

Institutional Attrition and Coercive Resilience: The Basij Paramilitary Force

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Key Points

- **The Basij remains the Islamic Republic’s primary instrument for domestic social control.** However, the convergence of three crises in 2025–2026, a nationwide popular uprising, Operation Epic Fury, and the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has placed the organization under unprecedented strain.
- **The Basij’s increasing dependence on material incentives over ideological commitment** and the regime’s decision to import foreign Shia militias to suppress Iranian civilians represent potential vulnerabilities in the force’s cohesion and loyalty.
- **The decapitation of the Basij command structure**, culminating in the killing of Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani on March 17, 2026, has left the force in a state of operational confusion.
- **The Basij is no longer a “people’s militia” in the revolutionary sense;** it is a professionalized internal security occupation force increasingly estranged from the population it polices. Whether it can sustain its coercive function under a new, unproven Supreme Leader is the central strategic question.

Introduction

The Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed (*Sazman-e Basij-e Mostaz’afin*), commonly known as the Basij, is a paramilitary force operating as a formal branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), ultimately answerable to the Supreme Leader. Established in 1979, forged in the catastrophic Iran-Iraq War through “human wave” attacks and a “cult of martyrdom,” and repurposed after the war as the regime’s instrument for internal security, the Basij derives its strength from a vast, tiered membership, deep societal penetration, and a multi-billion dollar economic empire, that sustains an extensive patronage network.

The events of 2025–2026 have fundamentally altered the Basij’s operational landscape. The December 2025 uprising spread to all 31 provinces and over 400 cities, with death toll estimates ranging from the state’s own figure of 3,117 to the UN Special Rapporteur’s estimate exceeding 36,500. The regime’s subsequent reliance on foreign Shia militias to supplement its domestic forces could signal concerns around the willingness of local forces to carry out the orders. The US-Israeli military campaign that followed has killed the Basij’s overall commander, Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani, destroyed multiple command facilities, and pushed the force into a purely defensive, neighborhood-level posture. Whether the Basij can sustain its coercive function under a new, unproven Supreme Leader whose physical condition remains uncertain is the central strategic question of the current moment.

1. Institutional Architecture and the Concentric Circles of Mobilization

The Basij is the Islamic Republic's most versatile tool for societal control, functioning as a hybrid of a volunteer militia, a religious social club, and a professionalized internal security apparatus. Established in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the force was initially conceived as a "20-million-man army" to defend the revolution from both domestic "counter-revolutionaries" and external threats. Its formative identity was forged in the "human wave" attacks of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), where young volunteers, including children as young as twelve, cleared minefields through a state-sanctioned "cult of martyrdom". In the decades following the war, the Basij was repurposed as a formal branch of the IRGC, shifting its focus from border defense to the preservation of ideological hegemony and the suppression of popular protest.¹

To understand the Basij's role and institutional position, it is essential to situate it within the broader architecture of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC is a combined-arms military force, separate from and parallel to Iran's conventional army (the Artesh), and answerable directly to the Supreme Leader. As of 2024, the IRGC comprised approximately 190,000 active personnel organized across five service branches: the Ground Forces (IRGC-GF), responsible for internal security and territorial defense; the Aerospace Force (IRGC-ASF), which manages Iran's ballistic missile program; the Navy (IRGCN), which exercises operational control over the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz; the Quds Force (IRGC-QF), an elite unconventional warfare and foreign operations arm estimated at 5,000 to 15,000 personnel; and the Basij.² Both the Artesh and the IRGC fall under the coordination of the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS), with the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters serving as the operational wartime command. The IRGC's internal structure was significantly reorganized beginning in 2008 with the creation of the Provincial Guard, which established thirty-two provincial commands that unified IRGC ground force units and Basij forces under a single command in each province. This "mosaic doctrine" was designed to ensure that each province could function as an autonomous defensive bloc, capable of sustained resistance even if central command and control were disrupted. The Provincial Guard thus serves as the critical organizational link between the IRGC's national command structure and the Basij's neighborhood-level presence, giving the regime a layered system of control that extends from the Supreme Leader's office down to individual mosque-based Basij cells in every city and village.³

