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Militia Adds Fear To Time of Unrest

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One of the more dramatic video clips from [Iran](#) this week showed a man in an upper-floor window firing onto demonstrators outside a building near Tehran's Azadi Square, killing at least one and wounding others.

The building was a base for the Basij, a semiofficial force of volunteers on whom the government has relied for years to enforce a variety of laws and religious codes. Protesters have accused them of committing much of this week's violence, saying they have raided university dorms, beaten women and smashed their way into private homes. Many said they fear the Basij will be used to carry out even worse violence as the protests continue.

But although the Basiji loom large in the minds of their countrymen, Iranians and analysts interviewed said it is hard to pin down the number of members, their precise activities and whether they are all as loyal to hard-line government factions as many believe.

Joining the Basij can be as simple as going to a local mosque and receiving a membership card. Training and membership are often informal, said Gary Sick, an Iran expert at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, adding that some who carry out activities associated with the Basij may not be official members. "If the Basiji are given a job, like to go break up a dormitory, and they call up their friends and say 'Let's go hit those sissy college kids,' it wouldn't surprise me a bit," he said.

The term, which means "mobilization," originally referred to people too young or too old to join the army during Iran's eight-year war against [Iraq](#). Then-leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for 20 million Iranians -- half the country's population at the time -- to volunteer. Many were preteens and teenagers who, swept up in a religion-infused passion, famously walked onto minefields, unarmed, allegedly with plastic keys to heaven around their necks.

After the war, they became known for enforcing moral codes. For years, the word "Basiji" has struck fear into the hearts of more secularized Iranians, who know them as young men who stop them on the street for failing to follow the dress code or fraternizing with the opposite sex.

Like the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the religious militia with which they are affiliated, the Basiji are "people who can get their rifles and guns to come and defend the revolution" if necessary, said Mohsen Sazegara, a co-founder of the Revolutionary Guard and now president of the Washington-based Research Institute for Contemporary Iran. Sazegara said that although the Basij claims 12 million members, he thinks the number is around 500,000.

Critics of the Basiji say they are largely poor, uneducated and motivated in part by envy of their wealthier or more successful compatriots.

But that characterization is not always true, said Afshin Molavi, a Washington-based Iran analyst at the New America Foundation who spent time with Basiji while researching a book.

"The Basiji volunteer militia . . . are not monolithic," he said, adding that while some fit the more hard-core and violent pattern, others become involved more casually. "They're religious, that they have certain ways of dressing, like you never tuck your shirt in, or you wear Palestinian-style kaffiyeh, and it's kind of a social identity."

"Some of the finest people I met in Iran were members of the Basiji, and some of the worst people I met in Iran were members of the Basiji," he said. "But among the more hard-core there is a core intolerance for Iranians who have adopted a more modern and secular lifestyle that they view as Western."

The less hard-core members may be a wild card in upcoming days, Sazegara said.

He said many were "ordinary young people" who may feel conflicted about this week's events. Some of them, he said, may have voted for Mir Hossein Mousavi, the defeated presidential candidate who has called on his supporters to protest the election, while still believing strongly in the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The conflict extends beyond the Basij, he said, adding that former colleagues in the Revolutionary Guard have called him expressing misgivings about the election.

Sazegara also cautioned against confusing the Basij with other, more professional and organized, militia, including those associated with the Ministry of Intelligence.

"Many of their friends and family are on the other side," he said. "If the regime thinks they can use them to suppress the people and kill the people, they are going to have a hard time."

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