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DEEPLY ROOTED YET ADAPTABLE – AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE BASIJ-E MOSTAZAFAN

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**DEEPLY ROOTED YET ADAPTABLE –
AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE BASIJ-E MOSTAZAFAN**

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Abstract

The Basij is a complex organisation: part socio-economic entity and part volunteer paramilitary organisation, its principal aim is the defence of Iran in conjunction with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Increasingly, this role has required defending against cultural invasion of the Iranian social fabric. This paper analyses the Basij organisation through the framework of institutional analysis, which considers its cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative components to determine its legitimacy, or robustness. Through this analysis, it is shown that the Basij has deeply rooted beliefs and values that resonate with its roles and structures, and assure that the institution will not only survive but continue to gain influence in the coming years.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Being oppressed is not in contradiction with being powerful. Basij is oppressed and at the same time it is powerful. It is influential and effective. Its influence will last. . .

- Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

In his address to the Basij, Supreme Leader Khamenei demonstrates cleverness and duplicity, motivating the young soldiers by appealing to their disenfranchisement at the hands of an unfair system on the one hand, and praising them for their power and influence on the other. This duality is characteristic of the Iranian people who recall and aspire to the greatness of their storied past as a vast and hegemonic empire, while feeling exasperation that their quest is being hampered by outside forces at every turn.

While this persistent narrative is much older than the Islamic revolution of 1979, the revolution's importance in shaping the society of Iran should not be understated. Most importantly, the revolution resulted in the establishment of the present governance system that sees the executive, judiciary and legislative branches of government overseen by a clerical jurist, the Supreme Leader. The Supreme leader is the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, but also appoints the commanders of the Islamic Revolution Guardians Corps (IRGC),¹ an entity also born out of the revolution. The IRGC, properly Sepah-e Pasdaran², is a separate entity from the regular armed forces that are referred to

¹David E. Thaler, et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads – An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), 24.

²The word Sepah is used to refer to the overall body, or Corps, while the Pasdaran denominates the individual Guardians.

as ‘Artesh’ though that technically simply means army. The IRGC is an elite force that is deeply grounded in the values of the revolutionary regime, as their name implies.

One of the many other entities that emerged out of the revolution is the Basij, properly Basij-e Mostazafan, which translates to Mobilization of the Oppressed. A reasonably obscure organisation, at least to Western audiences, the Basij and its many parts have rarely been analyzed as a whole instead of focusing on its individual components. Part socio-economic structure and part militia under the IRGC’s tutelage, the Basij appears at a glance as undisciplined and lacking focus. The stability and influence that the Supreme Leader assigns to the institution is therefore legitimately questionable. This paper will show that the Basij has deeply rooted beliefs and values that resonate with its roles and structures, and assure that the institution will not only survive but continue to gain influence in the coming years.

In order to understand the Basij, a brief analysis of its name and its evolution over the last generation is necessary. An analysis framework must then be defined. The most appropriate is American sociologist W. Richard Scott’s institutional analysis model. Documented in his 2008 text, *Institutions and Organisations*, it explains the role of three ‘pillars’ in providing stability and meaning to the institution.³ With an understanding of the basis for the model and each of its components, namely the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars, the concept of legitimacy can be exposed.

Applying the institutional analysis model to the Basij organisation requires an independent look at each pillar through the four separate lenses of symbols, relations,

³W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations – Ideas and Interests*, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008), 48.

routines and objects. These frames of reference are titled ‘carriers’ as they are the means through which an institution perpetuates itself. Completing this analysis enables the determination of legitimacy as resulting from each pillar, and from their convergence. Through these means, the power and stability of the Basij as an institution will be shown. The analysis, through this framework, can be easily and logically tabulated. A graphical representation of the components of the analysis and the findings regarding legitimacy can be found under Appendix 1.

One of the biggest challenges in making a detailed analysis that includes cultural and ideological motivators is that of impartiality. It has been noted that the Basij is not a widely studied organisation. More importantly, the reporting that is available is often extremely polarized. Some studies or reports, from Western or Arab sources, describe the organisation as a group of religious fanatics that have less sense than cattle,⁴ or victims of a ruthless and maniacal command structure.⁵ Alternately, domestic reports sing the praise of a righteous and moral organisation, even assigning it success in reversing the country’s centuries-long trend of progressive downfall on the international stage.⁶ This paper will take account of these diverging views and attempt to maintain a nuanced and balanced approach, though the humanist and Western outlook of the author is nonetheless acknowledged.

⁴Matthias Küntzel, “Ahmadinejad’s Demons,” *The New Republic*, April 14, 2006, 16-17.

⁵“Pan-Arab Paper Says Iranian Basij Forces Refuse to Fire at Protesters,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Apr 22, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/862912916?accountid=9867>.

⁶“Iran: President Khatami Addresses Commanders of Basij Resistance Force,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East -Political*, Nov 29, 2000, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451228125?accountid=9867>.

CHAPTER 2 – BASIJ-E MOSTAZAFAN

The Basij is a critical organisation within the governance and defence structures of the revolutionary Iranian regime. The term 'Basij', however, evokes three distinct yet mutually supporting groups. From a Western outlook, and that of the regime reformists, the Basij mostly refers to the volunteer paramilitary organisation that is committed to the defence of the country. This role includes fighting alongside and under command of the Sepah in the event of a military invasion. It also includes fighting along with law-enforcement agencies to defend the regime from internal threats whether they are hard, such as riots aimed at destabilizing the regime, or soft, such as Western culture permeating society. From the government's and the Basij's own leadership's points of view, the Basij is more akin to a parallel society that represents morally righteous counterparts to most components of the social construct. The Basij organisation does this by having eighteen separate branches that recruit and group members based on geography, vocation, or demography.⁷ The final evocation of the term Basij is one of a righteous group of people, an interpretation that is ascribed to by the clerical leaders of the regime and many of their devout followers. "Among active, conservative Muslims in the present community, . . . the meaning of the term Basij has shifted so that the word has also become a general term for an actively pious and good Muslim."⁸ As such, when queried, many Iranians answered "that they were Basij even if they did not take part in

⁷Saeid Golkar, "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing: Analysing the Role of the Basij Militia of Iran," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13, no. 4 (December 2012): 457.

⁸David Thurfjell, *Living Shi'ism – Instances of Ritualisation Among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006), 39.

any activities of the organisation with this name.”⁹ An analysis of the Basij must therefore be cognizant of these three meanings of the word. Also rendering the definition of the Basij complex is the temporal factor. The Basij organisation has had different priorities depending on the geo-political circumstances of the time. This chapter will describe these evolutions.

The evolution of the Basij can be generally grouped into four phases that coincide closely with the evolution of the Iranian society since the 1979 revolution. Understanding these periods will bring important context to the institutional analysis that will follow. The phases are the founding and Iran-Iraq war, the transition and construction period, the reformist years, and the hardliner period.

Although the founding of the Basij is commonly thought to have been in response to the Iran-Iraq war, the organisation pre-dates the war. According to the previous IRGC Commander, General Yahya Rahim Safavi, “the seizure of the spy den [US embassy] by the Students Following Imam's Line on 13 Aban 1358 [4 Nov 1979] revealed [the] espionage activities of America and an attack by America on Iran became more likely than ever before.”¹⁰ The decree issued by The Ayatollah Rudollah Khomeini for the founding of the Basij on 25 November 1979 was apparently in response to this threat.¹¹ Despite this *raison d'être*, the Foundation of the Basij originally focused on social aims. It was “responsible for handling the property confiscated from the royal family and exiled

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰“Iran Press: IRGC Commander Stresses Basij Role in South-West Security,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, May 03, 2006, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459132753?accountid=9867>.

¹¹Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force,” in *The Iran Primer – Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright, 62-65 (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 62.

elite during the revolution and redistributing the proceeds to lower class families.”¹² Iraq soon invaded though, and the Basij changed roles, grew, and became (in)famous. The defining role of the Basij during this first period was characterized by the war effort. The Basij became known for its employment of very young soldiers, sometimes children, and its irregular tactics that included the human wave. These martyr tactics were costly but proved effective in forming part of the Iranian defence strategy that stopped the Iraqi invasion, despite the Iraqi's larger regular force and superior equipment.

The second major period for the organisation of the Basij covered the near decade that followed the war. Returning to its social role roots, the Basij reintegrated into society. “Construction Basij [involved] young people in constructive activities . . . such as education, science, development, service, natural resources and agriculture, health, and environment. . .”¹³ This social focus worked in parallel with the continued defence aims of the organisation, even as the threat turned to an internal one. “On November 3, 1992, during a time when economic reforms were provoking urban unrest among impoverished people . . . the Iranian parliament codified the Basij's policing activities.”¹⁴ As the revolutionary spirit started to dissipate during the period, the regime relied on the Basij to enforce cultural norms and repress dissent. “[T]he regime once again reached out to the

¹²Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam – Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 41.

¹³“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 02, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/907146563?accountid=9867>.

¹⁴Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 5, 2010, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-basij-resistance-force-a-weak-link-in-the-iranian-regime>.

militia in order to suppress protesters calling for political liberalization.”¹⁵ These efforts proved insufficient, as evidenced by the 1997 presidential election.

Mohamad Khatami, a reformist, ascended to the presidency in 1997, and his government helped restrain Basij activities, especially as they pertained to enforcing moral regulations on the population.¹⁶ As Khatami “allowed greater freedom of the press and made some tentative gestures toward reconciliation with the United States,”¹⁷ the conservative clerics and the Supreme Leader redoubled efforts to confront this threat. As a major source of this dissent was the university students and professors, this “pushed the [Student Basij Organisation] SBO to enter the political arena and to oppose Khatami and his supporters.”¹⁸ Simultaneously, resentment towards the government, perhaps borne out of disillusionment with the lack of major reforms, started to grow. Citizens started blaming social woes on “a resurgence of the injured snakes of loose living and immorality [that required] more than ever a more active role by the Basiji forces, alongside the police and military forces.”¹⁹ Others openly called for the Basij to be empowered to use more coercive means to maintain cultural norms.²⁰ This third phase of Basij history ended with the 2005 presidential elections.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, no. 2 (2011): 211.

¹⁷Thomas Omestad, “Iran’s Culture War,” *U.S. News & World Report* 125, no. 4 (July 1998), <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&sid=633c3075-dfc2-4afe-8204-0948873bce6a%40sessionmgr15&hid=8&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=854593>.

¹⁸Saeid Golkar, “The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran’s Universities,” *The Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 23.

¹⁹“Iran: Paper Lauds Continuing Revolutionary Role of Basij Militia,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, Dec 07, 2000, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451226232?accountid=9867>.

²⁰“Iran: Basij Force must be Allowed to Quell “Seditious Elements” – Editorial,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, Nov 24, 2002, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451369844?accountid=9867>.

The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 elections, however disputed, marked a turning point for both Iran and the Basij. Supported by Ahmadinejad, a hardliner and a former Basiji,²¹ the regime “dramatically increased its efforts to exert greater social and moral control over Iranian society.”²² A primary tool to enable this control was the Basij, who went through somewhat of a revival. The Basij resumed the practice of establishing checkpoints to enforce standards of dress, acting as morality police. This fourth phase also saw major increases in resource allocations towards the Basij. In 2010, the commander of the Basij, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naqdi spoke of an unprecedented “seven-fold increase in the [Basij base] budget,”²³ which was evidenced in the capital region where the number of bases rose from six to twenty-two.²⁴ These changes are making the Basij increasingly robust both in the face of soft and hard threats.

The importance of the Basij does not appear to be declining. Speaking to fifty thousand Basijis in 2010, General Safavi stated that the Basij is “the symbol of the essence and everlasting values and competencies of the great people of Iran in achieving the horizons of Iran's 20-year outlook of 1404 [2025].”²⁵ Meanwhile outsiders have characterized the organisation as a group of observation posts amidst a panoptical society, subjecting all to their gaze.²⁶ To determine the robustness of the Basij institution,

²¹The term Basiji refers to a member of the Basij organization.

²²Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society . . .,” 212.

²³“Iran to Build 7,000 Extra Basij Bases,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Jul 29, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/733637811?accountid=9867>.

²⁴“Tehran Guard Corps Commander Says Basij Militia Bases to Double,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Feb 26, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458753045?accountid=9867>.

²⁵“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

²⁶Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 471.

which means such different things to different audiences, the institutional analysis model will be used.

CHAPTER 3 – INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS - A FRAMEWORK

Background

Scott's institutional analysis model is both logical and largely encompassing of the body of institutional studies that have preceded or co-existed with his own work. In laying out his theory, he takes care to identify the myriad influences, from multiple disciplines, that have helped shape what he terms the 'neoinstitutional' construct that appeared in the 1970s.²⁷

Scott's analysis model is intended to be applicable quasi-universally. He identifies "three primary categories of actors [that] have been accorded primacy: individuals, organisations, and societies, the latter in the guise of the nation-state."²⁸ He further subdivides these actors to produce six levels, ranging from world system (largest) to organisational subsystems (smallest), where institutional theory can be applied.²⁹ These various levels, when applied to Scott's framework, can be considered institutions. Institutions are simply organisations that have become infused with values, through an

²⁷W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 19.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 85.

evolutionary process.³⁰ Scott further provides this definition: “Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to life.”³¹ This definition identifies the main elements of his model.