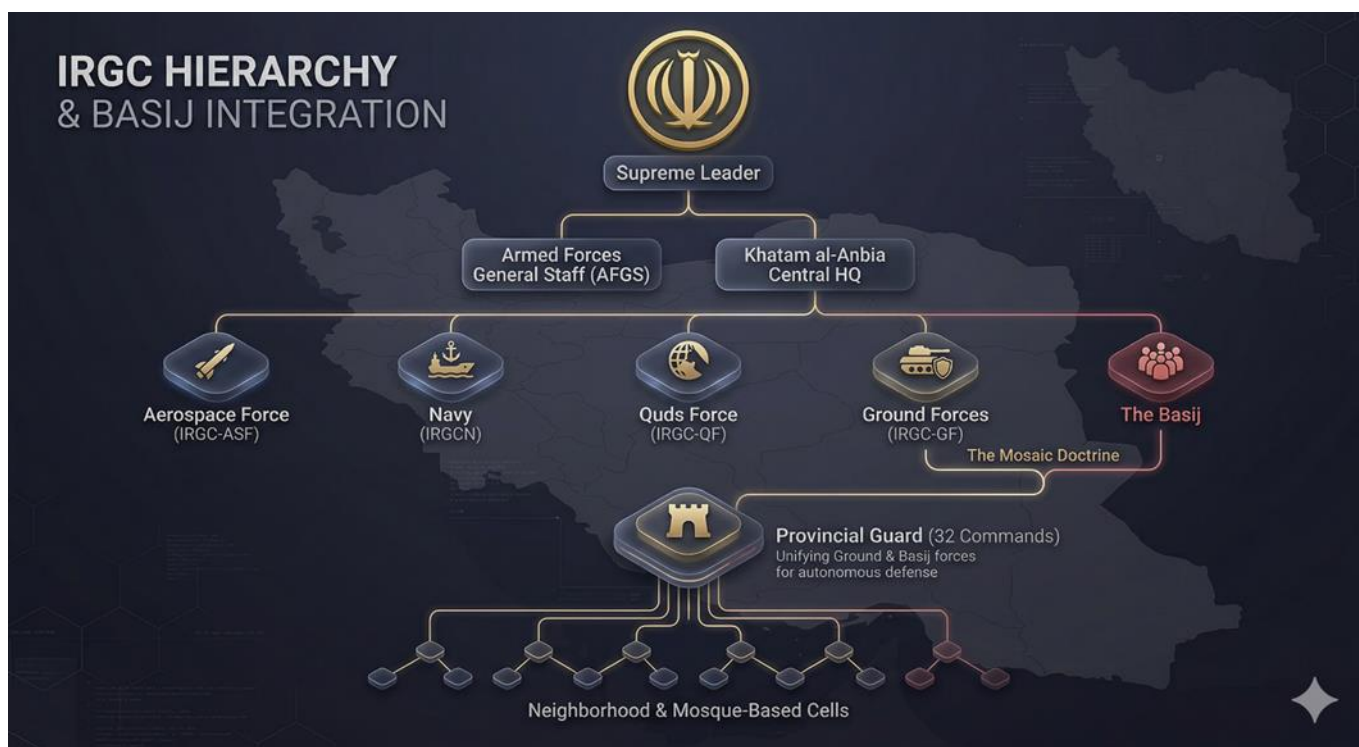


Image 1: Hierarchy of the IRGC and how the Basij is integrated. Created using Google Gemini.

The current operational strength of the Basij is predicated on a layered, tiered membership structure that allows the regime to scale its coercive response according to the level of threat. This “concentric circles” model distinguishes between the core cadres who are ideologically and professionally tied to the state, and the broader, more opportunistic outer layers. Estimating the Basij’s actual size is complicated by the regime’s incentive to inflate its numbers for deterrent effect. Iranian officials have historically claimed a total membership as high as 12.6 million, including women, a figure that has been cited by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) since at least 2023. However, the 2019 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report, *Iran Military Power*, estimated only approximately 450,000 active Basij reserve personnel, while a 2005 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) assessment placed the number of full-time, uniformed members at roughly 90,000, with an additional 300,000 reservists and up to one million who could be mobilized when necessary. Saeid Golkar, one of the leading academic authorities on the Basij, estimates total membership at approximately one million.⁴ The force is organized into three traditional membership tiers: Regular Basij, unpaid volunteers who receive basic ideological training and maintain loose contact with local bases; Active Basij, more involved volunteers who participate regularly in organizational activities but remain unpaid; and Special Basij, full-time salaried personnel hired on fixed-term contracts, typically lasting five years, who serve in dedicated military and security roles. A fourth category, the Basij cadre, was added after 2009 to provide a contracted, salaried workforce at the district level, bridging the gap between the volunteer base and the professional IRGC.⁵

