# Iran's Coercive Apparatus: Capacity and Desire

by Saeid Golkar **(/experts/saeid-golkar)**

Jan 5, 2018
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/qdrt-aljhaz-alqsry-alayrany-wmbtghah)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Saeid Golkar (/experts/saeid-golkar)

Saeid Golkar is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science & Public Service at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

Brief Analysis

## A closer look at the structure and tactics of the many-headed internal security network that the Islamic Republic has deployed to crack down on protestors nationwide.

The suppression of Iran's latest uprising has followed a familiar pattern, intensifying immediately after protests expanded in multiple cities and towns. This cycle of revolt and suppression has been repeated serval times under the ayatollahs, with the regime's crackdowns succeeding each time. The fate of the current protests will correlate directly with the capacity and desire of Iran's coercive apparatus; understanding the structure and inner workings of this apparatus is therefore essential.

## NATIONAL AND LOCAL HIERARCHY

The main security, military, and judicial branches of Iran's coercive apparatus are the police (Nirou-ye Entezami-ye Jomhouri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, or NAJA), the Basij, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The police are under the control of the Interior Ministry, which the constitution has placed under the president's purview. Yet the head of the NAJA is appointed by the Supreme Leader and serves as commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces, effectively limiting the interior minister's authority to logistical, equipment, and support issues.

The NAJA's vertical structure begins with the national police commandership. Beneath that, each province has a single command headquarters that controls all police stations. Each city in turn has one disciplinary district (*nahieh-e entezami*) that manages local police stations, usually called *kalantari* in urban areas and *pasgah-e entezami* in rural areas, as other scholars have described. Despite certain local differences, a typical Iranian police station will have a deputy of prevention, a deputy of intelligence, a deputy of inspection, a deputy of operation, and a judiciary police official, among other personnel.

Currently, police personnel consist of cadres (officers) and conscripts (i.e., people who spend two years of their mandatory military service in the NAJA). According to former NAJA commander Gen. Ahmadi Moqaddam, 45 percent of them are conscripts. Although no official statistics on force size are available, various estimates place the

total number of police between 100,000 and 200,000. In addition, more than 100,000 people work in NAJA-affiliated organizations such as the Police Electronic Services Office (aka "police +10"). These include 41,000 employees of protection and surveillance companies that provide security for more than 4,600 neighborhoods.

As for the Basij, it has become the largest civil militia organization in the world, with around five million members spread among twenty-four branches and divided into four main rankings: regular, active, cadre, and special. They form a cluster network consisting of Basij bases, districts, and regions. Although the bases are the lowest organizational level, their high visibility (50,000 locations throughout Iran) makes them the Basij's true grassroots backbone. Each Basij resistance district controls ten to fifteen bases and is home to local security and military forces. These districts are in turn controlled by IRGC regional branches. Depending on size, some cities have more than one IRGC region (e.g., Tehran).

To be sure, not all Basij members are involved in political suppression. Yet the organization has several security and military units composed of active or volunteer members, including the Imam Ali Security Battalions. These personnel undergo training in special tactics such as the use of bespoke weapons and motorcycles to suppress unrest. Some active Basij members are organized into rapid-reaction battalions called the Beit al-Muqaddas, with responsibility for defending vital installations in their neighborhoods.

The IRGC itself is a somewhat decentralized system, with ten regional headquarters that each command a handful of provincial corps (*sepah-e astani*). They were restructured in this manner years ago so that they could operate autonomously, defending the regime against both high-intensity warfare and low-intensity internal challenges such as insurgency. All members of the IRGC Ground Forces and Basij report to their local IRGC provincial corps. The missions for each corps include defending their provincial boundaries and suppressing unrest, which is accomplished by a security brigade (yegan-e amniat) consisting of IRGC Ground Forces and Basij units.

Indeed, the Ground Forces have mainly been geared toward quelling internal disorder since the early 2000s, leaving the regular army to defend Iran's external borders. Some Ground Force units are similar to conventional army units, while others are trained for covert missions and asymmetric warfare, but most of them consist of light infantry trained and equipped for internal security tasks.

## THE IRANIAN "POLICE STATE"

Iran has more than seventeen different security organizations, with three main bodies involved in internal intelligence: the Ministry of Intelligence, the IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO), and the Intelligence and Public Security Police (PAVA), a branch of the NAJA. All of them are directly or indirectly overseen by the Supreme Leader. Despite ongoing power conflicts between these bodies, they typically work hand-in-hand in to protect the regime.

These organizations have penetrated Iranian society through two main networks, the Herasat and IRGC-IO. The Intelligence Ministry has established Herasat branches in every civilian organization and university in the country, tasking them with identifying potential security threats. Herasat officials reportedly surveil employees (e.g., by monitoring their communications), act as informants, and influence hiring and firing practices.

The IRGC-IO also has its own broad social network, the Basij intelligence staff (*stead-e khaberi-e Basij*), whose members are present throughout Iran's estimated 4,000 Basij districts. Much like the Herasat, Basij intelligence officers act as the regime's eyes and ears by monitoring citizen activities and keeping files on local activists.

