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The Evolution of Iran's Police Forces and Social Control in the Islamic Republic

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The latest waves of protests in Iran, one of which started in December 2017 and early January 2018 and another in June 2018, have been a shock to the country's politics and society. The protests started over economic and environmental issues, but soon turned to political and social concerns. Despite their dramatic spread to more than eighty-six cities, the protests were suppressed quickly by the Iranian government's coercive apparatus—most importantly by its police forces, known as the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran or NAJA. Unlike in 2009, when the Iranian police were insufficiently prepared to put down the mass uprising known as the Green Movement following the disputed presidential election that year, the police in 2017–18 were able to quash the protest movements quickly, effectively, and without the help of either Iran's paramilitary militia (the Basij) or the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

This Brief argues that, over time and especially in the past decade, NAJA and its special forces have evolved specifically to prepare for such contingencies and to suppress protests. The recently demonstrated effectiveness of Iran's police in controlling and suppressing protests is the result of a continuous process of restructuring, expansion, and professionalization of police forces in post-revolutionary Iran.

When discussing the Islamic Republic's coercive apparatus, most academics and policy makers focus on the IRGC and the Basij and largely ignore the police.[1] In contrast, this Brief describes how NAJA and its special forces have become ever more important in maintaining domestic public order, blocking reform, and ensuring the survival of the regime. Furthermore, the expansion of NAJA and its increased capacity to suppress unexpected domestic unrest have allowed the Islamic Republic to commit military and paramilitary forces abroad without worrying that they might be needed at home.

The Creation and Organization of NAJA

The Iranian police, which developed into a modern disciplinary force during the Pahlavi era (1925–79), initially consisted of two main forces: the urban police (*shahrbani*) and rural police (*gendarmerie*). After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic began to implement Islamization as its main policy with respect to consolidating power and controlling society. Many police officers were fired, and clergy were appointed to monitor the police. In addition, a new disciplinary force called the Islamic Revolutionary Committees (*komiteh-ye enqelab-e Islami*) was created to help the clerical establishment enforce order, police society, guard the country's security, and defend the Islamic Revolution.

The administration of President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, which came to power in 1989, tried to reconstruct Iran's economy and reduce the government's budget. One of Rafsanjani's initiatives was to merge parallel state organizations, including the security and military apparatuses. Accordingly, in 1990, Iran's Parliament passed a law requiring the government to combine four different forces—the Islamic Revolutionary Committees, shahrbani, the gendarmerie, and the judicial police—to form a centralized modern police force. The new force, which became operational in April 1991, was named *niruha-ye entezami-ye Jomhuri-ye Islami* (Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or NAJA).

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According to the 1991 charter of NAJA, the organization is an armed force formally subordinated to Iran's Supreme Leader, who is the commander in chief of Iran's armed forces. Although NAJA is affiliated with the Interior Ministry, the Minister of Interior is responsible only for logistical issues, such as maintaining equipment and facilities. Although Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the only Supreme Leader since NAJA's founding, usually designates the Minister of Interior as his stand-in on NAJA affairs, the chief of staff of NAJA is directly appointed by the Supreme Leader and in turn appoints the higher echelons of police officers.[2]

Like other military and security organizations in Iran, NAJA has three main branches: the Police Commandership (*farmandehi*), the Ideological-Political Organization (*sazman-e aghidati va siyasi*), and the Counterintelligence Organization (*sazman-e hefazat-e ettelaat*). While the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader is responsible for indoctrinating police personnel, the Counterintelligence Organization is responsible for identifying foreign spies and corrupt police, as well as for guarding police intelligence and other traditional counterintelligence tasks.

