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BASIJ - IRANIAN MILITIA AS AN ELEMENT OF "MOSAIC DEFENCE" AND THE GUARANTEE OF THE ISLAMIC REGIME

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the main assumptions of Iran's *mosaic defence*, the implementation of which followed the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The introduction of a unique model of defence by Iran was a response to the changes that took place as a result of the American intervention in the Middle East and the resulting threats to Iran's security. One of the elements of the *mosaic defence* system (*defa e mozaik*), which exceeds the borders of Iran, is the The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed – Basij. This unique military structure stems from both the Iranian Constitution and Iran's approach to war, which have been shaped as much by historical experience as by religious ideology.

During the study special attention was paid to The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed – Basij, which is one of the main pillars of Iran's defence in the event of armed aggression, armed conflict and internal threats. As the *mosaic defence* strategy includes hybrid and asymmetric activities, other elements of the system, also from outside Iran, were identified.

The basis for the research is the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Constitution of the Army of the Guardians of the Revolution, the Act regulating the employment in the Army of Revolutionary Guards and the analysis of reports prepared by RAND Corporation and other credible research centers and institutions dealing with security issues in the Middle East.

The study answers the questions concerning the main determinants of the adopted model of *mosaic defence* and its main elements, the structure of The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed and its role in defending the Islamic regime.

KEYWORDS: *Ali Khamenei, Basij, Iran, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, mosaic defence*

INTRODUCTION

Modern Iran, a key player in the Middle East, has developed a unique approach to ensuring its security and stability. The central element of this strategy is the doctrine of *mosaic defense*, which assumes a multi-layered and flexible defense of territory and the ability to conduct asymmetric warfare. In this context, the Basij militia is not only a subsidiary force to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), but also plays a key role in maintaining internal order, social mobilization, and achieving the ideological goals of the Islamic regime.

Since its establishment in 1979, the Basij has evolved from a volunteer formation into a paramilitary structure with a wide range of competences,

from military operations, through spreading propaganda, to suppressing social protests. The use of this militia is not limited to domestic actions; It also plays a significant role in Iran's regional strategy, supporting allied groups and participating in armed conflicts abroad.

This article argues that the Basij militia plays a key role in implementing Iran's *mosaic defense* doctrine, performing functions in terms of both internal social control and support for the state's external actions.

Therefore, the main research question is: how do the structure and functioning of the Basij militia contribute to the implementation of the goals of Iran's *mosaic defense* doctrine, both in the context of the internal stabilization of the Islamic regime and external actions in the Middle East region?

Given the above, the analysis of the problem includes:

- structural and functional aspects of the Basij: examining how the organization, recruitment and training of Basij members affect its ability to carry out its *mosaic defense* tasks;
- the role of the Basij in maintaining internal stability: assessing how the Basij participates in controlling society, suppressing protests and propagating the regime's ideology, which contributes to maintaining the rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran;
- and analyzing the involvement of the Basij in operations outside Iran's borders, including support for allied groups and participation in armed conflicts, as part of achieving Iran's strategic goals in the region.

The solution to this research problem will allow for a better understanding of the mechanisms through which the Basij supports both Iran's internal and external political and military goals within the framework of the *mosaic defense* doctrine.

Taking the above into account, the purpose of this article is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role of the Union for the Mobilization of the Oppressed (Basij) within the framework of Iran's *mosaic defense* doctrine, with particular emphasis on its function in maintaining the internal stability of the Islamic regime and supporting Iran's external actions in the Middle East region. The study aims to identify and understand the mechanisms through which the Basij contributes to the realization of the political and ideological goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran, both domestically and internationally.

For the purposes of this article, it is hypothesized that the Union for the Mobilization of the Oppressed (Basij) is a key component of Iran's *mosaic defense* doctrine, fulfilling a dual function: internally, by maintaining the regime stability through social control and repression; and externally, by supporting Iran's actions in the Middle East.

The study is based on an analysis of legal documents, such as the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and laws regulating the activities of the Basij, as well as on reports from research institutions focused on security in the Middle East. The analysis focuses on the organizational structure of the Basij, its role in the Iranian security apparatus, and its activities in the regional context.

HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Iran's approach to the war has been shaped as much by historical experience as it is by religious ideology. The former referred to the Persian empire, Islamic conquests, religious and political sects (McInnis, 2017) of the Safavid dynasty, the 19th century Qajar dynasty and the Persian Cossack brigades, and the rule of Reza Pahlavi. The latter factor is closely related to the outbreak of the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the post-revolutionary conditions of the functioning of the state and the fight for its survival.