The three elements of institutions are systems that rely on each other and reinforce each other in the construct of a social framework.³² Institutional analysis, then, requires an analysis of each system, or 'pillar', while considering their effect on the activities and resources of the institution. Each pillar can be subdivided in components that fall into four categories that Scott refers to as 'carriers'.³³ Symbolic systems are the structure or rules that govern the institution. Relational systems include the codification of roles and resulting relational guidelines. Routines relate to the activities that typically are undertaken by the institution. Finally, artifacts are the objects or tools used by the institution, whether for actual, symbolic or mixed uses. These carriers are the building blocks of an institution, and will frame the respective pillar analyses. Although the pillars work together, they must be analyzed independently to identify friction between them.³⁴ The result of the pillar analysis thus aims to identify the institution's legitimacy. Strong and reinforcing pillars create legitimacy, while misaligned pillars decrease it.³⁵

Scott's institutional analysis model is not immune to bias. While the three pillars should theoretically be studied independently with their relative importance or strength

³⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

³¹*Ibid.*, 48.

³²*Ibid.*, 50.

³³*Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 59.

indicating the character of the institution, the observer's own natural tendency to attribute more weight to one of the pillars will invariably affect the result.³⁶ This analysis of the Basij will endeavour to maintain equal weighting on the pillars. Beyond the analysts' field of study, another source of bias is the geographical component. Scott acknowledges the greater individual autonomy of Western institutions.³⁷ It is therefore reiterated that this analysis of a Middle Eastern institution is influenced by the Western outlook of its author.

A number of critical concepts are broached by Scott in forming his framework of institutional analysis. Although they go beyond the scope of this dissertation, they merit brief discussion. In studying how individuals' actions are shaped by the institutions to which they belong, the question of rationality appears. Are people motivated to act in ways that maximize their benefits through a logical reasoning process, following an atomist or rational view?³⁸ Or do social and cultural influences alter perception and therefore motivate different behaviour? This analysis will follow the postpostivist model, which espouses that there is no absolute truth in the physical realm nor is there one in the mind of the actor, but that they co-exist.³⁹

The final concept that needs attention within the institutional analysis process is the question of stability versus change. In his coda, Scott issues a warning that the study of institutions risks highlighting the power of the institution over the individual.⁴⁰ The

³⁶*Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 67.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 220.

theme of institutions being both constraining and empowering runs through his book, and he gives a name to the power of the individual to shape or change the institution:

‘agency.’⁴¹ Institutionalists, over the decades, have vacillated between an optimist approach that recognizes the benefit of institutions and a pessimist one that characterizes institutions as oppressors. This analysis approaches institutions as equally capable of empowerment and confinement.

With the general background and concept of Scott’s institutional analysis model discussed, each of the pillars can be further investigated, as can their interdependence and reinforcing nature, which results in institutional legitimacy.

Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

The cultural-cognitive pillar consists of conceptions that make up the shared vision of reality, as well as the processes used to make sense of these concepts.⁴² The cultural-cognitive system demands a shared vision. It is also a highly personal system that can serve as a test to the other pillars to ensure they are aligned with the individual beliefs of the organisation member.

The importance of this pillar is argued by Scott to be central to neoinstitutional analysis as it is applied to organisations: “prevailing models of organization . . . [were] overly concerned with stability, order, and system maintenance”⁴³ but “[Neoinstitutional

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 77.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 57.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 42.

analysis] . . . proposed a phenomenological view of organizations that focuses attention on meaning systems and the ways in which they are constructed.”⁴⁴ It should be noted when applying Scott’s model that as an institutionalist and a sociologist, he self-admittedly favours this pillar.⁴⁵

The cultural-cognitive pillar is perhaps the most difficult to analyze, as it deals with the internal procedures that govern how data is processed and interpreted. It does not suffice to look at facts or events but rather requires that the meaning attached to those symbols and interactions be gauged, a highly personal pursuit.⁴⁶ The cultural component is somewhat more external than the cognitive, and can be considered to shape the cognitive reasoning. Culture theorists tend to believe in a shared developed understanding of who does what, rather than a coercive norm of what each person needs to do, as envisaged by normative theorists.⁴⁷

Although the cultural-cognitive concepts are essentially unenforced, as opposed to norms and rules, they nevertheless are strong motivators of behaviour. Cultural-cognitive concepts elicit strong emotions from members by reinforcing feelings of certitude and confidence or discouraging feelings of confusion and disorientation.⁴⁸ Although cognitive-cultural systems are the most basic components of organisations, prolonged social contact naturally leads to more formalized structures, namely regulative and normative systems.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

Normative Pillar

The normative pillar is a mostly social construct resulting from the inter-relations between members of an institution. It relies on the values and norms that should be shared within an institution. Values are the ideals of how things should be. Norms, on the other hand, are conceptions of the manner in which things should be done.⁴⁹ Certain values and norms are engrained into the society more deeply than others. In his well-known 1906 book “Folkways”, early American sociologist William Graham Sumner separates these into folkways and mores. Folkways are habits and customs that become regulated through generational advances and thus become a social force. Mores are those folkways that are so critical, perhaps because of their ethical nature, that they become predominant within society.⁵⁰ Mores often even become formal rules and thereby act to bridge the normative and regulative pillars. The distinction between folkways and mores is crucial to institutional analysis as it necessitates that normative concepts be evaluated for general institutional acceptance, but also for their relative importance.

The values and norms that make up the normative pillar are not physically enforced by a regulative body. As such, the nature of the society has a large impact on the effect of the normative system. It can be imagined that highly personally independent institutions, or those that value individual freedom, will exert less normative pressures on their members than tightly knit and inter-dependent social groups. Another complexity

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁵⁰William Graham Sumner, *Folkways – A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*, (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 30.

comes from the fact that norms and values are rarely applied universally within an organisation. The result, or perhaps cause, is the concept of individual roles.⁵¹ Roles within an organisation, which can be formally designated or develop naturally, play an important part in controlling and motivating behaviour.

Regardless of role, values and norms can constrain or empower members. This motivation is most effective when it is internalized by the members because it is in agreement with their own cultural-cognitive beliefs. Lacking an enforcement body, normative pressure acts on individuals through the moral plane by engendering restricting feelings of shame or disgrace, or liberating and empowering feelings of pride and honour.⁵² Where the social pressures of the normative system are insufficient or need reinforcement, more formal systems are developed, becoming the regulative system.

Regulative Pillar

The regulative pillar of an institution is that which encompasses the formal and implicit rules and rule enforcement mechanisms. Study of regulative systems has at times dominated the field of institutional analysis, such as during the early twentieth century in America.⁵³ The ease of identification and relatively definite nature of formal rules make them a subject of prime interest to analysts looking at institutions from the empirical end of the scientific spectrum. However, in the context of neoinstitutional analysis as

⁵¹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 55.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 56.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 5.

presented by Scott, the regulative pillar also includes some of the less formalized rule systems that rely on enforcement through the moral plane, such as by shaming and shunning.⁵⁴ Through these informal processes, the relative ineffectiveness of singularly formal regulative systems becomes evident. Normative systems, as discussed above, are often developed or materialize to reinforce the rules and mores.

Certain points should be clarified in defining the approach to analyze the regulative systems of an institution. Rules rely on enforcement or the threat of enforcement to have an effect on subjects. Institutions can rely on either internal or external bodies for that enforcement. The danger for the institution in relying on outside agencies, such as the state, for rule enforcement is that those agencies will sometimes have their own motivations that are distinct from those of the institution. This issue becomes even more salient when those external bodies take responsibility for developing the rules being enforced.⁵⁵ Conversely, internal rule enforcement can present its own challenges to an institution. Elitist sub-cultures can easily develop and corruption is not an uncommon result of self-regulating institutions.

Though the above description of regulative systems points to a confining system that limits possible actions, regulative analysis requires a broader point of view in two respects. Firstly, the rules can be an empowering agent instead of a limiting one.⁵⁶ Certain rules enable members of an organisation to act in certain ways or to perform specific roles that are regulatively or normatively forbidden for the remainder of the

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 52.

group. Secondly, coercion through fear of punishment is not always the intended purpose of the rules. Deliberately unenforceable rules commonly remain in place to act as normative or cognitive agents.⁵⁷ Once again, this highlights the intertwinement of the three pillars; a co-reliance that, when harmonious, leads to the concept of legitimacy.

Legitimacy

The central principle of Scott's institutional analysis model is that institutional legitimacy is generated by the alignment or convergence of the three above-mentioned pillars. Legitimacy can be defined as the presence of social acceptability and credibility.⁵⁸ As such, legitimacy is not a peripheral trait but the central tenet that relates the robustness of the institution. Robustness in this sense is both resistance to degradation over time, and strength against contemporary outside forces that would, whether purposefully or not, make the institution change or become irrelevant.

Although each pillar can individually generate legitimacy, each is different.⁵⁹ Legitimacy is derived from each pillar when the right condition is met. Cultural-cognitive legitimacy results when social systems conform to the shared common understanding of societal roles. Normative legitimacy is generated when the institution's goals are considered moral, an intrinsic reward, and when members feels social acceptance, an extrinsic reward. Regulative legitimacy results from operating in manners consistent with

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

the established rules.⁶⁰ It is the combined presence of these three types of legitimacy that makes the institution persistent.

Misaligned pillars, conversely, will likely result in institutional change.⁶¹

Understanding that the three pillars serve to frame the allocation of resources and the coordination of activities, it follows that divergent systems will provide resources to actors who are motivated to achieve different ends. One common way that legitimacy can be degraded is when institutions are responsive to different master organisations or persons.⁶² The more masters to whom an institution is responsive, and the more divergent their aims, the harder it is for the institution to remain legitimate.

Legitimacy is a complex concept that can be seen as self-referential. Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1967 book “The Social Construction of Reality” describe legitimacy as something that, when present, adds cognitive and normative validity to established institutional processes.⁶³ This is of course a mirror of Scott’s model, which defines legitimacy as a result of well-established cognitive and normative systems.

The framework described above can be applied to the Basij organisation with a hope of determining the institution’s robustness and, if applicable, its stronger or weaker conceptual components. Some of the nuances within the above categories will be exemplified by a detailed analysis of the Basij through the four carriers, themselves

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 61.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 62.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 60.

⁶³Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality – A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (London: The Penguin Press, 1967), 111.

within each of the three pillars. Whereas Scott's model looks at the regulative pillar first, this analysis will start with the cultural-cognitive pillar, as it will explore the individual beliefs that help motivate the actions and shape the rules defined under the two other pillars.

CHAPTER 4 – THE CULTURAL-COGNITIVE PILLAR

The following chapter will provide an analysis of the cultural-cognitive pillar, which will yield the core beliefs that unite the institution, and the processes that are in place to maintain and reinforce that ideology.

Symbolic Systems

There are two major components of the symbolic systems carrier, within the cultural-cognitive pillar, which are essentially the shared core beliefs of the Basijis: religion, and revolution. While there are commonalities between these two concepts, they should be considered separately. While the revolution and indeed the Iranian regime are considered Islamic, equating the two could lead to overlooking the deeply religious regime reformers or outright challengers. In fact, "contrary to popular belief in some circles, the revolution was not initially 'Islamic' in nature, but was subsequently Islamized

after the flight of the shah.”⁶⁴ The bond shared by the Basijis over their Shi'a faith has been a great source of cohesion, and a strong motivator during periods of extreme difficulty, especially against external physical threats to the country. Conversely, their belief in the revolution serves more dominantly as a rallying point when confronting domestic or soft opposition.

The most salient example of the Basij's reliance on faith appeared during the Iran-Iraq war, a war commonly referred to within Iran as the war of holy or sacred defence.⁶⁵ Massive recruitment eventually saw the ranks of the Basij swell to 600,000 during a period where their parent organisation, the IRGC, grew by less than half of that.⁶⁶ “Basijis were lightly armed and motivated by religion and ideology.”⁶⁷ During the war, it is reported that Basijis were sometimes accompanied in battle by a mysterious figure on a white horse, motivating the young soldiers to charge the enemy by evoking “a vision of Imam Hossein himself.”⁶⁸ This reference to the third Imam whose ill-fated attempt to challenge the illegitimate Yazid at Karbala appeals to the core principles of Shi'ism. According to German political scientist, Matthias Küntzel, the Shi'a belief in the return of the Hidden (Twelfth) Imam, was perverted by Khomeini to energize followers, placing the onus on the devout to eradicate evil as a pre-requisite for the Imam's return, as

⁶⁴“The Basij: Iran's Revolutionary Guardians (and How a Revolution was Islamized),” *Views from the Occident*, December 08, 2009, <http://occident.blogspot.ca/2009/12/basij-irans-revolutionary-guardians.html>.

