



Enforcing "Islamic" dress codes in north Tehran on April 23, 2007.

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Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic's "Culture of Modesty"

Fatemeh Sadeghi

"Simplicity has disappeared," laments Minoo Shahbazi, energetic at 50, and animated in the cheap *manteau* and black scarf she wears beneath her *chador*. Look at her 16-year old son, she says: "He likes to wear famous brand-name clothes. Obviously, I do not agree. He is very different from me."

Shahbazi belongs to the first generation of women to join the Basij-e Mostazafin (Mobilization of the Oppressed), the volunteer militia created in November 1979 by decree of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to protect the new Islamic Republic of Iran against counter-revolutionary uprisings as well as external threats. In 1985, worried by news from the war front, Khomeini

issued an edict to the effect that women should also receive military training, so as to assist men in defending the nation. The Sisters' Basij (*Basij-e Khaharan*) was established shortly thereafter. Today, according to an Iranian government website, more than 4 million of the 10 to 14 million Basijis are women. Like thousands of her peers, male and female, Shahbazi was sent to the front when the Iran-Iraq war began. Her six months up, she returned to her studies and graduated to teach religion in high school. Increasingly alienated from her family and society, she still finds happiness in her job.

Girls like and respect her, knowing that she works hard, and they feel free to remove their *hejab* in her class. The classroom is one of the noisiest and most entertaining at school, notwithstanding the clichés about stern religion instructors. Many of the girls are helping Shahbazi write a letter to Angela Merkel,

Fatemeh Sadeghi is a Tehran-based researcher of political thought and women's studies and a member of the editorial board of the journal *Goft-o-Gu*. Moluk Aziz Zadeh and Marjaneh Sekhavati provided research assistance for this article.

chancellor of Germany, requesting censorship of caricatures of the prophets they have heard will shortly appear in the German press. "Global activism," Shahbazi calls it. She says she cleared the idea of the letter with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The letter might lead to her students' martyrdom, she continues, to which she aspired during the war but "did not have the honor to reach." "I have been teaching [in high school] for many years and will remain here because I swore to serve people," she concludes. "Other places are not suitable." Minoo Shahbazi, like her Basiji sisters, feels left behind by the swiftly changing society around her—and, in her way, she is resisting.

Starting in 2005, conservatives in the Islamic Republic launched a "culture of modesty" (*farhang-e effaf*) campaign, aimed mainly at restoring the strict veiling (*hejab*) of women practiced in the early years of the Islamic Republic and at eliminating *bad hejab*, the increasingly bold (though technically still "Islamic") fashions that women are wearing in public. Today, Basiji women are not only chief practitioners of the "culture of modesty" the Islamic Republic of Iran prescribes for women, but also major agents of its enforcement upon others.

Back on the Front Lines

Shahbazi's complaints have been common among Basijis, male and female, since the Iran-Iraq war ended. They have lost social status, as Iranians seem to have forgotten their thousands of martyrs. One of the first, Mohammad Hossein Fahmideh, is held to have disabled an Iraqi tank by diving under it with a grenade, an act for which Khomeini hailed him as a national hero. Basijis feel that Iranians do not give them their due for helping to rebuild the country and staffing national inoculation drives in the post-war era. Before their eyes, moreover, Iranian society is changing in ways detrimental to their values as people seek to acquire the accoutrements of a comfortable middle-class life. Post-war society seems no longer to aspire to the simplicity, piety, spirit of self-sacrifice, loyalty to the Supreme Leader and other revolutionary virtues that are, literally, the bylaws of the Basij.

This feeling that revolutionary values are eroding, certainly shared by the upper echelons of the regime, was behind the revision of the Basij bylaws in 1999 to replace the organization's previous dedication to security with a broader focus on the "cultural, scientific and defensive domains." The Basij is now charged with safeguarding the entirety of the mission of the Islamic Republic, embodied in the present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but carried out at the ballot box, on university campuses and in street fighting. The regime's attempt to revitalize the Basij paid off in 2005, when a vast Basiji mobilization helped to elect the hardline conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹ Today, the security analysis of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), to whom the Basij are now formally subordinate, classifies feminists, mystics, dervishes, devil worshippers, journalists, bloggers, secular students and intellectuals, and reformists as the main

threats of the national security of the country.² The Basij are back on the front lines.

