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Quiet Intimidation in Iran

The Iranian security forces stepped into action to prevent opposition protesters coming out onto the streets and hijacking the annual anti-Israel demonstration last week.

The last Friday of Ramadan is designated Quds ("Jerusalem") Day in Iran, and is used by the regime as a ritual show of anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiment.

Last year, however, the opposition Green Movement took advantage of the officially-sanctioned presence of crowds on the street to make their own appearance, to the consternation of the government. They challenged official policy on the Palestinian cause – normally a taboo subject – by shouting, "No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, may my life be sacrificed for Iran."

This year, the intelligence agencies were ready, and took action to forestall any public appearance by the opposition.

A day before the Quds demonstrations, police made a show of force in the capital, with large numbers of officers deployed on foot or patrolling on motorcycles across the city and in particular on routes leading to Tehran University, a common focus for opposition protests. The code-name for the exercise, "Control", made its deterrent purpose crystal-clear.

Oddly, the head of Iran's police force, Brigadier-General Ismail Ahmadi-Moghaddam, was critical of the timing of the exercise, which he said was "in poor taste". This simply demonstrates the lack of coordination between the various security agencies in Iran.

However, the real operation to deter opposition members who might be considering taking to the streets was carried out behind the scenes.

In the days leading up to Quds Day, thousands of Tehran residents received anonymous phone calls demanding that they stay at home.

"The first few times they called me, I was completely unnerved," an opposition supporter who has been detained in the past said. "I kept having a conversation with an interrogator in my head, looking for reasons and explanations I could give for even the simplest daily activities. Gradually, as I discovered that some of my colleagues and friends were receiving similar calls, I stopped being afraid. Now I don't answer calls from unknown numbers."

The threatening phone calls do not just target people who, like this opposition

supporter, have already run foul of the regime. Relatives of people killed during last summer's protests against the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have also been harassed.

The mother of Ashkan Sohrabi, an 18 year-old student who died on June 20, 2009, has received calls from people who say she is wasting her time going to visit his grave, as they have seen him alive.

A psychologist in Tehran says this kind of pressure is designed to let individuals know the regime is "observing his every move like God, and thus break his will" – so much so that individuals may begin to believe they are in fact guilty of something.

Another tactic the security services used in the run-up to Quds Day was to summon individuals for questioning at various secret locations, one of which has been identified as a location five levels below ground in a building on Tehran's Motahari Street.

One of those summoned said he was advised not to be in Tehran on Quds Day, while the account given by another individual, who was called into the Motahari Street facility, suggests the authorities had widened the net to include people with only a tangential connection with last year's demonstrations.

"I'd never been arrested before and I didn't have a record of participating in protests," he said. "But they phoned me and said they'd seen my car in one of the streets that led to last year's Ashura protests in December. They asked me to go to the centre to give an explanation."

Individuals with a known history of opposition activity were issued with direct threats during these interrogations. The government has compiled exhaustive records of suspected Green Movement supporters, allowing it to keep track of their movements, and call them in ahead of any significant date that it fears the opposition might try to hijack.

As well as targeting specific individuals around notable dates, the authorities have pursued a general policy of detentions in recent months.

For example, visitors to Section 257 of the Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, where a number of victims of the election violence were laid to rest, are at risk of detention. Others have been taken in for questioning for taking photographs on the street, or honking their car horns.

These detentions normally last several hours or at most a few days. The suspects are photographed and placed on file, and are always asked where they were during last year's unrest.

Their mobile phones are confiscated, allowing the authorities to build up a database of potentially suspect contacts from lists of call and SMS message recipients. They are told their phones will be returned to them, but many opt not to claim them for fear of further police action.

In the psychologist's view, the cumulative effect of harassment, repression and reports that protesters have been tortured and raped in detention, have produced a "traumatised society in which ethics have collapsed and social conscience has been critically wounded".

A university professor compares the security agencies' current approach to the methods of social control employed in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

"This kind of system of control has its limits," he added. "Agents of the regime who are constantly looking for suspects could turn on the regime itself."

Yasaman Baji is the pseudonym of an Iranian journalist based in Tehran.

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