In the post-revolutionary period, ideology and religion proved to be so dominant that they determined the political system of the country, defined its external enemies, and influenced the shape of the security system. Until the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, it was the United States, Ba'athist Iraq, and Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban that were the main threats to the work of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The next country to be mentioned was Israel, which Tehran saw as a *little devil*, a helper of the US in the Middle East.

The situation in the Middle East changed after the US intervention in Afghanistan and then the invasion of Iraq, when the regimes in place there, fell. In the longer term, the Americans also considered overthrowing the Islamic regime, either by military force or by conducting the so-called *soft revolution*. Confirmation of these plans was the prolonged direct presence of US troops

on Iran's western border, which also contributed to Tehran's decision to change its security strategy (Connel, 2010).

CHANGE OF THE DEFENSE STRATEGY

In 2005, Iran began work on developing a flexible, layered defence doctrine known as *mosaic* (*defa e mozaik*). The author of this plan was General Mohammad Jafari, director of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Strategic Center, who took office in 2005. The experiences from the eight-year war with Iraq that broke out in 1980 and the 34-day war between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah in 2006 were also significant in this respect. Jafari, appointed in 2007 as the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, implemented all his ideas, including the asymmetric tactic provided for in the event of a conflict with the United States (Nader 2013).

As part of the restructuring, the command and control architecture changed, with 31 independent command centers: one for Tehran and the remaining thirty for each of the provinces. Additionally, Jafari incorporated the units of The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed (Basij) into the structures of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and subordinated them to its command. This meant that the forces were given a territorial character, and that the same number of independent battalions were under the command. It is worth noting that during peacetime not all battalions are fully completed. The main goal of the changes was to strengthen units at the local level and give commanders more freedom in making decisions at the local level, in situations of both external and internal threats. These actions were also aimed at making it difficult for hostile forces to disintegrate and degrade the Iranian command and to enable the conduct of an asymmetric war. The analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the US-led operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans had a significant impact on these changes. In addition, the doctrine of *mosaic defence* was intended to integrate irregular and conventional forces under a single command that is responsible for the defence of a specific area (hence the *mosaic*). Another important element in favor of adopting this form of defence in Iran is also the use of short-range artillery, which can be used as infantry support and as defence points.

In addition, the implementation of the *mosaic defence* was also dictated by the use of natural and at the same time hostile to opponents geographic conditions, which favored the mobilization of forces against a possible invader and the conduct of guerrilla warfare. Most of Iran's population and communication routes are located in the central areas of the country, for which the surrounding mountains constitute a natural protective barrier against invasion.

According to the doctrine, the first line of defence would be the forces of Artesh – *Artesh-e Jimhuri-ye Eslâmi-ye Iran* – the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, armored, mechanized and infantry units that would support the forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, including the Basij. At this stage of operations, the use of air force, most of which is under the command of *Artesh*, is also planned. The next stage of operations involves the invasion and deployment of enemy forces inside the country. For this purpose units established by the Guardian Corps are in charge of harassing the enemy and conducting massive and irregular offensive actions by fighters ready for full sacrifice. In addition, according to the plan, the Basij units, whose training includes, among others, attacks and ambushes on military columns and the destruction of helicopters, would be mobilized. Many of the drills were carried out in the urbanized area where most activities are supposed to take place. The adopted strategy means that the forces will be used to limit air support for the enemy army and its mobility. Iran also allows the use of passive defences such as fraud, distraction, concealment and protection. On the other hand, the offensive element in this doctrine are attacks on military and civilian targets of the enemy using ballistic missiles (led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) as well as the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman with the help of naval forces (fleet of small boats, Silkwarm – Chinese-made ship-destroying missiles) (Katzman 2018), mine warfare and destabilization of other countries of the Middle East and the use of all allies in the region, including terrorist organizations cooperating with Iran.

Iran successfully uses the problems of the Middle East to pursue its own interests, engaging in the internal affairs of other countries. For example, the organizations cooperating with Iran in Iraq include: the Popular Mobilization Force established in 2014, Kataib Hezbollah, Badr Corps, *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* (League of the Righteous). Although the militia of the Muqtada al-Sadr Peace Brigades

(*Saraya al-Salam*) show an anti-Iranian attitude, they can also become a tool used to achieve goals, mainly due to their hostile attitude towards the United States.