Since Ahmadinejad took office, the situation of the Basij is much improved. The president has appointed Basijis and the members of the IRGC as ministers, governors and other powerful officials.

The organization's budget has dramatically increased (see chart). These figures exclude many benefits promised to Basijis, such as preference in university admissions, jobs and housing, as well as mobile phones and loans. Some Basiji students receive stipends from the state. These material inducements run counter to the volunteerism that is supposed to motivate Basijis, but it is long since a fact that many young people join the organization for upward mobility.

Year	Budget (rials)
2003	790 billion (\$81.6 million)
2006	1.73 trillion (\$178 million)
2008	3.46 trillion (\$357.5 million)

In the last days of the Seventh Majles that left office in 2008, parliamentarians drew up a bill suggesting that Basij Construction should be given a chance at government construction tenders, for which 180 trillion rials (\$18 billion) were allocated at the time. Several deputies, including former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and former top nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, opposed the bill, strongly hinting that it violated the constitution. They argued that Basij Construction is a paramilitary corps whose involvement in the economy is against the law and could easily get out of control. The bill passed, nonetheless, and came into effect in mid-2008. Military officers explain that the state needs the Basij to participate in the economy and politics. In the words of Yadollah Javani, head of the political bureau of the IRGC's Joint Command Council:

In case a movement or party or group has the political or cultural potential to topple [the regime], one can't expect the Guards to deal with it militarily. Under such circumstances, the duty of the Guards is political and cultural resistance. Therefore, and because the Guards are needed to get involved in political or cultural work, one can't restrict the Guards to the military sphere alone.³

From this privileged political and economic position, the Basij has encroached upon various spheres of civil society, most importantly civic associations and student organizations at universities, to head off social unrest.

Back to the Future

Though women were key participants in the 1979 revolution, state-led Islamization of the country turned back the clock on women's rights in many respects. Many women were executed

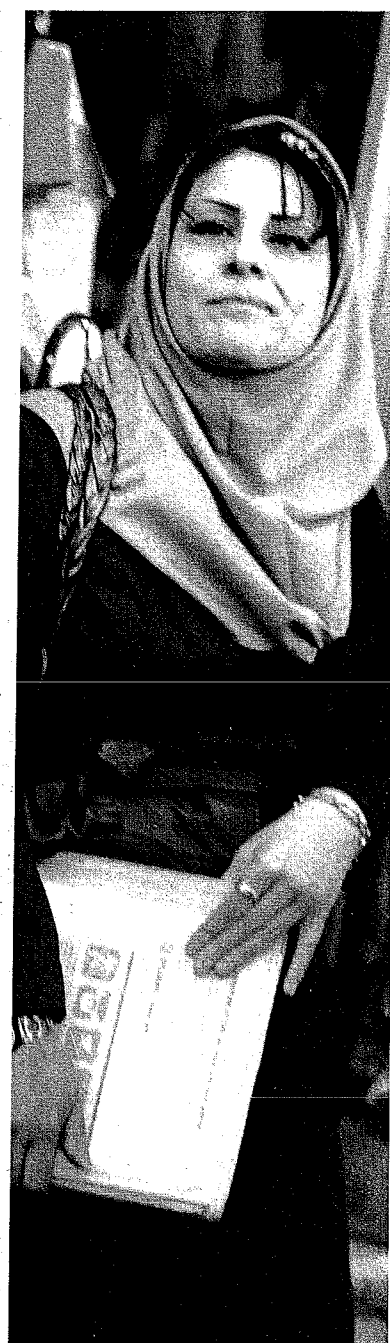
on charges of adultery, and many others were fired from their jobs as professors, judges and government officials. By 1981, the "Islamic" dress code had been imposed on women, and many fled Iran rather than submit to new rules banning them from leaving the house or traveling without their husbands' consent. The Islamic Republic's laws have labeled women as "unqualified" to get custody of their children, and women lost the right to divorce that they won after years of struggle with the Pahlavi regime. Meanwhile, the clerical establishment preached in favor of polygamy and *sigheh* (temporary marriage).

