]

After the new doctrine was adopted around 2005, Iran operated in a gray zone between war and peace, to challenge the United States while managing risk, as Michael Eisenstadt has written.[15] It also used tactics to compensate for its lack of advanced military capabilities, such as deploying a large number of forces in the battlefield. Back during the Iran-Iraq War, the Islamic Republic successfully used "martyrdom seekers," generally young, religious, fanatical Basij members ready to risk their lives for the nation. And up until the present day, Iranian strategists want to ensure that any military conflict with the United States, so long as it does not seek regime change, will be as quick as possible. (If, however, the United States appears to be attempting an overthrow, Iran will seek to resist as long as it can, imposing high costs and risks, especially given U.S. society's aversion to casualties.)

Deception is another critical element in asymmetric warfare, since the United States, in particular, carries great technological competencies. Under the doctrine of passive defense, Iran has developed a series of strategies for deceiving enemies and enhancing battlefield survivability through the strengthening of infrastructure and protection of sensitive locations, such as nuclear sites or oil refineries. To implement these policies, the Islamic Republic created a passive defense organization that operates under the AFGS.[16]

The 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel is a good example of this phenomenon: when an inferior military force endured a massive war with a technologically superior army, primarily by using asymmetrical means such as firing large numbers of rockets, conducting a massive psychological operation, and deceiving the Israeli military by concealing its arsenal and forces in underground bunkers and in populated urban areas (thereby using Lebanon's people as human shields).[17] Hezbollah suffered heavy casualties but in doing so amplified an ideology that portrays dying as martyrdom.

Another element of Iran's new military doctrine involves a tactic known as layered and flat defense. Unlike the Iran-Iraq War, in which the land conflict was mainly centered in the border areas where all forces fought along one lengthy front, Iran still anticipates that war with the United States would be dispersed throughout the country. To prepare for a situation in which the enemy rapidly moves deep into the country, Iran's military doctrine, adapted in the fifteen years since its creation, was based on a multi-layered defense approach, one that necessitated the creation of the Provincial Guard.

Four Layers of the Iran-U.S. Battlefield

The Iran-U.S. battlefield should have four layers, the territorial defense doctrine asserted: one beyond Iran's borders, in other countries (IRGC-QF); one along Iran's border (Artesh); one scattered throughout Iran's interior (IRGC-GF); and one operating in Iranian provinces, especially in urban areas, making each province a separate battlefield (IRGC-PG).

Thus, as set forth in the doctrine, the first line of defense should be the application of the Qods Force and its proxy groups in foreign theaters where the enemy operates. Accordingly, after the collapse of Saddam's regime, the Qods Force became involved in deterring Iran's enemies by creating a quagmire in Iraq for U.S. military forces. In addition, the Qods Force bolstered the "nodes of resistance" against perceived Western enemies. Expanded proxy forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and Syria, and Afghan and

Pakistani Shia groups can be understood through the framework of this doctrine. The Qods Force is first and foremost a tool of the regime's deterrence policy: it foments instability abroad, collecting military and strategic intelligence, and conducting foreign military operations in the backyards of Iran's enemies.

The Artesh is the second line of defense, positioned mainly along Iran's borders. Control of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Ground Forces (IRIA-GF) was divided to include several regional and operational headquarters whose mission was to defend their territory against any external military invasion or incursion. The Artesh distributed its forces along each border. Also, each IRIA-GF division was transformed into three independent mobile-combat brigades and infantry battalions as a means of forming "new quick-reaction units," more agile and effective in using unconventional warfare tactics to counter threats.[18]

The IRGC-GF would be a third layer of defense located deeper within the country. Its mission: to assist the Artesh ground forces in defending the country and halt invading enemy forces. The IRGC-GF—the backbone of the Guard—has eleven regional commands throughout the country, with each responsible for the IRGC land brigades and battalions in their respective areas of responsibility. The IRGC brigades and units under each headquarters would delay an enemy advance, attrite the enemy's combat power as its forces pass through each layer, and defend key terrain and critical lines of communication, such as major roads.[19] The main objective is to defend the Islamic Republic against the possibility of high-intensity warfare and low-intensity challenges such as insurgency or civil war.

The IRGC-GF is also responsible for countering "armed semi-hard threats," such as insurgent groups, and securing political order should it be threatened by mass uprising.[20] Since 2001, it has fought against the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Kurdistan—both the Iranian province and sometimes even in Iraq—and against Sunni Baluchi groups such as Jundallah in Sistan and Baluchestan province.

Under the Shahid Shushtari Plan—so named in 2009 after Nour Ali Shustari, an IRGC-GF official killed in a terrorist attack—the IRGC-GF has hired locals who are more familiar with each region's geography and population and has also involved tribal elders in implementing a "Sustainable Population Security Plan." According to this plan, the IRGC recruits tribesmen as members of the "special" Basij and grants them control of security in their respective regions. Because of massive unemployment and poverty, people are more than happy to work with the IRGC even under temporary contracts. Especially since the Kurdistan and Baluchestan regions are characterized by tribal society, some tribes have been coopted by the regime. Under this plan, the tribal head introduces several tribesmen to the Guard, which apportions jobs. While this arrangement can boost the tribes' status in the patronage system, it also creates intertribal competition regarding the share of IRGC-facilitated security roles in their regions.

The fourth layer of defense would be the Basij forces, to be located in urban areas and meant to support the IRGC-GF through several missions, including anti-helicopter-borne operations, passive defense, and neighborhood defense.[21] According to former IRGC head Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the role of the Basij in Iran's new military doctrine is protecting neighborhoods so that the IRGC-GF can freely maneuver against the enemy.[22] In Syria, this strategy was applied beginning in 2013 through the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces, according to Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamdani, an IRGC-GF officer who was eventually killed there.

The regime incorporated Basij military forces into the IRGC-GF in 2007 to smooth coordination between the two groups. Under the IRGC-GF, the Basij created a new series of combat infantry battalions, called the Imam Hussein battalions, that consist mostly of higher-level Basijis.

CREATION OF THE PROVINCIAL GUARD

The IRGC has one Provincial Guard command in each of Iran's provinces except Tehran, which received two Provincial Guard units, one for the city of Tehran, and a second for other cities in Tehran province. Right now, the IRGC has a total of thirty-two Provincial Guard units throughout the country.

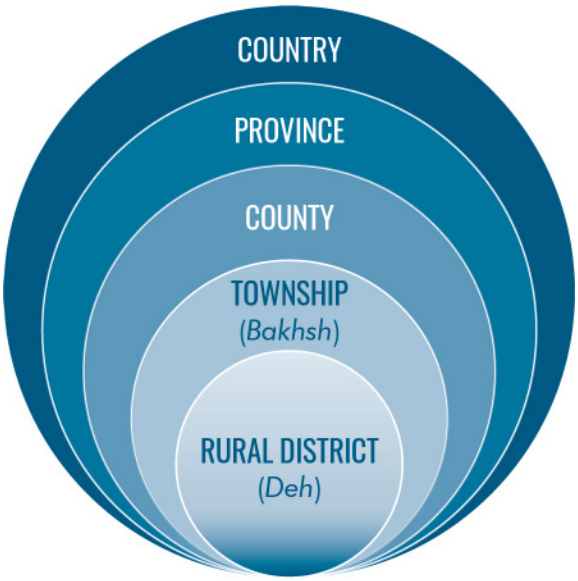
Horizontally, each Provincial Guard unit mimics the structure of the IRGC and is therefore composed of three main branches: military command, counter-intelligence, and Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader. The Organization for the Protection of Intelligence (*Sazeman Hefazat-e Ettelaat*) is primarily responsible for protecting the IRGC's personnel against both physical and moral threats and identifying foreign spies, while the Supreme Leader's representative focuses on indoctrinating, and mobilizing, the IRGC and the Basij. The ultimate goal, of course, is to keep the IRGC and the Basij subordinate to the Supreme Leader.

The Provincial Guard has several directorates, as does traditional military staff. These include: executive, planning and budget, health, training, legal affairs, logistics, security and popular defense, social, cultural and artistic, political department, public relations, intelligence, cyberspace, and the Basij social strata department.

