Iran Reframed: Anxieties of power in the Islamic Republic

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Context of Iran

Background into the
nation and its geopolitics

Political Background of Iran

Iranian Revolution (1979):

- The end of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic
- Huge Impact on the geopolitics of Iran and its relations within the region

How to keep the revolution alive as it becomes the status quo?

Context of *Iran Reframed* (2019)

Iranian Green Movement (2009):

- Protests erupted over Vote Suppression
- Citizens split between different factions of support
  - Anti-regime Vs Pro-regime (Moderate vs Hardline)
- **Highlights the political climate within Iran**

Context of Iran's State-led Media Production

Positionality of the Author:

- An Outsider:
  - Iranian American by birth
  - Family Members associated with anti-regime
- Only able to gain access through her past work with Iranian Veterans
- Often the only woman in a male-dominated industry

02

Key Themes

- Religion
- Gender

Religion

- Throughout the book, Bajoghli discusses how **military war culture** is intricately linked to religion
- Iran continues to use war culture to **unite** its population
- Us VS Them mentality
- Iran is **under constant threat** (USA, ISIS etc)
- Specifically, Islam has been used to encourage Iranian men to **fulfill their duties** for the religion and for the state

How is religion used in Iran's war culture?

"Avini's films presented the war as the setting where men emulated Imam Hussain, the grandson of the **Prophet Mohammad** and the third Shi'a Imam, who refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid and was martyred, along with his seventy-two companions, by Yazid's army in Karbala in 680 AD. The day of his death continues to be commemorated in Shi'a communities as an event in which the Prophet's grandson **refused to bow to an authority he deemed as oppressive to him and his kin.**" (Pg. 59)

- Made use of prophet stories to encourage Iranians to carry out their duties and protect their country from enemies such as the USA, Iraq and ISIS
- Religion is intertwined in films
- Iranian politicians and cultural producers used Imam Hussain to symbolize their position vis-à-vis the invading Iraqi army
- Thus, the battlefield was presented as a pious space, and soldiers were lauded for being model citizens who sacrificed their lives for their country.

How is religion used in Iran's war culture?

Snippets from Chronicles of Victory (Revāyat-e Fath)

How is religion used in Iran's war culture?

Screenshot from Amir Tataloo's "Nuclear Energy" music video

How is religion used in Iran's war culture?

There needs to be a protection for a bid day

Screenshot from Amir Tataloo's "Nuclear Energy" music video

- However, it seems ironic that the Iranian regime is now working together with previously seen as less religious popular figures such as Amir Tataloo (who has tattoos and is a rapper)
- Thus, we can see that the Iranian regime is focusing less on religion to spread awareness of Warfare
- As a country, Iran is slowly becoming more open minded to suit the needs of the younger generation
- Nevertheless, warfare remains the key message in government propagandas
- Medium has changed

The policing of Gender

Iran's Ideal Citizens

- Iran continues to engage in cultural moral policing of women's bodies through their hijab and the way they dress
- Moral policing
- Wearing the hijab is still mandatory for Iranian women

Iran's Ideal Citizens

Young women were strongly **encouraged** to **marry wounded veterans**—it
was seen as one of their contributions to the war effort.
(Pg. 23)

- Women do not fight in the battlefield
- As ideal female citizens, women are encouraged support in war efforts through marrying and supporting their wounded veteran husbands

Policing of the female body

It had become
second nature to discern when to **pull my headscarf forward** and speak in "official speak" in government buildings or when I was with markedly pious men and women. And likewise, I knew when to **pull my headscarf further back** and push my way into spaces that were hostile to those with pious comportment.
(Pg. 16)