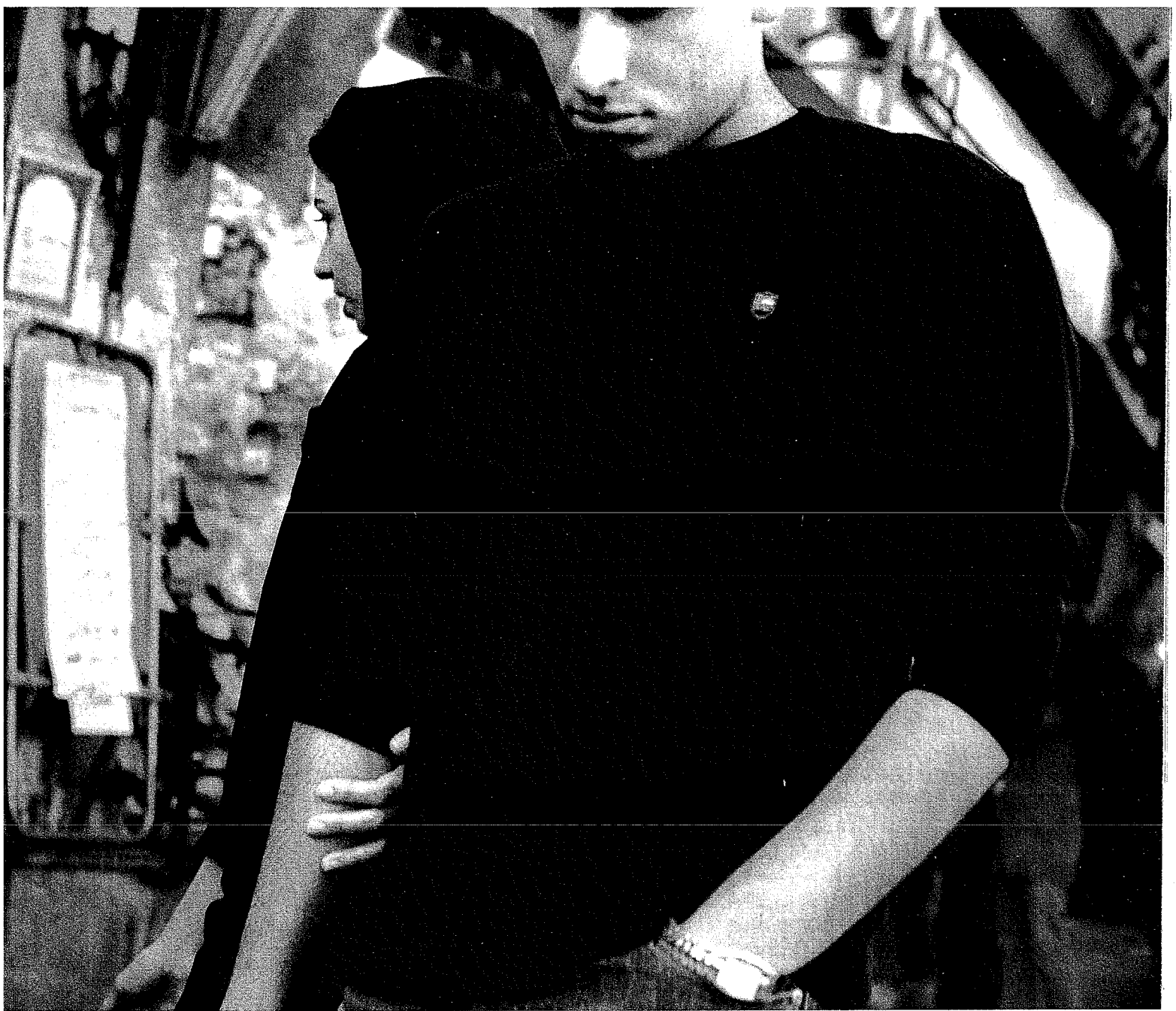
From the very beginning of the Islamic Republic, women challenged the patriarchal policies of the regime with both individual and collective actions. In the 1990s, they made significant progress. Young women, in particular, began to resist the compulsory dress code by wearing short, tight-fitting *manteaux* and loose, colorful headscarves that satisfy the letter of the law but anger conservatives and the state. Women returned to higher education, and now make up the majority of the student body at universities. The election of the reform-minded cleric Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997 was attributed, in large measure, to the heavy women's vote in his favor. Compared to previous administrations, the two Khatami cabinets, together with reformist deputies in the Majles, were committed to improving women's situation. Indeed, the Sixth Majles passed several women's rights bills, only to see them blocked by the Guardian Council, the unelected panel of senior clerics empowered by the constitution to overturn acts of Parliament. Key among these rejected laws was the ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati of the Guardian Council later called CEDAW a "nightmare."