⁶⁵“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”; “Basij Commander Supports Khamene'i, Says Iran Will Counter “Aggression”,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, Jun 10, 2003, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451350894?accountid=9867>.

⁶⁶Steven R. Ward, *Immortal – A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009) 246.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ – The Paradox of Modern Iran*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 146.

opposed to evil being destroyed once he returns.⁶⁹ These beliefs, shared within the Iranian society but most strongly within devout groups such as the Basij, motivate their actions.

The revolution of 1979, despite not being singularly led by Khomeini provided him nonetheless the opportunity to introduce his concept of Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the supreme religious jurisprudent).⁷⁰ As the cornerstone of the current regime,⁷¹ this principle holds that the Supreme Leader is “the ultimate authority and the earthly trustee of the Shi'a 'Hidden Imam'.”⁷² Now virtually synonymous with the revolution itself, this governance principle is a core belief of the Basij and it is one that must be protected. In a typical speech, the commander of the Greater Tehran Basij Resistance Zone states that “America and Zionism have identified the . . . factors responsible for the success of the Islamic Republic of Iran, . . . [including] the role and status of Velayat-e Faqih . . . and have formulated short and long term plans to do away with them.”⁷³ The concept that the revolution itself is being threatened is a recurring theme in public discourse. Khamenei, addressing the Basij in 2009, asked them to “stand together against those few people, who are fundamentally opposed to the revolution; who are fundamentally opposed the country's independence. Their objective is to hand the country over to the US and to the

⁶⁹Matthias Küntzel, “Ahmadinejad’s Demons . . .,” 18.

⁷⁰Iran Policy Committee, *What Makes Tehran Tick: Islamist Ideology and Hegemonic Interests*, (Washington: Iran Policy Committee, 2006), 9.

⁷¹Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ . . .*, 29.

⁷²David E. Thaler, et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads . . .*, 24.

⁷³“Iran Press: Commander Calls for Spread of Basij Culture in Society,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 07, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459165542?accountid=9867>.

hegemony.”⁷⁴ This quote exemplifies the convergence of the concepts of Iranian independence and that of the revolution; essentially, failure to uphold Velayat-e Faqih is synonymous with surrendering the country.

Born out of the revolution, the Basij itself is inextricably linked to the revolution⁷⁵ and responsible, along with the Sepah, for protecting it from the U.S. and its hegemony, meaning allies. Consequently, the Basij are decidedly more anti-American than other groups, including the Iranian government. In the six months preceding this paper, Basij leaders made no less than twenty-one anti-American statements that were reported in the national or international press.⁷⁶ These included the commander of the Basij laying blame on the U.S. for a deadly suicide attack against a mosque in Sistan and Balouchestan,⁷⁷ and later announcing a challenge that promises ten kilograms of gold as a reward to anyone who proves that “a more criminal [state] than America exists.”⁷⁸ This line of comments is in contrast with statements by the Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, Ali Larijani, who stated: “No one is against proposals by the U.S . . . if they have any rational proposals, they can discuss it with the 5+1 group [Permanent United Nations Security Council members plus Germany].”⁷⁹ America then, to the Basij,

⁷⁴“Iran's Khamene'i Defends President Ahmadinezhad in Address to Basij Force,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 26, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458628820?accountid=9867>.

⁷⁵“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

⁷⁶“US president not elected by people: Basij Chief,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, Nov 6, 2012, http://www.irma.ir/en/News/80402121/Politic/US_president_not_elected_by_people_Basij_Chief; The twenty other articles are listed in the bibliography.

⁷⁷“Iran Foils 5 Terrorist Attacks in 8 Months,” *FARS News Agency*, Oct 20, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107113858>.

⁷⁸“Ahmadinejad Replies to Khamenei on Presidential Power,” *Iran Pulse*, Nov 2, 2012, <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/tag/basij/>.

⁷⁹“Iranian officials differ on approach to nuclear talks,” *Payvand News of Iran*, Dec 8, 2012, <http://www.payvand.com/news/12/dec/1060.html>.

embodies the threat to the revolution. Though the spectre of an invasion remains, the focus is now being placed on the soft threat. All opposition to the revolution, including Iranian reformers, is attributed to the influence of the ‘Great Satan.’ Major General Mohammad Ali Ja’fari, Commander of the IRGC, described the reformist years as a period where enemies of the revolution tried to topple the regime at the behest of America.⁸⁰

The desire to preserve the revolution and its associated concepts, including anti-Americanism, are central tenets of the Basij shared ideology. They will be shown to be strong motivators and, in some cases a justification, for the actions of the Basij. An understanding of the Basij's core beliefs, religion and revolution, allows us to better understand the derivative carriers within the cultural-cognitive pillar.

Relational Systems

Relational systems allude to the likeness or isomorphism of separate institutions.⁸¹ For the Basij, this evokes similar groups such as Hezbollah, that although not exactly alike, share similarities. This section will investigate the cultural concepts that facilitate the export of the Basij model, and the examples of those concepts being put into practice.

As previously mentioned, the revolution is synonymous with the concept of Velayat-e Faqih. Velayat-e Faqih, however, was conceptually developed to be applicable

⁸⁰“Understanding the Basij Will Deter Enemies from Invasion - Iran Commander,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 28, 2007, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459084641?accountid=9867>.

⁸¹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

not just to a new Iranian regime but to the entire Ummah (Muslim nation). Muhammad-Javad Larijani, then Principal Foreign Policy Advisor to the president, stated in 1989 that “The true velayat-e-faqih is in Iran. This velayat is responsible for the entire Islamic world.”⁸² This unrealized goal of expansion remains a core component of the regime’s aims and that of the Basij. Lamenting the lack of reliance on Islamic values within the Muslim populations throughout the world, Khamenei concludes that the Ummah’s potential as a world leader in “learning, civility and knowledge” is being squandered.⁸³ The role of the Basij in overcoming this piety deficit was explicit in his 2007 speech: “When this nation is firm and when this nation is not ready to give up its high goals . . . and encourages the Islamic nations and the entire Islamic Ummah with its presence and existence, so it shows that Basij was successful and will remain successful.”⁸⁴ It is easy to link the symbolic carrier of defence of the revolution, and anti-Americanism in particular, to the struggle of expansion of the Basij; if America’s influence is responsible for the reformist sentiments within Iran, it is even more so responsible for neighbouring countries’ reluctance to accept the Iranian governance model. But another nation is equally central to the regime narrative: Palestine.

Support for the Palestinian cause has been a primary and enduring tenet of the regime’s ideology. Months before being installed as Iran’s Supreme Ruler, Khomeini called on the Ummah to take action and “defend [their] national and Islamic existence.

⁸²Iran Policy Committee, *What Makes Tehran Tick* . . . , 22.

⁸³“Supreme Leader Says Basij Force Guarantees Iran's Future,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 28, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458678823?accountid=9867>.

⁸⁴“There is no Force Like Basij Iran Leader,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 26, 2007, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459083635?accountid=9867>.

Israel has taken Beit ul-Moqaddas [Jerusalem] from the Muslims and has met only tolerance . . . We completely support the struggle of the Palestinian brothers and the people of southern Lebanon against the usurper Israel.”⁸⁵ These concepts still shape much of the Basij dialogue.

With respect to exportation of the Basij model throughout the Ummah, consider the 2012 General Command Headquarters of the Islamic Republic of Iran's armed forces' statement that the Basij was “on the eve of completing its foreign [Basij] sectors in the Islamic world. It is going to add its pieces into [the] jigsaw puzzle of the region and to fulfill late Imam Khomeini's aim in forming ‘global Islamic Basij’.”⁸⁶ The planned scope of this expansion is ambitious. General Naqdi stated in 2011: “We will form the 100-million-strong Basij force of the Muslim world to materialize the promise of the late Imam Khomeini about the freedom of the noble Quds.”⁸⁷ Easily accepted as empty rhetoric, such comments are far from it and apparent attempts are indeed made to put them into practice. General Naqdi highlighted similarities between Syrian defence tactics and the Basij's, describing an open relationship between the countries and their sharing of military experiences.⁸⁸

Nowhere is the exportation of the Basij more prevalent than towards the Palestinian cause. From being prepared to deploy twenty thousand Basij soldiers to fight

⁸⁵“Palestine cause from the Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini,” وش به ك و له (*Backpack Burden*), last accessed 20 April 2013, <http://kulebedush.blogfa.com/post-37.aspx>.

⁸⁶“Iran's Paramilitary Force to Develop “Global Islamic Basij” – Agency,” *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Nov 22, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1179279973?accountid=9867>.

⁸⁷“Former Commander Stresses Growth of Basij Organization among Iran's Friends,” *FARS News Agency*, Jan 7, 2013, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107133821>.

⁸⁸“Syrian pro-Assad militias similar to Iran's Basij,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Nov 1, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=290050>.

alongside Hamas⁸⁹ to commentary explaining that Hezbollah has become a successful, socially diverse organisation thanks to adopting the Basij model,⁹⁰ Basij soldiers are constantly reminded of their greater duty in unifying the Ummah through the subjugation or destruction of Israel. During the year 1391 (2012-2013), Basij forces conducted thirty-one domestic training exercises in a series named ‘El Bayt al-Maqdis’ (towards Jerusalem).⁹¹ Similarly, always maintaining an eye on the soft threat of Western cultural invasion, Iran aimed to counter the volumes of video games where Iranians are depicted as religious fanatics by releasing its own video game. The game, unveiled by the Basij Students Organisation, takes place in Tel Aviv.⁹² Choosing the capital over Jerusalem highlights the objection to the state of Israel, as opposed to a religious objection over Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem.

The Basij is expansionist at its core, within the Ummah, but specifically in solidarity with the Palestinians. In order to understand how the relational and symbolic carriers remain deeply engrained in the Basij institution, one needs to look at the cultural-cognitive routine.

⁸⁹“BREAKING: 20,000 Basij forces (Iranian) are prepared to fight alongside the Hamas militants.” *FARS News Agency*, Nov 17, 2012. <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13910826000541>; <http://translate.google.com/translate?sl=auto&tl=en&js=n&prev=t&hl=en&ie=UTF-8&layout=2&eotf=1&u=http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13910826000541>.

⁹⁰“Iranian Fars Provincial TV Airs Special Programme Entitled: Miracle of Basij,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 25, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458679373?accountid=9867>.

⁹¹“Final Basij maneuvers of Persian year,” *Iran Daily Brief*, Mar 14, 2013, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2013/03/14/final-basij-maneuvers-of-persian-year/>.

⁹²“Iran Unveils New Computer Game Depicting Tel-Aviv as Center of Events,” *FARS News Agency*, Oct 6, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107110932>.

Routine

Under the guidance of the Supreme Leader, 50 billion rials (4.2 million Canadian dollars) were recently allocated to provide Basij units with books on the subjects of “religion, insight, politics, enemies, the history of the Islamic Revolution, and the review of the past 100 years.”⁹³ This education or inculcation of the Basij with the regime’s ideology reinforces the other cultural-cognitive carriers. This section will investigate the formal process taken to achieve this aim.

Social and Political Scientist Saeid Golkar describes the education process of the Basij as Ideological-Political Training (IPT).⁹⁴ The evolution of this training system mirrors the four phases of the Basij’s own history. Officially developed during the Iran-Iraq war, IPT wasn’t implemented until 1994 since naturally occurring religious and ideological fervor during the war was sufficient in keeping the Basij motivated.⁹⁵ With the election of a reformist government in 1997, notably having received comparable vote percentages from the IRGC, Basij, and wider population, IPT intensified.⁹⁶ Since then, successive changes have only served to increase the time mandatorily allocated to conducting IPT, within the larger subset of all Basij training, and making the training accessible to larger groups, including the family members of the Basij.⁹⁷

⁹³“Books to be distributed among Basij centers,” *Iran Book News Agency*, Feb 27, 2013, <http://www.ibna.ir/vdccsiqs02bqeo8.-ya2.html>.

⁹⁴Saeid Golkar, “The Ideological-Political Training of Iran’s Basij,” *Crown Center for Middle East Studies – Middle East Briefs*, no.44 (November 2010): 1.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 2-3.

The IPT structure is aligned with the Basij organisational structure that is discussed in detail under the regulative pillar. The structure is hierarchical, and the training system caters to it by providing increasingly lengthy and diverse training to each successive echelon. The basic program focusses heavily on ground skills, including weapons handling, guard duty, civil defence and first aid, with some ideological training under the form of ethics, etiquette, and Islamic commandments.⁹⁸ By comparison, top level Basijis undertake numerous Shi'a Islam courses, as well as courses on sociopolitical knowledge, Islamic defence (holy war), logic and philosophy, military psychology, war sociology, and management theories.⁹⁹ Regardless of the level of training, all active Basijis are mandated yearly multi-week refresher training sessions.¹⁰⁰ Most importantly, “according to the Basij constitution, ideological-political training is the responsibility of the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader.”¹⁰¹ This central oversight ensures that the content and frequency of training satisfy the needs of the regime.