One of Iran's most important allies in the Middle East region is the Lebanese Hezbollah, which has significant military potential and has been waging war against Israel for years. Hezbollah confirmed its effectiveness during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and by supporting the Bashir al-Assad regime in Syria. Units consisting of Afghans, Pakistanis and Bahraini (Fatima Brigades, Zinaba Brigades) trained in Syria by IRGC specialists, will play an equally important role in the future conflict. Iran has recently gained another important ally in the Middle East region. Houthi movement in Yemen with a potential estimated at around 10,000 to 30,000 fighters, is fighting to create an independent region in the north of the country. An important element of the Iranian *mosaic defence* is also Palestinian Hamas (about 25,000 fighters), whose headquarters is located in the strategically located Gaza zone, directly adjacent to Israel. In December 2020 in Gaza, military drills, in which armed forces representing thirteen Palestinian organizations took part, were conducted (Michel, Tzoref 2021). The military possibilities were presented by Hamas in May 2021, when there was an exchange of fire between Israel and this organization, and in October 2023 during the brutal attack on south Israel.

Bearing in mind the plans to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, Iran began cooperation with the Taliban, which is gradually regaining its position in Afghanistan (Cordesman 2021). Military aid included light weapons and training in Iran (Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart, Mahnad, 2014). Currently, Iran has engaged in peace talks aimed at recognizing the Taliban as a political force and involving this organization in the process of rebuilding the country. Finally, Syria and the Bashar al-Assad regime, which, among others, thanks to Iranian aid, managed to avoid collapse should also be mentioned. In Syria, with the help of the Quds Force, the National Defence Forces and the Local Defence Forces were created, following the example of the Iranian Basij militia. Iran is also looking for allies in the small Shiite majority of Bahrain, of which the pro-Iranian militia *Saraya al-Mukhtar* have been included on the list of terrorist organizations by the US State Department (Abdulla, 2020). Among the organizations supported by Iran is *Saraya al Ashtar*, recognized by the Trump administration as a terrorist organization (Katzman, 2020).

Tehran uses the term *Axis of Resistance* to describe this informal relationship of both state and non-state participants in international relations whose goals are consistent with Iran's policy of limiting Western influence and increasing the area of strategic influence (DIA, 2021).

From the perspective of neighboring countries, Iran is seen as both an important economic and political partner and a threat to regional stability. Iran's policy is shaped by a combination of historical experiences and ideological and religious differences. A primary concern for Iran is the influence of Saudi Wahhabism, which it fears could inspire extremism among Sunni minorities such as the Kurds and Baluch. These groups' dissatisfaction with social marginalization could be exploited to destabilize the country by reviving their aspirations for independence, as has occurred in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf perceive Shiite Iran as a threat to their religious and political dominance. Iran's relations with Turkey, despite economic cooperation and a joint fight against terrorism, are marked by distrust and competition for regional influence. Pakistan is also a key country from Iran's security perspective, as it fears Iranian Shiite expansion and interference in its internal affairs. The presence of separatist and extremist groups on both sides further contributes to the tense bilateral relationship.

INFLUENCE OF IDEOLOGY

After the overthrow of the Reza Pahlavi regime and the victory of the Islamic revolution, the influence of Islamic ideology was so strong that it shaped two separate political centers in Iran, functioning side by side: one was the state institutions and offices, and the other was the religious leadership of the Islamic revolution. This division also applies to the military structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Two main components can be distinguished within the Ministry of Defence and Logistics of the Armed Forces, commanded by Brigadier General Amir Hatami since 2017. The first is *Artesh*, or conventional armed forces, a regular army that remained after the fall of the Shah of Iran Reza Pahlavi and was renamed the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Persian *Artesh*. It is worth noting that earlier this army was trained and equipped by

the United States, which had had a significant influence on Iran's policy until the revolution. Certainly, this was the main factor that determined that the regular army in the ranks of the revolution's leadership was not fully trusted, especially since many soldiers remained loyal to the overthrown Shah. Currently, pursuant to Art. 143 of the Constitution, the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran is responsible for defending the independence and territorial integrity of the country, as well as the order of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Irandataportal, 1989). In addition, in accordance with Art. 144 of the Constitution, those who believe in the goals of the Islamic revolution and are committed to the realization of its goals are commissioned (parliran, 1989). Units of the Islamic Army of the Republic of Iran are located mainly outside cities.