- Bajoghli carries out self policing of her own body to gain access to spaces
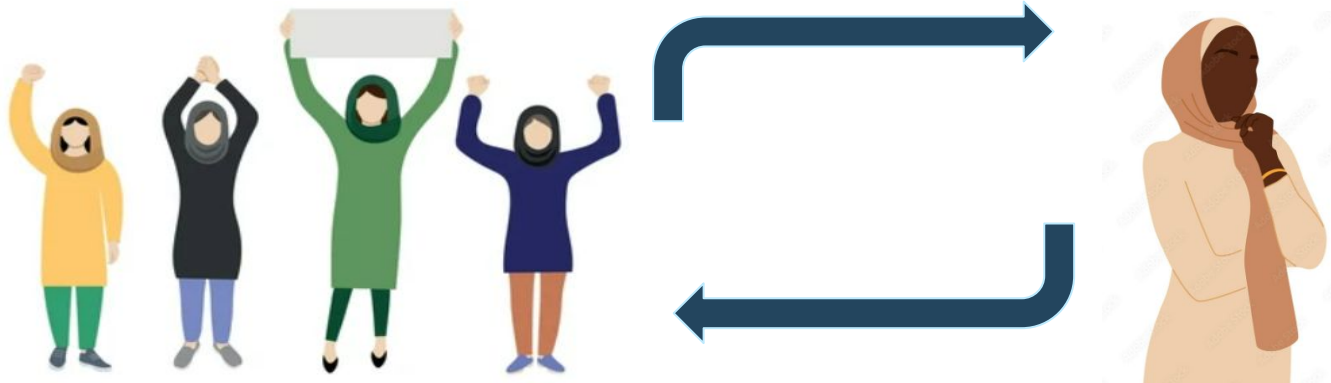
Policing of the female body

Although I visited this center countless times throughout my research, there was **never a time** when I was not stopped by (usually the same) female guard and asked to **fix my veil**, lower my overcoat sleeves, not wear jeans the next time I came—the **list of complaints** about my dress and presence as a woman seemed **endless**. (Pg. 61)

- Bajoghli was also constantly policed by by other Iranian people

Policing of the female body

- Bilateral policing
- Since Bajoghli is an outsider, Iranians would carry out policing on themselves so that they do not reveal sensitive issues to her
- Simultaneously, they will police her actions
- Bajoghli also carries out policing on herself, as well as policing her interlocutors

Policing of the male body

- The state and the media police male bodies by encouraging men to join the war through the use of religion, films and music
- Males are supposed to carry out their duties and protect their country
- Hypermasculinity traits

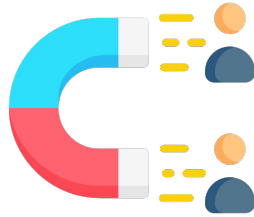# 03 Overarching theme

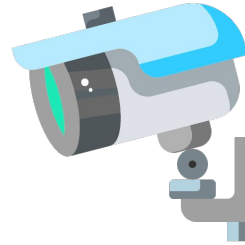**Heterogeneity** in <u>reception</u> and <u>production</u> of state media

Framings **contested** between different positionalities

Reception of pro-regime media

Production of pro-regime media

"Pro-regime" Self-surveillance

Pro-regime "Consistency"

Hozeh Honari hosting Tazieh performance

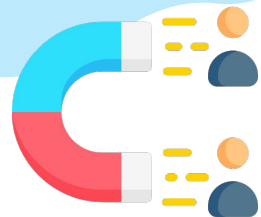Tazieh is being performed in Tehran's Hozeh Honari.

Hozeh Honari in Tehran has been hosting a Tazieh performance on September 6-12.

Tazieh is a religious play reenacting historical, tragic, and epic events of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hossein (AS).

Reception of Pro-regime media

"Turn on state television today—it's one boring old cleric after another lecturing us on morality. And we all know they're lying between their teeth. They're all corrupt too and not a single one is without sin. No wonder we've become this boring thing young people don't identify with." (p. 101)
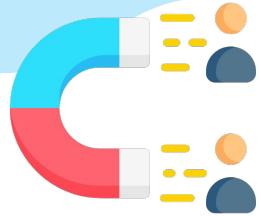
→ Lack receptivity by the cultural producers

→ Lack receptivity by the public

Production of pro-regime media

"See, it's these younger Basijis and hezbollahis who are our real problem. It's these kids who want to push us into a deeper division from the young people who were in the streets for the Green Movement. When I joined the Basij at the beginning of the war, it was a matter of life or death. These kids are just ideological. Look at how arrogantly they claim that our side is right. They wouldn't last a minute in the trenches in Abadan if Iraq invaded again right now." (p. 12)

→ Perceived generational divide between 1st generation pro-regime producers and 3rd generation

- Assumptions made of one another (young "hezbollahis" vs old being soft)
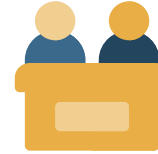
Pro-regime: Young vs Old?

