

Iran's Basij Mull a Wider Domestic and Regional Role

by [Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



Brief Analysis

In addition to expanding and professionalizing their traditional roles at home, Basij paramilitary forces are poised to assume a larger share of the fighting in Syria alongside Iran's foreign militia proxies.

On December 7, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed a new head for the Iranian paramilitary organization known as the Basij. Gen. Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar replaced Muhammad Naghdi, who had held the job for seven years. Among other things, his appointment highlights Tehran's apparent eagerness to cement the Basij's repressive domestic security role, and to use the Syria war as a de facto vetting and training ground for the next generation of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders.

CONFRONTING DOMESTIC "THREATS"

The Basij are a volunteer-based paramilitary force formed soon after the 1979 revolution. During the Iran-Iraq War, they assumed their main role of augmenting the IRGC by supplying a stream of short-term volunteers, quickly gaining a reputation as either martyrdom-seeking devotees or ill-trained cannon fodder. It was not until late 2009 -- after "Green Movement" protestors took to the streets en masse to dispute the presidential election -- that the Basij were fully integrated into the IRGC's "mosaic defense" provincial security architecture, gaining their own professional cadre in the process.

Gheibparvar, an avid proponent of meticulous intelligence preparedness in both "hard" and "soft" warfare, helped crush that year's unrest in Tehran and several other major cities in his capacity as an IRGC divisional commander. Previously, he led the Imam Hossein HQ, succeeding his mentor Gen. Hossein Hamedani. That headquarters reportedly oversees around 500 Basij battalions throughout Iran's thirty-one provinces. Attached to their respective provincial IRGC units, these so-called "independent" Imam Hossein (IH) battalions are said to undergo a gradually

expanding range of specialized training, including urban and nuclear/biological/chemical warfare. They are tasked with quelling domestic disturbances and supporting the IRGC in defending against foreign invaders. The IRGC's special Muhammad Rasoul Allah Corps in Tehran has a sizable Basij contingent specifically tasked with securing the capital area. The Basij have also reportedly organized a large number of Beit al-Moqadass reserve battalions that can quickly assemble and augment IR battalions in times of emergency.

According to recent remarks quoted by Fars News and other Iranian outlets, Gheibparvar believes that safeguarding the Islamic Revolution should continue to have "priority over peace, welfare, and progress." He also warned against "selfish" domestic voices, especially Expediency Council chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who recently called for a conciliatory approach in Iran's international affairs.

This hardline stance on domestic security echoes that of his predecessor. Prior to commanding the Basij, General Naghdi headed Iran's "Law Enforcement Force" (LEF) counterintelligence command. He was also the subject of high-profile trials for torturing dissidents, but none of them managed to put him behind bars.

In a letter appointing Gheibparvar to his new post, the Supreme Leader ordered him to monitor any domestic dissent and continue supporting other enforcement agencies. Likewise, on December 13, IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari warned of "severely heightened" hostility targeting the Basij inside Iran and recommended a "strategic solution" to the problem.

Other high-ranking IRGC commanders have expressed similar concerns. On December 6, Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh reemphasized the IRGC's responsibility to save the revolution from any threat, declaring that Iranian economic, cultural, and political administrators "have failed to listen to the Supreme Leader." On November 30, chief IRGC propagandist Lt. Gen. Ramazan Sharif stated, "While our defense industries have made remarkable gains, our society is still dealing with unemployment, low marital rate, poverty, discrimination, and corruption...The [IRGC] need to rectify those problems...Our patience toward those who betray the Islamic ruling system is reaching its limit."

Such comments point to a possible expansion of the IRGC and Basij's role in shaping the future of Iranian domestic policies. All indications suggest that their regional footprint is growing as well.