Still, by the end of Khatami's second term in 2005, the position of women in society had improved. The conservatives who are now in power resolved to resume indoctrinating women in modesty and propriety, a project in which Basiji women play a crucial role. In the first counter-attack, the conservatives replaced the Center for Women's Participation set up under Khatami with the Center for Women and Family, whose website proclaims that its function is to promote the culture of modesty among Iranian women. Center head Tabib Zadeh Nouri, appointed by Ahmadinejad, announced that Iran is no longer committed to "Western treaties" like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which she says aim at "corrupting Iranian women and destroying Islamic values." "So long as I am alive," she averred, "I won't allow Iran to join CEDAW or any other international treaty for women."⁴ She also ordered the destruction of several studies on women's issues done by the Center for Women's Participation.

Ahmadinejad's administration proposed a new family law that nearly passed the conservative-controlled Eighth Majles in the summer of 2008, but was shelved temporarily due to an August rally of women mobilized by Iranian feminists. The

bill not only rolls back the improvements in the previous family code, but also legalizes *sigheh* and polygamy without the consent of the husband's previous wife. There are once again incidents of women being stoned for alleged adultery, a practice that disappeared during the reformist era thanks to women's rights activism. And the backlash did not stop there. Backed by conservative clerics, universities established quotas for the admission of women out of concern that women's majority status at the universities has made them reluctant to marry. By the same token, school and university textbooks will be revised to lay greater emphasis upon women's domestic role and plans are afoot to decrease the number of years of girls' schooling. Several programs on state-run radio and television promote polygamy and *sigheh*, and endeavor to teach women how to cope. The government also cut the hours of women working at government agencies. Working women with young children are hence unable to afford the expense of privatized kindergartens and are compelled to sit at home. The state also winks at sexual harassment and rape perpetrated by intelligence officials, heads of universities, administrators and even secular professors despite the numerous petitions of student protest. An egregious case occurred in the spring of 2008, when the head of campus security at Zanjan University tried to rape a student in his office. Students who recorded the details were later arrested, tortured and scared into silence. Female students complain about the male chauvinist language spreading from Ahmadinejad out into society, even among secular professors, reformist politicians and intellectuals, male journalists and Friday preachers. To all this must be added the numerous arrests, interrogations and finings of women activists, closures of feminist publications and women's NGOs, filtering of blogs and websites, and measures to prevent women activists from attending international conferences.





Tehran.