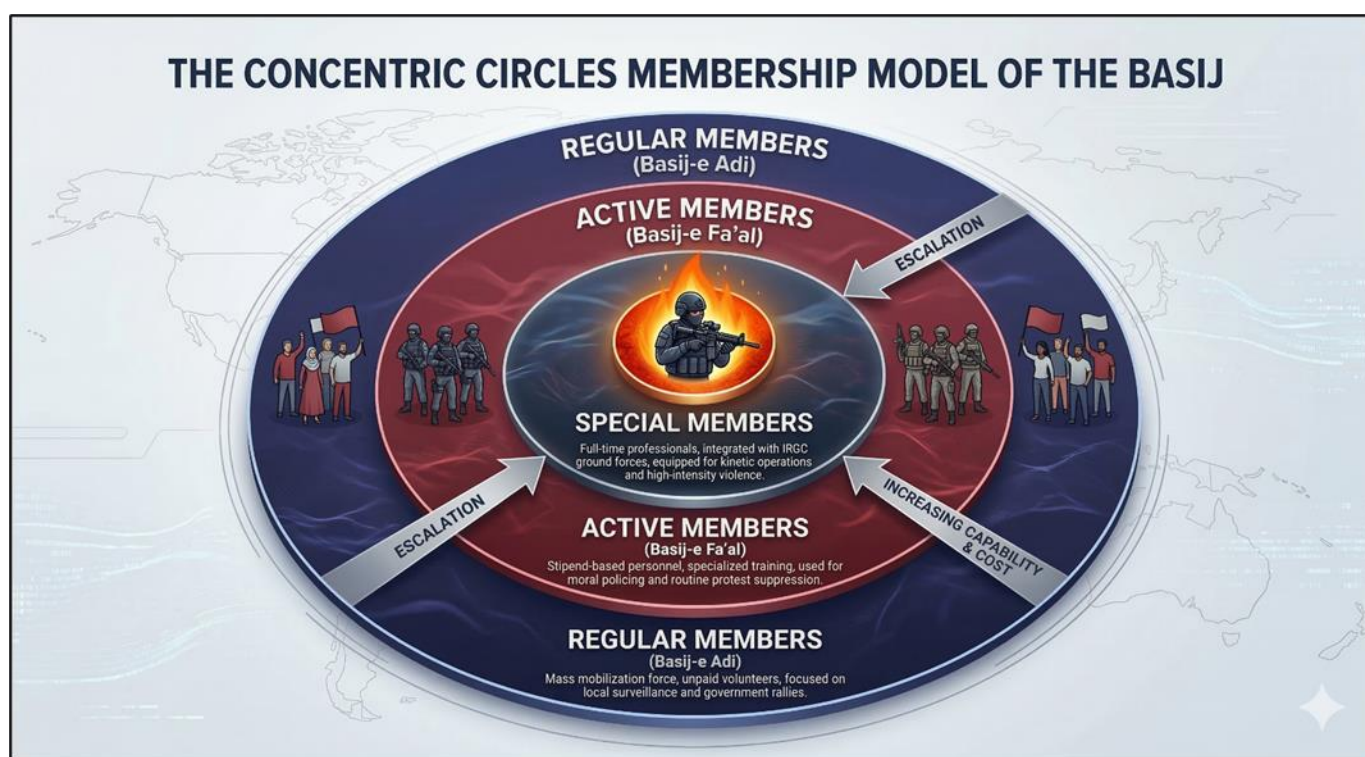


Image 2: Concentric circles membership model of the Basij. Created using Google Gemini.