Contestation on the applicability/validity of the appropriate media strategy
- How should the regime be defined in media production?
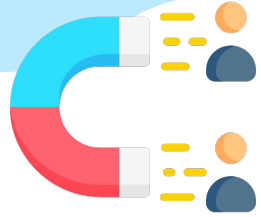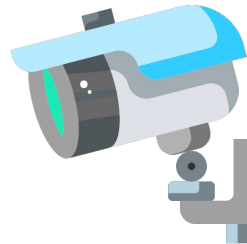- Should state media be more inclusive?

VS

Mostafa

**Mr Ahmadi and
Mr Hosseini**

Why this matters?
Contestation over media production for the purpose of maintaining the revolutionary state

"Official" stories

A war culture was created to support war efforts
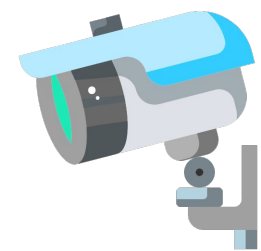
Content had to be ideologically sound:

- Resulting in the **editing out** of any sentiments adjacent to unsupportiveness

*[Avini] deleted scenes that did not communicate his version of the "**truth**" of the war, according to which Iranians were completely loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini and soldiers were ready to die for the revolution* — p. 60

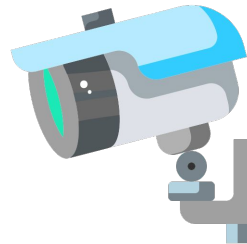## "Pro-regime" Self-surveillance

"Editing out" is also embodied in:

1. Pro-regime spokespersons

2. Regime cultural producers in relation to their jobs

3. Regime cultural producers in relation to each other

**"Pro-regime"
Self-surveillance**

1. Self-surveillance and censorship within Pro-regime spokespersons

The official story as "internalised":
- War veterans coached in the "right" way to speak about the war by crews from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting services

*Most veterans [were] well versed in the **aesthetics** of state–produced war films...He donned a mask, asked me if I was ready with the camera, and when I pressed Record, he started: "In the name of God, the most merciful..." — p. 52*

"Pro-regime" Self-surveillance

1. Self-surveillance and censorship within Pro-regime spokespersons

Internalised "official" stories a Mask they put on and took off
- "The official" version vs "the real" version of the war

Different settings presuppose the state of the Mask
- **Public**, broadcasted
  - Censored: "official speak", "rhetoric and comportment", formulaic and identical
- **Private**, safe spaces
  - Let go of official rhetoric, offer up own critical narratives of doubt and mistreatment

It's all theater. We don't believe a word that we have to say to them, but we just have to play the role when they come — p. 53

"Pro-regime" Self-surveillance
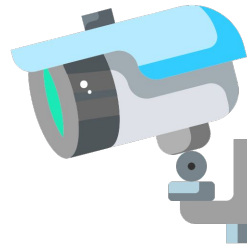
2. Self-surveillance within regime cultural producers

Extension of institutional surveillance of producers' "insiderness"
- Hid individual film ambitions
  - **Public** vs **Private**
- Lamented the socioeconomic status of independent filmmakers affording freedom of expression
  - Found media made for state to be dry and boring

*Don't judge me by what you saw me doing today...I have a family to support and state television pays well. **But I'll send you the work I really believe in to your personal address*** — p. 54

"Pro-regime" Self-surveillance
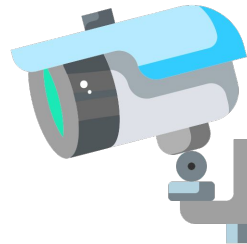
3. Self-surveillance **between** regime cultural producers

