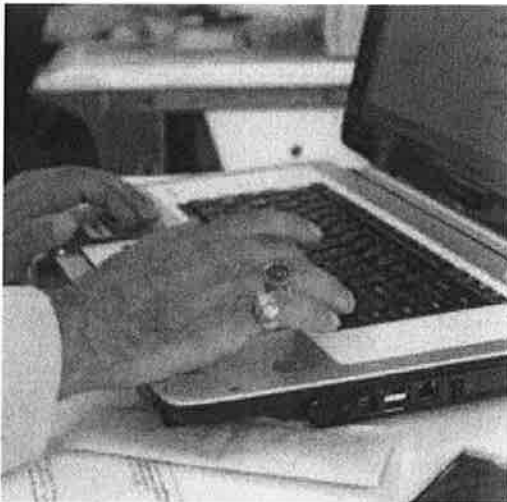


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Iran's 'Cyber-Jihad' Claims Another Victim

Abbas Milani December 11, 2012 | 12:52 pm



BEHROUZ MEHRI/AFP/Getty Images

monitoring, ease-dropping, and censoring not just the social media but cell phones and faxes in Iran—a prospect made much more ominous by the fact that the IRGC now owns the conglomerate that controls the internet, telephone, and fax infrastructure in Iran. As we now learn, these units also were provided with their own prisons and interrogator-torturers.

Yet, as the Beheshti case has shown, Iran's voices of dissent have not been entirely intimidated into silence or submission. Indeed, Beheshti, a burly man from a working class background, continued to blog even though he seems to have anticipated the tragic fate that awaited him. Eight days before his arrest on October 30, 2012, in a post called “Mr. Khamenei, Your Judiciary is Nothing But a House of Butchery,” he wrote that “even amongst dictatorships,” your despotism stands out. “Prisoners are tortured till they confess to crimes they have not committed.” The picture on the blog shows Khamenei laughing at bodies of men hanging from cranes. You rule in the name of God, Beheshti says, but asks “what kind of God” is it that “wants nothing but bloodshed?” Almost a year earlier, in a posting on 29 December 2011, he had directly accused Khamenei of lying. The Leader had said that Iran is facing challenges only because it is standing up to world powers. Beheshti instead accused the Leader and his regime of mismanagement, adding in a sarcastic tone, “Look at your allies, China, Russia, Venezuela, Syria...and all supporting you only to plunder Iran.”

But if Beheshti's blog posts were a testimony to his bravery, the regime's response to his death was a clear demonstration of the

regime's fundamental cowardice and its increasing fragility. The government's bizarre "damage control" in the face of international criticism was a strange brew of Kafka, Kundera, and Orwell. First, it offered only silence, then outright denial (including the absurd claim made by the judiciary's spokesperson that "there is the possibility that counter-revolutionary circles might have done something"), then grudging admissions, after an "official inquiry", that torture by rogue agents may have been involved. At each step, the government conceded only the points that had been made incontrovertible by hard evidence: They backtracked only when they were contradicted by testimony from Beheshti's cellmates, who valiantly signed a petition detailing signs of torture after sharing cells with him for only a night—and eventually by the release of a letter written by Beheshti himself during his torture, chronicling his torments.

But the flailing claims made by the government, absurd as they were, deserve to be remembered, as they express their own twisted form of truth. Consider a comment made by a leading member of parliament, who claimed that Beheshti had died not of the beatings that had left the bruises on his body, "but of fear and shock." It is hard to find a more sobering albeit inadvertent indictment of the regime. What kind of a regime causes a previously obscure blogger, with few readers, to be so afraid that that he dies of fear?

The most sobering lesson, however, is contained in the record of Beheshti's blog posts. Reading them, what stands out is his sober recognition that Iran offered him little alternative to the martyr's fate he eventually met. In one of his earliest of the 286 total blog posts, on 12 October, 2011, Beheshti invites the opposition to unite against despotism and ends by saying, "whether with my humble pen, or my humble life," I will fight for this unity and for an "end to the deplorable despotism that plagues Iran." His last blog post, published a day before his arrest, and less than a week before his tragic death, describes the intimidating calls he had received to shut up or prepare his mother to mourn his son, and ends by declaring he has entered this fight with resolve, and ready to die. Life in Iran, he had said more than once, is tantamount to life in prison, and he, and the nation, want freedom. A regime so brutal in its treatment of such aspirations is committing a jihad in the name of "national security" that is entirely in vain.

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