NAJA created one police provincial command (*farmandehi-e nahieh-e entezami-e ostan*) in each province, which is under the control of the national police commandership (*farmandehi-e entezami-e NAJA*). The police provincial command controls all the police stations in that province. At a lower level, there is one disciplinary district (*farmandehi-e nahieh-e entezam-e shahrestan*) in each city, which manages and controls

the police stations (*kalantari* and the *pasgah-e entezami*). At the lowest executive level of the police, *kalantari* are usually located in urban areas, the *pasgah* in rural areas.[3] While there are different levels of police stations based on their respective districts and the diversity of crimes in those districts, their structure is the same.[4]

After the establishment of NAJA in 1991, many of "the regular police forces were sidelined and all influential positions in the LEF [Law Enforcement Forces] were assigned to former Islamic Revolutionary committees-members."[5] An IRGC commander, General Reza Seifolahi, was appointed in 1992 as the second head of NAJA, replacing General Mohammad Sohrabi, who had led the Gendarmerie before the creation of NAJA in 1991. This paved the way for an increase in the number of IRGC commanders appointed to Iran's police—and for their domination of NAJA's high- and middle-level management.[6]

The appointment of IRGC commanders to high echelons of the police ranks meant that the police force became more ideological and was brought under the umbrella of the country's conservative faction, dominated by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. IRGC dominance within NAJA helped Ayatollah Khamenei control NAJA and use the police as his tool for enforcing political control and suppressing his political opponents—especially after 1997, when reformists won control of the presidency and, soon after, of Parliament.

Amidst high inflation during the second Rafsanjani administration, sporadic social riots started throughout Iran in 1993–95, including in Mashhad, Ghazvin, Akbarabad, and Islamshahr; in Mashhad, some police stations were occupied by protesters. The inability of the police to suppress these riots led the regime to use IRGC and Basij forces—and one of the lessons the regime learned from this period was the need for the creation of specialized anti-riot police. Consequently, in 1996, NAJA expanded its crowd control capabilities with the establishment of a special unit called NOPO, or the Supreme Leader's Guardian Special Forces (*niroo-ye vizhe pasdar-e velayat*), to help suppress popular uprisings and maintain political order.[7]

NAJA and the Suppression of the Reform Movement, 1997–2004

The victory of Mohammad Khatami, a reformist, in the 1997 presidential election and that of his allies in the 2000 parliamentary elections were milestones in the history of the Islamic Republic. After 1997, NAJA quickly became a tool for conservatives and the Supreme Leader in their confrontation with the reformists. For example, members of the Counterintelligence Organization of NAJA, which was originally meant to control police personnel, were used as a tool to confront Tehran's mayors. To pressure the reformists, the police incarcerated and allegedly tortured the mayor of Tehran, Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, alongside other Tehran district mayors who had supported Khatami's presidential campaign.[8]

NOPO forces were also used to suppress student uprisings. In July 1999, NOPO forces attacked Tehran University students as they protested the closure of the *Salam Daily* reformist newspaper and the parliament's approval of a highly restrictive press law. Police, alongside hard-liner vigilantes like Ansar-e Hezbollah, attacked the students' dormitory, resulting in the arrest and injuring of hundreds of students who had been publicly active since Khatami's election. Since this incident in 1999, NOPO special forces have been regarded as the branch of the police responsible for political suppression.

These activities led to widespread disappointment with and anger at Khatami's administration amongst the Iranian urban population, especially the youth. The suppression of student protests also harmed the reputation of the Iranian police, which had already been in decline.[9] To restructure the police and improve its image, Ayatollah Khamenei appointed the head of the IRGC air force, General Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, as the head of NAJA. Qalibaf was one of the IRGC commanders who had written a threatening letter in 1999 to President Khatami saying the IRGC would not be quiet until the government suppressed the student movements and had successfully modernized the IRGC air force during his commandership.

General Qalibaf tried to rebuild the police's reputation using a new policy based on what he called the "Society-Centered Police" (*police-e jaameh mehvar*), and employing the mottoes *jaameh-e mas'ul* (Responsible Society) and *polis-e paasokhgoo* (Accountable Police).[10] To improve police-society relations, the police created several institutions, including the "department of social affairs" (*moavenat-e ejtemai*), which was created to collaborate with writers, intellectuals, and academia. Another effort was to establish a new operational unit called the Police 110. Acting as a 911-style telephone hotline for emergencies, this unit worked as a police task force to rapidly respond to crimes, and to disperse gatherings perceived as dangerous to public order.

