

The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?

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In the months since Iran's contested June 2009 presidential election, the Basij Resistance Force has emerged as one of the regime's main pillars of support against the democracy movement. In the long term, however, it is uncertain whether the militia is capable of prevailing in a prolonged fight against a persistent opposition.

Background

In the early days of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for the creation of a "Twenty Million Man Army." In practical terms, Article 151 of the Iranian constitution obliged the government to "provide a program of military training, with all requisite facilities, for all its citizens." On this basis, the regime founded the Basij (meaning "mobilization") in 1980.

Following the September 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran, the nascent Basij began mobilizing volunteers. This effort peaked in December 1986, when one hundred thousand volunteers were on the front. According to the May 8, 2007, issue of the Tehran daily paper *Iran*, the militia mobilized a total of two million people during the war, though only a quarter of them served at the front. The Basij also contributed to domestic security by patrolling the cities, arresting so-called "counter-revolutionaries," and serving as morality police.

On November 3, 1992 -- during a time when economic reforms were provoking urban unrest among impoverished people living in the outskirts of major cities -- the Iranian parliament codified the Basij's policing activities. And in the late 1990s, the regime once again reached out to the militia in order to suppress protesters calling for political liberalization.

The Basij has also increasingly been drawn into economic activity. It has gradually assumed the role of the now-defunct Agricultural Jihad, the "revolutionary" organizational counterpart to the Ministry of Agriculture. It has controlled the Yazd Steel Works since 2001 and the Tabriz Tractor Factory since April 2009. In addition, Basij financial institutions have enabled members to take advantage of the lucrative housing market.

Basij Structure

Per the Basij's governing statute, each city in Iran -- depending on its size and population -- is divided into "resistance areas," which are further divided into "resistance zones," "resistance bases," and subgroups. Smaller towns, suburban areas, and villages have "resistance cells." The Basij structure in Tehran illustrates this strategy. According to the January 20, 2003, issue of *Sobh-e Sadegh* newspaper, the region is divided into two resistance areas: Tehran Province, which is subdivided into three resistance zones (Shemiran, Rey, and Eslamshahr), and Tehran City, which is subdivided into four resistance zones (the northwest Qods zone, the southwest Abouzar zone, the northeast Shahid Beheshti zone, and Pupil's Basij Zone with an independent command). This basic structure was incorporated into the so-called "Mosaic Doctrine" of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Conceived in summer 2008, this doctrine merged the Basij into the IRGC's provincial structure. Specifically, the Guards and the Basij are divided into thirty-one units: one unit per province and two units for the Tehran area (one for Greater Tehran and one for Tehran City).

Rather than having independent bases, the Basij is physically organized at mosques, government administrative offices, factories, and educational institutions. This and other factors make it impossible to establish precisely how many members the Basij has. Two of the militia's core components are the so-called "Ashura Brigades" for male members and "al-Zahra Brigades" for female members, established around 1992-1993 to suppress urban uprisings. According to one account, there are 2,500 such brigades with 300-350 armed members each. It is even more difficult to determine how many members joined the Basij for ideological reasons and how many joined for opportunistic reasons -- the latter are much more likely to defect.

The militia appears to have three levels of membership: Regular Basij, Active Basij, and Special Basij, or honorary Guardsman. According to the "Law on Employment Regulations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," passed by parliament on October 13, 1991, Active and Special Basij members are on the IRGC's payroll. Active Basij are paid for time they accrue working on specific projects -- four million rials or \$400 per day according to some sources, which is more than the monthly salary of a teacher. Special Basij are full-time employees and receive a monthly salary. Members of neighborhood Basij units can also be enrolled in specialized branches such as the

Labor Basij and Student Basij, established to provide a counterbalance to corresponding civil society organizations.

The Basij recruitment process takes place under the supervision of "clergy of the neighborhoods and trusted citizens and legal associations of the neighborhoods," according to the official statute of the Basij. In other words, the local mosque where the Basij center is located has the greatest say in whether applicants are accepted to the militia's armed wing. Members of this wing are also actively recruited for service and full membership in the IRGC. Other branches such as the Student Basij likely follow less restrictive recruitment policies, if only to present ever-growing membership statistics to their superiors.

Aftermath of the June Election

The Basij's performance since the June 12, 2009, election has been mixed. Although it managed to suppress street protests in the provinces with the help of the Law Enforcement Forces, maintaining order in major urban centers has been much more difficult, especially in Tehran.

According to Abdullah Araghi, the IRGC commander in Tehran, the Guards' leadership anticipated post-election unrest and ordered all security efforts in the capital to be handed over to the IRGC and Basij. On June 15, however, Basij members shot and killed protesters at Azadi Square as they were forcing their way into the local militia station. From June 22 onward, perhaps in response to outcry over these killings and the inability of the Basij to deter public demonstrations, the Basij constituted only a minority of the forces cracking down on protesters.

The December 8 Student Day protests proved equally challenging for the Student Basij, which was unable to suppress dissidents at campuses in Tehran, Shiraz, or Tabriz. This defeat is all the more striking when one considers that the Student Basij had mobilized several thousand members with no affiliation to the universities for the confrontation.

That same month, the Ashura days of mourning proved catastrophic for the Basij in Tehran. As Brig. Gen. Ali Fazli confessed, the IRGC had to mobilize militia members from the capital's outskirts and even from other provinces in order to suppress the unrest.

There are signs that the regime leadership has not been particularly happy with the Basij's performance. On October 2, Hojjat al-Eslam Hossein Taeb was removed as Basij chief, and on October 5, the militia was formally integrated within the framework of the IRGC Ground Forces, with Brig. Gen. Muhammad Naghdi as the new chief.

Implications

A weak Basij will be a serious problem if the Iranian regime becomes embattled. The regular military would not be able to pick up the slack: besides being politically noninterventionist, it is based in garrisons along the country's international borders, far from major urban centers. Meanwhile, the Law Enforcement Forces have given a mixed performance in street battles with protesters, and the so-called "pressure groups" (e.g., the Ansar-e Hizballah vigilante organization) are too undisciplined for concerted action. Theoretically, the IRGC could serve as the regime's backbone at a time of need, but many of its 125,000 enlisted men may be conscripts, raising questions about how they would act if sent on the streets. The last time regular IRGC personnel were ordered to move against demonstrators was in Qazvin in 1994; the unit in question refused to go.

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