Middle East war

Iran launches recruitment drive after US invasion threats

Human rights groups condemn campaigns that seek to register 'defenders of the homeland' as young as 12

Bita Ghaffari in Tehran and **Andrew England** in London

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Iran is signing up volunteers to "defend the country's soil" as the regime seeks to mobilise supporters and project strength in preparation for a possible US ground invasion.

In recent days, mass text messages have invited Iranians to join a national campaign, also promoted on state television, to confront "the American-Zionist enemy's threats against Iran's shores, islands and borders", without providing specifics.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a prime target of US and Israeli strikes as it spearheads Iran's military response, also announced a drive to recruit individuals for a range of services, including military roles.

The guards have separately invited volunteers as young as 12 to serve in patrols and security checkpoints as well as to tend to the wounded, cook or contribute financial support.

Human Rights Watch said on Tuesday that “children at military facilities would be at serious risk of death and injury” and called on Iranian officials to “revoke the campaign and prohibit all military and paramilitary forces in Iran from enlisting children under 18”.

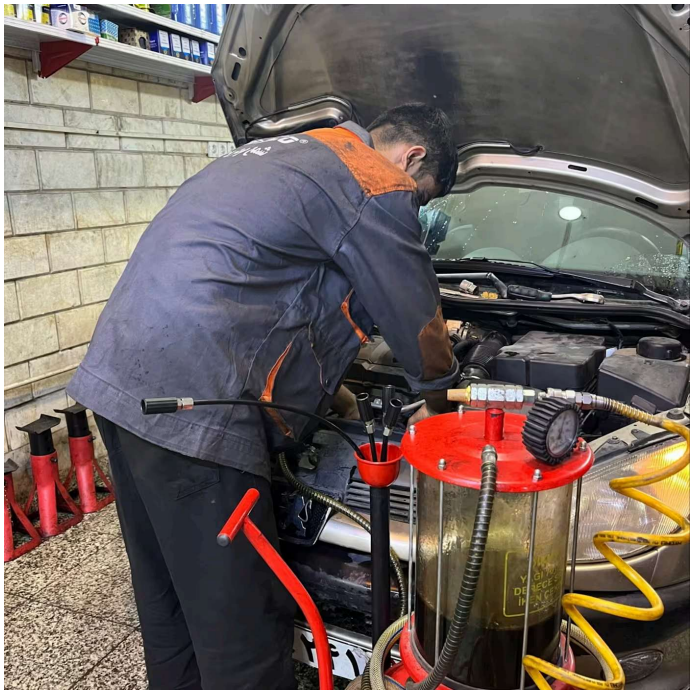
It was unclear how many volunteers were signing up. The online portal for the text message campaign claimed to have registered more than 5mn people, though applicants were only required to provide a name, phone number and province. Women are not conscripted in Iran and it was unclear whether they could register.

While many Iranians loathe the regime, the Islamic republic retains a committed minority of supporters, some of whom already serve in the Revolutionary Guards’ Basij volunteer forces, who are estimated to number in the millions.

But even some Iranians with little love for their rulers said they could be motivated to join if the US follows through on President Donald Trump’s threats to deploy ground forces in Iran, including by seizing Kharg Island and other islands in the Strait of Hormuz.

“If a ground war happens, I’ll go fight,” said Hossein, a mechanic in western Tehran, who was changing a car’s engine oil as fighter jets roared overhead and explosions echoed in the distance. “I prefer to die defending my homeland than die in bed,” added Hossein, who like other Iranians interviewed for this story has been given a pseudonym.

Iran has launched a poster recruitment campaign to mobilise volunteer forces



Hossein (not his real name), a mechanic in western Tehran, says he will fight for his country if a ground invasion happens

Others said they would refuse. “I don’t want to be used like a chess piece,” said Farshid, a 38-year-old architect. “I would do anything for my country and my fellow citizens, but it’s clear that these three powers will eventually come to an agreement, and then I’ll feel like a fool for having been exploited.”

Experts said the recruitment drive had its roots in the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, when millions were mobilised to fight Saddam Hussein’s regime.

“They definitely don’t have the same level of support now as they did then, but they do have up to 20 per cent regime supporters,” Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, said.

“It will be interesting to see if they can make the recruitment work. They will sell it as a test of their base,” Vakil added, “but this is more about wartime support rather than permanent or uniform national unity”.

The Islamic republic has suffered severe blows during the conflict. US and Israeli air strikes have targeted facilities run by the Revolutionary Guards, Basij units, the army and police. Security checkpoints in Tehran, many run by regime supporters, have also been attacked.

A local news agency reports that Tehran has mobilised a 1mn-strong combat force © Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto/Getty Images

The US is also deploying thousands of additional troops, including marines and paratroopers, to the region as Trump weighs a potential ground operation.

Iran, which has responded to US-Israeli attacks by firing retaliatory strikes at Israel, US bases, shipping and infrastructure across the Gulf, insists it is prepared for any invasion.

“If a ground war breaks out in Tehran, I will go to defend my homeland against American and Israeli forces,” said Kamran, a 35-year-old businessman.

“But under the current form of warfare, I will not volunteer for any branch of this regime. I will never forget January 8 and 9, and how brutally they treated their own people” — a reference to the killing of thousands of people in a violent crackdown on anti-regime protesters earlier this year.

News agency Tasnim last week cited a senior Iranian military figure saying Tehran had mobilised a 1mn-strong combat force, adding that the Revolutionary Guards, Basij and army were flooded with enlistment requests. It was not possible to verify the claims.

Rahim Nadali, deputy head of the guards' cultural division in Tehran, last week claimed that Iranians — including "youngsters" — have sought to join patrols or help guard checkpoints.

The poster for one of the guards' recruitment drives, titled "Combatant Defenders of the Homeland for Iran", features a man in a Basij uniform, a woman in a black chador, and two children — a boy and a girl.

Iran celebrates the case of Mohammad Hossein Fahmideh, a 13-year-old Basij member who threw himself under an Iraqi tank wearing a grenade belt during the 1980s war. Framed as a war hero, his image later appeared in textbooks and on postage stamps and murals.

Last month, 11-year-old Alireza Jafari was killed in a drone strike while accompanying his father at a Basij checkpoint in Tehran. His mother told local media that her husband had taken their son to an "understaffed" checkpoint "so he would be prepared for the days ahead".

Human Rights Watch said there was "no excuse for a military recruitment drive that targets children to sign up, much less 12-year-olds . . . What this boils down to is that Iranian authorities are apparently willing to risk children's lives for some extra manpower.

"Iran is bound by customary international law, which provides that recruitment of children under age 15 is a war crime," it added.

Elham, a teacher, said she had repeatedly seen children at checkpoints in recent days "as young as my own students, 13 or 14".

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