In order to protect the gains of the revolution and the religious regime, but also to fight counter-revolution, in May 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini called for the formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The purpose of the created military formation, in accordance with Art. 150 of Iran's Constitution was to protect the gains of the Islamic revolution, guard it and fight counter-revolution. In addition, the functioning of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is regulated by laws, the most important of which are: *the Constitution of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Army* and *the Law regulating the employment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guardians Army* (Andrusiewicz, 2012, s. 362). Currently, Ayatollah Khamenei has sovereignty over the Army, and the organization itself has become a socio-political and economic conglomerate that controls every scrap of Iranian political and social life. In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guardian Army mobilizes the population to join the million-strong army set up to defend the homeland and counter reformist movements as well as combat any criticism of nepotism and economic corruption in Iran (Wehrey, Green, Nichiporuk, 2009).

Revolutionary Guard structures exist in every major city in Iran and are organized into rapid reaction groups used to fight civil unrest. Another sphere of activity is the involvement of the organization in the destabilization of Iraq, financing and training of Hezbollah fighters, organizing terrorist attacks from Beirut to Buenos Aires, or, as is currently the case, supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime or Hamas. A special role in this case is played by the Quds Force, which until recently had been led by Kasim Suleimani (BBC, 2020),

responsible for operations outside Iran and accused by the United States of the deaths of millions of people. The scope of the Corps' activities is evidenced by, for example, the acts regulating its activities, cooperation with the army or other organs of the security system. There are over 5,000 of them in total (Andrusiewicz, 2012, s. 362). The Constitution of the Islamic Revolutionary Guardian Army, the form of which has been in force since 1982, consists of four chapters of 49 articles. It presents the goals, obligations and organizational conditions, as well as formal and legal conditions relating to the Basij branches that are part of it.

In addition to the Guard Corps, the security structure of Iran includes the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, which is responsible for collecting intelligence and domestic information and counteracting subversive activity, the Ministry of the Interior, the Law Enforcement Force, the national gendarmerie, whose area of activity includes combating drug trafficking, controlling riots, borders, upholding Islamic law, and fighting corruption. In the event of an attack on Iran, they all support the Revolutionary Guardians and the Basij. On the other hand, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic are under the General Staff of the Joint Forces, headed by General Major Mohammad Hossein Bagheri since 2016, who previously served in the IRGC and fought against the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 (Katzman, 2020). There are also other paramilitary organizations in Iran: *Ansar e Hezbollah*, which cooperates with the Basij and Revolutionary Guards, or a small elite *Haydaryan* militia established to protect Iran's spiritual leader (Ratzlav-Katz, 2009)

BASIJ IN THE DEFENCE SYSTEM

A special role in Iran's defence system is played by the Basij militia (mobilization), according to S. Golkar, an improved version of the former party supporting Reza Pahlavi's regime – *Rastakhiz* (Smyth, 2015). Originally the National Mobilization Organization, later the National Resistance Mobilization, eventually the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed (*Sazeman-e Basij-e Mostazafan*), was established by Ayatollah Khomeini

on April 30, 1980. Its creation was a response to Khomeini's call in November 1979 for the establishment of the *Twenty Million Men Army* – an army whose purpose was to defend the Islamic regime against both internal and external threats. The obligation to establish Basij was included in Art. 151 of the Iranian Constitution. The government was under an obligation to *provide a military training program with all needs for all citizens, according to Islamic criteria, in such a way that all citizens are involved in the armed defence of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Iradataportal, 1989). It was this article that influenced the establishment of the National Mobilization Organization – a paramilitary and pro-government formation used by the Islamic regime to implement its policies, both internally and externally.

Basij units initially acted as the police and supported the central government in combating separatist Baloch, Kurdish and Turkmen movements. A huge network of informants was created from members of the militia, who contributed e.g. to the suppression of the communist uprising and the surveillance of counter-revolutionary groups (Wegrey, Green, Nichiporuk, 2009). Their role changed during the Iran-Iraq War. Almost 700-800 thousand volunteers conscripted into Basij, after fifteen days of training, were sent to the front. It was mainly from them that the Iranian commanders created the so-called *human waves* that were to stop the Iraqi army. Deprived of access to Western technology and modern weapons, the Iranian Basij members, mostly young boys, were easy targets for the enemy. The strategy used by Iran resulted in enormous losses of life, mainly in formations made up of members of the Basij militias, who were also used to clear mined areas (Jarżabek, 2015, s.105-116). An extremely important feature of the Basij regime for the Iranian regime was the ability of its members to sacrifice their lives in the name of the religion and ideals of the Islamic revolution. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, more than 2 million people served on the front, 550,000 of whom were students (Golkar, 2015, s. 16).