According to Iran's administrative divisions, each province is divided into several counties. Iran has 437 counties, and the IRGC has created 502 IRGC-Basij regions.[23] Just for example, in South Khorasan province, the Ansar al-Reza Guard (*Sepah-e Ansar al-Reza*) has created twelve IRGC-Basij regions for the control of eleven counties.[24]

Furthermore, each county is divided into several districts comprising multiple cities and rural districts (see figure 1). The Provincial Guard has created at least a few IRGC-Basij districts for each city in its

FIGURE 1. IRANIAN ADMINISTRATION DIVISIONS



Source: "Making Sense of Iran's Administrative System and Divisions," *Nabz-Nameh*, November 3, 2016, https://bit.ly/34QbLAa.

provinces. For 3,915 urban and rural areas throughout Iran, 8,823 IRGC-Basij districts have been formed.[25] For example, the Ansar al-Reza Guard has created 118 Basij districts in South Khorasan province, which has 90 rural and urban areas within which to implement its policies.[26]

The creation of the Provincial Guard has helped the IRGC extend its presence throughout the country and broaden its influence through a wide range of missions in various realms: educational, training, cultural, social, construction, defense, security, and disciplinary (for the IRGC structure, see figure 2).

The Provincial Guard controls and manages Basij bases, units, and associations, which are dispersed throughout society. According to Brig. Gen. Gholam Reza Soleimani, the IRGC controlled 54,000 Basij bases in 2020, more than 16,000 of which were created after 2009.[27] Out of those 54,000, 23,000

are located in mosques.[28] In addition to these bases, the Basij has created 40,000 Basij strata associations and 60,000 "pupil" Basij units in 105,000 schools throughout the country. The Ansar al-Reza Guard managed 2,397 Basij bases as well as 82 Basij associations throughout South Khorasan province alone.

In addition to restructuring Iran's military organization and creating a layered system of defense, the 2005 doctrine included something called the mosaic doctrine, which divided the country into several sections, each of which featured autonomous IRGC units. The plan was for each "tile" in this mosaic to remain wholly sufficient unto itself should the central command and control be broken. To integrate the plan, the IRGC created the Provincial Guard in 2008, operating in thirty-two mosaics or blocs, as of spring 2020, with separate commands for each province. Under the control and supervision of the IRGC commander, the Provincial Guard became responsible for managing and utilizing all IRGC and Basij members in each province (for the the IRGC Provincial Guard structure, see figure 3).

FIGURE 2. IRGC STRUCTURE

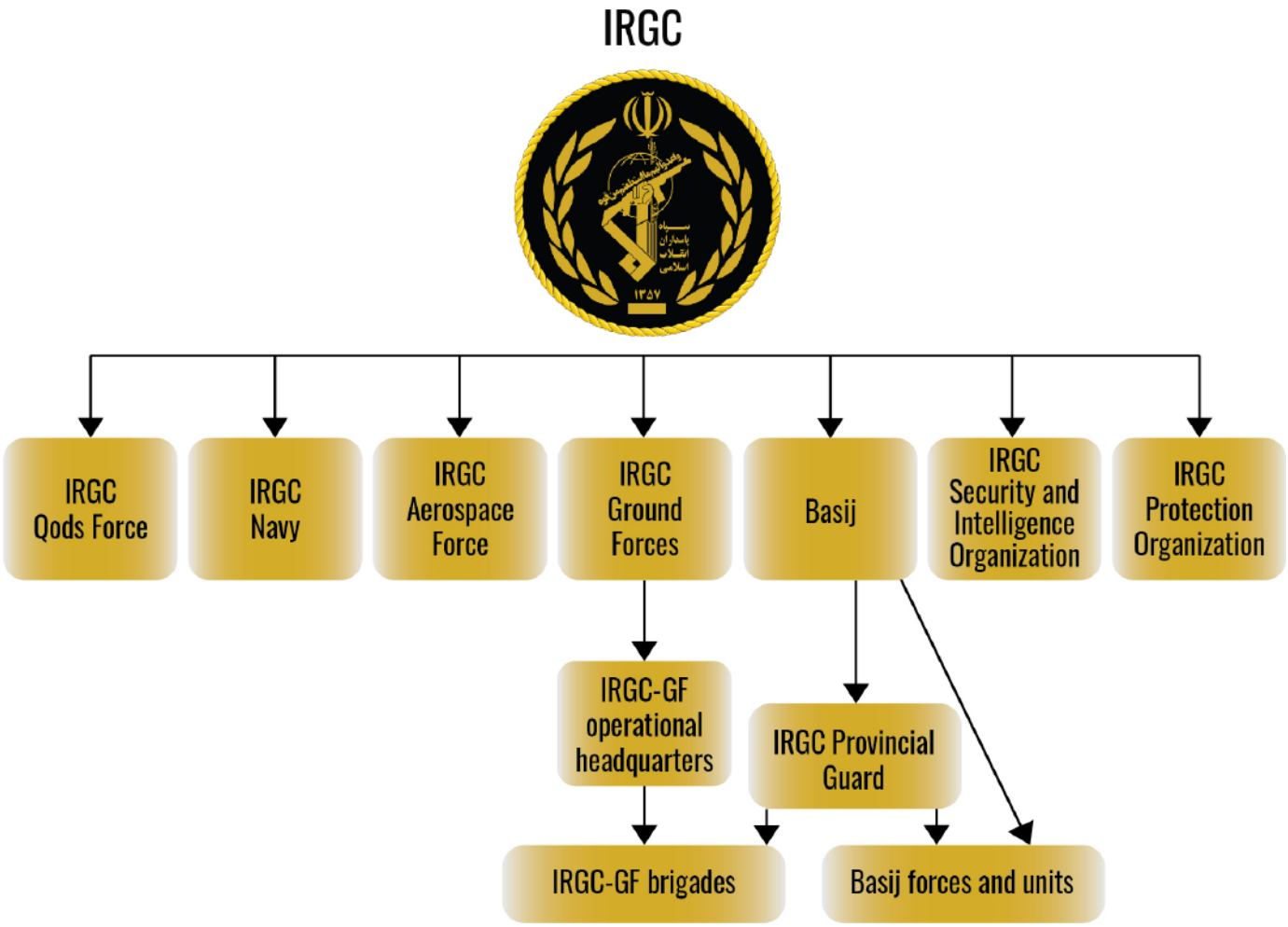
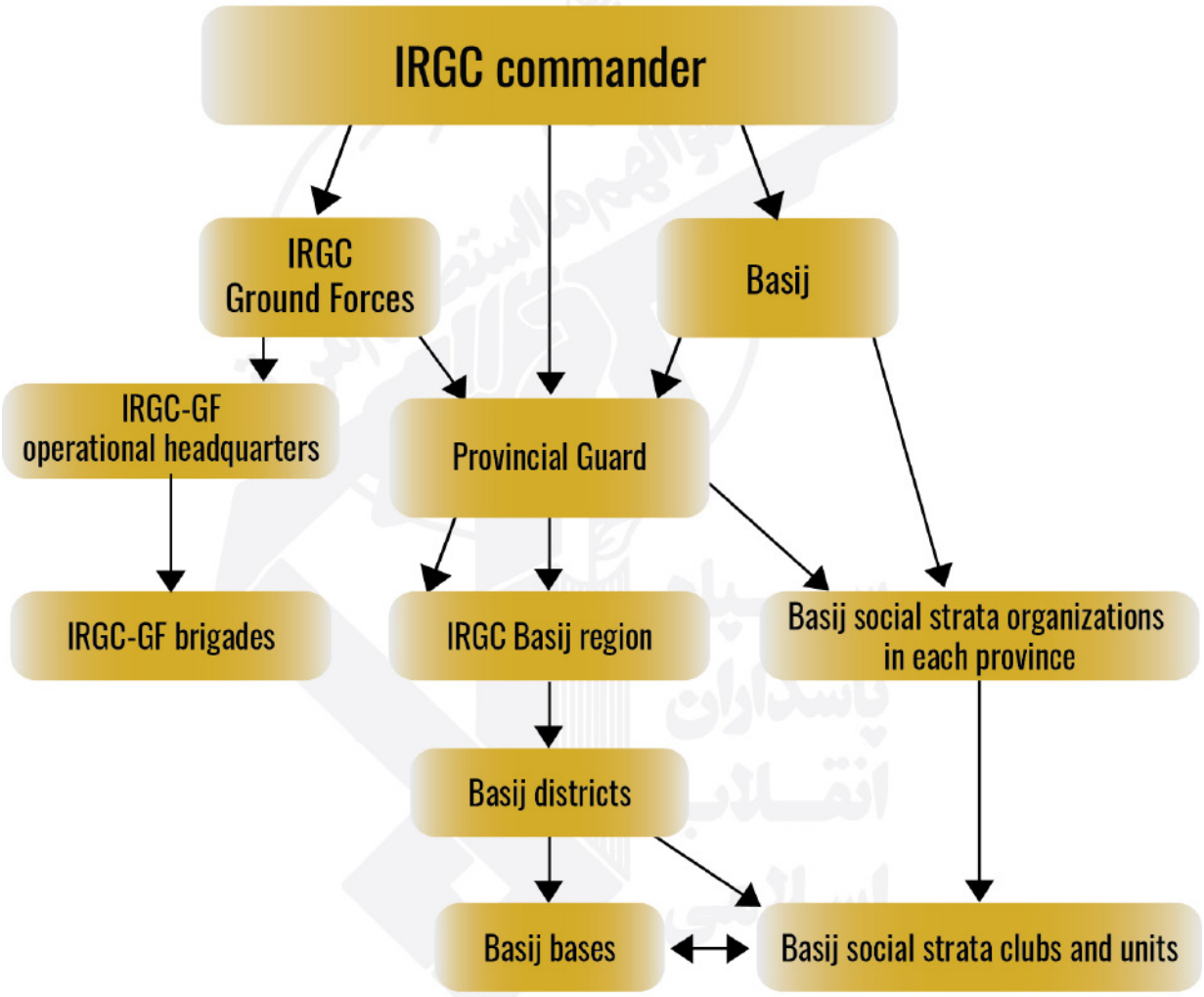


