

The contentious life of Basij revolutionary politics in poor neighbourhoods of Iran

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Waves of unrest shook Iran in December 2018 and late 2019. Although protests never appeared to attract more than a few thousand protesters, the radical chants and geographic dispersal of the recent unrest were unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. In a rapid escalation of the turmoil, the initial demands for economic relief took on a more radicalised, political tone against the regime, resonating with both frustrated youth and destitute working-class people across the country. In addition to economic and political grievances, Iran's effort to 'export' its revolution across the Middle East was also causing internal backlash: the dominant chant among protesters was "no Gaza, no Lebanon, my life for Iran." Almost a decade after the 2009 uprisings, when this chant was first used, protesters objected explicitly to the channelling of scarce resources to distant conflicts at the expense of Iranians' economic well-being.

Not only were these protests unprecedented in scale, occurring nation-wide in over a hundred cities, but new urban areas—particularly low-income neighbourhoods—became hotbeds of revolt. Widely circulated images of demonstrations in these neighbourhoods revealed the level of discontent that runs deep among the urban poor. The street showdowns between protesters and plain-clothed militiamen of the Basij, which comprises part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, not only illustrated the new demography of the protests, but also pointed to the paradoxes of revolutionary politics in Iran. How should one confront the poor in the name of the Revolution, when the poor are supposed to be the 'true heirs of the Revolution'?¹ To find an answer, we should investigate the contemporary dilemmas and contradictions of Basij revolutionary politics in poor urban settings, where both the poor and the so-called revolutionaries who confronted them had the same complaints about internal politics and economic mismanagement. Formed in 1979 as a paramilitary force to protect the Revolution, the Basij may not share protesters' critical views on Iran's regional ambitions. However, its members no doubt join the poor in harshly criticising the state for failing to deliver on its revolutionary promises to the poor in the face of a free-falling economy and glaring economic inequality.

Method

I conducted research with the Basij² in several low-income neighbourhoods on the peripheries of Tehran, as well as two small towns in the northeast and south of Iran. My research investigated the way in which the Basij relies on its vast networks and resources to deliver infrastructural, cultural, and social services to the poor. More specifically I

¹ A reference to Khomeini's saying about the poor

² I carried out over fourteen months of fieldwork between 2015 and 2016, which built on three months of fieldwork in 2013, and was updated with four months of follow up research in summer and fall of 2019.

wanted to understand how members of the Basij, institutionally and individually, strive to uphold the revolutionary promise of social justice for the poor, while ‘persuading’ them that the revolution is still relevant to their life. My main research sites were:

- a. The Basij of Neighbourhoods, the smallest operational units which serve as both structures of social control and places designed to recruit and train revolutionary forces;
- b. The Basij of Construction, which is active in delivering infrastructural services to the rural areas and informal settlements in cities;
- c. Mosques where I could follow centrally planned and locally executed cultural activities such as film screenings, programmes for the youth, religious or political gatherings and, in the period of 2015–2016, the intermittent recruitment of Iranian and Afghan fighters to Syria

I conducted over eighty informal interviews with different members of the Basij from all walks of life. They ranged from men who actively participated in the Revolution and war in the 1980s to men, aged twenty-five to forty years, who were university-educated residents of the poor neighbourhoods, described aptly by Asef Bayat as “middle class poor”.³

Observing on-the-ground administration of the Basij programmes, everyday dilemmas and ongoing negotiations of the Basij alongside locals in low-income neighbourhoods, enabled me to realise the internal paradox of the Basij. This was the inevitable paradox that revolutionaries typically faced, as they ventured into keep a balance between revolutionary zeal and obdurate state bureaucracy.

Confronted with failures of statecraft, the Basij is caught between supporting the regime as a whole (*nizam*)⁴ and contesting the state⁵ that administers it. This position seems highly contradictory. However, it becomes less divergent when we consider the following: although the commitment of the Basij to the Revolution relies on authoritative doctrinal training, this does not prevent them from expressing their dissatisfaction towards the ways Iranian authorities institutionalise and administer revolutionary ideals. The Basij thus occupies an ambiguous yet special position, simultaneously placed within and outside the state, enabling the Basij to act as the state while maintaining a critical distance from it. Such an ambiguous position is challenging, and makes the Basij’s revolutionary politics rife with tensions and conflicts. Through analysis of these tensions in the following two examples, I show how the Basij’s effort at maintaining the

³ Asef Bayat, “Plebeians of the Arab Spring,” *Current Anthropology* 56, no. S11 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1086/681523>.

⁴ *Nizam* refers to the statehood of the Islamic Republic. *Nizam* appears frequently in the daily conversation of the Basijis, for instance, ‘protecting the *nizam* is our priority’ or ‘I am ready to give up my life for the *nizam*’. In this sense, *nizam* is perceived as ideal by Basijis and no one is permitted to question its legitimacy.