Social Penetration and the Transmission Belt of Ideology

The Basij’s efficacy as an instrument of social control is enhanced by its deep integration into every sector of Iranian life. Specialized branches exist in schools, universities, government offices, and professional guilds. These

branches act as a “transmission belt” for the state, rewarding ideological conformity with material benefits while simultaneously monitoring and preemptively neutralizing potential centers of dissent.⁶

Central to this control is the Salehin (The Righteous) program, a seminary-style model of small-group discussion circles. These circles are designed to foster deep personal bonds between members and their “mentors,” enabling pervasive ideological monitoring and the promotion of velayat madari, absolute, faith-based loyalty to the Supreme Leader under the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih. By framing political obedience as a religious obligation, the Basij seeks to create a “doctrinaire” force that views the use of force against “domestic enemies” as a form of “Jihad of Clarification”.⁷

Evolution of Suppression Tactics (2009–2022)

The Basij’s tactical playbook has evolved with each successive wave of popular protest, becoming more lethal and technologically sophisticated. During the 2009 Green Movement, Basij members deployed primarily on motorcycles with batons and knives; by 2019, security forces were shooting protesters from rooftops with an intent to kill. Amnesty International documented 321 deaths during the November 2019 crackdown, explicitly naming Basij forces among the perpetrators.⁸

The 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement following the death of Mahsa Amini prompted an even broader crackdown. Human Rights Watch documented at least 341 protester deaths, including 52 children. The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran concluded in March 2024 that the state’s response constituted crimes against humanity, including murder, torture, and rape. Amnesty International separately documented the weaponization of sexual violence against detainees, collecting 45 testimonies from survivors. In parallel, the Basij Cyber Council expanded its capabilities, employing volunteer hackers to monitor dissent, spread propaganda, and target activists online.⁹

2. The Political Economy of Coercion: The Basij Cooperative Foundation

The institutional loyalty of the Basij is not maintained solely through ideological fervor; it is underwritten by a vast economic empire. The Bonyad Taavon Basij (Basij Cooperative Foundation) is a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate with significant interests across the Iranian economy, including the automotive, mining, metals, and banking industries. This foundation creates a “transactional loyalty” among the force’s members, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds who view Basij membership as a critical avenue for social mobility and economic survival.¹⁰

The foundation employs a complex network of shell companies and financial institutions, such as the now-merged Mehr Eqtesad Bank, to mask its ownership and facilitate international dealings. These funds are used to provide social welfare services, housing, and low-interest loans to loyalists, effectively creating a parallel state within a state. However, this economic foundation has become a primary target of international sanctions. In late 2025 and early 2026, the U.S. Treasury and its allies intensified pressure on this network, targeting the foundation for its documented role in financing the recruitment and training of child soldiers for foreign conflicts, particularly in Syria.¹¹

As the Iranian rial collapsed to approximately 1.42–1.45 million per U.S. dollar by late December 2025, prompting the resignation of the Central Bank governor, the cost of maintaining this patronage system skyrocketed. The state’s ability to fund these incentives is increasingly strained, forcing a shift where the regime must rely more on the fear of punishment than the promise of reward. This transition from consensual to purely coercive loyalty represents a

critical vulnerability, making the force more brittle when confronted with prolonged, nationally synchronized unrest.¹²