During General Qalibaf's commandership, police forces and bases expanded: The number of police stations, for

example, increased from 311 in 2000 to 748 throughout the country in 2003.[11] In addition to helping maintain public order, the expansion of police stations enabled the Islamic Republic to successfully control strikes by professional associations and guilds in big cities between 2001 and 2005.[12]

Police also began to recruit Iranian women into the police forces for the first time since the revolution. Iran's Parliament approved an amendment of NAJA's charter giving NAJA permission to recruit and train Iranian women to perform administrative work, to enforce rules related to women, and to suppress women's protests.

In order to focus on maintaining order and political control, the police in 2000 started assigning some of its bureaucratic responsibilities to the "private sector," with many contracts going to firms and companies created by police commanders. Several service offices, including the "Police Electronic Services Office" (*daftar-e khademat-e elektronik-e entezami*) or Police +10, were established in February 2004. The responsibilities of these offices included issuing driving licenses and passports, doing paperwork related to mandatory military service, and issuing fuel ration cards.

Throughout this time, the police continued to suppress many dissidents and intellectuals. This included the summoning and arrest of some journalists, bloggers, and writers accused by the police of "cultural degeneracy"—including the arrest, torture, and persecution of Siamak Pourzand, an Iranian intellectual, in 2001. Police were also used to suppress student protests in 2001–3, when university students were actively challenging the regime in the street. In July 2003, when a group of students protested against the privatization of universities, which the government had advocated, police easily controlled and suppressed them—unlike in 1999, when student protests dramatically challenged the regime.

The Basijification of Iran's Police, 2004–9

In March 2005, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf resigned as commander of NAJA in order to compete in the Islamic Republic of Iran's ninth presidential election in 2005, when he was defeated by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Tehran's mayor. Ayatollah Khamenei appointed Brigadier General Esmail Ahmadi Moqaddam as the new head of NAJA in 2005. Like all but the first of his predecessors, Ahmadi Moqaddam was an IRGC commander; he had led the Basij militia in Tehran, which actively supported Ahmadinejad's candidacy.

Because of Moqaddam's background in the civil militia Basij, the police under his commandership heavily recruited from Basij ranks. According to Moqaddam, more than 75 percent of the new police recruits in 2006 and more than 80 percent in 2007 were selected from the Basij force. The police chief stressed that "in the upcoming year, 100 per cent of the new forces of the police should be from the Basij."[13]

Police personnel consist of two groups: cadres (*payvar*), who are recruited as full-time employees, and conscripts, who spend only two years of mandatory military service in NAJA. There are no official statistics on police personnel, but there are some reports that the police have 300,000 personnel, approximately 50 percent of whom are conscripts.[14] Out of the total number of police cadres, about 6,000 are female.[15] Basij members were recruited mainly as police cadres. In addition to the

Basij, the police forces include many children of martyrs (for example, martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war) and children of military personal.[16] Since Basij members usually come from the more religious and conservative parts of Iranian society, by hiring them the police became more conservative and ideological, with the result that the cultural gap between the police forces and many Iranians increased.