⁵ The state, an assemblage of elected and non-elected governing bodies, is responsible to effectively administer and translate particular sets of revolutionary ideals of *nizam* into concrete practices. I distinguish between *nizam* and the state, in order to show Basijis do not dispute the legitimacy of *nizam* (i.e. the regime or the Islamic Republic of Iran), but the legitimacy of those who currently ‘run’ (parts of) it, who can sometimes be portrayed as ‘unworthy’ of their political position.

Revolution is intricately linked to perpetual contestation of the state that administers and governs the Revolution. Such perpetual contentions are not close to being resolved in low-income neighbourhoods, where the Basij and the poor meet.

The Basij of Construction

Similar to the experience of many revolutionary movements of the twentieth century, Iran's Revolution was built on developmental promises to marginalised populations.⁶ Numerous institutions and organisations were shaped around this promise after the Revolution, which later became a conglomerate of quasi-private financial institutions.⁷ ⁸ One such organisation that started off as a revolutionary institution and later became involved in massive economic enterprises is the Basij of Construction.⁹ Ever since its formation, one key activity of the Basij of Construction has been to encourage and organise its members to volunteer in provisioning infrastructural services to the poor. These services range from building schools in border towns and villages to fixing the ceiling of a house in one of the many satellite towns of Tehran characterised by informal settlements, overpopulation, and lack of amenities. Supervised directly by the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij of Construction organises regular week-long trips, known as 'jihadi trips,' to designated areas.¹⁰ Basiji volunteers are usually selected from high school or university students, many of whom come from extremely poor families. I accompanied different groups of Basiji volunteers in ten short trips at the North East border of Iran and on the peripheries of Tehran.

Basijis often justified their participation in jihadi trips by claiming it was part of their revolutionary duty to help the poor, which politicians often shrug off. Basiji volunteering is usually oriented towards spaces where the state has failed to deliver services, particularly infrastructural ones. 'I'm sure none of the authorities have ever stepped foot in here, was a sentence that I often heard from Basijis when they encountered scenes of rural and urban destitution.

The immediate castigation of authorities by Basijis should be viewed in a broader

⁶ See: Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1982); Donald L Donham, *Marxist Modern: an Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Marina Gold, *People and State in Socialist Cuba: Ideas and Practices of Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Alice Wilson, *Sovereignty in Exile: a Saharan Liberation Movement Governs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁷ Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

⁸ Kevan Harris, "Lineages of the Iranian Welfare State: Dual Institutionalism and Social Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Social Policy & Administration* 44, no. 6 (2010): 727–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2010.00740.x>.

⁹ Eric Lob, *Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ To choose a location, jihadi groups need to consult the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, which was formed in the early years of the Revolution to alleviate poverty in rural and urban areas (Harris 2012, 136). The Relief Committee provides each jihadi group with a chart that categorises Iranian cities and villages on the scale of 1 to 9, with 9 indicating the most deprived areas. Jihadi groups often selected locations which fall between 7 to 9.

context. As the Basijis moved to poorer areas to address the grievances of the poor, who supposedly comprise the base of the Islamic Republic's supporters, they advanced a strong discourse—the inadequacy of the state. By delivering infrastructural services to the poor, Basijis imitate and enact state practices. Such state-like practices, however, are rooted in the Basijis' profound suspicion that the state can fulfil its duty to cater to the needs of the citizens.

The act of highlighting state inadequacy while duplicating its practices can be traced back to a particular history that has led the Basij to oscillate between being inside and outside of the state. This is a special positioning that creates a space in which the jihadi practices of the Basij can pertain to both state presence and neglect. Since the 1979 Revolution, so-called revolutionaries have firmly believed that a firm that they should work outside or alongside state bodies. This is due to the state being an institution that is either not yet consolidated (in the case of the early years of the revolution) or too large and slow to adequately serve the poor.

This uneasy position vis-à-vis the state was a common topic in my ethnographic observations. It became particularly visible when locals asked volunteers for help with their unfinished homes, broken ceilings, or construction around their homes. It was clear that all their grievances could not be redressed by the jihadi group. Yet, Basijis' reaction to the needy community was a combination of compassion towards the condition of the poor and critique of the state for its shortcomings. Discussions among the Basijis who had to decide if they were able to help people with their requests would always turn towards the injustice engendered by corrupt politicians: 'we should send the politicians to live in exile here and directly respond to these requests, instead of staying in their luxury houses in the North of Tehran was a common argument.

Insofar as jihadi projects of the Basij are designed to render the *nizam* desirable in the eyes of the public, in most cases, they orient Basijis towards highlighting the failure of the state to deliver its promises. Basijis go to great lengths to encourage and enforce justice as a collective ethos and embrace it as an essential component of revolution and democratic citizenship. Witnessing visible discrepancies between expectations and the existing reality, Basijis' notion of justice provides a ground for contesting and questioning the state. It was in this context that the jihadi infrastructural projects became avenues for Basijis and the locals to exchange views on politicians, unfulfilled revolutionary promises, and the concerning direction toward which the country is going. A significant locus for these interactions was the Basij of Neighbourhoods, which I witnessed first-hand as part of my field research.