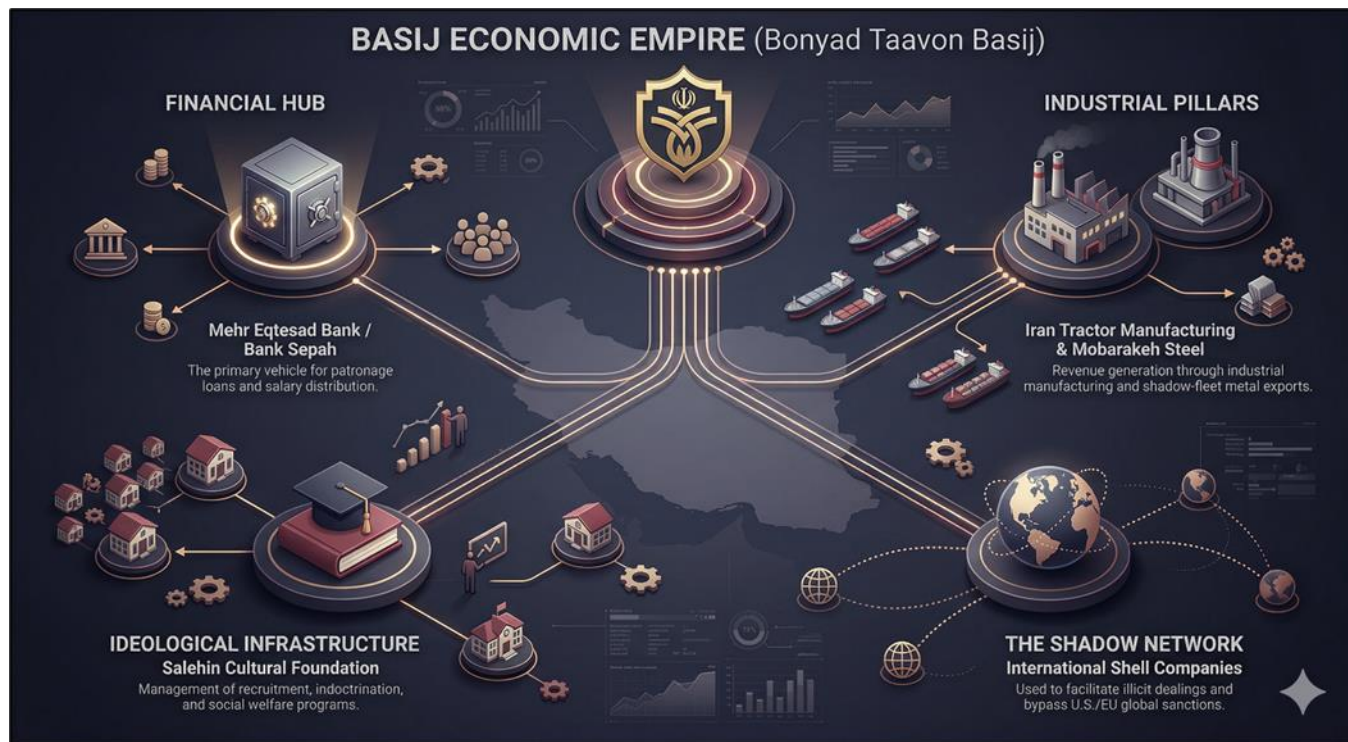


Image 3: The vast economic empire fueling the Basij. Created with Google Gemini.

3. The Uprising of December 2025: Evolution of Protest and Suppression

The protests that began on December 28, 2025, represented a seismic shift in the Iranian political landscape. Triggered by record-high inflation (42.2% year-over-year per Iran’s own Statistics Center), chronic mismanagement of essential services, and severe water and electricity shortages, the movement rapidly evolved from economic grievances into a full-scale challenge to the regime’s legitimacy. The demonstrations were notable for their geographic reach, spreading to all 31 provinces and more than 400 cities, drawing in a broader cross-section of society than the 2009 or 2022 waves.¹³

The state’s response followed a well-documented pattern of escalation, but on an unprecedented scale. Initially, the Basij and the police (FARAJA) utilized standard crowd control measures including batons and tear gas. However, by January 8, 2026, the regime signaled a move toward total attrition. A near-total internet blackout, the longest in the country’s history, was imposed to conceal the scale of the subsequent violence.¹⁴

The “Killing Nights” of January 8–9, 2026

During the peak of the violence on January 8 and 9, 2026, the Basij played a central role in the street-level suppression. Amnesty International stated that “the authorities carried out massacres of protesters, primarily on 8 and 9 January,” calling it the deadliest period of repression by the Iranian authorities in decades. Reports from eyewitnesses and verified video evidence showed Basij battalions positioned on the rooftops of residential

buildings, mosques, and police stations, firing rifles and shotguns loaded with metal pellets directly into crowds. In Tehran, the Mohammad Rasulullah Corps was implicated in the systematic use of live ammunition.¹⁵

The human cost was staggering: Iran's own Supreme Council of National Security acknowledged 3,117 deaths; HRANA's Crimson Winter report named 7,007 dead and 53,552 detained; while the UN Special Rapporteur estimated the toll potentially exceeding 36,500, based on leaked Ministry of Health data. The militarized clampdown was not limited to the streets; Human Rights Watch documented security forces raiding hospitals, beating medical staff, and arresting injured protesters directly from their beds.¹⁶