FIGURE 3. IRGC PROVINCIAL GUARD STRUCTURE



The first Provincial Guard unit was established on June 21, 2008, in Iran's East Azerbaijan province under the name Sepah Ashura, or "Ashura Corps." All IRGC-GF units in the province as well as each Basij area fell under the control of the Provincial Guard. In some provinces in which the IRGC-GF lacked any units, the IRGC would relocate one of its brigades there. For example, the IRGC relocated the 2nd Saheb al-Zaman Infantry Brigade from Kerman to Hormozgan province in the south along the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman to form the Imam Sadjad Provincial Guard.[29]

The main goals in creating the Provincial Guard were eliminating parallel command and control, centralizing forces (Basij and IRGC) under one command in each province to ensure improved coordination, and better preparing the Guard "against any attempts to decapitate the regime, such as in what might occur should U.S. or Israeli military forces strike the Islamic Republic."[30]

A FURTHER SHIFT INWARD

Elected president in 2008, the same year the IRGC-PG was established, Barack Obama adjusted U.S. Middle East policy toward increased engagement and negotiation with the Islamic Republic, thus dramatically reducing the threat of an American military invasion. In response, Iran gradually shifted the Provincial Guard's focus away from external war to internal security.

Each provincial command headquarters became responsible for the security and defense within its provincial boundaries, while at the same time certain IRGC-GF headquarters held responsibility for several provinces, reflecting the hierarchical system (see table 1). According to Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, who was appointed head of the IRGC on September 1, 2007, the Provincial Guard would have a broad range of missions in the realms of security, intelligence, politics, culture, social issues, and all else, with the exception of direct defense against hard threats.[31]

In soft war, the Provincial Guard would guide and use the Basij and IRGC forces in countering soft threats by employing IRGC-Basij resistance regions. However, when the country is facing semi-hard threats, including insurgency, only the IRGC-GF units (brigades and divisions) in each province are to be utilized by the IRGC regional headquarters. Moreover, when countering hard threats, the Provincial Guard is completely under regional control of the IRGC-GF. In these scenarios, the IRGC regional headquarters will manage, guide, and utilize the Provincial Guard units.

THE BASIJ: FROM BLUNT FORCE TO MULTIFACETED FORCE

Through the IRGC's shift, the Basij has morphed into a specialized organization primarily responsible for facilitating cultural defense and "domestic depth." The Basij became responsible for managing and guiding all the cultural and social activities of the Guard and its branches, including educational, propaganda, media, and cyber missions. Hossein Taeb, who was appointed head of the then-named Basij Resistance Force on July 14, 2008, focused mainly on countering cultural threats, thereby reducing the Basij military role.[32] Although the general perception was that the Basij had been losing importance since the reorientation of its mission, the force's role in suppressing the 2009 Green Movement proved its ongoing merit in safeguarding the survival of the Islamic Republic.

The growth and durability of the Green Movement, which objected to the fraudulent presidential election in 2009, led to a transformation of the missions of the Provincial Guard units and the Basij. Created as a tool of territorial military defense initially, now the Provincial Guard units were modified to be more security-based organizations responsible for state political control.

A few months after quashing the Green Movement, the Basij Resistance Force was officially transformed again, into the Downtrodden Basij Organization (DBO), in order to focus more on tackling social and cultural threats to the regime, through the expansion of the Basij branches. In October 2009, Brig. Gen. Muhammad Naqdi was appointed head of the DBO to reorganize and strengthen the Basij.

By changing the Basij from a force to an organization, the regime made the Basij responsible for supporting the IRGC Provincial Guard units in the areas of planning, budgeting, and logistics, while also evaluating the Provincial Guard's programs. The IRGC-PG units are thus under direct control of the IRGC commander, but the Basij is responsible for planning the PG's missions, supporting them logistically, and inspecting their functions.

After 2009, the Basij's deputy of operation was renamed "the popular resistance deputy" to imply that Basij members are ordinary civilians who defend

TABLE 1. JURISDICTIONS FOR IRGC PROVINCIAL GUARD AND IRGC GROUND FORCES OPERATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

	PROVINCE	IRGC PROVINCIAL GUARD	IRGC-GF OPERATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
1	Kurdistan	Sepah-e Beit al-Muqaddas	Hamze-ye Sayyed al-Shohada
2	West Azerbaijan	Sepah-e Shohada	
3	Ardabil	Sepah-e Hazrat-e Abbas	Ashura
4	East Azerbaijan	Sepah-e Ashura	
5	Zanjan	Sepah-e Ansar al-Mahdi	
6	Hamedan	Sepah-e Ansar al-Hossein	Najaf-e Ashraf
7	Ilam	Sepah-e Amir al-Mouminin	
8	Kermanshah	Sepah-e Nabi Akram	
9	Markazi	Sepah-e Ruhollah	Saheb al-Zaman
10	Qazvin	Sepah-e Saheb al-Amr	
11	Qom	Sepah-e Ali bin Abu Taleb	
12	Semnan	Sepah-e Ghaem al-Muhammad	
13	Gilan	Sepah-e Qods	Ghadir
14	Golestan	Sepah-e Neynava	
15	Mazandaran	Sepah-e Karbala	
16	Khuzestan	Sepah-e Vali-ye Asr	Karbala
17	Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad	Sepah-e Fath	
18	Lorestan	Sepah-e Abolfazl	
19	Chaharmahol and Bakhtiari	Sepah-e Ghamar Bani Hashem	Sayyed al-Shohada
20	Isfahan	Sepah-e Saheb al-Zaman	
21	Yazd	Sepah-e al-Ghadir	
22	Razavi Khorasan	Sepah-e Imam Reza	Samen al-Aeme
23	North Khorasan	Sepah-e Javad al-Aeme	
24	South Khorasan	Sepah-e Ansar al-Reza	
25	Bushehr	Sepah-e Imam Sadeq	Madineh-ye al-Munavareh
26	Fars	Sepah-e Fajr	
27	Hormozgan	Sepah-e Imam Sadjad	
28	Kerman	Sepah-e Sarallah	Qods
29	Sistan and Baluchestan	Sepah-e Salman	
30	Alborz	Sepah-e Imam Hassan Mojtaba	Sarallah
31	Tehran province	Sepah-e Sayyed al-Shohada	
32	Tehran city	Sepah-e Muhammad Rasoul Allah	

the regime against any threats. Military personnel, by contrast, should not get involved in politics, according to the Basij's constitution and the Supreme Leader's will. To better project this new, civilian image, the Basij was asked to expand its social branches.

