

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 29, 2016

Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*, Columbia University Press, 2015, 256 pp., \$60.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780231704427.

Forced to move from his previous location in exile—Najaf, Iraq—to Paris, Ayatollah Khomeini enjoyed far greater and open access to Iranians whose revolt had turned into the highlight of the world news, and whose increasingly more massive and confident demonstrations were shaking the foundation of the Shah's regime. Gaining immense popularity, with his charismatic interviews put on display by the western media and relayed in Iran, and with the demonstrators seeing themselves magnified on television screens and in newspaper images, Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as an unquestioned leader of the revolution. None of the other political leaders had come close to his popularity. Yet while still in Paris, even Khomeini himself could perhaps not truly believe that he and other members of the clergy would be capable of forming and sustaining a government, let alone an *Islamic government* of which he had dreamed in a book of that title.

Accompanying him on his return to Tehran from Paris were some western educated individuals, including Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, who was his spokesperson and interpreter while in Paris and was soon appointed as the Foreign Minister as well as the head of the national radio and television of the new regime. He was, however, tried and executed in 1982 for alleged espionage. Mehdi Bazargan, an engineer educated in Paris, was also endorsed by Ayatollah Khomeini as the first Prime Minister of the newly founded government. Thanks to Khomeini's support, Abolhassan Banisadr, an economist out of Sorbonne, became the first Iranian President. Neither of the two men could, however, hold on to their positions for even a year. Bazargan resigned under building pressure while Banisadr was impeached by the parliament—a decision backed by Khomeini. If the reason to offer these positions to more liberal individuals was Khomeini's pragmatism—i.e., these political maneuverings were intended to be for only short periods of time as a means of transitioning into the Islamic regime—the many parallel forces put into play within the newly formed government have had long lasting repercussions. The ease with which the support for a figure can turn into admonition, in cases even with fatal consequences, is indicative of a pattern that, I argue, at once exemplifies the pragmatism of the ideologues and founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the parallel powers to the state that emerged and characterize the dynamic relations of power within the Iranian post-revolutionary polity. From the outset, for example, Bazargan repeatedly expressed his frustration that his orders were being constantly undermined and intercepted by members of the Revolutionary Committees, Revolutionary Guards, Islamic Republic Party, and of course the Basij of the Oppressed Organization

which was created by Khomeini's order with a vision of forming an army of 20 million volunteers.

This vision for an army of volunteers was inspired by the neighborhood committees that emerged before Khomeini's return from exile. As neighborhood committees, however, they were radically different from the Basij; they consisted of young volunteers with revolutionary ideals responding to local needs, especially those that arose due to the strikes, and with the intention of helping the elderly and those in need, as well as to protect the most vulnerable citizens from the violent assaults of the Shah's soldiers and thugs. Although mostly based in the mosques, they also included many leftists and even members of other religious minorities. However, soon after the revolution, leftists and others who were seen as "unfit" were purged from these committees, which were transformed into Revolutionary Committees. The Revolutionary Committees were deployed for social and security control, and partook in arresting not only the agents and supporters of the Shah's regime but also leftists, dissidents, and those seen as "deviants." For the first few years after the revolution, the Revolutionary Committees, the Basij, the Revolutionary Guard, the conventional military and security forces, and the police were involved in several overlapping activities, resulting in tensions and at times even bloody conflicts among them. Some of these organizations were later dissolved or incorporated into others, while the powers and responsibilities of those remaining were rendered more distinctive; nevertheless, ambivalence and confusion are by no means rare features of the relationships both within and between these organizations. Yet, one of the most important factors in the success of the Islamic Republic's regime, from the moment it emerged as victorious after the revolution, has been its agility in fusing together its seemingly unwavering—albeit shifting—religious interpretations to its also apparently consistent, yet constantly fluctuating, political maneuvers.

