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## Iranian students fight hard and soft

By Ali Reza Eshraghi

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On a cold February morning, primary-age schoolchildren are lined up for a ceremony in which they will shout "Death to America" and hurl old shoes at effigies of Uncle Sam, the Great Satan.

The event, part of annual celebrations of the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, is the work of the Student Basij, a subdivision of Iran's powerful paramilitary movement which is seen as a bulwark of the regime.

The Basij force made its name in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, as an army of fearless volunteers who acted as auxiliaries to the regular troops, marching across minefields and through concerted Iraqi fire to clear a way through.

The movement fielded at least 550,000 under-18s in the course of the eight-year war. Thirty-six thousand were killed or were reported missing in action.

More recently, the Basij has acquired a reputation as a domestic security force loyal to the Iranian regime, and was deployed on the streets of Tehran to counter the widespread protests that followed last year's disputed presidential election.

The Basij is the largest organization in Iran and has a presence in schools, universities, factories, [government offices](#) and the private sector. Structurally, it sits under the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and its leader is appointed directly by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Student Basij has specific responsibility for work in schools and recruiting younger members. Under a 1996 law, the Education Ministry is required to support the Student Basij's activities.

### **Catch them young**

The Student Basij has a presence in 54,000 of the country's 150,000 primary schools and is expanding fast. One major new development is that its attention has broadened to take in young children as well as adolescents. Since last November, 6,000 "Basij centers" have opened in primary schools across the country.

The commander of the Student Basij, Mohammad Saleh Jokar, has said the primary schools are being targeted so as to familiarize youngsters with the "Basij culture, so that they will be fully prepared when they go on to join its ranks in a few years' time".

Jokar asserts that 4.6 million of the 14 million schoolchildren in Iran have signed up to the Basij, although such figures are hard to corroborate.

Children join different groups according to what class they are in - the Omidan or "Hope Resistance" for seven to 11 year olds, the Puyandegan or "Dynamic Resistance" for those aged 11 to 13, and the Pishgaman or "Pioneer Resistance" for older adolescents up to the age of 18.

Military prowess with a strong ideological slant is an important part of the Basij's image, and forms an important part of the training the organization provides in the schools.

Student Basij Day on October 30 commemorates the death of Hossein Fahmideh, a 13-year-old who strapped grenades to himself and threw himself under an Iraqi tank in 1980. At the time, then-supreme leader ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini said the teenager was Iran's real leader.

Since 1984, the Basij have run military training for middle and high school pupils, aged 11 upwards. Girls as well as boys are taught how to use Kalashnikov rifles.

### **Arming youth for ideological warfare**

Officially, the Basij recruiting drive in Iranian schools is to help build a 20-million-strong army, an idea conceived by the late Khomeini in the early years of the war with Iraq.

Twenty years after the end of the war, Basij and Revolutionary Guards commanders are still carrying out that order. But in reality, the Basij's raison d'etre has shifted from external to domestic security, nurturing a generation of young people loyal to the regime, devoted to defending it, and equipped with all the skills they need to do so.

As the movement's [website](#) puts it, the aim now is "raising and deepening the religious

awareness and political understanding" of young Basijis to enable them to steer the country's schoolchildren as a whole towards the state's objectives.

Khamenei made the same point in 2008 when he told Student Basij members that "the teenage years play a crucial and decisive part in determining the future of every individual ... It is therefore important to teach and train this segment of society."

To make recruitment easier, the Basij now offers a lot more than weapons-training in the schools. Competitions for science and inventions provide another way of scouting for new talent, and a range of sporting, artistic and cultural competitions are held - all with a strong injection of official ideology.

Last November, for example, primary schools across the country marked the 1979 takeover of the [American Embassy](#) in the Iranian revolution by holding drawing competitions. The theme? "Death to America".

Aware of the importance of the [Internet](#) and its use by the opposition, the Basij has been busy training its own [bloggers](#). Ten thousand were supposed to have been trained in a program ending this spring.

The movement also held a [blog](#) competition, which Student Basij commander Jokar said was intended to encourage "effective use of cyberspace to promote the values of the Islamic revolution" and - significantly - to counter "soft threats".

The term "soft threat" was coined by Khamenei to describe what he saw as corrosive Western influences designed to undermine the politics and Islamic culture of Iran.

Guards Corps commander Brigadier-General Mohammad Ali Jafari has made it clear that Khamenei has entrusted the Basij with the task of combating "soft threats" and "confronting those who would strike at the strong relationship between the supreme leader and the people". As part of this virtual war, the Basij has designed its own politically correct computer games.

"Devil Den", launched in July 2009 by the Basij's then overall commander Hossein Taeb, is based around a scenario in which Iranian students on a pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq are captured by [American soldiers](#). The Americans turn them over to Israel, which plans to perform experiments on them so that they will mutate into Israeli soldiers. An escape attempt results in a pitched battle with Israeli soldiers, which the Iranians win before returning home.

Other Student Basij activities involve summer camps mixing recreation with ideological content. The most famous program, the "Velayat Project", involves one-week camps in every province of Iran. The purpose, according to Jokar, is once again religious and political awareness-raising, and also "learning strategies to counter soft threats".

The "One Way to Heaven" camp scheme is designed for underprivileged schoolchildren. Last year, 20,000 attended these camps and were taken to visit the holy city of Mashhad.

"Rahian-e Nour", or "Seekers of Light", is yet another summer scheme; in this case to take schoolchildren on tours of Iran-Iraq war battlefields in the west and south of the country. This year, there are plans to take half a million children on these trips.

### **Teenage demonstrators - and riot police too?**

While the Basij undoubtedly had a strong presence on the streets during last year's anti-government protests, acting as auxiliary security forces, allegations that it deployed minors in this role as well are much more controversial.

Isa Saharkhiz, formerly head of the domestic media department at the Culture Ministry, was a lone voice when he made this claim. He was arrested and jailed in early July 2009, almost immediately after doing so.

Saharkhiz claimed that the Basij had been training underprivileged children and orphans in urban counter-insurgency techniques at special camps for a number of years. These youngsters, aged 13 to 16, were armed and deployed on the streets as shock troops against the protests, he claimed.

Such allegations aside, the main way in which the Basij deploys its youth members is as participants in pro-government demonstrations.

When Basiji schoolgirls mounted a nationwide march in May this year to urge the authorities to take action against women who flouted the Islamic dress code, police began arresting young people on the streets for "bad *hejab*" or immodest behavior.

At the start of the Israeli offensive in Gaza last year, the Basij began a campaign to sign up squads of school-age martyrs to go and fight. A website was even launched to register names of volunteer fighters.

As schoolchildren went on marches across the country, one 15-year-old girl spoke for many when she told reporters, "Should it be necessary we will go and fight Israel, so as to defend the Palestinians."

It turned out not to be necessary. The future martyrs were ready to go, but would have needed approval from the supreme leader before doing so. Nevertheless, the campaign was a demonstration of the Basij's capacity to mobilize large numbers of young people to serve the regime, and even die if need be.