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Think Tanks of the Backlash

More importantly, however, the state has set up a host of organizations tasked with fighting feminism and encouraging the state-mandated form of modesty. These organizations cook up the ideological justifications—based, of course, on “research”—cited by the regime in its counter-assault on women’s rights. This “research” frequently quotes from anti-feminist tracts produced in Western countries, such as *How the Feminist Establishment Hurts Women*, by the right-wing Christian Katherine Kersten, a former columnist for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.⁵ Closest to the executive arm of the backlash is the Center for Women and the Family. In 2006, the Center rolled out a “Plan of Mercy” with a budget of 10 billion rials (\$1 million) aimed at encouraging *hejab* while confronting *bad hejab*, and promoting marriage and domesticity while defusing women’s increasingly

vocal demand for rewarding work outside the home. The first objective of the “Plan of Mercy” is to preach the importance of housework. Basiji women and students at women’s seminaries are among those tasked with implementing the Center’s program in the Basij-affiliated mosques that exist in most urban neighborhoods and many small towns.

The Women’s Studies Center of the Qom Seminary is another important think tank training clergywomen in how to argue against feminism and how to convince reluctant Iranian girls to marry young. The seminary center publishes books and periodicals and holds seminars, particularly for Basiji women. A third institution enlisted in the modesty campaign is the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, which works to ensure that cultural production, including university textbooks, toes the regime’s line. On January 3, 2006, a subsection of the Supreme Council issued a bylaw directing all ministries,

government agencies and NGOs to forward the “culture of *hejab* and modesty.” The bylaw also ordered the Basij to challenge all manifestations of *bad hejab*, with force if need be.

Another subsidiary of the Supreme Council, the Women’s Socio-Cultural Council, was established in 1987 to address the problems of war widows, but has evolved into one of the most ideologically conservative organizations treating women’s issues. This council’s charter stipulates that a Basiji woman must be present at all of its meetings and events. It publishes periodicals and pamphlets celebrating the virtues of *hejab* and attacking feminism.

Both explicitly and tacitly, the discourse of modesty disseminated by these think tanks attributes several of Iran’s socio-cultural and economic problems to women—specifically, to their mass entrance into universities and workplaces, their embrace of *bad hejab* and their alleged refusal to marry. Women are blamed for the deterioration of the quality of university education and the demoralization of male students who are unable to marry. Women are also said to have snatched up the available job opportunities, producing the high rate of male unemployment. The absence of working women from home has supposedly led sexually frustrated men to infidelity, forcing the state to remove the temptation of vice by means of reinstating polygamy and *sigheh*. Still another proof of the decline of authentic Islamic values in the literature produced by these institutions is the increasing willingness of women to ask for divorce. All of these immodest behaviors, the Center for Women and the Family website alleges, endanger the “harmony of society.”

Abuses of Power

In 2005, Parvaneh Tila, a Basiji woman alarmed by the spread of *bad hejab* and the increased assertiveness of women in the public sphere, wrote an article arguing that “one of the most effective ways to combat the misinterpretation of women’s role in Islam would be to accommodate the active participation of women in the Islamic and revolutionary organizations.”⁶ She contended that an enhanced role for women in the Basij would result in “the spread of modesty” throughout Iranian society. Almost all of the Basiji women interviewed for this article agree that a Muslim woman should wear *hejab* and that the supreme form of *hejab* is *chador*. Basiji women are therefore, in theory, the ideal foot soldiers for the regime’s modesty campaign in the era of Ahmadinejad.

In an interview published in August 2008, the new commander-in-chief of the Sisters’ Basij, Mino Aslani, emphasized that the Sisters’ Basij exists mainly to strengthen the “Islamic Iranian family,” by instructing other women in modesty and Islamic codes of behavior, above all *hejab*.⁷ She also announced that study cells have been set up at Basiji paramilitary bases to investigate “the real needs of Iranian women.” Like their male counterparts, Basiji women are expected to patrol the streets and accost young women who are “improperly”

dressed in snug *manteaux* and headscarves that reveal too much of the forehead or, worse, wisps of hair.