THE BASIJ'S ROLE ABROAD

The Basij were originally the brainchild of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who envisioned mobilizing the oppressed Iranian masses into a twenty-million-strong army. When this vision did not exactly materialize, it gradually transformed into an international corps of devout Shiite youths recruited through an elaborate network of seminaries and universities, with the aim of creating a "new Islamic civilization" (similar to the Sunni jihadist concept of restoring the caliphate, though with less of a territorial emphasis). Yet it was not until fairly recently that Tehran began implementing the Basij model abroad on a major scale, beginning in Iraq and Syria. For example, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) currently operating in Iraq include several militias formed by the IRGC-Qods Force for the purpose of fighting alongside Iran's allies in Syria (i.e., Bashar al-Assad's army, Hezbollah, and various Afghan and Pakistani brigades).

General Naghdi's background was well suited to propagating Basij tactics in these countries. As an IRGC intelligence officer in the 1980s, he helped found the Irregular Warfare HQ, which waged guerrilla campaigns in northeastern Iraq and later morphed into the Qods Force. He also commanded Iraqi dissidents and former prisoners of war within the Badr Brigades (now the Badr Organization), and helped General Hamedani organize Syria's version of Basij paramilitary forces (in October 2015, Hamedani was killed in a road accident in Aleppo while overseeing the formation of these forces).

For his part, Gheibparvar previously commanded the IRGC's Fajr and Karbala provincial corps -- units that have

been well represented in the Qods Force contingents deployed to Iraq and Syria. More broadly, his recent comments in the media have made clear that he will continue to work toward Khomeini's idea of an international Islamic army.

EXPANDING ACTIVITIES IN SYRIA

Iranian leaders and military commanders tend to regard Syria as the most important foreign element of their country's strategic depth, even more so than Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen. This is why General Hamedani set up Syria's National Defense Forces, the irregular pro-Assad brigades that he claimed were responsible for saving Damascus from falling to the rebels in summer 2012. He also reportedly set the foundation for Syria's version of Iran's LEF police branch, complete with special antiriot and cybersecurity units. In his view, the Assad regime's lack of such specialized units had contributed to the rebellion getting out of hand. Today, the Syrian LEF is apparently still in its early formative stages, and progress is slower than expected.

As the IRGC expands its activities in Syria, it is also increasing the Basij's role there -- perhaps to relieve overstretched IRGC elements or meet increasing demand from devout Iranian youths eager to join the fight. The IRGC currently operates two distinct missions in Syria: the first is an advise-and-assist program run by the Qods Force, manned by professional IRGC and some national army (Artesh) personnel in close association with Hezbollah; the second involves small combat units jointly supervised by the Basij's Imam Hossein HQ and the Qods Force.

Since last year, the Basij have been more actively recruiting young Iranian volunteers to fight in Syria as part of the "Defenders of the Haram" initiative, which claims to be largely funded by private contributions. Organized into so-called Fatehin (Conqueror) Battalions, these volunteers undergo training before being placed on a waiting list for deployment to Syria in military aircraft or commercial flights. Upon arrival in Syria, they operate alongside the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade, both under Qods Force control. According to Fatehin commander Mehdi Hadavandi, these volunteers suffered their heaviest casualties in Khan Tuman on May 6, 2016, when one of their units was ambushed and lost twelve men.

Syria's battlefields give Iran's military and paramilitary forces an opportunity to hone their combat and organizational skills under uniquely demanding circumstances. Intervening there also helps Tehran fuel the flames of revolutionary zeal among religious youths back home. Under Gheibparvar, the Basij will no doubt continue using such deployments as a means of identifying and training the next generation of IRGC commanders, propagating the Iranian concept of popular paramilitary forces across the Muslim world, and expanding a "resistance" front that could set its sights on other countries in the region.

As the Syria war drags on, Iran is not only sending elite forces on advisory and support assignments, it is also deploying less-trained, though highly motivated, Basij members for more open-ended combat duties. With the main fighting seemingly poised to shift away from Aleppo (and likely [toward Idlib governorate](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-assad-target-idlib-after-aleppo) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-assad-target-idlib-after-aleppo>)), the number of young Iranian Basijis fighting in Syria can be expected to increase in the coming months -- along with their casualties.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖

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