## Panic in Isfahan, as Police Fail to Arrest Acid Attack Assailants

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## By Iran Wire

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Soheyla now speaks with difficulty, the acid burns across her face have collapsed her skin, tightening it so that she cannot open her mouth all the way. Her words come out broken and half-formed, but it is her eyes that trouble her the most. The acid gouged out one eye entirely, leading to full loss of sight, and the doctors say her other eye may retain 20 percent vision if surgery is successful. “I am only thinking about my eyes,” she says. “Nothing can replace my eyes.”

A victim of the recent spate of acid attacks on women in the city of Isfahan, Soheyela encountered her assailant on her way home from a local swimming pool. She had just dropped off her friends when she heard the sound of a motorcycle revving up from behind. An instant later, her whole face was burning. “It was burning so bad that I jumped out of the car,” she says. “I was moaning and taking off my clothes. People gathered around me, but nobody knew what to do. They all kept saying I must put my clothes back on. Some of them threw my clothes back at me, which made my body burn more.”

In early October reports began emerging in Isfahan that women were being attacked with acid in public places. All the accounts involved unknown assailants approaching women on the street, throwing liquid sulfuric acid on their faces and bodies, and then escaping. As the reports mounted, with unofficial counts finding at least 10, panic has set in across the city, with women fearful of moving freely in public, and local officials seeking to calm residents with news of purported arrests.

The Isfahan attacks have ignited national indignation and a political storm in the capital Tehran, with senior officials rushing to refute a connection with Islamist vigilantes. For the government of President Hassan Rouhani they may also preface an unwelcome showdown with hardline opponents, whose recent moves to re-introduce extremist street morality policing appears linked to the attacks.

Acid attacks on women who are deemed not to be sufficiently covered by strict Islamic norms, for having “bad hejab,” occur with some regularity in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan, but until now have been exceedingly rare in Iran.

On Monday, 20 October, Deputy Interior Minister Morteza Mir-Bagheri said that the interior minister and the governor of Isfahan have reviewed the incidents and that three or four suspects have been apprehended. “The acid attacks are not a chain crime,” he told Mehr news agency. “There should be no worries about acid attacks across the province of Isfahan.”

But two hours after this news came online, Prosecutor-General Mohseni Ejei told a news conference that as yet no individuals had been arrested. “Of course I hope the culprit or culprits of this crime are arrested as soon as possible and their case is sent to court,” he said.

Soheyla did not see her assailant and has no idea what could have motivated the attack. “For the past two weeks the questions has been torturing me. Why me?” she said. “Who wanted to do this to me?

The attacks follow a September announcement by Ansar-e Hezbollah or the “Supporters of the Party of God, a paramilitary fundamentalist group, that it would resume vigilante-style moral policing, couched in the Islamic notion of “enjoining good and forbidding wrong.” Through much of the 1980s and 1990s, the group terrorized Iranians by attacking civic gatherings, lectures by progressive academics, and women on the street deemed insufficiently covered. The group’s re-emergence marks a new strategy in the hardline assault on President Rouhani’s efforts to moderate Iranian society.

In Isfahan, people are speaking about an organized campaign to enforce strict Islamic moral and social codes, lending credence to the link between the acid attacks and Ansar-e Hezbollah’s announced resurgence. But officials in Tehran are pushing back against these perceptions.

 “These acid attacks have nothing to do with people’s hejab,” Ahmad Salek, an Isfahahn MP, told IranWire. “One of the targets of the attack was wearing full hejab and chador. These rumors are made up by the mercenaries who live in the West and want to weaken the regime.”

The Deputy Interior Minister’s remarks concurred with this view. “Investigations have shown that these acid attacks are not chain attacks,” he said. “Don’t even mention the word ‘chain’,” he says, “because it would disturb the peace of mind of the people of Isfahan.”

But residents of Isfahan are skeptical about the government’s response. Many say they do not believe a single serial attacker is responsible, but also cannot see how they spate is simply random. “What the police says is not logical,” says Ahmad. “How can one say that suddenly a few crazy guys have set out in the city and they are all carrying buckets of acid at the same time?”

Many in Isfahan have written on Facebook about a sense of insecurity and panic gripping the city. “I am so unsettled that the sound of a motorcycle makes me run away,” wrote Sahar.

Mahmoud, another Isfahan resident, wrote on his page: “Whenever my sister steps outside the door my heart goes wild until she comes back home.”

Zahra, also a Facebook user, reports of an instant message that she received from an unknown phone number. The message warned her to expect the worst if she does not observe proper hejab. Ali, who lives in Isfahan, told IranWire that “in mosques and other religious gatherings they have announced that women must observe proper hejab to prevent some people from being provoked.”

Yet MP Ahmad Salek believes that it is the BBC Persian Service which is stirring trouble, inventing the connection between hejab and the acid attacks. “The source of these talks was  BBC Persian,” he says. “Then the Voice of America and other media outlets picked it up.”

But contrary to his claim, the news was first reported by the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA). Salek’s words reflect the general attitude of hardline media, notably the newspaper Kayhan, which is published under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader’s office.

Soheyla has not heard of any arrests. While we are talking on the phone, a man takes the handset and introduces himself as a relative of Soheyla. “I contacted the Isfahan police to follow up on the news,” he said. “They said these are rumors and nobody has been arrested yet. I told them ‘but the Deputy Interior Minister has announced the news’. They did not explain more. They just said these are rumors and nobody has been arrested.”