After the Iran-Iraq war, it was the Basij student structures that Ayatollah Khomeini gave special importance and pointed to their role in defending the gains of the Islamic revolution. The successor of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also recognized the Basij organization as an effective tool both in defending the ideals of the revolution and in strengthening its position as a leader.

In the 1990s there were changes aimed at the direct subordination of the organization to Khamenei and the removal of leftist elements from Basij. The consequence of this policy was a change in the post of the Basij commander. Mohammad Ali Rahmani, who held this position since 1984, was replaced in 1990 by General Ali Reza Afshar. In the 1990s, Basij underwent a series of structural changes. New command centers were created in the provinces to supervise the vice police, civil services, support social institutions, research centers and other areas of social life (Golkar 2015, s. 16). After the social unrest in 1994, the organization's budget was increased and the equipment was modernized. A year later, Basij, by engaging in the elections, also assumed a political role.

Afshar's term of office lasted until 1998 when Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi was appointed in his place. Hejazi led the Basij organization until 2007, and it was at that time that the organization became the most important pillar of internal security and the protector of the Iranian regime (Alfoneh, 2020). The organization conducted ideological and political trainings aimed at creating more dedicated and determined members to defend the idea of the Islamic revolution and stopping reformist circles in Iran, as was the case with the attack on students of the University of Tehran (Golkar, 2015, s. 21). Basij's involvement in the fight against reform supporters was recognized by Ayatollah Khamenei, who supported a 50% increase in the organisation's budget and the creation of new regional offices with an independent command in Tehran (Golkar, 2015, s. 22). In 2004, after the election was won by opponents of reform, the organisation's budget was raised from USD 72 million to USD 172 million, and an additional USD 350 million was allocated to the purchase of equipment for Basij security units (Golkar, 2015, s. 22).

Following the US attack on Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran saw the need to change its defence doctrine. General Mohammad Jafari, director of the IRGC Strategic Center, decentralized the structures of the IRGC and divided them into thirty-two provinces in accordance with the assumptions of the defence doctrine. Responsibility for defence in individual provinces rested with the commands established therein, shared by Basij and Revolutionary Guards, with the obligation to defend the territory on their own. For the Basij forces, the changes meant taking over responsibility also for defence against external threats. In this way, the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps was strengthened, with Basij members ready to sacrifice their lives and prepared for asymmetric struggle.

In September 2007, Ayatollah Khamenei handed over command of the Basij units to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The new commander of the Corps, Gen. Mohammad Jafari, dismissed Basij Hejazi from the position of the commander of the Resistance Force and appointed Hossein Taeb in his place. The main reason for the consolidation of forces was the convergence of the organization's goals, that is, *protecting the gains of the revolution* and the belief that *half of the missions performed by the Guardian Corps rest on the shoulders of the Basij*. In addition, the change was intended to include militia structures in the training and mobilization of Iranian society for guerrilla warfare. However, Basij was to remain as a separate formation, but part of the IRGC and under its command. When joining the structures, a pattern common to all provinces was used, according to which the provincial commander was appointed from the structures of the Guard Corps, and his deputy from the Basij militia. Regardless of this solution, the leader of the Guardian Corps in each province placed a representative to supervise and monitor the situation. Only in the case of Tehran, this rule did not apply, because the command was recruited from the central staff of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Alfoneh, 2008).

In 2009, during the anti-government protests that broke out over the presidential election, Basij troops were directed to suppress them in schools, universities, factories and city streets. Since some Basij members did not want to use force against the communities of cities and towns where they lived, a proven method of delegating them to other places was used. In contrast, during the conflict between President Mahmoud Ahmenidejad and Ayatollah Khamenei, over 90% of the organization's members sided with the spiritual leader of Iran (Smyth, 2015). In the same year, the name of the organization was changed to the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed, and the new commander was Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naqdi (Golkar, 2015, s. 27), a member of the Quds Force and a participant in the war in Bosnia. In 2016, General Gholam-Hussein Gheybparvar became the commander of the Basij, who was also the deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The commander of the Basij also sits on the Supreme Council of the IRGC and is a member of the General Council of Culture, the Supreme Youth Council,

and the Social Council of the Country (IranWire, 2019). According to the structure of the organization, the commander of the Basij has a deputy. In 2018, these duties were performed by Brig. Gen. Mohammad-Hussein Sepehr. In 2019, Gholmareza Soleimani became the new commander of the Basij forces. In the organization, which is subordinate to the Supreme Spiritual Leader of Iran, the Basij has its own permanent representative, who is appointed to this position by the representative in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Islam (IranWire, 2019).