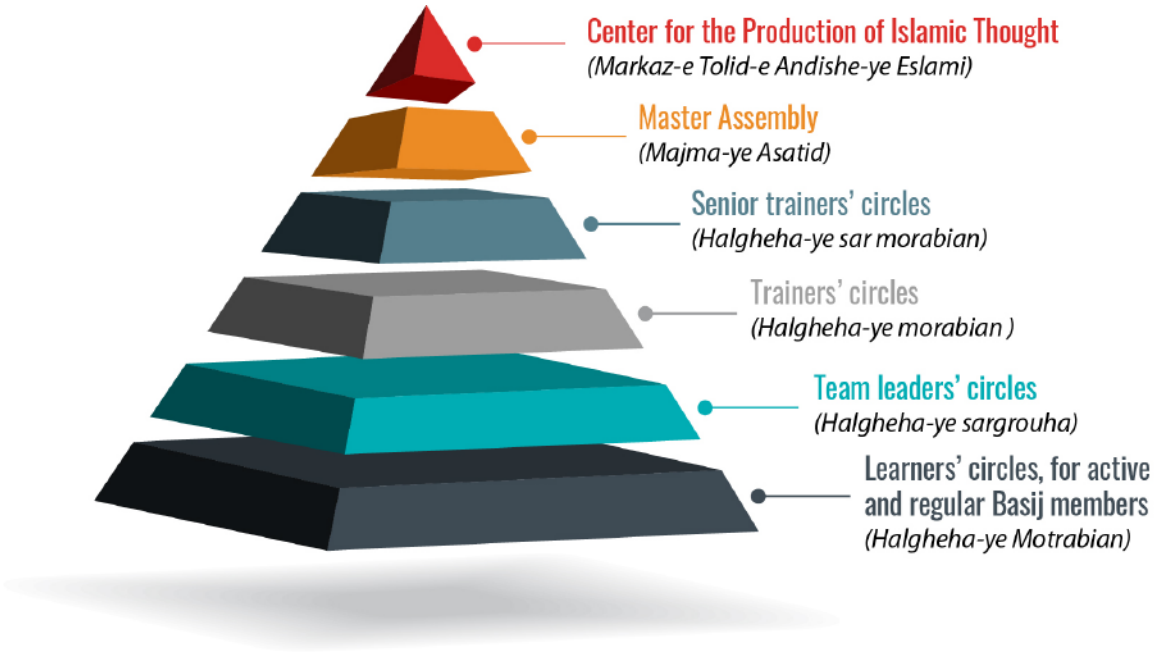
Historically, the Basij focused on recruiting and organizing people based on their residency in urban and rural bases, but after 2009, they created more than twenty-two different branches for recruiting and organizing Iranians based on different social strata and professions. These branches included the following:

- Workers Basij Organization
- Employees Basij Organization
- Guilds Basij Organization
- Medical Society Basij Organization
- Engineers Basij Organization
- Lawyers Basij Organization
- Artists Basij Organization
- Sports Society Basij Organization
- Cultural/Teachers Basij Organization
- Professors Basij Organization
- Clergy and Islamic Students Basij Organization
- Panegyrists Basij Organization (i.e., for religious singers; *maddahs*)
- Media/Journalists Basij Organization

All were promoted as civilian NGOs, despite in reality being regime-controlled organizations, in which members could actively participate in politics without being accused of being a part of "military involvement in politics" (see figure 4 for Basij hierarchy).

Although the Basij was now devoted to ideological and political training, it could still be mobilized in ways similar to the U.S. National Guard if needed. In the new arrangement, the IRGC-GF became responsible for the military training of Basij forces. The larger Basij, meanwhile, could focus more on the ideological-political education of its members in particular, and of the Iranian population in general. From 2009 onward, the Basij designed a new system of ideological-political education based on peer pressure and other informal means, which has been implemented through the Provincial Guard units. Under this new

FIGURE 4. HIERARCHY OF BASIJ IDEOLOGICAL CIRCLES



system, all Basij and IRGC members continue to be organized in "ideological circles" (*halgheha-ye eteqadi*); all Basij members specifically, ranging from the first level to those with special status, are organized based on age and education into different "righteousness circles" (*halgheha-ye salehin*). The aim is to more effectively indoctrinate Basij members and bind them through social pressure.

According to Brig. Gen. Muhammad Naqdi, former head of the Basij, more than 344,000 "ideological righteousness circles" were active in 2016, although they hardly seemed to be working with unanimous effectiveness. Very roughly, each circle might have ten to fifteen members. The Supreme Leader's representative to the Basij force, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Reza Toyserkani, claimed that only 1 percent of these circles were in excellent condition, with 64 percent deemed average or below average, according to the Basij inspection review. Gradually, meanwhile, some 20,000 clergy have been hired to work as trainers in the righteousness circles, strengthening the mission by indoctrinating Basij members and reinforcing the clergy-Basij relationship.[33] In more practical terms, promotion in both the Basij and the IRGC is dependent on participation in righteousness circles and approval from the trainer.

The success of righteousness circles—measured by increased participation in Basij activities—led the IRGC to expand this plan to personnel and its conscripted soldiers. IRGC members were organized in similar ideological circles called *sadeghin*, while the conscripted soldiers were organized in *nashin* circles, with the same goal: to socially bind their members and create an environment of peer pressure to ensure their loyalty to the regime.

The 2009 Green Movement was perceived by the regime as a budding soft war in which middle and upper classes had become alienated from the Islamic Republic and its cultural values. It led Provincial Guard units to enact plans to counter Western cultural invasion in urban areas, especially major cities like Tehran. One of these plans, implemented by the Tehran Provincial Guard (*Sepah-e Muhammad Rasoul Allah*), was "Labayk ya Khamenei," or "Here I am, Khamenei"; it was meant to hegemonize the Arzeshi ("valued" or conservative) way of life through strengthening the religious beliefs of every Tehrani. Training would be provided by Basij members to foster an Islamic-Iranian worldview aimed at countering the influence of "Western lifestyles."[34] A Basij organization called the Quran and Etrat was formed in each Provincial Guard unit to promote this Islamic education—reading, grammar, and interpretation of the Quran (*tafsir* and *tajwid*).[35]

THE SHIFT UNDER TRUMP

U.S. president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, following his abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, changed the regime's threat perception again. A new wave of mass unrest swelled in 2018 and continued into 2019, much to the clerical establishment's dismay. And now it was a new segment of the Iranian population protesting: the regime had antagonized Iran's upper class in the first decade after the 1979 revolution, and in the 2009 Green Movement the middle class had demanded social freedom, but from 2018 onward, the poor and lower-middle classes (*mostazafin*)—once the regime's stalwart social base—were most alienated from the leadership.

As a result of this altered threat perception under Trump's policy, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami was appointed head of the IRGC. Subsequently, Brig. Gen. Gholam Reza Soleimani replaced Brig. Gen. Gholam Hossein Gharib-Parvar as Basij chief in 2019, while Mohammad Ali Jafari took the helm of the IRGC's cultural and social command.[36] General Soleimani had commanded the Sepah-e Saheb al-Zaman Provincial Guard, which controls Isfahan province. In his decree of appointment, the Supreme Leader instructed the new Basij head to make every effort to

"strengthen the culture of resistance," and "protect the values of the Islamic Revolution," by expanding developmental groups, and also to "foster creativity and innovation among Basij forces."[37] The appointment of Soleimani as the new Basij head reflected a response to the deterioration of Iran's political and socioeconomic situation. To inject new blood into the system, the IRGC also replaced some PG unit commanders with officers from the younger generation, mainly in their forties. These include the commanders in Hormozgan province (Col. Hamid Dehghani), Semnan province (Col. Abazar Salari), and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province (Col. Hamid Khormdel).