In part it is perhaps due to this complexity that scholarly investigation and an adequate analysis of the particular forms of governance in post-revolutionary Iran have been so scarce. In addition, the reality of the state control that renders investigation into these sensitive topics difficult, if not impossible, since access to source materials, data collection, et cetera, is severely restricted if not outright prohibited. The fact that such inquiry remains a risky task cannot be underestimated. To this one may add another limiting fact: most scholarly works have been published in Persian and by scholars who live in Iran, not only restraining the scope of the writing on such subjects because of potential hazards the researchers face but also because the products of their labor are rarely studied or translated into other languages. In my own field in particular, sociocultural anthropology, few anthropologists have been able to go to Iran and conduct field research; for those who have gained access, their ability to conduct research freely and thus produce a serious ethnography has been curtailed by many obstacles, including the looming threat to, and on, the possibility of their return. Moreover, the young anthropologists who have recently undertaken research in Iran are second or third generation Iranians born and raised outside of Iran, and have thus often had little exposure to and familiarity with the complexity of languages and cultures of Iran. Consequently, their projects reflect narrow and privileged perspectives—e.g., a large number of these works deal exclusively with the middle or upper class urban populations. What this means is that after more than three decades since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran a myriad of aspects of its governance and the dynamics and mechanisms of its social control await scholarly exploration. While there are many outstanding books that contribute to our understanding of the post-revolutionary sociopolitical system, there are still

very few works that actually discuss the modalities of the Iranian polity in detailed fashion.¹ A comprehensive study of the Basij, an organization with a remarkable presence in nearly every aspect of Iranians' life, is one of these understudied areas.

Saeid Golkar's *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* inserts itself in this gap. The book is a welcomed contribution in offering a detailed study of the Basij organization, its history, and the transformations it has undergone and the expansion of its role since its formation in the 1980s. The book provides an informed perspective on how widespread the presence of the Basij has become and on the continuous though constantly shifting role of the Basij in protecting the state. It shows how from rural and provincial areas to universities, and to high-ranking political positions, the Basij has evolved into a parallel society that suppresses the survival of civil society in Iran. Although Golkar also points out the exaggerated and unreliable official statistics about the size of membership in the Basij, the reality of its role in social control and its economic power cannot be downplayed. Despite all the tensions and conflicts within the government about the extent of its power, through a complex sets of mechanisms, and mainly through the orders of the supreme religious leaders—both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei—the Basij has become an undeniable force with a significant impact in Iranian society. Not only, as Golkar argues, does it influence the outcome of elections, but it has even become part of the official governing body. That Ahmadinejad was elected first as a mayor of Tehran and later as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran had a great deal to do with the support of the Basij; he subsequently appointed many of the members of the Basij to key positions within the government. Furthermore, the presence of Basij units in schools and universities, as well as among the labor force, lawyers, doctors, and other sectors of society has become a well-established reality. And its presence and position within Iranian society has taken on new dimensions with the formation of the “Babies’ Basij” program which is aimed at children under three, drawing on the most cutting edge ideas in early childhood psychology regarding the formation of personality in the earliest stages of life. In the seminars that the Basij organizes, such ideas are discussed alongside religious and political views, showing once again how deeply woven these complex facets are within the Iranian polity. While Golkar avoids perpetuating the worn out debate on whether the Islamic Republic regime is compatible with modern forms of governance or not—and I think rightly so—his detailed reading of the way the state deals with the demands of global and domestic politics allows the reader to decipher the characteristics and the parameters of a modern polity in its functions and manifestations.

The book begins with a preface that briefly explains its methodology, which relies on a combination of textual and archival research, and the author's own observations and personal interviews—though one yearns for more on this latter aspect. The preface also outlines the book's structure, which is constituted of five parts, including a total of fourteen chapters and a conclusion. While Golkar introduces different perspectives on the “nature and function” of the Basij organization, his own view is that the Basij has been deployed by the Islamic Republic as a “paramilitary force to enforce state control over society” (xv). He argues that in its claim to be an organization of volunteers, it pretends to be a part of civil society when, in fact, its primary role is to suppress a true civil society as such. The book begins by introducing what Golkar calls the nature and functions of the Basij, followed by

¹ Said Amir Arjomand's *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009) is one of the few in this direction. This is not of course to deny the significance of many other great works published on various aspects of post-revolutionary Iran.

tracing its history. The following chapters provide detailed explanations of different modes of its recruitments and memberships, its programs for the indoctrination of its members, and its expanding roles, including, for instance, its growing economic power. An important aspect of the work is to show how in each historical instance that the state faced a challenge to its authority and power, either from within or without, it amended the Basij's roles to respond to those new demands.