Currently, the local Basij units, in line with the adopted assumptions, operate under the supervision of the Islamic Revolutionary Guardian Army, which plays a major role in training and mobilizing the Iranian society to participate in a nationwide guerrilla war. Basij's effectiveness depends primarily on the presence of the organization in society and shaping its proper image. Therefore, Basij is now represented in all key sectors of Iranian society. Basij's activity covers three main areas: security, economy, and intelligence. According to former commander Mohammad-Reza Naqdi, in December 2016 the number of registered Basij members was over 25 million (IranWire, 2019).

According to the information provided by the *Iran Wire* portal, in the Basij structure, there are 15 departments, and these are: executive, operations, investigation and excellence, social and cultural, coordination, planning, internet technology and communications, parliament, administrative and financial, training, education, technology, science and research, civil resistance, public relations, and the political division. Due to the fact that Basij members are recruited from various social groups in Iran, 22 industry Basij organizations were created for them, which include e.g.: employees and representatives of the media, women, sportsmen, guilds, faithful gathered around mosques and settlements, doctors, artists, workers, professors, scientists and technicians, lawyers, guides, elementary, high school and university students, speakers, veterans and political activists, private and government employees (IranWire, 2019).

Everywhere there are popularized the slogans of the Islamic revolution and ideological indoctrination is carried out, especially in relation to young members of the organization. Recruitment to Basij takes place under the supervision of clergy and other associations and organizations supporting the regime that provide detailed information on each volunteer applicant. The local mosque in the district is often the seat of Basij. Completing the training

in Basij is a prerequisite to receiving social privileges. It is worth noting that Basij members enjoy a number of benefits: financial bonuses, loans on favorable terms, discounts on religious trips to holy places, social welfare or access to universities. Depending on their rank, Basij members also receive financial compensation.

Until 2010, Basij members had been divided into three groups, belonging to which was determined by the degree of training, the scope of cooperation and ideological motivations. In 2012, it was extended to two additional categories. According to S. Golkar, these are the following categories of members:

- the first, potential members, level i.e. not formally members of the organization, but strong believers in revolution, recognizing the *Vilayat el-fakih* doctrine and at the same time the role of the Supreme Leader. Potential members of the organization participate in Basij activities, Friday services and celebrations;
- the second level – regular members, brings together those members of the organization who have basic training and have completed the 18-hour compulsory training program, are in contact with bases and are at least eleven years old. After completing the training, they receive a membership card that confirms that they belong to an organization, and then they participate in several-hour-long training sessions in the bases once a month (Golkar, 2015, s. 48);
- active members, first and foremost the basic condition is the age of fifteen. After six months of membership, the candidate submits an application, which is approved by the commander of the base and sends it for further consideration by appropriate institutions at the regional level, which check the candidate's ideological and political qualifications and carry out activities related to security. Another condition for membership at this level is a weekly training in the use of weapons, civil defence and first aid. Ideological and political training includes: material in the field of ethics and etiquette, the main principles of Islam, learning to read the Koran, or issues related to the exercise of power by the highest-ranking religious scholar (*vilayat al-fakih*). After completing the training, participants receive the rank of *fighter* and start their service. Basij members at this level are required to serve six hours

at the base and complete six hours of training. This membership layer applies primarily to the battalions of Ashura and Al-Zahra. Within this level there is the possibility of further training which includes more advanced military and intelligence training. It covers practical shooting, psychological combat, tactics of action in the case of suppression of demonstrations, intelligence theory, and other areas of knowledge of military operations. After completing this training, *basijas* are organized into battalions of the ground forces of Imam Hussein's Battalions and carry out tasks under the command of the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Although they do not receive a salary, they enjoy many of the benefits provided for that group (Golkar, 2015, s. 48);

- cadre is a small group whose requirements include knowledge of contemporary socio-political issues, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and issues related to Zionism and the problems of Palestine. The staff holds key positions and is the main part of the organization. Both the base commanders, their deputies, section directors and team leaders come from this group. All base commanders of resistance are recognized as Revolutionary Guard officers. Staff members whose service is regulated by the contract receive a salary for the duration of the contract;
- special Basij members who have a special level, their qualifications and skills are equal to the Guardians of the Revolution. They are recruited by representatives of the Revolutionary Guards responsible for the recruitment process, who also check their background. Training for Basij members who qualify for this group follows the same rules as for Revolutionary Guards. Some of them are sent for training at the Basij Special Academy, where they undergo specialist training in the field of intelligence, counterintelligence, information and communication, engineering and logistics activities. There are ranks from lieutenant upwards for members of this group (Golkar 2015, s. 49).