Officially, there are two ranks of Basiji agents in the morality police. Only the top-ranking officers, the *zabetin*, are permitted to carry guns and make arrests. These *zabetin* are under the supervision of the judiciary, though their mandate overlaps with that of the regular municipal police. Most agents are known as “instructors” (*nasehin*), who are to restrict themselves to issuing verbal admonitions. On many occasions since the morality campaign began, however, Basiji men of all ranks have stopped cars or apprehended pedestrians and transferred the detainees to clandestine locations where they can be held incommunicado for one day without charge or even notice to judicial authorities. Gross abuses have ensued, such as in the 2007 case of a female doctor, Zahra Bani Yaghoub, who died under mysterious circumstances in one of these Basiji “black sites.” The judiciary has sealed the case file.⁸

Following a succession of such incidents, the judiciary attempted to rein in the Basij. Hassan Firuzabadi, a top IRGC commander, proclaimed that henceforth Basijis would be limited to verbal “instruction,” but in practice many Basijis still take considerable liberties and pay no penalty for overstepping their nominal legal bounds. To the contrary, media outlets that dare to expose Basiji excesses risk being closed down. Shahla Sherkat, editor-in-chief of *Zanan*, a women’s magazine in existence since the Islamic Republic came into being, received a warning letter when *Zanan* reported that Basijis had raped a girl. Shortly thereafter, the magazine was shuttered. Such arbitrariness has helped to destroy the reputation of the Basij and Basijis among the Iranian people.

Natural Limits of “Modesty”

Despite the huge expenditures to inculcate the “culture of modesty,” the campaign appears to have backfired (see Azam Khatam’s article in this issue). Not only are most young women resisting the onslaught of criticism of their comportment, but the Basij—including the women among them—are also watching their social prestige erode even further. Polls show that most Iranians believe women should engage in political and cultural activities, but a majority opposes the existence of the Sisters’ Basij. Around two thirds of women pronounce themselves ready for political involvement, and more than 60 percent are ready to take up arms in defense of the country, but even the pious among them are not rushing to join the Basij.⁹

The reason seems to have to do with Iranians’ suspicion of the state’s modesty campaign, but also with the class and social status of the Basij and Basiji women, in particular. In an interview, a Basiji woman put it this way: “[Basijis] lost their popularity. These days nobody cares about the Basij.” “People have forgotten our values,” another Basiji woman ventures.

Interviews with Basiji women suggest that the problem lies elsewhere. For one thing, the Sisters’ Basij is rife with discrimination. Segregated from men, the women are often unaware of the

various benefits and privileges that Ahmadinejad has lavished upon Basiji men. Some of those who are aware feel the disrespect acutely. "While the preparation of the Iranian women for socio-political participation is high," protested Tila, "the majority of officials, on the contrary, believe that women have better jobs to do, like protesting, serving and nursing. The majority of them do not agree with women's military training."¹⁰ Azadeh, 18, joined the militia in 2006 through a friend. She enjoys military training, though she wishes it were more intensive: "It is limited to target practice, which happened just once."

In this attitude, as with her colorful scarf and the chic *manteau* beneath her *chador*, Azadeh is more like women outside the Basij than inside it, for most Basiji women accept the male establishment's rationale for this and other types of discrimination. Typical is Batool Naderi, who has been active in the Basij for 25 years, and now leads Qur'an study sessions for young girls. She recalls, "Once we were taken for military instruction, I could see that men were given better guns, transportation and accommodations." But the difference in treatment, she continues, was entirely appropriate. Naderi also excused the quotidian harassment women endure. "I witness it when I drive on Tehran's streets. It has happened several times that male drivers say to me, 'Madam! Go back to your kitchen.'" She lays the blame on women's shoulders: "Women proved not to be efficient enough [at driving]. This is because of women's own faults."

Like other Basiji women, Naderi is very strict with her own *hejab* and that of her daughters, but she believes in friendly relations with women who are not. "I believe we have to culturally work on them, to absorb them," she explains. "This year we had four girls who converted to *chador* as the supreme *hejab*. They may wear Arab *chador* [the *abaya* worn in Iraq and the Arab Gulf states], or national, but they wear *chador* and this is important."