Since 2005, NAJA has been involved in implementing a "Public Safety Plan" (*tarh-e amniyat-e ejtemai*) with the help of the Basij militia. Under this plan, the police began a new series of morality offensives in urban areas that ostensibly aimed at confronting "thugs," drug dealers, thieves, and other criminals. One part of this plan entailed police special units violently raiding homes at night to arrest such thugs (*arazel va owbash*), drug addicts, and other people considered a danger to public safety and morality. They beat thugs in public spaces and humiliated them in front of cameras—by forcing them, for example, to wear "hanging watering cans used for lavatory ablutions around their necks."[17]

The police became more involved in other moral policing as well. The Morality Patrol (*gasht-e ershad*), which comprises both male and female personnel, has been a branch of the police force in charge of the moral policing of society. It has been responsible for monitoring and arresting people deemed to be immodestly dressed or otherwise undermining the dress code, including prohibiting women from wearing "immodest" amounts of makeup, as well as discouraging male-female fraternization. The Guidance Patrol created a fearful atmosphere for Iranian youth, who are always anxious about the threat of arrest due to their clothes or hairstyle.

The spontaneous revolt in October 2007 after gas prices increased was another event leading to the expansion of the police force. Ahmadinejad's economic policies to safeguard the Iranian economy, which was faced with increased international sanctions, imposed a new system of gasoline rationing along with cuts to subsidies for gas. This led to Iranians setting dozens of gas stations on fire. Anti-riot police were sent to guard gas stations and maintain order. Fearing a mass uprising, the government developed a security plan for dealing with this situation.

To prepare for future such situations, and to expand social control, NAJA created several operational units, including emergency units (*yegan-e emdad*) and special units (*yegan-e vizhe*). The aim of these forces is to help other police branches fulfill their missions. For example, emergency units have helped the Moral Security police by confiscating illegal DVDs and performing other functions. They have also been used as an operational force in anti-narcotic missions, crowd control, and suppression of protesters.

Special units (YEGOP) represent another operational police force that is mostly responsible for crowd control, protests, and riots. There is a special unit in each province, which ultimately works under YEGOP headquarters in Tehran. One of the branches of the special units is NOPO, which was transformed into a force mainly responsible for counter-terrorism and hostage rescue operations.

The Green Movement and Continued Police Expansion, 2009- Present

The expansion of the police force escalated in response to the Green Movement in 2009. With the announcement of the results of the presidential election that year, hundreds of thousands of people poured into the streets to protest elections they perceived as fraudulent. They were brutally suppressed by the police, acting alongside the Basij militia and other IRGC forces. In one case, the police's brutality and suppression of students in a Tehran University dormitory on June 15 was broadcast by the BBC Persian service and shocked many Iranians.[18]

In the course of eight months of dispersed demonstrations, dozens of people were killed and thousands were arrested. Many of the youth who were arrested by the police were held in the infamous Kahrizak detention center, which was well known for its terrifying conditions; several people died in detention there. According to one reformist, "The members of the special unit of the police, who were there to protect innocent civilians, were extremely violent to the extent that paramilitary forces were screaming at them not to beat the students anymore."[19] In fact, many police personnel had no qualms about brutally suppressing the Green Movement, acting on the anger they felt toward opposition activists whom they perceived as members of the upper and upper-middle class.

The Green Movement led to dramatic structural and political changes in the police, including expansion of the number of police stations, creation of the cyber police, acquisition of new police equipment, and privatization of some police forces. After 2009, the NAJA structure expanded both vertically and horizontally. New police headquarters, districts, offices, and stations were established throughout the country, especially in big cities such as Tehran as well as in shantytowns and squatter settlements. For example, two new police

headquarters were established west and east of Tehran city to increase police control over these peripheral areas.[20] The police also created more than 400 police patrolling forces in 375 municipal neighborhoods in Tehran.[21] The police also created small portable stations in cities, especially in neighborhoods where police stations did not exist, and expanded its patrolling forces in large cities as well.

The police also expanded horizontally, developing new branches for social and political control. Iran's police already had several branches, such as border control (*marzbani*), anti-narcotic police and crime fighting (*agahi*) and driving and traffic control (*rahvar*); new branches were created after 2009, including cyber police, protection units, and voluntary police. Two branches also expanded dramatically after 2009: the "Prevention and Operation Police" (*polis-e pishgiri va amaliyat*) and the "Intelligence and Public Security Police" (*polis-e ettelaat va amniyat-e omumi* or PAVA).