PAVA is responsible for gathering intelligence in neighborhoods and penetrating Iran's guilds, arresting any workers who are deemed too subversive. To do so, it runs a network of local informers (*mokhber mahali*) to collect news and rumors. PAVA has also been tasked with conducting religious activities and ferreting out homes used for Christian worship.

The judiciary is another key part of Iran's coercive apparatus. In addition to general courts, the regime has two main extraconstitutional courts, the Special Court of the Clergy (responsible for intimidating and silencing dissident clerics) and the Islamic Revolutionary Courts (which try offenses such as propagating dissent against the regime). The latter courts have long been used to suppress uprisings, including the 1992 riots in Mashhad and Shiraz (where some demonstrators were sentenced to death in summary trials) and the 2009 Green Movement (where activists were sentenced to long-term imprisonment).

## DIFFERENT TACTICS FOR EACH SECURITY CONDITION

Although these coercive bodies work together to guarantee the regime's survival, their missions differ depending on Iran's prevailing security condition, which is assigned one of four categories at any given time: white, gray, yellow, and red. Condition white is normal public order. Condition gray goes into effect when unorganized opposition elements peacefully undermine public order, with no sign of destructive operations. In that case, the police are mainly responsible for controlling the situation and maintaining order. Basij offices help the police quash any strikes, while Herasat personnel help gather intelligence and identify protestors. For example, in 2005-2006, the regime broke a bus drivers strike by using Basij members from other state institutions to transport passengers and maintain the traffic flow. If such strikes ever became more heated, the NAJA's Counterterrorism Special Force (Nirou-ye Vizhe-ye Pad-e Vesht, or NOPO) would be primarily responsible for anti-riot actions.

If the police cannot control a given situation and the crisis intensifies, the regime invokes condition yellow, in which an organized opposition has begun more violent forms of protest such as disrupting order, blocking public spaces, and attacking public buildings. In response, the Basij are required to work more closely with the police by intensifying their intelligence activities and increasing their patrols and checkpoint stops. Plainclothes Basij officers are responsible for penetrating demonstrations, identifying activists, and misleading protestors. Other Basij members deploy near police personnel, recording videos and occasionally attacking people. In some cases, they use motorcycles to take control of the streets, contain unrest, and intimidate protesters, using force as needed to scatter people.

Tellingly, the NAJA requested help from some Basij districts after the latest protests expanded. Although the police were not completely ready for crowd control operations in 2009, they are more prepared today, with some eyewitnesses noting their increased efficiency. This is especially true in large cities, where they have practiced anti-riot missions for years. In smaller towns, however, inexperienced or minimally trained personnel are often involved in such missions, resulting in greater casualties due to fear and unprofessionalism.

Finally, if the above measures fail to reestablish control, the security level increases to condition red, defined as a crisis in which revolts have expanded throughout the country and the opposition is using weapons. In this case, the IRGC takes full control of internal operations, and all other forces must work with the Guards to restore control. During the current protests, IRGC forces have reportedly been deployed in three provinces to smash demonstrations.

## EXPLOITING CLASS RESENTMENT

Members of Iran's coercive apparatus have long been noted for their zeal in suppressing dissidents. In recruiting personnel for the NAJA and similar organs, the regime has historically drawn from the Basij, who mostly hail from traditional lower- and lower-middle-class families and tend to be less educated. Since 2000, all IRGC members have been recruited from established Basij and IRGC families, and the police are trending in the same direction. According to the NAJA chief, more than 80 percent of new police personnel hired in 2007 were selected from the Basij, and in 2011 he pledged to increase that figure to 100 percent. The security apparatus, including the Intelligence Ministry and IRGC-IO, mainly recruit from seminary schools, though they too draw from the Basij at times (and many seminary students are Basij members).

In light of this background, many police and Basij personnel had no qualms about brutally suppressing the Green Movement, acting on the hatred and anger they felt toward opposition activists whom they perceived as members of the upper and upper-middle class. It is unclear how much these sentiments are in play during the current unrest, since analysts indicate that **many protestors in outlying provinces (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/provinces-lead-the-center-in-irans-protests)** hail from the lower classes themselves, unlike in 2009. Yet the regime has made sure to complement the homogeneous socioeconomic background of its security personnel with massive levels of indoctrination in order to ensure their loyalty, reaffirm their conservative beliefs, and make them more inclined to support the clerical leadership over any opposition movement, regardless of class.

In the end, the latest protests are unlikely to succeed as long as Iran's security organs retain the capacity and desire for suppression. Yet both elements could be undermined by several variables, including internal division among regime elites, extended protests, and international pressure over human rights violations.

*Saeid Golkar is a visiting assistant professor of political science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and a nonresident senior fellow on Iran policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.* ❖

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)

◆

Ido Levy,
Craig Whiteside

(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

# The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Carol Silber

(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)