The IPT program has been successful and continues to ensure “widespread internalization of the regime’s values and beliefs, and the creation of a Basij voting block in support of right-wing candidates.”¹⁰² The interconnectivity of this training system with the other carriers of the cultural-cognitive pillar is evidenced by the stated aim of IPT trainers: explaining to Basijis that Western imperialist forces created the Muslim factions opposed to Shi’ism, and that they sustain those groups financially.¹⁰³ This shared

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 6.

ideology of the Basij is further reinforced beyond the classroom through symbolic objects.

Artifacts

The Basij organisation relies on objects that hold symbolic significance to reinforce the various cultural-cognitive components introduced in this chapter.¹⁰⁴ Much has been made about the plastic keys reportedly imported by the hundreds of thousands from Taiwan during the Iran-Iraq war, with the purpose of motivating Basij soldiers to martyr themselves knowing their key would open the gates of paradise.¹⁰⁵ Clearly tied to the religious carrier, the keys have been appropriated by Western critics as an example of the irrationality of the regime. A more lasting object is the headband commonly worn by the Basij during the same war. These headbands, still worn by Basij soldiers today, have been institutionalized.

Reinforcing the revolution carrier, an example of an object is the portrait of the Supreme Leader, either former or current, himself representing Velayat-e Faqih. Adorning many public places in Iran, their portraits are common within the households or places of work of the Basijis.¹⁰⁶ Another symbolic object is the keffiyeh. In an apparent show of solidarity with the Palestinians, black and white keffiyehs often adorn the necks

¹⁰⁴W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations . . .*, 79.

¹⁰⁵Matthias Küntzel, "Ahmadinejad's Demons . . .," 15.

¹⁰⁶Farnaz Fassihi, "News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown: Basij Paramilitary Gets Tough -- Amid Election Unrest, Ayatollah's Enforcers Act with Batons, Zeal," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, Jul 13, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/315576290?accountid=9867>.

of Basij members, including their commander General Naqdi.¹⁰⁷ Opening an exhibit of Basij culture, the Basij commander eschewed the Western ribbon cutting ceremony in favour of a keffiyeh cutting ceremony.¹⁰⁸

This analysis of the cultural-cognitive pillar has exposed the shared core beliefs of the Basij institution, as well as the means by which those beliefs are maintained and reinforced. This shared ideology enables shared actions by the group, and an adherence to common rules, concepts that will be examined in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 5 – THE NORMATIVE PILLAR

Having previously analyzed the core beliefs and the institutionalized processes that support them, this chapter will assess the values and roles held by the Basijis within society, so that they may be compared to both the cores beliefs previously identified and the rules and structures that will be exposed under the regulative pillar.

¹⁰⁷“Basij Commander: Zionists Should Expect More Drone Flights over Israel,” *Islamic Invitation Turkey*, Oct 19, 2012, <http://www.islamicinvitationturkey.com/2012/10/19/basij-commander-zionists-should-expect-more-drone-flights-over-israel/>.

¹⁰⁸“Commander Cuts Keffiyehs, Not Ribbon, to Open Basij Exhibition,” *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, Jul 16, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1026559370?accountid=9867>.

Symbolic Systems

The symbolic carrier, within the normative pillar, refers to the shared values and expectations of an institution.¹⁰⁹ The Basij organisation is replete with such examples, but six principal ones should be highlighted: mobilization, volunteerism, righteousness, work, martyrdom, and cultural guardianship.

The namesake of the organisation describes a ‘mobilization’. This is a central value within the group, that of shared responsibility requiring social solidarity. As evidenced during the Iran-Iraq war, “the presence of Basij who had come from Iran's alleys and streets was a clear message to Western enemies that this war was not just a war between two armies, but a war between the Iraqi military and the people of Iran.”¹¹⁰ Mobilization, of course, also evokes a forcing factor by a governing body. This value is not part of the Basij narrative. Using the war again as an example, Western critics lament the use of child soldiers within the organisation, but no-one has alleged (at least physical) coercion. The Basijis in fact pride themselves for being a thoroughly volunteer force.¹¹¹

Another core value of the Basij is righteousness. As previously alluded to, the word Basij has become synonymous for some with piety and goodness.¹¹² This concept has been reinforced by numerous leaders at every level. Khomeini referred to the Basij as a “school of love”¹¹³ while his successor equated the Basij with “devotion, endeavour,

¹⁰⁹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

¹¹⁰“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

¹¹¹“Iran Press: Basij to Form Joint Working Groups with Other Countries,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Sep 27, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459173844?accountid=9867>.

¹¹²David Thurfjell, *Living Shi'ism* . . . , 39.

¹¹³“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

enthusiasm and working hard in all spheres.”¹¹⁴ Righteousness is congruent with the core belief of religion, but Khamenei’s focus on hard work highlights this separate value.

Returning to the concept of the Basij as a parallel society, the Basij values work, in the vocational sense. The student, construction, and scientific bodies are all examples of professional workers within the organisation. When IRGC Deputy for Political Affairs in Mazandaran Province, Colonel Seyyed Mohammad Musavi-Rowshan described a Basiji as someone who was equally able and willing to wield arms as he was a pen, he could have said shovel or stethoscope.¹¹⁵

One of the most deeply rooted values of the Basij, for obvious historical reasons, is that of martyrdom. The concept of martyrdom exemplifies Scott’s question of rationality.¹¹⁶ While Western commentators use the plastic keys as examples of irrational behavior, trading life for cheap trinkets,¹¹⁷ it is equally easy to see the regime’s rationality of using available resources to counter a technologically superior foe, or the individual Basiji’s rationality in giving his life for glory and favourable afterlife conditions. Indeed many Western soldiers would likewise voluntarily give their lives for their fellow soldiers, essentially trading life for honour, and few would question their rationality. The value of martyrdom still animates today’s debates within the Basij. Arguing against discussion with America, General Naqdi poses a question: “If we were meant to compromise with America, there would be no need for people like Mostafa

¹¹⁴“Supreme Leader Says Basij Force Guarantees Iran's Future . . .,”

¹¹⁵“Iran's Mazandaran Provincial TV Debates National Security, Role of Basij,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 26, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459166076?accountid=9867>.

¹¹⁶W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 67.

¹¹⁷Matthias Küntzel, “Ahmadinejad’s Demons . . .,” 15.

Chamran [Iran's first post-revolutionary Defense Minister] to be martyred. They were martyred to safeguard Iran's honor."¹¹⁸ Of course, this view can just as easily be turned on its head. Anti-Americanism must be maintained in order to uphold the modern relevance of these old martyrs and thus the very concept of martyrdom. Whether a source or a result, martyrdom is unequivocally linked to both the anti-American core belief and the religious one. Martyrdom and anti-Americanism reinforce the final shared value of the Basij, the view of Basijis as cultural guardians.

As previously identified, the American threat is increasingly soft, or cultural. The Basij has internalized the responsibility for fighting against this threat. General Naqdi tied cultural invasion and martyrdom when he called on the Education Ministry to include the "culture of self-sacrifice and martyrdom"¹¹⁹ in the scholastic curriculum. The national student Basij leader, Mohammad Reza Mardani, appropriated Khomeini's refrain of 'Neither East nor West', which was likely in 1979 more about physical and political independence, to the cultural domain: "The policy of the Student Basij is to create immunity [against foreign soft threats] in the universities. This goal will be accomplished with certain moves towards raising the analytical ability and deepening the understanding and spirituality of the students."¹²⁰ This value of cultural preservation is

¹¹⁸"Basij commander: If Iran were meant to compromise with USA, there would be no need for "martyrs"," *Iran Daily Brief*, Jan 25, 2013, http://www.irandailybrief.com/2013/01/25/basij-commander-if-iran-were-meant-to-compromise-with-usa-there-would-be-no-need-for-martyrs/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=basij-commander-if-iran-were-meant-to-compromise-with-usa-there-would-be-no-need-for-martyrs.

¹¹⁹"Basij Commander Calls for Including "Culture of Martyrdom" in Textbooks," *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, Oct 31, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/761332820?accountid=9867>.

¹²⁰"Iran Student Basij Head on Confronting "Soft Threats," Challenges," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 28, 2007, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459077664?accountid=9867>.

closely linked to the morality police role of the Basij. The other values serve a similar function of validation with respect to the other roles of the institution; these will be explored in the following sections.

Relational Systems

The relational systems carrier within the normative pillar refers to the regime or authority systems of an organisation.¹²¹ The formal command structure of the Basij will be further examined under the regulative pillar, but a single organisation within the Basij holds a quasi-leadership or authoritative position, even if not formally recognized as such. That organisation is the Student Basij Organisation (SBO), and it will be analyzed in this section.

One of the oldest components of the Basij organisation, the SBO was founded in 1988 by Khomeini. His decree described the new body as “one of the most essential organisations, and [emphasized that] religious scholars and college students must defend Islam and the revolution in their centres with full force.”¹²² The importance of the organisation endured, with some analysts describing the SBO as the ‘vanguard’ of the Basij ideology, charged with developing new concepts to guide the organisation.¹²³ This evolutionary role is a logical one for institutions of higher learning but, as the SBO encompasses some of the youngest members of the organisation, it also attests to the

¹²¹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

¹²²“Iran Press: Esfahan Student Basij Official Praises Students' Activities,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Jul 12, 2006, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459093459?accountid=9867>.

¹²³“Iran Press: Basij Volunteer Force to have More Cultural Activities,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 27, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459162470?accountid=9867>.

distributed ‘agency’ within the organisation.¹²⁴ This agency is further institutionalized by the recruitment of SBO graduates as leaders within the regime’s governance structure.¹²⁵

The importance of the SBO does not simply rely on its ability to influence institutional change; members must also “lead the way in the field of science, study and research.”¹²⁶ Their groups are responsible for “conducting scientific visits, holding scientific conferences . . . publishing scientific journals, holding scientific exhibitions and holding ceremonies to praise outstanding, creative and innovative Basij students.”¹²⁷ In doing so, they act as part of the parallel society that the regime describes as a bulwark against Western influence. This cultural defence component is critical to the SBO.

Whereas grievances related to quality of life eclipse those related to free speech, social reforms, or democratic elections throughout most of Iranian society, universities are a clear exception and university students have repeatedly challenged the regime.¹²⁸ The SBO therefore fills two roles: the important generation of thought and personnel to sustain the Basij institution, and the suppression of dissent in its most fertile environment. The SBO, though not an enforcement body, accomplishes the ‘morality police’ aim by reporting groups or individuals through formal and permanent links with responsible Basij groups.

The superiority derived from this morality enforcement role emboldens the SBO to conduct its ideological evolution pursuits. The SBO’s institutional confidence is

¹²⁴W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 77.

¹²⁵Saeid Golkar, “The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities . . .,” 21.

¹²⁶“Basij Commander Supports Khamene'i, Says Iran Will Counter “Aggression” . . .,”

¹²⁷“Iran Press: Esfahan Student Basij Official Praises Students' Activities . . .,”

¹²⁸Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ* . . . , 114.

evidenced by public statements that ostensibly scold executive and judiciary leaders, including the president,¹²⁹ or argue for a tougher line with the U.S. by proclaiming that Iran has upset the strategic balance against its Western foe.¹³⁰ These statements demonstrate the robustness of the organisation, and a clear alignment with both the cultural-cognitive beliefs previously described, and the values of righteousness and cultural guardianship.

Having analyzed the moral leadership role of the SBO, the various roles of the larger Basij organisation can be better understood.

Routine

The routine carrier, within the normative pillar, refers to the jobs or roles of the organisation.¹³¹ The Basij is such a large and complex organisation that many such roles can be ascribed to its members. For the purpose of this analysis, these roles will be grouped into two main categories: soft and hard. Returning to the three meanings of the word Basij, the parallel society and righteous terminologies will align with the soft roles, while the paramilitary concept relates to the hard roles.

When asked to comment on his management plans as leader of the Basij, General Naqdi had this to say: “in the past, the young and adolescents used to be the main body of

¹²⁹“Basij Students Criticise Iran President, Judiciary Head for Disputes,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Oct 25, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1115125953?accountid=9867>.

¹³⁰“Head of Student Basij: Strategic Power Balance Between Iran and US has Changed in Iran’s Favor,” *Iran Military News*, Mar 3, 2013, <http://iranmilitarynews.org/2013/03/03/head-of-student-basij-strategic-power-balance-between-iran-and-us-has-changed-in-irans-favor/>.

¹³¹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

the Basij activists, but in our new plans, in addition to those groups, we will be seeking to establish or strengthen other Basiji groups, such as the teachers, engineers, businesses, guilds. . .”¹³² This parallel society construct allows the Basij to integrate with the population much more closely than they could as a solely paramilitary group, and it also opens new demographics to recruitment. Beyond these aims, each of these groups conducts valuable work independently. The SBO is one of the major groups in this category, but three other groups will be highlighted as examples.