The territorial structure of Basij covers four levels. The smallest organizational unit of Basij is the resistance base, which most often operates at mosques in cities or smaller towns. Their exact number is not known, as it changes frequently. According to IranWire, there may be around 38,000 of

them nationwide. The base usually includes: the commander, his deputy, the intelligence security office and other members. The tasks of the base include collecting information and monitoring the situation, promoting Islamic values, counteracting offenses against them, promoting Basij culture and Holy War, participating in rescue operations and patrols (IranWire, 2019).

The next level is the resistance districts, which cover from 10 to 15 bases. The highest unit of territorial organization is the regions, which also consist of 10 to 15 districts corresponding to the key administrative units of the country. Their number depends on the population and the size of cities. Control over the Basij resistance regions is exercised by the Command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Province. Currently, the number of commands is thirty-two (two in Tehran) (IranWire, 2019).

An example is the Basij organization in Tehran. Administratively, Tehran is divided into 23 districts, each one with a district Basij resistance structure. In each district, on average, there are from a few to a dozen regional resistance units, each of which has 12 Basij resistance bases, located near mosques, ministries, schools, and other places important from the point of view of the functioning of the state and the security of the regime (Nadimi, 2017). Each Basij resistance base has 2 battalions of Ashura (male) and one battalion of al-Zahra (female), whose tasks include:

- counteracting cultural threats,
- combating and counteracting threats generated in the Internet,
- city defence,
- participation in search and rescue operations,
- general helping,
- combating cybercrime.

Likewise, at the district level, there are Beit al-Moqdas light infantry units (male to strengthen the Revolutionary Guard Land Forces) and Kowsar (female to provide support), made up of younger members who are better trained and more effectively deployed. Additionally, there is one Imam Ali battalion at the level of each district. These troops are trained and fully equipped to suppress and control riots, they have heavy motorcycles and mobile cages to quickly trap demonstrators (Nadimi, 2017).

All of these units operate under the IRGC's four municipal security units and can be used for combat operations in, for example, Syria. One such unit is the Basij Fatehin unit, created in 2009 and partly composed of volunteers, whose members receive more advanced training (Nadimi, 2017). In 2015, a special unit of snipers was created, and the Basij soldiers themselves were sent to Syria where, as part of the IRGC Ground Forces, they fought in defence of the Bashar Assad regime (Toumaj, 2016).

In September 2020 Mohammad Yazdi, the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the province of Tehran, announced the introduction of Basij Strike Teams to the Basij structure. Their creation was preceded by the introduction of patrols in 2017, the activity of which focused on crime prevention and ensuring security in the immediate inhabited area. However, the final decision to create them was influenced by mass protests in 2019 (Iraninternational, 2020). The purpose of creating strike teams is to use them to neutralize kinds of rebellions in advance so that they do not turn into mass demonstrations. The composition of the team (similar to community patrols) is infantry or motorized groups of three to five people (IranWire, 2020).

The Basij core consists of two components: the Ashura Battalions for men and the Al-Zahra Battalions for women. Ashura battalions, which operate in each province, are subordinated to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Ashura Battalions recruit candidates, who are men aged 15 and above to the Basij forces, and train high-ranking Basij members for more responsible tasks, including serving in the Imam Ali and Imam Husajn Battalions. The main tasks of Ashura's Battalions are *protection and defence of the community* and *providing assistance in emergencies*. In fact, the main task is to combat riots and street protests, as exemplified by their participation in the suppression of student protests in 1999 and the Green Movement in 2009. In addition, battalions are also involved in pro-social, political and cultural activities. One of the new areas of activity of these battalions is combating threats on the Internet.

The Al-Zahra Women's Battalions are recruited from female Iranians from the age of fifteen. The area of activity of female formations primarily includes social, cultural, political and *soft war* activities (cyber war, media warfare, propaganda, etc.). An additional task is the logistical support of military exercises

organized by Basij. In 2015, the number of battalions was estimated at 1,800. The Basij military structures also include the Beit-ol-Moqaddas Battalion, known for its ideological determination to defend the Islamic Republic. In addition to the main task, which is to maintain the security of cities and villages, members of the battalions also participate in drills ensuring the safety and protection of the population. The total number of Beit-ol-Moqaddas battalions in 2015 was around 1,500 battalions deployed in all provinces of Iran.

Kowsar Battalions are other units that consist only of women. Within the Basij structure, these units serve as support in maintaining the security and protection of cities, as well as in anti-riot operations. The structure of the Kowsar Battalions is similar to the Beit al-Moqaddas Rapid Reaction Battalions. About 24 branches of this formation operate in Iran.

