



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Iran's morality police in action again - was Mahsa Amini's sacrifice in vain?



As we approach the anniversary of the death of young Iranian protester Mahsa Amini, the regime in Tehran has been stepping up its repression of the movement that has emerged after her death.

Will the murder of a 22-year-old Kurdish girl who opposed state repression be in vain? Will the entire movement of resistance to the repression carried out by the Iranian theocratic government be a victim of the changed geopolitical circumstances in which Iran has strengthened its international positions?

Police authorities in Tehran confirmed that the morality police have been returning to the streets of Iranian cities with an old mandate to warn and punish women who behave or dress contrary to strict religious rules.

"If they [women] disobey the orders of the police force, legal action will be taken, and they will be referred to the judicial system", said police spokesman Saeed Montazerolmahdi last Sunday.

After members of the morality police were seen on the streets harassing women because of the dress code, the police spokesman confirmed that these patrols are again operating across the country.

According to Mr. Montazerolmahda, their task is to "deal with those who, unfortunately, ignore the consequences of not wearing the proper hijab and insist on disobeying the norms".

## The regime in Tehran withstood the blow

Street actions by the morality police have been

on hold for months as the regime has tried other ways to enforce rigid religious laws regarding dress codes for women.

Last December, information appeared that the morality police had been abolished, which was indirectly and clumsily confirmed by a high official from Tehran, Attorney General Mohammad-Jafar Montazeri.

When asked by a journalist about the morality policy being abolished, which was based on rumours, the attorney general clumsily replied that the morality police "have nothing to do with the judiciary - it was abolished from the same place it was launched".

This seemed like a significant victory for mass civil protests, which have shaken the regime in Tehran since the assassination of Mahsa Amini last September, if only to the extent that it has considered concessions and "alternatives" to implementing rigid religious laws.

However, the distinctive white vans from which members of the morality police jump out and arrest women not properly dressed in the streets, malls, and other public places have been again operating across the country.

First of all, this is a sign that the authorities in Tehran feel safe enough from civil protests and can return to the former forms of repression, because of which the protests started last year.

Civil protests have lost their initial momentum even though they are still held in many Iranian cities. The number of people and intensity has been decreasing, particularly international solidarity, which was strong only during the initial days.

Dispelled expectations of cracks

## in the regime

The regime feels strong enough to return the repression to the initial level, which was hinted at last April when the interior ministry announced that there would be no retreat regarding the strict implementation of repressive measures against women who violate the regulations on wearing the hijab.

"The hijab remained an essential element of Islamic law and as such would remain one of the key principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran", the interior ministry in Tehran announced at the time.

This announcement followed after the Chief of Judiciary Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei said that women who do not properly cover their heads would be prosecuted "without mercy".

The regime in Tehran dispelled expectations that it cracked following civil protests or that it was ready to compromise on the fundamental principles of its repressive system because cracks appeared due to civil disobedience and mass protests.

However, the opposite has happened, and the return of the morality police to the streets of Iranian cities with a former repressive mandate indicates that the authorities feel safe and unshaken.

## Tehran has been legitimised as an acceptable interlocutor

Such self-encouragement is also a consequence of several important foreign political events and processes that, in recent months, have legitimised the regime in Tehran as an acceptable interlocutor and participant in stabilisation initiatives.

Thawing diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, under the mediation of China, has returned Iran to the regional scene as an actor involved in solving, not producing, crises.

Such legitimisation has been sufficient for Tehran to reactivate the highest level of repression at home even though it received confirmation for such an image from partners with whom it shares authoritarian concepts of state management.

After all, the decisive statements of the Iranian police and judicial officials that they will consistently apply the laws on the use of hijab came less than a month after the conclusion of the Iranian-Saudi diplomatic deal last March.

Iran has been abusing it to strengthen internal repression and hints of concessions with the US in the context of the so-called indirect talks on a temporary arrangement to limit Iran's nuclear programme.

The rigid regime in Tehran could hardly wait for this kind of situation to have representatives of the US administration as interlocutors, and use it to intensify repression at home.

It considers the stakes of a potential new nuclear deal are much higher for the other side than supporting civil anti-government protests.

## Sacrificing civil protests

Tehran has also been encouraged by the declining interest of the influential international public, human rights organisations and institutions in protests in Iranian cities.

Faced with a confluence of circumstances favouring the Tehran authorities, civil activists in Iran are entering a period when repression against them will increase, and support from the world will continue to decline.

In less than two months, it will be one year since 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, was killed in prison after being tortured by the authorities. She symbolises the rebellion of Iranian women and free citizens in the struggle for emancipation and civil liberties.

But her sacrifice might fade if the world turns a blind eye on Tehran for "higher goals" that the rebel Iranians will have nothing to do with except for even more repression.