The medical Basij represents a group of doctors, nurses and other medical professionals. Involved in humanitarian aid support to areas affected by natural disasters as well as routine medical projects,¹³³ they also support the effort to export the Basij model by sending medical teams to neighbouring countries, including those outside of Iran’s typical sphere of influence like Myanmar or Pakistan.¹³⁴

The Construction Basij Organisation (CBO) is a leading organisation working on the development of rural areas throughout Iran.¹³⁵ Providing employment within the poorer areas, the CBO is used to “train young people in the fields of agriculture, industry, poverty reduction and the fight against drugs.”¹³⁶ Faced with sanctions over its nuclear

¹³²“Iran: Basij Chief Explains New Focus on Development, “Scientific Jihad”,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 30, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458765004?accountid=9867>.

¹³³Peter Martonosi, “The Basij - A major factor in Iranian security,” *Academic and Applied Research in Military Science* 11, no. 1 (2012): 34-35; “Iranian Sahand TV’s “Sahandiyyeh” programme on Basij’s cultural, medical projects,” *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, Nov 30, 2010, <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-243344647/iranian-sahand-tv-sahandiyyeh.html>.

¹³⁴“Iran Ready to Dispatch Medical Teams to help Myanmar Muslims,” *Ahlul Bayt News Agency*, Jul 29, 2012, <http://www.abna.ir/data.asp?lang=3&Id=332690>; “Iran to Send “Basij Aid Battalions” to Pakistan – Paper,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Aug 31, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/748327131?accountid=9867>.

¹³⁵“Iran: Basij Chief Explains New Focus on Development, “Scientific Jihad” . . .,”

¹³⁶“Iran: Guards Corps Official Hails Basij’s Role in Economic Projects,” *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Nov 25, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/810284540?accountid=9867>.

program, Iran has relied on the CBO to be the face of the resistance economy, a concept forwarded by the Supreme Leader.¹³⁷ Responding by asserting that the CBO can resolve the economic challenges faced by the regime, General Naqdi equated the work of the organisation with the Basij's response to the Iran-Iraq war, demonstrating the close ideological links between modern projects and core beliefs.

The third example of a Basij sub-organisation, although not an official one yet, highlights the evolving role of the Basij. In 2011, General Naqdi announced the Basij would launch a Media Basij organisation.¹³⁸ A little over a year later, the Media Basij started operating.¹³⁹ Around the same time, the Basij announced they were forming a Cyber Basij Army.¹⁴⁰ These efforts clearly indicate that the Basij is recognizing the tools used by its adversaries in the cultural war and responding by forming capacity to fight in the information operations domain. These bodies, however, will not be used to ferret out external threats, but mostly internal ones. This is in line with one of the Basij's most contested roles, that of morality police.

Special Basij units called Nasehin are charged with enforcing morality. Their dual roles include educating the population and punishing offenders.¹⁴¹ Though commanders describe a dominant focus on the education,¹⁴² public resistance to their efforts indicates a

¹³⁷“Iran's Basij Militia Builds 'Resistance Economy',” *Al Monitor*, Mar 19, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/iran-basij-militia-combat-sanctions-resistance-economy.html>.

¹³⁸“Iran to Form “Media Basij” Forces – Commander,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Jun 10, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/871121612?accountid=9867>.

¹³⁹“Iran: Basij Force Launches News Agency,” *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Nov 14, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1151738443?accountid=9867>.

¹⁴⁰“Iran Guards Corps Commander Announces Formation of 'Basij Cyber Army',” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 03, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1125445813?accountid=9867>.

¹⁴¹Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society . . .,” 218.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*

more forceful approach is often undertaken.¹⁴³ Despite assurances by senior leaders that the Basij is able to resolve problems ranging from non-Islamic dress to drug use,¹⁴⁴ anecdotal evidence suggest the backlash against these policies is equally capable.¹⁴⁵ The gap of understanding between the Nasehin and those upon whom they enforce the rules may be related to more than simply religious interpretation, but rather reflect a clash of social classes. The Nasehin, and in fact most Basijis, are mostly recruited from impoverished neighbourhoods.¹⁴⁶ This distance between Basijis and some segments of society weakens normative legitimacy.

Acknowledging the growing Western influence, General Naqdi derides the West for overlooking the capacity of the Basij to fight on the soft front.¹⁴⁷ His belief in the superiority of the Basij in this domain is likely derived from the Basij's ability to fulfill mutually supporting roles, including the parallel society components and the Nasehin. Despite this focus, confronting the hard threat remains an extant task.

Although some of the Basijis who serve in the above-mentioned roles would be part of defensive mobilization in the case of an invasion, there is nevertheless a separate dedicated body of Basijis within the organisation whose primary task is defence. The Ashura battalions, a reference to the slain Third Imam (Shi'a notion), are populated by male Basijis, while the Al Zahra battalions, a reference to the Prophet's most praised

¹⁴³“Iran Faces Backlash Over “Morality Police” Spying on Coffee Shops,” *Slate*, Jan 25, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2013/01/25/iran_faces_backlash_over_morality_police_spying_on_coffee_shops.html.

¹⁴⁴“Iran Commander Says Basij to Solve Hijab and Drugs Problems,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 18, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/911594434?accountid=9867>.

¹⁴⁵Thomas Omestad, “Iran’s Culture War . . .,”

¹⁴⁶Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ . . .*, 28-29.

¹⁴⁷“Iran Commander Seeks Greater Role for Basij in Fifth Development Plan – Paper,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 30, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/814763292?accountid=9867>.

daughter, are for women Basijis.¹⁴⁸ These paramilitary units' governance structures have vacillated over the decades but they have usually been under some level of oversight, if not outright ownership, by the Sepah. When General Naqdi described Western aircraft carriers as not worth 'empty tin cans' or as vestiges from a former era of warfare,¹⁴⁹ he was referring to the irregular concept of war that the Basij and IRGC have termed the Mosaic Doctrine. Under this concept, the Basij battalions, which are recruited locally, take responsibility for local defence by making defensive plans of their neighbourhoods and identifying all critical infrastructure and how it can be protected.¹⁵⁰ The Basijis, if attacked, would be the local experts who, thanks to their connection to the neighbourhoods, would most likely become the leaders of a quickly expanding organisation.

The Basij conducts combat training, often in massive exercises that are well-publicized. In the six months that preceded this paper, Basij leaders made fourteen public announcements of over thirty major exercises throughout the country.¹⁵¹ In 2006, a large IRGC exercise involved 172 Basij battalions who practiced local defence tasks.¹⁵² One of the recent exercises was described not only as a defence exercise, but also one that aimed

¹⁴⁸Saeid Golkar, "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,"

¹⁴⁹"US ships not worth 'empty tin cans': IRGC Basij commander," *Islamic Invitation Turkey*, Feb 14, 2013, <http://www.islamicinvitationturkey.com/2013/02/14/us-ships-not-worth-empty-tin-cans-irgc-basij-commander/>.

¹⁵⁰Saeid Golkar, "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .," 463.

¹⁵¹"Basij to begin two-day military drills on October 18," *Iran Daily Brief*, Oct 12, 2012, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/10/12/basij-to-begin-two-day-military-drills-on-october-18/>; The thirteen other articles are listed in the bibliography.

¹⁵²Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam C. Seitz, *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction – The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2009), 82.

to rehearse “coping with mass unrest.”¹⁵³ This acknowledges an important point: soft cultural threats can become hard threats in the form of reformist riots. The Ashura and Al Zahra battalions are routinely used to subdue these popular uprisings.

Although major riots in 1999 and 2009 have been well-publicized, many smaller occurrences have also involved Basij forces, and the Basij are reportedly bracing for future unrest as a result of the decline of the economy.¹⁵⁴ No single role within the Basij organisation has driven a deeper wedge between the population and the organisation than riot control. A protester describing her actions in a 2011 protest quotes how, unlike previous protests, she and her fellow protesters were overwhelmed by feelings of oppression and tried to kill the Basijis.¹⁵⁵ An elderly woman who witnessed the fray seemed incredulous when describing the Basijis: “They kill people's children, then they pray.”¹⁵⁶ This indicates that the religious core belief, shared by the Basij, is not interpreted the same way by all of the population. But to the Basij, these riots are not only an assault against their regime, but against themselves personally. “The object of the cultural onslaught is . . . the destruction of the Basiji spirit.”¹⁵⁷ This view is easy to understand once the conceptual link between the Basij institution and the revolution is made.

¹⁵³“Quds Force Basij held mass unrest control drills in Gilan Province,” *Iran Daily Brief*, Dec 6, 2012, http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/12/06/quds-force-basij-held-mass-unrest-control-drills-in-gilan-province/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=quds-force-basij-held-mass-unrest-control-drills-in-gilan-province.

¹⁵⁴“IRGC and Basij Units in Readiness Mode: Guards Display Concern As Iranian Calendar Draws to Close,” *Payvand News of Iran*, Feb 12, 2013, <http://www.payvand.com/news/13/feb/1099.html>.

¹⁵⁵“They Kill People's Children, Then They Pray,” *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, Feb 18, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/852745336?accountid=9867>.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷Ali Rahnama, *Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics – From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 92.

The roles described in this section cover the various ways in which the Basij are engaged in the Iranian society. Their reliance on the above mentioned values are clear. Parallel society elements draw on the value of work and volunteerism, while the Nasehin draws on righteousness. The hard threat opposition role recalls mobilization and martyrdom. Altogether, with the Nasehin leading, they support the value of cultural guardianship. Having defined the values and roles, a brief look at the tools that are used is warranted.

Artifacts

The artifacts carrier, within the normative sense, addresses the question of whether tools used by an institution meet conventions and standards.¹⁵⁸ Though the Basij use a number of tools ranging from the stethoscope and shovel to the motorcycle and baton, the key tool that merits analysis is the gun.

Iranian-American journalist Hooman Majd argues that Iranian society, both before and since the revolution, has a strong aversion to guns and sees them as tools of illegitimate power.¹⁵⁹ This vision is evidently shared by the SBO, who issued a statement after the tragic 2012 school shooting in Connecticut, advising the American government to rethink gun laws, and asking “what is it which allows children, the youth and the

¹⁵⁸W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

¹⁵⁹Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ* . . . , 28.

young adults to carry arms?”¹⁶⁰ Many would challenge the legitimacy of the Basij to make such a statement given their historically violent riot quelling techniques. But it should be noted that the Basij refrains from using firearms in all but the most serious of situations. Twenty-four year old Basiji, Mehdi Moradani, when interviewed about his role in quelling unrest following the disputed 2009 elections, was not shy to describe the violent means he took to dissuade and disperse crowds; but he was also clear on the point that neither he nor anyone else in his division carried guns.¹⁶¹ Though the Basijis sometimes carry guns, they should not be regarded as a loosely controlled vigilante group. Their use of force, if excessive, is controlled and mandated by the regime. This concept will be explored through the next chapter.

Having now reviewed the Basij’s core beliefs and the institutional processes that maintain those shared beliefs, and having considered both the values of the Basijis and how they align with the roles of the organisation, the final system requiring analysis will highlight the formal structure and governance system of the institution.

CHAPTER 6 – THE REGULATIVE PILLAR

Analysis of the regulative pillar will consider the rules and laws of the organisation, as well as its structure and authority mechanisms. This final pillar will complete the picture necessary to determine the legitimacy of the Basij as an institution.

¹⁶⁰“Iran: ‘No Difference’ Between Conn. Shooting Victims and Those in Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan,” *cnsnews.com*, Dec 17, 2012, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/iran-no-difference-between-conn-shooting-victims-and-those-gaza-iraq-afghanistan>.

¹⁶¹Farnaz Fassihi, “News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown . . .,”

Symbolic Systems

The symbolic carrier within the regulative sense consists of the rules or laws of the organisation.¹⁶² In considering the laws governing the Basij, two concepts can be traced. The first is the core rules, including constitutional ones and religious ones, and the second is the evolution of the size of the organisation.

The basis for the Basij was enshrined in the Iranian constitution under article 151, which stipulates that the government must “provide a program of military training, with all requisite facilities, for all its citizens, in accordance with the Islamic criteria, in such a way that all citizens will always be able to engage in the armed defense of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹⁶³ Constitutional authority was further reinforced when the Basij and the IRGC were spared the ‘political non-intervention’ clause that was imposed on the Artesh.¹⁶⁴ Although this clause was originally meant to prevent the Artesh, which had questionable loyalty following the revolution, from usurping power, even the Pasdaran are formally prevented from political intervention. According to IRGC regulations, Basijis who attain ‘Guard status’ through training and promotion “are not allowed to become members of political parties and factions.”¹⁶⁵ This of course implies that the remainder of the Basijis are not similarly prohibited. The ability to be implicated in the political domain, though an area of dispute in Iranian politics, enables the Basij to

¹⁶²W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

¹⁶³Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force,” in *The Iran Primer* . . . , 62.