PROVINCIAL GUARD AND BASIJ MEMBERS

As of April 2020, approximately 190,000 people were serving in the IRGC, with some 15,000–16,000 in its Provincial Guard. The IRGC-PG, both before and during the Trump era, has supported all twenty-two Basij social strata organizations in fulfilling their missions in their respective provinces. In a representative example of the dual reporting structure, Markazi province's Professors Basij Organization chapter is simultaneously under control of the IRGC's Sepah-e Ruhollah and the larger Students Basij structure; the Professors Basij Organization provides the policy and planning programs for its chapters nationally, while the Provincial Guard supports their mission in their individual provinces and uses their members for their programs (see figure 5).

While the Provincial Guard staff and the IRGC's Basij regions consist only of IRGC personnel, at a lower level, the IRGC-Basij districts include Basij members as well as IRGC-GF officers. And while the command council of each Basij district is controlled by IRGC personnel, these Basij members have been hired to help the Provincial Guard deal with quotidian issues. Basij bases and clubs, situated at the lowest level, are completely managed by the Basij members, most of them volunteers.

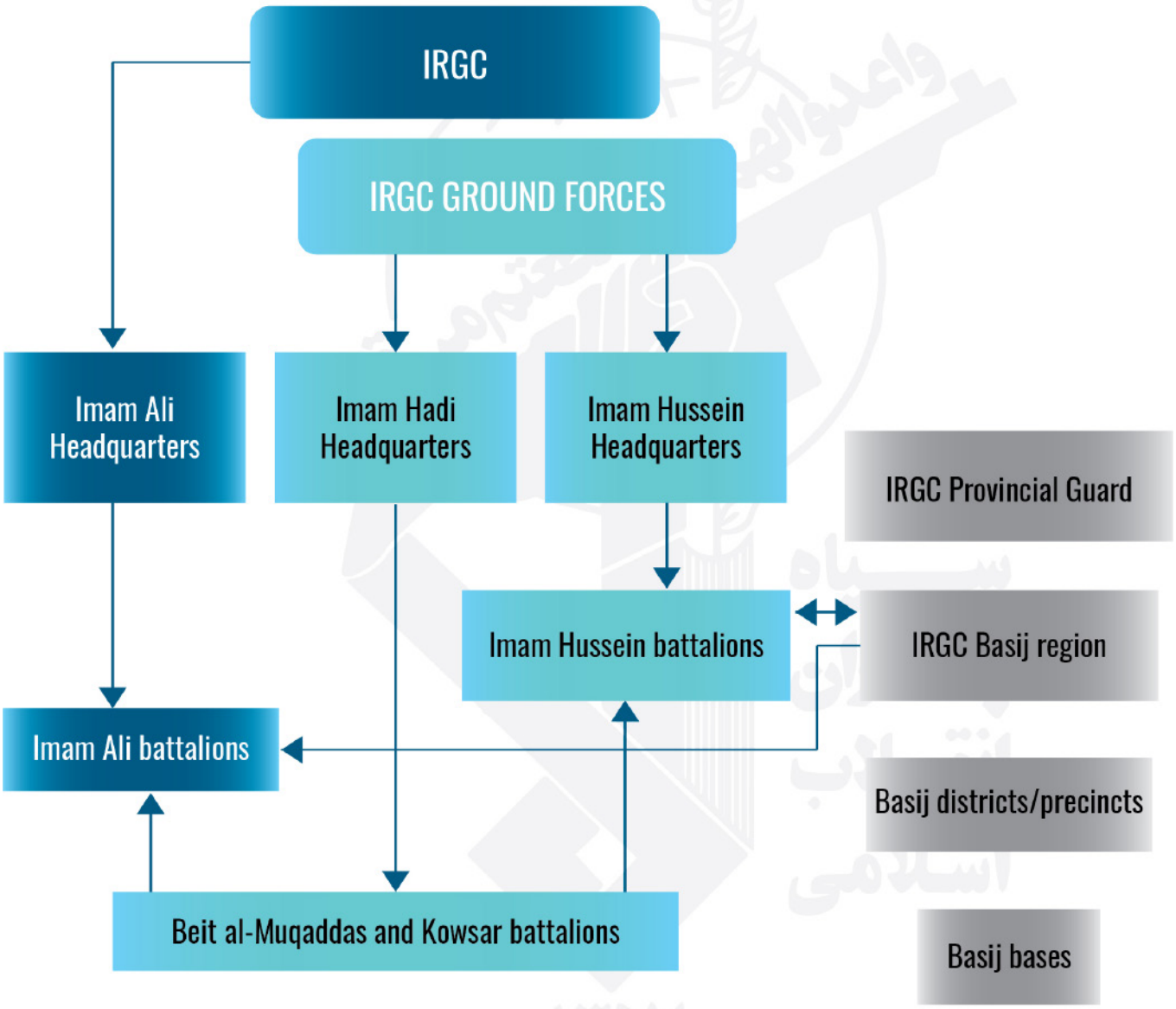
To allow the Basij personnel to fit this new structure, the contours of Basij membership have changed. Historically, there were three groups: regular, active, and special. The regular Basij (*Basij-e Adei*) are unpaid volunteers who receive very basic ideological/political training while having very loose contact with Basij bases. The active Basijis (*Basij-e Faal*) are more involved but still work on an unpaid, volunteer basis. And the special Basijis (*Basij-e Vizheh*) are full-time salaried employees hired for military missions on fixed terms, usually lasting five years. Determining a firm number of these salaried Basij, however, remains a challenge. Moreover, the IRGC-GF has recruited more than 20,000 special Basij members, mainly in border provinces such as Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchestan. Whereas special Basij members are usually hired for military services, active and regular members are volunteers not deemed trustworthy enough to work at the core of the Provincial Guard. As for the change: the Basij added another group in its membership category called the Basij cadre (or active-effective Basij; *Faal-e Moasser*), who work in Basij districts on annual contracts and on payroll. Being a cadre member of the Basij confers qualification to join the IRGC later if a promotion is desired.

Like all armed forces in Iran, the Provincial Guard uses conscripted soldiers who are completing their mandated military service period. This group usually consists of conscripts who were already active Basij members. After finishing their military service, they have a better chance of being hired by the Provincial Guard. If the IRGC determines that an individual is a loyal and firm believer in the Islamic regime, he will be asked to become a Pasdar (IRGC member) and continue working for the Guard.

MISSION OF THE PROVINCIAL GUARD

The Provincial Guard was created to take over the IRGC's responsibilities on the provincial level—most important, in defending the Islamic Republic against

FIGURE 5. STRUCTURE OF BASIJ COMBAT FORCES



any and all threats, including soft, "semi-hard," and hard threats. The relationship between the IRGC-GF, the Basij, and the Provincial Guard was based on the regime's threat perception. As long described by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, soft threats represent cultural and social threats that target the social base of the regime. In his view, these threats are the enemies' efforts to weaken Iran's national culture and the identity of Islamic societies through the spread of liberal and Western values.[38] According to Brig. Gen. Ali Akbar Ahmadian, the head of the IRGC Center for Strategic Research, semi-hard threats are political threats that target the Islamic regime, including ethnic conflict and insurgency. Hard threats, finally, challenge the very integrity of the country, such as would a war with external enemies.[39]

Hard Threats

Hard threats, as the earlier text indicated, are defined as those challenging the very integrity of the country. In combating these, each province's Department of Defense and Security is responsible for coordinating and utilizing Basij and IRGC forces. And the main military forces supporting the Provincial Guard are the Imam Hussein battalions—with one battalion assigned to each region within a province. Thus, the Ansar al-Reza Guard in South Khorasan has created twelve Imam Hussein battalions to match its twelve IRGC-Basij regions.[40]

Although the Imam Hussein battalions consist mostly of Basij members, they are nonetheless directed and trained by the IRGC-GF, by region. At least twenty soldiers in each battalion are IRGC-GF members. Through this integration process, the IRGC-GF can expand threefold by using the Basij popular-based units. Imam Hussein battalions throughout the country are managed and controlled by the IRGC's Imam Hussein Central Headquarters. The first head of this command was the late IRGC-GF Brig. Gen. Hussein Hamdani; it is currently led by Gen. Mohammad Ali Haghbin.[41]

The Basij also has a special force called Fatehin ("victorious"), made up of members who have passed through more military training, including work with snipers. Similar to the Sabirin special forces,[42] which belong to the IRGC-GF, the Fatehin has been deployed to Syria to support the Assad regime, and its members thus have acquired firsthand experience fighting insurgent groups. Each Provincial Guard unit has shaped at least one Fatehin unit in its province, which according to Gen. Ali Ghasemi, commander of the Sepah-e Ansar al-Reza Provincial Guard, has missions in many Muslim-majority countries.[43] Although the Fatehin is not explicitly an anti-riot force, it has been used to suppress mass unrest and social protests since 2018. According to Gen. Muhammad Yazdi, commander of the Tehran Provincial Guard, the effectiveness of the Fatehin unit in suppressing the November 2019 protests convinced the IRGC-PG to strengthen these units more than ever before.[44]

Imam Hussein and Fatehin forces are expected to support the IRGC-GF should Iran be invaded or a civil war break out. Imam Hussein battalions are trained and directed by the IRGC-GF to prepare Basij members with counterinsurgency training for anti-helicopter-borne operations, air-mobile warfare, tactics that include delaying operations, as well as ambushes directed at enemy armored columns and helicopters. Imam Hussein battalions are also responsible for all military training of Basij forces as well as implementation of the *amadegi defai* (military defense) course, a readiness regimen mandatory for high schoolers.