The Basij of Neighbourhoods

Since the immediate years after the Revolution, almost all urban neighbourhoods in Iran have hosted a paramilitary base of the Basij. Known as the Basij of Neighbourhoods, they were one of the first undertakings of the revolutionaries after taking control of cities in 1979. They envisioned the units to be central in policing the urban social order. In addition to acting as 'revolutionary bulwarks' against any security threats arising in each neighbourhood, Basij bases in the neighbourhoods played an active role in mobilising

and recruiting volunteers during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). In the post-war years, the Basij maintained its presence in these neighbourhoods and its bases continued to serve as spaces for cultural, political, and military training.

Whereas paramilitary forces usually consolidate their power in the absence of a functioning state and police,^{11 12} the Basij has, since its formation, operated closely with state institutions in security provision, for which a special quota is designated in the annual national budget. Nonetheless, operations of the Basij are not restricted to the provision of security, as they have gradually become a massive network of institutions involved in administrative tasks. The Basij of Neighbourhoods is inevitably part of this bureaucratic network.

The sheer number of Basij bases in neighbourhoods and the extension of their interventions have given the Basij a prominent role in regulating collective life at the neighbourhood level. Such a role is substantially reinforced by the distinctive technologies of control they employ, an example of which are the hierarchies of membership. In every Basij base in the country there is an office responsible for membership. Once registered, one can become a regular Basiji. However, if one's intention is to benefit from the loans, a reduction in months of military service, and jobs that are associated with the role there are special trainings that need to be completed. These trainings last almost six months, provided one has already completed the pedagogical courses on the Islamic teachings and Revolution. Otherwise, this process can take years and often ends in failure. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the Basij bases is to keep a record of its members' activities.

A constant demand of those visiting the Basij cadre is to upgrade their membership, as a prerequisite to sorting out their pending requests for bank loans and other related benefits. The staff of the Basij base often articulated a sense of responsibility for their bureaucratic roles. They acted as gatekeepers of revolutionary and Islamic ideology that residents of neighbourhoods failed to learn as part of the courses offered at the Basij bases. At the same time, they also expressed their deep dissatisfaction at how the Basij had become institutionalised. More often than not, it was the Basij cadres who would start complaining about elite members of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij who were unaware of rampant social problems in poor neighbourhoods. It was quite common to come across discussions which changed course swiftly to the topics of corrupt politicians and failed bureaucracy.

More than a top-down and stringent mechanism of social control, hierarchies of membership became grounds upon which both residents of poor neighbourhoods and the Basij reinstated the foundational revolutionary promises to the poor. It was an inherently critical stance and a poignant reminder of a revolution whose leader, “belonged to the disinherited (*mostazafān*) and the barefooted (*paberehnegan*), and

11 Jennifer Burrell, “In and Out of Rights: Security, Migration, and Human Rights Talk in Postwar Guatemala,” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2010): 90–115, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1935-4940.2010.01064.x>.

12 Mirco Göpfert, “Security in Niamey: an Anthropological Perspective on Policing and an Act of Terrorism in Niger,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, no. 1 (2012): 53–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x11000607>.

promised large scale redistribution of income and wealth.”¹³

Given this dynamic space of negotiation, I observed that, while the Basij of Neighbourhoods continued to exert their power over the residents, the members of the Basij increasingly appeared to locals as low-level state functionaries who were there to redress local grievances, but constantly failed to do so. In this context, the Basij’s everyday dilemmas and practices are grossly misunderstood if they are seen as merely veiled submissive attempts to uphold the status quo and the established political structure. By assuming revolutionary orientations, the Basijis with whom I worked promoted the overarching ideological aims of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet it was precisely their loyalty that precluded them from ignoring the state’s shortcomings and inconsistencies.

Conclusion

The general imaginary of the Basij has been limited to spectacular scenes in which they clash with protestors, or when they perform acts of vandalism. This dominant image leaves little space to see the ordinary life of the Basij; a key feature of which has been operating in tandem with general discontent in poor neighbourhoods. While the Basijis’ efforts consistently support the overall structure of the political system in their basic orientation, in practice, they invariably appear to contest the state. Arguably, the Basij’s efforts entail the remobilisation of the revolutionary notions, with social justice as a focal point. Understanding social justice as the eroding of class differences and the prioritisation of the needs of the poor, the Basijis inevitably take a critical stance towards the authorities whose administration has generated glaring social inequalities. In this social landscape, the Basij’s revolutionary politics has an inherent political paradox: those who feel loyal to the political system are motivated, precisely *because* of that loyalty, to criticise governance and statecraft that they perceive to be falling short of revolutionary promises to the poor. Awareness of this paradox allows us to see the ‘contested’ nature of loyalty to the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the contentious life of the Basij’s revolutionary politics in poor neighbourhoods of Iran.

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¹³ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Poverty, Inequality, and Populist Politics in Iran,” *The Journal of Economic Inequality* 7, no. 1 (2008): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-007-9071-y>.

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