¹⁶⁴Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link . . .”

¹⁶⁵“Iran Paper Details Volunteer Force Basij's Duties, Responsibilities,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, May 14, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458615575?accountid=9867>.

conduct tasks that were probably not envisaged when the organisation was founded.

The Basij's own bylaws are clear and well-aligned to the core beliefs of the organisation and the roles routinely performed. These bylaws include allegiance to and protection of the revolution, religious devotion, defence of the country, partnership with armed forces, and humanitarian assistance (domestic or external).¹⁶⁶ These judiciary rules are also reinforced by religious commandments such as *Amr be Maruf va Nahy az Monkar* (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong),¹⁶⁷ which provides moral authority to the *Nasehin*. If the legal basis for the Basij, as argued above, is clear, the size of the organisation is decidedly murky.

Debate over the size of the Basij is more than a question of structure; indeed it affects the identity of the organisation. On founding the Basij, Khomeini called for a force of twenty million Basijis.¹⁶⁸ Former IRGC Commander, Major General Mohsen Reza'i described the Basij as numbering three million in 1997,¹⁶⁹ while the government reportedly claimed a strength of five million in 2009.¹⁷⁰ The reported growth continues with another two million Basijis being presently trained.¹⁷¹ By contrast, Basij commanders speak of much larger numbers. One claimed a force of eleven million in 2005,¹⁷² while another pronounced that Khomeini's vision of twenty million had been

¹⁶⁶“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

¹⁶⁷Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society . . .,” 208.

¹⁶⁸“Iran Paper Details Volunteer Force Basij's Duties, Responsibilities . . .,”

¹⁶⁹“Iranian Fars Provincial TV Airs Special Programme Entitled: Miracle of Basij . . .,”

¹⁷⁰Farnaz Fassihi, “News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown . . .,”

¹⁷¹Thomas Omestad, “Iran's Culture War . . .,”

¹⁷²“Iran Press: Officials Warn Against Politicization of Basij,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 29, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459162172?accountid=9867>.

fulfilled in 2000.¹⁷³ Former President Khatami elucidated this discrepancy when he suggested that Khomeini's 'twenty million' was less a fixed number, and more of a description meaning every able bodied Iranian.¹⁷⁴ This view is reinforced by Khamenei when he calls for a Basij that is larger by tens of millions than Khomeini's original aspiration, describing the Basij as the sum of all those with faith and commitment to the regime.¹⁷⁵ It should be noted that most analysts peg the number of Basijis between one and four million.¹⁷⁶ The inflation of numbers and designation of non-Basij as Basijis clearly reinforce the normative value of mobilization, and is necessary for the continued relevance of the organisation.

The size of the Basij also has one other major impact beyond satisfying the basic mobilization tenet of the organisation, that of quantity versus quality. A portion of Iranians, including youth, clearly support mass recruitment when they "believe the Islamic Republic system is a people's system and [that] the Basij is the most important manifestation of this populist quality. If we do not recruit youth, with what people or groups will they associate?"¹⁷⁷ Another group, invoking the required values of "sincerity, purity, sacrifice and desire for martyrdom"¹⁷⁸ calls for a more restrained recruitment policy. The organisation, while proclaiming large numbers, appears aligned with the

¹⁷³"Iran: Paper Lauds Continuing Revolutionary Role of Basij Militia . . .,"

¹⁷⁴"Iran: President Khatami Addresses Commanders of Basij Resistance Force . . .,"

¹⁷⁵"There is no Force Like Basij Iran Leader . . .," "Iran Press: Basij to Form Joint Working Groups with Other Countries . . .,"

¹⁷⁶Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, (Washington: The CSIS Press, 2007), 81; Saeid Golkar, "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .," 459.

¹⁷⁷"Paper Highlights Growing Importance of Basij Militia in Iranian Society," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 01, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/906904794?accountid=9867>.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*

latter group, as evidenced by General Naqdi's comments about the lack of authenticity of numbers.¹⁷⁹ Having considered the rules and size of the organisation, its actual structure can be investigated.

Relational Systems

The structure of the Basij can be considered as two main elements. The first, the parallel society, is made up of a number of organisations that group Basijis based on locations, vocations, or demographics. There are eighteen such organisations, including Neighbourhood Basij, Mosque Organisation, vocational groups (teachers, engineers, lawyers, artists, athletes, clerics, etc), Women's Society Basij Organisation, Babies Basij Organisation and Retirement Basij Organisation.¹⁸⁰ The other element is the defence force, mainly based on the Ashura and Al Zhara battalions, as well as specialty elements, including the Nasehin.

All Basijis fall under three main categories, regardless of the element to which they belong. The regular Basij members are those who have received basic training, including IPT. Active Basij members must have participated in Basij activities for a minimum of six months.¹⁸¹ Finally, special Basijis are those that have been specifically

¹⁷⁹“Iran's New Basij Commander Comments on Recruitment, New Policies,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Nov 25, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458768625?accountid=9867>.

¹⁸⁰Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 457.

¹⁸¹Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 458.

chosen for advanced training and are in fact part of the IRGC as Honourary Guards.¹⁸²

An understanding of these three ranks is necessary to explain the defence force structure.

While the Ashura and Al Zhara battalions, mostly populated by active Basijis, form the main force of the Basij, there are two other types of units that merit description. Imam Ali battalions are elite battalions whose soldiers have received advanced combat training. Equipped with batons and mounted on iconic motorcycles, they are the first force of reaction against violent protests.¹⁸³ Imam Hossein battalions, formerly called Karbala units, are filled with special Basijis, and fall under the direct control of the Sepah. Their specialized irregular techniques are used to support the Mosaic Doctrine against possible hard threats.¹⁸⁴

Overall control of the Basij has varied over the years. The Basij fell under the IRGC in 1981, but manoeuvred towards some independence since.¹⁸⁵ This trend was reversed in 2009 with the placing of the Basij squarely under the IRGC.¹⁸⁶ Explaining this change in structure, General Ja'fari stated that “the military Basij must be separated from the non-military Basij. The military Basij must work with the ground forces of the Guards Corps, and the non-military Basij must perform its mission to fight against soft threats and soft war.”¹⁸⁷ This conceptual structural change has had concrete impacts on the organisation. The creation of the media and cyber components of the Basij have been previously discussed and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces for Basij and

¹⁸²Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link . . .”

¹⁸³Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 465.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 470.

¹⁸⁵Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force,” in *The Iran Primer* . . . , 63.

¹⁸⁶“Commander of Iran's Revolution Guards on Reorganisation of Guards and Basij,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Oct 19, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458772960?accountid=9867>.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*

Defense Culture, Brigadier General Massoud Jazzayeri's announcement of a governing agency called Soft War Headquarters in 2012 indicates that the soft war role has been internalized by the institution.¹⁸⁸

Another important component of the Basij structure is its system of rewards, both official and unofficial. The Basij is a voluntary organisation in both senses of the word; there is no conscription, but there is also no pay, except for special Basij.¹⁸⁹ Though rumours of financial rewards for riot control operations exist, they are not verifiable.¹⁹⁰ Other rewards do exist. Unofficially, Basijis have uncommon employment opportunities. Geographer Bernard Hourcade argues that Basij veterans are increasingly taking positions of power within all of society but especially the government, displacing the clerics who used to hold these positions.¹⁹¹ Similarly, the Basij Enterprises and Institutions Commander, General Mohammad Siraj reported that more than half of all government officers in the country were Basij.¹⁹² These links indicate a self-reinforcing loop that suggests support for the Basij from the government will remain strong. There are also numerous official benefits to Basij membership. These include accessibility to reserved tuition-free spots at many state universities,¹⁹³ "coupons or discounts for recreation facilities and subsidies for travelling to holy cities."¹⁹⁴ In fact, analysts and Iranians alike have questioned the degree to which devotion compares to material

¹⁸⁸“Soft War Headquarters to Develop Model for Confronting Enemy Soft Plots,” *FARS News Agency*, Jan 26, 2013, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107138947>.

¹⁸⁹Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 457.

¹⁹⁰Saeid Golkar, “The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities . . .,” 26.

¹⁹¹Bernard Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 62.

¹⁹²T. Jafarov, “BRIEF: Half Iranian Government Officials are Basij Members,” *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*, Dec 16, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/911025531?accountid=9867>.

¹⁹³Saeid Golkar, “The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities . . .,” 24.

¹⁹⁴Saeid Golkar, “Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .,” 457.

rewards in motivating youth to join the Basij.¹⁹⁵ Some have even argued that beyond devaluating the Basij spirit, the reward system has caused significant harm to the Iranian economy.

Golkar, in a 2012 report, argues that the agencies that were originally designed to help the Basij maintain a reasonable quality of life have now become bloated. He maintains that the government's efforts at liberalizing the economy through the privatization of state enterprise are being undone. He points to "corruption, inefficiency, financial mismanagement, and monopolies."¹⁹⁶ Whether a positive or negative force on the economy or society as a whole, the stability of the Basij structure and its deep roots inside and outside of the military sphere are clear. Having looked at the framework of bodies that constitute the Basij institution, attention can be given to the internal policies of these units.

Routine

Considering the routine carrier from a regulative point demands analysis of the standard operating procedures and protocols of an institution.¹⁹⁷ This section will take an evolutionary look at two such protocols to trace the consistency or divergence of the policies while also comparing them to the institution's actions. The two protocols are the use of force and the independence from government.

¹⁹⁵Saeid Golkar, "The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities . . .," 26.

¹⁹⁶Saeid Golkar, "Paramilitarization of the Economy : The Case of Iran's Basij Militia," *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 4 (October 2012): 643.

¹⁹⁷W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations . . .*, 79.

An analysis of the use of force protocol yields a somewhat unclear policy that is repeatedly ignored. In a 1998 interview, twenty-four year old Basiji, Asghar Farahani describes the techniques his team uses when culprits ignore Basij direction: “We beat them so that it will have an effect on the offenders, and we beat them in a way that there will be no physical traces on the body [using] an open hand.”¹⁹⁸ Meanwhile, then President Khatami affirmed the Basij as a non-violent¹⁹⁹ group that must know the constitution and abide by it.²⁰⁰ In 2001, several Basij confessed to committing murders to satisfy Amr be Maruf va Nahy az Monkar,²⁰¹ but two years later, Basij leaders were describing the Basij as an organisation that was a victim of violence and that itself had “nothing to do with violence.”²⁰² In 2005, Basij Commanders admitted that the organisation had committed errors in being overly aggressive and that its focus would now be on cultural efforts to “heal social wounds.”²⁰³ At the same time, however, the proposed justice minister advocated greater policing powers for the Basij, giving them police officer status and a responsibility to deal with various offences and prevent offenders from escaping.²⁰⁴ The Supreme Leader continues to call on the Basij to refrain from extremism.²⁰⁵ It is clear that the pattern of violence and public denouncement of such violence by leaders is persistent.

¹⁹⁸Thomas Omestad, “Iran’s Culture War . . .,”

¹⁹⁹“Iran: President Khatami Says Basij Volunteers Oppose Violence,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, Jul 27, 2001, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451190964?accountid=9867>.

²⁰⁰“Iran: President Khatami Addresses Commanders of Basij Resistance Force . . .,”

²⁰¹Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society . . .,” 212.

²⁰²“Basij Commander Supports Khamene’i, Says Iran Will Counter “Aggression” . . .,”

²⁰³“Iran Press: Basij Volunteer Force to have More Cultural Activities . . .,”

²⁰⁴“Iran's Proposed Justice Minister Says Basij can Act as Police,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Aug 21, 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459180535?accountid=9867>.

²⁰⁵“Iran Leader Asks Militia Basij to Avoid “Extremism”,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Oct 24, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/759688960?accountid=9867>.

There are multiple possible explanations for this apparent disconnect. Some point to ultra-conservative clerics as the source of motivation for the behaviour that appears so contrary to the direction of institution, government and regime leaders. Economist Ali Rahnama reports that, Assembly of Experts member, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi advocates an “authoritarian perception of Shi’ism. . . rendering permissible the killing of those who threaten what he defines as religious values and the faith,”²⁰⁶ adding that paramilitary groups shouldn’t wait for direction but should act independently when they felt it justified.²⁰⁷ This sort of influence may very well be the reason for the disparity between the Basij’s general guidance and actions, but where does this influence act? Some would argue it acts on the individual Basiji, characterizing him as a thug and religious fanatic, but the cause is more likely duplicity on the part of the organisation. As previously argued, the Basijis seemed generally complicit with the aversion to guns, which is a regime policy more than a religious one. In fact, violence seemed well-managed during the 2009 riot suppression. Basijis reported that the protesters were declared enemies by the Supreme Leader, through written orders, before riot fighting equipment was issued.²⁰⁸ This points to a well-controlled application of violence, despite calls to the contrary from the senior leaders. A similar policy-action divergence can be witnessed with respect to political action.