Recruitment and Deployment of Foreign Proxies

A potential indicator of the Basij's internal fragility was the regime's decision to deploy foreign Shia militias to assist in the suppression of Iranian civilians. By early January 2026, members of Iraqi militia groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, and Harakat al-Nujaba, were transported across the border under the cover of a "pilgrimage" to the holy site of Mashhad. Iran International initially reported approximately 800 fighters; CNN later reported the number growing to approximately 5,000 by mid-January.¹⁷

This use of foreign proxies suggests the regime can't rely on its own rank-and-file Basij members, many of whom are locally embedded and may refuse to use lethal force against their own neighbors. This strategy of "importing repression" allows the state to deploy fighters who lack personal or community ties to the protesters, thereby lowering the threshold for extreme violence. While perhaps a tactic rather than a sign of weakness, it presents an opportunity for exploitation by IO elements in CENTCOM and other agencies.

4. External Operations: The Basij as a Regional Force Multiplier

While primarily an internal security force, the Basij is an essential component of Iran's broader asymmetric warfare strategy across the Middle East. It serves as a vital recruitment pipeline and an institutional model for what IRGC leadership has explicitly described as an "international Islamic Basij."¹⁸

Maritime Asymmetry and the Naval Basij

The Basij's operational reach extends to the maritime domain via the Naval Basij, which operates as an auxiliary to the IRGC Navy in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. During the 2026 war, this force was utilized to disrupt global energy markets. The IRGC announced the Strait of Hormuz "closed" on approximately March 1, and daily transits collapsed from 138 ships per day to fewer than 5. On March 10, 2026, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) reported the initial destruction of 16 Iranian minelaying vessels near the Strait of Hormuz; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Dan Caine later stated the total reached 44 vessels destroyed. Many of these were small, civilian-style craft operated by Naval Basij personnel.¹⁹

5. Operation Epic Fury: The 2026 War and Succession Crisis

Operation Epic Fury has forced the Basij to adapt its internal security posture. As major military bases and command facilities came under sustained aerial bombardment, the Basij abandoned fixed headquarters. Security personnel began sleeping in buses or personal vehicles and using civilian infrastructure, schools, sports halls, and mosques, as temporary staging points.

The Basij under Bombardment: Shift to Neighborhood Defense²⁰

This tactical shift has brought the battlefield directly into everyday urban spaces. Instead of defending the borders, the Basij is now engaged in a “war over control of the neighborhood,” setting up mobile checkpoints and roadblocks across Tehran to prevent a popular uprising in the wake of the leadership vacuum. Israel has responded by targeting these street-level units with AI-driven drone swarms, specifically striking Basij checkpoints in Districts 1, 14, 15, and 16 of the capital. ISW noted that at least 9 of 23 Basij regional bases in Tehran had been targeted by March 6. The Wall Street Journal reported that Israel was receiving targeting information from ordinary Iranians who filmed Basij checkpoint locations and uploaded coordinates.²¹

Decapitation of the Basij Command Structure

The targeted killing of senior Basij leadership has further disrupted the force’s operational effectiveness. On March 17, 2026, an Israeli airstrike killed Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani, the overall commander of the Basij, along with his deputy Seyyed Karishi. Israel stated that “the majority of the Basij leadership was eliminated overnight.” No successor has been publicly named as of this writing.²²

Asadollah Badfar, the head of the Basij at the Armed Forces General Staff, was also reported killed in an airstrike in early March, with a funeral held in Qom on March 8–9, though Iranian authorities did not formally confirm his death. Other high-ranking fatalities included multiple senior logistics and intelligence officials. The loss of these commanders, coupled with the flight of other officers who abandoned their barracks after Khamenei’s death, has left many volunteers in a state of confusion.²³

6. Operational Vulnerabilities: Generational and Demographic Vulnerabilities

Iran’s demographic profile presents a growing challenge for the Basij. Over 60% of Iran’s population was born after the 1979 Revolution and has no personal connection to the Iran-Iraq War mythology that forms the core of Basij identity. Younger Iranians are among the most connected populations in the Middle East, with high rates of VPN usage and exposure to global media, a reality that the extended internet blackout of 2026 has brutally underscored. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement of 2022 and the December 2025 uprising both demonstrated that Iranian youth, including those from demographics traditionally targeted for Basij recruitment, are increasingly alienated from the regime’s values.²⁴