Golkar argues that through these transformations the Basij has grown into a parallel power functioning alongside the state, both in its capacity to suppress the internal dissidence and increasingly as one of, if not the largest, economically powerful institutions in Iran. Its ambivalent status, at once technically located within and under the Revolutionary Guard and yet maintaining its status as a voluntary "civil militia," is at the heart of its ability to maneuver more fluidly and freely between different activities that both fall within and outside of officially defined and divided institutional powers and responsibilities. Furthermore, Golkar argues, the Basij's interest in safeguarding the state hold on power increases proportionately to its own expansive economic and political power.

As Golkar makes clear, as an essentially para-state force, Basij has become a powerful institution with an incredibly noticeable presence in nearly every aspect of people's life—including Iranians' social life, from security, morality, economics, to the broader political and cultural domains. As I mentioned above, its significance was boosted especially during Mahmood Ahmadinejad's presidency and manifested most visibly in particular in its role in crushing the 2009 postelection uprisings and since. While initially Ahmadinejad was backed by Ayatollah Khamenei and the Basji, later he fell out of favor. His falling out of favor with both Khamenei and a large number of the Basijis was another indication of pragmatism and the complex power relations in Iranian polity. Through this example Golkar shows the importance of the Basij not merely in providing a sense of legitimacy for the government—especially through visible displays of orchestrated mass support by populating pro-state demonstrations, but also by voting for and mobilizing their families to vote for the state supported candidates.

The book also provides detailed statistics of the socioeconomic and gender backgrounds of those who join the Basij as a means to explain the effective use of monetary or other incentives to attract members. According to Golkar, a small number of its members join Basij because they genuinely believe in its religiously based doctrines. One of the most significant features of the book is its illustration of the ways Basij has been treated by different factions of the state, mobilized by Khomeini during the Iran-Iraq War, centralized by Rafsanjani in the Construction Era, attempted for its power to be curtailed by Khatami, and finally granted a far greater role by Ahmadinejad and most important of all by Khamenei prior to and during the 2009 election, and thereafter. Each of these approaches have evidently left their marks on the status and the scope of its power in Iranian society, though its presence has been increasingly growing.

Despite its many important contributions, there are some minor shortcomings in Golkar's study. The first I want to mention has to do with Golkar's assessment of the Basij's economic power. As he makes clear, the Basij's corrupt economic practices more often than not are the subject of rumors; rumors are illusive materials to work with and a scholar cannot soundly rely upon them. Rumors did not thus enter into Golkar's study. While this is understandable, I would like to suggest that it is here where extensive ethnographic research would have proved highly beneficial. Another slight oversight was his lack of an explanation for why the organization changed its name at various times. For instance, what was the significance of the organization changing its name from the "Basij of the Oppressed" to the

“Resistance Force of Basij,” and once again back to the “Basij of the Oppressed”? Golkar does not elaborate on the reasoning behind these alterations and instead leaves it to his readers to provide an answer. I would have found his own take quite valuable. I also have concerns about his choices in translating some key terminology. For example, Golkar translates *salehin* as “righteousness,” while *salehin* as a plural subject should be translated as “the righteous ones” (see page 60). There were several such issues with the translations throughout the book. While these issues are very minor, a more critical problem I found was the fact that even though Golkar does a wonderful job illustrating the constantly shifting laws and roles dealing with the Basij under fluctuating conditions and based on the interests of different factions in power, at times it appears as if he thinks that Khomeini’s and Khomeini’s agendas and visions are/were fixed and unchanging. The same pragmatism that he argues characterizes the functions and policies of the state can also be traced in both Khomeini’s and Khomeini’s approaches to governance and their ever-shifting perspectives and alliances. The power of the state, as a joke often told by Iranians about post-revolutionary Iran suggests, is the ability of the regime to say one thing but do something completely different—*kulah-e sharee sar-e chizi gozashtan*; i.e., to put a religious hat onto anything in order to make it appear religious.

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Citation Information

Talebi, Shahla, Review of *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*, *SCTIW Review*, March 29, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1056>.

ISSN: 2374-9288