As described above, special Basij are forbidden from political action, but regular and active Basij are not. The Basij takes advantage of this fact. During the 2005 election

²⁰⁶Ali Rahnama, *Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics* . . . , 95.

²⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰⁸Farnaz Fassihi, “News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown . . .,”

campaign, the Basij were reportedly used as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's own campaign workers.²⁰⁹ In an editorial letter, a student Basij leader called on his fellows to support the government, describing it as a Basiji government.²¹⁰ This does not represent the vision or expectation of society. While praising the Basij, another news editorial warns that the "Basij does not belong to [a single] faction organization and its aim is to protect the principle of the Revolution and the system. So, no group or person has the right to use this organization for his aims."²¹¹ The Basij has sometimes acknowledged the misuse of its organisation, such as when the Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, Brigadier General Gholamzli Rashid stated that "due to some unfortunate circumstances, at times the Basij has lost its popular identity and has assumed a semi-governmental role."²¹² But the duplicity of the system, as was argued with respect to use of force, seems evident in this context as well. Consider that two years after General Gholamzli's comments, the head of the Basij expressed disgust at claims that Basijis were influencing upcoming elections.²¹³ Even more explicitly, during the 2013 election preparations, the representative of the Supreme Leader cleverly argued that the Basij would remain neutral, but that, as a conservative institution, it would support conservatism, which should not be construed as support for conservative candidates.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹Matthias Küntzel, "Ahmadinejad's Demons . . .," 18.

²¹⁰Saeid Golkar, "The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities . . .," 25.

²¹¹"Basij Militia Forces Not "Tools of Power" - Iran Paper," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Jul 03, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458784856?accountid=9867>.

²¹²"Iran Press: Officials Warn Against Politicization of Basij . . .,"

²¹³"Claims of Basij Meddling in Iran Elections Insult to Public Choice – Commander," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Aug 23, 2007, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459116281?accountid=9867>.

²¹⁴"Basij interested in filling effective role in presidential elections," *Iran Daily Brief*, Apr 8, 2013, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2013/04/08/basij-interested-in-filling-effective-role-in-presidential-elections/>.

Having looked at two protocols, this section identified differences between public discourse on policy and actions. A study of the policies enabling the Nasehin to enforce morality laws would yield a similar result. With this understanding of the Basij rules and their procedural deviations, a brief analysis of the remaining regulative carrier is necessary.

Artifacts

Institutional analysis calls for the artifact carrier, within the regulative pillar, to assess whether tools follow the rules, laws or specifications.²¹⁵ The rules that have been identified in this chapter did not address tools, but one structural point should be identified. Despite modest increases in firepower capacity, such as the addition of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft weapons,²¹⁶ the Basij has neither conventional heavy weapons nor the ability to employ them.²¹⁷ Their separation and grouping under the IRGC for hard defence, while majority efforts focus on soft threats, seems well-aligned to their materiel capacities.

The analysis of the regulative pillar demonstrated a robust structure deeply intertwined into the Iranian society and reinforced by clear laws and statutes. The policies and actions of the organisations were shown to be poorly aligned, and it was argued that

²¹⁵W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 79.

²¹⁶“Iran Basij Commander on Defence Capabilities of Force, Failure of US Policies,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Mar 07, 2008, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/459059089?accountid=9867>.

²¹⁷Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces* . . . , 132.

institutional duplicity was the cause. The significance of this anomaly and the impact on the institution's legitimacy will be assessed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7 – LEGITIMACY

Having identified and described the pillars of the Basij institution, the legitimacy of the organisation can be ascertained. Each pillar must firstly be analyzed independently to identify cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative legitimacy respectively. Then, a joint analysis will enable the interdependency or friction between them to be exposed. The result of this analysis will identify the institution's legitimacy, which can be defined as the presence of social acceptability and credibility towards the Basij.²¹⁸

The Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

Legitimacy is derived through the cultural-cognitive pillar when social systems conform to the shared common understanding of societal roles.²¹⁹ This should normally be considered from two frames of reference, the Basij's own view of its societal role, and society's view of its role. Because one of the components of this pillar was the exportation of the Basij model, a third point of view will be considered: that of neighbouring Muslim nations.

²¹⁸W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 59.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

Despite the detailed IPT system described and the very robust basic tenets of religion and revolution, analysts have pointed to a non-internalization of these values by Basijis. American journalist Thomas Omestad highlights that Basijis' beliefs come second to their material needs, as they are routinely bribed.²²⁰ Research fellow at the Institute for Strategy at the Royal Danish Defence College, Ali Alfoneh asserts that the Basij have questionable reliability and that they are known to refuse orders.²²¹ Although these are indisputable comments, the Basij have proven mainly reliable, as evidenced by their employment to suppress riots when the designated IRGC unit had refused to deploy.²²² The body of work actually describes the Basij, at least within its command structure, as devout. This points to a close alignment between the institution's core tenets and the beliefs of its members, and is evidenced by the Basijis' own inability to comprehend or relate to the reformist protester narrative.²²³

If the internal legitimacy of the Basij institution is strong, it is somewhat less so within society. "The baby-boom generation of the early years of the revolution and the war with Iraq does not remember – or care for – the experiences and beliefs that are at the core of the regime's claim to legitimacy."²²⁴ Similarly, Iranians reportedly desire better relations with the West.²²⁵ These comments however, describe a divergence from the

²²⁰Thomas Omestad, "Iran's Culture War . . .,"

²²¹Ali Alfoneh, "The Basij Resistance Force," in *The Iran Primer* . . ., 62-63.

²²²Saeid Golkar, "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing . . .," 462.

²²³"Inside the Mind of Iran's Basij," *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, Feb 19, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/853072482?accountid=9867>; Farnaz Fassihi, "News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown . . .,"

²²⁴Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, "Three faces of dissent: cognitive, expressive and traditionalist discourses of discontent in contemporary Iran," in *Iran in the 21st Century – Politics, Economics & Conflict*, ed. Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi, 63-86 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 65.

²²⁵"Iran: Ahmadinejad vs Khamenei," *Al Jazeera*, Jul 8, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/06/201162994514399969.html>.

regime's own ideology, not just the Basij's. The Basij are solidly aligned with the current power brokers in Iran. Furthermore, they are supported by vocal members of society, some who adopt the title of Basij despite not being one,²²⁶ and others who evoke the unquestionable glory of the early Basijis when challenging reformists.²²⁷

Having argued for strong cultural-cognitive legitimacy within the institution, and to a lesser degree from society, the lack of legitimacy with neighbouring Muslim nations must be acknowledged. While examples were provided of the Basij exporting principles, if not soldiers, in support of Hamas, Hezbollah and Syrian forces, the Basij have had little success elsewhere. A cause may be power politics: "Khomeini and his radical clerical supporters imparted a territorial dimension to the Iranian Revolution, which was perceived by Arab and other neighbouring countries to be as much a grab for regional hegemony as a vehicle for the global expansion of Islam."²²⁸ But most evidently, the religion component seems the largest obstacle to implementing the Iranian dream of unifying the Ummah. Cooperation with, and from, the predominantly Sunni Islamic world seems unrealized three decades after Khomeini's call for it.

The analysis of the cultural-cognitive pillar resulted in strong domestic legitimacy and weak international legitimacy. An analysis of the normative pillar is now necessary.

²²⁶"A Look Into The Mouth Of The 'Big Mouth Basiji'," *Radio Free Europe Documents and Publications*, Nov 5, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1138416690?accountid=9867>.

²²⁷"Iran: Reformists Accused of Tolerating Anti-Basij Activity," *BBC Monitoring Middle East - Political*, Jul 12, 2001, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/451187198?accountid=9867>.

²²⁸Iran Policy Committee, *What Makes Tehran Tick . . .*, 22.

The Normative Pillar

Since the normative pillar deals with the roles and reinforcing values of the institution, normative legitimacy is derived from these roles being congruent with society's shared morality.²²⁹ Legitimacy is also derived from within the institution when members feel social acceptance.

Societal acceptance for the Basij is evidenced by the strong praise that is showered on the organisation. Obviously praised by their own leaders,²³⁰ Basijis also receive praise from senior religious leaders,²³¹ government officials,²³² and the Supreme Leader himself.²³³ In fact, while some of the actions of the Basij are sometimes challenged, their organisation as a whole, in part because of its deep ties to the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, is beyond reproach within public discourse in Iranian society.

The Basij organisation also generates social acceptance through its humanitarian and development roles. Extra-national aid missions and infrastructure construction of underdeveloped areas are clearly moral aims, as are scientific or economic progress. Finally, the role of the Basij as a local defence force against hard enemy threats also generates acceptance for the Basijis.

²²⁹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 61.

²³⁰“Commander: Iran's Military Might 100 Times More Powerful than 30 Years Ago,” *FARS News Agency*, Feb 20, 2013, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107146298>.

²³¹“Senior religious leader: Basij is one of the regime's pillars of power,” *Iran Daily Brief*, Nov 16, 2012, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/11/16/senior-religious-leader-basij-is-one-of-the-regimes-pillars-of-power/>.

²³²“Minister Stresses Basij's Vital Role in Protecting Islamic Revolution,” *FARS News Agency*, Nov 26, 2012, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107121942>.

²³³“Iran's Khamene'i Addresses Basij Forces in Kermanshah,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Oct 15, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/898430057?accountid=9867>.

The troublesome Basij roles, with respect to social acceptance are the Nasehin and the riot control operations. In the case of the Nasehin, it is clear that the role of imparting morality on society implies that the values being imparted are not naturally occurring within society; without shared morality, social acceptance cannot easily be generated. Still, the Basij counter this legitimacy deficit with strong mutual support between their parallel society aims and those of the Nasehin, such as discouraging luxury items both for moral and economic reasons.²³⁴ This bridging of the work value, appealing to the building of a resistance economy, with those of cultural guardianship and righteousness, such as opposing Western luxury items, makes the latter efforts more easily justifiable.

The gap between Nasehin and those who would flaunt their rules cannot be completely bridged. Descriptions of hatred for the Basij, especially from other youths,²³⁵ or their characterization as “illiterate people who only know the language of force”²³⁶ abound. The feeling of isolation between these two groups is clearly mutual. Mr. Moradani, the Basiji who helped quell the 2009 riots described being shocked and devastated when his fiancée left him and insulted him for his role during the revolts.²³⁷ This divide will not be easy to bridge.

The commanders of the Basij are not oblivious to the danger of this friction. General Naqdi explained in 2009 that the Basij's top priority was the establishment of

²³⁴“Basij official: Weakening national economy in enemy’s agenda,” *Ghatreh.org*, Nov 29, 2012, <http://www.ghatreh.org/view/2349/Basij-official:-Weakening-national-economy-in-enemy%E2%80%99s-agenda>.

²³⁵Saeid Golkar, “Politics of Piety: The Basij and Moral Control of Iranian Society . . .,” 219.

²³⁶Thomas Omestad, “Iran’s Culture War . . .,”

²³⁷Farnaz Fassihi, “News in Depth -- Inside the Iranian Crackdown . . .,”

close links with the population.²³⁸ Putting this kind of policy in place may prove difficult, despite increases in numbers and funding. But in the meantime, social acceptance is being generated within the Basij in a different way. Accepting the characterization of the Basij as an amalgamation of the lower class segments of society, it would follow that these disenfranchised youth find a taste of power and solidarity through the Basij organisation. In other words, considering the Basij as its own society, it generates strong normative legitimacy internally. Having argued for strong institutional legitimacy and mixed societal legitimacy, an analysis of the legitimacy of the formal structure is necessary.

The Regulative Pillar

Regulative legitimacy is derived from an institution when it follows established rules.²³⁹ The regulative pillar analysis exposed the Basij's legal basis in the constitution, its structure and associated rewards system, and its policies. The impact of these components on the robustness and effectiveness of the Basij will be explored in this section.

The first friction point identified in the regulative analysis is the reward system. The institution could be put at risk in two ways. Firstly, members who join for material rather than ideological reasons could dilute the values of the institution. While there are

²³⁸“Iranian Basij Commander Urges Basiji Forces to Reinforce Ties with People,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 13, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/458760293?accountid=9867>.

²³⁹W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* . . . , 61.

certainly Basijis who do not reflect the institution, the fragility this brings to the institution is questionable. The charge of recruiting from the poorer segments of society and enticing youth through financial benefits is one commonly leveled against Western armies. Yet, these armies have proven robust in combat despite less shared ideology than the Basij. Most importantly, the institution's internal social pressure, resting on deep core beliefs shared by most members, compels even those not completely ideologically aligned to conform. The second possible threat is the cannibalization of the economy by Basij (and IRGC) elements, which could result in weakening the society on which the institution depends. While this is a danger, it is also necessary and well-aligned with the core values of the institution. With the growing focus on soft power and combatting Western influence, keeping close control of the economy and imposing Islamic values on it, while economically undesirable, also prevents the luxury and excess that comes with riches. The Basij's ownership of segments of the economy also allows the organisation to influence or impose its values on other segments.