For many younger or lower-tier members, the motivation to join the Basij is less about ideological conviction and more about opportunistic access to jobs, university spots, or avoiding military service. This makes loyalty conditional on the continued flow of material benefits, benefits that are increasingly difficult to sustain under the weight of international sanctions, domestic economic collapse, and the physical destruction of war.²⁵

7. Strategic Indicators and Future Outlook

The Basij is currently at an inflection point. Its survival as an institution depends on three factors: elite cohesion under Mojtaba Khamenei (whose physical condition and capacity to govern remain in serious question), the continued flow of material patronage, and the ability to maintain the “fear factor” over a young, digitally connected population. **Analysts should monitor the following indicators to assess the further degradation of the Basij:**

Increased Reliance on Technology-Enabled Control: As the capacity for street-level presence diminishes, the state may shift toward “smart” repression, using facial recognition and cyber battalions to identify and harass dissidents without the need for large physical deployments. **Public Funerals as Political Theater:** The scale and attendance of funerals for killed leaders like Soleimani and Badfar provide clues about the level of morale and regime confidence within the core cadre. **Mojtaba Khamenei’s Physical Appearance:** If the new Supreme Leader fails to appear publicly

within weeks, it will fuel both internal power struggles and public speculation about a leadership vacuum. Patronage System Collapse: Any further rial depreciation or disruption of Bonyad Taavon Basij revenue streams would directly undermine the transactional loyalty of Active and Regular members.²⁶

Global Implications

The Basij's role in closing the Strait of Hormuz and its activities as a regional proxy recruitment center have global consequences. For international policymakers, the Basij represents a difficult target because it is embedded in the civilian infrastructure of Iranian neighborhoods. Sanctions that focus solely on the IRGC's military hardware will miss the vital financial networks of the Bonyad Taavon Basij that sustain the regime's social base. Information operations that highlight the corruption of Basij leadership, particularly the contrast between the wealth of those at the top and the expendable status of the volunteers, offer the most promising avenue for fostering internal divisions and encouraging further defections.

8. Final Assessment

The Basij remains a formidable tool of regime defense, but its efficacy is increasingly reliant on extreme coercion and foreign mercenary support rather than popular or ideological mobilization. The 2025–2026 protest and war cycles have fundamentally changed the nature of the force. It is no longer a “people's militia” in the revolutionary sense; it is a professionalized internal security occupation force that is increasingly estranged from the population it polices.

While Mojtaba Khamenei was elected to succeed his father, his inability or unwillingness to appear publicly raises fundamental questions about whether the IRGC-Basij command structure can sustain its coercive function without the personal authority of a visible Supreme Leader. The institution's long-term stability is imperiled by the decapitation of its command structure (culminating in Soleimani's death on March 17), and the strategic failure of its patronage economy under sustained international pressure.

The transition from a consensus-based authoritarianism to a purely coercive dictatorship under Mojtaba, will likely result in a more brittle state, where the Basij is the final line of defense between a battered regime and an increasingly courageous society. The force's demonstrated capacity for extreme violence should not be underestimated, but neither should the structural vulnerabilities that the events of 2025–2026 have laid bare.

9. Risks and Opportunities for USCENTCOM

The analysis presented in this paper carries direct implications for United States Central Command operations and planning. On the risk side, the Basij's deep embeddedness in civilian infrastructure—operating out of mosques, schools, sports complexes, and residential neighborhoods—presents a persistent challenge for targeting and battle damage assessment. The Provincial Guard's mosaic doctrine, designed precisely to ensure continued resistance after decapitation of central command, means that even the elimination of senior Basij leadership may not translate into a collapse of street-level coercive capacity. The Basij's intelligence and informant network, which extends through 54,000 bases and over 22 social strata organizations, provides the regime with a surveillance architecture that can persist independently of formal military command structures.²⁷ Additionally, the regime's demonstrated willingness to deploy foreign Shia proxies for internal suppression introduces the risk of a broader regional escalation, as militia elements from Iraq could serve as a conduit for retaliatory operations against U.S. forces and partners in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