Imam Hussein's battalions were primarily formed to fight against external aggression and threats to Iran's security. These units have an independent structure and carry out operations in the provinces under the supervision of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The *Basiji* battalions are paid, professionally trained soldiers who undergo regular monthly training (Nadimi, 2017) In 2015 the number of these battalions was estimated at 500. Soldiers of these formations participated in the war in Syria as volunteers.

Imam Ali's Battalions, which were established in 2011, are also planned to combat security threats. Their mission also includes participation in anti-riot operations and the protection of strategic infrastructure. One of the important features of these departments is the autonomy in making decisions in the event of an emergency. According to IranWire, Ali's Battalions in January 2017 had around 180 troops deployed in various provinces.

The Basij became more active during the suppression of the protests that swept through Iran in late 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini, who was detained by Iranian religious police and beaten to death. Members of the pro-government organization shot at demonstrators with live ammunition, banned pellets and other metal bullets, and used tear gas, water cannons and batons to disperse and intimidate protesters (europarl, 2023). In addition, protesters were taken to unknown locations where they were tortured. During the ongoing protests in Iran, the Basij also attacked social media in order to surveil and disrupt communication between protesters.

To highlight the role of the Basij in defending the Islamic Republic of Iran, an annual *Basij Week* is held, which is dedicated to glorifying this organization, recalling its role in defending Islamic values, and pointing out the role of the militia in Iran's national security system.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out in this work, which addressed issues such as the structural and functional aspects of the Basij, its role in maintaining Iran's internal stability, and its involvement in activities beyond the country's borders, confirms the thesis that this organization plays a key role in Iran's defense doctrine and serves as a guarantee of the continuation of the Islamic regime.

The Iranian defence strategy is a response to an armed confrontation with the United States and the country's attempts to overthrow the Islamic regime. In view of the existing disproportion in potential military, Iran's defence strategy has been focused on asymmetric activities, involving the use of open, secret, and military and non-military means. A special role in this respect is entrusted to paramilitary and pro-state organizations whose activities cover a wide spectrum of issues related to the functioning of the Islamic regime. Such organizations include the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed, which, along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which undoubtedly constitutes the most important element of the *mosaic defence*.

Basij's tasks, in addition to socio-economic and rescue activities, such as counteracting and combating COVID-19, cover two areas of activities related to two main threats: *hard* and *soft* ones. The first one contains an action strategy aimed at stopping a potential enemy from a conventional attack. It is carried out through deterrence, that is, causing an extreme number of casualties on the side of enemy troops. The strategy of operation includes, among others, the transition of infantry battalions to partisan combat and the fight against a much stronger enemy within the territory of their own country, i.e. an irregular war – an asymmetric war. Subsequently, after joining the war with other elements of the *mosaic defence*, including those from outside Iran, Basij becomes an element of a hybrid war. This type of activity is primarily the result

of observations by the United States Army and its military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Maintaining the peace and attempts to establish a new political order in these countries was not only a huge economic burden for the US administration, but also a responsibility to its own society for the death of its own soldiers. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, where it is known that the US military presence in this country will end at the end of 2021, the number of soldiers to achieve the goal turned out to be insufficient. The technological advantage and excellent training of soldiers, who faced with irregular units often had to recognize their superiority, did not help either. Ideologically and religiously motivated fighters, capable of making the highest sacrifice, turned out to be an unpredictable and demanding opponent. Within the Basij structures, such motivated members of the organization may be hundreds of thousands, and perhaps even millions.

The second area of Basij's activity is a response to internal and external threats falling within the concept of *soft threats*. The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed was established to protect the gains of the Islamic revolution and to counteract all attempts to overthrow the Islamic regime. The structure of the Basij forces and their territorial and industry character enable this organization to penetrate deeply into society. In recent years, progressive forces in Iran have been increasingly calling for social, cultural and political reforms. Their activity of promoting liberal values not only threatens Iranian culture, but above all poses a threat to the social structure that is the foundation of the Islamic regime. The Basij structures, which actively participate in the indoctrination of Iranian society and the suppression of pro-democratic demonstrations, are responsible for stopping the hostile ideology. Uprisings against the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran and ethnic conflicts pose a higher level of threats to which The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed was established.

Therefore, the strategy adopted by Iran reflects both the country's military strength and its Islamic character, strengthened by the spiritual strength of the Iranian people, which must be taken into account when considering the country's potential.

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