Semi-Hard Threats

The Provincial Guard is also involved in countering semi-hard threats such as insurgency and other internal security challenges.[45] The IRGC not only created an independent intelligence organization parallel to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security in 2009, it also developed a new series of units called Imam Ali battalions, comprising cadre and active members. Administratively, an Imam Ali battalion aligns with the Basij district or precinct level. Just to clarify, Imam Ali battalions, unlike the infantry Imam Hussein battalions, are anti-riots units responsible for suppressing internal dissent and maintaining order.

Imam Ali battalions in each province, under control of the Provincial Guard's security unit, have their training, education, and logistics coordinated through a central command called the Imam Ali Headquarters, led by former Basij head General Gharib Parvar and reporting directly to the IRGC commander.[46] Imam Ali Headquarters proved its high efficiency in suppressing the mass uprisings in November 2019. Imam Ali battalions in each city have a close relationship with the Iranian police (NAJA by its Persian acronym) as a means of effectively controlling society. Members of Imam Ali battalions are equipped with

tailored equipment and undergo training in anti-riot tactics, such as using weapons to control and suppress riots and popular unrest. Each Imam Ali battalion has a motorcycle unit (*grouh-e rekab seyr*) for rapid deployment and intimidation purposes.

Members of Imam Ali battalions have been used for security patrols in the neighborhoods where they operate. A rise in crime resulting from increased poverty, inequality, and what authorities cast as declining morality has revived an old neighborhood-watch plan. Beginning in 1979, Islamic revolutionary committees (*komiteh-ye enghelab-e eslami*) helped the clerical establishment enforce order, police society, safeguard the country's security, and defend the Islamic Revolution.[47] The Basij has always played a role in any initiative related to morality policing and patrolling society. Although morality policing was discontinued after 2008, Gharib Parvar announced the relaunch of the Basij patrolling plan a decade later, in 2018. According to one expert, "it corresponds with this time in which Iran has experienced widespread bread riots that turned into anti-regime protests."[48] Under this plan, two to five Basij members, usually from Imam Ali battalions, patrol their neighborhoods, impose control, and fight "theft, narcotics and hooliganism." These Basijis are equipped with security patrol equipment such as pepper spray, batons, and guns.[49]

Security patrols also enlist IRGC informants to identify any groups or individuals in their neighborhoods seen as posing a threat to the regime. Of course, not all Iranians are being watched, but Basiji snitching on colleagues is common within the state bureaucracy, university system, and elsewhere. The intelligence department in each IRGC-PG unit is directly subordinate to the IRGC's Intelligence Organization (*Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Sepah*), an entity that was established in 2009 and has since been expanded under the management of Hossein Taeb. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a dual Iranian-British project coordinator who was arrested in Iran in April 2016, was reportedly spied on and arrested by the IRGC Intelligence Organization in Kerman province. Since September 2012, the IRGC and Basij have also organized a new series of less professional units. These quick-response units, called Beit al-Muqaddas and Kowsar battalions, for male and female members, respectively, consist of 234 active Basij members in each district or precinct. Active Basij members populate these battalions, surrounding a core of so-called Basij cadre members, who work in the districts and are contracted for periods usually lasting one to three years. For example, the Ansar al-Reza Guard has created thirty-seven Beit al-Muqaddas and twenty-four Kowsar battalions in South Khorasan, within its 118 Basij districts or precincts.[50] Administratively, the Beit al-Muqaddas and Kowsar battalions fall within the Basij district or precinct level.

According to official state propaganda, two thousand Beit al-Muqaddas and Kowsar battalions are operating throughout the country.[51] A thousand of those were designed specifically to aid Imam Ali forces in their security missions.[52] Five hundred of the Beit al-Muqaddas units will assist Imam Hussein battalions in their military and defense missions in their local area through creating vital installations and seeking to reign in possible mass unrest should the country be invaded.[53] The last five hundred units are mainly trained for relief and rescue missions designed to help the regime maintain control during natural disasters such as earthquakes. For such relief and rescue missions, these battalions would be under the operational command of the Imam Hadi Headquarters.[54]

Provincial Guard and Soft Threats

To actively fight so-called cultural threats, the Provincial Guard exercises control over a broad range of educational programming, from kindergartens to primary and secondary schools all the way to institutions of higher education. Therefore, one of the major battle sites for soft war is the educational domain.

Basij schoolchildren in Tehran. Photo credit: Reuters.

EDUCATIONAL MISSIONS

Without seeking permission from Iran's welfare organization (*Sazeman-e Behzisti*), the Basij and the Provincial Guard have created at least three thousand Quranic kindergartens (*mahd-e mehrab*) for children three to five years old through the work of the Women's Society Basij Organizations (WSBOs). The schools are located at almost every mosque that has a WSBO base.[55]

The Provincial Guard additionally manages a series of primary and secondary schools in the provinces. The history of IRGC high schools goes back to 1981, when the Guard created several such schools to recruit and train its personnel.[56] But since 1998, IRGC schools have shifted to a nonprofit model and mainly serve the children of IRGC personnel. With strong support from the IRGC, they provide superior education as well as ideological-political training and religious extracurricular activities. The number of these primary, middle, and high schools expanded under the name "Seraj," and then "Imam Hussein" and "Rahian-e Koswar" after 2010, and can be found in almost every province.[57] Although the exact number is not clear, the head of the Rahian-e Koswar organization, Gen. Abdul-Rasoul Mahmoudabadi, claims that five hundred such schools exist in Iran.

However many IRGC- and Basij-run schools there are, the paramilitary organizations cannot register and train all 14.6 million pupils in Iran,[58] so they have implemented several plans to indoctrinate students in state schools and connect them with the Basij. One of these plans is called the Shahid Behnam Mohammadi plan, named for the famous fourteen-year-old child martyr from Khoramshahr killed in the Iran-Iraq War. This plan, which was implemented throughout the country after a few pilot attempts, is based on the premise of connecting Basij pupils in schools with Basij mosque bases in each neighborhood. Through this plan, the Basij has trained a

subsection of its active members, mainly those who are clerical and university students, to operate out of high schools. These people identify and recruit small groups of students and gradually connect them with the Basij mosque; they then serve as ideological nuclei in each school. By attending the mosque, they will be present in "righteousness" ideological circles and are likely to join the Basij.

Additionally, the Provincial Guard created at least one higher education institution and university in each province for its Basij members. These universities are separate from the official IRGC universities, including the Imam Hussein Officers University, Comprehensive Imam Hussein University, and Shahid Mahalati University, which focus on military education, post-graduate education, and ideological-political educations, respectively.

The Provincial Guard universities are part of the national University of Applied Science and Technology system (*Daneshgah-e Jameh-ye Elmi va Karbordi*), which can be likened to the U.S. network of community colleges. For example, the Applied Science and Technology university serving Tehran's Muhammad Rasoul Allah Provincial Guard offers several majors, including political promotion, political propaganda, public relations, cyber technology, cybersecurity, and judiciary bailiff.[59] The distinction from other higher education institutions is that there is no university entrance exam, and Basij members can receive higher education without being edged out by competition.