Conversely, the structural vulnerabilities exposed in 2025–2026 present significant opportunities. The Basij’s increasing dependence on material patronage rather than ideological commitment means that the continued degradation of the Bonyad Taavon Basij’s financial networks through targeted sanctions could accelerate defections among the Regular and Active membership tiers, the very personnel who staff the neighborhood-level bases that constitute the regime’s first line of internal defense. The regime’s decision to import foreign militias to suppress Iranian civilians represents a particularly potent target for information operations. CENTCOM IO elements and interagency partners could amplify this narrative to deepen the already significant rift between the Basij and the population it claims to represent, framing the regime as so distrusted by its own forces that it must rely on foreign mercenaries to maintain order.²⁸ The decapitation of the Basij command structure, combined with the reported abandonment of posts by mid-level officers following the Supreme Leader’s death, has created coordination gaps that CENTCOM can exploit through sustained pressure on command and control nodes. Finally, the generational alienation documented throughout this paper, with over 60% of Iran’s population born after the revolution and increasingly disconnected from the regime’s founding mythology, suggests that any post-conflict stabilization planning should account for the possibility that the Basij’s coercive hold may fracture more rapidly than its institutional footprint would suggest, particularly if the patronage system fails to reconstitute under a weakened or absent Supreme Leader.²⁹

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¹⁹ CENTCOM, Press Release, March 10, 2026: 16 minelaying vessels destroyed; General Dan Caine later stated total reached 44 vessels.; CNN reported March 10, 2026 that Iran had begun laying mines in the Strait of Hormuz. Reuters confirmed approximately a dozen mines deployed.

²⁰ Iran International, “Checkpoint Attacks Open New Front in Iran War,” March 12, 2026; ISW noted at least 9 of 23 Basij regional bases in Tehran targeted by March 6.

²¹ The Wall Street Journal reported Israel was receiving targeting information from ordinary Iranians filming Basij checkpoint locations and uploading coordinates.; ISW, “Iran Update,” March 6, 2026; Iran International, “Checkpoint Attacks Open New Front in Iran War,” March 12, 2026.

²² Iran International / Times of Israel, “Gholamreza Soleimani Killed in Israeli Airstrike,” March 17, 2026. No successor publicly named as of March 21, 2026.

²³ Iran International, “Conscripts Say Commanders Abandoned Them in Bases After Khamenei’s Killing,” March 6, 2026.; ISW, “Iran Update Evening Special Report, March 10, 2026.”; Iran International, “Basij Chief at Iran Armed Forces General Staff Killed in US-Israeli Strikes,” March 10, 2026. Funeral held in Qom, March 8–9. Iranian authorities did not formally confirm.

²⁴ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Iran’s Youth, the Unintended Victims of Sanctions,” Brookings Institution (2010). [Available at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/irans-youth-the-unintended-victims-of-sanctions/](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/irans-youth-the-unintended-victims-of-sanctions/); Saeid Golkar, “Iran’s Basij: Old Guard, New Recruits,” Middle East Institute, Policy Brief (2021).

²⁵ Golkar, *Captive Society*, 215–240.

²⁶ Steptoe, “Sanctions Update: March 2, 2026.”; Euronews, “Missing in Action: What We Know About Mojtaba Khamenei’s Condition,” March 12, 2026; CBS News, “Who Will Be Iran’s Next Supreme Leader? One Name Stands Out,” March 2026.; Iran International, multiple reports, March 2026.; Saeid Golkar, “Iran’s Cyber Army,” *Middle East Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 1–10.

²⁷ Golkar, “Taking Back the Neighborhood,” 6. As of 2020, the IRGC controlled 54,000 Basij bases and over 40,000 Basij strata associations dispersed throughout Iranian society. [Available at https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran)

²⁸ Iran International, “Iraq Militia Groups Enter Iran Under Cover of Pilgrimage,” January 6, 2026; CNN corroborated with approximately 5,000 fighters by mid-January 2026. The use of foreign proxies for internal suppression is historically unprecedented for the Islamic Republic and represents a significant IO exploitation opportunity.

²⁹ Iran International, “Conscripts Say Commanders Abandoned Them in Bases After Khamenei’s Killing,” March 6, 2026; Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Iran’s Youth, the Unintended Victims of Sanctions,” Brookings Institution (2010). [Available at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/irans-youth-the-unintended-victims-of-sanctions/](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/irans-youth-the-unintended-victims-of-sanctions/)