The Prevention and Operation Police (PPVA), which is the main branch of NAJA, is responsible for controlling all the police stations (*kalantari* and *pasgah*, or KOPs) throughout the country. PPVA also regulates and controls all the protection units (*yeganha-ye hefazat*) created to protect special governmental entities, such as the protection units for Iran's Cultural Heritage organization, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting police (IRIB police), and Tehran Municipality. These units are under the control of NAJA and follow police orders. Although the primary responsibilities of these forces are physical protection and enforcement of the law in their respective realms, they also help NAJA maintain public order and police society by gathering news and intelligence.[22]

Another mission of PPVA is crime prevention. To achieve this goal, the PPVA is responsible for the preparation and creation of new police stations in expanding urban and rural areas. The Center of Protection and Surveillance Disciplinary Services, a subsidiary of PPVA, regulates all private policing service companies in the country—and is also responsible for issuing permits for buying and carrying self-defense weapons to people who need them.

The Intelligence and Public Security Police is another branch of NAJA. Several police branches are subordinate to PAVA, including the diplomatic police, the Foreign Nationals and Immigrants' Affairs Office, and the Moral Security police. The three most important subbranches of PAVA are:

1. The Intelligence Police is a branch of PAVA that is responsible for gathering intelligence in neighborhoods, penetrating professional guilds and identifying members' activities, and arresting workers. It also runs a network of local informers (*mokhber-e mahhali*) to collect information, news, and rumors. Identifying and arresting people conducting illegal religious activities, and ferreting out homes used for underground Christian worship, are other duties of this police force.

2. The Public Security Police is involved with identifying and arresting thugs and crime gangs and with confiscating illegal satellite dishes—as well as, in recent years, arresting network marketing groups and forcing companies involved in pyramid schemes to discontinue operations. The Moral Security police (*police-e amniyat-e akhlaghi*) is a sub-branch of PAVA that is responsible for arresting women wearing an inappropriate hijab or taking part in mixed parties. The Morality Patrol is subordinate to the Moral Security police.

3. The police in charge of Supervision over Public Facilities and Locations (*polis-e-e nazarat- bar- amaken-e omumi*) is responsible for regulating and controlling businesses

such as shops, restaurants, and hotels by issuing and revoking work permits for people in these businesses.

To enforce the law and deal with increasing crime rates in Iranian society while also maintaining a focus on regime security, the police put in place policies to recruit volunteers as honorary policemen and to privatize some police services. The plan to recruit and organize volunteers became operational in 2013, when NAJA established "Volunteer Police Units" to cooperate with the police in preventing crime.[23] Volunteer police would be used in different branches of NAJA, including traffic, anti-narcotic, and moral policing. There were several benefits for those who joined the volunteer police, including fulfilling their compulsory military service in their hometown and enjoying priority in employment in the military.[24]

At the same time, some police services were privatized through the creation of the "Center of Protection and Surveillance Disciplinary Services," which was responsible for regulating and controlling private companies, and which provided security and protection for municipal neighborhoods, public buildings, and some government buildings that were not security-sensitive, such as small branches of banks. By creating private security and protection centers, police not only connected a group of people to the state but engaged them in maintaining social order.

One characteristic of Iran's Green Movement was the pervasive use of the Internet and social media by Iranian youth. The increasing number of Internet users led the government to establish specialized Internet-focused bureaus and police forces to tighten political control. A special office was initially established in NAJA in 2004 for identifying and arresting cyber criminals and dissident activists, but it was only in 2011, after the Green Movement, that the police established a special cyber bureau called the "Cyberspace Police" (*polis-e faza-ye towlid va tabadol-e ettelaat*, literally "police of the virtual space and information exchange", or FATA) to monitor users' online activities and investigate and identify cyber activists.