For example, 1,118,793 students registered for the 2019 national entrance exam in Iran, of whom 58 percent were women and 42 percent men.[60] The competition is intense for the tuition-free public universities—only 20 percent of applicants are admitted.[61] The IRGC Applied Science and Technology universities provide higher education to the Basij members who can neither afford tuition at Azad University, a tuition-based institution with hundreds of branches throughout the country, nor gain entry to free state schools.

Many of the Basij social strata organizations help the Provincial Guard implement its educational and training missions, including the Women's Basij Organization (within the Basij kindergarten system), the Teachers Basij Organization (at the general educational schools), and the Professors Basij Organization (at the PG colleges).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL MISSIONS

As an ideocracy,[62] the Islamic Republic has tried to create an Islamic society mainly through enforcing "*amr-e be maruf va nah-ye az monker*" (promotion of good and forbidding of wrong). The IRGC-PG has created a provincial command to implement this principle, mainly through the imposition of Islamic laws and regulations in society such as Islamic dress codes and strict rules of conduct for interaction between genders.

A rise, beginning in 2010, in social problems such as divorce, drug addiction, prostitution, shantytown dwelling, and hooliganism convinced the IRGC and Basij in 2019 to split the Department of Social and Cultural Affairs into two parts. One of the resulting entities, the Social Department, is now controlled by the Provincial Guard's commanders and has a broad range of responsibilities, including running and supervising NGOs, recruiting, organizing, and utilizing elites (*nokhbegan*), and maintaining the sub-department of Hijab and Modesty Affairs (*Efaf va Hijab*).

While the Supreme Leader and his revolutionary allies are still dreaming and planning for the creation of an Islamic utopia, more than 20 million Iranians are living in slums in the outskirts of major cities like Tehran, Mashhad, and Tabriz more than forty years after the inception of the Islamic Republic.[63] Increasing numbers of slum dwellers have come to resent and even loathe the regime. From December 2017 to November 2019, as already suggested, almost all protests in Iran were led by poor and lower-class Iranians, many of them living in slums.

The IRGC has implemented several plans aimed at controlling and neutralizing the threats posed by the poorest urbanites, or "*forudastan-e shahri*," as Asef Bayat called them.[64] One of these plans included the establishment of the Javad al-Aeme Command in 2017, intended to fight social problems such as addiction, divorce, and poverty. One of the campaigns implemented by Javad al-Aeme, called the Keramat (dignity) plan, focused on the rehabilitation of drug addicts, a population that more than doubled in less than six years, according to a study in 2017.[65] The Javad al-Aeme Command office in each province collaborated with the police, the provincial council for fighting drugs, and the local welfare organization chapter in carrying out its initiatives.

The social deputy of the Provincial Guard in each province also recruits and mobilizes those from the elite strata of society by establishing Basij think tanks (*heyatha-ye andishe varz*). The Guard appoints almost half the members of the various Basij assemblies, while Basij members elect the other half. In each region-level assembly, the Basij has created several working groups focused on local issues such as water scarcity or social problems. An assembly functions at the provincial level as well, consisting of elected Basij members. At the national level, the Supreme Assembly of Basij (*Shura-ye Aale-ye Basij*) consists of 2,500 people from every Basij strata and every province. The chief of this assembly is the IRGC commander; its secretariat is led by the Basij chief. Since 2016, the Basij has expanded assemblies in each city and tried to connect them with state bureaucracy. However, because Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and his administration have shown a lack of trust in the Basij, these assemblies were not wholly successful in cooperating with the state machinery. But the assemblies also consult the Provincial Guard to tackle social problems in their cities and provinces.

The IRGC think tanks number fifty-three. They are supposed to work as knowledge hubs for a particular branch, such as the Professors Basij Organization. In addition to the think tanks, the Provincial Guard has created forty-five "houses of the elite" (*khaneh-ye nokhbegan*). Inspired by the "houses of wisdom" during the Golden Age of Islam, which began in the eighth century, these elite houses are intellectual centers for the pro-regime intelligentsia. The goal in creating these houses, beginning in the 1990s, was for them to identify and solve the problems in their particular area. The IRGC has also founded more than eighty "growth houses" (*khaneh-ye roshd*) for the younger generation of pro-regime intellectuals.[66]

As Ayatollah Khamenei put it in a speech in 2003, "More than Iran's enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption. They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior offcial in an important American political center, said: 'Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts.' He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation."[67]

After 2009, the IRGC and Basij created a series of cultural and artistic organizations, such as the Owj Arts and Media Organization, founded in 2011 and consisting of eleven entities active in the production and distribution of conservative cultural products including movies, music, animation, and posters. Owj was aimed particularly at reaching the middle class, whose members became critical of the IRGC and Basij after their role in suppressing the 2009 Green Movement.

On the cultural front, the Basij Media Organization works closely with the Basij Narrative Foundation (*Bonyad-e Ravayat-e Basij*) and the Owj organization, alongside sub-branches in each province, to produce conservative cultural products, including flattering films about the Basij and Guard's social services. One film, for example, shows IRGC and Basij members helping people after an earthquake in western Iran by building homes and distributing food; another

praises them for cleaning the streets after flooding in the southwest.

In yet another area, the IRGC and Basij have arranged for members to work as journalists for numerous online and print outlets, including Fars News, Tasnim, Basij press, *Javan*, and *Sobh-e Sadegh*—all IRGC-Basij organs. The Basij's goal is to have a reporter and journalist (in reality, a public relations official) at each Basij base, thus expanding its news coverage throughout the country. Out of 30,000 registered journalists in Iran, half have been identified as Basij members.

Each IRGC Provincial Guard unit has created an organization for managing and coordinating Basij cultural and religious trips (*Sazeman-e Ordoui Rahian-e Noor*). To host Basij and Guard members from other provinces, the PG has created huge recreational centers, called "resistance villages" (*dehkade-ye moghavemat*), multipurpose spaces boasting hotels, restaurants, and sports facilities for "revolutionary entertainment."

CYBER ACTIVITIES

Surprised by the Internet's role in mobilizing youth and delegitimizing the regime during the 2009 Green Movement,[68] the Islamic Republic has since expanded its presence on social media, tried to control the Internet, propagated its own messages online, and suppressed online activism. The IRGC and the Basij have been behind much of this suppression and propaganda. They created the "Basij Cyberspace Headquarters" and the "Seraj Cyberspace Organization," professional organizations with branches in each province working under the Provincial Guard. Each Provincial Guard unit has a cyberspace division responsible for organizing pro-regime online activists, producing "appropriate content" for consumers, and confronting growing anti-regime attitudes online in their province. These Basij activists are also monitoring Iranians' online use "proactively—presumably to entrap Iranians it suspects might use it for counterrevolutionary purposes."[69] In Tehran, the Muhammad Rasoul Allah Corps has organized three thousand Basij members into several cyber groups, according to Brig. Gen. Mohsen Kazemeini.[70]

DEVELOPMENT PLANS

With regard to social services and development, the Basij has created a command responsible for development projects in underdeveloped areas, improvement of public health and sanitation in those areas, and creation of jobs in each province. The Basij and Provincial Guard have likewise constructed hundreds of recreational centers throughout Iran under an entity called the Progress and Development Command (*Qarargah-e Pishraft va Abadani*):

- In each county: 1,860-square-meter multipurpose sports complexes called "nine-day" ("*noh-ye dey*")
- In each city: smaller facilities called *salehin* halls ("righteous halls"; *salon-e salehin*) built for martial arts activities

These multipurpose sports complexes provide free recreation for Basij members, create incentives for people to join the Basij, and can be swiftly converted into detention centers during a crisis, thus serving the regime in a different way. During the 2009 Green Movement, the Basij lacked locations for holding detainees before sending them to jail. By 2014, the Basij had created more than 331 *noh-ye dey* sports complexes and 2,093 *salehin* facilities throughout the country.[71]

The Provincial Guard has used IRGC, state, and even nonstate resources for developing the neighborhoods where they are based, and the IRGC has shaped and deployed thousands of small jihadist groups to these areas as part of the PG's mission. According to Basij propaganda, the number of jihadist groups reached 19,000 in 2019, up from just 6,000 in 2016. In order

to support developmental missions, the Basij strives, as an ideal, to form a jihadist group in each base according to new regulations that direct social service delivery locally. Using volunteer jihadist groups is beneficial for the Provincial Guard, but the ultimate goal is to identify and recruit young pro-regime activists to the IRGC and the regime in general—young and single people who don't suffer from everyday economic hardships and who are still naive enough to believe in the regime's propaganda.