The regulative pillar analysis pointed to a lack of independence of the Basij with respect to the government. This could be a major destabilizing force for the Basij, especially given the governance structure of Iran where supreme rule could someday be challenged by the government. The Basij has undoubtedly become an increasingly political entity. However, recalling that one of the core beliefs of the Basij is the revolution, or Velayat-e Faqih, it becomes clear that the increased politicizing of the Basij is just a natural response to the politicizing of the Supreme Leader himself. Some have argued that "in light of Khamenei's clear support of Ahmadinejad and the president's allies during the 2009 election, the Supreme Leader can no longer claim to be

above factional politics.”²⁴⁰ This is clearly true and was reinforced by Khamenei’s representative when he called for effective involvement of the Basij in the 2013 elections.²⁴¹ In arguing that the Basij’s alignment with the government is ideologically enabled by the Supreme Leader, a look at the 2011 Iranian governance dispute is warranted.

Alfoneh argues that a power struggle emerged in 2011 between the Supreme Leader and the President, with the increasingly independent Pasdaran and Basiji leaders becoming the power brokers.²⁴² Whether the power actually resided with the Sepah and Basij or whether it remained with the Supreme Leader can be argued, but the result was clear, the President was somewhat marginalized and close alignment was maintained between the Supreme Leader and the IRGC and Basij. The Basij continue to make statements slightly opposed to government positions on topics ranging from official appointments,²⁴³ discussions with the West,²⁴⁴ or the Iranian nuclear program.²⁴⁵ The close link between the Basij and the Supreme Leader is clear and robust, and it follows directly from the core belief in Velayat-e Faqih.

The legitimacy of the Basij as derived from each of the three institutional elements has been assessed. In sum, the legitimacy was found to be poor within an extra-

²⁴⁰David E. Thaler, et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads* . . . , 47.

²⁴¹“Basij interested in filling effective role in presidential elections”

²⁴²Ali Alfoneh, “Khamenei’s Balancing Act,” *The Middle East Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 74.

²⁴³“Revolutionary Guards’ political deputy accuses Ahmadinejad of narcissism and delusion,” *Iran Pulse*, Feb 22, 2013, <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/1416/revolutionary-guards-political-deputy-accuses-ahmadinejad-of-narcissism-and-delusion/#more-1416>.

²⁴⁴“IRGC leaders opposed to bilateral talks with US,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec 10, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=295274>.

²⁴⁵“Iranian officials differ on approach to nuclear talks,” *Payvand News of Iran*, Dec 8, 2012, <http://www.payvand.com/news/12/dec/1060.html>.

national point of view, mixed when considered within Iranian society, and very strong both internally and in reference to the Iranian power system, presently centered on the Supreme Leader. A further analysis of the convergence points between the three pillars is now needed to complete the picture.

Combined Legitimacy

An analysis of the legitimacy of the Basij institution as a whole requires finding reinforcing carriers working across pillars to support one another. The integration of the components of the Basij institution is evident. Links can easily be drawn between the normative value of mobilization and the structural ambiguity over the organisation's size, or between the cultural-cognitive belief in religion and the regulative naming conventions of the battalion's names. Both of these, meanwhile reinforce the value of martyrdom, as does the headband artifact. Beyond these individual links, a number of major themes that unite the organisation should be highlighted. These are the focus on soft threats, the agency, and the artifice.

General Ja'fari noted that the highest threat to the regime from outside influence was the soft threat, and assigned the task of neutralizing that threat to the Basij for reasons of capacity and importance.²⁴⁶ This soft power crosses all elements and carriers of the institutional model. It is a cultural threat opposed to the basic beliefs of religion and revolution and therefore is the focus of much of the IPT. Soft war also targets values

²⁴⁶“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

of martyrdom²⁴⁷ and of course cultural guardianship. Most of the Basij's roles, from parallel society to the Nasehin, are designed to confront the soft threat, and the revised structure of the Basij removes the hard threat responsibility, enabling institutional focus on the soft front. The institution's legitimacy in relation to the population was shown to be strong culturally and cognitively, and somewhat less so normatively. The Basij is evidently addressing the situation, as indicated by General Naqdi's recent comments about new methods being implemented for the Basij to address the soft threat: "negative and violent methods in the prevention of sins is the job of the judiciary, the police and intelligence services and that the Basij should not practice these methods."²⁴⁸ While the soft threat is not likely to be vanquished soon, or ever, it serves an important unifying function, making the Basij robust.

Another major theme is Scott's concept of agency. The Basij's ability to adapt to the geopolitical situation was presented in the introduction. This inferred regime driven change, but the Basij is a populist construct that actually empowers members at various levels, within certain guidelines. From a cultural-cognitive respect, IPT is a tool that equalizes the members, giving them even grounding and opportunity for development, while ensuring that only those closely aligned with the core values progress. The SBO, one of the younger sub-components of the Basij, was already described as a moral leader of the organisation. The reward system of favourable consideration for government employment further empowers Basijis to steer the organisation. Once again, Basij

²⁴⁷“Basij Commander Calls for Including “Culture of Martyrdom” in Textbooks . . .,”

²⁴⁸“Iran: Commander Says Basij Pursuing Softer Methods to Combat “Vice”,” *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, Jun 07, 2012, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1018989372?accountid=9867>.

leadership is cognizant of the importance of this facet, as shown in General Naqdi's comments that "all the members of the Basij organisation are expected to contribute to the way the organisation is managed. They should express their views and opinions and have an active presence and participation."²⁴⁹ The distribution of agency throughout the organisation has made it very adaptable.

The last major theme drawn from this analysis is the institutional capacity for artifice. This concept is the best explanation for apparently incoherent Basij positions, both international and domestic.

It was previously shown that while exporting the Basij model is a central tenet of the organisation, it has had only modest success and future opportunities to increase exportation seem limited. American Enterprise Institute Resident Scholar, Michael Rubin arrives at the same conclusion but notices that the regimes' continued efforts demonstrate a desire to achieve this goal even if it sours international relations.²⁵⁰ It is more likely however, that rhetoric about exporting the Basij model in an effort to satisfy Khomeini's (if not the prophet's) vision of Ummah is actually mainly intended for the domestic audience. This would indicate a more rational decision-making process based on reinforcing the key cultural-cognitive values that the institution relies on. This hypothesis would also explain similar standpoints, such as the strong anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, which many consider illogical. Assigning a duplicitous quality to the institution explains some of its international positions but can similarly be applied domestically.

²⁴⁹Iran: Basij Chief Explains New Focus on Development, "Scientific Jihad" . . .,"

²⁵⁰Michael Rubin, "Internationalizing the Basij," *American Enterprise Institute – Foreign and Defense Policy*, February 7, 2013, <http://aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/internationalizing-the-basij/>.

The divergence between policies on use of force and independence from government, when compared to the actions of the Basij, are unlikely to be the result of middle and lower level Basijis diverging independently from the normative and regulative functions of the organisation. It is clear that these divergences, when they occur, are well-aligned with the cultural-cognitive beliefs of the organisation. Duplicity, here again, would explain the divergence. The Basij, with its dual construct of parallel society and defence/law enforcement force is structurally well-suited to artifice. It collects good faith from its humanitarian, development and hard defence efforts, and is able to cash it in with the population when needed to confront localized dissent. The final indicator of duplicity is the focus on soft war. While cultural invasion is undoubtedly a most serious threat and a Basij responsibility, calling it ‘soft threat’ is much more effective. It is a vague term that can be used to justify anything. Economic woes related to sanctions, or protests demanding better election oversight are hardly cultural subjects. But they can easily be grouped under the soft war. In fact, General Ja’fari summed it up well when he described the soft threat as “those who want to damage the strong relationship between the people and the leader.”²⁵¹ In these terms, anyone opposed, for any reason, to the regime and its well-aligned mechanisms, including the Basij, is a soft threat. Artifice is a powerful tool that can yield great influence, and the Basij have demonstrated a strong affinity for using it.

Through the legitimacy analysis, it was shown that the Basij is robust, adaptable, and wields significant influence. Its close alignment with the regime makes it

²⁵¹“Analyst Discusses Basij Militia's Importance for Iran . . .”

interdependent. It seems likely that the institution will continue to grow in stature while the current regime is in place. Conversely, the Basij is one of the key mechanisms for the regime to maintain legitimacy.

CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION

In just three and a half decades, the Basij has gone from a small social wealth redistribution organisation to one of Iran's important societal components. In order to understand this organisation, Scott's institutional model was applied. This model was particularly apt at analyzing this institution whose complex and multi-faceted nature has led many scholars to consider it in independent parts. Through an analysis of each of the three pillars, institutional legitimacy was derived. A holistic study of institutional analysis described an institution that derives robustness from its deep roots but is also very adaptable, thanks to a populist structure. Finally, the institution was shown to be adept at influencing others, whether within or outside of the organisation.

The difficult to describe concept of 'soft war' was demonstrated to serve a useful unifying function for the institution. The existence of the soft threat was assumed as valid throughout this paper, sidestepping one important question: what mechanism generates this soft threat? A brazen reporter asked a senior military commander the same question on the occasion of the announcement of the media Basij: ". . . Western countries too [like Iran] would like to propagate their culture and literature. They maintain that we should not look at this issue from a negative point of view. What is your answer to such

people?”²⁵² This interesting question on the nature of the soft threat could merit further study, but in the context of this analysis was unnecessary. Whether Western influences are active and purposeful or natural and passive, the result is the same. Western culture is permeating the Iranian fabric, and reinforcing domestic counter-regime influences whose bases existed in Iran well before the revolution.

While it was argued that the Basij uses the concept of soft war duplicitously, it is nevertheless clear that the soft threat, at least in the cultural meaning of the word, is a legitimate concern for the Basij. The institution’s deep cultural roots generate much of its power and, as such, the Basij is more susceptible to weakening through cultural distortion than through armed assault, as their values would only be further reinforced in an armed conflict. Basij leaders are keenly aware of this fact, and work hard to prevent the cultural distortion.

While this analysis was focused singularly on the Basij, it identified many similarities between the Basij, its parent organisation, the Sepah, and the Iranian regime itself. This indicates that some of the conclusions about the organisation could be equally attributed to the Sepah or to the regime. An institutional analysis of the three institutions would elucidate this question and possibly determine additional convergences or friction points between these institutions. Such a study would yield important deductions about the nature of power and stability within modern Iran. Fortunately, it appears that there will be time to complete this analysis, as Supreme Leader Khamenei was correct when he asserted that the Basij’s influence would last.

²⁵²“Deputy Chief of Staff of Iranian Armed Forces on Creation of Media Basij,” *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Dec 06, 2010, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/816026263?accountid=9867>.

APPENDIX 1 – BASIJ INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS – COMPONENTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1 – Analysis Components and Findings²⁵³

	Cultural-Cognitive	Normative	Regulative
Symbolic systems	<i>Categories, Typifications, Schema</i> -Religion (Shi'ism) -Revolution (Velayat-e Faqih, anti-Americanism)	<i>Values, Expectations</i> -Mobilization -Volunteerism -Righteousness -Work -Martyrdom -Cultural Guardianship	<i>Rules, Laws</i> -Constitution and bylaws -Size of organisation
Relational systems	<i>Structural isomorphism, Identities</i> -Exportation of Basij (Ummah, solidarity with Palestinian cause)	<i>Regimes, Authority Systems</i> -Moral leader – Student Basij Organisation (SBO)	<i>Governance systems, Power systems</i> -Organisational structure -System of rewards
Routine	<i>Scripts</i> -Ideological-Political Training (link to Supreme Leader)	<i>Jobs, Roles, Obedience to duty</i> -Soft: Parallel society (Medical, Construction, Media, . . .), Nasehin -Hard: Defence force, Riot control	<i>Protocols, Standard operating procedures</i> -Use of force protocol -Independence from political action protocol
Artifact	<i>Objects possessing symbolic value</i> - Plastic keys, Headbands - Keffiyehs	<i>Objects meeting conventions, standards</i> -Aversion to guns	<i>Objects complying with mandated specifications</i> -Lack of war-fighting equipment
Legitimacy	<i>Social systems conform to shared common understanding of social roles</i> -Strong institutional legitimacy -Good societal legitimacy -Poor international legitimacy	<i>Institution's goals are considered moral and members feel social acceptance</i> -Good societal legitimacy (parallel society, defence) -Poor societal legitimacy (Nasehin)	<i>Institution follows established rules</i> -Strong institutional legitimacy through alignment with regime (Velayat-e Faqih)
Overall Legitimacy	<i>Convergence/mutual support of pillars</i> -Focus on soft power demonstrates robustness -Distributed agency demonstrates adaptability -Ability for duplicity/artifice demonstrates influence		

²⁵³W. Richard Scott, *Institutions and Organizations . . .*, 61, 79.

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