According to FATA's organizational chart, the aim of this bureau is to protect national and religious identity, Islamic values, and critical national infrastructure against electronic attacks, while preserving national power and sovereignty. Although the Islamic Republic had made known that FATA's main responsibility was combating cybercrimes, such as financial scams and violations of privacy, FATA has also been involved in monitoring, tracking, intimidating, and arresting hundreds of online activists who were active in writing blogs on social media or creating and selling virtual private network (VPN) accesses. Some of the people who were arrested were freed after providing the user names and passwords of their accounts and promising not to be active again. In one case, a blogger was arrested by the cyber police because of his activities on Facebook and died, presumably during torture, while in police custody.[25]

In addition to structurally reconfiguring the police, the Islamic Republic also expanded and upgraded police forces' crowd control equipment. For example, according to General Hassan Karami, "At the time of the sedition [*sic*] of 2009, we did not have secure vehicles that could enter the crowd without being damaged. Previously, we had a type of water spray that was called 'heavy' water spray. Now, however, we have five different types of water sprays, 18 tons, 5 tons and 2 tons, as well as four-wheeled engines. We have a variety of water sprays and each of them can be used depending on the situation."[26]

NAJA also established new units, including an anti-riot unit of female personnel in 2013. This unit aimed to help the police disperse women protesters and women activists. Other branches included the mounted police and a police canine unit for controlling riots.[27] NAJA also increased benefits and salaries to keep their personnel satisfied. In fact, the higher salaries of special forces led other police personnel to ask to be assigned to a special unit.[28]

In 2015, General Ahmadi Moqaddam was accused of corruption and was replaced as head of NAJA by Brigadier General Hossein Ashtari. General Ashtari was, like Moqaddam, an IRGC commander, but he also had an extensive security and intelligence background. He was previously the head of Intelligence and Public Security police and, before joining the police, had been the head of counterintelligence for the IRGC's 14 Imam Hussein Division and the dean of Imam Hadi University, the higher education academy of the IRGC counterintelligence organization. General Ashtari was also the man behind the implementation of many of the security policies of Iran's police, including the "Public Safety Plan" launched in 2005.

The new priorities of NAJA, according to General Ashtari, are strengthening Iran's border police to stop smuggling, strengthening the cyber police, and creating new specialized police forces, such as for economic crimes. The expansion of the police into multiple domains has continued under his leadership: Thus, NAJA created a Center for Strategic Studies to help better prepare for threats facing the Islamic Republic. After quelling the 2017 protests, General Ashtari and the police

were praised by many politicians, including President Rouhani, for the force's effectiveness and fast responses.[29]

Iran's Police in the 2017–18 Riots

The cumulative effect of all the aforementioned changes is that when a new wave of protests began in December 2017, Iranian police were well organized, trained, and equipped. Consequently, compared with 2009, they were more professional, especially in big cities where they had practiced anti-riot missions for years and were presumably more self-confident, thereby enabling them to avoid overreacting to protests and escalating grievances through the use of excessive force. In small cities, where ordinary police get involved, there were often more casualties, largely on account of the fear and unprofessionalism of some police forces—especially conscripts who serve for only two years.

Owing to the effectiveness of the police in 2017–18, the regime has not needed to use Basij and IRGC forces—unlike in 2009, when both groups were poured into the streets to suppress the Green Movement. The effectiveness of NAJA and its special forces in putting down these recent protests demonstrates how central they have become to maintaining domestic public order and ensuring the survival of the Iranian regime.

The expansion of the police forces and their increased capacity to suppress domestic unrest has allowed the Islamic Republic to commit military forces to Iraq and Syria without being worried about needing to use them to maintain stability at home. Since 2012, Iran has increased its military deployments (the IRGC, the Basij, and even conventional army personnel) in Iraq, Syria, and, to a much smaller extent, Yemen to defend its interests. These deployments are possible because the clerical regime believes that NAJA forces are now sufficiently capable of handling any domestic unrest. Time will tell if they are right or wrong.

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