But it is not just propaganda the jihadist groups offer. They also help the Basij in developing impoverished neighborhoods by building or renovating mosques, schools, and health clinics. And since the regime believes social problems are the result of secularization and the spread of Western culture, jihadist groups try to tackle such problems through religious education.[72]

Each provincial command has a construction body subordinate to the IRGC's conglomerate Khatam al-Anbia, and each is responsible for building especially mosques, seminaries, and clinics in underdeveloped areas. Through these activities, the IRGC not only perpetuates a positive image for itself and the regime, particularly in rural areas where development is desperately needed, but it also expands the clergy's presence in these regions to further the Islamization of society and regime control.

The Progress and Development Command, builder of the recreation centers, will collaborate with the Basij Construction Organizations (*Sazeman-e Basij-e Sazandegi*) as well as other Basij social strata organizations such as those belonging to engineering and medical practitioners in carrying out its missions. For example, Basij medical practitioners have been deployed since 2018 to poor and underdeveloped neighborhoods as well as rural areas to visit impoverished citizens and provide them with necessary medication.[73]

Another mission of the Progress and Development Command is to create nonprofit financial funds (*sandogh-e gharzolhasaneh-ye mardomyar*) within each Basij mosque base. Led by participants from each neighborhood, these nonprofit funds will provide no-interest loans to those in need. Through the creation of *sandoq-e-qarzolhasaneh*, which function as local development and micro-investment funds, the Basij connects people with their bases in each mosque and later tries to recruit, indoctrinate, and mobilize them. But massive corruption and embezzlement targeting credit institutions, which were expanded in the 2010s, has undermined Iranian trust in the IRGC's initiatives.[74]

In another plan, called "Keep Up with the Farmers" (*Hamgam ba Keshavarz*), the Provincial Guard deploys its agricultural engineering members to Iranian villages to educate farmers on the use of new technologies, tools, and knowledge. The goal is to enhance stewardship of the land and water, and to improve operations by increasing profit through improved production and marketing methods. This plan has been implemented in about 40,000 villages throughout Iran, according to the head of the Agricultural Basij Organization.[75] Early evidence suggests some successes, such as in rice farming in the Amol township.[76]

FUNDING THE PROVINCIAL GUARD

The funding streams for all these overarching activities, social services, and construction initiatives are labyrinthine, coming from above, below, and in the form of volunteer labor. The Provincial Guard, which lacks legal status in the IRGC constitution, does not have an independent line in Iran's annual state budget, unlike the Basij and IRGC. Since the Provincial Guard is a combination of Basij personnel and the IRGC-GF, much of the budget comes from these two sources. In fact, since all IRGC personnel who work at the Provincial Guard come from the IRGC-GF, they receive their salaries form the Ground Forces, and the cadre Basij members receive their salaries from the Basij.

According to the budget plan proposed by President Rouhani for the current fiscal year (March 2020–March 2021), the IRGC's overall official budget would be 18,315 billion tomans (very roughly equivalent to USD 43 million as of May 2020), compared to 15,000 billion tomans for 2019–20.[77] All told, the IRGC budget has increased by 20 percent annually since 2015. The Basij budget fell to 923 billion tomans in the coming year, compared to 1,746 billion tomans in 2019–20.[78]

The commander of the Imam Sadjad Provincial Guard in Hormozgan province said its Guard unit had asked Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters to help with construction and developmental projects.[79] In some cases, the Provincial Guard forces also receive support from other sources, including municipalities, neighborhood residents, and professional guilds, in exchange for protection and other services such as free legal advice, educational consultation, education, recreation, and so forth.

RE-ISLAMIZING IRAN

Like the 2017–18 protests that rapidly spread throughout Iran, the November 2019 protests jumped to eighty counties in less than forty-eight hours. Since protests are clearly a neighborhood-level phenomenon, the IRGC and the Basij are now focusing on neighborhood-centered programs in an attempt to strengthen the relationships among Basij bases, the people, and the mosques. Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, the commander of the IRGC, has said that the goal is for each Basij base to serve as an IRGC model in miniature, fulfilling all the basic functions of the Guard at the local level.[80]

The IRGC's Provincial Guard plan for 2020 consists of five main themes: education, security, culture, jihadist development, and health. In addition, a longer-term goal is to make mosques the center of social, political, and cultural activities in each neighborhood. While mosques played an important role in the first decade after the revolution, and especially during the Iran-Iraq War, the gradual secularization of Iranian society has reduced their importance. Right now, mosques in urban and rural areas alike tend to be empty during prayer times and are only used for funeral ceremonies.[81]

The IRGC's latest plan, first designed by the Imam Sadjad Provincial Guard in Hormozgan and then adopted nationally, involves yet another new command, the Neighborhood Social Transformation Command (*Qarargah-e Tahavol Mahaleh*), which focuses on controlling each neighborhood and addressing its social, cultural, and political problems. It says that the Friday prayer imam for each neighborhood mosque will cooperate with Basij bases to formulate different committees for tackling the problems specific to the locality. These committees, working alongside Provincial Guard commands such as the Progress and Development Command, cover the realms of security and intelligence, economy and employment, social and cultural issues, health and sanitation, and cyber and media.

According to Gholam Reza Soleimani, some seven thousand groups have helped the IRGC-PG develop four hundred neighborhoods by disseminating social and other services. Neighborhood by neighborhood, the security and intelligence committees (*gasht-e razaviyoun*) are responsible for patrolling their territory; the social and cultural committee is meanwhile responsible for fighting social ills such as prostitution and drug dealing. For cultural issues, work focuses on monitoring parks and art galleries and promoting an Islamic lifestyle in such spaces. The cyberspace and media committees are responsible for increasing cyber awareness among people in their neighborhood, warning them of the "threats" posed to their families by the Internet and social media.

The coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly hindered this IRGC effort, but initial plans called for an expansion of the Neighborhood Social

Transformation Command chapters to a thousand neighborhoods nationwide.

CONCLUSION

The Provincial Guard's quest to re-Islamize Iran neighborhood by neighborhood represents the IRGC's latest bid—and possibly the last, if it fails—to create an "Islamic society." This is likewise a step toward Ayatollah Khamenei's ultimate goal to establish a global Islamic civilization.[82] Decentralization is the defining characteristic of this assertive Islamization policy—spreading the IRGC into every corner of Iranian society, working through the Provincial Guard.

Since its inception in 2008, the Provincial Guard has been expanded dramatically, but its assertive policies in an increasingly secular society characterized by a tech-savvy, educated population have created resentment among Iranian youth, who have become largely alienated from the regime. Unintentionally, the Provincial Guard's actions have widened the gap between state and society.

The popular demonstrations in 2019 centered on what protestors considered governmental incompetence and repression in the name of religion.

The 2020 coronavirus crisis, handled particularly ineptly in Iran, has added yet another reason for the Iranian people to disdain the regime.[83] As the IRGC and its provincial offshoots worked to curb the spread of the virus by building temporary military medical facilities, many people saw the Guard's activities as propagandistic and performative, rather than actually effective. This reaction reveals a fundamental lack of trust and the widening gulf between the IRGC and the people.[84] In March and April 2020, Provincial Guard soldiers carried out arrests and investigations of people critiquing the regime for what was effectively its coronavirus cover-up, adding further reasons for public bitterness.[85]

In early 2020, some 70 percent of Tehran residents saw a drop in their income due to the economic effects of the virus.[86] Additional dramatic losses are sure to follow. One can only speculate on the nature and scale of the popular response to come. Will mass uprisings ensue? And, if so, will the Provincial Guard suppress these demonstrations as it has in the past? Or will fear of the contagion somehow prevail, allowing the regime to continue its repression? The response from the West, including the coming U.S. presidential election and the prospect of eased sanctions, could also offer clues about the future. But whatever develops, the protests of 2019 could well be a harbinger rather than an aberration.

NOTES

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