She is conscious, however, that many Iranians have little feeling of amity for the Basij. "I don't expose that I'm a Basiji for fear that people will think I am a spy," she says. "Once a neighbor got angry at me having realized that I'm a Basiji... My son-in-law didn't know about it, then he found out and I know he does not like it too much." Her daughters preferred to attend college, rather than follow in their mother's footsteps, and two of them now hold down jobs.

The younger Basiji women have a different sort of family difficulty, namely that their husbands disapprove of their involvement. If they are unmarried, they suspect that most prospective suitors would disapprove as well. As Azadeh puts it: "Many husbands ask their wives what they get out of being in the Basij." She herself intends to marry a Basiji man to avoid the awkward questions. "He must be a Basiji. My brothers are Basiji, too. I won't allow him to prevent my activities. I will never marry someone who would prevent me. If this happens, I will argue and will try to convince him." Azadeh's friend Maryam is married to a man who wishes she would quit the Basij. Maryam hurries home so as to arrange household affairs

before her husband arrives and deflect his pressure. Ironically, these young Basiji women, with their commitment to political activism, may run afoul of the same male-centered cult of domesticity that is promulgated by the anti-feminist think tanks and that the Sisters' Basij tries to enforce.

There is a further irony in the reliance of the Islamic Republic upon these female Basijis to help the state reverse the achievements of Iranian women in the last 20 years. Both Azadeh and Maryam intend to vote for Ahmadinejad in the June presidential election. But neither is eager to back the new family code that his government introduced to Parliament in 2008. Azadeh first pleads ignorance of the bill, and then declines to answer more questions, but she does note that she is against polygamy. Maryam concurs: "I know about that code. But I am against polygamy, because it lacks justice. The Qur'an says that men are not capable of justice in that matter." Naderi, she of the first generation of Basijis, was also unaware of the bill before the Eighth Majles. "I'm not interested anymore in reading the newspapers and following the news." She also disagrees with polygamy, however: "This is not what the Qur'an says. It says if you can be just, you can have more than one wife. Obviously, it's impossible for men to manage this."

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the hardliners in the Islamic Republic have failed to impose their rigid gender ideology upon Iranian society is that not one of the Basiji women interviewed for this article endorses their full agenda. None think that a man should be permitted to marry a second wife without the consent of the first one, and all of them are against *sighbeh* except in special cases. In addition, while almost all Basiji women say that a woman's main role is to be a good mother and wife, they do not prefer to stay at home. On the contrary, Basiji women feel very strongly that women should be politically and socially engaged. For this reason, and because so many Iranians resent them so deeply, the shock troops of the "culture of modesty" project may therefore be agents of its long-term failure. ■

Endnotes

1 See Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

2 Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Political Bureau, *Report on Threats to National Security* (October 2006). [Persian]

3 *Sobh-e Sadeq*, May 19, 2008, quoted in Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly* 15/4 (Fall 2008).

4 *Shargh*, May 31, 2007.

5 Not surprisingly, but probably unbeknownst to the Iranian backlash ideologues, Kersten regularly used her column for Islam-bashing. She once wrote that Islamic law is among "the reasons that Muslim nations have found it so difficult to come to grips with modernity." Katherine Kersten, "Many Texts Offer Students Only Sugar-Coated View of Islam," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, February 27, 2003.

6 Parvaneh Tila, "A Study of the Legal Capability of Iranian Women in Expanding the Public Basij: The Requirements of Cultural Security," *Basij Studies Quarterly* 8 (Winter 2005). [Persian]

7 *Bulletin of the Center for Women and the Family* (September 2005). [Persian]

8 Further information can be found at the feminist website www.irwomen.com, which has been hacked several times by security personnel due to its interest in Bani Yaghoub's case.

9 By contrast, only 20 percent of state officials believe women should take up arms. The rest think women would be more profitably engaged in nursing, sewing and cooking. Mohammad Hossein Elyasi and Fatemeh Souri, "A Study of the Level of Preparedness of Iranian Women to Confront the Political and Security Crises," *Basij Studies Quarterly* 7 (Spring 2004). [Persian]

10 Tila, pp. 52-53.