"*Just don't share it with any of these guys*"
- – All believe everyone in their space agree with the official narrative of war retellings
    - – The **Myth of Consistency**

Unbeknownst to the film director, those two regime center directors had also complained to me about having their **hands tied, unable to choose how to represent the war** *in their programming*
— p. 54
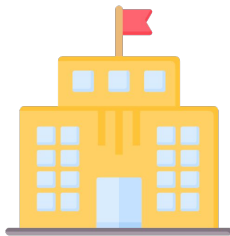
"Pro-regime" Self-surveillance

Myth of consistency extends to the regime's narratives and its institutions

Narratives as institutionally embedded…

VS

but reality of institutions inconsistent with narratives

Pro-regime "Consistency"

Myth of consistency extends to the regime's narratives and its institutions

Narrative Foundation: Aesthetics of **war as cultural and moral policing**

Regime cultural producers continued to use the battlefront as a trope in which issues of proper citizenship and revolutionary identity played out — p. 60

Narratives as institutionally embedded...

Pro-regime "Consistency"

Myth of consistency extends to the regime's narratives and its institutions

Mistreatment of veterans during the war and in their current care:
- Martyrs Foundation denying care
- Psychiatric Hospital
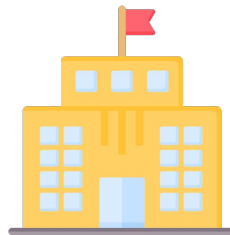
Reality of institutions inconsistent with narratives

They would **prefer if we would all disappear** in institutions like you see in this film, and they'll throw the keys away — p. 64

Pro-regime "Consistency"

Regimes and their narratives constantly in a state of making and remaking

Constant grappling between :
- The **"rigidity" of ideology**; and,
- The **plasticity of everyday experience**

Pro-regime individuals also contesting with narratives from their individual subjectivities

Rigidity ineffective?
No longer the goal to recruit men to fight
- Now: consolidate and reinforce regime through cultural and moral policing
    - Requiring different vocabulary

Pro-regime "Consistency"

04

Conclusion

Bajoghli's argument:
War culture continued to develop in postwar Iran, precisely because **the war is the foundational narrative** of the Islamic Republic

1. Media and propaganda as tools for moral and cultural policing (to advance state narratives) presupposes its coherence, but its reality is heterogenous

2. People in institutions are not mirrors of those institutions, "official" stances remain fluid and negotiated throughout (not all those pro-regime are hard-liners)

3. Regimes and their narratives are in a constant state of remaking as goals change over time, through different socio-political-historical circumstances

4. The narrative space is a contested one: it has to grapple with its own inconsistencies in definition and influence the public at the same time

A success?

Media strategy moving away from ideological rigidity -> nationalism

Populist nationalism as the new foundational narrative: from an Islamic Iran to an Iranian Islam

- War recast as nationalist project
- Persian Gulf as national symbol
- Subversive musicians
- Qassim Soleimani and divers as national heroes, not religious martyrs

"Look at how chaotic the entire region we live in is," said Sepideh... opposed to the regime. *"Iran is the only stable, safe country in our region, and we have Qassim Soleimani and the revolutionary Guard to thank for that"* — p. 112

→ Language of narrative adopted

This is our absolute right
To have an armed Persian gulf

Questions

1. If the regime defers to such nationalistic portrayals, would that not mean they are contributing to their own delegitimization?
   a. What are the boundaries between nationalistic portrayals that adhere to religious ideology, and nationalistic portrayals that undermine such ideology?
2. What other states employ similar forms of state-led cultural production as a form of policing?
   a. Can you sense the inconsistencies among their producers like Iran?
3. Given that Bajoghli gave assistance to pro-regime cultural producers, is it possible to reconcile the ethics of her (and other ethnographers') actions that helped gained access within a repressive system?

References

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Akkadi_Namsaru. 2014. 'Iran-Iraq War Veteran and His New Wheelchair given by an Iraqi Soldier'. R/Arabs. (www.reddit.com/r/arabs/comments/2cq0v4/iraniraq_war_veteran_and_his_new_wheelchair_given/).