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## Rival Rallies Turn Violent in Tehran

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Protest Is Opposition's Largest in 2 Months

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TEHRAN, Sept. 18 -- Hard-line supporters of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad clashed Friday with protesters who defied a ban on opposition demonstrations to stage the first major street protests in two months, a show of force during an annual government-backed rally against Israel.

Pro-government demonstrators attempted to attack two opposition leaders, former president Mohammad Khatami and former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, at separate protest sites in Tehran, but both escaped unharmed, news agencies and opposition Web sites reported. Two other senior opposition figures, including influential Shiite Muslim cleric and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, also appeared at the protests in a rare show of defiance against Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had warned the opposition not to disrupt Quds Day, the annual day of public support for Palestinians.

More than 100,000 opposition supporters took to the streets in Tehran, and similar demonstrations were reported in several other Iranian cities. Although the protesters were outnumbered by government supporters observing Quds Day, it was the largest opposition turnout since mid-July, when protests against Ahmadinejad's disputed victory in the June 12 presidential election ran into a fierce government crackdown.

In a speech at Friday prayers, Ahmadinejad denounced Israel and the West, questioned whether the Holocaust had occurred and charged that it was a pretext for occupying Palestinian land.

The competing demonstrations turned violent after security forces intervened in the afternoon, and riots erupted at several locations in downtown Tehran, the state-run Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

Security forces initially seemed overwhelmed by the number of opposition supporters. Wearing green, the campaign color of Mousavi, the leading opposition candidate in the presidential election, protesters gathered along the main routes leading to the prayer venue and shouted slogans against the government.

As opposition supporters marched outside the gates of Tehran University's prayer ground, Ahmadinejad defended Iran's total rejection of the Israeli state and called the Holocaust a "lie" and an "unprovable and mythical claim." Worshipers responded by shouting such traditional slogans as "Death to Israel" and "Death to America."

Outside the compound, anti-government demonstrators shouted, "Death to you." There were also chants of "Death to the dictator" and "Not Gaza, not Lebanon -- our life is for Iran," a critical reference to the Ahmadinejad government's support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

A week before Quds Day, Khamenei, Iran's top religious and political leader, had warned that the ceremonies

must not be turned into an occasion for "discord and division." The day of protest -- Quds is Arabic for Jerusalem -- is observed in several countries but originated in Iran, where Islamic revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established it in 1979.

State television employees, doing live broadcasts on the official rally from Enghelab Street, pointed their cameras at the ground as groups of anti-government demonstrators passed by, flashing victory signs and shouting, "The resistance has not died; it's the government that has died."

*Staff writer William Branigin in Washington contributed to this report.*

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